

Michael C. Thompson

Shadowless

1 -- (*Gone to Ground*)

EXT. CITY STREET -- NIGHT

Watched **ARLOW** wash away in the rain, clay rivulets running down into the gutter, following his shade into the muck soup of the sewer below. He was headed down-stream, feeding the tree. Had that look on his face like he was caught, at least until it melted away. My eyes stared out as the rain took chunks off him, cutting holes in the trunk of his self.

He hadn't wanted to die, but decided to dissolve in the down-pour rather than face Pinkerton and his fucking mouths. He would rather return to the shadowless tree, back through the artery, better washed away than put on ice.

My own **SHADE** leered at me as I watched the target melt, slide down through the grates into the dissolution below, a vein of the sick streets.

--*'You should have been faster,'*

the shade said to me.

I tried not to listen to it. The shade never said anything worth hearing.

--*'Pinkerton will have your eyes,'*

it added maliciously.

--*'I can fashion more,'*

I replied, catching myself

only after the words

had fallen out,

popped on the dirt below

like filth out of a gut.

--*'You are running out of clay to shape them with,'*

the shade answered.

By the time our conversation was over, Arlow'd gone to ground.

FADE TO BLACK

INT. ARENA -- NIGHT

The **SAVAGE** pulled through his collar, taking his own head clean off; his body ran in aimless circles, his arms flailed wildly, confused. His shade bore witness, shrieking in delirium, until its caster's head was stomped flat by the **OPPONENT**, mashed to the mat. The decapitated body fell lifeless, and the referee hosed his clay to nothing, spilling muddy remains into the gutter surrounding the ring, feeding the artery of the tree.

The savage lifted his arms in victory, and the **REFEREE** hosed him down until only the stain of clay remained on the mat before following suit and turning the water on himself. His hand gripped the hose for a few moments after the rest of him had joined the erased competitors.

The crowd around us cheered the dissolution.

I looked at my watch. 9:25.

-- 'Oh, God, '

I thought.

'I'm still alive.'

Tomorrow was coming fast, along with an appointment I didn't want to keep.

A flash of Pinkerton's mouths.

Rain was due -- I pondered the quick way out.

FADE TO BLACK

INT. HOME -- NIGHT

Held my clay over the fire, felt my fingers growing hard, numb, listening to the rain patter outside. My digits crackled in the heat, and my shade flickered on the wall, focused on me with malicious intent. If it had lips it would have been smiling, grinning like one of Pinkerton's mouths.

--*'Wasting your time,'*

it told me.

--*'No such thing as waste or time,'*

I replied.

I feel less guilt about answering my shade in privacy, as most do.

--*'You cannot stick around,'*

it continued.

'You cannot bake yourself into permanence.

Ash, clay - in the end its all the same.

Muck for the artery, headed for recycling.

You'll follow me through the sewer grates.'

--'Not if Pinkerton devours me.'

--'I'll get you eventually,'

the shade chided.

'Wherever I go, you follow.'

A finger cracked, broke off of my hand and fell into the flame. I watched it blacken, breaking apart into gray ash.

The shade said nothing else.

FADE TO BLACK

INT. PINKERTON'S WAITING ROOM -- DAY

Half of her face was a fingerprint, mashed deep into the flattened clay of her head. Touched by God. What remained of her spoke from the left side as her single eye glared from just above her smashed half-mouth. Her voice didn't sound quite natural, but **LUCILLE**'d been that way ever since I'd known her. Her shade eyed mine from the moldy wall-paper, thick with shit-sick floral artifice.

--*'Pinkerton will see you now,'*

she informed me.

I stood up, walked past her shade, which looked ready to attack. Pinkerton's office door opened as I neared.

My own shade walked in, dragging me behind like a pet on a leash. I pondered what Pinkerton would do to me knowing that I couldn't secure Arlow for freezing. He'd probably freeze me instead.

I waited for my shade to speak, but it didn't.

CUT TO--

INT. PINKERTON'S OFFICE -- DAY

--*'Where's Arlow?'*

asked **PINKERTON**,

all four of his mouths speaking in unison.

--*'He's gone to ground. I've failed you,'*

I answered.

'The down-pour took him into the artery.'

--*'You mother-fucker,'*

he replied.

I waited for him to go on, but he didn't. Just sat there, all four mouths frowning, one with teeth bared. He had no eyes or nose to speak of, all four of his sculpted maws carved into the clay of his single face.

--*'Sir?'*

I finally managed,

expecting violence in response.

--*'I ask you to do one fucking thing for me,'*

he says with his top row of mouths.

The bottom two are showing teeth now

--*'Can't do that?'*

What am I supposed to do with you?

What do you want me to do?

--'Do with me as you wish,'

I said.

'Whatever is your desire.'

My shade laughed in my ear. Pinkerton's own grew larger.

--'I think you want to wash away.

Does your resolve falter?

Does your fucking nerve quaver?

*You must be thinking about standing in the rain,
like Arlow and the rest of those motherless fucks
that let themselves be flattened by the down-pour.*

But you still can't do it, can you?

Never could, that's why you came to me.

Because I let you stick around,

mostly in one piece. You know why?'

I shook my head, oblivious.

--'You're different, more useful than
the rest of those walking puddles out there,'

he continued.

'They who just wait to be pissed on by God
and flushed away to that festering fucking tree.

I always thought you were a survivor. But now?

You can't stop listening to your own shade.

If I've told you once, I've told you a million times.

If it doesn't follow you, then you must be following it.

Ignore the fucker. Show it whose boss.'

--'How do you ignore it?'

I asked.

--'How does anyone ignore their own shade?'

he replied.

'Choice. Choice and fucking excuses. You see?'

--'No.'

--'That's the difference between you and I.'

Now for punishment. Put up your right arm.'

I lifted it to his top-right mouth, obedient, terrified. The maw opened, far too wide for a single finger; a circle of sharp round teeth stuck out of the clay of his gums, gleaming in the amber glow of his office. His head jumped forward, the mouth snapping off my entire baked right hand in a single bite. I yanked my arm back and stared at the stump, sheared red clay oozing moisture into the air.

I hadn't expected him to take the whole thing.

--*'One more chance,'*

he added, speaking with the three of his mouths

that weren't still chewing my dirt.

'One more fucking chance.

After that, I don't stop with your arm,

and you'll wish you'd been baptized with Arlow.'

I sat staring at my stump, wondering if I could fashion a new hand from the clay of my torso. Pinkerton didn't seem to care.

--*'Go to the shadowless tree.*

You'll find a collector there waiting for you.'

--*'Then what?'*

I asked, not looking up.

--*'Go and fucking find out.'*

FADE TO BLACK

EXT. THE SHADOWLESS TREE -- DAY

The **SHADOWLESS TREE** stood tall before me. I saw rivers running beneath the streets, veins, pouring clay and water back into its roots. New branches reached for the sky, dried up, broke off and fell back to the earth, then got up and walked away. Faces formed in the trunk, tore out of the wood, sallied forth to die again, to be washed by rain back into the artery, feeding the tree that bore them and would forevermore, new to the world, forgetting all that they were previous.

A man with seven heads walked up to me. A mass collector. Violent types, prone to extreme behavior for the sake of mashing other people up into their bodies. The collector's shade stood tall, reaching toward the shadowless tree. My own kept a good distance. All of his heads looked at me simultaneously.

--*'You work for Pinkerton?'*

they asked, their identities sounding

as merged as their bodies.

--*'Sure do,'*

I replied, keeping my answer

short to try and sound unattractive

as a potential addition to their mess.

His heads simultaneously gaped for a moment, I knew he was thinking about adding me to his

collection. I tried to ignore the gazes of his different faces. His hands trembled, He wanted to take a chunk of me - and which chunk, I had no trouble imagining. He clearly had a preference for heads. I made no move to stop him. He didn't, though. Pinkerton's orders, I hope.

--*'Did Pinkerton tell you why you're here?'*

one of his heads questioned

- the ALPHA, I presumed.

--*'Told me it was my last chance*

not to be devoured.'

--*'Good a reason as any.'*

His heads gazed up to the shadowless tree, through the cracks in its high, petrified branches at the distant sun, slowly and uselessly trying to bake our world to entropy.

--*'We've got a problem to take care of,'*

said the alpha head.

I looked up at the head, it met my gaze as its compatriots continued to gaze up at the tree branches.

--'What kind of problem?'

--'A shade-eater.'

FADE TO BLACK

EXT. CITY STREETS -- NIGHT

The collector dragged me around like my own shadow, one of his heads constantly staring at me, the other six gazing around the city streets in search of people missing shades. I tried not to look at the leering lower face, but my own eyes were drawn back to it repeatedly. It wanted to absorb me.

CUT TO--

INT. BANQUET -- NIGHT

By the time we reached the Banquet, I could feel electric in the air. The rain would be falling soon. We reached the entrance just in time, as a pellet of water clipped off my back heel, sending it sliding toward a sewer grate.

At the front door, we were greeted by another collector, a **HOSTESS** - she with only three heads. They appeared to be equally in control, and I couldn't determine which her alpha was. All of their movements were coordinated, and within a moment, her three sets of eyes were focused on me. She spoke to the collector while looking me over.

--*'Dinner?'*

she questioned with three mouths.

Her eyes moved to the stump of my right arm.

--*'Looks like a meager portion,'*

she added.

--*'He's protected,'*

the collector told her, speaking through the alpha.

'We're here on Pinkerton business.'

She nodded, let us pass. Inside there were hundreds of collectors, thousands of heads attached to clay lumps, bodies out of symmetry and synchronization. They sat around a large, circular table, upon which lay various shorn body parts, many of them heads, all still alive and staring toward me with pleading eyes. Some shouted out in my direction.

--*'Where is my body?!'*

--*'Save me!'*

--*'Please, sir!*

Fucking please!'

It was none of my business. I followed the collector around the end of the table until we stood before a fat sack of clay. Heads stuck out of his body in all directions, at least fifty of them. The alpha head sat atop his putty-mound, looking down upon us. He dwarfed the collector's size by at least five times, in both mass and

people trapped within him. His shade stood against the back wall, leering threateningly over the Banquet table, an enormous silhouette.

--‘*Mister OSCAR?*’

the collector asked him,
still speaking through his alpha.

--‘*Ah, Pinkerton cunts,*’

the monstrous thing replied,
all of his heads talking simultaneously.

The effect of over fifty different voices insulting us in unison was almost overwhelming. I’d never seen a collector with so much mass. He reached toward the table, picked up a shrieking head, slapped it into his gut and mashed out the mouth so it could no longer scream. The eyes rolled back in his new head until those were mashed out of existence as well.

--‘*Here on business,*’

said the collector’s alpha.

--‘*Make it brief. I don’t like*

business conducted at MY Banquet.’

--*'Following a lead
on a shade-eater.'*

Oscar's multitude of heads all shot their gazes directly at the collector, and his monstrous shade stood up, walking toward us with menace, standing beside its owner and dwarfing him in size.

--*'That subject is taboo,'*
said Oscar through over fifty mouths.
*'No one shall talk about such filth in my presence.
Pinkerton is aware of my sensitivities!'*

--*'This isn't business as usual,'*
the collector's alpha told him.
'It's dangerous.'

--*'Nothing that walks into my Banquet
should expect to walk out again
without my expressed permission,'*
Oscar's heads replied.
'Shade-eater or no. I am not

threatened by hypothetical rumors!
You insult me by suggesting that I may
have knowledge of such an abomination?

How dare you?'

--'We're both mass collectors, Oscar.

Let's not pretend we don't know each other.

There's a line. And there's a temptation to cross it.'

I glanced at Oscar's shade. It was eyeing my own shade with an alarming scrutiny. With my remaining hand, I tapped the collector's back-side, pulling off a finger in the process. One of his lesser heads looked at me from his torso. All eyes were on us, and now the atmosphere was hot enough to cook in.

--'We should leave,'

I told the collector.

His alpha looked down and saw me gazing at Oscar's shadow, trembling, then met the lump's gaze once more.

--'This investigation isn't finished,'

the collector's alpha informed Oscar.

'We'll come back, if we have to.'

--'Next time bring a fork,'

said Oscar's many mouths in similitude.

FADE TO BLACK

EXT. BANQUET DOORWAY -- NIGHT

They let us stand in the doorway while the rain continued.

--*'What do you think?'*

the alpha asked me.

--*'Can't say.*

This isn't my scene.'

--*'Of course not. You should try it sometime.*

I could show you the ropes.'

His hands were trembling again.

--*'Thanks for the offer, but I'll decline.'*

--*'I thought the lump was suspicious,'*

the alpha continued, ignoring my
rejection as if it had never happened.

'And his shade was way too big.

Didn't seem right. Almost like he wasn't in control.

That wouldn't be natural for someone like him.'

--'What about like Pinkerton?'

--'Pinkerton isn't sick that way.

He's got something else.'

CUT TO--

EXT. BACK ALLEY -- NIGHT

We met the **PROCURER** in an alley shortly after the rain stopped. He was carrying a briefcase and immediately upon seeing the collector, he glanced at me, focusing particularly on my missing right hand. His shade was keeping a good distance away, as if cautious. One more look back up at my accomplice, and the procurer opened the briefcase. Intact hands, single digits, eyes, a brain and a tit fell out. He panicked as they slapped the wet concrete, reached down and scooped them back up into his case, leaving small chunks of clay matter on the ground.

--'Not interested,'

the alpha told him.

--'You a cop?'

the procurer questioned.

--*'Just want some information,'*

I added, growing more comfortable outside
of the horrific atmosphere of Oscar's Banquet.

When the procurer turned toward me, I saw that his entire face has been pinched together horizontally,
mashing his features into the center of his head.

--*'About what?'*

--*'Shade collectors,'*

said my accomplice.

'Those types.'

--*'I don't traffic in that. Traffic in mass only.*

Nothing insubstantial. Don't even believe in it.'

--*'No one asked if you believe in it,'*

I said.

'Or if you trafficked in it. We want to know what

information you might have about people who do.'

--'Hey, mind your own fucking business.

Are you gonna buy or are you wasting my time

like every other shit-head walking around tonight?'

The collector's alpha spared a glance at me, and then he yanked off the procurer's head, molding it into a blank spot on his own chest. The procurer screamed in protest until the collector mashed his mouth closed, erasing it from his face.

--'Do you mind?'

the alpha asked as I stared

at his newest addition.

CUT TO--

INT. APARTMENT LOBBY -- NIGHT

We left his body in the streets and headed for the nearest building. It would rain again soon. Inside, he told me the purpose of his actions.

--'Looking in his head,'

the alpha told me.

*'This ugly shit-heel is coming right off
after we get the information we want.'*

I said nothing, and tried to look away so as not to upset his vanity. He spoke up as the rain started to fall again.

--'He lied to us.'

He grabbed the shitheel's head and ripped it from his chest, opened the door and threw it into the rain. It cascaded across the wet cement, bouncing and breaking apart, and within seconds was washed into the artery through the sewer grates.

--'His dealer is a big-time collector.

Deals in mass and shade. Friend of Oscar's...'

--'You know where to find him?'

--'Yeah,'

said the alpha, trembling again.

'Likes to hang out in a freezer.'

FADE TO BLACK

INT. CITY STREETS -- NIGHT

Our shades led us down the street, dripping in the mist after rainfall.

--'I'll tell you the future,'

my shade whispered,

skipping across cobblestones

with faces in them,

their eyes wide and watching.

The collector didn't hear it. I wondered what his own shade was whispering.

CUT TO--

INT. FREEZER -- NIGHT

The collector stepped into the freezer first, looking around cautiously. It was too dark to notice our shades, they blended in with the blackness surrounding us perfectly. Condensed air spilled out, crystallizing mud, slowing animation. The collector stared into the darkness, saying nothing.

--'How is he alive in there?'

I questioned.

One of his heads turned to look at me.

--'He's not one of us,'

the alpha said.

'He's a shade.'

--'Where is his body?'

--'Who knows?'

his personalities answered,

all in unison.

CUT TO--

INT. FREEZER -- NIGHT

My foot stuck to the floor of the freezer, keeping a layer as my leg pulled away.

--'Why are we doing this? For Pinkerton?'

I'd rather be washed away than freeze...'

I started to ponder the possibilities. It wouldn't be so bad... I'd be free, then, to start over - without Pinkerton's threats, without my fear. But no longer myself. New clay, rolled into a husk for habitation by whatever sick spirits chose to infest it, shackled to whatever shadow first crossed its dirt.

--'You're giving up too easily,'

the alpha responded.

'Do you know how old I am?'

--'No,'

I replied.

I was surprised that I was beginning to lose my fear of him, or of the possibility of him snatching my head off of his body and adding it to his collection.

--'Many generations.

Because I choose to survive,

rather than wash away.

I choose to follow the rules.'

One of his heads stared at me as he walks on. I could feel a frost starting to form on my outer layers.

--'Why don't you just collect Pinkerton?'

The words came out slow, chilly.

--'Some people shouldn't be collected.'

--'I can't take this much longer...'

I told him.

'We're going to freeze.'

--'It's not much further,'

he replied.

CUT TO--

INT. DEEP FREEZE -- NIGHT

Hundreds of crystallized forms stood round us, molded in sculpted in all shapes and sizes, their frozen eyes glued to the wall and the silhouette shifting upon it. The shade-eater blotted it out, standing tall before us with eyes of missing darkness, replaced by lit blue triangles of cold freezer.

Our shades stood back, small and withered behind us, afraid.

--'Come...'

a voice whispered,

echoing through the black.

Closer stepped my companion, his feet leaving particles behind, clay crystals frosting over. The shade

grew larger, and his own tried to run, but found itself chained to the atoms it once claimed possession of. I glanced around, feeling my neck crack, and noticed the shape of the shade-eater - a tree, branches cracking off, faces and bodies forming from the the immatter.

I saw a vision in the black.

The collector stood still, staring upward, his faces all in one direction, as the tree drank of him, sucked away the darkness that animated him. My own shriveled at the sight.

-- *'Run,*

my shade begged.

'Reset! Wash away!'

I couldn't move, already a statue, watching the collector be collected. When he was gone, a lifeless ball of icy clay, it came for me.

I saw through the eyes of my shade, a world of negatives, and a looming white shadow, its mouth an ivory vacuum, magnetizing me into its abyss.

Atoms slowing. Crystallizing, swallowed by cold darkness, empty space, I find it. The secret, my shade's own shadow having brought me a gift in the black unreality that I had always longed for in the light and heat.

Immortality.

CUT TO--

EXT. THE SHADOWLESS TREE -- DAY

With old eyes, I looked down upon the world below, saw my children fall from branches made of bones, splattering on the clay earth and climbing back out in disorder, animated nevertheless. I felt the blood of life flow into me, liquid clay through the arteries of the street, revitalizing crackled mud roots breaking free from the living soil.

I felt the heat of the sun and the chill of the freeze hardening me, my soul and soil separated yet always entangled, my mind in two places at once.

Then I remembered.

--Oh, yes, '

I told the world.

'It's always been this way.'