

Shea Mitchell

Toothless Dreamer, or Logan, King of the Playground

She parked her car in the back of the school. She walked through the parking lot, watching the beat up tan sedans as she passed them. Finally, at the end of the lot, in the space marked *Principal*, closest to the school's entrance, she stopped and gazed at a cherry red convertible. Even in the light of the drab overcast morning the car seemed to shine intolerably bright, sparking a sense of annoyance deep within her. She focused hard on the delicate yet obtrusive ruby shine of the paint, reading the gaudy lettering near the bumper, repeating it in her mind—*Miata*. Sparse footsteps tore her from her revelry and, turning around, she found the school's custodian, an even-tempered and complacent woman. She stood a short distance away, straight-backed, head down. Storrar approached the woman saying good morning. The woman raised her head briefly, saying hello, telling her, "It's a Monday, alright." Approaching her, Mrs. Storrar saw that the woman was standing over a goose lying limply on the asphalt, still wet from the previous night's rain.

"Oh, God," she said.

"Yep." The custodian stared into the clouds passing slowly overhead. "Just awful."

Once in her classroom Storrar perused the colored posters strung along the walls. Time passed flatly until two o'clock when she handed out a worksheet covering basic multiplication and then walked to a window that looked out at the suburban expanse to the south of the school. There were geese flying overhead. She watched as they raced through the dense gray of the sky. The heater hummed softly. Logan yelped from his corner seat. After a few minutes a child left her seat with her worksheet in hand, approaching the woman, tugging on her shirt. Storrar turned and looked down at the girl, smiling, studying her for an odd amount of time. The girl said something but Storrar's mind was elsewhere. The girl said her name once more and Storrar said, "Yes, sweetie," and the child asked her what she was thinking about.

Watching the geese, Storrar had been thinking of a day in 1977, when she was in college and she and a boyfriend had taken mushrooms and spent hours talking and drawing each other's face without looking at the paper. After another dose they made love on the cold floor of the living room in the boyfriend's shared apartment, and when his roommate eventually came home he watched as the two fucked for close to an hour, his eyes meeting those of Storrar just after she had had her second orgasm. It was shortly after this episode that she saw the boyfriend with another young woman on campus, too close to be acquaintances. They walked by each other saying nothing. They hadn't spoken since.

"Multiplication," Storrar replied to the girl. Her faux smile melted into the soft nothing of her face.

"Can you help me?" the girl asked, holding the worksheet up to the height of the woman's belly. Storrar could hear Logan in the back of the room, loud, belligerent, nonstop. She pretended not to notice him, as did the children.

“Of course” she said, walking the girl back to her desk. They passed Logan on their way. He watched them tirelessly, muttering what sounded like some strange and ancient invocation. The girl eyed him uneasily.

The aide sat in the back of the classroom grading worksheets. She was an unremarkable young woman. She watched the boy as he shimmied back and forth in his seat, chanting unmeaningly. He tore his paper into shreds. Math problems were scattered across his desk, across the cool gray carpet. The aide stood from her seat. Storrar turned as she heard the chair push almost imperceptibly across the carpet. The two women locked eyes. Storrar smiled tiredly. The aide looked from the woman to Logan, then to the woman. She sighed and sat back down. They had dealt with the boy all year. After many struggles and phone calls home, Storrar had finally conceded her power to the boy.

Logan noticed not the interaction that had just taken place. As if in a trance, he made balls of the shredded paper, threw them across the room as his arms waved wildly. Other children turned their heads toward him, whispering his name contemptuously. The aide stopped grading and looked at Logan—flailing, babbling—then to Storrar, then back to the boy. She stood and pushed her chair back once again, walking determinedly to Logan’s desk, grabbing his shoulder, saying his name, imploring him to please clean up his mess, then demanding that he clean up his mess, demanding ceaselessly until the boy could take it no longer and began to curse and howl at the aide, waving his arms hard at her, smacking her in her face, her chest, her side, she all the while hopelessly pleading with him to stop until finally grabbing his arms and holding her face as far as she could from the boy’s frantic hands. Now Storrar was with them, grabbing Logan’s arms as well and speaking in a low, calm voice to the boy as he flung his small wrists through the stale classroom air. The children had stopped working. The spectacle continued, and they watched on.

After fifteen minutes his arms still waved but less brutally, as if they did not know their reason for attacking, and his eyes seemed dead in their sockets as his mouth rambled on and on in increasingly meaningless chants of indignation. Storrar and the aide were hardly holding on now, looking to the floor, desperate, tired, swaying back and forth slowly with the dancing rhythm of the boy's movements. His body eventually stopped. The children watched as the women eased their grips and sat panting on the carpeted floor. The two of them got up after a few moments and walked to the back of the room. The aide rubbed her arms and side where the boy had beaten her. Storrar looked on maternally as the aide moved her hands back and forth along the blotches of red cascading from her sleeves.

"This isn't right," the aide said. Then, lowering her voice, "This kid should not be in this classroom."

Storrar nodded sympathetically, and just as she did she heard a door close on the far side of the room. She and the aide looked to Logan's empty seat. Storrar walked out the door to follow him. She followed him down the hall to the blacktop, calling his name until finally he reached the play structure. He ran up the slide. She watched from far off, approaching slowly until she reached the outer perimeter of the structure.

She repeated his name ceaselessly until it became as meaningless and impenetrable as some ancient tongue lost centuries ago, until neither she nor him could or cared to understand the exhortation behind her calls. She bent down and sat on her haunches, watching him crawl endlessly through the play structure like a manic beast. He spoke in what seemed like limericks, senseless and rhythmic sentences that spun out from his mouth and through the thin dry air of the playground. It began to rain lightly and the woman closed her eyes as the sporadic mist fell over her face, strained and hot from her incessant calling.

Logan crouched near the top of the play structure adjacent to the slide, jumping up and down, waving his hands from time to time.

His voice felt distant to the woman as it echoed through the playground. “I’m the king,” he called. “This is my castle and nobody knows me. I am the king.” She watched on, her eyes only half open in the gentle coolness of the faint rain. She called his name once more. Suddenly his spastic alternation between crouching and jumping stopped and he stood facing the west, his eyes stoic and wide. “Am I dreaming?” he whined. “Is this a dream?” He didn’t seem to be speaking to her. He wasn’t speaking to anyone. She turned her face toward the west as well and stared with tense concentration at the decrepit trees that sat on the other side of the blacktop, repeating the boy’s query in her mind—*is this a dream, is this a dream*—until her meditation was interrupted by the harsh clanging of Logan running down the slick tin slide, and it was then that she burst from her crouching stance and grabbed him hard by the arm and dragged him back to the classroom, him all the while berating her with his manic tantrums, senseless absurdities stretching from an unknown source, unknown even to him, and crashing wildly through the stale halls of the school.

Hours later the boy howled and pleaded in the cool night air in the yard behind his home, dirt brown stains in the knees of his jeans, a faint red reflecting from a source past the windows in the kitchen, where his mother lit a cigarette, unhearing and sordid in the horrid redness of the dim sickly light, the boy calling all along as she stared unflinching into he knows not what, he calling all along with the brown dirt rubbed into his denim jeans, and across town Storrar, at home with her husband, poured a drink for herself.

“We have ginger ale,” he said.

She made no response and drank the whiskey straight. She poured another. The two of them sat together for an hour, saying nothing, she watching a corner of the room, he watching her, until finally she spoke.

“I just feel so inadequate.” His eyes left the woman and trailed around the living room. She got up and poured herself another drink. After an hour she felt amazed and lost in the haze of the whiskey, her eyes still affixed to that drab and meaningless point of convergence. They eventually retired to their room and in the night her sleep was poor and she awoke many times. She dreamed of the children and of a masked intruder in her home who abducted her young child, a child that did not and would never exist, and the dog did not bark at the intruder and in the end it did not matter that the dog had not barked because what had happened had happened and the child was gone. She awoke after this in the cold blueblack of the night and absentmindedly turned on the light. Her husband turned. He lied watching her as she fell back into that limitless nowhere of sleep, her breath uneasy and weird.

In the lounge the next day she sat amongst her fellow teachers, mostly women but one a man, and they all spoke of Jaydens, Jacksons, Zekes and Taylors. This excepting the man, who spoke little and simply gave a sympathetic nod of the head to every story that passed between them. One woman told of a Tony. “He just doesn’t like me,” she told the room. “Not at all. He told me so. He fucking *hates* me.” Storrar thought of Logan. Thrashing about, hollering. She shuddered. One by one they all relayed tales of troubled children, exchanged gossip about parents, the alcoholics, the ex-cons, the surprisingly normal. The man left after a short while.

“Well you all know David, of course,” one woman said. “I really had to give it to him today. Just sat him down in the corner and told him what’s what. I had his mother, too. Total bitch. And she hits the shit

out of him, of course.” She nudged Storrar as if to suggest something. “I do what I can—deep down I love the kid—he just gets in these... moods.” The room erupted into a dull *mmhmm*. “But, hey,” the woman continued with a sigh, “it’s Tuesday.”

The conversation ended and the women concentrated solely on their meals—tuna salad sandwiches, fluorescent cups full of yogurt and processed fruit, stale apples. Storrar stared aimlessly into the sandwich she constructed of mustard and roast beef from the night before. Soon recess began. Through the crinkled blinds of the lounge windows the women watched as a deluge of children rushed through grass and concrete to the asphalt topped playground and the bluewhite play structure which was guarded by adults clad in neon yellow, blowing whistles hardly louder than the consistent and barbaric din of the children’s screams. The clouds were heavy and gray above the expanse of the playground.

Storrar could see Logan running through the blacktop, wielding a jumprope, swinging it through the air with a wild abandon. He hit two children in the backs of their heads. An adult in a yellow vest approached him, saying something, trying to convince him to cease his wanton behavior. “What can I do?” Storrar wondered aloud. She continued slowly. “What is there that I can I do to help this kid?”

The women in the room continued eating, sighing and nodding, watching through the window as the boy tried to wrestle the jumprope free from the adult’s grip. Soon Logan forgot about the jumprope, instead choosing to throw a basketball hard into the air, watching it rain down on fellow students, hitting them one by one in the head or shoulder. The adult followed, holding out his arms, saying something. The women watched on.

“Someone should just grab him and hang him up by his goddamn thumbs,” an older woman barked. “Back when I started, this kinda shit would not fly.”

“Something in the water,” another woman added.

Later in the day Storrar walked through the dense fog to her car in the back parking lot. She opened the door and sat in the driver’s seat staring ahead for a few moments. She began to cry and then once she was done she drove home. As she slept that night she dreamed of the children. They were all huddled around something in the back of the classroom and as she tried to push through the crowd that had assembled she could not, and the children acted as though she were not there, and she tried harder and harder to push through the small mass of bodies until finally she broke through and saw the spectacle that had attracted the attention of the class. A large slug lie on the floor of the room, wagging its body back and forth, a slimy puddle accumulating all around it. As the crowd watched the creature’s head slowly began to split open. A white mass peeked through the small incision in its crown. Inch by inch the break in the head grew bigger. She and the students watched on in silent amazement. Hair began to poke through the cranium of the slug, then a beady eye and finally a mouth. Storrar could see the mouth clearly and knew by the arrangement of missing teeth exactly what strange creature was emerging from the beast. The students knew as well. One student yelled, “Logan!” The mouth protruding from the slug gasped and whined incoherently. Another student called his name, and yet another announced, “He’s the king! On this day he is born!” They all began to cheer and cry and dance around the lanky, wet mass on the floor, the face becoming clearer as it made its way out of the dripping flesh until finally Logan’s entire head could be seen, dazed and insane in the pale fluorescent light of the classroom, his mouth biting and moving aimlessly. Storrar watched the ritual unfold, confused and scared and wanting to run but not being able. His mouth opened to a massive crevasse. His eyes turned to meet Storrar’s. Large, circular, black as fresh asphalt, his eyes stared into her, into her past and her ever-expanding future and the ever-expanding now, into the phantasmagoric makeup

of her subconscious and all that lay there, his mouth all the while growing larger, his jaw unhinging in a frightening and supernatural way.

At this she awoke. She was sweating profusely. Her husband sat on top of her, holding her arms, wide-eyed and stunned.

“You were screaming,” he told her. “I’ve never heard you scream like that.”

One week later she sat at her desk, eyes heavy, breath light. She watched Logan intently as her students worked. He used crayons to scribble on the worksheet she had handed out. The aide sat behind him in her desk with her head down. His arms raced across the desk. Bits of crayon flew from his paper. Flakes of purple and green and red and yellow had flown onto the floor, onto other children’s desks. The aide pretended not to notice. The day was dim and the light cascading through the windows frail.

A few miles south of the school lie expansive marshland, untamed and wild, and, shifting her gaze from the boy to the window, it was there that Storrar’s mind went. She remembered being a child in the small rural town due south of the school and the summers that she and her brothers spent watching grebes and dragonflies and the fog descending down the mountains and through the trees, and her brothers playing games in the next room at her uncle’s house and he saying let’s go for a swim and she not wanting to, and she remembered the grebes and the dragonflies and her brothers and her father asleep on the couch and her mother hovering over him—it was only three in the afternoon—and she didn’t want to go swimming but her uncle insisted.

A boy interrupted her wandering daydream, and there he stood, his face pink and squeezed into a distorted scowl, and in the back of the room Logan sat, taking his crayons and flinging them one by one at the boy, hitting him in the back of the head, hitting Storrar in the mouth and eyes. The aide watched from

her desk, unmoving. Storrar ran to him and grabbed his arms. He began to scream. "I hate this school," he bellowed. "I hate this school and I hate everyone in it, and nobody likes me, and nobody even *knows* me, I hate this school," and on and on in a violent and semi-coherent manner until he fell from his desk and lie on the floor with his face buried in the carpet. His howling lost all coherency, resembling the dull gargling of a slit throat. Storrar moved and sat on top of him, holding his arms as he tried to swing at her, at the students, at whatever was closest to him. The aide was standing now, watching from a few feet away. Children stood too. One boy walked closer and Storrar told him to get away, that he shouldn't try to help, that she loved him but he can't help now sweetie just go back. Logan was squirming hard on the ground.

"It's OK, hun," Storrar said softly to him. "It's OK, I'm here for you." She tightened her grip on the boy. She was straddling him. The aide went to the phone and dialed a number. Storrar was watching her while Logan turned his head and bit hard into her wrist. Blood seeped from the boy's mouth. Storrar screamed. "You fuck!" she shouted. She eased her grip on the boy and he stood and darted across the room, out the door. The room was steeped in a dense silence. Storrar clutched her arm and looked around at the children, at the aide, all equally astonished and traumatized by the scene.

"I'm sorry..." Storrar began. "I'm sorry I used that kind of language." The children's eyes were wide. A few shuffled in place. "I was just... surprised." It was then that the principal entered the room. Storrar smiled weakly from the floor. "He's gone," she said to the principal.

Later in the afternoon, in the office, Storrar noticed the woman's gold bracelets, how they mirrored the staggered teeth marks on her wrist, how they bobbed back and forth as she dialed Logan's mother's number. "Hello," she finally said cheerfully. "This is the principal from South Hill Elementary."

And in the night he lied under his bed sobbing and hitting his hands hard on the wood floor, and his mother sat in her bathroom down the hall with the door locked and the only light in the room came from her lit cigarette and she smoked and smoked until it was out and then she lit another and the boy kept crying and crying. He strikes the floor again and again. I hear you she says in the cold dark of the bathroom, I'm sorry I hear you, she says, until finally she can take no more and she leaves through the smokey darkness and walks down the hall in the faint red and his screams grow louder as she grows closer and finally there he is and she takes him and they lie in the cold air in the backyard with dirt brown stains all over him, gasping for a breath, soft to the touch and wild, and she says no more crying, don't cry no more, and his cries seep into a vast nothingness, expansive streets and houses and fields and smokestacks, and she lies there with him in the damp dirt—the rain stopped hours ago—and they just lie there for a while, her stroking his dull, strawberry blonde head.

Storrar sat alone in her classroom that morning. It was seven thirty. She sat at her desk, moving a cup full of pencils out of place, into place, out of place again. Looking around the room, her eyes eventually came to rest on a laminated multiplication table. *Nine*, she thought. She closed her eyes, and with a faint smile went over the nines. Her mind was simple and serene—clear, ordered, as luminescent as an aisle in a grocery store. After reaching 135 she opened her eyes. She took from her desk her roster and began to peruse the attendance records of her students. Logan had been absent thirty two consecutive days. An eerie euphoria washed over her. She closed the roster and sat back, and soon the children arrived, one by one, some

approaching her desk, some hugging her tightly, she all the while smiling vaguely and giggling softly to herself.

The day passed hazily, and as she walked to her car the principal stopped her. “Hey, Tiffany,” she shouted as she jogged toward her, a subtle ding coming from her faux-gold jewelry. She caught up with the woman, asking if this is a bad time, the woman replying no not at all with a smile.

“So, as you know, Logan hasn’t been to school in over a month.”

Storrar nodded complacently at the principal. The principal smiled enthusiastically, though Storrar knew not why.

“And that’s a *long* time,” she said with a smile. She spoke to Storrar as she did to the students. Storrar stopped nodding. She looked at the woman.

“I know it’s a long time, Barb.”

The two of them stood awkwardly for a moment. The principal chuckled quietly.

“Well, I’ve contacted the mother, and still *no* response. The district has been working to get ahold of her as well... We’ve talked to the police as well, because—and I’m sure you know this—this is just a *little* bit troubling.”

Storrar looked at the woman blankly, mouth slightly agape, not entirely processing her words but rather trying to hide the deep annoyance her voice and cadence sparked in her, then furrowed her brow quickly and frowned, saying, “Yes, of course. Well... you let me know if there’s anything I can do to be of assistance.”

The principal smiled insincerely. “I am just *so* glad you said that. I do have a small favor to ask—well, not even a favor, it’s more of an opportunity for you to...” Storrar nodded as the woman faltered in her

words. The principal fixed her hair before she continued. “We had the idea of holding an assembly tomorrow morning. We know the kids must be a little worried about this whole thing and—I mean, you spent *a lot* of time with him, and... We were just wondering if *maybe* you could give a little speech to, you know, bring everyone’s spirits up.”

“I mean, I...” Storrar stopped. The principal nodded, smiling expectantly. “I would love to, Barb. Anything to help.”

She and her husband spoke very little that evening. In the night she dreamed of nothing and slept hardly at all, thinking of many things but mostly of the day to come. In her bed she watched her husband’s body move vaguely with each breath, up and down in the cool moonlight. There were sounds all throughout the room at various points in the night, sounds that she attributed to something supernatural, then to something mundane, sensible, then to something supernatural, back and forth until she cared no longer what the source was. Her alarm rang at five thirty. She showered for forty minutes. She did not wash her body, nor her hair, but rather watched the small bulbs of water fall onto her skin, cascade down her legs, slink quickly into the drain. The beads cascading slowly from the shower head were cool on her skin, slapping and sticking, almost effervescent. She sat down. She closed her eyes and pictured a dream from childhood, letting the water fall on her head as she tucked it between her knees.

In the dream she was in a pond, following her father as he slowly waded through the murk and grime, eventually venturing into a small cavern that lie underneath the hollow of a gnarled tree stump. He turned and gestured for her to follow. The sun shone gold onto the water. Small flakes of moss flew through the air, glistening in the warm afternoon light. She waded through the water slowly, not by choice but by

necessity—it felt as though she were underwater—until her father disappeared into the depression and she made her way, slowly parading toward the opening at the edge of the pond.

Opening her eyes, she shut the water off. She got out of the shower as if still in that dream, floating aimlessly through the rooms in her house and out the front door to the parking lot of the school. In the distance she saw geese in the field beyond the playground, lying, waiting, for what she knew not. The custodian was once again in the parking lot, cleaning graffiti from the side of a shed. “Eat fuck,” it read. Storrar smiled at the sentiment. *Eat fuck*, she thought endlessly. In her classroom, after the bell rang, her students sat watching her. There was an overwhelming silence among them. *Eat fuck*, she thought.

“Well, boys and girls,” she finally said. “We have an assembly today.”

The children stood sporadically and they walked into the crowded cafeteria. They walked single file among the masses of children, each in their designated plot and each watched over by an inflexible and authoritarian eye. Storrar marched her class through the hot and scattered mess of children—some crying, some taken by the arm and thrashed toward a seat closer to their teacher, many blissfully unaware of their environment and its complications, staring blankly forward or gently caressing a shoe string—to their spot in the front of the cafeteria, closest to the stage. It was after seating her children that she noticed the parents around the perimeter of the vast building, the lunch ladies, their eyes wide and awaiting. It was then too that she remembered her lack of planning, that not a single note was written in preparation for the coming moment. With these realizations and observations slowly swimming through her mind she perused the room—teachers sitting glumly, children screeching, being shushed—yet nothing could stir her from her ataraxy. The moment approached ceaselessly as did the moment before and she welcomed it easily.

Soon enough the principal entered the room and ascended the stage. She sauntered around excitedly. She spoke into the microphone but no one could hear a word. Pulling the microphone from her face, she pushed the switch on the side and spoke again. A tremendous feedback rang throughout the room. She pulled the microphone farther from her mouth. The feedback quieted.

The woman spoke to the crowd, its attention wavering and scattered. Her words flew enthusiastically throughout the large room and fell on deaf ears. Storrar listened as the woman bemoaned the absence of the boy Logan. Animated frowns and exaggerated gestures of mourning and melancholy were performed. Parents watched the spectacle solemnly in between furtive glances at the mass of children scattered across the linoleum floor of the cafeteria. A low hum permeated the room, the source multitudinous, a hum akin to that on the floor of a psychiatric ward—incoherent, babbling whispers of the watched mixed with stern admonitions of the watchers.

Soon it was time. The principal smiled hard and clapped, her garish jewelry clanging in the dim fluorescent light, motioning and tracing Storrar's path from her seat to the stage with her squinted eyes, eyes that glowed with a sense of purpose and intensity. Storrar was still dazed, and only half realized that the principal was now inviting her to fulfill her role as mourning matron. Her children all looked to her from their rows on the linoleum floor. She stood and walked to the stage absentmindedly. The principal handed her the microphone and grinned into the woman's face.

Nobody clapped. The low vibration of the industrial refrigerator crawled throughout the room. She stared around the room for a moment, watching the expectant and uncertain eyes of the parents, the blank stares of the children. She knew what was expected of her, but could not bring herself to break her spell of serenity. The spectacle of mourning, like the spectacle of hope and resilience, seemed null, unreal. She knew

not what the future held, but she found peace in knowing it did not include Logan. This sinful admission she was sure to leave unsaid, yet it was sure to influence every action she was to perform.

“I’ve never had a child of my own,” she began. “I’ve never been able to, well... I have never, other than these children here. *These* are my kids. Logan is—Logan was my kid.” Her voice wavered as she looked to her class. “I’ve learned so much from these kids, about strength and courage, about compassion and...” She looked to the parents in the back of the room. They stared at her, each with their mouth slightly open. Her mind was going blank, and she could feel the performance becoming less authentic. *Tears*, she thought. *Tears*. She closed her eyes.

“Logan,” she said. “Logan was just...”

Her eyes remained closed and her mind drifted languidly to an abandoned lot far off in the distant expanse of the suburbs, deep into the cold earth until she reached the body of a small boy, deep in a tomb of burnt umber, the eyes open still and staring unblinking into a dirt darker than black, mouth open, forever stuck, stuck between frenetic spasms. She envisioned the boy’s body and felt something wash over her, something so simple and mysterious that she could not articulate it until finally her mind closed in on the sensation in an overwhelming and surreal way—*relief*. And it was in relief that she cried, in relief that she spewed out, “Logan, O Logan.” The crowd watched on as the spectacle unfolded. Parents watched with solemn and strange eyes, smoky and unfeeling, while the children seemed bewildered and concerned. Some began to cry as well, saying with her, “O Logan!” Now the principal had returned to the stage, rubbing Storrar’s back with her ringed fingers and nodding slowly, slowly, showing the crowd that she too felt the immense sorrow that was being displayed.

“O Logan!” Storrar cried, and far off in that drab and inconsistent suburb that lie to the south, in the depths of his home, crowded with memory and ash, the mother too cries—*O my Logan!*—cries into the floorboards, strewn with red, strewn with red from the battering fists, the tooth-worn tongue, the gnawing familiarity, the incessant disarray, and all the while the boy lies deep in the dirt behind the woman and beyond the walls, and one can hear for miles the incessant cooing—*Logan! O my Logan!*