

Horseplay

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I've never seen a play, but if I did, it would be one where all the people are horses. Or all the actors are people, but they're pretending to be horses. Horses pretending to be people. And they have to *clip-clop-clip-clop* their way around the stage, but not too much, because people don't *clip-clop-clip-clop*, and since they're playing horses pretending to be people, they have to do it only enough to be believable. Yes, in this play, there is no perfection. In this play, the story emerges from the cracks.

I'm not sure what it would be about, exactly, but I think if I saw a play like this, where people are pretending and pretending, someone would need to be outed as a horse. All the other people/horse/people pretenders would have to play a mystery. A witch hunt – no – a horse hunt! Ha!

The thing about plays, and remember I've never seen one, is that audiences like a certain amount of familiarity. They like to feel like they know what's about to happen and it either comes to fruition or it doesn't in a memorable and totally narratively justified way. That's the key: the patterns. Without them, it's just people in horse costumes.

I was thinking about this yesterday during the rest period. It can get so quiet, you know, because no one is around and even the bird stops chirping. I made sure to only move as necessary, but a bead of sweat slipped into my eye, and it stung. I'm pretty sure it's made of the same stuff as tears, but I had to wipe it out of my eye to stop the burning, and I estimated about five wasted calories.

A horse would never be able to get a reverse tear out of its eye. That's one way to be outed.

When the sun finally sank past the window, Gillian was already at my door.

We were on the outskirts of the neighborhood when she asked me a question that sent me into a spiral.

"Jesus, I'm sorry."

She threw her hands up in the air, a surrender.

The billboard across the street was bowing like an Englishman. Had it advertised something other than the scratched and weathered face of an injury lawyer, a drooping man raccooned in dust and spray paint, it would have been regal. Gillian jumped in the air and gave the post a good slap. The metal rang out.

I saluted the billboard man. I bet he used that injury money to get out of here when it was still possible. Good for him.

"There's really no point in asking."

"It was just a question. Trying to make conversation."

"That's some of the most dangerous thinking you could be doing. The second you're imagining some other life you could be living, even though you *know* you can't, you're giving up on the one you have. And that's step one of the very few steps between this and dying."

She twisted her hand into a little puppet, mocking me. "Between this and dyyyyyinnngggg." The puppet hand plummeted and turned belly up, her sweet puny wrist glaring up toward the moonlight. How easy it would have been to end her right then and there.

Everyone inside was up to something. The dark-haired woman in a geisha outfit snorted powder off the kitchen counter. A cavalry of strangers lined up, waiting for their turn behind her. It's the little things. All that's left, really. Some were sitting on the floor chatting and laughing. Behind them, a rawboned man drew a landscape on the wall. With big fat markers, the stinky ones, the ones you can't get anymore, he colored in a cowboy sunset, where everything is orange and red and if you were lucky, you could ride a horse off into it and find some better story.

Freddy handed Gillian and me a shot glass each.

"Your rations, ladies." Lips curled, a tip of a cap, onto the next one.

Gillian rolled her eyes and clinked her glass against mine.

"TAKE YOUR SEATS, LADIES, GENTLEMEN, AND THE REST OF YOU FORTGOTTEN BEINGS AND DIRTBAGS," a voice boomed from the other room, and everyone shuffled to their spots.

Donning a bedsheet around his waist and shoulder, Billy pranced through the doorway. He wasn't the biggest guy in the room, but even with those poor bones he gripped everyone's attention. We were here for him, really. The show, too, but Billy was the biggest part of the Archives. Three months ago, after the first few shows, it was obvious no one was watching. No one cared about Neighborhood 76.

Knees to chin, Gillian folded her body in a rickety chair by the window. Like the bird, she could never rest low. She always had to be perched on something. The woman in the kimono sat next to me on the floor, buzzing, then tapped my knee and smiled, two black teeth shoved in next to the rest of them. They were smeared with cherry red lipstick.

"You been here before?" she asked.

"You know I have."

"I haven't seen you."

"We do this every time I'm here."

"We do what?"

"This! You and me. We do this."

Her face scrunched, the white makeup creasing at her brow.

“Does Billy know you’re here?”

“Fuck off, lady,” I said, standing.

I moved to the floor next to Gillian’s chair, my back against the wall. The warmth from the day was still in the plaster and it slid up my spine.

Even amongst friends, you can never be too careful.

The geisha lady didn’t notice, or she already forgot our interaction. She picked at a thread in her hemline and ripped it out with those obsidian teeth, slipping it around her tongue until it was sopping wet. She tied it into a knot and flicked it across the room toward a person sitting at the front. Then she tapped on the knee of someone else and pulled them into her web.

“FRIENDS, ROMANS, COUNTRYMEN, LET’S GET THIS SHIT STARTED.”

Voices lowered; limbs sank to the floor.

“Tonight, we have a special treat for you. Something that has never been played at the Archives before. Something I didn’t even know we had until I found it under an old storage crate. It isn’t even listed in the official catalogue.” He lifted a plastic blue case into the air, its cover mostly ripped, but the remaining was half a woman’s face smiling up, eyes all shine and madness, sequins and lipstick. “*Sunset Boulevard*.”

He popped the disc into the projector system, an ancient thing jerry-rigged to an illegal solar generator. The machine sucked the disc into its body, grinding and whining. The screen flicked on and off, a little menu appeared and disappeared. Billy waved his hand over it, feeling for its exhaust. He rapped his knuckles on the side of the box and wiggled a fraying cable. The menu returned. The music began. Once it was queued up, he stepped back and sat on the other side of Gillian.

The funny thing about these old movies was that I could never imagine these worlds as real. But look at that man in his suit, all those fabrics, that tie swaying side to side in the water. Look at those men, the ones being cops. Look at their weird little hats, the way they peer into the water at the drowned man and are caught by this camera. In what world could this many people put something like this together? In what world is it worth anyone’s time to pretend?

But I absorbed these made-up people, the sets, these costumes and wigs. The world I knew leaked a little bit more each time, and that night, my body knotted on the floor, Gillian’s neck straight, like the bird just before it flies away, Billy with his too big ears: I knew what it would’ve been like to stomp around on a big hollow stage.

Billy wrapped his arm around Gillian’s leg, clutching at her knee. She looked down at him, but only for a second before she shot her chin back toward the screen and adjusted her posture, letting his weight hang off of hers. It’s something he does. It’s something she lets him do.

The film ended where it started, but the meaning changed. Remember what I said about patterns? They’re not just for horses. That main character – not the guy

who ends up dead, but the actress – I knew that look in her eye. She descended that staircase, all those cameras in her face, and she told them what she wanted, what she needed. I, too, knew what it felt like to make a request of the universe.

Billy rose from the puzzle of Gillian's legs and surveyed the room. Only a few sleepers. A couple folks at the counter licking up dust like fiendish kittens. Freddy prepping a row of shot glasses. Mostly, the rest of us, arranged around the floor in different groups and poses, transitioning back to the plane of the real, from that unimaginable world into this one.

"AND NOW WE BEGIN."

This is what people came to the Archives for. The films, yes, but we were here for Billy. The archivist. The teacher. The professor. Important people throughout history take surprising shapes, and Billy's undergrown, spindly form was no exception.

Knowledge resides in the strangest containers.

"When we tell the story of the before, of the past, of that which preceded us and our knowings, of the world's ancestry, of *our* ancestry, of the big, long scrape of desire and desperation that humanity has scorned upon this wretched earth, of everything from then until now, of all the little whinings and secrets and sips of water and blood spilled and semen swallowed and pictures drawn and technologies built and technologies destroyed and mothers made and then lost – when we talk about that story, we are talking about something so vast we can never know it. But we are compelled, aren't we? Look at us."

Billy lifted his arms and gestured around the room. Heads turned, bodies creaked.

"The one throughline in all of this unknowable history, in this infinite story, is this: compulsion. Desire. The more more more more more."

He squealed this last part like an angry baby, smacking his tongue on the roof of his mouth, lips at the teat of the universe.

Gillian laughed, the only one, her brief cackle filling the room.

"But we know better, don't we? We know that this compulsion is bred from the same thing that led humanity to this. That left us here to scavenge like rats. And that's what they want: rodents. They can control rodents. We are all here because we are the unwanted, the undesired, the left behind. We are the very few who are still connected to this land. Whatever the stories we tell ourselves about being here, in Neighborhood 76, the truth is that we are the future of this place. We will not be controlled by agents of the past."

A silence. Billy paced the front of the room while he spoke, a sentry.

"I am here to show you that we can learn from our mistakes. We may think that we're at the tail end of our lineage, but we are at the beginning. This," he pointed out the windows, into the dark, "this is an act of revision. We are the ones meant to inhabit a better world. And to this, we say, ONWARD!"

This was a slogan of his. Onward. He thrust his weary little fist in the air and everyone sitting on the ground, even me, jumped to their feet and cheered. I clapped so much I felt the pulse in my palms. And on his cue, the social part of the evening began. Freddy passed out the booze and everyone clumped into groups.

Gillian's hollow-boned frame slid up to Billy again. The way she both leaned into and pulled away from him reminded me of an adolescent tree, back when storms and the wind would push the branches so hard, it would relent, fall slack. It would bow to the earth.

"Hey, Billy," I said, shoving myself between the two. I could be a barrier; I could be an excuse. If she wanted it.

"Finn," he replied.

"So, that one wasn't in the catalogue?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you found it under a box."

"Oh, yeah. I was doing some cleaning house. It was all caked in dust, too. It took forever to clean without scratching it."

"Seems weird that you wouldn't have seen it before, though. How unorganized are you down there?" I slapped the side of his arm and laughed.

Gillian's face could never hide her embarrassment, the way her eyes widened, how she grabbed my elbow with her cold, spiny fingers.

"What are you saying?"

I liked Billy, really, I did. He opened up an entirely different world for us and made it possible to be a part of the Archives. But he was so easy to rile up, I couldn't help myself. Some part of me wanted him to know he wasn't our savior.

"Just a joke," I smiled.

He raised an eyebrow, wrapped an arm around Gillian's waist, and turned to Freddy. "Over here!"

Drinks, drinks, drinks. Freddy was synonymous with the stuff. His demeanor was an antidote to Billy's. Freddy's eyebrows took over his face. It was hard to notice the rest of him, how under there he was a pretty good-looking guy. But those brows were like fat caterpillars. He played a role here: Billy's sidekick, Billy's bus boy, Billy's minor character, Billy's supporting actor. Every once in a while, I saw past the script: a heavy energy, calm but morose. A man lost at sea.

"To your health," he said, a glass for each of us.

Up, down, gulp.

"So, what did you think?" Billy asked, eyes on Gillian, hands on Gillian, that infant hunger radiating.

"I felt so bad for her. I mean, the world moved on while she wasn't looking and then that's it. There was nothing left for her, nothing really."

He nodded, adjusted his bedsheet toga. "Right, exactly. It's what it is to be stuck in a time you weren't meant to be in. Weren't meant to thrive in."

Freddy sauntered away. He handed out shots to more people. It must have felt good to have a job, to be able to dip in and out.

"Exactly," Gillian said.

"It's why I picked it – in a lot of ways, Norma is an example of how our past controls us. It's not the world as it is that keeps us down. It's our unwillingness to let go of a past that no longer suits us."

Gillian nodded, big eyes, burning breath.

"You really think that?" I asked.

"It's an interpretation."

He turned back toward Gillian, which was my cue to move on.

"I am just not sure what she was supposed to have done different. Aren't we all made up of everything that came before us?" I asked.

The room hummed. Mouths and palms came together and broke apart, reformed on other sides of the house. Lines appeared and disappeared on the kitchen counter. Voices grew, voices shriveled. Bodies trickled out. The sun found its way to the other side of the sky and began clawing its way up, starting its next brutal ascent.

By the time I managed to pry Billy off Gillian, we were late to the Well. Dangerously late. Freddy already left, and Billy's toga was somehow both sagging and riding up his boyish body, his pink, soft belly and milky hairless thighs exposed, nauseating.

The world outside was orange and gleaming.

"We'd better hoof it."

Gillian's flimsy legs looked like they could snap at any moment, but she tolerated my hurrying.

Out the gate, down the cracked and fraying road. Through and out the lot that holds the Archives. Past the billboard, his ragged stare recording our every move.

"I don't see what you like about him," I said.

"Billy?"

"Yeah, don't get me wrong. I like the shows. I even like his speeches. I get *that*. But I don't get the way you let him touch you like that."

Gillian's shoulders were nuts and bolts, washers and screws, true joints, all of their little mechanisms visible under her skin. She hugged them up to her ears.

"I don't know," she said. "I guess it just seems right?"

"Right, how?"

"Like, why not, you know?"

We turned into the Well.

"Did you remember your card?"

She twisted herself around and pulled it out of her back pocket.

At the gates, only a few people were still waiting. The sun was almost above the horizon and everyone with any sense had come and gone at least an hour ago. I tapped my card, and the turnstile unlocked. Pushed forward. Gillian right after.

I swerved to the left lane; the Official I liked was almost always assigned to the same spot. He nodded at me, and I nodded right back. I've never seen his face clearly under the visor, under the hood and the face shield, but I liked that he acknowledged us. The other ones were essentially machines. I gulped down the paper cup of water and showed him its empty bottom. Handed it back. He threw it in the sanitized bin and released my rations: two plastic sealed lumps of tasteless nutrients that will sustain me until tomorrow.

"My liege," I crooned, kicking back my leg and bowing deeply, my forehead nearly to my knee.

Gillian laughed, but the Official didn't. He waved her forward.

"Next."

We crossed the asphalt lot, stepping over the cracks. Gillian nibbled at her food. She never learned to pace herself, to control her impulses. It was one of her many flaws, one of the million things I liked about her.

The sun penetrated the skyline, singeing my cheeks. From the other side of the lot, someone called out to us. Everything was blurry and bright.

"I'll be quick!" the voice said.

Gillian sidled up to me, nesting her food in her bag.

"Just a second, really!" they called again. They squawked from behind an old tollbooth, a junky blue structure at the edge of the asphalt expanse. "I need a little help."

Around the booth, a shade tent hung precariously between an old sliding window frame and a large stone on the ground. The acrid reek of piss and flesh rose, worsening every second with the sun's climb. Old plastic cups, stretched out springs, shards of metal and plastic, table legs, bedsheets, a busted guitar, a small trash can, shoes of varying sizes and styles, and even a few books – an astounding collection of things that would be very easily considered contraband. They were all splayed around this shit-soaked encampment, reeking and rotting. Amidst the heap, a body camouflaged as a weird relic. This person wore a strange outfit from another time: purple trousers, a matching jacket, and around their neck, a loosened tie, knotted too many times – it looked more like a leash.

"Any chance you could spare one of your rations?"

Gillian looked away.

At first glance, the person appeared to be quite old, but they were a mirage. Their eyes were tired, their face fissuring and churning, but they couldn't have been older than me.

"I lost my card, and the system won't recognize me," they said, digging through the heap of junk. "I can show you. I can show you the paperwork. They made me fill it out. But then they gave it back to me. Nothing they could do, no nothing, they said. But without my card, nothing either. Can't cross over, can't stay here. I can trade you for one of my things. I just need something. Please."

They lifted a wet, rotting book toward me. Gillian skirted behind me. I could hear the tears welling up in her eyes. Such a waste of water.

"Alright, but I can't do it again, you know. I'm not going to just fork over my rations every time I come to the Well. Okay?"

I looked them in the eye.

"Of course, of course, I would never, never expect, no, not ever, no, we need everything we can get, don't we, everything."

They rose from the pile, bent, cracking. They handed me the book and I pulled one of my meals from my pocket.

"Stay safe," I said.

The person grabbed my wrist and pulled me in. Their eyes were yellowed, hair alive with whatever species found a home in it. When they opened their mouth, a jaundiced string of spit stretched between their lips, the haunting smell of an eco-system in that maw, fermenting and growing.

"You are the one who needs to stay safe, not me. You, it's you, you and her." They point to Gillian. "Don't tell anyone you got that from me. No, I wasn't here. I've never been here and neither have you, no, none of us have been here before. Right? Right? Everything we can get. Right? Oh, everything."

I rip my arm from their grasp and shove them back into their pile. Gillian and I darted back across the parking lot.

The sun filling the sky, we galloped. No looking back. Forward, ever forward. When I got to my squat, I told Gillian to keep running, to not stop, that this place is full of nightmares, and that none of us can escape the past, not in a place like this.

"Get back now and I'll see you tomorrow," I yelled.

Inside my squat, I flipped through the book. Its pages were fat with warping and bending, having soaked up so much of the world in its time. It smelled like smoke and decay. It was a wonder the pages were still together, and with each turn, I was sure it would fall apart in my hands. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I hid it in the drawer and pulled my weary body into the shade bed. My wrist still smelled like the person behind the tollbooth.

To fall asleep, I counted to one hundred. I started over. Again. How many one hundreds before my brain could shut off? How many clips and how many clops?

It's probably important to know I've never seen a horse. I know about them, the way we all know things about the before. They used to live here, I guess, prancing around the valley and drinking from the rivers, before they were dammed up, before they dried up. Horses were big with soft noses and when people rode them, they turned into a new kind of creature, a chimera thundering through the desert. They say the horses liked it, having that sense of purpose. Too much freedom is another kind of prison.

The sirens started midday. I was asleep – miraculously, a dense, black sleep – and was startled awake.

They'd only ever gone off for tests.

"Out! NOW!"

How many calories did I burn shooting out of my shade bed? Flying across the floor? Is that what we were saving them for all those years?

Outside, people were running, catching their breath every few hundred feet. The afternoon sun was in full force, reflecting off derelict streetlights and the glass of shelters across the way. Flocks of Officials in shade suits knocked on every door, yelling. Down the street, the heat pooled silver light, and for a brief moment it looked like everyone was parading toward it, cinching their spines, preparing to dive into its cool, slippery body. Screams and legs and long slivers of flesh.

One of the Officials pointed at me.

"Go!" he yelled.

My feet were bare, my shoulders uncovered. I hurried back into my house and grabbed a shawl. I pulled my boots over my sticky heels. Just as I was turning to run back out the door, I saw it: the bird. It was propped up against the windowsill, unnervingly calm, leaning the entirety of its miniscule body to the left. Oh, the bird. I'd never seen it this close. How its feathers conjured dramatic spots on its breast, daggers of wings. Its eyes were wet beads – their glinting, their reflection – it was hard to believe this creature really existed. Its partially agape beak was an unkempt fingernail. It blinked. It looked at me. I tapped my finger on the glass, and it shuffled its feet, or tried to. One foot stretched out, but the other lay limp at its side, snapped and bent.

Officials were everywhere. I slipped out of the squat and turned the corner. The bird tried to scoot away from me, but the weight it put on its broken foot tipped it over and the bird flopped onto its side. I grabbed it and wrapped it up in my scarf. One hand cradling its hollow, shaking body, I emerged back onto the street and joined the flow of running bodies. The stampede, if you will.

Across the way, an Official was dragging someone out of their house. They clawed their doorframe, kicked, shrieked. Then, I suppose after the Official was fed up, they took a blow to the head. Slumped slack on the asphalt.

Down the street at Gillian's squat, I paused in the shade of a sun-bleached billboard and pretended to catch my breath. Her door hung open. Clothes and trash and paper and everything she owned were strewn across the floor. Her shade bed's cover was ripped from its hinges and lay bunched by the bathroom. The bird writhed in my hand. It was as though it could tell, as though it could feel the fear in the air.

If this were a play, I'd cut out all this running. That's right: if this were a play, I'd open Act II with me busting down the door of the Archives to find Gillian. I'd rescue her from whatever took her before the sirens cried. And then I'd make sure the plot makes some kind of reference back to the beginning of the story. The audience would see the pattern, feel the cohesion. Gillian and I would be changed forever, somehow understanding each other in new, more complicated ways.

Maybe we'd kiss. Maybe we would go our separate ways, having grown from the experience. Our arcs fulfilled.

But this is not a play.

The truth is that I kept running in the direction of everyone else. It didn't occur to me to do anything different.

The bird was impossible to feed. I'd found a few ants and a cockroach by the toilets. The stalls were removed. An Official kept watch over the row of people shitting and pissing, which meant catching the bugs was precarious. He must have thought something was wrong with me, how long I sat and waited. But he was only there to make sure we weren't running faucets or flushing. Our bowels weren't his problem.

Even with the bugs, there wasn't enough water for the bird. I barely had enough for myself. A makeshift Well was set up on the far side of the gymnasium, although with smaller water cups offered less frequently.

I cradled the bird into my chest while I slept on my mat, Row 4, Aisle G.

"You did this to yourselves," an Official said. He took each of our cards and replaced them with name badges, to be worn around our necks at all times. "You chose this life."

Mat after mat after mat after mat of exhausted, thirsty people. There were at least three hundred of us in there. What are the odds that every single one of us would have decided to stay? In what world did any of us have a choice?

A tap on my shoulder.

I adjusted my scarf to hide the bird, trying to play it off as an itch.

Freddy. His caterpillar eyebrows furrowed at me, disappointing beasts.

"I didn't know you were here too," I said.

"I'm on the other side." He pointed to the far end of the gym, where the same indistinguishable crowds of people milled about between their mats and the bathroom.

"Have you seen Gillian? Billy?"

He shook his head. "You're the first person I've seen from the Archives." I looked around. Fog lights and swamp coolers. Body odor and dust. If I was there for three days and didn't see Freddy, was it possible I missed her too? "You need to get rid of that thing." He pointed at the shape of the bird.

"What thing?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"How long do you think we'll be in here?"

Freddy sat down next to my mat. I had only ever seen him as a butler, a host, a man who greeted you. Here, he was someone else.

"I'm sure they'll figure out what they're trying to figure out and we'll be out of here soon. This isn't ideal for them either."

"Figure out what?"

"It's only Neighborhood 76, you know. We're the only ones in containment."

All these people lived in my neighborhood? I'd never seen any of them.

"Do something about that thing in your scarf. If you don't, the Officials are going to take it away, and then you."

"Freddy, what do you know?"

"I'm not going to be able to stop them."

He rose from the ground and lumbered down the aisle and toward the dilapidated basketball hoop. A group of people took turns throwing their shoes through the ring. One made the shot, and they all raised their arms in the air and cheered.

One morning, the Officials called us all up from our mats. We were told to gather against the walls of the gym. "Leave your stuff with your mat," they said. "As close as you can to the wall. Everyone. Come on, come on."

We had been there for almost a week. A week of stiff joints, sleeping on the floor, trying not to watch each other's bodies be bodies. It is when people are sleeping that they are the most aligned with their flesh. Their bellies ebb and flow. Their throats clog and gag, they snore, they spew secrets, they scream and roll. When they wake, they are this other thing, this thing they know as themselves.

In that gymnasium, shades drawn, buzzing lights shut down, it was impossible not to watch the sea of bodies escaping the traps of their minds. Against the wall, we waited for our instructions. Grumbling. Whining. Pleas for more rations, more water. Some people looked ill, cheeks thinning, eyes sinking. The bird was still wrapped up in my scarf on my mat.

"Now jog," an Official called from the intercom.

Everyone looked around. One person from across the gym laughed, but most people weren't listening or weren't sure what the Official meant.

"Everyone. Now. JOG. Counterclockwise."

Officials in the center of the gym yelled. They closed in on us. Jog, they wanted us to jog. There were too many of us, it was too crowded to jog in any real way. But people started scuffling. Shoes squeaking against the linoleum. Somewhere between a walk and a prance, a horse and pony show. My legs could barely manage it. They stiffened, cramped, shrunk into fleshy stilts.

"Faster!"

The man ahead of me couldn't keep up either, and when I tried to pick up the pace, I accidentally kicked the back of his ankle. He came crashing to the ground, the heavy thud of his body hitting the floor with a depth of sound I've never heard. It was crushing. A few people hopped over him, continuing their jogging. I reached down to help him up, but he refused. He shook his head, curled his knees into his chest.

"Keep moving," an Official said to me, ambling up to the man.

I don't know what it was exactly. Maybe it was the way this Official leaned forward to check on the man, the way he caressed his arm while checking his pulse.

Maybe it was how his body moved, how his legs were short, but his fingers seemed too long. It was the Official from the Well. My Official.

“Seriously, keep moving,” he said to me.

He lifted the man from the floor. The old man’s frame curled around the Official, who carried him across the gym and out through a metal door that clanked an echo through the room when it opened, and again when it latched closed. I fell back in line, returned to the trot.

The lump of shawl on my mat was still there. I couldn’t tell exactly, but the bird seemed fine. It wasn’t moving, and I wondered if it, too, found the blessings of sleep.

Around and around we went. The stomping of feet against the floor. The room filling with hot breath. Sweat beaded and fell from my forehead, soaking my shirt. How much water was I giving to the air? How much could it take and take from me without giving anything back?

Ahead, one of the doors was cracked open. Somebody shoved something between the frame and the door, and the moonlight leaked in before dissipating in the fluorescence of the gym. I slowed down and skirted to the outer edge of the ring of joggers. I jogged in place, hoping no one would see me. Out the cracked door, there were other buildings, other parts of this place. There was a large truck with barred windows and a collapsible step ladder fitted onto the back of it.

Beyond, lit windows and the murmuring of walkie talkies.

Then, boots crunching dirt.

“It shouldn’t be too much longer,” a voice said.

“It better not,” said another.

“It’s not hard to break people down. They do it to themselves, really.”

“I just want to be done here. This place is foul.”

“You’ve been here for one week, man. Want to switch?”

The voices got closer, two figures bending around the truck. One, an Official with his visor up. His face – his face looked like any other face. He had eyes. A nose. A mouth. His cheeks were a little round, his chin softened by the padding of his neck: the padding of a man who has enough to eat. The other man, inhaling from a cigarette, was harder to see. His face was cast in shadow, but he wasn’t in an Official’s uniform. He was wearing worn out basketball shorts and a ratty gray T-shirt.

“I’d rather be dead, I think,” the Official says, laughing. He pulls his visor down over his face. “Best get back to it.”

They both turn toward the door. The other man’s face became clear, shining in the sliver of light pouring out of the gym. Those eyebrows. That look of a man with a job to do. Oh, he wasn’t lost at sea. He *was* the sea.

Freddy’s eye caught mine, briefly, for a cactus needle of time. I jogged away – back into the stampede, back into the ambiguity of other people and their bodies, back into the track race of Neighborhood 76.

A crackling voice churned on the intercom.

"Everyone to their mats. Rest period begins in five minutes."

The room swarmed. People going to the bathroom. People begging at the makeshift Well. Officials creating a wall between the squatters and the tables that passed out water and rations.

"It's not time," they yelled. "Back to your mats."

The woman on the mat next to me slid onto the floor, panting.

"So, what do you think they're going to do with all of us now?"

Her voice was a whisper, but it didn't feel restrained. It seemed like it was her normal speaking voice.

"What do you mean?"

"If there was an emergency any more urgent than the daily emergency of living here, wouldn't they have evacuated us? Wouldn't they have told us what's going on?"

While the woman was speaking, the bird started calling.

"You think all this effort is for nothing?"

The woman glanced down at the bunched-up scarf.

"I'm not saying it's nothing."

"Then what are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's *something*."

She parted her lips then, presumably a smile. Her teeth were black, iridescent. The woman rolled back over, and before I had a chance to say something, an Official was walking down the aisle.

"Rest period. Silence."

That's when the bird started flapping around under my shawl. Its cry turned into a screech. The poor thing started pecking at my fingers. Its hunger must have gotten the better of it. Its whole body vibrated. Its feathers puffed and rumbled. All those tiny bones, all that nothingness balled up into the form of a bird, it was unimaginable that this wimp of a creature could make so much sound. I pinched its beak closed. I tickled its breast feathers with my pointer finger.

The Official turned back toward me. "Hey," he said.

I cupped my hand over the bird, but it only screamed louder.

His boots stopped inches from the top of my head.

"What do you have?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Don't play games with me."

"It's nothing, really."

The people on the mats around me started sitting up, turning their heads, murmuring, rolling over.

"Give it to me."

The Official crouched down. He smelled like a campfire, like he'd been outside somewhere recently, somewhere like the woods. Woods: I've never seen them ei-

ther. That's the thing about the desert. You can tell when someone was born outside it.

"I'm going to ask one more time."

He would never have made it as a horse.

"You must be mistaken."

The bird cawed.

The Official smashed his palm into my face and lunged for the bird. Once it was in the grip of his hand, it screeched and flapped. I could barely catch a breath beneath the weight of his hand, clutching at my cheeks and chin. It's hard to estimate the strength of other people. I didn't know someone could, with one arm only, pin me down. I didn't know I could be so easily restrained. His hand hot on my face, his other, pulling the bird and my scarf away from my body.

"Where did you get it?"

He released my face. Clutched in his grip, the bird writhed. Its head slumped, neck broken. The final frenzied revolt of a body that had no options. Even in its most helpless moment, that bird fought to live.

"Don't make me ask again."

"Outside," I said between coughs.

"Outside where?"

"My squat."

He didn't believe me. The way his body hovered above me, the way his voice demanded answers, the way no Official has ever believed a squatter.

"Get up."

The bird's twisting slowed. Its feathers poked between his fingers. Its head hung slack.

"Up."

I could barely hear him.

"Now."

Three other Officials walked up. What did they think I looked like, all curled up and covered in bird shit on the floor of this gymnasium? Had any of them ever been contained like this? Had any of them ever pretended to be someone they weren't? Did it make them feel closer to who they actually are?

"I'm not going to ask again."

A stillness rose over the room.

One started it. Which one, I'm not sure. My ribs, my arms, my stomach, my legs. I wasn't a body anymore, but an accumulation of parts. I was a pile of bits. A kick to the face and I wasn't anything anymore. Tunnel-visioned, fat-lipped. They could have me.

It was only once the Officials pulled me off my mat, marched me out of the gymnasium and outside into the sunrise, only once they cheered and hooted and hollered in a sort of parade of compliance, three or four of them lined up, watch-

ing and congratulating the ones carrying me out, only once they shoved me into a small, dark room in another abandoned school building, only once they threw the carcass of the bird in after me and slammed the door – it was only then that I knew I'd never see Gillian again.

The interesting thing about the bird was that it looked, for a moment, like it could still be alive. Its fluff, its roundness. If I didn't look into its eyes, it could have fooled me as sleeping. It's the eyes that give everything away, even horses.

I.

The curtains never fully open. They begin to part but get stuck in the rails. A crashing sound. Stage right curtains snap and slump, leaving a weird space above them. Whoever is responsible for opening the curtains gives up when they're about three-quarters of the way. Finn trots around in circles. The stage is empty. They clip-clop the best they can. They stop, shake their head, try again. Clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop. A voice bel-lows from offstage.

UNKNOWN VOICE. Would you knock it off?

Finn stops, looks around. A beat. They shrug and keep working on their clip-clopping.
Seriously! Stop!

FINN. Who are you? (*Looking around, confused*) I mean, *where* are you?

UNKNOWN VOICE. Over here.

FINN. Uh...?

Finn walks across the stage, looking for wherever "over here" is.
I don't think you're here.

UNKNOWN VOICE. I'm definitely right here.

FINN. You're definitely not.

They look around. Once again, they do a clip-clop.

UNKNOWN VOICE. I could end you right here and now.

FINN. Fine, fine. I'll stop.

UNKNOWN VOICE. Good.

FINN. I promise.

UNKNOWN VOICE. Okay, thank you.

FINN. I piiiiiiiiinkie promise.

They lift a pinkie into the air.

UNKNOWN VOICE. I appreciate that.

FINN. But you have to do it too.

UNKNOWN VOICE. Do what?

FINN. Pinkies!

UNKNOWN VOICE. Why?

FINN. That's how pinkie promises work.

UNKNOWN VOICE. I am not doing pinkies.

FINN. Then I guess I'll have to keep rehearsing.

UNKNOWN VOICE. Don't you dare.

FINN. That's the rules of a pinkie promise. Two pinkies? A promise. One pinkie? Not a promise.

UNKNOWN VOICE. I swear to God, if you do that one more time, I will –

The sound of a metal door swinging open and slamming against a wall. Finn jumps, runs to the corner, crouches down. Nothing happens on stage, but we can hear everything.

ANOTHER UNKNOWN VOICE. Get up.

UNKNOWN VOICE. No, no, no, no, no.

A scuffle. Someone is beating someone. The two unknown voices are fighting. Yelling. And then after a few minutes, it's over. It was hard to listen to. Finn is frightened, not sure where the sounds were coming from or why. The door slams again. Silence. Finn sobs.

II.

FINN. People sometimes eat with their hands. They lick their fingers.

Finn sucks the tips of each one of their fingers, one by one. They pull each finger out of their mouth with a little popping sound.

But horses, horses didn't have fingers.

They make their hand into a fist.

Horses had hooves. Hooves were kind of like blocks made of bone.

They bonk their two fists together, but because they have soft human hands, they do not clip or clomp.

They wore shoes too. But the shoes were metal.

They take the shoes off their feet and put them on their hands, clapping the soles together.

And they were nailed into their feet. Like some real biblical shit.

They lick the shoe, try to stick the toe of it in their mouth. When they pull it out, they make the same popping sound as before.

III.

Finn lies in the center of the dark room, a mirror backstage so the audience can see them. Their arms are splayed but their feet are together. They look crucified minus the cross. Billy enters. He's still in the bedsheet toga, but it's covered in blood and dirt. He limps up to Finn.

BILLY. You know you are one of the forgotten beings and dirtbags, right?

FINN. Yes.

Billy nods, sits down on the ground.

BILLY. Do you know what they did to her?

A beat. Finn doesn't move.

Do you?

A beat.

Did you ever see her naked?

Billy crouches on his hands and feet, his face right above Finn's.

Did you know her whole deal? Why she was squatting? (*Now yelling.*) Why did you bring her to the Archives? Why did you let her come? Who do you think you are? Why are you squatting, anyway? Why aren't you on the other side with whoever pushed you out of their cunt? Why did you stay here? What were you trying to prove? What are you trying to prove now? Do you know there will be no record of you, of your life? Yes, you must – you must know there is no archive of this.

He spits in Finn's face.

That's the thing about the Archives. Is it about remembering? Is it about letting go? Or is it just a bunch of stories? You, Finn, are barely a story.

IV.

Freddy and Gillian walk across the stage. The sun is setting and there is a sense of relief. Gillian looks battered, exhausted. Freddy does too. They stop to rest.

GILLIAN. There's a rock in my shoe.

She sits down on the stage, takes her shoe off, turns it over and shakes. Nothing falls out. She reaches her hand into it and digs around, feeling for the rock.

Isn't it funny that you can have a bruise on your leg that you have no idea where it came from, but one little pebble in your shoe can send you over the edge?

FREDDY. Mhm.

He's not really listening.

GILLIAN. What time of day did you say you snuck out again?

Freddy is looking at his hands, absorbed in thought.

Freddy.

A beat. She smacks his leg with her shoe.

FREDDY. What? Sorry.

GILLIAN. What time of day did you say you got out?

FREDDY. Morning.

GILLIAN. What time was it, though?

FREDDY. Oh, I don't know. Just, morning.

GILLIAN. Old morning or new morning?

FREDDY. New morning.

GILLIAN. And no one noticed?

FREDDY. No one noticed.

GILLIAN. And it wasn't too hot?

FREDDY. It was pretty hot.

GILLIAN. And you were fine?

FREDDY. Fine, yes.

GILLIAN. And then you just ...found me.

FREDDY. Yes.

GILLIAN. That's a pretty big coincidence.

FREDDY. It was.

GILLIAN. There's like hundreds and hundreds of people.

Freddy nods. Gillian puts her shoe back on, takes her time tying its laces.

Hundreds of people and you find me.

FREDDY. Yep.

GILLIAN. And not Finn?

FREDDY. Nope.

GILLIAN. Or Billy.

FREDDY. Or Billy.

GILLIAN. Right.

FREDDY. Right.

A beat.

Ready to keep going?

GILLIAN. Yeah.

Gillian takes a deep breath and stands up. They begin walking. The sun sets. The sun rises. The sun sets. The sun rises. The sun sets. The sun rises. Gillian and Freddy walk. And then they rest. They walk. And then rest. Days go by. Maybe weeks. No other people cross their path.

Do you think they took everything?

FREDDY. I'd imagine so.

GILLIAN. Why do they think it's so dangerous?

FREDDY. Couldn't tell you.

GILLIAN. What did they think was going to happen?

Freddy is trying to avoid having this conversation. He looks to the horizon. He picks up his gait, getting ahead of her.

Do you think they're watching them?

Gillian trots behind him. Freddy shrugs.

FREDDY. Does it matter?

GILLIAN. Which one do you think they will like the best?

FREDDY. Depends on who's watching.

GILLIAN. I'll bet it's the one with the sharks.

Gillian stops at a great tree.

I think people who feel bigger than other people would probably like to watch sharks. Sad men and sharks.

FREDDY. What makes them sad?

GILLIAN. Oh, everything. Everything makes them sad.

Gillian puts her hand on the tree. Looking at her hand, she curls it back into a shadow puppet shape. She lifts it into the air and swings it around in front of her. She speaks with a weird, high-pitched voice.

Between this and dying.

FREDDY. What?

GILLIAN. Nothing.

FREDDY. We have to be there soon.

GILLIAN. You think so? Have you been before?

FREDDY. How far could it be?

GILLIAN. I don't know.

FREDDY. This all used to be one state.

Gillian looks around, lost in thought. She looks for evidence of a fissure, a border, some clear sign that there is a line between here and there.

GILLIAN. Do you think they know we're coming?

FREDDY. If they did, they would have found us already.

GILLIAN. Why isn't everyone else running?

FREDDY. I guess they didn't have the gall.

GILLIAN. How did you find me again?

FREDDY. I don't know. I just did.

GILLIAN. That's pretty hard to believe.

FREDDY. Sorry.

GILLIAN. It's like you knew where I was. Like you knew what happened.

FREDDY. But I didn't.

GILLIAN. It's like you did though. Like you were there.

FREDDY. But I wasn't.

GILLIAN. Are you sure?

FREDDY. I'm sure.

GILLIAN. There was definitely someone there who I felt like I knew.

FREDDY. Who?

GILLIAN. I don't know, someone.

FREDDY. How do you know?

GILLIAN. We were down there. It was smaller than I thought it would be. It smelled like something old, like how I imagine the woods would smell, or a beach. Something that came from the earth, you know? And we were down there, and Billy was digging through boxes. That's how he was keeping everything, in these cardboard boxes that had to have been older than him, older than any of us. They kept falling apart, spilling little plastic cases onto the ground. There was a figure in the corner, the body of a woman. White, plaster. No head. One arm extended forward. There was a bag hanging from it, but I couldn't see what was in it. And Billy was shouting. He was shouting at me, but all I could think was that the woman couldn't smell what I was smelling. She didn't even know she lived in a place from the before. Or maybe she didn't know that outside this place, there was the after. The now. But Billy was ransacking his own basement, tearing apart the Archives. He was looking for something but couldn't find it. That's when they came. Three of them. All in their uniforms. They told Billy to stop. To turn around. One of them, though, wasn't looking at Billy. When he got into the basement, he turned away from Billy. He looked at the shelves, the boxes. He traced his fingers along an old, red sofa, leaving a wake of dust behind them. He turned to me, cocking his head to the side. That's the one. He moved like he knew me.

FREDDY. What happened then?

GILLIAN. Then they took Billy. They took him kicking and screaming, out of the basement, through the house, outside to the street. And when I ran after them, one of the Officials – I couldn't tell any of them apart anymore – stopped me. He put his arms on my shoulders and told me to run.

She points in the direction they are walking.

He told me which way to go.

FREDDY. And how long were you running before I found you?

GILLIAN. I don't know. Forever.

They walk side by side around the stage. The sunset mural from the Archives rises. Lights hit it dramatically, the oranges and pinks reflecting around the stage. Freddy reaches a hand toward Gillian, who takes it with hers. They walk into the rising sun and disappear in the abundance of light.

V.

Midday. Bright light. Too bright. Everyone in the audience should be squinting. Someone is running across the stage. Clip-clop-clip-clop. Running. Someone is chasing them. Silhouettes.

GILLIAN. Billy?

Dramatic black. Another bang. The wobbly rung of curtains crashes onto the stage.

∞.

Finn weeps in the corner of the dark room. They weep, groan, shake. When they inhale, they whinny like a horse. It is hard for them to catch their breath.

∞.

Finn pretends to drown. They've never felt their face submerged in water, so they don't know what drowning is supposed to look like. But they imagine it. They close their eyes. They hold their nose. They glub-glub-glub. They cough. They fall over. They accidentally breathe.

FINN. Damnit.

∞.

Finn stands at the center of the stage. They smile. Really big. They pretend they are walking down an elegant staircase. People all around. They wave. They smile. Cameras and lights.

FINN. Yes, yes, down below.

A beat.

Cameras. Action!

Finn lowers their voice, becomes a weird transatlantic narrator.

So, they were turning after all, those cameras. Life, which is strangely merciful, had taken pity on them.

Dramatic music plays.

I can't go on with the scene. I'm too happy.

Finn drops to their knees.

Wait.

They pause. Think. They ball their fingers into a fist. They punch their hands together. Stare. They stand, a wide-legged stance. They jump. Clip-clop-clip-clop.

HA!

Clip-clop-clip-clop.

Again.

Clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop. They prance around the stage. They prance and they prance. They rear their head upwards and whiney. They snort. They whip their tail side to side.

THE OFFICIAL. Knock it off in there.

Finn will not knock it off. They rear. They trot. They buck.

Now! I'm not kidding!

FINN. I am a horse. I don't understand you.

THE OFFICIAL. What?

FINN. Horses don't speak English.

THE OFFICIAL. And what do you call what you're speaking now?

FINN. Telekinesis.

THE OFFICIAL. Well, knock it off.

FINN. No.

THE OFFICIAL. Don't make me come in there.

Finn rears, front hooves waving gloriously in the air. Their mane waves, unaffected by gravity. The Official opens the door, billy club in hand. It is the Official from the Well.

Stop. Now.

Finn digs their hind hooves into the ground. They snort.

Wait, it's you.

But Finn is not Finn. Finn is a horse. They rear again, a great stallion. Hooves in the air. Lights like lightning. A great feeling of importance in the air. Finn has never felt more important or powerful or themselves. The Official raises the club, but Finn knocks it out of his hand with their hooves. He is startled, surprised by the horse's might. He steps back. Finn begins their stampede, trampling the Official. Over his soft, meager flesh, Finn volleys. Out, out – out and away from the ruins of the old school.

The sun is setting. Everything is orange and terracotta. Into the desert, away from the ashes of this foregone city, into canyons and valleys, basins and high desert hills. Finn splashes their hooves into a freezing river of snowmelt. They prance. They sleep standing up. They graze. They bat flies away from their hind with the strength of their tail.

The house lights rise while Finn is still on stage. The set is enveloped in darkness. Finn is sitting on the floor, hooves no more. They're sitting cross-legged. The bird carcass lies in front of them, partially ripped open, scooped out. Feathers blow across the stage. Whispering, they count to one hundred. At about seventy-six, they lose their place and start back over. They count to one hundred. They count to one hundred, again.

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