

the extinction papers : cat food baby

1.

He always played the lid edge first, checking its sharp aggression, remembering that she always called him her *cat food baby* after what she'd always fed him. The slim string of viscid light hanging from the can reaches out now to link with the spoon and now it refractures, sealing the wallet of darkness in which she was always partly present, emergent from nothing, re-webbing him with the guilloche of persistent despair that had encased him as he was pulled from within the chilled foil organ of her body. And now she was everywhere, immutable through her absence. She rode his every moment like a saw blade's passenger, breathing the oil that coated his bite. He put his fingers through her. It was an unnatural and perforating way to touch a mother, but no other approach was thinkable; her chickenwire frame both revealed and obstructed the shallow path to her interior. His attempted embrace was always a half-climb where traction failed. Her posture warped and seemingly knelt at additional joints improvised in tortuous directions until he released; stepping back, the struggle would reverse, inwardly degenerating, a spindle torus of apartness compacting his wounds into a fetid ball.

He raises the spoon; before the taste there is the waste perfume and the porcine stink and before the taste there is a crust at the edge of his sleeve. It rakes his lip slightly and summons an hour from three nights prior, when he laid in botched light like a book that closes its own cover, wiping semen from his wrist with a recalcitrant movement of total divorce; that was when they called him to tell him, and he transferred a portion of the mucilage to the face of the device, where a serrated voice knifed through the backlit glaze.

He mouths a section of the canned loaf and moulds it against his palate, where it seems to hang aloft, a kite in a cave. The clotted noise of his inhalation shapes the penumbra, thumbs a muddy crease where elements accrete and sour, a cleft snaring unwanted things that pass by on effluents of shade and disposal. Tuna blood water in a wax paper fold.

2.

Even at the side of the bed he never confronted her face. On the cobalt spread, a limp shield of pale lettuce enclosed in a bifolioed paper towel with a torn edge intercepted and reprocessed the transmission of her words; its veining and crenulations became radiant with densified glare, descrambling her sounds and suffusing them out on a dimpled fundament of faintly retching blue. Her eyes pestered his face, sure that he would only ever look away. He could feel them

incessantly pacing the rank stall of his features, laying shellac that would not wash, insistent but hopelessly obedient to the failure of their communication and reined in by the cadence of surrounding machines. Finally they fell to his bag of cans as though the sinews training her inspection had become overstressed and snapped. The plastic loop handle choked and resegmented his fingers. *One day I just decided to see if you would like it and it seemed like you did. So that's just what I gave you back when it was my business to keep feeding you.* The room's divider curtain hissed back and forth in its track each time a nurse would check in; they appeared like lone gulls inspecting a trash bag in which they found nothing of genuine interest. Disregarding his presence, they would note the patient's values on a chart and then vanish. There were moments when she would briefly stir and raise one enfeebled hand as though to operate an unseen mechanism, as though hanging invisible shirts before her. *You didn't stay little. You didn't stay inside. So I didn't know what I could do for you. I never meant to forgive you for that but I suppose I couldn't help it.* He leaned against the rail, drained by the hours, surrendering more of his weight against the bed. The cavitation in his joints evoked a doubtful effervescence.

The body leaked as it died, vented a belligerent redolence, a tag on something secret and lactic decompartmentalised from air, shown only at the harshest interstice. He had so long been reactionless that they finally subjected him, too, to a rudimentary corporal examination. They had no findings. They do not realize that the slob's

heart does not beat to thrive but only churns and wrings through a stolid prayer of disaffection, resents a lifetime of constant drenching.

As he passed the nurse's station, they handed him a brown paper bag that they said contained her personal belongings. *This is all she came in with.* The elevator chimed through a song of descent; he uncrumpled his prize to discover a broken pair of honey-coloured glasses and a birthday candle shaped like the number nine. His thumb read the scribble of overlapping crescent signatures her teeth had left in the wax.

3.

While he ate, commotion flared outside in the street. There was the slam of a car door and a panicked separation, blossoms of violence and shouting under night rain laned by traffic. He pressed himself to the window and tried to see. A citrus rind of putrescible light dangled from a sidewalk halogen. A running woman crossed through this conical space; the distance she struggled to achieve from her pursuer assumed a startling elasticity, contracting and lengthening in the desperate bounds they made across the derelict courtyard, where a concrete lion lay broken on its side. The building ingested them; hostility surged in the capillary of the stairwell. He ran to his door and pressed his ear, the erotic fibre of his reclusion powerfully ignited by the percussion of her heels on the landing; he held the can and the spoon

with one hand and through his jeans he manually engorged the head of his penis with the other, pulsing as she yelled. Down the hallway a final door slammed shut. She had won safety; another's prey had been lost. A lethal promise preceded a lethargic retreat.

His own excitement also waned. He remembered his meal. Seeking another bite, he knocked the spoon from its stance in the can, and it fell to the black disorder of the floor, stamping his slack torso with a single beat as it descended to a new station among a strewn topography of detritus and clutter. He found the light switch. At once the throbbing bulged in his eyes again; after three days he still had not grown accustomed to her lenses, and the arms of the frames clamped tight against his temples, furrowing in his skin. They made no sense of his world. He surveyed the bags around his feet. Even here, discarded lids ornamented the floor, like aluminium petals peeled back and dropped. They undulated, stretched, and lewdly bent with the travel of his vision. The search was futile. He turned the light off again. He dug in his pocket and towed out the phone, then stuck it headfirst into the can, following its curve, troweling up the remnant third of its content; it was like pulling slurred meat from a flat plastic bone when he sucked it, swallowing hard and momentarily marvelling at the gross deformity of his flaccid embouchure as he withdrew the device from his mouth.

Returning to the kitchen, he unloaded the plastic bag of fresh cans one by one with a single hand and stacked them on the counter, unknowingly reconstructing the same pyramidal structure they had assumed throughout his carry. He flung the empty can into the bag and then held it open, lowered the phone into the same, and then doubled and tripled the plastic over on itself, walked to the trash can and placed it neatly on top of other unwantedables; its reactive light glowed through the swathing and then went out.

4.

He knocked at the door of the shed before sliding it open. She half-rose from an upholstered dumpsite lake of plastic bags, newspaper shreds, and cereal boxes that littered the recliner she'd dragged out from the house. *Go take her a piece if you really want to. I'm not stopping you. It's your goddamn birthday, after all. But don't come crying back to me if you're not happy with whatever she tells you- I'm just about through with the both of you.* He offered the plate. *Is it better out here than inside the house.* She took it and plucked the candle from the icing and hastily tested it in her teeth. Then she slid the cake down into a box of cereal, closed the flaps, and stowed the box behind her chair where he could not see it. *If it's better I want to stay out here with you and not inside with him. I want to stay out here with you either way. Can I stay.* She disengaged her mastication with a small explosive sound and frowned at him, motionless but for the quiver of her mouth, from which a

minute waxen binary star emerged to plot the contour of her lip. The shape of her face extruded granular words as his gaze dropped to fixate on the lattice of scrapes and blood lines graphing the exposure of her shins. *Please let me. I came from you. I came from you.* He put his fingers through her. It was an unnatural and perforating way to touch a mother, but no other approach was thinkable; her chickenwire frame both revealed and obstructed the shallow path to her interior. His attempted embrace was a half-climb where traction failed. Her posture warped and seemingly knelt at additional joints improvised in tortuous directions until he released, edging backwards into an assembly of shovels; like flat red hands that kept nothing they collected and dropped his stare. She drummed two fingers on the empty cake plate and draped her words around the incoherent rhythm. *Just because they pulled you out of me it doesn't make you real. I kept you real inside me. Now you're just a kind of animal. I don't want animals. I don't see reason for it.* And then only ever the armoured angle of the cheek. Look always away.