

CRAM

DANIELLE PAFUNDA



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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES



#32

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INTRODUCTION

CRAM is an excerpt from a longer manuscript entitled *The Book of Scab*, an epistolary memoir, taking place during the slow decline of corporate oligarchy. Scab is (I am) white and cisgender. The phrase “all my rights are alienable” and the ensuing section takes inspiration from Roxane Gay’s [essay](#) on *The Rumpus*.

CRAM

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Dear Mom and Dad,

I won't be home tonight. At the concert we ate a bag of soap powder that we bought for 25 ripped-up sweaty dollars, and swallowed something a girl said was Tylenol and Eurydice.

There's a boy here calling me Sister. He wants to know where MommyDaddy is, he wants me to follow him through the park, to leave some money in the base of a tree MommyDaddy often pisses on, to hold my hand and sit on the edge of the fountain until MommyDaddy comes back from the grave. He says that MommyDaddy is a beautiful wolfman with 12 apostles and wants us all to wash our feet before we come to the table he says that MommyDaddy takes his pants off and has babies all over the bathroom floor he says that MommyDaddy always knew I was a bitchcuntwhoreslut but he still would've fed me he says that MommyDaddy has a generous nature and will give us all plenty of time to please him before he sends us out to skeleton for rent. He wishes I could've known MommyDaddy when he was alive he says MommyDaddy is coming back after the third set he says MDma-ma-ma comes on the wings of a guitar solo with a leather broom handle in his teeth riding a horse's skeleton.

I sit with that boy as long as I can, and then dying of boredom, tell him to wait there for me. There. That I'll be back, that I'll find MommyDaddy and come back for him. That of course I know what MommyDaddy looks like, he's only described MommyDaddy to me

down to the tiniest detail of spent cock whimpering on generous thigh, wiry hairs on guard, Lucky Strikes spilled out of the pack in a halo around bruised face, chest heaving, ingrown toenail throbbing in hoof, propped on the arm of the sagging couch its frame split, beer spilled, blending into the stained fabric, a pair of pliers dropped to the carpet a roach slipped out extinguishing itself in the dank shag, and one colossal hand flung out in benediction.

I can see that boy from here. He's bent over holding a digital watch and counting on his fingers a contorted set of numbers. One of the speakers fell off the stage during the first act and crushed a girl's skull and one of the singers stuck his tongue on the microphone, which stopped his heart but he was brought back to life by another band's singer, and then they sang a classic-rock love ballad duet, which they dedicated to not being dead. The band on stage now is performing shirtless in blood-soaked pants with knives at their throats they're playing their hit song about how much they hate each other's lovers, except for the drummer who's a four-hundred-year-old monk and never touches flesh.

It's getting darker. Our blanket is damp with smuggled vodka + strawberry soda. Damp with piss. Cold sweats. We know for a fact when they turn off the stadium lights, you can fuck in the trees and sleep in the ravine. There's a party outside the north gate, down deep in that crevice, so deep the lights from the parking lot wash over like a visitation.

My boyfriend's best friend is there and waiting for us to show up so that he can pin me against one of the tree trunks and tell me again how much he loves me. He keeps telling me he can't live without me even though the sight of me shoving my tongue into my boyfriend's mouth makes him want to gouge out his eyes. He keeps telling me to take off my clothes more quietly, that he can hear me taking off my clothes and it's killing him. He tells me the elastic makes him die. The buttons rubbing on cotton are needles under his fingernails wishing for morning. He tells me when I squat to piss in the woods he hears Heaven shouting his name. He thinks he could fit both my breasts in his mouth, he thinks he could suck the grief out of them. He thinks I rub my nipples before he comes in the room so that they're pointing at him, tack-sharp accusers. He hands me a letter that he wrote on the dirty crotch of my underwear in permanent marker, and it says I need to shut the fuck up right now because every time I speak he hears me getting boned by someone else. He says I have the voice of someone who goes down every day, he says I have the face of someone you can't imagine fucking, he says I have the face of a dead girl from another century and someday I'll get a disease. In the letter, he says I'd better plug up my eyes because when I look at him he sees how possible it is for me to love him and knows I'm just not trying. He wants to know what's wrong with me. He reads the whole letter aloud and then puts his mouth right next to my ear and says, "Tell me."

Your Ugly Little,
Scab

Remember when I sat in my cradle, when I was a bab, when I sucked a baba, when I was just new to this world and didn't know the world had love in it or stars above it and didn't know the world had a smell other than ammonia and whey? I didn't know there was a sidewalk you could skip down straight out of this world? Remember when I was a bab and I didn't know any songs and no songs were sung and the whole world tilted toward dark and then back light again and no one ever mentioned it? When I sat in my cradle and counted all the letters in each of your names and added the numbers up until I came to the date of your death, but I didn't know what that was, I just knew it sparkled, a little jeweled fig from the future?

And then Great-Gamma came to my cradle and gave me a lolly and told me how one day Great-Grampa got so sick of the world and all the love in it and all the spring girl scents and all the sweet-tobacco farm dinners and all the nickel-soda movie jives and the music with its funny horns and the funny medicines you could buy from the well-oiled man in the back room and the way a needle also went oily in a flame's tongue and the way the same ray of sunshine swept in through the same rent in the curtain every morning across the same warped plank in the floor over the spot where he'd dropped his trousers but now they were hanging neat as you like 'em on the back of a chair even while the kids bawled in the living room until they learned that bawling wouldn't get them a sugar cube because when you're a bad little pony you'd best go down to the river and stay there till dusk, till he comes

home hands stained with grease and skin breaking and hardly hungry it's another fish out of the river it's another fish passed by a corpse downstream, no one says anything, a corpse is just the cost of dinner, and so Great-Grampa went out on the tracks where he put his head down on the tracks and the train came and crushed his skull?

And then she told me about the two pert girls in the convertible who were both decapitated by the tractor-trailer as they slid red and desperate and sideways beneath, in the past even, and even though I couldn't comprehend how red convertibles existed in the past, perhaps she meant the present, but I couldn't comprehend how she could know anything about the present because she was so fucking old?

And then she told me all her friends were dead and gave me a vanilla wafer in a cellophane package and called me Da'Nell, a name she preferred to my own, and told me about all the famous murderers she knew in the city and how they would rub their tommy guns up against a girl and put a run in her army grade stocking and you could cheat them at cards but if they caught you it meant a knife through your earlobe or a knife up your dress and though they might send you a new dress in the morning your mother would never let you back in the house and, again, all her friends were dead and then showed me her pinkish scalp pulsing beneath that thin white net of floss? And then she was dead?

Before anyone else was born or old enough to know? When I was the only bab on the hearth. After the bells had rung, but before the ground thawed.

After you started drinking, but before you stopped shattering that crystal bowl against the dining room wall, after I spilled on the carpet, but before you caught me wheezing in the crawlspace covered in fiberglass, after you paid the poison man, before you came to in the driveway with the neighbors trying not to look as they scooted off to their day jobs, or after you tipped over the kitchen table and crushed one of the kittens that was always freezing to death in our yard or before you hired the roofers next door to scrape up the kitten and just before one of you shoved me up against the newly paneled wall while the other one of you lit a match?

There was a splinter working its way to my heart, a splinter works its way still. All the friends I ever had are gone.

ATROCITIES IN APRIL

Bay of Pigs, Beirut U.S. Embassy bombing, Black Hawk, Black Sunday storms, Boston Marathon bombing, Chernobyl disaster, Chicago April Fool joke Frank Linnament killing, Columbine, Donner party starts out, Fort Hood shootings, Germanwings crash, Great Mississippi flood, Highway 410 concrete barrier crushes family, Hillsborough disaster, Hitler born, Lincoln assassination, Ludlow massacre, Martin Luther King Jr. assassination, McDonald's opens, murder^{murder}, Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped, Oklahoma city bombing, Pierre Curie run over, rape^{rape}, San Francisco earthquake, SS Sultana explosion, Scottsboro Boys sentenced to death, South Korean Sewol ferry tragedy, Revolutionary War British invasion, Texas City explosion, Tbilisi tragedy, Titanic, USAAF Mortsel Belgium bombing, USS Iowa explosion, Unabomber final bombing, Virginia Tech shooting, Waco siege, Walter Scott shot in back by police officer, West Plant explosion, Yom HaShoah, Yuma AZ twin toddlers drown—

Information crowds each pitiful cell, and this moaning thing that burrows under my ribs. My teeth ache a dull prosthetic ache, they're hardly part of me. I'm like an elephant who's just become aware of the great distance between her grief and the tree. The great distance between the sob in her face and the bones of her herd. With my tusks, I'm moving something vulnerably soft across the grass. I'm lifting up the bones, those that used to be in our house, that used to be inside a person who lived in our house, who had 32 teeth and a lamp shaped like a tree, who had a sign on the wall that said I'm Okay, God Doesn't Make Junk, and a copy of The Trumpet of The Swan, which I kept promising to read when I was old enough to make out all the words, but by then it was boring and I only wanted to read books about girls on the lam.

I'm using a scissor to cut through the thick skin on my feet, and to nip little Vs in my forearms, I'm dabbing up all the blood with rose petals and silk like some sort of medieval courtly promise and eventually I'll cut off what's left of my hair and maybe also cut into my most somber dress and cut up the bedclothes and cut up this letter and stitch it back together so that what it actually says is "Dear Mom and Dad, I'm a swan, all toothless and goo-hearted."

There's something soft in the bed with me. Something whose tissue folds weakly in on itself, something parted from its mother. There's something that might be wet, but it's too warm to tell. I think it's alive, in part, and writhing slow. I'm singing to it the low

cuckoo song like a counterfeit lullaby. I got it from the radio from the future from the kind of music you pay too much for off a gritty blanket in the subway station because you're standing as far as you can get from the guy with the bruised and lolling cock on one side and the two guys who look like they plan everything together and never sleep on the other. It's a good enough song, it's putting us both to sleep with its no matter how high you build you keep missing your chance at the Lord, something old fashioned like that slightly heretic a low bodice and a weeping lockback blade. A nightingale at the river plays fiddle, sobs out for his family, don't sob, clean-plucked sinner, huddled in the shelter of a dripping thatch. In the glade go to seed, in the sun dead lover wink like a live one.

There's something I've been meaning to tell you. About that day in the water park when everyone drowned and the only child left in the pool was me, and I'd a bloody feather tucked in my crown? I didn't mean to do it. I meant to do it well.

I kind of like how much you hate me. I kind of like the way you push my face in my dinner plate and tell the waitress not to bother.

feeling starts to fade and I can't do anything about it. Do you know how stark that is? I can't do a thing to feel. Then my body trundles along, oh little scab, hobble off and take a pee—

Here I am sweeping up from the latest suicide party, spilled pills, jack-knifed shotguns, photos smashed from their frames. At your wedding, the priest bit the rabbi and the rabbi was sore, and everyone rabid on that foaming bowl of punch. Then I was born, bent-skull and fat from the squalid pigeon hole Mom calls a body, and she turned me in to the cops, three days old, for homicide attempts.

Here you are now, trying to take it all back.

No wonder I'm so insanely boring, no wonder I'm such a nonstop whiner. I say everything twice, I have only myself for reference.

Only. I eat the entire baggie of mushrooms and when my soon-to-be-dead friend ditches me for a better party, I hop on the back of the nearest primate. I hop on his alien back, his otherworldly horse back, his loping back copper-stunk and studded with bones, I ride him smoothly into a glade and read an article about the occult practices of high-stakes day traders while he goes down on me. In the glade, it's like every movie I've ever seen lush, like a stupid planet full of languageless bear children about to be obliterated by an even lusher, sadder orb. I have a stable feeling. I have the feeling that everything I do is sound and that I'll be A-okay and then the

This isn't really me. This is the suicide I've always dreamed of. This is the kill kill I get to cram in the creek's bloody molar. This is the fuckstop this is the piece of muscle scavenged from the wreckscape this is the pathetic attempt at music. In the hand the handle sits heavy and meaningful, with the knowledge of where one rib is sewn to another, with the knowhow of an upward thrust, with the complete conviction that this gesture can end it. This is not me, but the image-tic that wakes me, the ickickickickickickit that stutters through a tightly woven fabric of protists, bacteria, potential.

In the future, when she/it/me walks along the ridge of the mountain who frowns on us grievously before its guillotine, she'll never admit to having known this/it/me. In the future, even bearing my own broken fingers, even marking the earth with the same carbon burn, will say "Who, now?"

This is ahistorical. This is perverse presentism. This is the normate fucking her way into a dilettante's pose.

I don't want to know to know you, do I?

This is the longing I had with my head a cocoon of goo and long-shot wings between the speakers and a mouthful of shag rug. Where I ruined my skin with

crying, this is where I ruined my skin with crying, this is where I drank a bottle of witch hazel and promptly puked it back up. This is where I ate raw nutmeg and saw the future. In the future I was a talking wolf and I told the boys to get a head start. I ran through town, capeless, full of pearls, shedding. In the park, I climbed the gazebo and on its pitching roof I pitched.

I'm doing the best I can to be—

Here are things that happened on the fairgrounds. A camel sat on a woman. A woman lost her ring and its finger when she climbed the fence after hours and put her hand in the tiger's cage. The grandstand went up in flames. The water ran sour and everyone began to choke. In the middle of the night, children erupted in sores. In the middle of the day a man made of jerky sat under an umbrella with a shard of plastic in his teeth to make a bird's call. Where they sold a sack of needles and broken handles for a dollar. Where we sold a sack of needles. In my face the needle registered and it became clear that I was still in possession of my hymen, my hair, my quivering happenstance. I happened to be good at the ponies, I happened to weigh little enough that I could keep coming back long after the time had passed, and there I'd be, stale around the collar, filled with horseflies, pressing my face into a wad of spun sugar, and couldn't feel the rides.

Beside the kittens, the parakeets, and the fish, lie the dead dogs drowned in the house in the hole in the basement that's always filling up with water. A cataract eye floats wearily to the surface. A box of fat books seething musty, a box of ammunition, a box of small records, all blank. What am I doing here, scumming around in your scumbags?

If I could tie up anyone in the basement, in the garage, the little attic-like hutch beneath the dormer, and give him a blue plastic pail to piss into and give him a sandwich and pretend like I forgot his hands were tied and tie him extra tight because I'm prepared for this. I am prepared for this.

Like any house, we have mice and they die of exposure. To the chemical. I write all my love letters in chemical and set them on fire in a tin drum in the basement. I piss in the blue pail myself to test it out. I try the ropes against my wrist. Ligature marks. I consider the guest towels; I'll have to wash his face, I'll have to keep him clean in ways no one else does. If I could have anyone, I'd bind him to a chair and wedge the chair between the wall and the furnace. He'd like his nest, lined with my T-shirts. I fill three plastic jugs with water, and collect a dozen old paperback books, grizzly romances and supernatural thrillers. When one of the kittens

follows me, I scold, "No no, it's for him." It's for that boy I'm getting. Why is he taking so long?

I pace the street looking for him. I rip the sleeves off a jean jacket and install speakers in the breast pockets. I play the same album at top volume over and over again. Your love is like bad medicine, bad medicine is what I need. I lay down in the street with my nearly invisible tits blasting. Ain't no doctor that can cure my disease. I'm girls, girls, girls. I'm teasing my hair, teasing my skin, teasing what remains of my muscle tissue. I've got my jeans on so tight I can travel back in time. I'm filleted with zippers. The lighter in my pocket catches my pocket on fire. I'm looking for a boy to come back by here, whose hightop sneakers hang loose as hooves. I'm looking for a boy whose dark hair drips greasesorrowfangvenom. I'm looking for the geometry of contraband in his back pocket and the evident crush of his balls. When he gets here we'll know it's him by his breath rank with hallucinogens and his second-rate terror seizure accusing "Gonna eat me."

Everything's ready. I flip through a magazine. I try not to disturb the old sleeping bag I've unzipped and spread over the chair, try not to leak on its mallard duck lining. I flip through a magazine. Thighless thighs, fractured ribs, netted face restraints. Lovers. I make myself a face restraint out of dental floss and rubber bands. I sit still. He's taking forever. I flip through a magazine. Tangled hair masks. Bird's nest cunt. Stretched-canvas limb flag, fellatio nation.

In a dream, I crouch in the woods with his arm lodged inside me. I dream we're married and he uses my hair to scrub the bathroom floor. We're married and he uses my tongue to check the oil, he uses my eyelashes to strain the grease from the bacon pan, he uses my upturned pelvis to hold his bottle caps. He buys me a pair of stockings made out of lamb's wool and formaldehyde. He makes a plaster cast of each of my legs and my crevice. He makes a plaster cast of my diary and then burns the diary in the charcoal grill. He carves his name in my fender and pushes the car slow and dreamily off the cliff. I dream we catch a rat and split it between us. I dream in the basement apartment we find a mosquito queen and her cast of vagabond kittens. I dream we're sitting wearily beside each other on a floral sofa, waiting for our names to be called. These are the lamps in the waiting room for Hell, I say. This is where pesticides come from, I say. I dream we have to get our faces lifted. I dream he's gone through three gallons of water and I can't get home in time. I dream we've gone to war and in the trench I roll him over and in each of his sockets I find a diamond, right before my own bomb goes off. I wake up panting, and dressed like a widow. I'm wearing one of his pubic hairs in a vial around my neck, which even I know is in poor taste, I'm not so stupid as all that, but oh am I lonely—

We're all in a play and the director keeps feeling up the other girls backstage. All the white girls. He doesn't cast the black girls or the Asian girls. He casts a Latina girl, but she's half-white and six feet tall and punches him in the mouth and quits the show when he asks how her tits got so big so fast. He doesn't cast the Indian girls, but he asks a Persian girl to do the lights. He doesn't touch me. He doesn't seat me so that my dress hikes up, or ask me to cross the stage in a slip without a bra, he doesn't care if I wear glasses or not, and never replaces my iced tea with Wild Turkey. He brings me a list of props that I'll need and all the props are appropriate to the show, even though I saw him earlier gesturing at a pink blonde white girl with a bright pink dildo and a pair of pliers. Up in the costume loft, in a dusting of dead flies, he pushes another white girl back on her heels and nuzzles her stomach. He leaves an extra-wet trail of saliva across the front of her sheer robe and tears some of the feathers from her carefully crafted hair. The Persian girl who does the lights carries her back down to the edge of the stage and hands her a cigarette and a Twizzler and asks if she's on the pill.

The director licks the pancake from the chest of the biggest white girl, he takes one of the boys out to buy more lumber, he writes a new scene into the

script that requires quick changes backstage, and asks the black girl stage manager to make sure that no one's wearing panties. He changes his mind about the Asian girls and sets up a bubble-filled tin tub on stage and tells the two Korean girls who sit in it and sing a song from The Pajama Game no one will guess that they're actually naked. When I walk over to his desk, he hands me a broom and asks me to sweep up all the false lashes. He asks me if I've found the right shade of red for the star's big luscious fat suckface mouth. He asks me if I think he made a mistake about the Asian girls, if I know where to get Ecstasy, if I have the phone number of the Latina girl who quit the show. His ruddy head blends into his ruddy face blending into his flesh neck where his collar perches and his V-neck sweater calls up ruddy welts, tucked into his pants, neatly pleated across his lap.

He has a wife. He shows me a picture of her and asks me to buy something in her size at the grocery across the street. I buy a pair of pink latex gloves and a plasticized apron printed with teapots. He asks me to try on the apron and when I cinch it tight across my bare back he hardly looks, says it will do. The black girl who builds the sets makes a "Tssk" and one of the white girls from the garden-party scene laughs behind her hand.

When the director calls the rest of the cast in for notes and tells the lead to tape her tits together everyone argues about the best kind of tape. He tells the white girls in the chorus to keep their legs high, and tells the boy playing Stanley to get one of

the Indian girls to oil his chest. He tells me to wash my face, he tells the Indian girl who sews costumes to sew him a smoking jacket for the cast party, he tells the boys to bring all their rope and all their trading cards, he tells the prettiest white girl to pick one of the boys from the chorus and show him how it's done, he tells the prettiest black girl on the crew to go along and take notes, he tells me again to wash my face, he asks for his glasses he makes a note in a little notebook with a nude by Degas on the cover he asks for his flask back from the lead boy he asks for a couple goddamncuntandwhore aspirin, he cries a little and tells us we can't imagine how long he's waited for this, how long he's been teaching U.S. history in the shitforbrainspodunklittle school, how long he's hung his dong out the window on dark nights, just waiting for the muse to come and suck the wonderpoison out, how long he's been making do with the hole he drilled into the ladies room through which he threads a tiny fiber-optic microphone that broadcasts back to him the sound of piss on porcelain, how long he's had his hat in the ring, how many times he's struck and struck out and been under the strain of it all.

Indicate to me that it's acceptable to feel this way forever. In my ribcage, which is broad and shallow, I've got a perpetual conviction. A gilled sliver of phosphate on the bone shadow frog-kicking back up from under river, taking the steps by two, leaping shank-limbed so cheerful into bed! Precious flesh kin! My chest withers and blooms with it, a new organ feinting over the old one. But as it turns out, I won't go. I won't into night either rage or whimper. Instead I follow a cranked-up voice into the basement of a half-built display home. I'm a saunter-free drownedfaced pilgrim. My head a searchlight, my heart a slippery eel brocade all turned out for treasure. I take a cat to my breastless panting. I leave the windowpanes all in wrenching tact, and step carefully over a coiled cable.

I'm telling you what I was doing out there alone at night meeting that sort in an unlit, desolate.

In the brain there's a mutilating wire that runs from hilt to shame in the name of memory. Barbed fatty brain, whose spikes make slut-raid on every whorled thing there, a stump. A puzzler. Screwed in gob-tight as a bulb, pulpy lamb flash gasping through its lacerated cask. Its hood. Or caul. Lodged there with baby spring's fuckfrost retributions that garbled, gray, speculative loser. It's a party. Impromptu. Guess

what weeps out, now? Love? You know where we're headed. Any floor can be the killing floor—

Which is how we can remember the peopled world, filled as it is with plastic constraints. A line of rock salt between my fearsome and yourn.

It's the bleaching hour. I take your wedding album out on the back porch, mid-January and my breath comes out an ice huff. My skin sticks to the clasp and tears away, fingertips going white on the fake white leather fake gold scroll, and only the bleach stays liquid, coat after coat. I'm also going to bleach you in your sleep. I'm going to put a funnel between your pillows and bleach you from the underside. I'm going to feel so cheerfully possible, it's always like this, every time science makes a promise. I go reeling out into the cold with my little prayer face all tipped up and shining, I believe things. I'm sure I'll get a nosebleed that tells the future, I'm sure I'll get a sign, my hands whispered tight like snake babies and my faith giggling up a fat bubble of woozy please.

Or maybe that's just begging. Anyhow, I buy my own bleach, and mix up a paste that I apply to all the framed photos and all the certificates of merit. I bleach the contents of the deli drawer in the refrigerator and bleach out the inside of the Canadian V.O. bottles. I bleach the deer's head perched atop its own folded hide, and while I'm in the freezer, I bleach the ice. I bleach my breath so it'll never smell anything other than absent, I bleach each of my tears in a special saucer I keep for bleach and tears, and then pour them into an atomizer.

I write a letter in bleach and then bleach it because of all the times I said "I'll die if you don't" and all the times I used the word "beautiful" to describe what's really just a scrawny stench of a boy. I bleach his address and his phone number, which is still on my inner arm and my inner thigh in permanent marker, and on my neck and the arch of my foot, part of it on my labia, I take a bleach bath, I bleach my towels when the numbers rub off and then I bleach my bleach until I've got the clearest glass of nothing you've ever seen.

My boyfriend promised to take me out into the woods where we'd live on biodiesel and shit at the base of trees. Where we'd stack up permaculture terraces and farm our own darkofnight mushrooms. Where we'd truffle like pigs and speak the original language. He says he doesn't believe anything you told him about my dumbbitchheart. He shoos the kittens out of the kitchen sink and gets me a glass of water. It's the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me. I won't drink it. I'll keep it forever, I tell him I'm going to keep it forever. He tells me that when we leave we can turn the gas on and the lights out and nail a two-by-four over the window.

But then he leaves town alone. He gets a job walking the perimeter of state parks and making out with lonely hikers. He gets a job selling truckers a compound of herbs and ethanol. His job is to keep his name out of the papers. His job is to put children back together with loose matches and a box of Steri-Strips. He leaves town without me.

I find myself with a lot of time on my hands, so I learn to make incisions. Then I learn to make small doses of chlorine gas. I take a staple gun to all the curtains, I paint the names of show dogs in black nail polish on the living room carpet. I'm so lonely, I can't stop reading the books on alien abduction.

I try to past-life regress myself, and wake up with one of the kittens retching into my lap. I shave my legs, I shave off my pubic hair, I pluck all the hairs from around my nipples, I reduce my eyebrows to thin arcs of ghostwhite flesh. I volunteer at the only hospice where the dying don't feel the need to speak politely. I try to volunteer at a center for people with developmental disabilities, but a boy I used to fuck works there and thinks I've come because I'm pregnant so tells the receptionist I'm stalking him. She walks me out to my car and gives me a package of Fig Newtons and a cigarette and tells me she'll have to call the cops and men are shitforbrains, anyhow, you know.

I work in a soup kitchen, I place calls for a telethon, I'm always hanging around the neighbor whose brain was pierced by a metal pipe. I learn sign language, I wear a dog tag that alerts medics to a seizure condition I don't have, I learn to fake a seizure, I learn to take my tongue far back in my throat and kill my bladder. I walk with a limp, I lose 15 pounds, I wear no make-up, everything I eat turns to stone. While eating a chicken sandwich from the fast-food drive-thru, I hallucinate bells, I see straight through the room into the past. I see the cult leader who loved me before I was born, everything smells charred, I can feel the scorch of an incense stick on my lower back. I take the test to see if I'm worth an afterlife. Is it a pyramid, you ask me, is it a square, is it four wavy lines, is it a sphere with an arrow? Is it?

I try to leave, but I only make it as far as the gutter. That's a joke, guys. I try to leave, and I make it far enough to buy a new set of tattoo needles, by which I mean safety pins. I call a girlfriend and she promises to do me later if I bring all the supplies. I find a bottle of vodka with the seal still intact and six ballpoint pens out of which I pop the ink tubes. I get a couple of pain pills from a guy at the ice cream shack, who trades them to me for one of my red painted nails clipped to the quick. Here on my gut it's going to say never. To say I came here to do right, but I did wrong again. Leaky or flabby or ugly smells. Nothing. A bent over stick figure puking into a bucket, that figure wearing the bucket over its head. The name of them whose life I ruined in blacked-out heartsript. In an eel heart, inside out, in a nest of treasure. In a nest of rotten teeth, pirate's teeth, why the hell not, I'm not shy. I tried to get away, but here I am strolling the shame arcades with a sack of dead daisies. Here I am upside-down on the tilt-a-whirl, yelling the lyrics to "Surrender." Here here here they come, some paramedics with their arms full of beer and blankets and ready to have a barbeque with me in the sandiest lot or dead-endedest alley, ready to make out inside a dumpster plastered with pictures of runaways. I can't get out of here. Not without some money.

Anyhow, she tattoos a misshapen skull, big, from ankle to calf, one socket x'd-out and the other one crying for its mama. I'm so grateful I myself can't stop sobbing and she gets worried about her parents, so she stuffs a T-shirt in my mouth and then I'm the happiest I've been in months. I put my arms around her. I put my arms around her shoulders, which are narrower than mine, and I feel like I'm wearing a big pair of boots, kicking the fuck out of her row of china horses. I'm smearing blood and ink all over her white sheets and she can't stop laughing. We're going to be a little bit famous, we imagine. We're going to get out of here so late in the game, we'll be covered in welts and filled with the kind of neveragain you only see in the movies.

I miss him, I miss them. I don't miss you.


All my rights are alienable. That I hold onto them for the time being is material. I might pull my breast out and shriek when it's offended. I might not pull my breast out. My breast is small, targeted, fetid, prudish, hot to the touch, infected, swarming, bedecked, pierced through, has sleep in the eye, makes it clear that I am on borrowed time. All my privileges are plenty suckled up around me at night in the bed when I dream of getting out of here of getting a pretty boyfriend who loves my face when I dream of getting in good with all the girlbangfutures and forming a party, and I dream of the dress I will wear to the emancipation of all bad feelings. I pray to be a beautiful actress and model whom everyone loves and also for all the cats to be relieved of their despair and the dog never to suffer loneliness and also for all the strangers whose diseases and failures I'm unable to catalogue. My prayer is addressed to the heart of the construction, to the gear from which all shafts emanate. I am a white girl in a headdress. Costume is a privilege. As are ostrich feathers as are gestures made with the ringed hand as are tilts of the head. My privilege gets sawn in half two-for-a-quarter and I gape in mirrors at my own torso mounted on a butcher-block trolley. Time and a half.

Your Ugly Little,
Scab

AUTHOR BIO



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