Atrophy

Kirby watched the double-decked flies fuck. The static nature of their sex was impressive. The two insects were as still as the statue on which they rested, a black iris on the blank stare of the bar-end Buddha. Kirby looked his stiff drinking buddy in the eye, privy to an almost invisible event: a dispassionate torsion glazed by small, sheer wings.

Kirby rubbed his chrome friend's distended stomach. The Buddha sat smiling on the bar, gently offering a context for the factory-sized dining room: Zen as an organizing aesthetic principle, Zen as a way to hang curtains, Zen as a determining factor in the size, location and wattage of the room's lighting. Yes, that was what was truly *happening* in this restaurant: an elegant destruction of meaning. This backlit Buddha was decay, rottenness, a carious tooth in the euthanized grin of a near-dead city. And there were the two flies, persisting on (in) the face of that fat imposter. Kirby laughed. Loudly.

The bartender stopped polishing and looked up from a wet snifter. He flung his towel over his shoulder and approached Kirby with a well-practiced smile. Sweat, alcohol, and syrup stung the air as he folded his thick arms on the bar. His expensive white button down was nearly translucent at its pits. Wintergreen breath wafted a question toward Kirby:

"Gimlets getting the best of you?"

Kirby said nothing, only smiled above his glass.

"Something funny down here?" The bartender grinned accusingly. Kirby wanted to smack the smugness from Smiley's jaw.

"Just a joke, earlier. I mean, a joke I heard earlier today," Kirby said.

"What was it?"

"What."

"The joke. What wa--"

"Can't remember."

Kirby let a thin strand of drool drip into his drink. The bartender's chin folded into his fat mug.

"Dude..." Smiley was serious now.

Kirby wiped his chin and launched an attack.

"I will say...I will—I wish this had been made with *fresh* lime juice. I mean, *14 dollars*.

14 dollars and you expect quality to be commensurate with price. I mean, that's the promise, right? Of price? But this drink is *shit*. This whole fucking place is, is *shit*. Nothing of real *value* here. Nothing really going on, nothing—"

"Dude, don't *bore* me with this crap, OK?"

The bartender lumbered back to his glasses, his large back broadcasting hostility. Kirby needed to keep it together. He was getting excited.

Today was Pace's birthday. She had asked Kirby not to come. She had insisted his "protection" was paranoiac. She preferred to go on her dates without his presence. He had ignored her requests, as he always did. He didn't trust her; he *loved* her. His love lay in this lack of trust. There were these tenuous scenarios, watching another man with his woman that inspired Kirby's anxiety, agitation, and rage. The (often brutal) actions these emotions motivated expressed something inherent in Kirby, an innate violence, an inner schism. In anger, Kirby felt complete. He felt most angry when observing Pace's dates. So angry, in fact, that the word *anger* could not accurately describe the brain pulsing passion he felt when Pace cooed for another man. And so he labeled this feeling *love*, this feeling that had very little to do with Pace, and everything to do with Kirby's selfish, sad desire. Pace was the medium for Kirby's furious current. She allowed him expression, without which Kirby would surely self-destruct.

He had shown up at 7:30, a half hour before Pace's reservation. It was now 8. The place was filling up quickly; men flooded the row of tall white stools to wait for their girlfriends, lovers, and wives. Well-dressed hunchbacks slouched into their drinks, forming a row of headless designer jackets at the bar. Kirby's slender back (growing thinner by the day) was similarly clad; his slump matched that of the other patrons. But had the lighting been a little less *Zen*, Kirby's bar mates might have noticed the difference in Kirby's clothing. His jacket was frayed at the shoulders; the elbows were marked with pale spots. His jacket was *old*, an artifact from his previous life, one that Kirby clung to for moments like this, occasions where he was required to venture out on account of Pace's work.

Pace. She arrived in the dining room with a loud laugh. Kirby didn't turn around; he didn't have to. She was wearing her green heels, the high *high* ones, at least six inches. He knew them by the sound they made: the left heel had worn down, its sharp *clack* muffled to a dull *cluck*. *Click cluck, click cluck.* They were old shoes, but well polished, and apart from the sound, there was nothing to betray their age. Kirby could see them without looking, just as he could see her green dress, the one that painted her lanky frame, the one with the broken zipper, the one he always had to safety pin on the inside. *It does my eyes nicely*—that was the line that went with the dress, a line he heard repeated as she and Nik took their seats. Nik owned the restaurant; any table was his. And yet he chose the table closest to the bar. Just close enough for Kirby to grasp the louder points of their conversation, but not the whispers. And it was the whispers that interested Kirby. Whispers on Pace's birthday. A day that should have belonged to Kirby, a day Kirby and Pace should have shared. But Pace's date on this day was a necessary manipulation, an

event designed with Nik in mind. It was vital for Pace to see Nik on this day if the illusion of their relationship was to be maintained. Nik didn't pay Pace, not exactly, but there were gifts, there was an understanding. Money made its way to her, money she never demanded and money he never offered, but money that appeared nonetheless. Kirby often complained. But he took her (Nik's) money all the same, an action laced with tacit encouragement. Nik's magic money kept things going for the two of them. But Nik's magic money had Kirby worried that Pace might go straight to the source.

Pace bubbled at Nik's vulgar mumbles. Sure, the prick was paying for her duck, but she was laying it on thick tonight. All part of the birthday act, Kirby hoped. He kept his eyes off the table. Kirby didn't need to look. He felt Pace's presence throb through the building; she rushed at him through the walls, poured from the ceiling, crept up his stool. He slapped, slapped, slapped the bar with his palm.

"HEY, uh...Hey." Kirby hit the bar with his fist. The bartender tensed his shoulders, but didn't turn.

Kirby had never killed anyone. His thoughts were exercises in exorcism. He was gently tugging at the bartender's soft, brown hair. He was shattering his glass. He was taking a shard in his hand. He was bleeding, but he didn't care. He was cutting a wide hole in the bartender's full cheek. He was holding a thick slab of flesh while the bartender screamed from his new mouth.

A man's voice brought Kirby back:

"Excuse me. That's...that's my drink you just knocked there."

Kirby's bar mate wiped his wet sleeve for emphasis. Kirby ignored him. Kirby preferred his big Buddha buddy with the fly eye. He turned to the statue and did his best not to laugh. Kirby was getting excited. Pace cooed; her lilt cut the din. Nik was whispering. The man next to Kirby coughed.

"Excuse me, but you knocked my drink. It's almost emptied."

Kirby kept his back to the man. Pace's coo echoed in his skull.

Kirby watched as an army of waiters emerged from the kitchen with a chocolate soufflé. A pink candle was stuck in the small brown lump. Kirby began to sweat. Tuneless *Happy Birthdays* tumbled from the waiters' mouths.

"*Hello*? You *knocked* my *drink*."

The waiters vanished from Kirby's view. He didn't turn to follow their path. They were headed for his girl. Kirby crushed the two flies in front of him. He took their combined corpses and flicked them into the man's drink.

“What the *fuck*, man?”

Behind him, Pace screamed with delight. It shattered his hearing, brought him beyond sound. His head was silent with shock. He felt his neighbor’s hand on his shoulder. The bartender approached, brow furrowed, lips flapping. Kirby only saw, didn’t hear. His gaze sunk to his neighbor’s glass and the newly spotted ice cube. Kirby felt his love build: ready to burst, ready to burn.

+++

“Some douchebag...”

“What?”

“At the bar. Some—”

Pace didn’t look. She didn’t have to. She grabbed Nik’s leg under the table.

“The sauce on this thing is killer.” Pace pinkied some chocolate drizzle and brought it to her lips.

“I love you baby,” Nik said.

Pace giggled instead of answering. She pinched the pleat of his pants and grabbed a little skin to go along with it. Nik jumped.

“My baby’s feisty tonight. Doesn’t she like my soufflé?”

Of course, the soufflé wasn’t really his, as nothing in his restaurant truly *belonged* to him. He had provided the fiscal support necessary to launch the restaurant, to pay the cook, to supply the chocolate. But other than money, Nik didn’t make much of anything. And yet he was very attached to the idea of ownership, and Pace always allowed him this idea of himself. It had been the quickest way to his heart, which she now owned. It never bothered him that his *I love you’s* were not returned. Reciprocation was not essential to Nik’s love, only receipt was required. And Pace took it all like a champ, and took his money right along with it. Just enough for herself and Kirby.

“I’m not paying for *anything*.” Kirby’s voice rose from the bar behind her. She pretended not to hear and took the first bite of dessert. The chocolate dripped down her chin.

Kirby. She detested his presence at these toxic events. Pace loathed Nik and hated Kirby for failing to believe this, for needing to linger anonymously in the background, loitering under the pretense of *protection*. She was insulted that Kirby imagined these dates as anything other than torture. It worried her that she loved someone who failed to understand her. It was this disappointment that inspired her passive attempts at expressing indignation. In this way, she relished her encounters with Nik, insofar as they

injured Kirby. This was the only path to Kirby's heart, through his hate. His jealous rage fueled fires necessary to sustain their connection. And so, dates with Nik were essential: they injured Kirby in the way he loved, and deepened his dependence on Pace. Also, they (he) needed money. Kirby viewed *work* in any form as a *contemptible submission to the systemic violence of a capitalist society*. Making a living: a phrase Kirby hated. He preferred to *take* a living (or, rather, have Pace do the taking). This was Kirby's sentimental rebellion. But what Kirby failed to grasp, and what Pace never articulated (allowing her beloved his illusions) was that regardless of whether one *took* or *made* a living, the equation was essentially the same; in both contexts, money was the implied composition of life. The method of procurement was the only difference. Pace took a living for the both of them. Kirby didn't want any of that green ink rubbing off on him. And yet he knew it was necessary. Pace wondered if Kirby regarded her with the same sense of grim necessity. A dismal thought as she smiled at Nik's over-tanned face. All this fucking work for nothing.

"I have a present for you, Pace." Nik said.

He smiled. When Nik smiled, only his mouth moved. His full lips stretched wide, while the rest of his face remained motionless, irrevocable inertia maintained by regular botox injections. Large bleached teeth sharply contrasted his tan. There was always an air of plastic serenity about Nik, a cold peace made possible by money.

"Nik—you shouldn't have. After all you've—"

"Oh please. Twenty five is a big year," Nik motioned to a waiter, "Jason. Jason could you come here for a minute?"

Jason arrived at the table. Nik kept his wide blues trained on Pace while whispering in the waiter's ear. Jason gave her a wink and vanished.

Another outburst from the bar. Pace couldn't make out the exact exchange, but she knew the voice to be Kirby's. She curled her toes. Her stomach turned. Nik frowned.

"Look," —Pace didn't—"same douchebag...at the bar."

The waiter came to the rescue with Nik's gift, a rectangular package that was as large as the table. Pace had to stand up in order to unwrap it. The waiter helped. Nik watched the two work on his gift. Slowly, a painting appeared from under the paper.

"It's the one you liked." Nik said.

"Nik—it's, it's so...big. I mean, I love it, but wow."

"You can't get a good look while you're holding it, hon. Jason, grab the canvas. So she can really see."

Pace stepped back. Jason took the canvas and propped it up against his legs. It was a photorealist painting of a sleek red convertible, one in a series that Nik was currently peddling. He owned an art space/car dealership in the city's exclusive gallery district. The venture was a side project of his, an experiment. The car was called the Žižek, and with its classic silhouette, energy efficient engine, and hefty price tag, it was the perfect vehicle for the target demographic of the city's artistic epicenter: well heeled global citizens that dutifully clomped cobblestones, looking to make manifest costly ideas of themselves as champions of culture. What they did not consider, thought Pace (an outsider, certainly, but one who had been informed by Kirby's knowledge of the world, a viewpoint she trusted to a certain extent, but knew to be tainted with bitterness, regret, and envy), was the nature of their contribution, and its effects beyond the space above their sofas. Money had not created this particular world, but was now in the process of defining it, encouraging counterintuitive synonyms: *art* and *industry*, *expression* and *spending*, *self-worth* and *market-potential*. And so, when Nik introduced his showroom (paintings, cars, paintings of cars) it was welcomed by the *art community*. Whatever grumblings had surfaced (they were few, they were small, they came from irrelevant neighborhoods) were ignored. Nik was selling more art than autos, but it made no difference. Money was money, the vehicle unimportant.

Nik got up and took Pace in his arms, gripping her shoulders, his face close to hers.

"I can't tell you how many people have wanted to buy this puppy. I've had to fend them off all month."

"Nik, it's fantastic. It's my favorite from— "

"Yes. From my opening."

Pace had met Nik at the opening of his gallery, a boozy event that was both a launch for the convertible, and the unveiling of the *Žižek Series* (Nik's name for "his" paintings). The artist of the *Žižek Series* was Melanie Baltimore, a former classmate (and lover) of Kirby's from art school. Melanie had garnered a fair amount of buzz within the art world. Nik had commissioned the very promising (and very poor) painter who had recently finished her MFA at a prestigious university. Melanie had been in the final round of interviews to become sculpting supervisor for Haruki Yoshinabe, an artist who employed a staff of twenty to create his large-scale installations: 10'X10' purple chrome cubes, modular units that had the potential to expand infinitely. This coveted position came with considerable creative control (but of course, relative anonymity), and was an ideal steppingstone for any recent MFA graduate looking to make it big (Yoshinabe himself had been a studio assistant in sculptor Geoff Kann's factory). But Nik had offered better money (his restaurants were a global success) and promised to put her name all over the exhibit. The catch: she was required to paint the cars. A task she was willing to complete; Nik had influence with the neighbors. Kirby felt contempt for Melanie, contempt that was rooted in jealousy, an erotic hatred that inspired him to attend her opening with Pace in tow, a six-foot declaration of disinterest. Bringing Pace had been prudent, although not in the petty way Kirby had initially intended. Pace had found Nik, a situation that proved

vital to Kirby's existence (Kirby had just been fired and was freshly desperate, angry, and in need of dough). Pace had seen an opportunity, one that would instill Kirby with a new jealousy, and thus displace his passion for Melanie. She had deepened her hold on Kirby by engaging Nik. That night, she had smiled at him over a plastic glass of cheap red, chewing the rim and affecting absentmindedness, while carefully calculating: Nik and Kirby and money and love. But now, faced with Nik's present, Pace was overwhelmed.

Nik cradled her on the dining room floor. He inhaled her hair. Jason the waiter looked at the ground.

"Oh Jesus, Jason, you can go. And take the painting."

Jason limped off with the canvas. Nik gave Pace a kiss and returned to his seat. Pace felt empty. She wanted another champagne.

"My glass," she called after Jason, "you forgot my glass. I need another."

Jason's back froze for a moment before he entered the waiter station with the canvas. She waved her flute at him.

"My *glass*? I know you heard me," --and then to Nik-- "He fucking heard me."

"I know babe, I know. He'll be back. We'll get him then."

"Let's fire him," Pace giggled. Nik joined in. Soon the two were laughing loudly. Tears welled in Pace's eyes.

Something cold, wet and hard hit the back of Pace's neck. She jolted forward, her tears knocked from their ducts. Whatever it was, it was Kirby; this Pace was certain of. Nik leapt to his feet.

"What the *fuck?"*

Nik was large, muscular, 6'4". His age only showed when he was naked; loose skin sagged around taut muscles. She imagined his nude body as he marched to the bar. Pace didn't look back, she didn't need to. Pace closed her eyes, shut her ears. She conjured Kirby's face, the one he made in moments like this: the flared nostrils, the wide eyes, the blushed cheeks. Rage in search of an object. Muffled shouts came from behind her. Pace held her breath. The voices came closer, moving past the table, bringing with them vibrations that shook the floor. She opened her eyes in time to catch Kirby's exit. He looked right at her as the bartender pushed him out the door. Kirby's left eye was bruised: the white bloodied, the socket blackened. Pace couldn't help but feel a sick, sweet pulse at the sight of his shiner. She started crying. A hand rubbed her back. Nik. He whispered in her ear.

"You OK baby?"

Pace only nodded; she didn't trust her voice.

"We got him, baby. Out for good."

Pace coughed and settled. She wiped the tears from her face. Nik kissed her forehead and returned to his seat. He took her palm. His hand was wet. Pace coughed again, not bothering to cover her mouth. He stroked the back of her hand with his thumb.

"That's my Pace. It's OK. Some idiot threw some ice at you. We got rid of him, baby. Everything's OK. Its just us again. On your birthday. So let's celebrate. I know just the thing to soothe that throat."

Nik brought a thick spoonful of chocolate sauce to her lips.

"Open wide..."

Pace did as he said. He put the spoon in her mouth. She was sick, she was sad, but she swallowed.

"That's my baby. Now, daddy's got a question for you."

+++

He bought the pack of frozen peas with his last two dollars. The sight of Kirby's damaged socket revived the crushed cashier. She gave him a concerned frown with his change, and Kirby was out the door.

Down the street with plastic peas icing his eye. The kids stared as Kirby passed. *Kids*—Pace's term for the hip things that populated their neighborhood, filling up the ugly grey boxes that sprouted from the remains of a formerly Latin population. Kirby had been lured to this latter-day bohemia with a vague idea of joining a movement, an artistic community. But Kirby quickly realized the absurdity of his counterculture fantasies. In fact, these were the kids who created culture, who designed the storefronts, made the TV shows, and churned out ad copy. *Creatives*: the corporate term. Kirby's art-school MFA had gotten him a *good* job at a design firm. *So cool*—the kids without jobs envied him, the kids *with* jobs commiserated, and so in this sense, Kirby *had* joined a community. Not the community he had envisioned. A community of working *creatives*. It all felt like a compromise, a silly semantic safeguard against the taxing deluge of consumer culture. Nothing creative about re-imagining logos for clothing brands, toothpaste tubes, or luxury whiskies. Kirby's disillusionment bred a mad itch, an aggressive burn that had triggered his scratchy workplace episode: The Incident of the Injured Intern. It was an offense that had assured both Kirby's termination and a permanent place in office lore.

Kirby stumbled down the street. The gimlets had stained his tongue, stung his throat, fuzzed his brain. His eye pulsed beneath the frosted wrapper. The kids thinned as Kirby

came closer to home. Kirby lived on the edges of gentrification, past the point where previous people had been pushed. Empty condos loomed like promises over smaller, shabbier residences. Luxury to come, the new buildings claimed. But an economic downturn had halted the development of these structures and many had been left abandoned as a result of the bust.

Squatting—a term Kirby hated. The word had a quality that implied a submissive position, a lowered state of being. And what Kirby felt was the opposite. He felt raised, heightened by his living arrangement. He was free from renting or buying. His sense of ownership lay in his length of occupancy; his presence alone was his claim to the space. But his choice was still one determined by money, Pace liked to point out. Had they the dough to live elsewhere, they probably would. But Kirby held fast to his insistence that living there was a statement, a rebellion. They were *living freely*. Pace would have preferred central heating.

Kirby's condo was next to a Pentecostal Church. The church was old, but its weathered brick and dirty awning did little to discourage the Saturday night service crowd. Kirby slid through the native population, lifting his pea bag to show off his shiner. He was proud of his tough little socket, its fat glamour. No one noticed, no one turned, no one cared. Disappointed, Kirby disappeared into the neighboring alleyway, the one that led to the first floor window of his cold, abandoned condo. Kirby lifted the frame and climbed in. His leg got caught mid-climb, and he fell to the floor. The bag of peas flew out of his hands. Kirby let it slide. Kirby let it lay. Kirby stood up.

The ceiling of his condo was not finished. Kirby and Pace's wardrobes dangled from exposed pipes, old designer duds hanging like jungle leaves. Kirby pushed a suit aside as he staggered toward his king-sized mattress in the corner of room. The walls were a thin white, a color abandoned after the first coat. A floor-length mirror stood next to the bed. In front of it was a clear plastic bag filled with pastries: croissants, muffins, unfrosted cake. Day-old discards from the local vegan bakery, perfectly edible excess that had been left to mold by the trash. Dumpster diving was Kirby's new thing. Often, pastries piled up faster than Kirby or Pace could eat them.

Kirby flopped on his mattress and dug for a scone. He took a big cranberry bite. A little stale, but still good. His eye throbbed, yearning for the discarded ice pack. But Kirby was drunk and didn't feel like getting up. He crawled all the way back to his pea bag by the window. By this point, its contents had completely melted. Kirby felt the small pellets swim in their skin. He lay on the floor and put the pack on his eye.

+++

It was freezing, her hands were numb, but she sucked her cigarette to the filter before climbing through the window. There was Kirby, out cold, a pile of vomit under his cheek, a bag of peas resting next to his face. She knelt beside him, frowning at the smell, and nudged his shoulder.

"Kirby...Kirby?"

Kirby's eyes flapped open.

"I...my eye...I needed to ice..."

"Kirby--what the fuck. What the fuck is *wrong* with you?"

Kirby sat up, wiping his face.

"I...my eye...it's--"

"Yes, I know. I was there, Kirby."

"I just couldn't handle..."

"You were out of control."

"...seeing you, like...seeing you with--"

"He proposed, Kirby. Nik proposed. After you lef--"

"And you came home?" Kirby stood, propping himself against the open window.

"That's all you can say? 'You came home?' I came home for *you*, Kirby."

"What did you say to him, Pace?"

"Kirby, this is a difficult situation for me. You have to understand..."

"What did you say, Pace?"

"..my situation. *Our* situation. You know this affects us b--"

"What did you *say*, Pace?" Kirby pounded his fist against the windowpane.

"*No*. I said no."

"That's why you came home without that ugly fucking painting."

"Kirby. I said no for *us*. Because of you. I can't *marry* him Kirby, that's just--"

"Us? You should have taken the money, honey, cause without it there is no *us*."

"What the fuck are you talking about? There can be *us* without Nik. Nik is nothing to me, to *us*."

"I'm fucking broke, Pace. You know th--"

"*Of course* you're broke, Kirby. You always were. I'm the one making the money. Without me you'll just...just...fucking *ROT* here, in this sick fucking excuse for an apartment." Pace knocked one of Kirby's shirts from the ceiling pipes.

"You're right. I will rot. I'll rot here all by myself. Without you. Without anyone, or anything..." Kirby marched back to his mattress. Pace followed, yelling at his back.

"Oh give me a fucking *break,* Kirby. I'm telling you I *love* you and--"

"That's not fucking good enough, Pace. Now, now we're fucking screwed unless...unless I go back to work which--"

"*YES,* Kirby. *YES.* Go back to work. Why don't *you* fucking work for a change?"

"You *know* how I feel about work, Pace. I thought you understood me."

"Understand *me*, Kirb. Understand *me*. I've been the one working for the both of--"

"Going out to dinner a few times a week is not--"

"Work? Really, Kirby. You think going out to dinner with that man is not work? You think laughing at his jokes is not work? You think sucking his dick is not--"

"SO FUCKING STOP THEN. If you hate it so much just FUCKING STOP."

"I DID KIRBY. I said 'NO' to his fucking proposal."

"Which is why we are fucking SCREWED now, Pace. Like totally FUCKED, PACE."

"I can't do this, Kirby. I'm fucking OUT OF..."

"I hope you DO leave. Cause THAT'S THE FUCKING WAY..."

"...HERE FOR GOOD."

"...I WANT IT."

Kirby's fist traveled fast, a direct flight to Pace's eye.

+++

She had nowhere else to go at 2am. Nik answered on the first ring.

“I knew you’d change your mind, baby.”

Thick wet heaves from Pace on the line. Nik adjusted his tone accordingly.

“Baby, baby. Shhhh. It’s ok. Getting married is a big decision. You were scared. I forgive you. It’s all forgotten. We have each other no—”

“Mugged,” Pace lied, “I’ve been mugged.”

“Jesus Christ. Are you OK? Did you call the police?”

“Gone. He’s gone now.”

“Where are you now?”

“Downtown...I— ”

“Get in a cab. I’ll pay. Get here now.”

“Ok...ok....”

Pace flailed for taxis.

“Pace? Stay with me. I want you to stay on the phone until you’re in the cab. Ok?”

“Yes...I--yes...Ok.”

“Baby?”

“Ok. I’m in. I’m on my way.”

+++

Suds dribbled from her hair and slid down her bare shoulders. She cried, all toweled up on Nik’s leather sofa. He cradled her skull in terry cloth. Together they stared out Nik’s wall-sized windows. Pace imagined pushing through the glass and bringing Nik along for the tumble, their two bodies joining a shower of shards, approaching the promise of the river’s black, cold body.

She was still warm from the shower as she straddled him and bit his neck. Her knees sunk into the couch. She let her towel fall and brought her mouth to her man’s. His presence became unimportant; she drifted in the kiss, escaping the particulars of the evening, hiding in his mouth cavity. It was there in that hollow she felt more dead than alive, as if she could slip down his throat and settle in his stomach. It was his insides she was interested in, and the escape they offered. When Nik smoothed her spine, she was snapped from her internal fantasy and forced to reckon with the external expression of his

passion, the slick grip of his wet palms. He wanted her present, alive, moaning under pressure. He caressed her bruised eye. Even that he wanted. She winced. Nik smiled.

“You OK, baby?” he whispered.

Pace didn’t answer. She wanted to get back to it, into him, away, away, away. She kissed him again, hoping he’d shut up. No luck; Nik broke it up again.

“Does my baby want to do the rope tonight?” Nik asked.

Pace didn’t want to *do the rope*. Pace wanted to drift without disturbance.

“If it’s too much, we don’t have to, baby. But it could be fun...just the thing to take your mind off...you know, the...tonight’s incident. Seems like that’s what you...well you want it right? I mean you’re the one who...”

Without a word she walked to his closet. Nik shut up; he was getting what he wanted. She couldn’t blame him for his expectation; it was a precedent she had helped to set. From the first noose onward, she had facilitated his knotty kink. Now she was trapped, responsible for his escape: he needed her to choke him, he trusted her grip, trusted that she would bring him just close enough, not over, not beyond, not black. She was in his employ in her position above him, with that rope in her hands. When she tightened, it was because she owed him, he had paid for this constriction, it was his idea of a good time, and his ideas were her duty. And so even when the familiar fibers were in her hands and she closed in on his Adam’s apple and his dick rose and his neck pulsed and his lips sputtered and his nostrils shrunk, even when he was afraid, afraid that she would finish him, even when he smacked his mattress in surrender, she was his, all his, he owned her. His idea, his death.

She rifled through his tie rack until her hand settled on the rope. She was sick of being *his*, anyone’s. She was sick of the stupid throb inside of her that led to belonging. She hated how she felt less without another. There was nothing unique in her need, her desire to descend, forget. She wrung the rope in her hands until her palms were raw.

“Baby?” Nik called.

Pace let a quick, silent sob fly in the closet.

“I’m getting ready,” she spurted.

“I miss you. Get over here and case me, baby.”

Pace took a breath and turned from the closet. Nik was naked on the couch, his taut cock inching up his stomach.

“You gotta get your pillow first, turkey.” Pace lilted through her teeth.

“But turkey’s tired. Can you get turkey’s pillow for him?”

“Why doesn’t turkey come with me to the bedroom?”

Nik looked at her with expectant eyes; always the same in this moment. She lassoed his neck, and led him loosely to the bedroom. She tossed him on the mattress. He lay on his back.

“Does baby wanna get on top? Does baby wanna choke her turkey? Is turkey gonna get what’s coming to him? Is turkey gonna get the case?”

Commands as questions: Nik’s familiar tactic. Pace got on top, and let Nik inside her. She rode him slowly, reaching for a pillow. She stripped off its case and hooded her man. His large features protruded through the countless threads of the designer pillowcase. The fabric covering his mouth moved in and out with his breath.

“Turkey wants it tight. Can you make it tight for turkey?”

She pulled on the noose, gave Nik what he wanted. His sheathed face allowed her to project what she wished. Who said her anger needed a definite object? She much preferred this anonymous mask to Nik’s specific face, it allowed her to let loose, imagine who she liked. It was Kirby, it was Nik, it was no one.

In, out, in, out, breath pushed at the mouth of the blue silhouette. Pace pulled tighter, twisting the rope to the left, leaving a trail of bloody chafe. Her man pulsed inside her. He was close; she could feel it. So unfair, that only he should find escape, that he could drift selfishly, hide in his bag, alone with his pleasure while she did all the work. The pulling, the riding, the moaning: all for nothing, all for him, or him, or him. *Who* didn’t really matter; it was all similarly tiring, angering, *empty*. She would not allow him tonight. Pace made a final twist and thrust his crown against the headboard. Nik went limp. Pace let go, rolled off, and sank into his mattress.

With her turkey out cold next to her, Pace was free to scream as loud as she liked, but she chose to muffle her noise with the naked pillow beside her. She was afraid of what her anger sounded like, and what that sound might inspire.

In the morning, Nik felt like a new man.

“I feel like a new man.”

Pace had not slept all night, but she pretended now.

“I’m sore, but baby I’m *alive*. I don’t know what got into you last night, honey, but whatever it was, you put it into *me*.”

Pace gave a slight hum of acknowledgment.

“I meant to ask you, baby. Do you think you could watch Gorgeous this weekend? I have to go to that exhibition in Miami.”

Pace rolled over, and looked up at Nik’s smooth face. A scab lined his Adam’s apple.

“Sure,” she said.

“You might as well stay here...I mean you’re here all the time anyway...and you’re gonna be spending a lot more soon...”

He rubbed Pace’s hair with a nervous smile. She had not said yes. But this was typical of agreements made with Nik; his talons tacitly took.

“I mean, it’s gotta be better than your place”—he said with a laugh—“Not that I would know...”

Pace had never let Nik see “her” place. He would never understand. Or, rather, he would understand too much.

+++

Kirby’s old grad school buddy looked ghosted. Running into Kirby after so long, with such bad news. The worst had been delivered. Now, the ex-friend frowned as he surrendered the final detail:

“Heroin,” he said.

And there it was again, that same stupid feeling, now deeper than ever, a tension that racked his chest and sunk his gut. There it was again: jealousy. Apparently he was the last to know; the news had already made its way through the neighborhood. She had been their darling deity, a fixed point on the scene, a sick little gem with a glam little habit. Yes, Melanie Baltimore had always been ahead of the game. Kirby could never catch up. And now she’d fucking won for good, she’d gotten her goodbye at 28.

“I didn’t realize she messed with—”

“Yeah, well you kind of dropped out, Kirby. Where the hell have you been? I haven’t seen you since—”

“I’m around. Just not, you know...”

Kirby let his sentence hang. His former friend crushed his cigarette on the sidewalk. It was a long stomp; neither had much to say.

“Yeah well, I should get going. I got some stuff I, uh...a girl I’m, uh meeting. So...”

“Well it was good seeing you, Kirb. Really. I’ll see you around, OK?”

“Yeah. See you.”

Kirby walked a few blocks to nowhere, sat on the ground and let wet heaves wash over him. Snot, tears and sweat poured from his face as he grappled with Melanie’s terminal success. He raked his knuckles against the concrete. They bled. Kirby brought his fist to his mouth and sucked.

+++

Bubbles floated to the top of the marble pool. At the bottom, Gorgeous snapped at goldfish. Omnivorous Gorgeous only got goldfish on special days. Not that it really made a difference to her; snapping turtles have no sense of occasion. But Nik thought it nice to feed her something other than plants this weekend. Gorgeous wanted to celebrate the engagement. Her celebration was Pace’s responsibility. Nik was long gone to Miami.

Nik’s buzzer rang. Kirby. Pace was expecting him, an apology. Then it would be over.

+++

Kirby stood outside, ready to be gutted. He imagined Pace opening the door with a grin and a knife. He wanted her to open him up and out, into that brave space that Melanie Baltimore occupied. But Kirby was chicken shit. His fantasy was one born out of cowardice. Even in his thoughts, he couldn’t imagine taking his own life; he needed another to do it for him, and there he failed again where Melanie had succeeded. Yes, he was one sick piece of poultry.

He waited. He rang again. The door opened. And there, hanging behind Pace’s expectant face, was one of Melanie’s cold red cars on a big fat canvas. Kirby crumbled to his knees.

“Kirby?”

Pace had never seen Kirby cry. It was this rare expression of hurt that led her to believe he was truly sorry. Pace began crying as well; she was not sure that she could forgive him, but she could certainly pick him up off the floor.

She knelt on the threshold and scooped her sad buddy up. He heaved on her shoulder, drooled down her back. Linked together, Pace limped them through the door. Kirby slid down her body, pulling Pace into his messy crumble. He hit the floor first, Pace followed. On Nik’s linoleum, Pace found Kirby’s gaze. He was not with her, he was somewhere else. She drew back, sat up and slapped the salt off her cheeks. Kirby let a low moan rumble.

“Kirby, what the *fuck*. We need to talk. *Talking* Kirby. Not moaning. Let’s *speak*. We’re, we’re not *animals*.”

“Melanie.” Kirby let her name loose, and with it a whole new mess of sobs.

“What?”

“Melanie’s...dead.” Kirby slapped the air with a sick chuckle.

Pace didn’t care about Melanie; it was Kirby’s injuries she loved, but only when she caused them. She wanted Kirby back, wanted him present, needed him now. Kirby’s fraught giggles disturbed her.

“Kirby...Kirby. Look at me.”

Kirby kept laughing into linoleum.

“LOOK AT ME.” Pace slapped Kirby hard. Kirby stopped. Kirby steadied. He looked at Pace. Pace took him in her arms, cradled him on the floor. He felt Pace’s weight on top of him, as she descended with him into rest. Together, they were gone.

+++

When they woke, it was dark. Where they were in the weekend was uncertain. They lay on the linoleum, faces pressed together, dried drool commingling.

“Let’s leave,” Kirby whispered.

Pace eyed him wearily, warily, brushing crust from her cheek.

“What? I’m here for the weekend Kirb, I told you.”

“No, I mean let’s *leave*.”

Pace paused.

“Just you and me. Out of this fucking city. It’s killing us, baby. *Us*. We’re better than this.” Kirby sat up and clutched her hand.

“Kirby I—”

“It makes sense Pace. You hate it here, you hate this”—Kirby slapped the floor.

“*Where*, Kirb?”

“Berlin. Things are *happening*, there babe. People are making things. Things that count. That’s where the real art is.”

“Berlin.”

“Yes. *Berlin*. Just *us*. Free of *this*.”

“Berlin.”

“Leave with me baby. C’mon.”

“Berlin.”

Pace smiled. Escape. She nodded. Suddenly Kirby was on his feet.

“BERLIN, BABY!” Kirby laughed hysterically and pulled his girl to her feet.

Gorgeous loped into the foyer.

“Gorgeous. How did you get out of your pool?” Pace frowned at the pet. She walked over and reached without thinking. Gorgeous snapped the air, just missing Pace’s pinkie.

“Jesus Christ. You almost fucking got me, you little bitch.”

Pace reached again, readjusting her position. This time, she got Gorgeous with ease. She grappled the turtle’s armored exterior, careful to grab it from the center. With her strategic hold, Pace was safe from harm. The animal’s small skull writhed: left, right, left, right, its fruitless snaps making nothing but noise as Pace brought the turtle back to its pool. She plopped another goldfish into the water out of pity for the captive creature. Pace watched as the orange flapper met his fate, a doomed amber glint at the bottom of the pool. One snap and the gold was gone.

Jonathan Parks-Ramage lives in Brooklyn, NY. He works in the Writing and Development Department of Roadside Entertainment, and New York-based production company. His fiction has also appeared in *nthWord*.