

Runa wished she were depressed. Nevertheless, she hadn't left the house in twenty-three days, a new record. From the street, you could see the top of her face peek over the window seal, revealing her buzzed head and black eyes. She had been crouched in front of the window for hours, as she did everyday.

Runa had memorized every detail of her front yard. The heart sticker on the lamp post. The black cat that sauntered into the gully to urinate each day at 10 a.m. and 7:25 p.m. The dents and scrapes on the road guard. The tall grass that grew over an old well. The ditch scattered with boulders and trash. She liked to make up a story for each element of the world outside her front window. If the story was good enough, she would paint scenes from her imagination on the large white canvases that lined the garage like ghosts.

The reason Runa wished for depression is because she imagined depression to be a numbness, a nothing, a void. Runa's experience of being conscious was the opposite. Each moment clacked loudly against the next: too bright, too loud, too fragrant. As she crouched by the window, she watched her cold hands writhe in her lap like two angry snakes.

It feels good to be cold, it feels like being dead, her brother had told her. But to Runa, being cold felt more like biting into tin foil, a shock drawn out in time. She ran her icy fingers over her buzzed hair. She hadn't meant to keep it so short, it just kept getting shorter because each length was intolerable, the hair tickling the neck, then the jaw, then the temple, then the forehead. Her hair became another reason not to go outside.

Which is how the collection of days recently began to gain weight. The shorter the hair, the more cloistered became the days, the harder it was to break the spree. Now that it had been so long, the days seemed to line up in front of the door like toy soldiers, the little green kind, like her brother used to arrange outside her bedroom door. They would, at her brother's bidding, take

the dolls she hated hostage. Or else, standing over a dead animal he had killed, green eyes gloating. Now they stood, waxen faces blank with the burden of their duty: to keep her in, to keep everyone else out.

Eating was a challenge. Last time she skulked to the grocery store, she waited until it was twilight to avoid the glare. She wore sunglasses inside, ear plugs, and breathed through her mouth, avoiding the laundry aisle. She bought dry cereal boxes by the cartful. Canned food. Frozen veggies. Powdered drinks. She could last in here a while.

Runa's knees ached from the prolonged crouching. Looking at her watch, she noticed it was time: noon. Her knees cracked as she entered the garage and pulled down a canvas. She began every painting with a slop of paint right from the can, usually a primary color, or some garish pink or orange. This act was artless, childish, and fulfilling in a way that the rest of the experience of making a piece of art was not.

Painting was a gruelling enterprise, but the required focus was her antidote to the swirling overstimulation of the world, her own private tornado-center where she could spread out and relax. After this first slop of paint, Runa added more color, mixed in new forms. The blob would grow a shape, edges, complications. From here, Runa usually found a place of productive progress.

But today, the stain on the canvas remained, stubbornly, a stain, a blob, a shapeless pool of crimson, no matter the blues she worked into the edges, the yellow ochre and whites she added to pull it up from the place it had settled on the canvas. No matter what technique she applied, it remained. The mysterious pigment seemed to seep through all other colors, unwilling to blend. To some degree, Runa trusted, even admired, the blob. The blob knew something she didn't, like tea leaves or wine stains. But Runa also resented the blob. The blob said that today all Runa would do would be under the control of some intangible force.

The day was just beginning to grow dim; the darkness came on early this time of year, about 4 p.m. She observed the waning daylight through the windows that lined the top of the garage. Runa admitted defeated. No, today it wasn't happening. But was it really the blob's fault? It wasn't a productive painting session because Runa could not stop thinking about what was outside her window. The crimson blob resembled what she had been anxiously viewing all morning: under the lamppost, in the dim of dawn, she had first spotted the pool of blood.

In the early hours, the black blood reflected the moon, like a pool infinitely deep in the asphalt. She watched until the sun rose and the blood's color took on a sickening hue. That was when she decided it was time to paint.

After cleaning her brushes, Runa headed inside and grabbed a handful of cereal, then resumed her position at the window. Her bald head, once again, became visible from her station. Her dark eyes penetrated the glass. Nothing had changed, the ragged grass had not grown and the light pole had not moved. No one had cleaned it up or seemed to care at all. It seemed indecent.

She had hoped the anomaly would disappear. For the thirteenth time that day she wondered if she should call the police. The murderer could be caught, brought to justice. This could be made right. But she had waited too long, hadn't she? Wouldn't they suspect her? If only she could creep now to the phone and lie. *I had been walking my dog, or just walking* (because she didn't have a dog) *and came across what is probably an oil spill or road kill but just to be sure. Just to be positive I am calling it in.*

As Runa debated the pros and cons of calling the authorities, the phone rang. *Could it be the police?* The phone's ring reminded Runa of school when her brother would pull the fire alarm. Piercing, reverberating through her body and mind like a rotten tooth. Runa's eyes darted

unfocused from object to object as if she could not locate the source of the sound. She could taste the shockwaves of the ringing phone like bitter lemon. Finally the ringing stopped.

If I call, there will be questions. Cameras with flashes. She considered the shrill sound of sirens, the police lights. For Runa, even the sensation of breath on smooth lung tissue was too much. So police sirens and lights and knocks at the door were out of the question.

As Runa agonized, a truck rolled up in front of her house and stopped.

It was the UPS man, again. She caught him a number of times in the past few weeks admiring her paintings in the garage, which she leaves open to air out the smell. She had the feeling he liked her. Usually he knocked, waited a while, left the boxes of paints or canvases, and then Runa came out to pick up her packages before he left. She would always wave. But today he rang the bell, knocked again, rang the bell.

Maybe he saw it.

As if he could read Runa's mind, the UPS man stopped knocking and walked up to the blood. He stared down at the pool as if sending prayers to the deceased. Then, he looked directly at her face in the window. Runa's heart was pounding. But he made no sign of recognition.

The UPS man mounted his truck and drove away.

Runa shivered and felt sorry for herself. Of course, *it is beautiful outside: the sky a sunset salmon, the mountains brilliant, the air clear—but my blood is not red. I shutter at the metallic membrane that shuts me off from everything. I am a roach half-paralyzed by raid, vibrating.* She wasn't capable of anything anymore.

A simple conversation was all that was required: *Hello I saw some blood. Or: A crime has been committed. I could write it down before. But then, the questions. They'd ask questions, surely. They'd come knocking around here like the twitches in my eye, here and there.* She imagined the dark shadows behind the frosted glass, BANG BANG BANG! Miss Bird! Miss Runa

Bird! We know you are in there; oh, we know! They'd have shoes on. She'd have to ask them to take them off. And then what? They'd have big heads and dark eyes, or big shoes and small heads.

Overtaken by this convulsive train of thought she became repelled by everything. The blood, the police: every thought seemed monstrous. Viscerally repellent. Revolting. Revolting as if she were a magnet and everything else were a magnet with the same charge. She chewed on tin; she bit through wires.

Runa stood in the middle of the empty living room and fought with a demon, like a twisted and broken hero, the soldiers at the door seemed to smile. Runa wished for peace, space, a void. Like a fervent typist who had suddenly died, her finger stuck for eternity on
oo. That kind of peace. Like a toy that had run out of batteries, like a stuck-on-switch.

She had to do something. A whole day passed and no one had done anything. With a painful succession of firing neurons she was able to find her way to the bedroom. She slid on black yoga pants and a black hoody. She tossed out the contents of her already dismembered drawers, but her black socks did not appear.

Who could have stolen my socks? Finally, she found some panty-hose and, though she had to remove her pants to put them on, she was one step closer. *One thing at a time. Just one thing. One foot, now the other. Now the gloves, now the shoes, now the white chalk.*

Runa headed down the stairs and, as she came around the corner, she was greeted by the wall of toy soldiers. How would she get passed them? She hadn't thought of this. They lined up in front of the door, stony faced, a waxworks. She counted, but there were only fifteen. *Where had the others gone?*

Runa crept through the kitchen and opened the back door. She never went this way because the backyard gate scraped against the ground and the sound reminded her of her brother's door when it closed. Finally, she worked up the nerve and opened the gate.

No odor, good. No wind, good. The neighbor's lights were dark and the street sat still, as if it had been pulled out of time. As she walked onto the asphalt, she was taken in and comforted by the silence. Inside, the furnace, the filters, the fans, all seemed like a cacophony compared to the oven quiet of the empty street. The stars, however, were oppressive with exuberant clarity. She pulled the strings of her hoody more tightly around her face, adjusted her glasses, and placed the ear plugs in her pocket. She looked behind her and to the side as she approached the pool of blood.

The spot sizzled into the pavement just before the grass, above the crack in the concrete, a couple of steps from the lamp post. She could smell the forest. The tall pines were mercifully silent tonight. She was now face-to-face with the blood, the deep pool of red mercury. A glassy eye set in the lifeless street. Runa imagined what it would be like to slide into it and disappear.

She looked around again, reached for the chalk, and kneeled next to the blood. It was sticky. She swabbed the q-tip for a sample and outlined the pool in white chalk. This is what her brother did to the animals he killed, as if, after taking a life, he experienced a spasm of remorse. Or maybe he just wanted to play cop.

It seemed sufficient. She could test the blood to make sure it wasn't hers, couldn't she? *They can do that now. DNA and stuff.* Runa hesitated, looked around, then crouched down and peered into the pool of blood. It was like a mirror. Her white face, the surrounding tree tops, and the missing toy soldiers all stood against the backdrop of stars. Runa spun and glared at the soldiers that were moving in behind her.

Then, lights swooped through the darkness. Runa's pupils constricted to pinholes as she leaped into the ditch. The vehicle slowed, stopped, was silent for at least a minute. Runa's head rose up from the gully. It was the UPS truck. The truck's engine stopped, and the street was again silent. The UPS man jumped out, knocked at Runa's door, waited. She watched, wondering why he was here so late.

Runa realized he must be the murderer. He suspected she saw his crime. After a bit of knocking, the UPS man approached his truck again, walking like a wilted rose. He backed up, turned around, and, as he drove past Runa, just before the pool of blood, the ally cat darted into the street. His black body dissolved under the tire, became nothing but a thud, a sound that stole Runa's breath.

The truck stopped and seemed to Runa to take on animation, as if the big truck was sorry. It backed up. Runa wrung her cold hands, she closed her eyes, opened them. The cat was crushed, lifeless, and dark blood pooled around his body. The UPS man climbed down and stared at the blood. The cat's body was barely visible. Runa emerged from the gully.

"Poor, poor little guy. He wasn't yours was he?"

Runa had not spoken to anyone in weeks. Her throat was soggy and loose.

"No, he lives over there."

The man nodded.

"Hey, I've been trying to talk to you. I wanted to apologize. The other day I stopped to deliver a package, and I dropped a box, a canister of red paint burst. I'm sorry; UPS will pay for it."

Runa just nodded, unable to speak. *Maybe he isn't a murderer.*

The man looked at his shoes, then back. "Also, I'd like to buy one of your paintings. I moved into a new place, too much white, you know."

Runa realized for the first time that the man was handsome and that, most likely, she ordered more than was needed so he might come by. That she would wait for him at the window. So, she took a chance. She invited him inside to look.

As they walked across the street, she wasn't creeping. She didn't think about her too-short hair, or the sound her feet made on the street.

Standing before the wall of paintings, the UPS man pointed at the painting Runa worked on earlier that day.

"I love all the reds in that one."

Runa scowled, pointed at the wall of finished paintings along the wall, "These are some of my favorites." She blushed.

The UPS man nodded absently, then looked back at the stain Runa had tried to erase earlier that day, "There is just something I love about this one. The deep reds, I almost feel I could fall into into it."

Runa noticed that as he spoke, his pronunciation of the letter A was too flat and it vibrated her eardrum in a displeasing manner.

"It reminds me of the eye of a hurricane, a place of stillness, but then the stillness is not empty, no, it full."

Also, his cologne was overpowering, the room began to spin.

But he kept on, seeming not to notice the swooning Runa, "Full of potential, as if the stillness is what is actually driving the storm, the potential of the storm is all held within this deep, still pool of red."

As he spoke, the toy soldiers had started to appear behind him. With each word they soundlessly gathered, bayonets in hand.

“What’s more, I get the sense of eternity, as if the pool never would end, that the pool holds infinite power, and, I know this is strange, but it is smiling. The pool has a secret. It holds within a source of impetus, as if underneath it is another pool, and then another, neverending.”

Runa backed up and tripped, caught herself on a stack of empty cardboard boxes. They collapsed as she fell to the floor. The UPS man turned toward her and his eyes had taken on the stain, the edges impermeable as a cell membrane. Just like her brother, he stood over her and she cowered.

The toy soldiers stacked up behind him. Bayonets pointed forward, one of the soldiers hit the switch and the garage door closed. In the dark, she could feel the stain, she could even see the stain in her mind’s eye. The UPS man’s breathing faded and Runa couldn’t be sure, but she felt he was swallowed by the painting. Runa thought about the animals her brother killed, and realized she never knew he did with the bodies.

The room became completely quiet, still, icy cold. She wasn’t sure if the UPS man was still standing over her in the dark, but she was pretty sure she was alone, again. Runa wondered if maybe she was depressed: she was cold, *it feels good to be cold, it feels like being dead.*

But Runa was not dead. She was lying on the concrete and it was now the early part of dawn. The garage was bathed in rose-colored light. Above her, the stain painting seemed to laugh, to leap off the canvas with joy. It was indeed beautiful, now nearly finished.

Runa crept up the steps and into her home. She passed by the toy soldiers and counted, twenty-four now. Grabbing a handful of cereal, she took her place in front of the window, her dark eyes searched the scene.

But there was no blood, no cat, no UPS man. It was an exquisite morning, much like the morning after her brother disappeared. The day was white, the new day shone too bright, too

bold, too full. But Runa took it all in anyway. At noon, like everyday, she would see what the slop had to say.