

issue 28

streetcake



@nikki dudley

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seth crook

Where will this sentence go?

You ask, quite sensibly--
expecting a definitive answer.
a “to here”
or a “to there”,
a subject matter,
a reference,
or at least a proper end
and not just a petering out into a load of dots.....

Poetry Race

Words passing the baton
of comprehension
along the sentences
lines
nearly dropping it
in stanza three
feet moving frantically on
almost out of the lane
to the conclusion: done.

caitlin hoffman

Past The Finish Line

We're running a relational marathon. My emotional cardio sucks.

Rubbed moist with the most exhaustive, sweat-quenching lies such as, "Only your cock could feel this good," and, "The medication's working just fine".

I was always real in the figurative sense, (mostly) sober on weekdays.

They gave me the go-ahead. My vessels popped and threw a party. I was just so happy to see the sun.

"Freedom, baby. That's what it's all about."

Declared (legally) sane and responsible. I was ready to immigrate to Normal, request a transfer back to Boredom.

"You're gonna be jaded by the time you're twenty-nine."

"Yeah."

"Bored with existing."

"Yeah."

"Done everything to death."

(Done with that, numb with this.)

"Shut up, shut up, shut up and kiss me."

Yes. Kiss me and set those sparks to anger the sky, bid the heavens gut us with their Nihilist philosophies.

Remember the crash. All the orgasms that came too fast.

Punish me for being here with you when I should be back home with him. (Stroking the lungs of Normality.) Curse my spectacular sinew; mount me 'til my bones crush.

Remind me what this body is for. Dictate to me the colour of my bruises. Make me buckle and curl, lash out and snap free.

("Freedom, baby. That's what it's all about.")

Help me pretend the moment is all that'll ever be.

Happy endings won't last in the midst of mortality. There's always some other peak you have yet to climax on. Eventually none of the sounds make sense, no matter how high-pitched the pain.

That's why I tried so hard to die. Fifty-eight pills and a cynic's prayers against my chest, making a bee-line back to the bed. Hoping to dream without any REM, leaving

my diary with a scribble on its corner, thinking that may work as a conditional epilogue.

A part of me knew living too long would kill me. Not just milk this material of all its worth, but set the flicker useless and limp. Living too long would make me a slave to changes of heat, rises and falls in the stock market. I'd mutate to combat the sickly conditions of an oil-saturated world, and in turn my soul would wither.

Flop and sputter like a half-dead fish.

Young and in love. Ha!

This misanthropy hardens my feet, makes high heels impossible to eat let alone walk on. Already there are lines curved like cannons behind my eyes, dotting wee x's against the pores. My skin is a pock-marked sheet attesting to tsunamis in the frontal lobe and thunderstorms smoking poetry out of the limbic system. Soon I won't be beautiful- I'll just be tired.

"We won't grow apart, we'll grow together."

HOW MANY FALSEHOODS DO WE FEED OURSELVES?

Guess my happy ending came too fast. I had all these years left to mess and twist but my satisfactory, stable conclusion was already stamping the manuscript shut. Guess I got scared. Panicked when being committed to commitment. Had to run right out of Normal. Had to nuke Normality all the way into the next galaxy!

Watched the fairy-dust coat neighbouring cosmos.

"Yes officer, I'm afraid this mess is mine."

Can you blame me? Whenever the ride settles I go all itchy in my spine, craving a star I can't reach. Wishing for a colour I'm no longer entitled to see.

Some of us just can't stand to slow down. As soon as the ground ceases to blur beneath us, we are terrified to witness the world in all its stale predictability. So we punch powders up nasal tracts. Kick art into the glass floor.

"Oh, baby," he laughed at me (not meaning to be cruel but tasting nasty all the same, rubbing my tongue dry with bitter, wrinkled cherries), "what if you're not exceptional? What if you're just Normal? Damn, wouldn't that be a bummer."

It was a joke leaning into a kiss and a grope for him, but for me it was a bullet right up my ovaries. He recited the Cliffnotes of my greatest fear, my most harrowing mirror-moment.

'Cause the truth is a bitch that can't be reasoned with.

This ripe age of two decades has taught me well. Ha!

Now I know everyone's gotten a sample of Crazy. Everyone's hunting down a spotlight to call their own.

We could all find a home with shackles on the beds.

If you manage to rape your dreams until they rip, you really are one in a million.

Every other blue moon someone lands on their very own comet to hump, but most of us aren't so lucky. We're the extras, not the leading ladies. We will fuck, work, drown in debt and suck cum stains from the booze-juggling monkeys running this lead-paint, pure plastic world.

Most of us get shipped to Normal and most of us will die there. No scars on our face or implosions in our hearts.

Just grandkids, mortgages, pink slips, miscarriages.

Love Letter from a Ghost

I'll tell you a secret.

Wherever you are, there's somebody watching you.

You could be in an empty room, on a remote hillside, in the middle of the sea; there will always be someone next to you.

Watching.

Perhaps we're in the walls, or in the trees, or in the flowers outside your window. We could be in your shirt collar or in your electricity bill or in that nasty old coffee mug that you should have cleared away two days ago.

We could be anywhere.

We're ghosts. That's what we do. We watch. And we walk.

We're shadows of people. Nothing more. Whispers of people that have come before, or that somebody somewhere remembers, or that someone invented once. It's where we came from that defines us, because we have no future. No now. We're past. And we always will be.

There are some I know that leaked out of novels. I see it sometimes. A musty old book lies untouched while the characters drip out of it like water from a sponge. They rise up and swirl in the air, living in people's memories, colouring people's thoughts; living now because of what happened then.

Others live in pictures. They smile at us from within photographs or enchant us from an artist's brush.

My favourites are the ones that children make. A child's mind is a dazzling light. Every thought is real; every idea an explosion of colour. I sometimes see little boys and girls walking down a street, holding their mother's hand, with dozens of little ghosts sprouting out of their ears and curling up into the sky. Ghost ducks, ghost pigs, ghost fairy queens, ghost superheroes, ghost plants-that-talk, ghost giant-mice-that-play-the-violin. I love children. It's a shame when they fade.

Most of the time, though, we're something else. Most of the time there's no colour to us at all.

We're could-have-beens.

Nothing more than could-have-beens.

We're not thoughts, because nobody thinks about us. We're not memories, because nobody remembers us.

We're could-have-beens.

If we're lucky we're should-have-beens, or would-have-beens or perhaps even will-have-beens, but whatever we taste like, whatever colour we are, we'll always be could-have-beens. That will never change.

Because we don't have a future. All we are is past. We are a decision that was never taken, or a mistake that shouldn't have been made, or a fate that was poisoned with the wrong kind of luck.

I don't know what I was. A ghost never does. You get glimpses of it; imperceptible tastes. I remember things; disjointed colours and scents and the tiniest glimpse of what went before I could-have-been.

I remember a face as delicate as the remnants of a dream and with a smile that chased away clouds. Somebody wanted to make her laugh all the time.

Was that me?

I'll tell you what I know. Maybe they will remember what I am even if I can't.

There was a man. He lived in a place that tasted of people in a hurry. It wasn't a happy place. He liked to poison himself in dark corners, he liked to melt into the city fabric. He spent his life on trains, waiting for the sun to go down, finding slender comfort in the rhythmic clicks of wheels on rails. As the days went by they turned into weeks. As the weeks went by they turned into shapeless time, interrupted only by sleep and poison. That was the life he had made for himself: harshly built ruins.

Then there was a moment.

These moments are like bliss to me. They make us what we were. They are the past given life. It is in this moment that I feel alive, when I can feel and smell and sense like a living thing. I become real, just for a moment. Just for the tiniest moment.

There was a crowd. Lots of people. The girl with the cloud chasing smile stepped out and touched his hand.

That's all there was.

He looked down at their hands. They looked so different. His square fingers in her gentle grip. He was in awe of her confidence. He was changed by her optimism and the way she trusted everything around her. She was part of a world that had forgotten him. It was the first time she had met him and yet she wanted him back in her arms as if he were a fond memory.

A landscape formed between them. It was a simple and happy place; populated by moulded dreams and enduring hopes.

And then she went. Somewhere far away. He followed her and left his trains and his poison behind him. In those little days a hundred memories were formed. They are colours and scents and glimpsed moments. I remember moss green on granite, and snow white smoke curling against dark carpets. I can smell vanilla and incense. I still have the touch of her cheek marked on my fingertips. I can remember jet black hair and bright eyes that looked on me with a delight I didn't recognise. Above all I remember the patience, and the gentle words, and the arms that held me when the sky went black.

The serpents came back when he went home. The poison took more of him. The world broke what was left of him and built him anew. The light that he had hidden for her was chased away by the insatiable shadows of his harshly built ruins.

I remember distrust, like an icy wind, whistling under the door. Ill thoughts formed in damaged places. The gentle embrace faded into memory and was gone. All that remained was the poison.

I remember how you spoke to me. Your voice... there was a softness to it, an eternal warmth. You could tell that I had been broken, you could hear the poison in my throat and in the words I spoke. You tried to give me something of you. You tried to be my clean soul.

I remember how your voice changed when I told you to go. Something happy disappeared. Something hopeful fled. Something loving was broken and crushed. Something I needed flew away.

I tried to kill your kindness. I tried to give you my poison. So you took some of me with you and left me with the rest. You never came back. I never saw you again.

Then there was him. The ghost. The could-have-been.

I left the trains and the ruins and built another life in another place, leaving him to walk the streets where we had walked. He watched the places we had been. He followed our path for us. Winters and summers converged into eternity and still he walked and watched.

We could have been, but weren't. We left a ghost who will always be there, in the streets that sheltered us and in those half-distant memories that linger when life changes.

If you go back there, you might see him, standing alone under a tree or walking the night streets, over and over; wondering what to do with the rest of forever.

silva zanoyan merjanian

SOME NIGHTS

There are times
when the night lingers
like the smell of cigarettes
on the lips of an old man

drops of moments hesitate
then drip on poet's heart bleed ink
she licks them with her thoughts
as if drops of honey squeezed from the night's crevices
intoxicated she barters reason for a sip of yearnings

and forgets how not to remember him

there are times
she lets the night linger
to savor morsels of memories
crushing them like she would a grape between her teeth

the lover whose cannibalizing passion consumed all
no carry-over memories to reminisce

the friend whose voice was the hammock she rested in
disentangled from cobwebs of her sins

she sees dawn pressing against the window
and she knows when she kisses daybreak
she will taste the night
like cigarettes on an old man's lips
she has kissed a thousand times

there are times
she lets the night linger
to forget how to remember him

jonnie nash

This Gun

This gun's gonna muster up his mustard and make a move for he needs to get in the city 'fore it's ready for him. See his moves, see his weightlessness, see the slick, edged curves down the handle that is his body. He's at his peak, at his quickest, his strongest, his sharpest, finest, boldest, loneliest. Yeah, he's lonely, an independent rogue gone wrong type-a lonely, but one gun's loneliness is another gun's sanctuary, and tonight there's a feeling in the air that he'll feel closer to the world than you'd ever believe. Breathe in hard and you might just be able to smell it.

It's nearly time. If you have to know – you're in too deep already – this gun's in his apartment, joined only by a black mattress with red bedding for sleeping, a black pull-up bar and two black dumbbells with red strapping for sculpting, a black iPod dock sporting a red iPod for psyching, and a red ashtray and a pack of Black smokes (they're exotic) for breathing. It's in London somewhere; you don't need to know where. Don't try and work it out.

This gun gets ready; the pre-show ritual is just as much a part of the totality as the event itself. Pull-ups, push-ups, sit-ups, squat-downs, up, down, up, down, up-down, up-down, up-down, maximum exertion. Bigger, bigger, bigger, veins pulsating in those bulging firearms. Now looking out the window, it's all hustle and bustle; that's usually the problem, but not tonight, tonight that's just the ticket. Like a hair of the dog, the poison becomes the antidote.

This gun adds the ambiance, the backing track to tonight's pièce de résistance: 'This gun's for hire'; 'Three guns and one goes off'; 'Bang bang, he shot me down, bang bang, I hit the ground, bang bang, that awful sound, bang bang, my baby shot me down'. One song after another like they're all components of the same melody, the same narrative of lyrics of a murder too big to speak of. This gun is pumped, locked and loaded, cocked back and clicked in, honey, and a smoke is lit as if the trigger's just been pulled. The cigarette in, now breathe hard, then down the barrel, coming right down the handle, hold, hold longer, let it swim through till it sways amongst the edge of every crevice, then breathe that sweet stuff right back up and out, like it'd never been in there, except for that lavish, lingering moment in which no harm would come upon anyone, but just the pure bliss of a rising and falling, smoky satisfaction engulfing this gun from tip to tap.

Soon, sooner, nearly, now. 'Not yet'. Okay, not yet. It's probably best. Preparation is key. There are lives at stake, it would seem a shame to rush. How disgustingly undecadent, when you think about it. Yes, preparation seems a much better idea, now. It's not the size of the gun in the fight. Oh no, one little gun can make a big difference. A grenade-launcher, you say, as you stand there trying to pick that heavy-arse machine off the ground, thinking the sheer power could pummel through a children's hospital if you wanted it to, but this gun will fire a bullet through your cranium, through your heart, before you can regret everything you never did and it would all be over, soon, sooner, nearly, now.

The preparation was the appetiser, a mandatory prologue to salivate the senses, but now the stomach, the gauge, is aware of the protocol, that a main course is to follow, it's preparing for what's to come, making way for some juicy meat, drizzled in red wine, and the chef will no doubt oblige.

It's time. Yes, now. This gun is leaving the black and red sanctuary for one monumental hayride, leaving the decadence and anti-decadence behind, leaving the big, bad world and entering the big, bad world outside the apartment for one catastrophic, apocalyptic, monumental shit-storm of a hayride this one time that will make all the difference. Fresh, beautiful, hard-hitting air outside the apartment block for one short second, an air of disdain, a fragrance of savage solitude with a hint of a larger goal, a common objective.

Is the suspense killing you?

Killing, murdering, slaughtering, massacring, ending. One little life at a time. Down. Down. Down. The shooting outcries the screams. Down. Down. Down. The shooting outcries the cries. Down. Down. Down. Anyone, everyone. No reason, every reason. Down. Down. Down. One little life. Down. At a time. Down. Down. Down. This gun is indiscriminate. Down. Just think of fate. Down. Down. The little lives passing by at that precise moment. Down. Down. Down. On that precise street. Down. Down. Their choices leading them there. Down. Keeping count? Down. Down. Regretting what you never did. Down. Front-page news. Down. Down. This gun is a symbol, this gun is a sign, this gun represents progress, this gun represents decline. Down. Down. Down. Oh, the humanity. Down. Oh, the impassiveness. Down. Down. Oh, the pointlessness. Down. Make it stop. Down. Make it end. Down. Make it start in the first place. Down. Down. Down. Make your point. Down.

LIFE IS DIFFICULT, BROTHER

Life is difficult, Brother.
It isn't even always easy to distinguish between
What is
And what is not;
You'd think they are easily separable,
But you'd be wrong.
That sodden man, for instance –
The man with the drowning eyes,
The drooping shoulders
And the turned-down mouth,
Who's taking his umpteenth peg
For the millionth time
In his shattered life ...
Now is he,
Or is he not?
I dare say you'd say he is,
Seeing him as you do,
Unashamedly guzzling down stuff
He can't even hold;
But see that yellow leaf
Eddying on the ground and scraping it
Like a puppet of the wind,
And therefore possessed of motion, no doubt,
But who'd say
That motion is its own?
Like that lifeless leaf
That sodden man,
Though present in his drinks,
Is gone, is gone ...
But there's a difference
Between him and the leaf –
He can return,
Resurrect,
Be re-born;
Not so the leaf.

jeremiah walton

DIY Shaving

Youth with grimy
stubbles of black hair
DIY
tailored chins
bristles propping
up, words
sentenced to
death

Pin back layers
of onion eyes
bleeding, but
never crying.

Mantle jaw
churning,
needles piercing
the pulled back flesh
to the dissection table
pouring soul
into the core
where it's
sentenced to
death.