

the duck

Akari leaned against her counter of reclaimed live-edge wood with the little butterfly joints, wearing a simple white tank top and waxed canvas apron. She sipped an umami-rich gyokuro and leafed through a culinary magazine for the feature on her very own 'Japanese Style Cafe', her narrow shop pictured in black and white, nestled between the bank and bulk goods store. And she tried her best not to cry. Not about the feature, and not about her condition—her colpotortuosis, or counterspiral vaginal morphology—but her whole afternoon. It was just one thing after another, lately. She alone had made the decision to leave, when sex wouldn't work, and to do this by herself, yet she still felt abandoned for it. For things not *fitting* properly. He'd been more concerned about the cat, than anything.

Then earlier today, someone had left in a huff over her refusal to over-water an espresso. He threw a handful of silver change into a tip jar like they were poker chips, small change into a mason jar she clearly kept full of larger coins and folded bills for a reason. So she made him fish it all out again, thank-you-very-much. Wished him a lovely day once he slammed the glass door on his way out. Kicked the counter and would have bawled her eyes out, if not for the handsome unflinching mallard in the window, staring. Its emerald head upon broad shoulders watching her over the frame of the window, the gentle curve in its beak leaning to its expression the appearance of a smirk, almost.

At first she pretended not to notice. Busied herself wiping down the counter and adjusting her flowering pothos. Stacking paper cups. And it watched her. When a customer arrived, she frowned her way through the preparation of a flat white. Felt the mallard's eyes crawl the tattoos up her arms in search of its hidden likeness, its glossy black eyes getting warmer and warmer, while she measured the grounds by weight, pressed them into the portafilter, allowed the musculature of

her slender arms to ripple tamping the espresso into a perfect puck. When it came to steaming and frothing the milk, she could judge the foam by sound and feel, by the hiss of her wand and the temperature of the stainless steel pitcher, so she could hardly be blamed for meeting the mallard's eyes again. And over the shoulder of a customer who requested a venti, she even risked a smile, as if through the window the mallard understood, but could only hold it a moment before blushing away. It was stupid, the blushing, like a teenager. And yet, alone again, upon making a coffee for herself, she this time braced herself to hold the mallard's gaze. She dipped the steam wand into a swirl of creamy, velvety microfoam, twisting like a corkscrew, and hardly blinked. And neither did the duck. Even once the drink was made she didn't look away, instead stepped out from behind the machine to be observed, finding herself slowly slipping the left strap of her tank top down her arm. She exposed her left breast, and the drake tattooed there.

The duck moved to the door and presented itself—as if somehow sensing her avian müllerian malformation, the twist in her vagina—and she straightened, bit her lip, covered her breast and nodded. But when she crossed the space to invite the duck in, it waddled away.

She would not chase it down, not again. Instead she spent the day cradling her face over the magazine, imagining lines depicted the shop owner as lonely and hopelessly lusting. Still, steam rose from her tea, and palming a tear from her eye she saw the mallard was back again.

Only briefly did she consider putting up a fight, then hurried to the door. She flipped her sign—*what are you thinking, Akari? these things only end in disappointment*—and followed the duck into the back room.

the redness

As far as I could tell, the three of us—the man I'd taken to calling No Eyes, the man I'd taken to calling No Ears, and me (No Tongue, I supposed)—had never woken up in this place, in this tall grass, not from sleep, exactly, so much as we simply became aware that this place existed all around us—a storm whipping at our tattered clothes and spitting coolly in our faces—that we were already standing here, in our little triangle, the three of us observing each other haggard and emaciated, observing our confused and unshaven faces just close enough to touch if we wanted to, each of us strangers to the other two, and with similar sensory impairments, each of us recently maimed in some terrible irreversible way we could not remember, how someone had scooped the eyes right out from one of our heads—the poor head of the frightened eyeless man on my left, No Eyes, since he had none—just as they'd taken my tongue and faculty of speech, just as they'd done some similar sort of violence to the hearing apparatus of the taller man I called No Ears, on my right, the bigger of the two, and as deaf as the blind man was blind, who couldn't even hear clapping up close, a fact we discovered through some experimentation—consisting mostly of Ears's obscene screaming in an attempt to hear himself, while No Eyes, meanwhile, wailed incessant for someone to please explain where he was or who was talking, or why No Ears wasn't responding at all, and what was going on, how many of us were there and so on—none of which No Ears could even hear, nor could I respond to without my tongue, since it seemed as well that any breath intended to make a sound wouldn't come out right—after which experimentation we made our way up the hill (No Ears dragging No Eyes by the shoulder) toward the only landmark on the horizon, for shelter, a dark and slouching shack on a bluff in the distance, a slumped and sagging carcass of a home, inside which we found this pad and pencil for this writing, and further, to my own private horror, discovered—that is, the two of us with eyes discovered—a canted wooden table upon which sat a very old and mysterious tome that among all the gray and colorless dark of this gloomy place was somehow vibrant and impossibly red, red as maple leaves in autumn,

or the way wet rubies were red, that rich and special redness of a sunset's very edge where it deepens toward purple, swelling the arils of ripe pomegranates, or fat dark cherries, the red of a wax seal or a royal velvet cloak or theater curtain, or even yes, under certain conditions, the way fresh red blood was red.

"It's fucking blue, ya cunt."

It was not. It was red.

"I've got eyes, remember. I see what you're writing in your little pad." He spoke real loud like it made a difference, steered Eyes by the shoulders to a chair at the table and plunked him down, then jabbed me with a finger. "Have you lost your fucking mind?"

I shook my head.

No Eyes rocked back and forth in time with his muttering. "*Help. Help. Save me.*"

"It's a blue book if it's anything," argued No Ears, "and barely that. Probably it's just grey as everything in this place. If the gibbering man had eyes he'd tell you the same."

"Help me."

"The fuck is he flapping his mouth about, anyway? Anything sensible?"

He was saying help, still, over and over, all day now.

No Ears examined the text in my hand, turned and glared at the other man. "Will you shut up already? I can't hear a word of whatever it is you're mouthing about, I just know you're doing it, and it looks funny. Like you're eating with your mouth open."

"Mommy."

And then, as if in response to our presence, the book's redness seemed to spill down and spread out across the table. It inched redly to the edges of the table and ran fast down the table's legs. It pooled on the floor and I alone took a step back.

Reading over my shoulder. "Look. Look at that. What you wrote, you're fucking loony. This just gets worse. I've gone and got my ears scooped out and I'm stuck with you goofy lot. A crying manbaby and a mentalist. You should give me that pencil. Unreliable is what you are."

I was not unreliable. I was not a mentalist.

"Hey man baby, you should see what this fool's writing about. Just a bloody book."

It was bloody alright.

*"Mommy. Mommy. Mommy."*

"Is he still talking? Blah-blah-blah is all that looks like. What you look like to me. Blah blah blah like a baby, rocking like that. Is he talking to you? Are you two leaving me out of something? Go on, write down what he's saying."

Nothing helpful.

"Well that's it, then, isn't it? He's driven you mad with this. I can only imagine having ears with this fool around. Now you've gone and started seeing things."

It was unpleasant, earlier, the sounds, but I got used to it. And now the redness was climbing up the weeping man's chair.

"This is my place, I've just decided. Too small for two loonies. The both of you can fuck off and find your own spot."

Now he waited for the writing, watching as I wrote, this hulking, angry man, a man by whatever fate standing as the only real way for the three of us to communicate, his two eyes and a tongue turning out to be the most fortunate combination.

"Ga blah blah fucking blah. If you had a tongue would you really talk like this? I'll count my blessings. And flattery will get you nowhere, my friend."

The redness had now crept up No Eyes' legs, saturating his clothes. It spread up his body like ink in cotton and he didn't seem to see it, the running redness.

"Fucking mental case, you."

The big man reached for the red book off the table but I touched his arm to stop him.

"Lad, are you fixing to lose another tongue?" he said, which didn't make any sense.

Eyes stopped rocking for a moment in his chair. "Is the book red or isn't it? Is the book red or isn't it? Is the book—"

No Ears brushed me away and picked up the red book and stepped away and leaned against the wall and opened the book, frowned into it, flipped a page or two and back again, twice, frowning, deeply frowning,

and then he looked at me, and the notepad in my hands, narrowing his eyes at my furious scribbling, and then the red book again.

"Well, now this is just pretty strange."

What was it, I wanted to ask, but had no tongue, etc.

"What?" asked the man in the chair, rocking. The redness had crawled up the hands in his lap, up his arms. It spread just as it spread in the big man's hands.

"It's that thing you're writing," he said. "It's the—yep. It's the same stupid shit you're writing."

"Oh dear," worried No Eyes, rocking and rocking. "Oh fuck. Mommy. Mommy no. Please."

"I'm flipping ahead," the big man said.

"No! No skipping. Stop it!"

"The whole book is...full of...stuff."

The man on the chair tipped back to look at the ceiling—not to *look* at the ceiling. Gaped at it. "What's going to happen? Don't tell me. Don't tell me what's going to happen! Oh Mommy what's going to happen!"

"Oh Mommy," read the larger man with strange timing. Out loud, still unhearing, deaf and reading out loud. "That's you, I take it, crying about what's gonna happen, blah blah blah, whine whine whine. Okay here, the large man read, it says here. That's me, I presume. Blah blah blah, yadda yadda yadda, and even though he couldn't hear the man in the chair, he knew, the larger man knew, somehow, everything the chair man said, blah blah blah, because it was in the book he was reading and so on and so forth, and at some point I stopped writing, but the book proceeded—we get it already—and then he paused, me, I think," No Ears paused and looked up at me for a moment, and registered the worry on my face, "the large man paused and saw the horror and even then, even seeing, didn't seem to fully fathom or appreciate this thing blah blah blah I'm skipping ahead. It's too much."

"Don't skip," said No Eyes. "Don't read what happens next. I beg you."

And for a moment the man with the book planted a finger on the page and paused to observe him, the man on the chair, as if he could make out what he was saying.

"Did you just say kill me?" he asked, eyes up from the book and down again. "Did he just say 'please someone kill me'? You're shaking your head. Did you just say 'I want to be dead'"

The man in the chair shook his head but the large man continued, running his finger across the page. "Are you saying 'I beg you, blah blah blah. Use a table leg if you have to, just kill me. Just like the book said I'd say when you asked what I said'." Another pause. "Is this what you're saying right now?"

"Not yet!" cried the man in the chair.

And the man kept reading, while the redness spread, until all of us were red.