

Sam felt the leaves. He ran his fingers across them. They felt firm, solid. They felt like the only real thing. Realer even than his fingers, than him. They were colorless.

Everything was colorless. Everything looked empty. And nothing was clearly visible—at least, nothing but the leaves. Everywhere around him.

He looked at them for a long time. He felt them with outstretched hands that he didn't remember raising. He looked at them until he felt them looking back. He felt them until they felt him.

Sam woke.

Although he was unsure he had been asleep. He looked down, saw his feet covered with dirt and grass; he had sleepwalked. He looked around him, saw the same things as he had seconds before. Trees around him on every side. The night sky empty above him. Leaves he had been stroking just a few moments previously. Leaves that looked closer to him than he remembered. Leaves reflecting moonlight in isolated patterns, like small pale faces in the dark, looking at him. He followed their gaze.

He saw that he was naked, covered only by a thin pair of boxers. He threw his hands over his body. He looked around him. He searched the empty trees. The cool of the night felt him harshly. It touched him like an invisible hand. His skin was cold, his flesh heavy and damp. His arms clutched tightly to his body, covering his nakedness as his eyes searched everywhere—but for what? What was he looking for? Who was he hiding his body from? What was walki—

—*thbssbb, thrsh, thrsbb* . . .

Sam's eyes darted. Looked for the movement. All was still. He squinted, tried to see what could not be seen in the darkness. For it always seemed to come when he could not see it coming—

—*tbHHrShb-b-, tshb-sh* . . .

And seemed always to come from where he could not see. For he had been looking elsewhere.

. . . *shrsbb* . . . *shft* . . .

Always looking elsewhere.

. . . *shft* . . .

Because the sounds were coming from behind him.

Thrrsshb-sh . . .

Sam turned around. The leaves behind him slowly went still.

“ . . . god?”

His body was cold, so much colder. His mouth was dry. His spine felt something run up and down it, like fingers over the beads of a rosary. Though he held his arms in place over his body, it felt as though his flesh had already been felt, had already been held, that it had been for a long time. And as the

leaves rustled before him, they still felt to be the only thing that was real, the only thing that was true, carrying with them another truth:

Nothing would stop It from touching him.

Tbbrssbsbsbs THRS~~H~~ . . .

Sam blinked. He stared at the tree for a long time before he knew he needed to run. He felt his feet bring him backwards. He felt his legs begin to walk, then walk quickly, then run, stumble, nearly fall to the ground as his body swung in the opposite direction of the rustling leaves, now beginning to sway more strongly. It was the last thing he saw before nothing; blurs and darkness overtaking him, the empty sky consuming all. In the black, he felt his lungs breathe for him, felt his feet walk for him, felt his body brush against leaves in its stumble, felt their invasive and longing touch. And he couldn't seem to stop brushing against the leaves. And no matter where he went, they seemed always to rustle so closely to him.

His naked body was so cold. His naked body hung about him like a sackcloth. His naked body was becoming numb, feeling bleeding out of it, or being replaced by something else, something different, something in him but not of him, Something that would rip him open, filling him with new blood the closer he came to—

Sam stopped running. He saw a light. Passing by in the corner of his eye.

His head swung around, found it. A thin glow, across moonlit earth. It shined out toward him, for him. Squinting through the darkness, he saw it clear, the first thing he had seen clearly for a long time. It was light coming from behind the barely parted door of the abandoned cabin.

He looked at the light. Looked at its golden color. He looked at the first real light he had seen that night, the last light he could remember having seen.

And he felt that he should enter.

Sam walked slowly. Slowly toward that vine-covered structure, sunken into earth, but that looked to him now like a chapel. He had seen what was inside before, had seen the leaning walls and filthy floor, had known he would never set foot inside again—but now it looked like a sanctuary. A place he could hide, could stay. The only safe place left for him in that camp.

As he got closer, he heard things. Sounds that were thick with either misery or joy. Cries like those of animals detained with one another. And, as he reached the door, held the knob, Sam heard voices. Wordless voices. Familiar voices.

Sam's naked body was cold. He opened the door and entered.

They were nude. They were many. They were his christian family. Bending over. Sprawling open. Mounting, gyrating, writhing atop one another, like bodies squirming on brimstone.

Within the four small walls of that golden cabin, a communion, a devotional, a litany from flesh to flesh, a yoked herd with a hole for him. Deep cried out to deep and all were thirsty; all asked and all received, from faces to fleshs to glistening lips, to the flowing of milk and honey. Entering and exiting narrow paths, each controlled their own body in a way that was holy and honorable, and with every cry gave thanks unto their Lord, then turned their blessings back into praise, bringing tongues to rest on each other, tasting choicest fruits. Seed landed on good soil, fertile and fresh, or landed along curving paths to be eaten up, or on the rocky ground of the cabin floor, or among thorns, which grew up with it, stiffening like a pillar of salt before again swallowed by another mouth, tasting two different masters, going down smoothly for her beloved, gliding over lips and teeth.

All lips met one another, a pair of every kind of unclean animal, greeting one another with a holy kiss, eagerly grazing among lilies, as a deer thirsts for the water. One was lifted into the air, her skin like unleavened bread as the multitude passed her from hand to hand, to lay her down between a circle of five husbands. A single kiss, then her plea:

“Do what you came for.”

The sword was drawn, one to plow and the other Four to reap the sown, to the tempo of her hymn:

“Oh, s-sinner, come on down-n . . . come on d-down, don’t you wanna come—
—”

Her open lips swallowed the scroll, sweet in her mouth, and within moments her lips dripped sweetness like the honeycomb, honey and milk under her tongue.

Immediately a cock cried across the room, then withdrew from a fountain sealed, a canticle of moans escaping the woman attending him out of her own means until it dropped lower, into a gate even narrower, squeezing in as a camel through the eye of a needle. Another came instantly to stand in front of the woman who was about to release it, so that she might devour it the moment it flooded back out. It poured in a stream, wine from between bread loaves, anointing her head with oil, drenching her hair with dew.

Sam stood and did not move. He felt his fingers numbing. He watched and felt his once cold body become warm, hot from within.

Her voice was like a trumpet of revelation.

“Sammy-boy!”

A fold of bodies opened like an unsealed scroll. Her words were distant, but sharp, the eager screech of an owl:

“Arise, come, my darling . . . my beautiful one, come with me . . .”

Molly was carried forth from the fold, held up by ten boys laboring her slowly to the ground, then kneeling at once behind her. Her body, a lily among brambles, was magnified by nudity, flesh thick and engorged, kings and inhabitants of the earth intoxicated with her. Her hair, black as a raven, covered none of it, running down her back in full exposure. Obscene glory lined with polished ivory. Clusters of henna blossoms bare and uncovered. Her mouth, a scarlet ribbon, parted slightly in a grin. She looked at his body.

Sam’s face shook, teeth chattering. His skin felt cold, his insides hot, a divided house unable to stand. His hands felt the call to cover him. But they didn’t.

“Ohhh, what’s wrong . . . what’s wrong, Sam . . . is Sammy-boy afraid of me . . .”

His face was set, numb, or so hot that he could not feel it.

“Sammy-boy doesn’t even want to look at me . . .”

Sam stared at her. He stared at her body. His throat felt embers, scorched. He felt sulfur in his veins.

“Let me come a little bit closer . . .”

Molly began walking, a twisting, winding, serpentine path in his direction.

Sam went back as far as he could but it hurt. It hurt his blood, convulsing as if to escape him, to rip out of his veins and leave him empty. It flailed and screamed as Molly came very, very close, and whispered into his mouth.

“Dark am I, yet lovely . . .”

Molly sat with full weight onto Joshua Green’s upturned face, gyrating slowly, stifling his suffocated voice. She stood back up, and Joshua fell backwards with the face of a blind man healed, awe opening fully his eyes and mouth. The other nine quickly attended him, kissing and inhaling his face.

Molly looked into Sam’s eyes. She looked so deeply. She looked at the blood inside him. He could not bear to touch her with his eyes again and so closed them, tightly, holy.

He felt unseen hands hold him, poise him into a cruciform pose. He felt his boxers touched by lithe fingers.

Camp Havenside

He opened his eyes, looked down at his bare self. His body a desert, and slain with thirst.

Molly spun around and pressed her tail against Sam's crotch.

"Hhhkkkh—*rk—rkgh?*"

The force was firm, strong between surpluses of flesh. Sam's abdomen lurched, felt flames pierce them from within. His eyes rolled into his skull. His face went numb. He raised his head to the ceiling, faced the sky. He prayed with bloodless lips.

"All other sins a person commits . . . are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body . . . do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit . . . who is in you . . . whom you have received . . . from God . . . you are not your own . . . you are not your own . . ."

Arteries convulsed. Tears continued to fall. A flow of blood and water . . .

Tetelestai.

Sam stopped praying. He looked down at her. He reached down to his boxers, and the curtain was torn in two.

"... ahhh, aaahh—"

He put himself inside her. He gripped her by the ass.

"—aaaah, haaahnh, hyaaah—"

He touched her with his eyes, with his hands, his hands.

"—hyaahh, hyaaahn, hyaaagh—"

He tasted her with his self. He tasted what her body meant.

"—*rhaaanh, aaanh, aabhbhb*—"

He rammed her onto the floor. Buckled her balance into pleasure. He shaped her insides in his image.

"—*bbaangh, raaagh, yaaaghrgh*—"

He filled her flesh with fire, and felt hers fill his back. He returned it unto her.

"—*rrruuaagbh, rrrruuaagbh, brruaagh*—"

He fathomed the world inside of her. Filled every gap with him until there was no space left; until she was empty of space.

"—*eeuuaagbh, baaaggbbrb, rrrgghagbh*—"

Clutched her cheeks with hands that felt like wood.

"—*bryaaagbh, nnggbbhouugh, rrrrrbbbhgggngb*—"

Dug his nails into her with fingers that felt like claws. That looked like claws.

“—*hrrrrgggrgrgrghbbkbb*—”

He tried to breathe, couldn't. He painted her soul white.

“—*nnnnbbbbbrrruuuugghghbrkbbhgh*—”

He emptied his body until there was nothing left of him.

“—*gggggggghbbbbbboooooouuuuuugggggghbbb*—”

It all vanished.

Sam opened his eyes. It was dark. He was staring at an iron wall. With a drawing on it. And a name written.

“GILLY”

Sam's hand was wet. He felt something warm on it. He lifted it before his eyes, barely visible in the moonlight from a gap in the ceiling. Pale semen covered his palm, reflected the moonlight, congealed between his fingers.

Sam felt the cool of night again. He heard the waters of the lake. He felt the humid air of that cabi—

Uhnngb . . .

. . .

Sam listened. He listened for what he had already heard. He listened so he could believe that he had heard it—

Rrrgghbrrggbbb . . .

. . .

Only then did he realize he could smell something. He could smell something awful. He could smell it from where he had heard—

Ggghllggkbf, lbrgggkkek . . .

. . .

Behind him. It was coming from behi—

Euuuuuuuggggaaaggghbbb . . . onngggggghbbb . . .

. . .

Sam's flesh was weak. So his spirit became willing. He turned around.

A mossy silhouette. Nearly twice Sam's height. Black and almost invisible in the dark. Made entirely of vines running in twisted tangles around a shadowy, hidden body. Tree branches forking out to form hands, claws. Claws that extended themselves.

Gilly stood before him.

Sam faltered, fell. He buckled backwards onto the ground. His glasses fell from his face, and frantic hands scampered along the floor, desperately moving his body away in a crawl.

Rrrrggghrroouuggghhhh . . .

It moved one monstrous foot in front of the other. Its mossy body shambled forth, twitching and cracking.

Sam struggled backwards until he reached the wall. His breath came thinner with each gasp. Somehow without his glasses he could see, could see with perfect clarity the abomination towering forth, could see something at the center of the vines and foliage. Could hear its breath as it approached.

Ggkkkkhrgghghkk, ogghhkkkh . . .

Sam's lips folded in on themselves. His throat felt a retch clinging to the back of his tongue. He felt again the tears.

Something, or someone, was inside the thing. A body, or the remains of one, was just barely visible behind the black weeds, perhaps synonymous with them. Sam recognized the semblance of a ribcage, strung up in vines, tangled in branches growing through it. He could see, half-covered by blackened lids, eyes. He could see a mouth, or what had once been one. He saw the pieces of lips.

Rrrnnnnmggggkhhh, kgh—! kgh—!—eeurraalklggghhh . . .

It moaned. It wheezed. Its breath was one with the colossal thing of leaves, sharing a body and identity, feeding life into that which held it closely, closely, closely. And maybe it was Sam inside the thing, or a piece of him. Maybe it was a camper from decades ago. Maybe it was Eve or Adam inside, suffocating, clinging barely to life, never banished from Eden but trapped inside of it, swallowed by it, able only to continue living from inside the deformation cast upon them, the Thing born from their shame as their names were cursed, and their pains amplified.

Ggggghhhrrrrggggghhhhhkkkkhhhh—!—!—!

Sam turned away, pressed his face into the wall, into the horrified illustration likely penned by someone in his very position, and he wept that the name had ever been uttered, that he had ever come to Camp Havenside, that he had ever come to behold the eating of flesh, the drinking of blood.

He cried out, forsaken. The leaves covered him entirely.

He tasted blood.