

Yong Xiang Li - Curl 5.9. - 17.10.2020

Thin - Lipped and Unemployed For Sean's Curl

A subtropical fever I thought long-lost crawled up my left leg. I felt thoroughly insane. My tongue wrapped in cellophane.

I had to sit.

They finally pulled the chairs closer together. I uncrossed my legs and made sure to see myself in their eyes while I restretched one over the other.

"Are you here to take him away from us?" one of them dared to ask.

I leaned back and realized the one's eyes were muted—thick dark amber mold. I pressed for contact but he fixed his gaze on a heavy lacquered wooden cabinet in the corner.

"What would make you think that?" I snapped in a reassuring tone as if to wipe the pearls of sweat off my forehead. "I am just passing through on my way to St. Petersburg."

"Well isn't that what they all say?"

"The trip was planned last year already. It would be rude... He anyways asked me to stop by. The year began only..."

"But what brings you back? Business or pleasure?"

I found the question old-fashioned, but I bit bait. "I spent all afternoon in the lab looking at raffia from the masks you brought back from the Congo back when you thought it would be the last of them."

"I see," one answered while they all nodded as if synchronized by a higher force.

"These strains are always the ones on the front, those that wither away and dry up like day-old French toast. I used to bleach them, shave them or just gel them down. Those little kidnapped mishaps would have been, to be honest, best forgotten until I suddenly saw a leftover thick black curl—unbothered—stuck to a rusted staple..."

A mouthful of dry air swept the room bare like dragon breath. I felt thoroughly insane. My tongue wrapped in cellophane. He had stood up without me noticing and opened the paneled door leading to the balcony.

“How about we make fresh drinks while I fix up some hors d’oeuvres,” he asked— without looking— as he strolled down the steps separating the living room from the kitchen.

It had been a long trip—a detour actually—just for the sake of revisiting this subspecies of friends. Some would call it curiosity, others a death wish. For me, it was more like finally ironing a long memory straight. Those that hold you still yet heavy-bored.

They once felt like true friends: people you speak at instead of with, who tell you stories that don’t add up and give you advice they wish they could follow. Those friends who neither freeze at your sight nor resist touch. Like flesh against flesh in the afternoons when we would take Dendrotoxin K, he would compress his lips like merging clouds.

“Do you also feel your limbs liquefy?”

“Like welding copper coils.” He hurled back.

Here with my dear callous friends it didn’t need to come to that. As I heard the knife hitting the cutting board over our silence, my flesh, my memories, my spirit grew shy. I wanted to shove them around. But nothing moved them.

“Did you also fall asleep hoping a bunch of crusty creatures awaited you—brimming with thirst—in the secret chamber?”

Their lips were not at ease and the deserted salon furniture smothered the words. A dashing silver tray with carved handles approached the living room. He managed once again to move without being noticed.

The cheese’s pungent smell made me feel sick—nauseous—all the secrets we never told. The walls blended with the ceiling like a forest of leafless tree trunks coiling towards the sky with no end in sight.

I looked behind me. I couldn’t find an essssssscape. I broke sweat again. It stunk just like that time. My throat is dry. I need to go. Now.

He calmly rested the tray on the table and walked towards the cabinet behind me. He held me at the forearm, sizzling to make eye contact.

"I carved a viper's bugloss flower head onto each collar bone at the height of your breasts," he said.

"I know each blueweed's contour lines remind you of desert strolls and lost afternoon souls."

A burning sensation had made its way to all extremities of my body, coiling around the crevasses of what felt like six hundred bones.

"Do you still know?" He asked.

"WHAT?"

"That time... Your sweaty buttocks stuck to the plastic table cloth. That night when we decided it was time to stretch our arms like tired lions. That night when the moon served a foamy currant dessert with lemon bitters. That time you knew I can't love."

I felt thoroughly insane. My tongue wrapped in cellophane. I basked in the hurt of his words. The others sniffed the wound and took pride in their steely nerves.

I had been waiting for this moment. Every word uncoiling from his mouth hurt. Remembering how often silence halts my universe, time moves forward again.

It is the morning after the night. The fine white line tattooed along those thin-lipped snakes bores me. Work ends at seven. I cannot breathe through the nose again.

–José B. Segebre