

The Anointing

I am always being looked at. I forget about that. Behind the tinted windows of large pearl white SUVs are mothers whispering prayers to an ambivalent god that the babies in car seats behind them do not turn out like me. They pity me, too. As if there were a single detail in my existence that I did not plan. Half of their babies were less intentional than the black cavities I'm growing in my two back teeth. So, let them watch me. Let them stare at the sunburned man-thing with holes in his skin where melanomas once grew, eating a sandwich, or burrito, or some other greasy fast food someone set at my feet without looking me in the eye.

They don't see where I am. Really, I don't see them, either. I am somewhere else, some time else. In a memory or maybe it is just a dream. I am back at the red barn-shaped house in Topeka. Those three years that we were there together, we pissed indoors and read books like it was our fucking job. I was his pet, always being taught new tricks, like how to fatten my r's in French words. He taught me about the new world, the one coming, that was perfect and equal. He told me I would help him show the people. We made plans. But then, like an old toy, he handed me down for the less fortunate ones to play with that night at the Christmas tree farm in Garden City.

The last time we smoked together, he talked about our future. We would “prophesy” is what he called it.

“Do you even *know* who you are, Raymond?” he would ask.

I didn’t.

“You are my prophet, my priest, my church, my bride. It’s fucking biblical, man. We ‘gon run this whole world from right here in this house. You’ll see,” he said then took a long drag on the blunt. He inhaled deeply. “You know,” he gasped, “that’s all that’s wrong. Greed. You learn to live with nothing, and you’ll get it, baby. You’ll know what I’m getting at. You’re ‘gon help me show them, aren’t you?”

I smiled and nodded, not knowing exactly what he meant. Not that it mattered. What he meant was, to prophesy, to teach, to speak, to cast out the greedy demons in Middle America.

That night at the tree lot he watched me while I stood up on the soapbox, a real cardboard Irish Springs Soap box he reinforced to hold my weight, while I preached his sermon. He had called me Homer and I sang-spoke the poem scriptures he wrote about the evil he’d seen as a gay half-black man in the Midwest forced to deliver newspapers until he was thirty-eight. He stopped after that, when his mother died and moved into her red barn house. His angry poems chided the free market, manifested by a big arm hitting the working folk over their head each time they punched their time clock. He’d say:

And, each tick, tick, tick is

a beat, beat, beat that’s

The man’s heart pumping

Blood, sucked by you,

Tick, Tick, Tick.

That's the one. I repeated it that night at the tree farm and they heard me in spite of their fuzzy ear muffs. If I would have been angry, shouting his words, they would have ignored me or assumed I was preaching about the imminent return of our Lord and Savior, and probably given me a passing, "Amen." But I wasn't shouting or screaming into the crowd. I was just washing them with his words. A few people eventually stopped to listen, probably thinking at first I was giving them advice about how to keep the pine needles on the branches of the cheap trees I stood in between. I remember them all in military caps and high school football letter jackets, each one from any year except whatever year it was that night, covering the ears of their little kids, as if my slimy doctrine would make their pure, rigid lobes dirty.

My eyes swelled with tears and my heart began pumping faster. Words that were once clear on a piece of long lined sheet of yellow legal paper became jumbled and slurred. This language, this new tongue, was my soul spilling out and strangling me as it came through. They were deaf and unyielding to it. I, angry at their diffidence, began removing my clothes. My congregation, stunned, couldn't stop watching me as I flung my emotion and garments, soaked in clammy sweat, at them with my arms. Still, they did not respond.

When I had no coat on in the cold, no one minded, but when I was completely naked they were offended. My body, reddened in the bitter air and twitched as the snowflakes pricked my skin. Those hicks were horrified and fascinated at the nude queer in the snow with his dick hard. I closed my eyes so they could watch me in

private. When I opened them, people were wailing on about the police, but Jack was gone. I picked up my clothes and walked away, whistling the song my Dad used to when he came home from the mine.

I had a bottle of something sweet and syrupy, and hard in my pocket that I swigged and winced down while I made my way to wherever I didn't know I was going. It warmed me more than the clothes pulled hastily back over my skin. As I walked I kept the highway in sight, but cut across fields and hid when I could under clusters of tall hickories in case the cops really were looking for me. They seemed to pop up every so often, as if planted there just for me to move along under. When I got tired, I sat down and looked at the stars. I tried to count them, but the moonlight caught hold of wheat germ specks and they sparkled so much that I could not make them out from the stars at all. So I stopped trying.

I stumbled into and then out of Holcomb around five in the morning. By the time I made it to the Clutter House, about fifteen or twenty miles from the tree lot, the earth was starting to hum and glow as the sun slowly drudged up from behind the hill and into its place in the sky. I listened for the echo of the screams of those people twenty years before, but they never came out from the single paned windows of that old place. No blood, no screams came out. If I had heard that girl and her mother scream, I would have shaken off my daze and done something to help. Instead at dawn, the silhouettes of two black crows unfolded themselves from the eaves of the farmhouse and flew toward the yellow sun until they were just black specks of pepper on a runny yolk; then nothing. I stood up, zipped my jacket, and pointed myself toward the highway.

I just kept walking and hitching all the way here. West Texas is a warm enough place to be me, because it's a warm enough place to be outside. The limestone library downtown has a tall, domed porch all the way around and lots of guys sleep there. The women that go to libraries are always the same. They are either home schooling moms wearing long denim skirts that they sewed themselves with swarms of restless kids begging them to be allowed to read *Harry Potter*. Or sometimes they are older batty rose-pruning types wearing dresses and polyester pants at the same time. They all glance at me, quickly, obviously wondering if I am the type of bum to rape women going into the library. Some of them are deeply afraid in broad daylight of the crazy man smoking crushed cigarette butts fished out of the parking lot outside of the library. But then some of them are trying to keep from fantasizing about what it would be like. I'm not interested in them, but I still don't want to make them uncomfortable, so when I catch their nervous glances, I limp away to my corner, where people watch me, but are less threatened because they are safe inside their cars.

While they wait in cars for the light to change to green, they fidget with their buttons, wipe away invisible bugs from their windshields with the blue slime that ejaculates from the wipers, and stare ahead to keep from making eye contact with me or my sign. I love to hear each ten second bit of song blaring from the cars in the summer when the windows are down. When someone's listening to "Blackbird," I fall in love with them. I'm back in the red barn house sitting naked, cross-legged on the wood floor across from Jack. We're smoking musty pot next to the fire place talking about how nice it would be to grow our hair and beards long enough to sit on so our balls don't touch the cold, hard floor. But then the car drives away and I'm left alone with some

asshole listening to a Hootie and the Blowfish song. The sensation is most similar to being left by your lover naked in the snow with a bunch of rednecks staring at you, although a little different because it is a hundred degrees.

When I get a little bit of money together, I'm going to buy a huge stash of weed and start dealing. That is where some actual money is and I know there are plenty of guys like me selling newspapers every Sunday that would love to score but it's hard now since dealers all take orders on their cell phones, instead of standing outside the liquor store or plasma donor center.

For now, I hold a sign that says "Hungry Vieteran" and roll my sleeve up so that everyone can see my Marines tattoo on my left arm. My tattoo was done outside the library with a needle and a bleeding Sharpie marker, but every single Marine can still see the bird and the globe in the messy stain and they always bring me food or cash, but they are pretty much the only ones that stop except for youth pastors trying to save my soul.

The youth pastors, bringing kids out her to teach them to be thankful, are the worst. Once, to keep them away, I made a new sign, on cardboard cut into the shape of a cross that said "JESUS SAVES SOULS." I thought they wouldn't waste their time on me, if my soul was already spoken for. I got a lot more food, and the Bible-belt pandering Fox News Station even came out to talk to me, but those fucking youth pastors came out in hordes and they all wanted to pray with me and shit. They also brought a printed metal sign that was a lot bigger and easier to read, but that thing was too heavy to carry to the library and back every day, so I threw it away in the dumpster behind the vacuum repair shop on my corner.

Today, I get up early and walk to McDonalds for some coffee. It's shit, but it will keep my hands warm. By the time I get to my corner, and get my sign up the morning work rush had started. Kids that cross the street to get to the junior high deliberately cross the street two extra times to avoid getting too close to me. I shrug and smile thinking about how seriously their mothers must tell them to do this every morning. It's December, and even all the way across the street, I can feel how anxious they are for a break from school.

They don't need to go to school. They will become deejays that advertise in the Thrifty Nickel or felon mechanics that fix and scrap down stolen cars, but today they are afraid of me. I watch them walk like a herd of sheep down the street, bumping into yard signs and mailboxes while looking down at their cell phone screens and then turn a corner toward the school.

When they are out of sight, I look up and across the street toward the bridal shop with the green awning. There's another guy, like me, holding a sign. He looks at me, smiles and waves and I flip him off. This is what it feels like to have an intruder in your home, I think. This is *not* what it feels like to have a home, though. But, then I see what his sign says. I can tell it's not a pander, but an advertisement. It's a white, plastic sign with huge green letters. Squinting against the severe winter morning sun, I read, "FRESH CUT CHRISTMAS TREES" with an arrow pointing down the road. The man holding the sign is wearing a dingy, white fleece headband around his ears that glows in the bright dawn. He is parting his lips, grimacing, like me into the sun. I catch a spark of gold from underneath them. The arrow on his laminated sign blazes bright, reflecting the sunlight, directing me down the road. I close my eyes and reopen them several times

to look at the empty sidewalk extended from the arrow, next to the prophet toward my Macedonia. The cement glitters as the sun catches hold of the swirled iron and rock specks, and I can't clearly make out the scene because of the glare, but it is all illuminated. My eyes are still burning and my vision is corrupted by floating spots seared onto them. I release my sign and my bag and stumble forward, bringing my arms up and my hands to my face. I cover my eyes with my wool-gloved fingers and feel my tears soaking through the knit.

I walk on, blind, thinking of the gold-toothed prophet, toward the tree lot where I know, where I in faith believe, my congregation waits for me. Overwhelmed, in pain, in emotion, in spirit, my continuous tears are cooled by the crisp air. They sting my face. As I go toward the call of my new name, my feet scrape and tap the pavement to the beat of a poem my lord once spoke to me on the back of my neck, washing it with warm breath, while he kept time on my back. And I hear his voice, calling me to his service, telling me, reminding me, who I am. I am still his priest, his prophet, his bard, his bride, his blood. If I walk this straight, cement path long enough, it will probably take me home to Topeka and the red barn house. If I have enough faith, of course he will take me in. If I convert them all on the way, he will kiss me and say, "Well done my good and faithful servant."

So I go on, thinking of how one tree lot at a time, I will be redeemed. The snow starts to fall, onto my head and melting into my warm sticky skin. The water mingles with the oils smeared on my scalp and runs down my hair and my neck, anointing me; anointing him that is called to preach.