

THE FRUIT-BY-THE-FOOT FOOL

[speaks like a frat boy four feet down the quartz barrel]

Life's a game out there for suckers, man. Life is the sour grapes on the fox's balls that the fox forgets in search of juicier prey! Life's a waltz for one! Life dips by you if you don't meet it halfway! Life is just a moment-to-moment shindig, man! Life is just a life raft strapped to itself and barrelling downriver! Life is just a box of crayons and you make the most of being the last kid to pick and you're stuck with pea green!

Life's the lightness of reckoning with can I, like, change or not? Life's what you make of it but bro I bet you life's snickering behind the curtain hoping you'll make the most of it! Life's just a diversionary tactic devised by death! Hahaha just joking, bro. Rather, life's the lime-flavoured White Claw at the back of the fridge that you leave there for years only to find it when you need it most! Thusly life is so bejeweled. Life is a one-way saviour complex that way, you know, life, life's way, life's the way.

Life's what survives even when it's cornered by lack, man. Life's bedecked in bygone fineries. Life's a mega-tautology that's ultimately at peace with itself, at the close of days. Life's a limbless cheerleader squad; life, like, perseveres. Life's a whole season of *The Bachelor* but all the suitors have been evicted from the premises. Life's that underwatered coconut tree in the background as they film on location in Atlanta. Life's loss's next-to-none, yo. Life's penitent.

Life's kinda hard to find right now because life's accordioning from period to period, unawares of how the sways rough up the kid who swings 'cross time, knees swole from the humidity of too much come too fast. Life's endless capacity gets jammed up and that's a damn bummer, man! Life's just a flavorless bruise whose time's up at the buffet. Life's up like surf.

THE GRAND INQUISITOR

[speaks with an angelic vocal fry; as though such a sound were possible]

Must my motivation be dictated by the vicissitudes of energy?

Is energy real?

Does energy have to be real to matter?

Do you accept the ways you might trigger toxic masculinity?

Do you know you're only as much to blame as the sucker who set foot on the landmine?

Why can't we recognize power as the primordial psychosis?

Is there some measure or regulation that walks me down the line between the real and unreal?

Why would I even need it?

Can we conceive of the individual only as a node for relationships, never as a thing in itself?

Should artists be paid for their work, or should we all get paid for existing so art can return to its rightful place as liberated uselessness?

Can we make love work as art?

Art work as love?

Can we escape the binary inevitability of loneliness versus monogamy in a world of plague?

Is loneliness inevitable?

Do we deserve it?

Do I put my own loveliness too far down my own pockets?

Must we pretend "deserving" is a concept worth any moral coin?

Am I sick to simply think so?

What did we replace God with to then shuttle under the name of secularism?

What will China do next?

Will you miss Taiwan if it gets annexed?

Could you more easily fuck someone you're not attracted to if you don't find yourself attractive?

Why does BDSM practice help my friend fuck people she's not attracted to?

Does the power of dominatrixes simply substitute for the power of the normatively attractive?

Am I grateful not to be easily seen as "hot"?

Have I run myself out of steam?

Are we happier under the anticipation of a better life, or are we better off living in the here and now?

LITTLE LAW-AND-ORDER LEAGUES

[speaks with a hint of penitence as though hiding something at the back of his throat]

I turn the left handle to 45 degrees and the right to 80 degrees. The left handle demarcates cold and the right handle hot water. I wait the appropriate three seconds it takes for the old reservoir of still water to empty itself, and for water to freshen in accordance with the positions of the taps as I've presently adjusted them. I begin with the least dirty of the non-oversized dishes, the ordinary porcelains, in which category I include plates, saucers, bowls, mugs, and glasses small enough for me to fit my fist into it so my fist touches the bottom. The existence of glasses that are bottlenecked such that the bottom can only be reached with use of some extending-sponge device--the existence of this kind of glass bothers me to no end, so much so that I've banned my roommate from introducing any of this type of glass to our kitchen's ecosystem. Anyway, I begin with the least dirty non-oversized dishes because some principle of hygiene in me worries about sullyng the cleaner with the dirtier. But the very fact that a sponge is reused from washing cycle to washing cycle never ceases to discomfit me; because if I end each cycle with the dirtiest dish, and I begin the next cycle with the cleanest, am I not, in principle at least if not in fact, sullyng the cleaner with the dirtier? But I will shelve this tangent which concerns sponges. I only wash the insides of bowls unless the grease on their outsides are perceptible to my fingertips; the principle of conservation (which jostles against the principle of highest hygiene) forces me to be hypercognizant of soap consumption, as though I were trying to match an exact ratio between sud and speck. As my hands spin dishes counterclockwise to clean them, I imagine that I am a potter who's shaping the porcelain for the first time, and the mere fantasy of each plate as First Clay charges my duty, stooped as I am over the parsley sticking to the drain, with a divine purpose.

When I arrive at the pots and pans portion of my evening, I'm elated enough off the fumes of my own craftiness that I can dodge the greater portion of my pots-and-pans related discomfort. You see, our late-Victorian-era sink is a few cubic centimeters too small, so the water often spills onto the countertop when I am trying to clean such a thing as a cutting-board, or a family-size pasta pot, or a barbecue grill; and the countertop is prone to peeling from moisture exposure. So as you can imagine, the type of object that includes cutting-boards mean endless grief for me; so I've devised little whispered justifications for not washing them: "I use parchment paper anyway so the pan itself is clean; or soap isn't good for cutting-board wood any way; better for the longevity of the thing to give it a simple rinse," these things I mutter inaudibly under my breath.

I often don't bother to put the dishes on the drying rack back in the cupboard before I stack new dishes on top. This is because I figure the whole load can be done all at once later. Of course this is an ultimately patchy logic. I'm certain this causes my roommate chagrin; though he's never fully come out and complained, I can see he bears a grudge over this neglect of mine in the tone he takes with me when we share a meal.

THE NARRATOR

[speaks with a rapidly diminishing patience]

It falls to me to commence these affairs, I suppose; I'm supposed to outline some of the key dramatic themes, maybe foreshadow a climax or two, or for godssakes at least establish a common setting in which the erstwhile audience might ground themselves. Perhaps I do this in a quasi-objective tone to forthrightly assert my dominance.

In the past half century more--dadaism, postmodernism, blah blah blah--and more narrators are being called "unreliable," because they have biases, limitations on the scope of their truth, and in general just a hunky flap of too much skin-in-the-game. I really resent that, like how dare you project your own ontological insecurity onto *me*! Just because your frail subjectivities began to understand that you stood under the cold light of contingency and relativity and fundamental emptiness doesn't mean you get to put that shit on me. / never lied to my ex about my online shopping habits! / never cancelled a friend only to the next day turn tail and do the same thing I cancelled them for! / never wallowed in the cognitive dissonance of adhering to a heteronormative script all the while knowing better of my own desires yet never mustering up enough willpower to tear myself away, and now baby number two is on the way! / never had to suffer the dissolution of positive truths like God and law and Good only to then be hurled into a cesspool of squabblingly relativistic identification!

Anyway, whatever, I digress. It's comforting to our reptilian brains to ride a narrative structure of beginning-middle-end; the meetcute then the domesticity then the divorce; or the first date at Thirsty & Miserable then three months of wanton fucking then blowing up at each other over emotional stakes you just couldn't admit to one another because, well fuck knows, father too distant/too late to sex/too hard on yourself? You know, narrative structures. Cradle you, make the world comprehensible, that kind of shit. I'm not a cynic, and the fact that she left me has nothing to do with it...

THE ORIFICE ARTIFICER

[speaks with a breath that's entirely appetite, in a rhythm that passes manically between fulfilment and lack]

if I were to begin then snap six beer down twiss his tit did up his hunger tit hiss crawly tongue
low my throat I gorge on it yiss lick it back there so deep it tweaks my key bump bent two moon
high just so just to reight up the right oh ping sniff drip right angles of my brain right here and
body reclines spine relaxes to the thrill of ah the jolt of whatever difference of all that is the
nerves' way of sending shocks here do it on my new copy of *Ducks, Newburyport* and the shock
of any change in state I can then formaldehyde eeeee into pleasure

it will drown from my seeing it or be smothered by my sensing of it for nothing in the world can't
be pried into a relation of delight with hole of appetite with what tasty morsel must've been
designed to meet it sixty dollars on UberEats packed up to the high wall of my guts real free and
fresh and what's more holding those superglue-sweat-sex-panic whore of babylon narratives out
to dry out on the line godless flicker as I come low to concussion big black tar pit soul rubbed
out

the noon sun is close so close to my frilled body lustgummy high park a grid of pricks of parts ah
here a cheekbone then an arm draped just lax across a bike the posture when they eat up the
picnic foods the spray of hair that garland an upper lip a wormy body doing yoga on a goalpost
the coincidence of smelling a girly floral while watching a longboarder go by aloof to death yes I
do gird myself for life to ravish me like light with all the wet wrung out of it

edging edging pumped to the gills with high cunt haven the globule thuds settin my new mind
aspinnin' from the la la la lath latherin late la la la lave the I la la lav la lav u at last

THE BUCK-FIFTY JURY DEAL

[speaks with enough venom under the tongue to poison a family of horses]

People will gather up any junk, glue it together with spit to make it stick, and call it their 'meaning in life' and let that meaning motor them to god knows all kinds of unconscionable actions. They can't see the arbitrariness that underlies it all and that takes away their right to self-seriousness at every turn. Instead they stake a claim on their own little corner of the world, ignore all the scratchmarks that say *this ground's been plundered already*, and plant their own puny egos in it and fertilize it with "projects" and "artwork" and "labour." These trinkets of personality are just ways to disguise the chains that bind us to the falsehood of our perceptions, to enslave us to the egos we believe to be proper to us, but which are no more than a high-faluting self-inflating abstraction from out of the bundle of nerves and blood we fundamentally are.

A noxious lethargy has swept across the world. Evil is no more evil than the righteousness we've taken up as a reaction to evil; at least the Evil flaunt their greedy extractions in the open air while the Good wither away from a frenzied pointing of fingers and clutching at pearls with Evil's every appearance. The stench of the mob clings heavily to the Good; like a pack of hysterical hyenas the Good closes in on their prey, Evil itself; but Evil's ultimate trick is that it offers no nourishment; its hollowness drains the vitality of those stupid enough to attack it, stupid enough to hinge their Good meaning on Evil's defeat. What's most pathetic is the moralizing of hope.

The Good are seduced by their image of Goodness, as if it were a portrait hung over the fireplace that they grow so used to they mistake it for a mirror. The Good are suspended in a non-Euclidean geometry of regurgitated wokeness, where there are no coordinates for real action but only memetic surfaces, pale semblances of virtue that claim to be speaking for the weak but are in actuality the distraught flapping of lips in hopes that a Change Is Gonna Come from the hot wind the flapping produces. The very few of them who do possess genius--at least enough Will to make them true actors on the stage of History--are weighed down by the anxious and clawing masses of Good who, having sated themselves by pumping out virtue signals til their thumbs are hoarse, now want a piece of the pie and jostle for a teeny hint of ego affirmation. This is the last chapter of the human, because once the human comes out with full proof that the most they can be is the degradation of nature into a force far more brutal; who could ever be sad to see our species extinguished?

THE COOL-COLLECTED DIME STORE STORYTELLER

Because race is not natural, it requires an origin story, like all cultural productions.

Here is one version of the story. We can call this version of the story the structural account of a human psyche. In order to perceive the world as other than just a blank mass, as other than a wholly uniform totality, we begin to intuit difference. The baby differentiates the presence of the milk-bottle from the absence of the milk-bottle; though it does not yet know why the milk-bottle should ever be absent, it nonetheless registers this absence as a feeling, then as a reaction: it cries, it wails, it begs for a return to the comforts of presence. Our first intuitions of difference arise from sheer animal need.

As we grow into our first year, our difference-perceiving faculties become ever more refined. We learn that there are things which delight us, like the furred tip of a cat's tail, or the suck of a thumb, or the motion of a rubber toy. We learn that there are things which displease us, like our father's raised voices, or too much heat or hunger, or our mother too soon walking out of the frame. There are many more affects besides; but even sticking to this simple schematic of good & bad, we feel difference in our bodies before we understand how to differentiate the objects of our world and how to differentiate them through naming them.

Here is a lesson we learned from post-structuralism: that names sacrifice singularity for generality in each use. When we say 'cat' we collapse all the features of this PARTICULAR cat, with its tortoiseshell coat and doglike mannerisms, into a generic category.

The act of naming both highlights difference (because we know that what you're speaking when you say cat that it is not a dog, not a crocodile, not a computer) and erases difference (by sublimating an individual into a species).

Of course we accept this sacrifice as one of the very first conditions on which society can be built.

So when we speak, we never fully "mean what we say"--that is, our intention and motivations cannot but be distorted by the words we choose as vehicles for those intentions and motivations. When I say "cat" I am invoking a constellation of associations: cartoon cats, childhood cats that destroyed IKEA furniture, the mewling sound cats make; and when I say "cat" to you I trust that enough of those relevant associations will be transferred to you; or even if your constellation of associations is extremely different from mine, that nonetheless they will be sufficiently meaningful to you. In this way, linguistic communication is a negotiation of differences, differences that are internal to each word as it's passed between two people.

The toddler's induction into language is seen to be innocent, but in fact it is a marvelous, horrifying fall from innocence. We open the picture book and teach it the sign "cat," which appears below the picture of a cat; we point to our housecat and say "cat"; and the toddler

understands that the word can bring two disparate things--the image-cat and the flesh-cat--together in one sign. As soon as language is learned, the constellation of associations with each word begins to twinkle into existence and differentiate what each word means: "cat" is a good word, a nice word, it reminds you of sweet Toby the tabby; but "dog" is a meaner word, a sharper word, because your sister sneered it at the neighborhood bulldog, who yapped ceaselessly through the night. Each word, beyond its literal definition, also carries the scars and slime of the tones in which it's been vocalized by the people around you, and also the sound of the word itself: the hardness of "cat" or the languorousness of "dog".

At the same time that language makes communication possible, it makes the potential of power implicit in every act of communication. Language is as vulnerable to being policed as it is capable of transforming our vulnerability into openness and connection.

A baby perhaps perceives the world as one huddled mass; but as it ages, a child will certainly begin to see difference before they can name it, or delineate the meanings of differences.

We have not yet broached the critical question, but have merely laid out the preparatory groundwork we needed to arrive at race. Here is the critical point in the story where it becomes harder to tell it in a semi-mythological tone...