

The Coming of the Cold:

Tonight the summer is on the edge of fall. Jeffery, attending the University around the corner, is strangled in the space between his sweating thighs and the fabric of his underwear. The air conditioning and room fan run constantly, but the outside still presses against his chest. He can feel an induced itch behind his legs and on the left side of his scalp. As he scratches (admittedly, he has no nails, so he moves bald finger tips across his body, applying more pressure to produce relief) the gnawing pull runs up his neck, down his shins, and to the base of undiscovered hair follicles. This sort of itch can't be scratched, it's permanent and always on the run.

Jeffery opens the window in his room hoping to bring finality to the heat. The air is full of smells from carrying a single-street of restaurants, trees plotted intentionally throughout the city, asphalt pounded by thousands of cars daily, soap from the hospital's power washer, and rainwater gathered in the troughs of shallow inclines. The room is cool by virtue of new air, but only temporarily. Minutes from sleep he wrestles his sheet, pillows, and blanket, masterfully trying to expose just enough body to capture the air yet still feel the comfort of being beneath something. The room dims and eventually disappears.

He hears carousels swinging, something audibly pastel. The music is dream-scape. As the volume grows he expects images to replace vacantness, the nostalgic music becomes buzzing light and animates Jeffery's body. Borderless images never arrive, it's a dream of only sound.

Bodies and iPhones share a psychic relationship. Less than one minute before Jeffery's alarm rings, something tugs him from sleep, it's too early to rise

naturally and the sun is dull this morning. Preparing for the day and trying to compensate for a night of unusually loud dreaming, he pulls a single cigarette from his container of Dunhills. The thrust of tobacco demands a cough from the bottom of his stomach, collecting things as it rises. He doesn't enjoy smoking but he lights the cigarette after each puff to smell the breath of tobacco, to hear the soft crumpling noise of receding plant, and to command an artificially solar orange.

During the night Jeffery becomes scared in an adult way. His heart beats loudly enough, you can hear it inflating his throat, to render sleep impossible and he feels the stay of sweat; not physical endurance forehead-sweat, but Mom and Dad have been gone for a long time chest-sweat. The vaudeville swing has round edges, it replaces everything of subtlety.

Every night the song crescendos.

He hasn't slept in 36 hours. Jeffery's eyes are wrapped in sharp red vines, blood vessels run from his pupils to the edge of his eyeballs. They might stop or keep going.

If you measure from one end to the other, reality keeps the same shape, inch for inch, but something is momentarily smaller, the difference is floating. Every point of physical convergence on his body feels the centering of acute pain. Not a physical pain, an awareness, a feeling of humanness, an organic mass essentially degradable, the analytically stomach feeling of a garage door left open. It will pass, his friends pull all nighters too, they feel urgency under the pressure of a library's hollow spaces, they do it in groups, they've optimized leisure.

He hasn't slept in 78 hours. When his head drops, abandoning the neck for sleep, he hears indiscernible laughs behind the piano, giggles are pulsations, he feels them move. The noise possesses a shaking quality and modulates pitch to ensure the mind doesn't grow accustomed. His world, the world of scurrying heads, is no longer full and flowing, everything is being pulled apart, moments essentially taffy. Often long pauses of non-time occupy gaps in Jeffery's memory. People on campus are fixed, turning in sync, creatures of accountability following him. He can hear them whispering.

He'd do anything for at least 15 minutes. He's tempting the music, this is the hardest part. An organism refined over tens-of-thousands-of-years recedes into primordial stuff. A body can't stay on for this long. The first time is fire, everything repels. Then, he tries a pillow folded behind his neck, grabbing the ears. It's just as loud, it's taunting him.

148 hours. The purple beneath his eyes is spreading, his chin is shaped by a coagulated stripe. He can't help but shuffle on an angle, nothing is arrow straight anymore. His things aren't falling, he's just not sure when they'll sway, and has to be prepared for his world to lose integrity. Usually he can infer the time of day based on how many students are moving. He hasn't been staying in a single place, sitting or laying, for more than one hour.

It's impossible to say how long it's been — how many and since what? It's hot again. Jeffery falls in a group of students standing for the bus, he's smiling during his exhaustive collapse, he can finally sleep. His body forgets to employ defense against the release so his head crunches against the ground. Blood spills from flattened bone, the liquid is soothing against his hair.

Sound bends against his wound, it's excruciating. The nearby Children's Hospital recommends rest to get through "such a powerful concussion."

Jeffery searches for the brightest and most pounded-by-the-sun patch of grass, shade is too relaxing. He forgets the exact proportions of a body, but he knows they aren't so consuming — he sees masses of tissue and thin beige wrap, breathing, up and down, stretching to capacity, drawing in the air he needs to stay moving, to keep away from his mind. They are doing it. An appendage of the monster balloons towards him and Jeffery responds as if his whole self depends on it. Using his arm, he clubs the student's nose, bone pierces the brain. Jeffery hears fracturing and sees clearly for a single moment, he feels responsible for something deeply regrettable. A human, someone young, gasps for air on grass greener than he'd remembered it.

Home. The cartilage of the ear is pliable and can fold in on itself. He crumples the long parts together and stuffs them deep in the canal. Using a single strand of duct-tape he fastens his ears firmly to his head, creating a seal. Giving in, his body lets go, a final attempt at breathing after being strangled. Loud and bopping erratically, it nudges. Something basically human possesses Jeffery, he sleeps for 20 minutes. He senses having dashed from music. It was playing.

26 days, he doesn't feel tired anymore. Feelings don't persist in a world of one flat line, he doesn't do things for feelings anymore, he's the thought experiment from his philosophy class, a sponge floating in a warm pool. Constantly and orgasmically still.

His reality is tearing apart, great and colorful holes, oscillating in apocalyptic grandeur, stand at the center of his sight. The project of human-society is an

attempt to escape the randomness of Jeffery's new world. Being subject to the internal logic of a system beyond comprehension, numbers extending forever, a beginning, an undefined end, a cavernous in-between. Human excellence is the tried attempt to understand how inevitable it all is, to recognize the rules designate themselves. Jeffery isn't limping anymore, his legs thrash against his bed-posts. The bruises seep.

Everything is storing excess, his body feels doubled, his mind is dripping fluorescent green, his apartment's hard wood floor is crawling up his leg, the spinning ivy of circumstance. He is damp, sweating in proximity to a plan, an escape route.

Tape around the ears, he stayed in his place then, nothing jumped. The less than perfect seal opened for wind and passing cars, but the sounds did not dissipate easily, they bounced around and folded onto each other. The mind repurposed them, they transformed, he needs something flush, a sound-proof stretch of skin.

He's pulling drawers from their tracks, trying to find a knife sharp enough to displace cartilage. No one's cleaning plates and silverware anymore, the room yields to bags of veiny trash, the fatalism of passive living is immersive.

Measuring cups, a bottle opener, old ketchup packages, and softening gum. Someone's plate of pale green vegetables on top of glazed ceramic is limped on an arm of the couch, food is crusted on the knife's blade, it seems sharp enough.

Pulling gently, his ear is fragile. He's responding to the physicality of the thing. He mauls it meticulously, a faith in the logic of location, the way you feel a hand pass in front of your closed eyes. A piece hangs, it curls in pure misery. There's an agency to it's dangling, it's convulsing, life's in its jump, his ear's randomness

flops. Physical pain is 4,000 to 1. During the tearing process Jeffery recognizes the full-body panic of drowning. Submerged in blood, the buzz of the refrigerator sounds muffled and wrapped in something. He's being replaced by "squirts" and "squishes" and all of the wrong and lazy words we use to classify real, gratuitous violence. You are deflating, stop the bleeding. His body responds effortlessly, necessarily; this feels lucid, finally. Heat aching over the wound would stop his bleeding. Flames pounding against teflon smell gaseous. Viscous air above the pan wiggles, almost playfully. Fast, breaking air, cracking at the end, his head is firmly planted against a flat, quasi-steel and melting surface. An oily and searing pan, he slides around, gliding, a lobe of degrading fat charring and peeling up, forcefully. It's over now. Literally howling, he is going to live longer than he would have; his skin will cool, it will grow structure again, something down its center. His face will scab a deep and glowing, pussing, golden blue.

Something has gone wrong. Using his shoulders to flutter his arms, Jeffery inspects his body, his hand feels air leave his mouth. Reaching across his body, his left arm is cold to the touch, it dodges. His stomach sounds hollow when he taps on it; low vibrations are enveloping the bulge of slowly expanding, thin skin. His left leg is missing from below the knee. Potentially hallucinating, he places a finger on the wet patch of thigh trying to survey damage. Slowly, he injects his pointer finger in an opening, thinly accurate pain attaches itself to him, a feeling suited for real things.

In a hunger more intense than starvation, no consumption of anything for more than one thousand hours, his body turned on itself. Mindlessly pulling, the toothy knife near his right arm ripped at his leg, using himself to prolong the end. His only purpose: fueling an obsession, the passive chewing.

It's on him. His ears are hurling empty music — his body assumes it's resting, the screaming is steady, fixed, permanent now, he recognizes all of the melodies, it's developed a silence of its own. He can finally sleep, but everything's the same.