

Lobster Clouds
and
Pieces of People

words by
Michael Watson

five

Dark spots in the corner of my eye flicker as I stand in the terminal.

I turn my head toward them, but they're gone. The teller asks me if I want change for my tram pass.

I tell her no.

The dark flicker's still gone, no matter where I look, replaced by the flicker of fluorescent pipe lighting above me.

Nothing behind the columns on the deck, but I can't really see around them from here.

I take my token and pass through the turnstile.

At the door to the car, I wait behind a line of people. Dozens and dozens of faceless people. I'm trying to put the spots out of my mind, because the train's about to leave, and I need to be on it. I can't remember where it's going, but this is important.

The train's always important. I have to catch it. I have to be on it.

I'm going somewhere, I know it. I just can't remember where, is all.

I turn to my left, and the whole world around me rotates clockwise in parallax.

There they are, like some ghoulish three-dimensional shadows, walking toward me. Black, like the deepest charcoal cloth, and undefined like the surface of a dandelion.

I think they have claws. Or teeth, or horns, or countless other things with which to tear apart my chest. To slice open my neck like so much plastic wrapping, spilling me everywhere onto the floor.

There *are* monsters under your bed.

There *are* demons hiding in your closet.

I'm looking at them coming closer to me.

I want to move, but the figures are closing in on me, and the floor is like glue. My heart's stopped pumping, and my brain is being clouded with the dark, moving voids in the buzzing fluorescence.

I have to get out of here. I have to scream. I have to get someone's attention. But they're not paying attention, the faceless people moving around me. Dammit, see them. *They're right there.*

But no one can, and I stop breathing. Everything's eternity at this moment. A second is a century, and a century is forever. Air escapes into my lungs, and I can run again. And I do, like directed lightning, my feet tearing up the tiles in the floor.

There *are* monsters under the streets.

There *are* demons hiding in my head.

And this isn't a dream this time.

Sometimes, when I think back really hard, I can remember being born.

I'd like to tell you about all the wonderful things my mother did for me when I was a kid. I'd like to spin stories about how she would take me and my brothers on road trips across the country during the summer. I'd like to tell you these things, but I can't, because I can't remember them. And if I had any brothers, I don't have any memory of them, either.

I couldn't remember my mother well enough to describe her, or even say her name, but I did remember certain things here and there. Bits. Snippets of life. Cut-out newspaper headlines and magazine articles from my past.

Baby Boy Born to New Mother, page A3.

Playground Fight Leaves Boy Crying, page D2.

New Wristwatch Broken During Fall From Bicycle—see *Style* insert, page 4.

All the little things that chew up five minutes of your life, and somehow leave you crying each time.

You wake up one morning, and you can't remember what color your shoes are. What you ate for dinner last night. What you watched on T.V. Insignificant things that make reality seem shifted an inch to the left.

My shoes are black.

And I put them on, and they're brown. That can't be right.

I just took them off a few hours ago.

Something's wrong, you say to yourself.

The good part about having a memory full of holes is feeling like there's no past, that there's just here, and there's just now, and that's where you can live. The bad part is when all you can remember is the bad things, and that's where you end up living.

We live in the past, because that's all there ever is.

We are who we are because of what we can remember.

Because that's all there ever is, and it hurts like nothing could ever hurt.

Searing fire poker in your ribcage.

It got to the point where the only reason to get up was the chance I could get hit by a car or a truck or something while walking across a busy intersection. I could wake up with a gun in my mouth and stain my pillow with whatever memories I had left.

Spill a wasted and meaningless life all over my cotton-poly blend bedsheet.

I could get cancer in inoperable places.

I could be in a McDonald's somewhere when some psycho gunman decides to kill six bystanders and wound fifteen more after being fired on a Friday after work. It's not supposed to cause stress when it happens at the end of the week.

Neurofibromatosis is a genetic disorder that causes tumors to develop anywhere along the branches of the nervous system. I wanted that.

I wanted to fall asleep and get my memories back. Wake up on the shore with my past intact.

The bitter metallic taste of the gun barrel is the last thing you'll ever remember. Because everything's a memory, and it lives forever, you'll live forever.

I could live forever if I could just wake up, I thought.

It's funny how you never remember the good things that happen to you nearly as well as the bad things. Made me wonder if Maura was a good thing or a bad thing, seeing as how I clearly remembered everything about her.

Deep inside the limbic system, the hippocampus is a horseshoe-shaped part of the brain whose job is to weigh the importance of short-term memories to see whether or not they should be stored permanently amongst the other memories in your brain. Studies show the storage of so-called *episodic memory*, memory of contextual events, is regulated by the hippocampus, and that there may be as many as five memory centers of the brain to handle both episodic memory and semantic memory. Semantic memories are like facts that are without context.

Knowing the amount of milling on a dime, for example.

With the parahippocampal gyrus, special cells called *place cells* construct three-dimensional mental images of people and places. Without them, you wouldn't be able to navigate your own house.

I sometimes forgot where my kitchen was. I sometimes forgot where I lived entirely.

It made me wonder if my house wasn't somewhere else one day, and I just didn't know it. Couldn't remember it. Maybe it changed, and my memory with it, but not enough to know what was going on.

Maybe *deja vu* is a toddler screaming at you from another room to get your attention. A fading memory of that exact moment in time, already taken place. You did something last time, didn't get it right, and got to do it again. You're just repeating the past, over and over and over until you eat the right fruit, drink the right water, close the right door.

Try to remember what you did last time. Stop and think hard. How many times have you repeated this single moment? You could be replaying this moment for the hundred million millionth time and you wouldn't have any way to know. You'd just be that needle skipping across the record with the hairline scratch in it. God rest, ye— God rest, ye— God rest, ye—

Memories buried in the scratches of time.

But maybe all those memories aren't real, like a memory is supposed to be. Maybe there isn't a past at all, and there isn't a future. There's just one moment in time, one flicker of existence. You just *think* you remember blinking a second ago; you just *believe* you turned on the television and saw that train accident wreckage somewhere on the interstate. But there wasn't a second before now, and—

Blink—

A second didn't just pass, and you didn't record the second before that. Really, it's just all just facade. Prop memories held up with masking tape and thumbtacks.

Maybe your memories are wrong.

Obsession, noun.

A compulsive preoccupation with a fixed idea or an unwanted feeling or emotion, often accompanied by symptoms of anxiety.

I replayed the diner over and over. The rain sheeting down the windows and how Maura wasn't afraid of it as long as it was on the other side; the blisteringly red panties stretched like a flag across the table; the airheaded blonde behind me on her cell phone.

It won't make you any smarter. Get over yourself. You aren't more important than anyone else.

The more I replayed it, the more I wondered when it all happened. Did I quit my job because of Maura, or did I meet Maura because I quit my job? We'd been meeting there for weeks, after the clinic, but I couldn't remember when everything really started.

"Are you comfortable here?" she asked me. "Like, eat-by-yourself kind of comfortable?"

I suppose, I said.

Tiny cracks where her cheek met the edge of her lips as she smiled.

“Okay, then. Let’s fix that,” she said. Fix it, like there was something wrong with it in the first place. I looked down at my menu.

I tried my hardest to focus on it and all the stuff on it that wasn’t good for me. The stuff healthy people tell you will clog your arteries and give you gastrointestinal illnesses. Great, I’d say to them. I don’t know what cancer feels like, and I bet if I eat enough of this stuff, I’ll get it someday. After all, give a lab rat enough of anything, and it’ll sprout tumors faster than you can say *angiogenesis*.

Maura fidgeted with something under the table, leaned over so her head was almost on it, when the blonde’s phone went schizo again. Repetitive pop-song ring tones. Antenna poking out from her chemical-laced hair. Trying so hard to be connected and loved.

Worthless.

I gave up on the menu and stared out of the window into traffic.

You are what you eat! Eat right!

And then, the product pitch. Advertising with life lessons. That way, the young, hip executive in charge of the campaign gets the seat in Hell next to the air conditioner.

I wouldn’t have paid so much attention to the billboard if the bus it was on hadn’t stalled at the intersection. People in cars around it screamed and honked their horns like time was going out of style. They must have all been transporting donor organs or something, with the rush they were in.

You are what you eat. Words to live by. I thought about the blonde on the cell phone behind me. Structure, Gap, Old Navy, J.Crew, Nike. There’s a billboard stalled in traffic, and a billboard on the phone, I thought.

You are what you eat. Consume enough products, and you will become one.

I looked back at Maura, and she was smiling contentedly, very proud of herself about something. I remember thinking that this wasn’t going to be a good thing. People don’t get that look when their intentions are filled with sugar and syrup. You only see that look when your kid has flushed your watch down the toilet.

“Do something unexpected and dangerous,” Maura said, “and you won’t have time to fear anything.” About here is where everything changed frame rate. She’d slipped her panties under the table into my lap, like some covert agent slipping secret documents into the hands of anonymous contacts.

The crow flies to Albuquerque at dawn.

I looked down at half-speed to the red glow of her underwear resting quietly on me.

Maura asked for them back as loudly as she could without yelling. I went frozen for a solid minute, until she leaned over the table and stuck her hand out to me. I think it was her eyebrows that pulled me in, but I’d like to think I leaned closer and reached over to hand them back to her on my own free will. I’d like to think that, but it isn’t true.

I balled them up tight, so maybe no one would see. After all, I wasn’t the pervert, Maura was. She had other ideas, and grabbed my hand tightly with one hand and pulled her panties out of it with the other hand just as quickly as I shot mine out to her. I tried to let go, but she’d pinned them to my palm. There we were, playing tug-of-war with her underwear over the table, next to the napkin holder and the \$3.99 breakfast plate menu.

She held me over the table and stared through my eyes to somewhere deep in my brain. She held me up with a stare. I froze again.

You are what you eat. And right then, I was eating icebergs.

I came back to reality for the second time when she *barked* a sharp, loud yelp across to me. If anyone wasn't looking before, they're glued to us now, I thought. Little. Red. Panties.

Erection, noun.

Maura burned her eyes into my memory as the panties turned everything else in the diner a flat, empty grey. Some sort of kinky sore thumb.

Om there is no one looking at me.

Om the only thing in the world is the falling rain.

Om I am the universe, and nothing can affect me on that reality.

And then, like all things, it passed. Over. The former present.

Everything was water.

If people can be addicted to anything, they can be afraid of anything. Most people don't like to be afraid. Most people are stupid. Fear is a motivator.

Fear makes you do what you didn't think you could do. Fear reminds you that you're still breathing. More importantly, it makes you breathe.

I feared everything. I feared I was coming completely apart, like a ball of string. I feared I was nothing more than a hypocritical, contradictory, tacked-together patchwork of a shell of a person. Less and less made sense, and more and more weighed like stones for feathers on my head.

It started all breaking down, and I was incapable of stopping it. Carthage was falling.

I felt it like never before when the diner owner stopped me at the door. In the excitement, I'd gotten up without paying.

Money is worthless. It's just paper and ink. So are suicide notes.

In the unlikely event of a complete financial collapse of the world markets, you will be worth every penny you were before.

Maura was eyeing the door, and I just stood there. That's all I *could* do.

It only takes a few seconds, and you're there. Rolling down a hill for the endless few minutes it takes for the panic attack to run through. Sweating, nauseating, collapsing, confining fear like fear was nothing before that moment. Hyperventilation takes your lungs away. You choke on your own throat and hope you die just so it'll stop.

There isn't a specific trigger—you're just holding the right ticket for your own personal panic disorder lottery when everything goes wrong. My head was already flooded with endorphins when the owner stopped me by the arm.

The only thing you want to do is blow the windows out screaming at the top of your soft palate. Drowning in a fog of complete confusion and panic.

I don't know what's happening.

The owner squeezed my arm harder, and I got dizzy. I got a taste in the back of my mouth, sweet and sharp like acid. *Deja vu*. I thought hard, like I was replaying a moment in time. I flashed, and my head burned like a solar flare.

I flashed. Knife in my hand. Knife on the table. Knife in my hand.

I don't know what's happening, but it keeps coming. Faster and stronger.

I flashed again. Burying the knife into the fat oaf's neck. Being showered with blood. Burying the knife deeper and harder into his neck.

My lungs filled with air, and I was staring at the table with the knife on it, untouched.

My lungs filled with air, and I woke up in my apartment.

There are five schedules of drugs, I through V, as defined by the Drug Enforcement Agency. An individual drug's schedule designation is determined primarily by its habit-forming properties. Non-habit-forming drugs available over the counter, such as aspirin, are labeled as schedule V drugs, while drugs that come with high risks of becoming dependencies, such as morphine and codeine, are labeled schedule II. Schedule I drugs are limited to research use only, and include things like cocaine and heroin.

Schedule I drugs tend to mimic the effects of endorphin rushes in the brain, lending to their addictive properties.

The way I see it, fear is the perfect schedule I drug.

The way I see it, everyone needs to be afraid to know they're alive.

Agateophobia is the fear of insanity or going insane. How's that for irony?

Hylephobia: The fear of materialism. Or epilepsy. Make of that what you will.

Fear of confined spaces. Fear of the moon. Fear of being afraid; fear. Imagine living with that one. You may as well just eat the bullet now.

Ombrophobia is the fear of rain or being rained on. Down this hallway, third door on the left, Maura sits still in an exitless room. There are no doors here, no windows. Dirty floor tiles are always cold, and the lights are never on bright enough to see them clearly. This is an oppressive place, one in which the corners are a thousand miles deep and as black as night. It's draining and too dry even to shed tears. All you can do is shiver in the deep, dark corners and hope the light finally goes out so you can get some rest. Imagine that claustrophobia kicking in about now.

Imagine pellets of rain falling on the glass, and imagine Maura's dry mouth as she watched it and waited for it to stop. Imagine her panties coming off, and her telling me about doing something unexpected and dangerous so there's no time to fear anything.

Her head ran in place like a rat in a cage, unable to leave the diner until the rain stopped. And right when the rain's stopped, and she's free to leave, I go and almost flip on the owner in the diner.

Worthless.

The kind of worthless that comes with peel-and-stick decals of wrecking everything in front of you. The kind of worthless that requires assembly. Requires you to help it along.

Not the kind of worthless of out-of-control consumerism—

Imagine the blonde sitting behind me—

But plastic and worthless just by being in the moment.

Atychiphobia. Fear of failure.

Imagine me, blacked-out on the floor of the diner.

I slept for two days, Maura told me.

People don't sleep for two days, they *go comatose*.

Pretend when you wake up, you've never woken up before.

Pretend it's all been a dream up to that point.

That isn't just any shadow lurking behind you—that's the void of memories you can't quite fill in. If it's been a dream, what was before that? You'll never be able to remember.

Were you a murderer before? Did you have another wife? Robbed a bank?

Now here was an idea Maura loved. Poured over. Soaked up like honey, thick and dark. Around me, Maura had changed. Had she ever been the person she was before, she wondered.

No, the real reason the idea excited her was that it meant you were free to be and do any-

thing you wanted—every day, every time you woke up.

Go ahead, bark at a stranger. It doesn't matter.

Switch those strollers around. No one's going to notice.

Walk backwards for a day and curse at people who run into you. Watch where you're going next time, buddy.

She was free now, because of me.

I stopped going to my appointments with Doctor Morgan, Ph.D., after that.

Either I was totally enlightened at that point, or was too far beyond her help. Whichever it was, there was no point in turning over a chunk of what was left of my savings to her every week.

I kept wondering if I really quit my job, or if I'd been fired. I didn't *care*, but I kept thinking about it.

My grungy, greedy, sloth of a landlord was starting to get in my face about the rent.

Bills piled up.

No one in my apartment cared.

My sleeping problem was gone. I slept for hours at a time during the day or night by then.

Revolution, not evolution, as they say. Everything was changing, one staccato at a time.

Things were picking up. Getting much better than I could have imagined. Maybe I should revise my tombstone:

Here lies David Preacher. May you be as edified in your next life as he was in his first.

There are a million ways someone can make himself or herself better person. You can be a better driver. You can cut down on salt and saturated fats. Donate to charities. Volunteer at church.

But you're really just making sure you don't run your sport utility gas guzzler into a cheaper car. You're really only avoiding costly medical bills, adding more tax write-off line items to your books, and making sure you get that great spot in Heaven next to that movie star you've always wanted to meet. You're no better than anyone else.

So stop trying so hard.

Do the things you didn't think you could ever do.

Step into the light, like me.

Sleep. Quit working at your draining, repetitive, carcinogenic jobs. Crush your digital life-style devices under your shoes and throw the splintered debris into the streets.

Give up, let go, be saved.

I woke up and realized I had powers I never knew I had.

I was important and powerful.

I had the power to make someone know they were truly, really, fully alive. And I had the power to take that away from them if they chose not to embrace it.

Death, esquire.

Actually, I prefer *freedom inhibitor*.

Here's the edge, and this is me, big swan dive over it.

