

Small Predators

by

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Abstract

Small Predators is a novella from the perspective of student activists troubled by their university's colonial history and its embodiment of neoliberal ideology. They are millennials, a generation with a keen awareness of the human impact on the environment and a sense that it is already too late to prevent total disaster. *Small Predators* posits that those who attempt to contend with climate change are afflicted with Sianne Ngai's concept of "stuplimity." They are first agitated to dissent and then dulled to fatalistic complicity by the eminency of environmental catastrophe, the enormity and complexity of its perpetration, and the perceived impossibility of effectively intervening against it. Through stuplimity, however, comes a cleared affective slate, a radical receptiveness and responsiveness that allows the subjects to understand the world as it is and as they are situated within it, and to create new possibilities of being and being-with the world.

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To the University of Manitoba, with all my bleeding heart.

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Ecological Writing in the Era of Stuplimity

My reasons for writing this thesis are deeply personal. Although nothing that takes place within the narrative is strictly autobiographical, my personal experiences as an activist at the University of Manitoba are the basis for and framework of the creative project. *Small Predators* centers a group of activists organizing from within their university against capitalism and climate change. When one member of the group takes drastic action against the university for its financial partnership with a corporation perpetuating climate injustice, the group is compromised, and turns on each other. We follow the narrator, fox, as she negotiates acceptance and forgiveness in a dying world. The critical component of this thesis investigates the function of fox's dark ecomimetic construction of the prairies. I use Lee Edelman's theory of anti-futurity, and Sianne Ngai's concept of the *stuplime* to demonstrate the unique affective relationship that the millennial generation has to a planet we've always known to be dying, a relationship that fits Timothy Morton's concept of *dark ecology*. I theorize that those who attempt to contend with global capitalism and climate change are first agitated to dissent, and then dulled with fatalistic complicity, by the certainty of environmental catastrophe, the onslaught of tedious simulacra representing the inevitability of total disaster, and their powerlessness to intervene when there are endless points of injustice. However, through millennial stuplimity arises a residual empowerment in the cleared affective slate--a renewed relationship with the world that does not reduce it to a romantic object of desire--and through this openness a dark ecological politics emerges, a politics that forfeits environmental futurity and opens new avenues of resistance within the sticky interconnections of the present.

Early in *Small Predators*, fox establishes the importance of the prairies as the site of her story. She is fixated on the spaces she occupies, oscillating in and out of the narrative flow to

indulge in long descriptive asides that give vivid shape to her physical surroundings and the placement of her body within them. Timothy Morton, in *Ecology Without Nature*, describes this descriptive fixation on atmosphere and surroundings as *ecomimesis*, a poetic immersion in the environment that communicates something about the person who muses upon it in attempt to authenticate or naturalize their perspective (33). For Morton, ecomimesis can be either strong or weak. Weak ecomimesis occurs when the narrator centres the environment in the mind, and falls back on old tropes of nature as a romantic object; whereas strong ecomimesis occurs when the mind is situated in the environment, evoking the “here and now of writing” (*Ecology Without Nature* 32-33). “Situatedness,” Morton argues, “is distinct and modern” and signals the particular position of contemporary subjects as immitigably vulnerable to ecological disaster, projecting their voices from “the jaws of general doom” (33). Fox does not depend on one mode of ecomimesis. Rather, her narrative diversions fluctuate between weak and strong ecomimesis, as she both situates herself in a present space and time, and also reflects romantically upon visions of a prairie before herself, her context, or her university.

The narrative opens with fox lying on her back in a field, meditating on the sky and the prairie’s relationship with it. Her meditations start out romantic, personifying her environment as an empathetic subject in a relationship with the sun: “the prairie asks the sun what it’s feeling and the prairie responds in shades and bursts of sky; the prairie is compassionate, empathetic, it proves that the sun feels because it feels back” (Black 14-15). Later she describes a man-made construction at the site--a stone pillar erected to mark a new suburb--as an “imposition” interrupting the “perfect-flat prairie” (16). These ecomimetic exercises lean heavily on old tropes of a Nature that is special, lovely, and markedly other from humanity. However, as fox moves from scattered introductory thoughts to situate herself within the time and space of the

narrative, “tonight I’m lying in the open field” (15), her ecomimetic fixation begins to investigate her precise physical and temporal arrangement. She lists for us: what she hears (“the distant buzz of cars on the highway”); the arrangement of her body parts (“my head is turned”), (“my arms are spread before and behind me”); what she sees (“I see horizontal, the sky to the right of me and the dirt to the left”); and her perception of the passage of time (“in a few minutes the sun will be resting directly in my palm”) (16-17). In this passage, fox allows her physical place and placement to emphasize the potency of the present moment. Throughout the text, fox fluctuates between weak and strong ecomimetic practices, engaging in a tense discourse with place, a discourse that is heavily invested in her understanding of herself and others in relation to the environment and the institutions erected upon it.

For Morton, fixation on place, particularly fixation on the local, is a push by environmental romanticism to affirm subjectivity from within the homogenizing grip of global capitalism; however, he says, this rhetorical affect ironically acts as a barrier to an ecological way of thinking that legitimately challenges capitalism (*Ecology Without Nature* 84). “Under the current economic conditions,” Morton asserts, “not only is there no place, but there is also no space. Contemporary capitalism seeks to ‘annihilate space by time’ --and then to collapse time itself” (85). For fox and her friends, situating themselves in an immediate present is a lone comfort in a temporality in which there is no future. When they try to imagine where they’ll be after graduation, or in twenty years, all they can muster are images of total climate disaster, nuclear annihilation, or plain, white nothingness (Black 50). While their imaginations may be hyperbolic, the affect of a futureless present is a reality for those who have spent their whole lives in the era of climate anxiety. Fox tells us how neighbourhood kids would speculate about the dump over which their suburb was built, fearful it would one day explode from the pressure

of unventilated methane (15); later, she recounts the long lists of news articles she reads daily about global climate disaster (46-47). Canadian millennials were born into the knowledge of the earth's deteriorating capacity to maintain human life. We learned about recycling and the greenhouse gas effect in elementary school. We watched the ice caps disappear. We were made the vulnerable, nubile faces of Earth Day. We were told again and again that more must be done to save humanity's future at the same time that pipelines were expanded, rainforests were cleared, and chemical waste was dumped into the ocean. Now there are fresh nubile faces for corporate greenwashing campaigns to exploit--millennials tossed aside as apathetic, narcissistic scum with no futures--and, perhaps, rightfully so--because with the knowledge of ever more imminent disaster came the numbing realization that we are powerless, that it is too late to prevent environmental catastrophe. For millennials, there is no future. For millennials, the future isn't even death and destruction, it's just dead.

Lee Edelman, in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, describes the way in which politics engage in a process of "continuous staging," arranging and rearranging figures and discourses of desire in order to enforce the perpetual pursuit of a collective future-fantasy centered around an "Imaginary wholeness" of self--a wholeness for which the Child as concept, as object, is emblem (10). This staging of desire positions itself in opposition to the death drive--the spectre of meaninglessness that haunts the social order--the thrust of which is maintained by the cyclical reproduction of jouissance (10), an "unnameable remainder," surpassing pleasure and pain to violently undermine fantasies of self-realization (25). Jouissance is reproduced, Edelman tells us, by its self-negating promise that there is "nothing at all: neither identity, nor survival, nor any promise of a future" (48). Desire's production of meaning constructs the Child as victim of jouissance, thereby creating a "social imperative to grasp futurity," to sacrifice the

now in service of a more vulnerable future (49). The discourses of environmental romanticism and contemporary environmental justice movements depend heavily upon these discourses of futurity. They implore that we make change now for the sake of the future--in order to ensure a future. But in refusing to honour and engage with millennial forfeiture to the death drive, these movements martyr themselves to the defeated/defeatist discourse of “who gives a shit?” Morton insists that “notions of place are retroactive fantasy constructs determined... by the corrosive effects of modernity” (*Ecology Without Nature* 11). However, if history as we know it is a biopolitical construct aimed at subordinating humanity to futurity, and there is no future, then all there is is *now*: what you see, what you feel, what you taste; your body and how it is situated; jouissance; place. And if place, so fundamental to our contemporary experience, “impedes a truly ecological view” (*The Ecological Thought* 26), what is left in which we can ground our joy, suffering, and resistance?

Millennial forfeiture to the death drive might better be described as what Sianne Ngai calls *stuplimity*. Ngai discounts the traditional affect of sublimity as no longer adequate to describe our contemporary relationship to art and the world. Traditional models of sublimity suggest that the terror and awe immediately felt when experiencing an overwhelming power eventually subside into a cathartic sense of tranquility and wellbeing, the subject inspired by their own ability to comprehend powers greater than their own (thereby, in fact, reinforcing the superiority of their capacity for reason (Ngai 266)). However, these models fail to account for the long-term effect of overstimulation--a deadening, or numbing of the nerves (270). Ngai defines this existential numbing as stuplimity, an intersection of astonishment and boredom in which the initial excitement or agitation at beholding immense power subsides to a “prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue” (271). Rather than one incredible blow of stimulation

creating the rippling affect of the sublime, stuplimity is chipped out of the subject through indefinite repetition of definite elements, affective scraps that stand in for the larger signifying system (272). Contemporary subjects who are socially conscious are bombarded with the same simulacra of death and disaster ad infinitum. Although our immediate reaction might be outrage or agitation to dissent to news that the honey bee is now endangered (Dell'Amore), carbon concentrations in our atmosphere have reached critical levels (Shwartz), or that Husky thinks they can just throw money at the more than 200,000 litres of oil they spilled into the North Saskatchewan River (Heroux), the persistent repetition of the same type of event, events symptomatic of the dominant systems of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, etc., leads to boredom and apathy, a dulling of the senses that extinguishes our political motivation. For fox this stuplime onslaught is exemplified by an exchange with an instructor in which she reads the dozens of headlines she consumed on social media just that day about the deteriorating world (46-47). Rather than reading off this list at an increasing pace or volume, projecting the violence outward, fox reads this list matter of factly, digging her fingernails into her arm as she does so, internalizing the violence.

Contrary to the functions of anxiety, which cause subjects to obsess outward and project their fears onto those around them (in Ngai's investigations, resulting in the literal projection of bodies through the air (210)), I propose that stuplimity causes us instead to retreat within ourselves and bodies, to puncture rather than project. The wearying affective lack that constitutes boredom is akin to Edelman's jouissance. To be detached is an affective remainder that unites pleasure with pain, the post-orgasmic ache. There is an old Hungarian idiom with which my mother would scold me when I would spend days at a time reclined on the couch, *faj a lustasag*: it hurts to be lazy. Throughout *Small Predators*, fox and her friends are engaged in

acts of self-harm dubbed ‘the sick,’ acts that, while varying in severity, are centered around breaking or removing skin. The sick is tied to internalization of both the political systems that the collective stands against, and also the anger, apathy, and guilt that they experience generationally. As the collective comes to terms with the insidious pervasiveness of capitalism, as they negotiate the ways in which their existence depends upon the exploitation of people and land, they see fewer avenues out of the trap, they feel increasingly powerless to effectively intervene, and so they turn their gaze inward, picking apart themselves (literally) and each other (figuratively).

The sick is an active representation of stuplime jouissance, the nagging tedium of ennui as a gently pulsing self-violence, but this is not the final stage of the stuplime. Ngai tells us that following boredom comes “a secondary feeling that seems strangely neutral, unqualified, ‘open’” (284). “Open feeling,” as Ngai defines it, is neither a lack of affect, nor can it be reduced to a single emotion. It persists beyond binary emotional constructs of euphoria/dysphoria. It is the echo under-riding the entire experience, -phoria itself, the suffix undressed (284). For Ngai, this means that the modernist texts that inspire the framework of stuplimity can be held up as mirror shards to the social systems they replicate, resisting these systems by playing with their scraps (297). For millennials, this means that all that apathy may actually be an avenue to radical resistance, because underlying the stuplime--and all that’s left once the astonishment and boredom subside--is “a state of undifferentiated alertness or responsiveness--a kind of affective static” in which unbridled understanding might be realized (283).

Open feeling is not a blank canvas; it is a cracked mirror. It absorbs political simulacra, it absorbs the world as it exists and, in its shattered reflection--an image altered only by thin lines and gently angled shards--proves our systems to be mere spectres of reality. Open feeling is not

romantic. Rather than using the past to imagine a future--notions of a pure earth that must be redeemed from the stain of humanity--open feeling accepts “the sticky mess that we’re in and that we are, making thinking dirtier, identifying with ugliness, practicing ‘hauntology’” (Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* 188). Through what you might call *stuplime intervention*, open feeling creates new methods of ecomimesis that resist the hegemony by accepting its dark, dirty truths.

Morton refers to this new ecological thought, one that complicates environmental romanticism to honour the “dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of an ecological catastrophe,” as *dark ecology* (187). Where, for Edelman, the Child stands in as the emblem of reproductive futurity, for Morton, Nature becomes the emblem of *environmental* futurity. By rejecting the fantasy of Nature, dark ecology embraces the death drive, recognizing the fundamentally queer desire to “stay with a dying world” (185).

Dark ecology is *the* ecological thought in the era of stuplimity. To write dark ecomimesis is to move beyond mourning for a lost environment. As Morton points out, the act of mourning is not possible in this context because we cannot be separate from the environment despite our conceptual insistence that Nature is Other. To lose the environment is to lose ourselves--the loss is too absolute to comprehend and, thereby, mourn (186). To write dark ecomimesis is to find the precise point between self and other at which we are eternally suspended, the axis of the dualism Human vs. Nature, and to ground an ethics in the melancholy of this irreducible and unrequitable longing (186). This melancholic dualism exists at infinite sites of interconnection, a phenomenon Morton calls ‘mesh.’ The mesh is the immeasurable web connecting all things to all other things, it is absolute. It is not homogenizing. There exist entities within the mesh, and yet no entity can be pulled outside of its interconnections. The mesh is sticky. The more we try to engage with an entity the more difficult it becomes to distinguish it from what it sticks to (*The*

Ecological Thought 15). Yet, despite its scope, the mesh is intimate. It requires that we consider inner and outer space at every point of relation, haunting our subjectivity with ambiguity and darkness (100).

For fox, the mesh is pervasive. The environment becomes personified to the point of obscurity while she struggles to discern her friends from their surroundings. Consider the opening paragraph of the novella:

I've always found the autumn resentful. Maybe that's not fair but it's how I feel. There's something there in the dry-dying-brilliant momentary bursts of colour fighting the inevitable loss of life; something in the crust of frost on morning grass--cold fighting to lock in the damp, clinging to each slip of dew. Something about that stubbornness, I don't know, it's familial--like the way a cousin might mutter at your queerness under their breath but never quite out you to your grandma; their tone might quake, quivering surface of water about to boil; you might grip their leg urgently beneath the dining room table, trembling of tectonic plates. I guess it's different though because in that scenario your cousin has all the power and autumn, well, I suppose autumn has almost none. Maybe autumn is you in that scenario, eyes fogging, frantic, pretending to contain your composure but under the table digging fingernails into your cousin's knee, biting tongue, crusting dew to the grass (Black 14).

At first, fox dips into weak ecomimetic romanticism, indulging in traditional Nature imagery; she then expands the scope relationally--the environment becomes familial, a fraught intimacy; and, finally, she pulls into herself and the reader, the environment confused and muddled within our combined subjectivities. This sticky relationality projects outward as well, as her friends' bodies, movements, and voices blend into their surroundings, mingling indiscriminately with rushing water (34), buckling walls (34), dripping pipes (40), the hiccuping river bank (40), and billowing bedcurtains (60).

When fox experiences moments of great stress, the mesh is pulled into the foreground by engagements with magical realism. We see this first when badger asks fox to re-engage with social activism. Fox zones gradually out of her conversation with badger, distracted by the stars which shoot sticky webs down to the earth and pull the field into the sky (21-22). When the collective argues heatedly, the river seeps through the walls, fills the room, and submerges them (33-34). Reflecting on a time when her relationship with badger was tense with confused romantic tension, fox remembers the damp fallen foliage along the riverbank clawing its way inside of her body and out of her mouth (36-38). And in her confrontation with mink, fox is unable to tell whether she or the wind is destroying the room (60-61). For fox the mesh is dark, muddy, sticky, volatile, and leaking; it is alternately comforting and alarming; it both decays her body, affirming her mortality (36-38) and pulls her into a throbbing ethereal womb, assuring eternity (22). Fox's engagements with the mesh undermine the Otherness that she assigns to *place* and situates her subjectivity as suspended at points of interconnection.

Mink's political demonstration is mired in romanticism--it is a performance that, even by the distance of memory, cannot be removed from its affective intensity. Her demonstration represents an anxious political response, one that projects anger, apathy, and guilt outward. While fox vehemently rejects mink's actions, she at the same time engages in romantic ecomimetic rhetoric that mimics the very actions she rejects. Fox's confrontation with mink replicates, and is narratively partnered with, the romantic intensity of mink's demonstration. Each of fox's engagements with the mesh, in fact, demonstrates the inherent romanticism of interconnection, complicating the ideological purism of dark ecology and staking out a space for romanticism within open feeling. The final meeting of the collective demonstrates a responsive, compassionate, and forgiving political relationality. For Morton,

forgiveness is fundamentally ecological. It is “an act of radically being-with the other” (*Ecology Without Nature* 196) and, as such, forgiveness is crucial to open feeling and the pursuit of a dark ecology. We return, at the end of *Small Predators*, to the field in which the first scene takes place, only this time with the collective joined together. On first glance, the repetition might suggest a narrative holism; however, ixby’s small act of vandalism cracks the mirror and haunts the signifier that marked fox’s early discomfort, the pedestal. The spray paint is described as blending the structure with the sky so that they can barely be distinguished from each other, evoking the temporality of the signifier and eroding its physicality. To enmesh time and space is the opposite of holism; it is ever-reaching; it is a forfeit to the incomplete. The final image of the text is one of infinite and unknowable interconnection: “the horizon is suspended in perfect ineffable dark, the same dark brimming between my shivering atoms” (65). This image turns fox’s gaze both inward and outward and submits to a dark and ambiguous present that is infinite in scope, and gracefully contingent.

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Prologue

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The Nonsuch

Your source for campus news

Suspect in Critical Condition Following Campus Explosion

A lone suspect was taken to the hospital in critical condition Monday afternoon following an explosion at Manitoba University's historic Abbott College.

Canadian Security Intelligence Services (CSIS) has taken over the investigation, Winnipeg police spokesperson said on the scene. 'The explosives appear to have been detonated from the sewer beneath the college.'

Witnesses report evacuating the building after the fire alarm was pulled around 1.p.m. Monday afternoon. Authorities are confident the evacuation was complete. No deaths have yet been reported.

'We're all struggling to come to terms with what's happened' says the University's Vice President Health and Wellness, Sandra Goodhell, 'students are shaken and we are doing what we can to ensure classes resume their normal schedule. The university will be providing free group and individual counselling sessions to all students on request.'

Carl Shucksly, a first-year student at the university, was waiting for class to start when the alarm was pulled. 'Everyone was moving really slow but we realized something was wrong when we got outside because [the suspect] was screaming and waving a knife around.'

The suspect reportedly performed a violent demonstration outside the college before turning a knife on herself as the explosives were triggered. Authorities suspect that mental illness played a role in the attack. The university has not yet confirmed whether the suspect is a student or an employee of the institution.

'It's just so senseless,' Carl says, 'you'd think a school would be safe and then something like this happens.'

'Security services will be increased in the interim period,' reports Goodhell, 'while administrators meet to review campus safety policies and emergency protocol.'

1

fox scales the stalk

I've always found the autumn resentful. Maybe that's not fair but it's how I feel. There's something there in the dry-dying-brilliant momentary bursts of colour fighting the inevitable loss of life; something in the crust of frost on morning grass--cold fighting to lock in the damp, clinging to each slip of dew. Something about that stubbornness, I don't know, it's familial--like the way a cousin might mutter at your queerness under their breath but never quite out you to your grandma; their tone might quake, quivering surface of water about to boil; you might grip their leg urgently beneath the dining room table, trembling of tectonic plates. I guess it's different though because in that scenario your cousin has all the power and autumn, well, I suppose autumn has almost none. Maybe autumn is you in that scenario, eyes fogging, frantic, pretending to contain your composure but under the table digging fingernails into your cousin's knee, biting tongue, crusting dew to the grass.

If you're not in the prairies I feel sorry for you, I really do. I'm sure wherever you are it's beautiful--it always is, you know, almost everywhere--and that's not what I mean anyway. It's just, well, mink once told me that the sun doesn't feel a thing. It's sentient, she said, fingers toying her wrist--absent--but it doesn't feel anything, it just provides. Was the sun benevolent or sociopathic in her imagination? I couldn't tell then and still can't but I do remember that I didn't say anything in response to the matter. I suppose I didn't say much at all back then. It was better just to listen. I think for myself a lot more these days though, at least, I speak what I'm thinking more often, and I wish mink could know that. And I wish she could know that I think she's wrong about the sun. See, the prairie asks the sun what it's feeling and the prairie responds

in shades and bursts of sky; the prairie is compassionate, empathetic, it proves that the sun feels because it feels back. It's a sort of magic to be in the middle of all that feeling and that's why I wish you were here. That's all.

Tonight I'm lying in the open field behind the long gated suburb that wasn't there when we were kids, beside our older, bleeding suburb. I remember kids saying our neighbourhood was built on top of an old garbage dump--they buried all the trash a couple dozen feet below and dropped some big houses on it and that's why the sidewalks are always sinking and the whole place stinks like shit. Kids would say the gas from all the rotting garbage was seeping up from the soil but it couldn't get out fast enough and one day the whole suburb would explode. I didn't really believe that but every spring I'd watch the line between the window frames and the garden plots get a millimeter thinner. I bet if you tore the planters out you'd see a series of descending lines like the rings inside a tree trunk, recording each year's sinkage.

When I was little I would try to dig up the dump in my backyard. This exploit had two goals:

1. another person's trash, right? and, also
2. just in case, best that the neighbourhood doesn't explode.

I never found any trash, though--actually, I never got more than a foot or so deep--after that the gumbo gets so fucking thick with clay it can't be pierced by a garden spade in a kid's thin grip. I buried some trash of my own though.

I got a digital watch for my eleventh birthday. It had a bulging plastic frame and a velcro strap. It had an alarm function programmed on and off by a slim plastic button. One morning the button fell off and the alarm wouldn't stop. I couldn't quite fit my fingernail far enough into the gaping plastic to turn it off. I tried to smash it but the face shattered and the alarm

continued. I put it in the garbage bin in the garage but you could hear it all the way from the kitchen to the basement if you listened close. I didn't want dad to know it was broken so I took it to one of my gumbo holes in the backyard and buried it. I imagine it's fossilized now, its perfect plastic bones carved relic into the cold clay, echoes of its ancient beeps rippled in the surrounding muck. But I'll never dig it up.

The plot where I'm lying is a field now but soon it'll be another suburb. Winnipeg is just like that, constantly brimming outward, thinning with the spread, like spilled milk. The sign is already erected--an eight-foot brick-and-mortar pedestal at the intersection of two pretend streets with a slab of limestone at the centre-top of the imposition. Someday that slab will be carved upon with flowery cursive declaring the neighbourhood's title--something that imagines a scenery like 'River Gardens' or 'Emerald Hills'. The web of rivers is at least three kilometres out in any direction and there isn't a goddamn hill in the whole south of this province but that's just the way these things go, it's more about planting an image than honouring one and the perfect-flat prairie never is enough for the folks who get to do the naming. I guess they couldn't think of anything catchy yet so they just erected the pedestal blank. You'd think it'd be much harder to get the letters on after the fact. You'd think they'd do that with some sort of laser that you can't just point at something fixed in the ground. But I guess sometimes it's better to stick your flag in the mud even if the flag is blank. I guess that feels important. I'm not sure; I'll let you know if I ever end up leaving a mark.

I'm lying on my back in the dry-flat prairie grass beneath the pedestal and I'm listening to the distant buzz of cars on the highway, the little-perceptible, warm hum of my phone in my pocket, and the small clawing snap of grass beneath me as my weight shifts. My head is turned and I see

horizontal, the sky to the right of me and the dirt to the left, a scattered brush of grass scratches my eyes--each blade lit with the setting sun as though a drop of blood is running down its sharpest skimming edge. My arms are spread before and behind me and the fingertips I can see are lit with the same setting red--they flux and fold like twitching, severed arteries pulsing final heart-beats. In a few minutes the sun will be resting directly in my palm.

My phone buzzes. I dig into my coat pocket. The shock-bright screen reads

Where are you

Irritated. It's not even a question. I put the phone back in my pocket and roll onto my back but now my chest is full of fast-tumbling stones, gushing pressure builds in my ears. Phone buzzes again. I pull it out, roll on my side

Are you ignoring me

No, I think. Fuck. It's not even a question. I roll onto my back. Phone buzzes again and I don't pull it out but I imagine it probably says

fox...

or

Please

or

Hellllooooo

Aggressive. Distracted, I forgot to wait for the setting sun to rest in my throbbing palm. Now it is too late; the sun is gone. There is no horizon, just a long draft of clean electric-blue buzzing into the dark-receding prairie dome.

‘Why didn’t you respond’ I hadn’t heard him approaching, swift and silent over shifts of grass. He stands directly over my head so that his legs are the wide imposing base of a mountain, his torso sloped by the trim line of his long tweed coat. His head is the snowy peak--obscured, like by clouds, by the smoke off his joint.

‘I want to be alone.’

‘You could’ve let me know. I was worried.’

‘About what? It’s flat for miles. You were obviously staring right at me when you sent those messages.’

badger moves to my side and extends a hand to pull me up but I stay in the grass. He drops down and sits next to me, one knee poking up and out from his long coat. I sigh and roll my spine up, hug my raised knees.

‘Tell me what’s going on with you’ he says.

‘Tell me what you mean by that.’

‘Don’t do that fox. Shit.’ badger swings his pocket knife open and pokes away at a thick block of wood in his palm, joint dangling lazily off his lip. I pluck the joint and drag it.

badger and I met in university in my first year. We sat beside each other in this philosophy class and he was constantly flicking little wood shavings onto my desk. I told him to fuck off with the whittling already and he suggested a compromise, we switched seats so that his shavings would land on someone else’s desk. We became friends after that--if daily joints by the river, social silence, and a shared crude-nihilism counts as friendship, anyway. He was constantly fucking whittling. badger’s grandad taught him to carve--would guide him on instruction, affirming or denying each push and dip of the blade with a throaty ‘mhmm’ or ‘mmuhm.’ badger said he stopped whittling when he was a teenager--he got embarrassed and threw away all the figures he

and grandad had made together. Now grandad is dead and badger whittles again. I imagine that he tries to recreate the shapes he made with grandad--the shapes he lost to his teenaged embarrassment--but badger never told me so, that's just what I imagine. badger tosses all his carvings in the trash. He says his hands are useless without a reassuring "mhmm" to guide them but I don't know if that's really it or if he's just ashamed to be creative and also ashamed of being ashamed. I don't think he's held onto anything he's ever made.

'I went to see mink today.' badger says, his eyes guiding the the stiff curve of his knife. He's cut smooth squared pillars from the long edges of the woodblock. A thick brim at the top and bottom. His knife moves slow, picking the pillars out from the centre of the block. 'I just wanted to tell you.'

I figured that this would be about mink. Everything has been about mink since she was committed.

'Ok.' my voice pockets in my throat 'How was it? Are you ok?'

badger pauses his hand, pulls the blade from the block, brow furrows. 'I dunno. It was really hard.' He looks up at me and then back at the block. 'I went right after she was admitted but that was different. They had her on all these sedatives then. She couldn't really communicate. She's different now. Whatever meds they've got her on are more balanced, I guess. But she's too calm. It's creepy. She's more cryptic than ever.'

I nod and make that sympathetic 'mmmm' sound with my throat. I know I sound disingenuous but my eyes are brimming and I don't dare open my mouth. I hide my cheeks in my arms so he won't see me flushed. I take a deep slow breath through my nose and hold it. My brain rattles like dry static in my skull. badger doesn't look up.

‘She doesn’t remember any of it--big college or ripping up her arms--not even my first visit to the hospital. She’s lost whole days.’

I make that pathetic ‘mmmm’ noise again, stand up, rest my back against the pedestal. badger stays in the dirt, arm balanced against his knee, focus on shimmying the knife carefully. ‘Look, I’m sorry to bring this up, but mink mentioned you. She’s bringing you up with everyone.’

I exhale. ‘Yeah, I’ve heard.’

‘She’s just in rough shape, you know,’ he says, flicking a large shaving off the tip of his knife, ‘and she’s sorry. She won’t stop saying how sorry she is. And she won’t stop saying how she wishes she were dead.’

‘How is that supposed to make me feel?’ I ask. Too loud and too quick.

‘I don’t know, fox.’ He looks up at me. ‘How does it make you feel?’

I shake my head, kick a heel in the dirt. badger’s brow furrows again. He turns his eyes back to his knife. His shoulders slouch toward his chest.

The sky is filling quickly with darkness. Stars slip quietly into the sky like a swimmer emerges from a dark lake, smooth black water rolling up and around the cresting head, gliding over shoulders--a flexing blemish that grows out of the perfect depths of molten dark.

I was never very good at constellations. I know the big dipper, that one is easy, and I know orion’s belt, although I don’t know which stars make up the rest of him--that’s about it. mink and I made up a couple constellations of our own, lying in this field: big-clump, little-clump, the long potato. I don’t know that we ever really tracked the stars well enough to say for certain that december’s little-clump was actually april’s little-clump. It’s likely that we just assigned a

similar clump of stars the same moniker. It didn't matter. I guess it still doesn't. People don't need star-clumps to map the passing of time anymore.

'There's a rally in Saskatoon this weekend' badger says. It's easy to change the subject gracefully with a knife in your hand. 'I'm driving out with onnun and rosi.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah. It's an anti-pipeline march off the SU campus and then we're driving up to the blockade with the SU energy justice collective. We're going to camp at the block-site for the weekend and rosi's going to photograph it for the zine. You should come.'

'Yeah, ok. Maybe.'

His brow is still furrowed and his eyes still glued to his carving. I dig my hand into my jean pocket and grip my keys in my fist.

'It'll be good for us to do some work again. We've all been a bit out of it since mink was committed.' badger says.

'Yeah. I get it.'

'Plus it'll be great footage for the zine. It'll help us re-establish, you know?'

'Sure'

'I just really think you should be there'

'Yeah. I get it. I'll go.' I grind my keys between my fingers and my teeth against each other and smile at him when he finally looks up at me again. A trickle of blood fills my palm.

As the sky deepens the stars become brighter--they reach toward the earth with long thin fingers of cool-shimmering light that touch the field and cling to single blades of grass, forming tethers of sticky film that connect sky to ground. The grass grows brightly at the tugging of the star-

webs, grows thick and strong and tall to tower dozens of feet over me. Each blade sprouts a top-nest of full and vibrantly glowing seeds. The brightness of the star is amplified by the stalk, the stalk made weighty and strong by the star, and the thin strings of new matter tethering them flux and fold in the atmosphere between.

I push off from the pedestal and move towards the nearest star-stalk. The webs emit soft heat like the warmth of a body and, when I wrap my bloody hand around the stalk it reacts, pulses, grasps back my touch and guides me up further, pulling the weight of my body off my feet and into the sky. The trunk makes room for my hands and feet; it is warm and sticky; it clings and, as I pull my hand off to reach higher, a tendril of the warm web trails behind it, attached, a net grows around my limbs and torso. As I reach through the bundle of wet seeds at the top of the stalk, they move aside to invite me in--rolling and folding their mass--warm orbs--separate pieces connected by a central gravity--around my fingers and arm. The mass throbs, gentle, until my whole body is cocooned, curled and comfortable and completely contained, as though I am now the gravity, the pulse's core.

Once, mink and I were lying in this field together, before she started ripping her skin off and before she flooded big college. We were holding hands and tracking the stars by clump-constellations and mink squeezed my hand and said *time is pretty because it isn't real*. She said *every moment of our lives and every moment infinitely forward and infinitely backward in time is the same moment and it's not like those old philosophers or the scientists are wrong, it's just a construct. A construct that makes the world work the way it works*. I squeezed her hand back and didn't say anything in response to the matter. *Otherwise*, mink said, *it all hurts too much. We can't take on everything at once*.

2

it's never as simple as a page marked 1

Ever since I was a little kid I've seen my death coming. When the visions first came they would scare me--shocks of pain strung to images of my skull smashing to pieces--groaning brains splattering--crashes like ocean waves in my ears--hot, hot static. I would wrap neutral thoughts around the knowledge like a child bandages a sliver, hoping it will go away. It doesn't, though. It burrows and festers, grows rancid and and more persistently aching. I don't know how I will die, exactly, but I feel gusts of death--pushing me off curbs into moving buses, pulling me onto tiptoes over balcony railings, shaking my wrist at the grip of a hammer. What I do know is that my head will cave in and I know that because I've felt it already and again and again. These days it feels so close, the sensation in my skull so powerful, immediate, the vibrations closer in frequency to the vibration of the present moment than they have ever been before.

ixby reads palms and they confirmed for me that my lifeline is short. They said most people don't like to hear that but I just nodded and smiled. I told them I had a feeling. *The line doesn't peter*, ixby said, *it stops blunt*. I didn't tell ixby about the buses and the balconies and crushing my own skull with a hammer because I figured they would just worry. I shrugged and smiled lopsided. People always worry when you foresee violence--they suspect you're mentally ill. I'm not sick, though, I'm symptomatic. The world is sick and its sick wears off on me and everyone I know and we're stuck dragging around its bile and bandages. mink talked me onto pills once but they didn't make me want to die any less--they just wrapped neutral thoughts around the premonitions--bandage over a sliver. Thing is, you can't cure sick by dosing the

symptom. Anyway, I stopped telling people about the crushing. They just worry or try to get me on pills.

In the libraries and in the halls of our university they've got these blown-up banners showcasing nearly-beautiful, carefully diverse students with straight teeth and armfuls of books. Thick red letters rip across the bottom of each banner declaring "This is Your Student Experience." Let the university curate the exhibit:

1. here you are walking with your peers in a straight line along the cobblestone pedway, six abreast, perfectly diverse, laughing;
2. here all six of you gather mirthfully over the shoulder of a peer to read from the same page of a book;
3. here you are smiling brilliant and knowingly over your shoulder;
4. here you are reading a campus directory with the aid of your pointer finger, paused at a name;
5. here you are glancing up from a completed exam booklet, gracefully tired and beamingly triumphant.

A different story is told beneath the banners, a story written on our bodies. Let me curate the exhibit:

1. here you are alone, slouched beneath the weight of your backpack, marching through dimly lit halls;
2. here you are in the back corner of a 300 seat lecture hall, struggling to hear the professor over your grinding teeth;
3. here you are glistening with nervous sweat, splitting a \$400 textbook between three credit cards;

4. here you are ripping out a clump of your hair in a corner corral of a library, trickle of blood runs down your forehead;
5. here you are at the precipice of the six-floor pharmacology building, eyes on the sun, toes over the edge.

When I first met mink she was sitting on the lowest marble step of big college with her legs jutting akimbo across the concrete. A grey-beige of grit climbed up her black jeans; her boots were caked in crumbling mud; her face was blank but her eyes inquisitive. I can't show you big college now, not the way it was, but I wish I could because I don't think I can do it justice by description. I can't show you mink either, and I suppose I feel the same way about her. Memory is fickle, and the more I try to see her face--the way it was before she got sick--the more her face blends into the slate nothingness of those marble steps.

I met mink that day on the steps but that wasn't the first time I'd seen her or thought about her. I saw mink every day, since my first day on campus. I'd pass her in the hall. I'd sit down and eat lunch beside her. She was blown up 20 feet tall, hanging outside the south library--glancing over her shoulder, smiling brilliant and knowingly. They've taken her banner down now, of course, and it wouldn't be the same anyway, but having her there was soothing. If she could be so sure and consistent and confident then maybe I could be to. I guess that marketing team was onto something.

Big college is the oldest building on campus, with long limestone columns and thin latticed windows, like a cathedral. It has a long and wide marble staircase at its front that bleeds almost seamlessly into the campus lawn. This campus is made of sharp angles plugged into dirt, stiff lines cutting up perfect prairie and severing us from river and sky, but mink made everything

soft. She had this way of arranging her body as the campus's mirror, elbows and knees at right or 45 degree angles, punching back at the concrete and iron with her own sharp edges, somehow smoothing out the space. When I saw her on the steps of big college, her image crashed over me--punched at my temples, rattled brain against skull, smoothed me out. I balled my fists, mind dribbling down my shoulders. I walked over, sat beside her on the steps, motioned for a light. We smoked in silence, mink's eyes locked to the treeline just past my head. I kicked words around in my dry mouth, gathering ideas like chipping paint. I did my best impression of a nonchalant slouch, tried to mirror her angles, looked instead like brittle snapped twigs. She didn't glance at me or say a word, her eyes still locked on the treeline. I opened my mouth but before I could utter a word she cut me off. *Sshh. Look.* She took my hand, cigarette and all, and pointed it toward the jackpines she'd been staring at. At the top of the tallest pine was a small, shuffling bird.

mink and I sat quietly on the step, with my wrist in her hand, staring at the pines for maybe a full minute before she dropped my hand, turned to me and whispered *baird's sparrow*.

Oh, I said.

Do you have class right away? She put her smoke out on the step and stood up. I did have class right away.

No.

We tiptoed toward the pines, mink never taking her eyes off the bird. She squeezed my wrist tight when my step shuffled too noisily. I made more noise than I needed to. Her palm was warm, her fingers strong. *I don't know what it's doing here*, she whispered, *they're supposed to nest in tall grass*. The sparrow sat in a small gathering of twigs and leaves. It could have been a nest, maybe, but I didn't really think so. It seemed just to be perching in that tree.

Oh. Maybe it lives in the ag fields? She positioned herself beneath the tree and took a quiet image with her phone.

ixby is going to flip.

I didn't make it to any of my classes that day--or many of them all semester, honestly. We watched the sparrow until my shuffling spooked it and then mink asked me if I wanted to meet her friends. We walked back to big college and down into the all-season tunnels that network below the campus. The tunnels start bright, big windows and colourful, freshly painted lockers but, as you walk deeper underground--toward the heart of the campus--the tubes gets narrow and grey with low ceilings and drooping copper pipes. mink took me deeper still, where the concrete floor is porous and weeping and the damp-weighted drywall caves in and bubbles and you're pretty sure the ceiling is about to give in. We pushed our way through a grey wooden door that blended almost entirely into the walls.

Welcome to the pot.

Past the door was a cramped basement classroom with slim windows lining the ceiling and no AV. There were two small tables clumped at the centre of the room and the room's circumference was lined with stacked broken chairs--the type with little desks hooked to the right arm. Eight or so people were packed into the tight space, sitting precariously on stacked furniture, propping themselves against the walls, a few at the tables in the centre, all of them now staring at mink and me. *This is fox, she's cool*, mink announced in her thick, crackling voice. She strutted through the room and sat cross-legged on top of the centre table. I stood still in the doorway, tried to gasp away my anxiety. mink motioned someone over from the corner--they had dark hair slipping from under their raised hood, dark jeans and big boots. *ixby*, mink

said, *you've gotta see this*. ixby cracked a huge smile when mink pulled up the picture on her phone--I would later find out that ixby studies animal biology, endangered birds.

For real? On campus?

mink nodded with a blushing smile. Pleased with herself. *In the jackpines behind big college*. ixby's smile quivered and they bolted toward their bag. *It took off though, probably lives in the ag fields*, mink shouted to ixby's back. ixby didn't acknowledge mink's last words as they pushed their way out of the room, knocking past my frozen body like it was furniture. mink then cleared her throat loudly. *Let's call this meeting to order. The first item of business is who the fuck is going to facilitate the meeting next week because it can't be me every fucking time*. This was followed by laughter and some shuffling boots and then silence until mink sighed, *onnun, step up?* onnun agreed, smiling sarcastic, black collared shirt tight at his throat.

onnun didn't show up to the next meeting--mink ran that one too, and the next one, and the next. The collective met almost daily in that hole in the tunnels and we plotted editions of an anti-capitalist, unabashedly eco-terrorist zine titled The Buzzkill. We called the meeting room 'the pot' because the pot is the part of a circuit board that manages the amount of power moving from one end of the board to another--it channels where the power goes and how much goes where and it dissipates the power that isn't useful. ixby told me once, later--after big college flooded but before the summer--that community is the only important thing there is--we just need to be heard and to take care of each other and we all owe each other that. It's a nice idea, but, in the end, it's power that let's us be heard, and power that lets us take care of each other.

The spring mink was sick, this spring just passed, was the worst of my life, even worse than now that she's gone. mink would sleep constantly and her body was so hot and small and wet with

sweat. I came over to clean her up more than once a week but wasn't sure if she could tell that I was there at all because she didn't seem conscious, not really. I would climb into mink's bedroom through the sliding window, which I always left just barely unlatched. I'd pick up her limp body out of the damp bed and move it to the couch two rooms over and mink wouldn't even wake up. I would wash the blood out of her sheets with baking soda in the bathroom sink before putting them in the machine. I'd wake her up and run a shallow bath and help her in and leave the door open a crack to sit on the floor outside, watching for a head above the rim, listening for splashes or gurgling or slipping, and all this with one eye on my phone, prepping my assignments for the next day's classes. I would remake the bed with clean sheets and put mink in and would comb her hair over a towel while she slept and I'd blow-dry it and wrap it into a loose knot and the knot in a fresh, dry towel. I'd make sure mink was asleep and then I'd pull the shoebox with her kit in it out from under the bed. I'd wash all the kit's instruments--little blades, slips of wire, sharpened pencils with worn erasers--with soap and water and wipe them down with rubbing alcohol and throw out anything rusting. I'd put the instruments back in the box and the box under the bed and I'd sit down beside mink's shrinking body and do my readings until the last buses left downtown--then I would slip out the window and push it almost-closed and crawl down the fire escape to the bus stop.

mink got sick about the same time as everyone else. I don't know where it started but if I look back I can see it building--the tracks on the arms of one, the bags at the eyes of another, the film of rotting clothes, thin skin draped on bone. I can see it when I look back; I just didn't see it then. You can get used to an unpleasant smell if you sit in it a moment and I think that's sort of what was happening. The sick gets in you and you don't even know it. Maybe it feels sort of like anger at first. You get frustrated at work and in meetings and classrooms and just hanging

out with friends--people talk too much, never think about what they are saying, make a verbal mess--then you're exhausted--no one listens to anyone else, the ground is wet but the air is static, so much dry heaving--what's the point, who gives a shit--then responsible, guilty--it's your fault that communication is broken, you take up too much space, you've always taken up too much space--you consume everything and produce nothing--you are more than a burden, you destroy--your friends, your lovers, your planet.

The sick usually starts out like picking your scabs. Unconscious, shedding only the skin in danger of ripping, self-mutilation as self-preservation, tactical maybe. At first. But gradually, as you lose focus, you begin digging too deep into the clots, ripping up new formed flesh and deepening the wound, tearing fresh tissue, widening the scar, making grotesque and permanent the smallest scratch. I've seen friends digging their fingernails into their chins in the middle of conversation--making little crescent impressions sometimes so deep they're pink or torn--never noticing that they're engaged in the gesture. I've seen classmates rip the skin right off their knuckles--one hand rolling the strip of flesh into a ball between their thumb and forefinger, then tucking the bleeding knuckle into their abdomen. mine was partial to blades and erasers and this cut of coated wire she'd wrap around her fingers til they were blue and dented with a thick bruise-almost-incision that'd take weeks to fade. I once watched someone rub a long line into their forearm with a penciltop eraser until the skin broke red all over their notebook. I once watched someone puncture their knuckles with the library stapler, still tethered to the copy station by a plastic sheathed cable. It doesn't start brutal but--

--after a while your fingers flex unconscious and constant. It hurts to be still. Your skin feels heavy on your muscles and too tight around your joints. If you could just open it up, make a bit

more room, it'd be less cumbersome, less tense, less suffocating. You imagine it would feel near climactic to sever a limb or shatter a joint, but you'll settle for peeling off a thin layer--a slip of skin you can roll between your fingers.

The collective (minus some) is back in the pot and badger is taking the lead. It is only at the moment that he speaks that I notice he's sitting on top of the centre desk, his voice has this low-dragging monotone, a lull much deeper than his usual rumbling pitch and his eyes scan ours pragmatically, as though I'm not sitting across from him. He is playing at mink.

mink didn't always facilitate the collective, not formally anyway, but she was always accommodating the meetings. mink kept the floor clean. When conversation got hot or mean or collapsing-inward, mink would eye her wrist watch, keep track. Every few syllables uttered mink would glance down, calculate, map the argument and then, in a low voice, make a patiently paced suggestion or comment that, like a gesture, cleared space for the voices backed into the corners of the rukus.

'As a gesture of good faith to ourselves and each other, I'd like us to conduct this meeting with our palms on the table,' badger says. All of us--me, badger, ixby, ayna, and onnun--roll up both sleeves and lay our forearms on the table. Together our arms are a fragmented map, scabs and scratches forming a cross-body network of rivers and lakes. With hands on the table it is difficult to repent. Not impossible, but difficult, and easier to keep an eye on each other. This sort of accountability request has been common at meetings since cutting ourselves up became a cultural pastime. 'ixby called this meeting today, though I think we've all been eager to see each other. We had a rough summer and we've been avoiding each other since classes started up again' badger continues.

ixby nods ‘mhm’

‘We need to talk about what happened at the college, to the college. As a group, I think, we also need to discuss how we’re going to deal with Mink personally. I know we’ve all gone to see her, but we should strategize that care. And the police have spoken to us all separately, we should strategize those discussions’

My throat is knots and I eye the convex heave of the damp-paper ceiling.

‘We also ought to be figuring out, you know, what we’ll say at the trial.’

Have you ever found that when panic is an avalanche in your chest, blood pounding reckless through your veins, faster than the river rips up the bank, faster than the prairie wind, that you glance down at your watch to ground you? Do you find, in these moments, that your watch appears to be a broken compass, spinning in your stillness? I do.

ayna, hands on the table, fingers flexing tightly, sighs, ‘I think Mink did it, I just do. That’s the only thing that makes sense. I mean, we basically know that she did it. I’m not going to lie under oath.’

badger nods. onnun sits with his eyes loose-averted to the grey-green walls. Our collective silence is broken only by the aching shudder, twitch, and scratch of fifty fingers against the table’s frayed laminate.

‘We know that she had access to the labs and the basement.’ ayna continues. ‘We know that she knew how to make explosives’. ayna pushes herself up off the table, stands, crosses her arms. badger nods. onnun sits, eyes averted. ‘We know she had a motive, even if it was a stupid motive.’

‘Don’t, ayna’ I say. She glares at me. ‘We don’t need to be mean.’

‘What was her motive?’ ixby asks.

‘mink was losing her research assistantship, didn’t you know? She’d been skipping work for months leading up to the flood.’

‘Hmm’ ixby looks toward onnun, who says

‘don’t you think she deserves a bit more credit than that? As if it could be as simple as ‘she was losing her job.’ How do you explain the banner?’

‘Well, what about that racist fucking banner? How can none of you have anything to say about that?’ ayna turns away from us and paces slow. We hover in silence again, for long aching seconds until, with a slap on the table, badger shouts ‘ayna, hands.’

ayna spins and jolts her hands out from the crooks of her elbows, the joints now clawed purple-red, and slaps her palms back on the table. Still standing, her head hangs, a crowbar in her spine. A thin line of blood runs down her left forearm. The walls of the pot are weeping; the sludge from the riverbank seeping through its pores. The ceiling heaves down on us, crowding our eyes to the floor. The floor crawls with sewage. I rub the heel of my sneaker hard against my shin.

‘Doesn’t anyone here think mink deserves the benefit of the doubt?’ onnun’s breath is heavy. ‘So what if she snapped? We’re all snapping, she was just the first. We don’t really know what happened in the college, all we saw was outside on the steps and none of that proves anything’

‘So you think it’s just some big fucking coincidence?’ ayna’s head jerks up, she is shouting. ‘Big college is lost, onnun, the university tore up the whole river bank because of what she did--just to prove that they could. They’re going to put up another big wall blocking the

river. You think she just climbed up on the steps and screamed that insane fucking manifesto and the sewers blew themselves up?’

Trees are falling outside. I can hear the groaning of their bones trembling, shifting, tipping. They crash against the earth. The whole basement shakes. Branches punch through the dim windows of the pot. My heel pushes harder against my shin, skin breaks beneath my jeans.

‘No. I think mink did it’ onnun is firm, meets ayna’s glare ‘but she deserves a fair trial. Our feelings and theories don’t matter. What’s the best case scenario anyway? She goes to prison? She’s fucking dying, ayna, the trial doesn’t matter.’

‘Justice always matters’ ayna whips around and brushes quickly out of the room, her quick feet the rushing of water. badger glances at his watch, sighs, then stands slowly and follows ayna out of the room, his wet boots the groan of buckling walls.

In through shattered windows of the pot the river now pours eagerly, pulling in with it the debris of fallen trees. The walls and floor weep just as eagerly. The flood rises from all sides. Over our heads. We are completely submerged. I pulse my heel softly against my bloody shin, each twitch delivering a shock of pain that ripples through me, reminding me that I have a body to drown in.

ixby meets my eyes. ‘I’m sorry’ they gurgle into the sludge.

‘Why are you sorry?’ I gurgle back.

3

the river isn't listening

Look, we're stuck in this loop of pretending that we're somehow divorced from nature. Like we're splintered. You asked me 'what about nature'. Well, what about it? Aren't we also nature? The concept is flawed, get it?

That's so fucking Hegelian of you.

No, it's so fucking Nietzschean. The category is false. We get it, it's just boring essentialist bullshit.

But our conception of it makes it real, right? Like, to understand nature creates it.

Is that supposed to be Kant?

Maybe a weak fucking reading.

Like, the category is false. The attempt to categorize at all is false.

We're all coming from the same false beginnings, right. Indoctrinated through churches and schools to categorize nature as an other, outside ourselves, but it's a false distinction.

Or category. Whatever.

I don't think that's what Nietzsche was saying. Because he talks about our break from nature, which implies definite categories and--

Right, but his discussion of a return to nature foregrounds faith, not truth. Whether or not there's a distinction between man and nature is irrelevant.

You're forgetting that Neitzche wasn't a nihilist, he just described the condition of it.

Across the room, mink's hand slips down her face and smacks the stripped laminate tabletop. We turn to look at her. Blood pools behind her ear and runs down her neck, a puffy purple wrist, layered with scar tissue, has slipped out from her sleeve. mink quickly balls her sleeve over her hand and her hand over her ear. We turn back to each other.

I think you're confusing Nietzsche with Hegel. Hegel is the one who said that only the rational is real.

--

There's this ridge between the river and the campus, an upturned, unstable marker of its spring breadth. Below the ridge lie the bones of eroding forest, above is the hard-packed, frozen gumbo that the campus rests its miniatures on. All of it is considered university property, including the forest and probably the river too, but the ridge matters--no campus security or administrative suit ever breaches the ridge, especially in the damp-autumn when each step presents a new risk of slipping down the slope, knees or face or ass first in the mud.

badger and I had this tradition after our philosophy class, back in first year. We'd hike out past big college, descend the ridge, trek out behind the research fields, along the river-shit and over the chain-link, to a soft patch of leaves and dirt, safe beneath big-reaching boreal arms, and we'd get high. We'd sit side-by-side on a fallen log, crumbling--with a view of the muddy current--knees stretched out and bare feet sunk into brown muck. badger would light up a joint and I'd

rip right off his two-finger peace-grip, drag slow and intentional, let the sticky paper hover at my lips/his fingertips. I'd latch my eyes to the current; the river bent back and out and thick-dark-brown over thin-dark-green--my eyes would tumble dizzy. I'd imagine badger watching the precarious dangle of joint-off-my-lip even though he'd just be watching the river too. Soft-high would come on and I'd feel a tingling urgency of awkwardness/try to think of something clever to say/be grateful for badger's oblivious simple comfort/pull my lips off the joint/exhale/be soothed into badger's quiet/wait for him to say something/pick up a clump of leaves/push bare feet deeper into the black muck/let it suck up between my toes and

with a snap the muck would rise suddenly over the tops of my feet, too fast for me to wrestle them out. Mounting higher as I struggled myself deeper, soggy fallen leaves, brittle half-twigs, and the liquid-plastic sheen of damp-late-autumn would rise--cool compost climbing to my chest where it would tunnel and settle into me--prying with slipping-wet grip--would curl, a burrowing rodent. It would wrap around my organs. It would nest in my scrambling heartbeat and

badger would brush his fingers across the back of my hand like a smooth blade along tender wood. i'd drop the handful-of-foliage-clenched-into-muck. he would wipe the mud off my open palm, massage fingers between mine to work out the dirt settled in the ridges of my skin. pointless. he would place my palm on his thigh at just the moment that my ribs, to make room for the rapidly growing family of rodents in my chest, would drop to the ground, seep marrow into the muck and sludge. i would reach down to pick up my bones and, spine collapsing with no ribs to support them, place both hands against damp earth to steady my tumbling--but one hand, the damp earth would push, the other, wet treeline pulse--i'd try to balance with desperate grip, a slip of grass in each drunk fist, but the dirt that hugged my sagging

skin weighed the smile of my folded abdomen. my mouth much smaller than a mouth, overfull and overflowing, packed with fistfulls of muck and leaves would dribble through my teeth-clenched grin and stillness.

--

ixby and I exit the pot together and decide to walk out by the river. I'm nervous because I'm sure we're going to fight. ixby's got the surest fists I've ever rumbled with. They take power like your mother might have grabbed your wrist too hard when you wandered into traffic; not aggressive, not passive aggressive, just reactive--a sudden unconscious force that seizes you both with white knuckles. It hurts but it works. We all ignore gentle hands.

You know when it's too warm but it snows anyway and it gathers thick and wet midair so by the time it hits the earth the clumps splash down like wet slaps to the face? Well, that's where we're at. We have our backs to the wind and snow and our faces to the river. The university has torn the treeline straight out all along the bones of big college--including the line of jackpines where mink and I watched the sparrow. After the flood the university declared that they would rejuvenate and expand big college into a multipurpose research, commercial, and living space. They're going to build the new extension right up to and hanging over the river. The building will be a marvel, bridging centuries of architecture. A marvel plugging its hopeless beams into sinking gumbo. I can see it if I close my eyes--just like the coloured-pencil-sketches they showcased at the townhall:

1. Limestone fades to glass and steel. A long, above-ground tunnel connects the old bones of big college, to new walls, translucent and glistening like electricity.

2. A long glass cube of offices, shops and diners; a lip of dorms that hangs over shimmering blue water; little stick bodies in fluorescent colours going in and out and sitting on benches, reading and shopping and living.
3. A long glass cube spilling over with brown water like a fishtank shaken, the spring river rising; fluorescent little stick bodies caged in, drowning.
4. A long glass cube cracked right down the centre; the winter gumbo shifted, splintering foundation; fluorescent stick bodies ripped to little pieces beneath the shards of crystal fishtank falling.
5. A long glass cube just fragments remaining, the river's reclaimed it all--the bank and the campus too. There are no bodies just dust and rusted beams sketched on wet parchment paper dissolving in my restless hands.

With the barrier of sweet pines gone, the shit-stench of our poison river rises unchecked and noxious. Beneath our feet, the woods are spread in a sludge of dust, debris, and mud turned a sick yellow-green by the construction floodlights erected off the curb. Stumps have been ripped clean out to make way for progress. Muck crawls toward the brown water like a slithering mass of copulating snakes. We stare at the bubbling, swills-like-tar water.

'I've been thinking about the river a lot.'

'Me too.'

'I haven't been sleeping. I can still hear her screaming sometimes.'

'Me too.'

'Look, I saw mink yesterday.'

The current blinks slowly, mud and ash.

I sometimes hate ixby. It isn't anything they've done, but just because of the wet way that they speak. I get hung up on that shit sometimes. ixby's got a throat like a wet sack that draws out a 'thuck' on their long vowels and drips like a sink on the short ones. Those first few weeks in the pot I was convinced that the pipes began to leak every time ixby spoke, like their voice was the valve. Beside the river I can barely distinguish them from the hiccupping bank. The part of me that I know is an asshole wishes they'd just shut up.

'I'm not going to tell you what to do. She's--it's just--she's really sick. onnun wasn't kidding. He was there with me. She's probably going to die, fox. Like, it wasn't her place to do what she did. I get why you're mad. I'm mad too.'

'I'm not mad.' I squint against the crinkling line of the riverbank, the brown water folding so slow and patient that there is no clear distinction between river and land. The crushing comes on like blinking, grinding like sandpaper, like punching my own ears. ixby sighs.

'Did I ever tell you about my mum?'

I shake my head no.

'Mum's from a first nation northeast of here--along the hundred little lakes up there. She got taken to a residential school in Ontario when she was little. They wouldn't let her go home for the summers.'

I nod slow. Try to silence my squishing brain. Open and close my mouth like a dying fish.

'She tried to go home after she graduated but the community had been relocated for a Wincorp dam. She made it to the new settlement but there was nothing for her there. My grandparents were dead. There wasn't much work except up at the dam that flooded real-home.'

'Shit.'

‘Yup. Wincorp, you know, the company that funded that dam, they funded mink’s research here too.’

‘Shit, really? Did she know that?’

‘Yeah. Wincorp funds most of the research in big college. And yeah, well, I told her. I wish I hadn’t though.’ ixby hangs their head down a second and then looks up at me from the river.

When I would clean up mink’s kit, the shoebox full of razors and wire, I often found myself taken aback at the perfectly coordinated chaos of it. Each piece would be tossed in so carelessly, left filthy and scabbing and all jumbled together, and yet the collection looked somehow arranged, intentional, like a renaissance painting--each figure the mark of some action I wasn’t really witnessing but was nonetheless asked to examine, to understand.

‘Mum ended up getting a good job in the city, you know? Water and waste management. Have you ever been down in a sewer, fox?’

‘Shit, ixby.’

‘Shit. Yup. Literally. It’s just, like, the university gets flooded, you know, and they spin it into an opportunity. They cash in on insurance and demolish what’s left of the earth and stick up something new and shiny and they’ll slap some administrative-fuck’s name on it and pretend this never happened. Well, what about us? They flood real-home and there’s no getting it back. They drown half of us and throw the other half out and then force the second half to maintain the machine that drowned the first.’

‘Shit, ixby.’

‘Stop that. Just listen.’

‘Shit, sorry. Shit’

‘I guess I just wish the university was hurting a bit more from this, you know. That might’ve made it worth it.’

In stories, people will reflect beside a body of water; as the waves shift and scramble their reflections, they recognize that perspectives shape realities, not the other way around, and that who they are is determined by the way they reflect the world back to itself. They recognize themselves as river, fallible, impermanent, life-giving and destroying. Everything. Nothing. So what does it mean when the body of water we reflect beside is opaque? Brown sludge. Shimmers of depth, sure, but when we can never catch more than a trace of limb or cheek in its quick pockets of light?

The last time I went to clean up Mink she was awake. She was sitting up in her bed. Her face had some colour. She smiled when I came in. She helped me strip the bed and load the machine. She said thank you. She undressed herself and got in the bath while I sat outside the bathroom doing my assignments. She called my name when she was ready to get out. I took her hand and she stepped out of the tub and I wrapped a towel around her hair. All up and down her arms and legs, along her hipbones and collarbones and jawline, white/pink/purple scars flexed. I took her in. For the first time since she got sick, all her wounds were closed. No fresh clots; no open sores. She took my hand and pulled me into her bedroom and we climbed into her bed together.

I woke up cold hours later. No sheet or cover. Mink was gone and it was dark. I walked slow and naked, groping my way along the walls of her apartment. I found her in the bathroom, her face in gentle concentration, illuminated only by the stubby white emergency candle over which she was holding her forearm, a liquid welt bigger than my thumb bubbling down to meet the

flame. I vomited on my bare feet. Called 911. The next time I climbed up the fire escape the latch of her window was firmly locked.

The ebb of the river coaxes the remaining brush and bones off the bank and into the swill. Eventually the whole graveyard will be sucked into some spring flood and there will be nothing left for us to remember the boreal by.

‘How did you do it.’ I ask.

‘From the sewer. onnun shut one valve, I opened another. mink tripped the explosive. It was so easy.’

‘And mink? What the fuck, ixby.’

‘We didn’t know she was going to try to kill herself. It was supposed to be anonymous. It was supposed to be safe. She promised.’

4

pretend there is a future

I leave ixby standing on the bank of the river and head inside the arts building complex, up to the sixth floor. I knock lightly at the glossy wood-panel of my english instructor's partially ajar office door. My knuckles cling and pluck off the heavy varnish, nudging the door gently open. Ms. Crowley is leaning back in her chair, an essay pressed close to her face, eyes blinking rapidly at the pages like in disbelief, immersed. I knock once more and she spots me over the paper, motions me in with a tilt of the head. Ms. Crowley shares this office space with four other instructors. Two desks line each adjacent wall. Four dusty old computers hum, their screens coat the room in dull-blue buzzing light. Each desk has a small cubby shelf above it crammed with books, loose sheets of paper, soiled coffee cups. A little potted plant slouches meekly in the corner, its leaves thin and jaundiced. Behind Crowley a man is folded over his desk, his face pressed flat against his notebook. He appears to be asleep. Maybe dead. He's tipped a styrofoam cup over with a splayed arm. A rorschach of coffee and cream climbs up the sleeve of his shirt. His notebook is ruined--his computer may be next.

'Sit down' Crowley says. I roll a chair out from a neighbouring desk that is stacked to my chest in ungraded assignments and position myself across from her. There is little space for guests in this office and we are so close our knees are almost touching. Crowley drops her book amongst the scattered journals and essays on her desk.

'So, what have you got for me?' She asks.

I direct my glance at the dead man behind her. 'Do you think we should wake him? His coffee's spilled.' I'm fidgeting. Crowley glances over her shoulder and smiles.

'Heron? No, let him sleep. He probably needs it.'

‘His computer though--’

‘No mind. These shit boxes hardly tick anyway. What have you got for me?’

I shake my head and look at the floor and Crowley sighs.

‘Nothing. I’m sorry. I know--’

Crowly nods slowly. Rests her face on her fist.

‘I know. You’ve given me lots of time and--’

‘Three weeks.’

‘Yeah, three weeks. I know it isn’t fair.’

‘To me or your classmates?’

‘Both? Right? I’m really sorry.’

‘Are you, fox?’

I run one hand over the other arm, gently dig in with my nails, release the tension building up against the skin. ‘I’m not going to ask for another extension, I just--’

There’s a sharp crash behind us and we spin in our chairs. Dr. Heron has jolted awake, apparently flinging his keyboard into the wall in the process. He is on his feet and jamming books into his messenger bag, including the coffee drenched notebook. His entire left arm from elbow to armpit is soaked in soft brown.

‘What time is it?’ he mumbles without looking up from his bag.

‘10 past 4’ Crowley says amusedly.

‘Oh, good. Good. Do I look awake?’ He spins around to face us. The metal coil of his notebook has impressed a red ladder up the side of his face. Sleep is crusted to his eyes.

‘Maybe put your coat on.’ I offer.

‘Oh, Heron, your face.’ Crowley mutters.

He rubs his hand against the impression and then shrugs his coat over one shoulder. 'My students hardly look at me anyway.' He glides briskly out of the office, one arm submerged in his coat, the other carrying his bag. He pushes the door closed and Crowley turns back to me. 'So.'

'So. Yeah, I uh, I'm not asking for another extension. I'm dropping the class. I just can't--right now--seem to get it done. And I know it's not fair.'

Crowley leans back in her chair, frowning. Her elbow knocks her mouse, kicking her screensaver to reveal her faceplate page.

'Sorry,' she says, minimizing the social media app. 'Mindless drivel, you know, it helps to zone out sometimes.'

'Sure,' I say, 'I do lots of organizing on social media. Plus I get most of my news from faceplate. In my newsfeed this morning I read that bees have officially been declared endangered and without bees everything dies. Pesticides is part of it but they've been discovering large crops of dead bees like mass graves and no one can figure out why yet.'

'Oh?' Crowley raises an eyebrow. I dig my fingernails a bit deeper.

'Yeah. The african rhino is extinct now and the liverpool pigeon and this little brown tree frog from the rainforest too. I also read this morning that slave labour was discovered in Canadian owned tantalum mines in the Congo. Tantalum is in all our phone batteries and everyone has a phone so all of us are exploiting that slavery together which is pretty fucked up. They've got kids working those mines.'

'Mhm.'

'Sixteen black people have been killed by police in the States in the past month alone. Sixteen. And that's just what's in the media. They have body-cam footage of one cop

talking out loud about how she's going to kill the guy and then she just does it. Blam. He wasn't even armed. There's mounting evidence that the kkk has infiltrated governments and police forces in the States, likely Canada too. The body of an indigenous woman was found in a shallow grave just off a bc highway and the rcmp say they don't yet suspect foul play. I'm not surprised at that shit but it doesn't make it any less shit.'

'It is shit.'

'Yup. Police forces are basically occupying militaries now. Oh, I also read that that massive oil spill in Saskatchewan is killing all the salmon and they aren't respawning properly. Two hundred thousand litres of oil. I can't even imagine what that looks like. Can you imagine what that looks like?

'No.'

'Me either. The government just approved another massive pipeline project across some major bc waterways but that's no fucking surprise. And here in Manitoba, they've recorded almost two hundred million litres of raw sewage leaked into the river that runs along this campus in just this last decade alone. It'd take my whole lifetime to imagine two hundred million litres of shit but just a fraction of my lifetime for the river to overflow with it.'

'Fox--'

'Oh, and our atmosphere's carbon concentrations have reached 400 parts per million. Scientists say there's no getting back from that in our lifetimes, so, I mean, no surprise there either, really. I'm honestly not sure why I keep reading. We're all fucking dead anyway so what's the point?'

'Fox, your arm.' Crowley says calmly.

The fingertips of my left hand are wet. I look down to see red tears throbbing from cirrus clouds raked across my right arm.

‘It’s important to keep reading.’ She says, handing me a tissue. ‘Even when there isn’t any point.’

‘Oh? Why?’ I dab my fingers on the tissue and wipe my arm and roll my sleeves down.

‘Because that’s what it takes to live in this world.’ She says. ‘It isn’t glamorous and it doesn’t feel good but nothing worthwhile ever feels the way we want it to.’

‘Is living at all worthwhile?’ I mean the question to come out cheeky, I hope it did. I stand up to leave.

‘Now, there is a question without any point.’ She says, standing with me. ‘Don’t drop my class. I can give you one more week.’

‘That’s really nice, Dr. Crowley, but I don’t know if--’

‘Don’t call me Doctor, I’m not. just try, ok?’

‘Right, I’ll think about it.’

--

ixby and I spent a lot of time at mink’s apartment in the evenings before everyone got so sick. After classes we’d take the 60 downtown and walk from east broadway to the very heart of the city. mink’s home was this little pocket of dark, a three story apartment jammed between two massive office buildings and surrounded by highrise condos. We’d slip out the window and up the fire escape to the rooftop--you weren’t supposed to go up there but everyone did. Someone had set up a ring of those old crosshatch lawnchairs, decaying in the rain and sun, and we’d sit up there and smoke cigarettes and down king cans. ixby and mink would

sometimes grade papers but I don't have a job with the university so I'd just sit and smoke and provide second opinions on bad first year writing.

Once we were sitting up there late at night, all three chairs in a row at the edge of the rooftop. The streetlights were multiplied in their reflections off the long beams and plate glass of the surrounding highrises, shimmering softly. The headlights of passing cars were bouncing and dancing off the buildings, twinkling 30 stories high like spinning galaxies. ixby, feet propped on the crenellations, asked *what do you guys want to do when you graduate?*

mink and I sat silent, looking back at ixby, who smiled wryly.

Come on, pretend there's a future.

That's pretty hard to do. mink said.

Try this, I said to ixby, *where do you see yourself in twenty years?*

Do you think we have twenty more years? They replied.

Hmm. mink said. *Nuclear holocaust?*

Probably. The prairie a crater. Radioactive plant life crawling up over the shadow of our remains. Surviving humans with three eyes and deer with six antlers and frogs with beaks and birds with arms all on a migratory pilgrimage together to some fabled land where earth still remains.

Cute. Or, Environmental catastrophe?

Oh, certainly.

When oceans rise do you think Winnipeg's basin will fill back up like the prehistoric lake it once was?

Maybe. Or tornados will dance constantly through the city. Each of these highrises replaced by an eternally spinning cyclone.

Good one. What about fault lines that start trembling and rupturing, even in the centre of the continent, ripping up the prairie and shooting mountains into the sky. Filling Winnipeg's basin with molten lava.

Yeah. But probably just mass starvation. Drought and death. Our rivers and lakes full of poison. Fields of dust. Oceans turned upside down.

When I look ahead all I see is white. Like an existential nothing.

Like in cartoons when the fourth wall breaks and it's just daffy duck on a sheet of white talking back to his animator?

Yeah, only without the animator.

Are we daffy, then?

I don't think so. No. There isn't even an animation. It's just a page without any means to be marked.

Shit, fox. That's grim, ixby said as they stood and walked over to the fire escape to crawl down to mink's bathroom.

mink came over and climbed into my lap. The lawn chair creaked beneath our combined weight. I let her settle deeper into me. *If the chair breaks, it breaks*, I thought. She put her arms around my neck and rested her head on my shoulder.

You really see nothing but white? She asked.

The blood was rushing in my ears like early volcanic rumblings. *When I close my eyes. When I try to see that far ahead. Sure.*

What do you see when you close your eyes now. When you're only trying to see now. She asked.

I see your tits.

Fuck off. She laughed.

Sorry. Sorry. Ok. I mean, honestly, all I see is dark. It's not like the white is, though, not like the future. It isn't nothing, it's just dark.

Dark is good. I mean, I get that. There's infinite dark inside of us, you know. It hovers between our atoms and between the particles in our atoms and between whatever those particles are made of. Everything in the world is made up of almost infinite darkness.

That isn't very comforting.

It's not supposed to be comforting. It just is. There's infinite darkness outward too. Is that comforting?

Not really.

Oh, well. Aren't you going to ask me what I see when I close my eyes?

Sorry. Yeah. What do you see?

Your tits.

5

forgiveness is an open casket

minutes feb 12

chair, mink aka rabies aka twofists

minutes, ayna aka lockjaw aka punching bag

present, brisby mink fox badger ayna

fingers:: 111 block, 11 hesitant, 1 unsure, 0 consent

Buzzkill 2.2 10 pages, print at oxford? 60 editions colour, or 200 b+w

cover - rosi's shoot image 2; inside cover - collective statement; pg 3 - drought poem 1; pg 4-6 -

mini-essay 'shoal 40 and water sovereignty'; pg 7-8 - rosi's shoot image 1+3; back inside -

drought poem 2; back cover - image 4

mink - colour print essential

badger - more copies better for mobilization

move to print 10page/colour/max budget

moved by mink/ayna

brisby 111, badger 111, fox 0

motion blocked

mink - cut pages to 8 for more colour editions?

rosi's pics need colour

Cut the drought poems?

me - echoes. but cut two images?

fox - echoes. Cut poems

(cut my damn poems, see if i care)

brisby - can't depend on donations for next zine if we don't distribute more copies

badger - echoes

fox - fundraising is a failure overall

need new strategy

*(is it any surprise that people don't want to buy baked goods
from crust punks
collecting change in tin cups
on the floor of the science complex?)*

move to print 8page/colour/max budget
by fox/mink
badger 111, brisby 111, ayna 11
motion blocked

move to print 10page/b+w/max budget
by brisby/badger
ayna 11, mink 111, fox 11
motion blocked

perfect. beautiful

brisby - distribution the main issue

badger - spreading shit vs showcasing art
aesthetics matter
mink - echoes

fox - language in collective statement alienating
wording should be easy to understand for non-academics

fuck. not this again

brisby - best language is concise
passage would be twice as long if we dumb it down

badger - our audience is academics
don't want to be coddled

retorts locked and loaded

mink - not the place to discuss
already agreed on statement

was fox at that mtg?

mink - make this one of several prints of same edition?
collect more donations while distributing
tie to fundraising

fox - keep full content?

move to print 10page/colour/max budget
mink/fox
brisby 11, badger 11, ayna 1
consensus

*trees ache in
winter like
overslept bones
stretching*

*snow is canvas for
shadows
distended limbs
snapping fingers
crumbling*

--

The day mink flooded big college I was alone on campus. It had been three weeks since I'd seen or spoken to her, since I'd called 911. It was afternoon. badger messaged me

marble steps outside the college

And then

mink is here

And then

hurry

In the bright of day the windows of big college hides behind stone columns, pocket-thin strips of dark glass reflecting slivers of pale sky. The marble steps ought to have been visible as I ran across the quad but hundreds of students were crowded at the exits of the building, blocking the steps from view. The fire alarm was ringing and over that I could faintly hear shouting. Where is badger? I stamped the thick mud off my boots and pushed through the gathering, toward the voice that I knew to be mink's.

mink stood at the top of the marble steps. The crowd was tight, a half-moon around her platform. Where is badger? A long beige sheet was draped over the steps with huge letters in red paint reading "Your Student Experience Courtesy of Dead Indians". In panic-tripping, pitch-shaking shouts-sometimes-screams, mink was delivering a sermon.

--

read slowly. she is shouting. screaming. she is hoarse:

don't let them wrap learning
over your eyes like
sick blankets
indian corpses
to be students at
this university is an
act of colonization

*did you read that in screams? i think you did not.
start from the top and go slowly. she is screaming:*

it is not enough to say we
reject it
not enough when
they fix our
lives our livelihoods our
ability to live to their
violence it is
violence to live

then

*--mink pulls a folded knife from her pocket--or was it in her hand the whole time--i don't know, i
can remember it both ways--she rolls up her sleeve--her eyes on my eyes and then the eyes
beside mine on my eyes and then her eyes and mink drags up her sleeve and--*

quickly. she is whispering. we strain to hear:

poison
to tear new veins into
old earth
pry like weeping
infant mouths
newborn screams
pores of earth
porous soil
rivers heaving
dissolving bodies

then

*--mink, eyes on my eyes, digs the knife into her forearm, just above the back of her left wrist, and pulls hard and fast and red and thick to her elbow from which falls a long, coiled sheet of skin--
she is screaming she is--screaming--*

--it is the only sound i have ever heard--

--wrist trembling, passes the blade into bloodsoaked--her hand--rips, again, sheet of flesh from her right arm falls--like coiled wood-shavings--we are still--we have never moved/have never heard/the womb is warm/cocoon does not unwrap slowly but breaks off in little pieces/falling scabs--

so, slowly again. through blankets of falling red she is screaming as blankets spill from her arms over the cold steps--screams waver like blood pulses like heart beating until--finally we are/moving/the crowd moves--we grab her/the crowd moves to grab her--I reach for--she moves to--knife drops--body limp at my touch but--

in blankets she spreads herself over us screaming:

power
has to come from somewhere
it comes from
the ground
and from hands
our hands theirs
hands to plow beneath
hands to build
hands to pass profit between
hands not holding
hands choking hands
spilling

*--under blankets of her bleeding we hold her to the ground--first shaking from her screaming and then the ground is ripping, earth creaking, like scratch of her screaming, echo erupting, now dim in our ears but still screams she is screaming
hoarse and disintegrating:*

suffocate
drown
remorse is
nothing is nothing is
passive is violence is
violence is

--her body pinned beneath me and blankets of bleeding--i nestle wet eyes in the back of her blood soaking--ground shakes again and with a guttural rumbling the door of the college bursts open with gushing brown sewage--flows like the river--shit, piss and runoff--our bodies digested, debris and brown steaming--

*--I'm trying to lift her--we're slipping in shit and the weight of the crowd hanging over our
bodies while--
mink's hoarse white voice is a flame's angry whisper
at water poured over its kindling--*

--

mink's eyes are closed. Her face, expressionless, is pocked with dozens of large long scratches and scabs. She is flat on her back with just a thin pillow under her head. Her left arm is amputated just past the elbow, the stub wrapped in bright white bandages. Her right arm is wrapped from wrist to elbow, her remaining hand covered in a thick white glove and wrist strapped to a raised bar of the bedframe. There is a long leather strap across her chest, over both arms, secured beneath the bed. Bright flowers, carnations and daisies, crowd the bedside table in foggy-glass giftshop vases. Underneath the vases, stacks of newspaper. The room smells like rubbing alcohol and rot.

I stand at the foot of her bed for a long time. I can't tell if she is sleeping or just has her eyes closed. I don't want to interrupt if she is sleeping. Maybe that is just an excuse. Maybe I don't want her to see me. Maybe I don't want to see her. I turn to walk away but with the first step she mutters softly 'don't go.'

I stop and turn back to the bed. Her eyes are still closed--this irritates me.

'It feels nice to have you here, you know, thank you.'

I do not move. A rabbit tricks its predators by the power stillness. Maybe I can stand here motionless until she dies and she'll never see me and we'll never need to have this conversation. mink's breathing is stuttered and heavy. She looks weightless in the scary way. 'Why didn't you come before?'

One of the scabs beside her mouth cracks with her speaking. A sliver of blood settles on her cheek.

‘It’s ok if you were scared.’

‘I wasn’t scared.’

‘Are you going to take care of me again?’

‘There are nurses to take care of you now.’

mink opens her eyes heavily, bloodshot and shallow. ‘Right, yes.’ Then, scanning over my trembling figure. ‘Don’t be mad.’

‘I’m not mad.’

Wind gusts angry at the window. The panes crash loudly. Outside trees shake and bow. The window is closed but the curtains are blowing. I chew hard on the inside of my cheek.

‘It’s been in the news lots. onnun’s brought me all the papers. Do you want to see?’

mink motions her eyes to the bedside table. She cannot move her arms.

‘No. I’ve seen them already.’

‘Even if you’re mad, seems like it made a pretty big impact.’ mink closes her eyes again, a little smile.

‘I’m not mad.’ I am choking. I turn again to leave.

‘Wait, fox, please. I don’t want to die here alone. It’s so bright.’

I turn back to her. Fluorescent light rakes over her scars. Small panic in her face.

‘What am I supposed to do? Stand here until you die?’

Small grimace. Silence.

‘So, what is it you accomplished, exactly?’ I am spitting, hostile. ‘What have you seen in the news about Wincorp or corporatized education or real-home? Nothing, right? Because I’ve seen

nothing. All they care about is you.’ I’m shouting, have I been shouting all along? ‘They don’t care about the integrity of research or ixby’s home or the forest or the river, mink, they mostly don’t even care that you’re a student. You’ve just given them a bullshit sensational story about another sick-in-the-head millennial that lost their shit. The story does nothing and goes nowhere except to make a flashy headline and collect clicks.’

mink nods her head slowly. Looks down at her feet.

‘Well fucking done. You’re so selfish.’

A punch of wind bursts the window open and spins manically through the room. mink’s bedcurtains dance around her like gymnast’s ribbons, framing her solemn face in frantic spirals of pale yellow. Against the sickly hospital linens, her skin is glowing--the dollop of blood on her cheek is a dew sprinkled rose in her teeth. I grind my jaw tight against my cheek. My mouth fills with blood.

‘You left the collective a mess.’ I spit red. ‘We’ve been together once since the flood and that was today. To talk about you.’

‘That’s not my fault.’ mink’s voice is calm and soft. Benevolent through windswept curtains. The rose at her cheek cracks.

‘Like fuck it’s not your fault.’ I am screaming ‘And now you’re dying and isn’t that just fucking perfect because no one can be mad at you but me and everyone thinks I’m the asshole for being mad at all.’ My last words are heavy and wet, splatter fat mouthfuls of blood on the blanket over her feet.

‘I don’t think you’re an asshole’ mink says quietly.

‘Well, I think you’re an asshole.’

I drop cross-legged to the floor at the foot of mink's bed where she can't see me because she's strapped down and I sob mouthfulls of blood into my palms as a wind rips violently through the room. Beeping machines slam against the wall; curtains rip from their rods; furniture is upturned and tossed. The room crashes and shatters and splinters around me and I hold my fluid face.

When the cyclone quits, I stand. mink's eyes are closed and her face expressionless. The room is demolished and I'm unsure of how much of the damage is my fault. The colourful flowers that stood by mink's bed are ripped to confetti and strewn in a ring around her body.

6

how to finish what you've started

What's the longest you've ever held your breath.

I don't know, maybe, like, a minute and a half?

I can hold mine for four minutes. Wanna see?

No, that's impossible. I don't want to see.

mink rolls, dewy grass squishes, sky like dark water surrounds her as though she is half submerged. She brushes her hand against mine. Soft. Everything is soft here. My brain sloshes gentle as a cradle in my skull. I move to sit up. mink sucks air hard between her teeth, her breath screeches like a door-hinge. She puffs out her cheeks and stares at me lopsided. Laughing eyes. I poke her side and she deflates. Laughing mouth. Round. Soft. Her chest concaves. Warm breath in my palms.

You never let me have any fun.

Untrue. Tell the star story, again?

Ok. She smiles. Perfect. Sits up. We face each other. Our knees bent, legs intertwined. She clears her throat for effect. She tells this story with her hands.

It starts with instability. You are the centre. She places a hand on each of my bare thighs. *A cloud of dust in empty dark begins to swirl.* Her fingers fold and open against me. *Warm. Eager.* Her fingers dip lower. *Dust swirls faster and faster in perfect dark. Dust grows tighter and tighter.* Her fingers trace over my labia. Trembling. *Density increases with each turn. Is heavier. Is deeper.* Dancing between my lips, delicate. *Friction builds heat, is hotter, hotter. Hotter than spilling blood.* She pushes inside me. *Hotter than forest fires.* She

pushes deeper. *The core of the earth.* I lean my head at her throat. *Spins deeper and hotter and tighter and tighter until.* She whispers. *Perfect.* Her throat hums against me.

Perfect, it halts. It is everything. Time itself. Mass hovers like a glass overfull clings liquid in. Brimming. Brimming at the edges of time and space. Complete and perfect and brimming and then. Her fingers so quickly. *Eternity folds.* She's drumming my skin. *The mass spills over.* She's strumming my strings. *Grinds together.* Vibrations crescendo. *Collapses inward.* Breath escaping. *Explodes.*

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'Jesus, fox, what the fuck.' badger sprints toward me. I'm slouched sleepily against the pedestal in the field-soon-to-be-a-suburb.

'What?' I mutter back.

He crouches down in front of me and wipes the sleeve of his coat over my face. Scratchy. He pulls the sleeve away and it is covered in rusty blood.

'Oh, shit, right.' It occurs to me that I've walked two hours through the suburbs with blood running out of my mouth, smeared over my forehead, pooled on my shirt, staining my sneakers. badger pulls water from his bag and hands it to me. I pour it over my face and wipe my face on my bloody shirt.

'I went to see mink.' I say, handing the bottle back.

'Do you consider that explaining yourself? You've made it way worse. Take off your shirt.'

I take off my shirt and put on badgers coat and he wets the blood-free back-half of my shirt and uses it to wipe my face and then we sit down in the dead grass and he looks at me and I snicker and he scowls and that makes me really laugh and then we both laugh until our lungs hurt and

we're tipping over and it's really not a great way to handle the situation but what are we supposed to say.

When we've caught our breath again, badger asks 'Will you come with us to the protest at SU? It'd really be good for you.'

I shrug. 'I dunno.'

'Why not?'

From across the field, across the highway, I see ixby walking toward us with ayna and onnun.

'I'm waiting to see what feels right.' I say.

badger nods, shifts his weight, brow furrowed. 'Ok.' He pulls a small carving from his pocket and hands it to me. It's the little house he was carving yesterday, with the four pillars and a peaked roof. Inside, a centrepiece floats. He's whittled a smooth round ball in between the beams, just barely too big to escape. I roll the ball against its bars with my thumb. He has sanded the whole figure smooth and varnished it too. It has this perfect, chemically processed wood smell. I smile at badger and put it in my pocket.

My phone buzzes and it is ixby. I wave my illuminated phone screen over my head so that they can see us. We sit and wait and watch the sky.

'Gemini, I think.' badger says, pointing over my head.

I try to meet his gaze but can't spot the constellation. 'Cool.'

'And orion's belt' he says, moving his finger.

'What's the rest of him, though? I've never been able to tell.'

‘Two above’ badger points, squinting one eye closed, ‘two below and the foot.’ I follow his finger through the sky. ‘There’s the first arm. I think it’s holding a sword, and then the other arm, and those two are the shield, or bow, maybe.’

‘See that one there?’ I point over my head at an indistinguishable mass of dim little stars

‘No’ badger says.

‘It’s called little-clump.’

badger rolls his eyes.

‘And that one over there?’ I point to a bigger mass of nothing stars ‘that one’s big-clump.’

‘Where?’ asks badger.

‘It doesn’t matter. Oh, and that one! That’s long-potato.’

‘Ha.’ badger laughs small and guttural.

ixby, ayna, and onnun arrive and stand over us grinning. ‘Cute spot.’ says ixby.

‘What’s this?’ ayna asks, looking the pedestal up and down.

‘The tombstone for whatever suburb they’re planning to dig here.’ I say.

‘It doesn’t have a name,’ onnun says.

‘Mmm, let’s fix that.’ ixby says. They dig into their backpack and pull out a can of spray paint.

badger and ayna give ixby a boost while onnun and I sit in the grass. When ixby comes down we can just barely read their mark, a cursive string of black paint like a hole cut through to the crackling black sky that reads

RIP

We laugh together and settle down in the dirt with our cold hands in our pockets. The horizon is suspended in perfect ineffable dark, the same dark brimming between my shivering atoms.