

*Bodies languish on racks, carved from the slab that once breathed life into this world. Asian mostly, but a few Americans, and one rare, exotic beauty whose feminine contours and siren song that hands could neither resist nor silence. She would become her maker's masterpiece once his life's work was exhibited and his name household. All of them with horns smoothed and polished under the shed's clinical fluorescents. Cavities gutted and routed for experimental hardware.*

*Against the other wall, their companion necks suspend from hooks, finger markings evident. Blonde, ebony, rose.*

*Connective tissue sits in queue upon the workbench, ready to be machined to precision tolerances, these straps and nuts and pegs and bridges. Coils of nickel-plated wire, instruments of torture.*

*Evidence everywhere, yet all unfinished.*

*With the luthier's ponderous footsteps approaching, Sera tugs a hanging chain and the shed cloaks her in blackness.*

Lucidity still eludes him, leaving only these used-up memories, these hand-me-down dreams that Sera embeds nightly. Despite awareness that the visions belong to her, channeled somehow, he can never steer them from their invariable conclusions.

His own dreams are far easier to interpret, with their familiar realities and symbolic projections.

*The sounds of emergency vehicles approach, brakes squealing and lights strobing. Doors slam. Urgent chatter while feet shuffle and equipment is gathered.*

*He's dead again.*

*Flaming grass encircles the hallowed ground in his periphery. Impossibly, he maintains an earthly view of the rural sky, which Sera then fills, crouching over him wearing a paramedic's half-zipped jumper suit and that divine smile. She strokes his hair and brings her electric lips to his.*



Tobe Mohr's eyelids flicker, resolving their dewy focus upon a popcorn-textured ceiling. Concentric stains of faulty plumbing linger above. His bedroom. The mattress under his back vibrates in five-pulse bursts synchronized with lightning strikes that flood the walls—sensations that are reminiscent both of his resuscitation and his recurring dreams about it.

He flings a limb in the direction of the bedside alarm clock, but still the silent fire drill persists. 9:57. And it was five pulses, not three: the doorbell. He slithers off the mattress, grumbling consonants, and shuffles across the hardwood floor into the living room, where the table lamp echoes the bedroom's lightning show.

A figure moves on the porch out front.

The peephole's fisheye caricatures a fortyish bottled blonde sucking lipstick from her teeth and brushing wisps from her forehead with her ring finger. Natalie, the neighbor. A pan of baked goods balances in her other hand. Brownies, most likely, given their simplicity and her reputed aversion to domestic tasks. This must be important. Tobe opens the door as her smile assembles itself then breaks down just as quickly when his eyelids recoil from the radiance of her backlight.

As she takes in his dishevelment, her silhouetted mouth forms silent shapes: "Looks like I'm Miss Thereafter."

“Huh?” Tobe croaks, palm shielding the violent rays.

She tries again, her inflated lips exaggerating and contorting the same syllables he can't hear. Missed a spot of Passion Plum lipstick on her incisor. Tobe spares her feelings without a mention, then taps his temple to explain his auditory confusion. Now the squint is hers, until she notices he's not wearing that thing he's always plugged into. “Oh!” she says. More mouth shapes: “Wine scotch year on?”

Tobe blinks several times in response. Can't trust his eyes so early.

“Should we reschedule? I could come back.” Natalie thumbs down the street.

“Nah, nah,” he yawns, catching on. “We said ten, right? It's fine. Just didn't reckon I'd need the alarm today.”

She extends the pan to him with both hands, head sheepishly bowed in a question of offertory worth: The Supplication.

He peels back a tinfoiled corner—brownies, indeed—and inhales with a practiced smile that's comforted so many widows and thieves alike on this very porch. He disappears back inside, wishing he could bring himself to charge actual legal tender sometimes instead of whatever bartering chips the locals deem of value.

Natalie cranes her neck into the living room for a peek, but minds the threshold of this holy dwelling. Like a vampire awaiting expressed permission for entry. Newspaper fragments litter half the room, while other exposed surfaces are veiled in dust. The lingering musk of Indonesian tobacco. Stuffed animals and blond dolls of impossible genetics strewn about, despite being a childless home. She considers suggesting he trade out his services for some housekeeping favors now and then.

“Pull up in the dining room, Nauti,” his voice calls, “and I'll put on some coffee.”

*Nautily* was the regretful nickname she had earned in college, and it stuck. She's afraid to know how Tobe had picked it up.

As she crosses the room, various Jesuses eyeball her path from every wall. Rendered in two dimensions or three, ethnicities from Semitic to African. Impostors, all.

Two steaming mugs sit on the table, one's gothic script proclaiming that on the eighth day, God created caffeine. Tobe pulls a robe around himself and flips a switch on a palm-sized gadget that he drops into his velvet pocket. An attached cord scales his neck, where a beige electrode at its end disappears into his scruffy, saltwater-blond hair an inch above his ear with a satisfying magnetic thump. She had never seen him without the device before.

"It's just askin why ain't you got your ear on." She points, continuing her porch inquiry as her voice finally comes into focus and Tobe sits down across from her.

"Gotta recharge it overnight." He blows across his coffee's surface. "So what was that before about being Miss Thereafter, something like that?"

She wrinkles her nose, then makes the connection. "Oh! I said, 'Looks like I missed the rapture.' You in your nightie there, all pillow-pleated and bed-headed." He rakes a self-conscious fingers-comb through his coif and she laughs. "Your lip readin needs some work, darlin."

It helps when speakers don't run all their words together. Or compound them with ceaseless gum chewing. He keeps this to himself.

"So I bet you must sleep like a rum-gummed baby," she says, "if you's all unplugged, right?"

Tobe laughs. "Can't switch off the *brain*, Nauti. I got just as much laundry spinnin round up there as anybody, believe me. And hearin something—or even just *thinkin* you hear it—it's all processed the same. Probably more akin to ... I dunno, blacking out your windows, maybe."

Her nostrils flare with a tinge of embarrassment. After traversing small talk about bipolar spring weather, Tobe settles in and asks what

he can do for her. “Well it ain’t a roofing job,” she chuckles. He doesn’t, the memory still raw. “Eh, I’m just goin through some . . . girl stuff. You know, man problems?” She chews away the silence, one finger entwined in her locks. “But I bet you knew that.”

He shrugs with modesty. He knows *now*, so why spoil her fantasy once given the benefit of the doubt? Such freebies are often the thesis statement that tunnels down a predictable rabbit hole with little variation, upon which the core of his reputation is based.

Natalie catches the glint off a rosary that appears at the base of Tobe’s sleeve and unspools from his wrist. He loops the slack remainder of the wooden beads around her own wrist like a bracelet, mirroring him and binding the two, then places her manicured hand palm-up on the table. His warm, deliberate hand grips hers, the silver crucifix charm palmed between them. She looks up, weakened already, to meet his eyes, but his are preoccupied elsewhere despite her lingering fascination. He sets her other hand the same way with his atop it, bare, his palm calloused and cracked with the pink scar tissue few dare speak about. His first two fingers are extended as if taking her pulse. The accelerated throbbing at her wrist might be an omen, were it not so common to these sessions.

“Umm, ohhh-kay,” she says, her quiver evident, “what’s this got—”

“Shh-shh.” He shakes his head, ears cocked and eyes closed in concentration. But there’s activity behind his lids. Like REM sleep while fine-tuning a radio. Measuring her.

“Well, what if I get a itch or somethin, Tobe?”

“You won’t.” He shrugs some tightness out of his shoulders, rotates their sockets. A guttural drone now resonates from his sealed throat like an idling motorcycle, slowly revving as it sweeps through frequencies. His eyebrow considers one, just as the unseen Natalie prickles, her downy blond forearms at attention. He stops and intones the note twice again like a singer verifying his baritone pitch

pipe. Eyes now refreshed, he's open for business. "Allrighty. So tell me, what'd you have for breakfast this morning, Nauti?"

"Well, Ron usually cooks, but he wasn't there when I got up. So one a them toaster pastries. Why?"

"What color is my robe?"

"Red. Maroon. I dunno, velvet? Ain't a color, but." She snaps her gum. "This kinda like a lie-detector setup or something?"

Unblinking focus. "Just getting a baseline."

"What's it matter what I say, anyway? I wanna know bout him, not me."

Tobe's knowing grin might be mistaken for a patronizing one, were Natalie able to distinguish such things in her shame. "So. *Man problems*," he says. "Of the Ron variety?"

"I been gettin a total cheatin vibe offa him lately."

"And you wanna know if he is."

"That's why I'm here."

"Well, Nauti ... I honestly have no idea. Could maybe ask around if ya want."

Her jaw detaches and she tries to pull away with a scoff, but remains locked in his charged grip. She swallows, eyes to her cooling coffee. "My girlfriends all said you could help me."

"And they're right." His soothing tone unmodulated, his hands steady. "You're just askin the wrong questions. Ones about other people."

Released by passing clouds, oblique rays once again slice through the bay window at their side, modeling her face with the creases of sun worship. Little deltas form at the corners of her mouth and eyes, skin stippled even through her cosmetics.

"Ron," he continues, "Ron's just a symptom."

"Of what? Our lousy Missourah public schoolin?"

"How many of your exes cheated on you?"

She sighs, feigning calculation. "Well, I guess if you—"

“All of them,” he summarizes. “Every bastard ever shared your bed was gonna pack up his pickup and drive out on you eventually.”

She sneers for truth. “Mm hm.”

“I mean, is it really askin too much for them to put forth the same effort they did that first date?” he asks. “Pay a little attention? Make a girl feel desired?”

“Certainly shouldn’t be,” she says.

“And if *they* can’t be bothered to, well hey, town’s full of second-stringers.” Closing time at The Well lacked no surrogate chivalry for unmanned women. “In small doses, anyway. Until they disappoint as well.”

Natalie nods, on wide-eyed autopilot. “Can’t win for losing, Tobe.”

“And let’s face it,” he continues, “hurts much less these days to just go on the offensive and do unto others before they can cheat unto you.”

“Cause they *will* do it, guaranteed.”

“Except with Ron, you don’t *wanna* have to cheat on him. Treats you like a princess, and better every day. But all that past conditioning, and impulses being what they are, your skeptic meter’s peggin right now. So you manufacture these scenarios to justify your paranoia, you build up defenses, keep some options in the bullpen—all the while waitin for that other boot to drop.”

Natalie reels, scanning Tobe up and down. “English, *por favor*.” A reflexive grasp at denial. Everyone does this when confronted with the facts.

He shoots her a doctoral look, prognosis: terminal. “I’m sayin Ron was doomed before you ever met.”

Her denial persists. Then, reluctant, scrunched-up contemplation. Finally, the lightbulb. “Unless I—”

“Right.” He nods.

“But not even—”

“Especially then.”

“So all this, you’re tellin me—”

“Hey, I’m only tellin you what you already know.” Tobe gives her hands a reassuring pat and lets them go with the finality of benediction delivered and penance decreed. A negative of the crucified savior remains impressed upon her flesh, a reminder of their heretical session, however fleeting.

“And all that junk about,” she searches, brightening at the redefinition, “*my past*, Father Foley don’t need to know, right?”

Tobe taps a clove cigarette against its pack, his finger swishing an X over his heart. The air saturates with those previously-hinted Indonesian notes as the kretek crackles, sending chaff embers near his face that he swats away.

“The hell you smoke them things for, anyway?”

He regards the cigarette wistfully, nostalgia quickly shattered by gusts of smoke coughing from his every orifice. The amateur smoker clears his numbing throat and rubs his lips across each other. “They remind me of Sera.”

Out the window, the yard next door commands his view, where a toddling girl in a dress too untamed to cover her diapers chases the calves of her young mother whose vision is obstructed with grocery bags.

“Yeah, we all miss her,” Natalie says, placating him. “Must have been really special.”

He eyeballs her gaffe. Past perfect. But an apt tense in its own way. “Is. She is really special. Not givin up just yet.”



He began seeing Sera less than two years ago. Emerging from a recovery phase that found his body resilient but his passions entombed, human touch seemed unlikely to inspire him ever again. The healing beneath Tobe's bandages had barely born its first itches when he suspected she had been watching him for days already.

Now he can hardly recall a time when they didn't live together. This house had been her little haven of light in a darkened world. And it was to become his own sanctuary in her absence.

Sera now manifests only in his dreams. Fragmented visions of foreign places and shadowed strangers, like some Ghost of Christmases Future, Present, or Past. But not his own.

Dacey, her precocious five-year-old daughter, never makes such dream appearances. She inhabits his thoughts always, only in memory replays. Crayon strokes everywhere but inside the lines while she colored books on the floor, legs scissoring the air behind her. She would bounce to the endless pop-music loop that exasperated her mother, but that Tobe welcomed in melodic reprieve from the noise of his life. He came to love Dacey as his own, and had hoped to be called Dad one day.

*Hopes.*

Still, Sera's physical presence is imprinted everywhere upon the dwelling. In a wisp of smoke or perfumed closet. Each creak of hardwood flooring would bolt Tobe upright if only he possessed such aural perception anymore. Every draft, every door swung ajar—he takes them as signs that she simply doesn't wish to startle him upon her return. Those backyard shadows cannot merely be branches in the breeze; she probably just fears being glimpsed by some neighbor from the street. After all, she wasn't supposed to be here.

The wafting bacon that lures Tobe from bed to kitchen leads only to his own two-days-crusted cold skillet. A solitary place setting at the dining room table. The dripping tap of their claw-foot tub is now from his own soaks, showers foregone to immerse himself in tranquility as she so often would. He feels a spiritual communion, but longs for any physical sign during his waking hours that would confirm her safety. A new happiness. Or a soul's peace.

The turbulence of his dreams pollutes such optimism.

Three hundred fifty-five red Xs blotted last year's calendar. With the pink scratches of a dying marker, Tobe crosses off the tenth so far this year, making today an anniversary of sorts. Each commemorates one day since Sera last came home. Four seasons: January to January. All the cycles of life, death, and rebirth.

Her rosary rarely uncoils from his wrist. It's not an article of religious faith, rather, a symbol of their unconsummated bond, a possession that must be returned. She once told him the hand-carved totem had been blessed by the Pope.



Saint Anthony of Padua offers his bronze reassurance in a sculpted relief at the church entrance. This friar with the inverse bowl cut cradles a young Jesus, lilies tucked under one arm of his habit. Patron saint of the missing.

The wooden door opens with a reverential silence despite heft that might deter the infirm faithful. Tobe's pupils dilate to normalize the eternal twilight of stained glass within. He skips the community finger bowl of holy water, just as he does with the dried-up fonts in his own home near each light switch. The pews of this empty sanctuary could easily seat half the population of Barroe, and he's been told they once did, but even the obligatory holidays rarely find the room at capacity these days. Tobe walks up the main aisle of the cross-shaped floorplan and nearly reaches the head/altar before catching a twinkle in the left arm/wing. Shaggy, dark hair atop a black, short-sleeved shirt revealing muscled arms. The man kneels before a bank of devotional candles at Mary's statued feet. "Father Oblivion," Tobe calls to him.

Father Vivian Foley crosses himself hastily and rises to offer a buddy's handshake and one-armed hug. "Tobe-Wan Kenobi!" The residual brogue from his Emerald Isle childhood in Limerick has mostly dissolved. What he lacks in height is offset at the gym, veins straining his collar. Late thirties, like Tobe, and another rare unmarried Barroe resident, though so bound by vow. The *Oblivion* endearment is a Tobe exclusive, from the Frank Zappa song about a priest serving semen-tainted pancake batter at a church breakfast. Van, as he prefers to be called, had always just figured it for a rhyiming Irish slur: Vivian Oblivion.

"Don't forget to drop in a buck, there, padre." Tobe taps the adjacent lockbox. "I'd hate to see your prayer come back for insufficient postage."

"Prayer? Oh, I was just replacing some of these." A dozen small flames bathe the men in amber, while a box of new votives waits upon the kneeler.

"All those hopes, snuffed out ..." Tobe muses. "Anyway, I got a couple old tubs of kid clothes over at the house collectin dust, and was wonderin if you guys could use them. If you still adopted

families or did those drives or whatever. Shoeing the shoeless, that kind of thing.”

Life drains from the pastor’s face as he turns away with pursed lips and steels his voice. “Of course. Bring them on by and we’ll see to it.” He occupies himself with retrieving the spent candles, exhaling through his nose and suppressing the quease of memory.

“Wait, doesn’t Ignacio take care of this stuff?”

“Archbishop made us cut the sexton’s hours back.”

“I really wish you’d stop calling him that.”

“Speaking of, been meaning to bend your ear about something.” Father perks up and pokes him in the chest. “Thought since you’re living right next door, maybe ...” That expert Catholic guilt. There was something about church folk, Tobe had always noticed, that empowered them with a certain shamelessness when it came to their ability to ask favors.

“My drums? Cause I try not to play whenever I see cars in the lot.”

“No, I mean, with me having to pick up the slack on Ignacio’s tasks, and me da on top of everything else ... there’s still quite a bit to delegate, you see.” The elder Foley had been suffering a long-term illness that required Van’s live-in care, which was ultimately St. Anthony’s excuse for selling off its vacant rectory to Tobe over a year ago.

Tobe puts his hands up as stop signs, their puffy, gnarled shine a stagy reminder. “I’m just ... not quite ready to—”

“To what?” Van challenges. “Get off your candy ass and stop scattering about?”

Tobe can’t hold his intended glare. Everyone knows the pastor trades the cloth for sparring gloves at least once a week at the gym over in Gladstone. Tobe swallows. “No, to ... work on these grounds again.”

“It’s time.” Father puts his hands on Tobe’s shoulders. “You know what they say about idle hands.”

“Who’s *they*?”

“Hell if I know. Quotesmiths and whathaveyou.”

“Since when you ever been stumped for scripture?”

“It’s not the word of God, T. Closest thing in the Book’s something about how ‘the idle soul will suffer hunger.’” Van neatens his friend’s shirt, Tobe’s favored western style with pearl buttons, then mimes a few body shots into Tobe’s gut, softened a few pounds by a rural diet. “In your case, I’m guessing that’s a metaphor.”

Tobe sets his gaze upon the floor. Forever indentured. “Guess I could bring the mower by.”

“Fridays would be best.”



That thrilling *crack* of drumstick against mylar head may be but a distant memory on file, yet the resonance of the snare’s birch wood against Tobe’s thighs still brings a smile. The stick’s precision bounce, honed through years of regiments. Vibrations shimmer up his arm off the ride cymbal. Pedal choking the hi-hat. His spine shudders with each bass kick, thanks to a subwoofer mounted under his throne. Just a plug shy of a prostate massage, Sera used to tease.

Old, bottom-heavy P.A. systems reverberate in his mind. Those sweaty seas of flannel from his first winter in Kansas City’s nightclubs behind the kit with Sludgebucket. Sizzling copper eighth notes swallowed by the mix’s vocal angst. A wall of sonic mud between the rhythm section and frontmen, rearranging molecules within the first ten rows of teeming bodies. Regulating their breathing.

It hadn’t always been heavy artillery. While touring as a drum tech for The Kettle Black—prior to trading his cargo shorts for leathers, backstage for onstage—every night he assembled and tested the boss’s electric kit, and he grew to love its utility. This was before his silent rebirth on the charred lawn, before the bilateral sensorineural

deafness that now governed him. Back when a little high-frequency tinnitus was easily cured with a few snorts of whiskey.

These days, the tactile feedback of acoustic hardware is Tobe's only connection to the music. It grounds him. Just as The Kettle's drummer's rubberized pads had triggered prerecorded samples through a piece of electronic synthesis, now Tobe's brain has become the sampler and his memory replaces the timbres of the tom-toms. He finds his mouth moving in sync with his strokes the same way guitarists are compelled to make wah-wah faces, or children trill to their toy machine guns.

No matter how he twists the knobs on his belt-pack processor, the acute, distorted peaks of percussion sound like trash can lids, so Tobe never bothers putting his "ear" on down here in the basement. Certain sounds he doesn't miss hearing, like the squeaking chain of his pedal. Or the phantom plumbing rushing overhead. Or rumbling strains of hip-hop from passing cars, though they still rattle his fillings. Eight-hundred-dollar Hondas with thousand-watt sewage systems polluting the air. Just because he can't know for sure that it's hip-hop doesn't mean that it isn't.

Beneath fingerless leather gloves, the pads of his chafed palms throb, and his conditioned nostrils recoil at memories of the minty funk of silvadene ointment.



"Are you still having trouble with new voices?" Dr. Neumann (Au.D.) is a tornado of stubby hands and fingers as he signs the words. He removes his glasses for concerned effect like so much television has taught him.

With a couple years of instructional books and videos, Tobe has become semi-fluent in the literal translations of Signed English. The more practical American Sign Language, however, still eludes

him because of its shorthand pantomimes and warped grammar. It's impossible to advance without real-world practice, and the doctor is the only one who engages him as such. Annually, and needlessly. "Some, yeah," Tobe says. "I understand their words for the most part. Just some character around the edges gets lost."

"Is the sound getting clipped? When the volume falls below a certain level?"

"Sure. But not when people talk. Usually just some background noise that drops out. Like with a noise gate."

"Yes, yes, the gate threshold." The audiologist bares a mouthful of porcelain veneers at this kindred knowledge, hands still flapping about involuntarily. "Been reading your owner's manual?"

"I used to engineer at Sine Studios a few years after I moved to KC." Tobe's eyes roam over the lab's equipment: medical-grade versions of many familiar instruments in his own past-life occupation. Oscilloscopes and laptops and synthesizers and headphones.

Neumann sheathes his teeth and clears his throat. "That's just ... wow, I'm so sorry. Had no idea." Rare empathy from a clinician untrained in bedside manner. Like mourning the surgeon afflicted with Parkinson's. Or the tragedy of the paralyzed athlete.

Tobe waves him off, ever cautious about cashing in karmic pity. "Oh, I been outta that game almost ten years now, way before I died. Not a career ender." He shrugs. "Not *that* career, anyway."

A slow-motion skeptic's nod from the doctor. "So. About these toneless voices." Virtual faders and knobs animate on a computer screen as Neumann swivels on his stool to adjust them.

"It's the same with music," Tobe says. "The only melodies I can make out are ones I already knew from before the accident."

"That's because you have no frames of reference, Tobe. No auditory memories to fill in those missing frequencies like they do for the old ones. Remember, that implant only has sixteen electrodes doing the job of *sixteen thousand* hairs that would normally stimulate the

nerve inside your cochlea. What can I say? Hi-fi it isn't." He chuckles, noticing his patient thumbing at the controls of his processor. "Hey, you're not switching me off, now, are you? Wife does that sometimes, and frankly I'm jealous."

Though no longer an engineer, much of Tobe's current livelihood is staked on being able to read people through multiple senses, but their scratchy, constipated voices often distract him.

"They're kind of laryngitic-sounding, right?" the doctor says.

"Yeah, like Vegas throat. Y'know, those blown-out lounge singers who do fifteen matinees a week? Also sorta reminds me of the earliest digital audio I ever heard online. That low-resolution stuff." He asks Neumann about upgrading his processor or the magnetic microphone, but any future medical advances would require both a new implant and surgery that his settlement won't cover. The other option, making his right ear bionic as well, cannot be advised, either, because of the imbalance with the two-plus years of rehab invested in his left one. Assuming the grey matter in Tobe's madcap brain didn't liquefy in the process.

Tobe complains about sarcastic lilt that go undetected. Voices nasal from colds. The inability to have slurry barroom debates. Speech in arenas, or even St. Anthony's, still renders as bursts of gated static because he can't distinguish where a word ends and its reverberation begins. The first time they ever plugged Tobe in and switched his ear on, this same cacophony made his entire face hum like a massage pad—a face that spent the next twenty minutes hovering the toilet bowl, both hands gripping porcelain for dear equilibrium life.

Neumann called these little broadcasts "hearing sensations" that they would train his mind to reinterpret over time.

"People say I still go mousey sometimes," Tobe says. "That I don't project enough."

"Well, that makes sense, because you're hearing yourself so much louder than everything else."



“There any way to turn me down? Some kinda phase cancellation or something?”

“Nope, only by modulating it yourself like you’re already doing.” They mapped out the frequencies and amplitudes during his initial sessions, first scientifically, and later through conversations and preferences, tweaking the settings monthly thereafter, and now yearly. “It’s calibrated about as close as we can get it.” His veneers return as he attempts a Scottish accent. “I’m givin her all she’s got, cap’n.”

When Neumann begins tangenting about the feasibility of technology on vintage television shows, Tobe feigns an itch and switches off his belt pack, nodding intermittently. Digital meters collapse on the screen behind the doctor, who continues his alien gestures in oblivious silence.