

CRUELTY

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by Jefferson Hansen

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Raccoon

The interior of my skin sags. My finger and toenails grow yellow and crack and split. Time is the slow, weak pulse in my kidney, the effort to raise a single finger. The tick-tock is for another world, the one of cares and concerns, the one I left and long for, the one from which I have been banished.

The raccoon has grey fur.

The raccoon has a facial mask of black and white.

The raccoon's front paws scratch the outside of my skin. They scratch the underside of my skin, too.

A mask never smiles, is frozen as a corpse.

In the afternoon block clouds rise—grey and dense as rage. I cannot tell if they are outside me or inside. The animals all grow quiet, waiting and wondering, I guess. Like me.

I went animal before I knew it. In my mother's womb. And I fled from that reality, as we all do, in the distractions—distractions lasting a lifetime. Oh, the stories. Oh, the poems. Oh, the songs. Oh, the promotions, the brilliance, the one-of-a-kind deal, the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that all means bunk, now.

Those eyes I wanted so much to fall on me—

I laugh.

Yesterday I saw a butterfly flit and fly, scoop and lift its way about the crevices of a window. I may have imagined, but none of that matters, not anymore.

Some say decaying neurons create the image of butterflies.

Some say a lot of things. No matter. I saw a butterfly: pick the significance.

*Raccoons may be intelligent, according to some studies.
Raccoons may remember tasks for up to three years after first
figuring them out.
Raccoons sink their claws into the skin of my ankle, crawl up
my leg, and I stop caring.
A live raccoon rests on my head, sniffing, coalescing a world
for itself, indifferent to me, to me, to me.
My concerns no longer hit any other's sensation, perception,
radar.*

To sag is to stretch; to stretch is to accept time, real time, not the time clock, not the punching or the tick-tocking. We are all sagging fruit, growing moldy, and by the time we cave we are no longer fun to eat.

I am overripe and stink like apples and cheese left in a warm, small apartment.

People hover around—I used to love and be loved—and I feel obligated and dutiful even though I stopped caring more than an eternity ago.

Some boundaries are absolute. Or so I think.

Raccoons have a voluminous braincase.

Their front paws are protected by a bone-like layer that becomes pliable when wet.

The raccoons on the outside want in, and the raccoons on the inside want out.

(We humans all have a totemic animal whether we acknowledge it or not. It is the life of us. It will be the death of us.)

I see the butterfly again. I idly watch it flit around, in and out of the sunbeam. Raccoons sit in each corner, itching their snout or twitching their eyes, watching me as just another object.

To decay is to live; to live is to decay.

I always said I would go with no regrets. (Clouds block and bank white, deep grey, charcoal.) I always said I would go with no regrets. (In that distant, other world, that I can see glinting at the horizon, I could have been more and now it doesn't matter.)

No regrets. (I hear a slight breeze and imagine a few dandelion spores tumbling away.)

No regrets. (I stink as my room did in 6th grade when I missed school for over a week, and my mother grew tired of cleaning out my bucket.)

No regrets, I say. No regrets. That is another world, another world.

Stay away, please.

No regrets.

I say.

“I ground my teeth until they ached.” I forgot everything
but white.

*(This is the
this is the
this is the
raccoon speaking.
We are all of us
all of us
all of us
omnivores.)*

Alice

“Go ask Alice, when she’s 10 feet tall.”
—*The Jefferson Airplane*

On that strange day my 15-year-old daughter grew six inches, then lost back five by sundown, for a total of a plus one gain.

It was snowing and the windshield wipers didn’t work. Instead, they caked the snow into a thin patch of ice layering the outside of the glass. This hampered visibility. So we pulled off the highway and into a convenience store. My daughter told me she didn’t like the place because it was too antiseptically clean. I said that we needed to do what we needed to do. A clerk got the manager. A portly, cheerful man waddled out of a back office and in an upbeat voice told us that he couldn’t help us, but some fellows down the street could. “Now, they’re not too professional looking, I got to tell you. But they’re good guys.” He told us where to go.

Outside, the snow came thicker. From the windshield, I picked it and the ice off with a brush and scraper. Then we headed to the service station.

It was a weather-beaten shack. Inside, it stank of oil. An old man in a thick flannel shirt sat on a wooden rocker in front of a gas furnace. He had a greasy afghan on his lap. A younger, hairy man—long beard and long hair—came out and greeted me. The only clean thing about him was an immaculately polished silver Christian cross that hung around his neck. I told him our difficulties, and he took one

step out, saw our car, and disappeared into a back room. I asked the old man where the toilet was. He grinned toothless and directed me to a place that was lit only by a slit of a window, but it was enough to tell me I wanted to touch nothing. There was a bowl of what looked to be stale pretzels in there. I didn't touch them.

When I walked out of the bathroom, the hairy man was walking back into the shack carrying a wrench. "Nice daughter," he said. "It's done." I asked him how much, and he just said, "Merry Christmas. Some nuts just needed tightening. Saturns are like that. Have a good trip." I mentioned to the old guy how nice the hairy guy was. He said that oh yeah, he was.

As I walked toward the car, I noticed an average-sized guy in a three-piece suit leaning against the shack. As I began to get in the car, he grew enormous and walked up to me. I stood facing his enormous chest. "Back inside," he said. I told him that we needed to get back on the road. "I don't have all day. Inside." He took three long strides in alligator skin cowboy boots back into the shack. I slowly followed. He stood in the middle of the room, next to the old man, who seemed to be squirming deep into the rocking chair.

"Nothing is done pro bono in this fine facility."

"Aw, come on, Dad. It's Christmas," said the greasy, hairy guy.

"Butt out, Junior," he said out of the corner of his mouth. "I said there is nothing pro bono. That will cost you \$100 for the repair and \$10 interest per minute that you didn't pay. That's \$150. Pay up. No checks." He cracked his enormous knuckles. I noticed that he was cricking his neck so that his head wouldn't rub against the low ceiling. His face was square and not unhandsome.

"Now it's \$160. Another minute has gone by." I was paralyzed. Living a movie moment will do that to you.

“\$170,” he said. I noticed the old man, now like a little dog under the afghan, shoot me a look of pity and fear from the corners of his sunken eyes.

A short old woman hobbled through the door using a cane. She complained about how hard it was not to slip in such weather. She took one look at the behemoth and pulled up. “Now what on earth is going on here, junior?” There was a little bustle behind the behemoth. “Don’t you skulk away!” she shot at the hairy guy.

“Gramms,” he whined.

“I get it. Junior!” The behemoth seemed to lose about a foot in height. “Are you messing with Arthur?” The old man squeaked that all was fine. He now looked like a beetle under an afghan. “Then you’re messin’ with this guy.” She pointed her cane at me. “What’s he doin’ to you?” The hairy guy snuck away into the shop. “Speak up!”

“I don’t rightly know.”

“That your daughter out there in the car?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you best be a good daddy and get the hell out of here.”

“By the love of Jesus Christ nobody is leaving here without paying me,” said the shrinking behemoth.

“Put that gosh darn thing away.” The behemoth was now shorter than me. He also held a Glock. “Put it away, fool.” She looked at me. “It’s not even loaded.” The short behemoth put a shot into the ceiling. “Fool, you put a hole in my ceiling!” She pointed her cane at me. “Move!” she shouted. I ran back to my car. I heard another shot. As we drove toward the freeway, I called 911 and reported the shooting. “I’m getting out of here, though.”

“Daddy, I’m stuck,” said my daughter. I glanced back to see her head touching the ceiling in the backseat of the car. I told her to just hang on and, after getting back on the highway, stopped at the first rest stop. I checked on her.

Had she grown! I yanked the driver's seat into a forward position and eased her out of the car. I expected her to be a little woozy from the spurt, but she was spry as could be. "I'm thirsty," she said.

We went inside to get a soda pop for her. It was strange to now only come up to my daughter's jawbone. Once inside, my daughter complained about the immaculately clean rest stop house. "It makes me claustrophobic," she whined.

A short woman walked up to me and ignored my daughter. "That's one big kid you got there. Were you at that redneck garage up Faribault way? That's where I shrank a couple hours ago. I'm waiting to grow back up. I hate being short. It just reminds me of that Randy Newman song. I can't get the stupid thing out of my head." The woman's torso was almost square, and her face sat atop it like a misshapen pumpkin.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, sweetie," she shrugged. "Time heals everything, especially what happens at that weirdo service station. Bizarre place, I tell you. One time, I saw a guy get shot there, and the bullet went straight through him, then stopped in mid-air behind him, reversed tracks and, on the way through backwards, repaired the damage. Incredible. The guy was good as new." She paused and shook her head. "Yep, it's taking a little longer with me." She giggled—her little mouth widening in the middle of the pumpkin. "You'd never guess I'm actually cute, would you sweetie?"

"Daddy, I got my pop." I pivoted and left the woman alone. My daughter had seemed to shrink a little already—I was now up to her cheek—but thought it best to mention nothing. You know how teenagers can get. I told her to drive, for practice, because she had a permit and was working toward her license. "Ah, Daddy, do I have to? I won't know how far back to put the seat?"

“It’ll be good practice,” I said. “It will help you get used to weird situations.” She rolled her eyes and got behind the wheel. As she entered the freeway she drove over a sign that had fallen over the right part of the ramp and blew a tire.

“Oh my God! What should I do? We had a BLOW OUT.”

“Drive over to the shoulder, honey, and stop. It will be okay. This happens all the time.” She kept saying, “Oh my God!” but handled it perfectly. I jumped out and retrieved the jack. But a piece was missing. I couldn’t get the car in the air to put the spare on. I called AAA.

My daughter and I sat in the car and debated the best kinds of apples—while she shrunk. She held out for Granny Smith while I argued for delicious. I emphasized sweetness, she snappiness. She thought consistency was more important. The AAA driver finally arrived and told us that even the wheel had gotten a massive dent. “Not drivable. I will tow you to the service station in Fairbault.”

“No,” I said. “They shoot each other there and grow and stuff.”

“That’s true,” he said. “But nobody really gets hurt. Hop in. You have no choice, buddy.” My daughter and I jumped into the tow truck. I put my arm around her. There was a lug wrench at our feet. The driver lit up a fat cigar. “Excuse the cigar, but I drive like shit if I’m not smoking.” He rolled down the window and puffed away as we made our way back to the cursed place. My heart throbbed.

We arrived back to find a structure that was the same shape but was no longer a shack: it was immaculate. “Hey, I liked it the way it was before. Clean sucks,” said my daughter. The driver assured my daughter that it would change back soon enough. “Oh,” she said. “Good.”

I trembled as I walked toward the door, my daughter at my heels. I started as I opened it: it was the same ragamuffin place inside as before. The grease. The old man sitting under an afghan. The hairy guy just said, “Hey,” and ignored me. I said, “Straw,” as a rejoinder just to be silly. Something smacked my Adam’s apple and I looked up to see granny holding her cane right at my neck.

“You sassin’ my grandson?” she asked, her eyes fierce.

“No.” I paused. “I was just here.”

“Impossible. I am a devotee of Heraclitus, among other early Greek philosophers. You can never step in the same river twice. Therefore, you are not the ‘you’ that came here whenever you were here before. And I am not the same ‘I’ you saw before. All is radical, absolute change. Do you want to see me naked?”

“Uh...”

“I asked you a question, fool. Do you want to see me naked?”

I figured I should say, “yes,” so as not to offend what could be her female vanity, and did so. “Sorry, buster, only the mirror sees this happy vagina. Ha-ha,” she said. “Would you like to see my wide assortment of vibrators?”

“No.”

“Here you go.” She was suddenly a naked, young, somewhat large woman. She threw the cane at my throat. It connected, but hurt not at all. She reached behind the greasy couch and brought out a huge box of multi-colored vibrators and dildos, which she dropped on the floor in front of the couch. Then she sat down. “I like to sit on this greasy thing and get off. Once in a while Arthur comes over and makes glorious love to me, but I only let him do it when he is in one of his young phases. Old men gross me out, especially ones with no teeth. Ain’t that right, Art, ol’ boy?”

“That’s right,” mumbled Arthur through his bare gums, as he pulled the Afghan all the way up to his chin, so that it covered his entire body, and he looked like a talking old man head. “That’s right. And I makes love good.”

“Oh, you’re all right. You’ll do.”

“That’s all I ask for, baby.”

“I’m not your baby, now. You’re old.” The young old woman now sat on the greasy couch. “I feel like shooting someone,” she said. She pulled a six-shooting revolver out of the skin right above her hip bone and shot my daughter, who gulped, in the stomach. As the woman at the rest stop described, the bullet quickly stopped about two feet beyond my daughter, then went straight back and repaired all the damage it had done.

“Daddy, that was weird, but it was kind of fun. Like a roller coaster. I like this place.” She turned to the granny. “You look good naked.”

“Thanks, dearie. I like the way I look, too, in spite of the fashion industry that would have me think I’m fat. Would you like to talk philosophical intricacies?” My daughter plopped down next to the young old granny and said she would. It was quite a sight: an unashamed heavier woman naked in all her glory sitting on a greasy couch next to my rail-thin daughter who wore diaper safety pins as earrings and dressed all in black.

“To begin, with Thales one must always be careful, since all we know of him comes in fragments, many of which were reported by others in dialogues. Poor Thales! But what we know is that he believed all is water. Philosophers, bless their sorry souls, like to point out that the importance of this claim was that he was attempting to find an ultimate principle. They say this is the start of philosophy, which then got off to a bang with Plato and his Forms, which were an attempt to account for the many and the one. However, Plato is a punk. A mere punk. Because

philosophy is ultimately, my dear one, poetic. Thales knew this because he preceded Plato and therefore did not live in the 4,000 year Platonic hangover called Western philosophy. Water is a metaphor, my dear.”

“I thought this was going to be a discussion, like, where we both get to talk. This seems like a lecture.”

“Sit back, dear, you’re being lectured by one of the great ones!”

“Oh, okay,” said my daughter. She dutifully looked the naked woman in the face. Could this be my rebellious daughter?

“Water is a metaphor, springing from the ubiquity of moisture. The earth sits on a bed of water, and is itself moist. How else can the flora and fauna draw the nutrient of water from it? The earth is fairly frozen water, but not absolutely. The air is water in its vapor form. The streams and oceans and lakes are water in its fluid form. But this is all interchangeable.

“And that is where Heraclitus comes in. For he extended the metaphor by emphasizing fluidity. For Heraclitus, nothing subsists; there is no substance. All changes all the time absolutely. Think about heating an ice cube: it goes from solid—earth—to fluid—water itself—to air—vapor—in the course of a few short minutes. We, my dear, are water.”

“In my biology class the teacher said we are about 85% water.”

“That’s science, which is bunk. I have proven that with my service station here, which is itself an ode to water, to Heraclitus and Thales, to prove the poetry of their assertions on an empirical basis. I consider it the return of the repressed in Western thought: and I am demonstrating it in Faribault rather than New York City because I believe in radical democracy and its twin—decentering.”

“Kinda like a work of art in nowhere to show that everywhere is nothing.”

“Sweetie, you have it going on,” said the naked granny. “Would you care for some scrambled eggs?”

“Yes, with Tobasco sauce.”

“That’s stuff’s bad for your stomach. Will Heinz ketchup do?”

“Yes.” The hairy guy walked in from the garage. His long beard was no longer smooth, but composed of sizable triangles, cut right out of the mange, from the tip to the cheek and chin.

“Granny, get dressed. You will alienate customers.”

“This service station is not dedicated to the Mammon of profits, but to learning—through the empirical demonstration of metaphorical principles. Buzz off, Junior.” Junior rolled his eyes.

“I got your new wheel on. It will be about \$320 parts and labor. I also rotated the tires.”

“I’m so sorry, Daddy, that I drove over that sign.”

“Nothing to worry about, honey. It was an accident.”

“You have a good daddy, sweetie,” said the granny. “I’ll get those eggs started. You want some, daddy?”

“Why not.”

The granny disappeared into a back room and reappeared within a minute with three plates, one balanced on her forearm like a waitress, of perfect scrambled eggs and a plastic bottle of Heinz. She gave one to Junior and commanded him to eat it because it would be good for his indigestion.

As she turned to us with the remaining plates she became old again, her sagging skin translucent in places, revealing capillaries, wrinkles everywhere. She limped over and handed us the plates and the bottle. “You don’t get any,

Art, because you need to lose weight,” she said to the tiny old man.

“Grannies don’t need to eat,” she said. She watched my daughter gobble down the eggs.

“These are the best eggs I ever had,” she exclaimed.

“Of course. I made them, didn’t I? Do not think I am a Narcissist or have an undue expansive view of my abilities. My construction of ‘self’ comes from the sober assessment of an old lady: I am one who simply kicks butt in everything I do.”

“Oh,” said my daughter.

After cleaning the dishes, the naked granny kissed my daughter long on the lips, punched me hard in the shoulder, and told us to “buzz off.” I gave my daughter the keys, and as she worked her way toward the freeway, I looked back at the immaculate-on-the-outside service station. I saw it melt into a puddle of aluminum, then billow round and up in a vapor cloud, only to be dissipated forever by the winds. “I saw that in the rear view mirror,” said my daughter. “It’s sad that we can’t see granny on the way home. But I get her. She’s now moving through the whole atmosphere. And we all breathe her. She’s in us, and she’s our best part.”