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Braille Lessons for Very Tall Children

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Braille Lessons for Very Tall Children

Abstract
I'm such a dunce. I stole the orange-brown crayon. In the corner, under the cone, under the thumbs of questions, I let my leg hair grow like the beards of men who put down their dogs. Thighburns. This will teach me a lesson, Mr. Chin explains. My insides are jars of half-empty lost-and-founds. I wear my sister's hand-me-down resting bitch face.

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I’m such a dunce. I stole the orange-brown crayon. In the corner, under the cone, under the thumbs of questions, I let my leg hair grow like the beards of men who put down their dogs. Thighburns. This will teach me a lesson, Mr. Chin explains. My insides are jars of half-empty lost-and-founds. I wear my sister’s hand-me-down resting bitch face.

The children aren’t all very tall, except in age.

And also: in desperation, anger, predicament.

We take life too personally. Here, we do arts and crafts, musical chairs, and duck-duck-goose, looking at our foreclosures and divorces, audits and enlarged prostates, gray hairs, layoffs, anxiety-triggered oral fixations, etc., through infant eyes. “Excuse me?” Stan Uzzle asks the teacher. “I want to eat the glue but am worried about the calories?”

“Are you worried about the calories,” Mr. Chin says, “or the you before your youness?”

So Stan picks smelly glue out of his teeth.
Gail had a single gray—not on her head, where I gave it. Her hair is so oil slick black I’d watch a seagull die in its surf. We talked about dying and got lost in the homonymity of confession. I haven’t seen her in a month. She phones at odd hours, calling my mattress a Lakebed. Drunk, she’ll overuse iambic pentameter. She’s obsessed with feet.

“Miss Lake,” she’ll unstress/stress in this too-lateness, “me, the Lakebed bottomfeeder.”

“Grown-up Daycare” was a Groupon I found after she left.

The crayon is ochre. It’s unwanted, unnubbed, eighty mm long and eight mm around. There’s a peculiar kind of cuntiness to the metric system. The crayon is the waxy width of vintage. It’s the diameter of my pinky toe. It’s as long and short as extraordinary love.

I made Crayola lipsticks with my mother as a girl. We’d melt a crayon of choice, mix in jojoba oil, shea butter, lanolin, vitamin C, zinc oxide, and gum arabic. It was her failed attempt to teach me where the line was and how to color inside it.

A very tall child requests a glass of warm milk during nap time, unable to sleep, unable to infantize the recent test results around his sexually transmitted disease. “Milk isn’t in the budget,” Mr. Chin indicates. “However, you’re free to BYOM.”

BYOM makes me recall our last conversation about why mothers milk their babies.

“It must be pheromones,” I said. “Capturing the remnant heel of an essence.”

“No,” Gail said. We were nibbling each other’s cute Achilles heels in our underwear. Her smooth shins held sickles of light, and I imagined them slicing off the tops of my ears. “It’s called dimorphous expression. We want to milk a baby because its heart is so damn unflawed you literally can’t believe it. You just want to remember it.”

“Why don’t you milk me anymore?” I asked.

We very tall children play telephone. End to end, we error in our retelling, misheard or misremembered: virtual interface becomes virgins in fleece; selects the withdraw cash option becomes sex with cats at auction. AMEX or cash? becomes am I okay?

Ochre gets its color from iron oxide—the surface hardpan of a skewered, dry lakebed.

I’m dense, a dunce, destroyed but not; an earthy salt flat, southwest Idaho.
Am I okay? All I know is that I’m ochre.

***

I haunt open-mic nights, maybe always just missing her. My sister tells me things simply end, a cauterized limb. But what does she know about ends? She’s a sous chef at the Olive Garden. All she does is start fires and fire starters. An end is a place linked to another—a timeline, a telephone call. My sister’s resting bitch face isn’t always resting. “Stop being a fucking idiot,” she tells me.

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Achilles is such a dunce. He sexually transmitted the orange-brown crayon. In the corner, under the cone, under a beard so peculiar it looks like a put-down dog, he thumbs the question between his legs. He tested the unnubbed Crayola inside his warm diameter, his half-empty lost-and-found. Thighburns. “Will this teach you extraordinary love?” Mr. Chin asks. Achilles sits on the waxy width of an ochre infant, a bottomfeeder.

“Excuse me?” I say. “I believe I want to milk the heart but am worried about disease?”

“Are you worried about disease,” Mr. Chin says, “or the you before your you-ness?”

So I pick stolen heart out of my teeth.

Gail had a single gray—not on her head, where I heeled. Her hair is so oil slick black I’d watch a seagull die in its surf. We talked about dying and got lost in the confession of homonymity. I haven’t seen her in a month. She phones at odd hours, calling my mattress a Lakebed. Drunk, she’ll overuse iambic pentameter. She’s obsessed with feet.

“Miss Lake,” she’ll unstress/stress in a too-lateness, “the unwanted destroyed bitch face.”

Achilles hand-me-down-undered the earthy crayon, his passion “budgeted.” The long and short is that there’s a desperate kind of metric to the cunt.

We remember, play telephone, duck-duck-goose, musical chairs, arts and crafts, etc.
Unable to nap and grow, a very tall child requests a glass of unflawed calories.

“Calories aren’t in the predicament,” Mr. Chin says. “However, you’re free to BYOC.”

*Predicament* makes me recall our last conversation about why mothers rust their babies.

“It must be a baby’s age,” I indicate. “Like the remnant essence of vintage.”

“No,” Gail says. We were skewering each other’s underwear with our pinky toes. Her smooth shins held sickles of light, and I imagined them slicing off the tops of my ears. “It’s called *dimorphous expression*. You rust a baby because you give it so much, but you can’t jar it. You worry until it angers you. You just want to damn it.”

“Why don’t you rust me anymore?” I asked.

***

I bring home a face with features of jealousy after open-micing and martini-ing. She’s as generous as a sieve, a tongue like a gunslinger, quick draw. I break from myself. A jar spills, and she finds an earring she lost in the seventh grade. That kind of connection.

The way we feel around in the frantic dark you’d swear we’re looking for religion.

“You’re the me before my me-ness,” I utter.

“What made you the meanest?” she asks.

“I felt provoked, unnubbed,” I say. “But the truth is is because I could be.”

“Are you being mean now?”

“No, this is just how my face rests.”

The phone rings. I don’t answer it.

“You need bootstraps,” she tells me, pulling a catalog from her purse. “You need to pick yourself up.” By her phone’s glow, she shows me pages of bootstraps—colors and fabrics and lengths and patterns, the things of casualty and causality.
“Is this a seduction or solicitation?” I ask.

“Is this a rebound?”

I order a leather pair.

We try to resume, but the mattress is pan-hard now.

After she’s gone, I look beneath it and find a leftover iamb, like a loose tooth.

***

Stan Uzzle is such a dunce. He bit the orange-brown crayon. In the corner, under the cone, he picks wax out of his grown teeth. Widths of ochre essence—the color of a warm dog in sunlight—in his beard, in his rusty leg hair from the too-short of his shorts. Thighburns. “This will teach you to not transmit disease,” Mr. Chin tells him. My insides are half-empty, lost and not found. I wear my sister’s hand-me-down resting bitch face.

The children aren’t all very aged, except in predicament.

“Excuse me?” one of them asks. “I want to label the diameter of extraordinary love but am worried about the inside?”

“Are you worried about the inside,” Mr. Chin says, “or the you before your you-ness?”

So the very tall child labels the long and short of it, around.

Gail had a single gray—not on her head, where I napped and thumbed. Her hair is so oil slick black I’d watch a seagull die in its surf. We talked about dying and got lost in the homonymity of confession. I haven’t seen her in a month. She phones at odd hours. Drunk, she’ll overuse iambic pentameter. She’s obsessed with unfairness.

“Miss Lake,” she’ll unstress/stress, “me, the flawed un-bottomfeeder.”

A very tall child requests warm milk, unable to sleep. “Milk isn’t in the budget,” Mr. Chin says. “However, you’re free to BYOM.”

I’m coloring a picture of an ochre Lakebed, rehashing. The teeth marks in the crayon make me recall our last conversation about why mothers bite their babies.
“I believe it must be a baby’s smell,” I said. “Like pheromones.”

“No,” Gail said. We were eating cereal in our underwear, feet up. Her smooth shins held sickles of light, and I imagined them slicing off the tops of my ears. “It’s called dimorphous expression. We want to nibble a baby’s toes because it’s so damn cute you literally can’t stand it. You love it so much you want to destroy it.”

“Why don’t you bite my toes anymore?” I asked.

It was too late. I pointed out the gray hair, frustrated in the way of a child. Her silence was indifference, a drawing and quartering. Maybe I tested for anger, to see if it could indicate, or revive, remnant passion. How else could I make her feel this predicament? I needed to steal something back. Desperate, I crossed a line. The put-down I used, by all metrics, had teeth. The thing you can say to someone you’ve loved enough to know what will skewer the Achilles heel of their heart. My own weapon, a vintage infant of consonants. The glue between us had rusted. The peculiar appendix of questions, unwanted calories. Sunlight captured her hair’s slickness, the hard lines of her eyes. She breathed in iambs. She returned to the earth.

Tom Howard’s work has appeared most recently in the Cincinnati Review, Willow Springs, and Bellingham Review. His stories have won the Robert and Adele Schiff Award for Fiction, the Tobias Wolff Award in Fiction, the Robert J. DeMott Short Prose Award, and the Arcadia and Willow Springs fiction contests. He lives with his wife in Arlington, Virginia.