

Taylor Dodd Geu
P.O. Box 537
Vermillion, SD 57069
(605) 677-9325
geut@kenyon.edu

about 14,200 words

Newts

by Taylor Dodd Geu

When a Newt laughs it makes your teeth grind. It's the syncopated squeaks of clean glass, laced with cussing. Their voices cut into your head, and maybe you try to think of something else. You try to remember a favorite joke or song. But slowly you realize your thoughts have drifted. Your thoughts start to sound like squeaking glass shot through with cussing. And you realize you aren't thinking anymore, just listening and mulling over the Newts on the subway.

These Newts were sitting across from you on the A-Train to Riverside. It was a busy ride, every seat packed with only a few folk standing. Everyone was bundled for winter, but it was still a swampy summer in the tunnels. The glass was misted with fat droplets, the floor slick with wet feet. Despite the discomfort, everyone was doing an amiable job ignoring the Newts. They stayed tense, took the character of ornamental statues gazing hard into nothing. The Newts bumped into them, squirmed onto their laps, whipped their faces with an errant tail. But everyone knew there were no Newts, and so anything you felt was a trick of the mind. The bruises were somatic responses to vivid dreams of Newts.

But, if you humored yourself in the dangerous notion that Newts were on the train car, you'd guess there were three Newts there: about half a squaddie, maybe split from the rest to chase a distraction or blow off steam after a tussle. Two of them were about as long and thick as a baguette, rubber bodies whipping about as the train bucked on its rails. Their chief, four feet tall, body cross-hatched with deep pink scars, was touching them. The two cronies chattered and laughed about their newest hunt, the number they did on the old lady who thought she was so smart, even as their boss stuck his fat-grub fingers in their mouths, tracing their gums and tickling their tongues. He poked another's eye, pushed down until the eye bulged as if to burst.

But if the crony even noticed, they didn't voice it. It didn't even blink as tears wept from the corners of its eyes. A sudden bump and the finger slipped, a claw hooked the pupil, and the eye split. The crony Newt screeched, paws batting at its eye, trying to stop the blood squirting with every heartbeat.

"Bitch! They're a bitch!" the other crony chirped. "Munch 'em, Boss! Munch 'em!"

The blinded Newt leapt away, into the laps of the other passengers, its blood smearing on their chests, their laps. It grasped for purchase, leaving red prints on faces, scratches on cheeks. But everybody knew there were no Newts on the train and examined nothing as hard as they could.

The Chief Newt dashed after it, barreling over passengers, knocking them to the side or out of their seats. His jaw opened, cracked as it stretched.

The crony collided with the wall, body piling itself into broken angles, tried to find footing.

The Chief Newt swallowed his crony's head, bit down on its neck, and shook. The body slammed into knees, into the floor, into the wall. There was the snap of a thin neck breaking, the body twitching and spasming. The Chief Newt stopped, tilted his head up and swallowed. There was a series of gags and belches as the crony bulged down the neck, passed the chest, and settled in

the gut like a stone. The Newt chief farted, sat on his hind legs as he digested.

The other crony cackled, clapping its paws. The passengers stared forward.

And then the train lurched to a stop. The doors opened, and the intercoms murmured a half-heard address. The Newt chief moaned, farted again, but clambered onto his hind legs, clutching his disgorged stomach. He waddled out, the crony fawning after him.

If you admitted that there may be Newts in the city, you'd say ten more entered at this stop, cajoling and barking at each other, pink hides gleaming in the fluorescent lights. There were two big Chiefs slithering in their midst. One of the Chiefs may have stared right at you. Maybe a dare to acknowledge he was there, or maybe for the joy of knowing you couldn't look back.

But there are no Newts. There never were Newts. You put in your earphones and listened to the newest chart-topping hit, feeling glad that there're no such things as Newts.

And if there were, they happened to other people.

#

You spent your day in an office, like most people these days. You read contracts between parties as they haggled for control of their ideas. This woman owned her thoughts, but the company owned her tongue. This man owned the third word in a

slogan because he was the one who suggested which syllables to stress. This couple owned a baby, though the Newts owned its name.

You stopped briefly, but only to dab whiteout over the word "Newt." You wrote "Certain Parties" over it and laid the agreement aside to be filed by the intern. Only the intern knew where the Newt files were kept. It was always a different intern. You suspected that meant something, but you wisely ignored the suspicion. Things had been that way for months if not years. Maybe before there were even Newts, which really was only a few years ago. You kept forgetting it was a few years ago. Time was funny now, although you couldn't say if it wasn't just you.

Your boss handed you more papers. He was old with a belly heavier than his body. He had dark circles under his eyes and a darker smile despite his immaculate teeth. Somehow, he made small talk a violence.

"How you doing? Glad to hear it. I need you to whiteout all these documents. I need you to white them all out, every word. I tried to destroy them, but Certain Parties, you know? You seen any good theater? There's Moliere in the park. I liked it I liked it, surprised it was still so pertinent. People never change do they? Nothing ever changes no matter how much everything changes. Oop! That's my pager. Sounds like 'Certain

Parties' are ready for their lunch. Try to get it all whited out soon, please. Soon as possible.

"I mean it. Soon. Please."

And he trundled off, the conversation left in your mind like an old bruise. You hunched back over the contracts.

When the working day was over, you kept working. You stayed much later than you wanted, which was about as much as you spent every night. The office was empty except for the buzzing of lamps. Even your boss, as desperate as he sounded, had left you behind.

That meant you had the archives all to yourself.

The archives were kept in the basement. It was a cold dirt pit, the concrete eroding to dust. There was always an inch of black silted water on the floor. The plip of pipe drips echoing in the cold must. It was hoped that the documents would get water damaged, become illegible. Should future generations come down to study their history, they'd only find rusted cabinets and wood pulp. Already many of the filing cabinets were broken. The handles could come off in your hand, and any cut they gave burned for a few seconds after.

But it was worth it for the pictures.

They were filed under W for War.

They had been your first and most interesting assignment at the office.

The pictures were taken in your lifetime, one you suspected had been on TV years ago. But you had so thoroughly repressed the memories you only felt an ache. Like a bad tooth, you couldn't help but probe the soreness, finding an odd pleasure. There was a companion pang, this time somewhere behind your lungs. That one never went away, you just noticed it when you held the pictures.

Oh, you'd think, I remember this pang. How did I ever forget?

It was obvious how you forgot, but it felt good to wonder.

These are the pictures filed under War:

1. Three skinny boys sharing a cigarette in a bombed-out building. Their rifles were held between their legs. Light came in through a window; so bright you felt the warmth on your back.
2. A man in a uniform and cap gave a speech from atop a tank. You remember the tank was the only tank they had. That's why they only drove it in parades. The crowd before him held up their hands. Saluting? Voting? Reaching out to touch?
3. A Newt dissected. The skin was held open with pins, but the innards had been scrawled over with sharpie. On the back, someone had written in neat handwriting "Barbara, what am I looking at?"

4. A sapling in an overgrown lot. Soldiers, men and women, sat around it. They were gauzed with ruddy bandages. Many were missing their limbs or scarred. They were laughing though, and one held a ukulele. A bandage was wrapped over her eyes.
5. This picture was taken somewhere above the street. On the street was a military parade. The wounded led them, carrying a sign facing away from you. The uniformed man was on his tank, he held a roman candle high.
6. Your favorite picture: A lake, surrounded by pines. Speed boats ripped water's surface. A big dog sat on the shore, and a small child hugged it. The child smiled, and you liked to think the dog was smiling too. There was no place in the city like it, meaning there was some place outside your life. It was comforting to know the world was bigger than yourself.

These were the pictures of the war you barely remembered. At least you assumed. The photos were undated, so these could have all been different wars. You knew the Newt photo was not from the war you remembered. But that could have meant anything. Maybe you chose to tell yourself that.

But the point was remembering the war, and even if these pictures weren't from the war you were thinking of, it was enough to believe you had existed back then. So few people had

pasts these day. So many lived for the now. That was a healthy way to live.

Holding these pictures made you feel like there was more to you than this moment, and life felt tangible.

You put the photos back in the file, then went back upstairs. It was closing time, and you hadn't eaten all day.

#

Dinner: a stale, limp sandwich. Every bite made you think of tissue paper and all the much better sandwiches the deli made before it was burned down. Places just combusted these days, that was the hazard of home ownership. It was a shame though because that was the last of the delis. It was even their slogan: The Last Place with Salami. You never cared for their salami, but they had good turkey with mustard. The mustard brought out the sweetness of the tomatoes. And the lettuce was crunchy. Sometimes you'd even order a coffee, freshly ground, and spend the evening at a table, watching the river slither by. Sipping your coffee, you imagined the river flowing down your throat, filling you forever.

You lived in that memory for a while, until you heard the scream.

There was an alley on your right. In the alley were a squaddie of Newts. They hopped in a huddle like athletes before a match, tails slapping the ground in alternating beats. Between

them you saw canvas, hair, dirty fingernails. A Chief Newt's head rose from the scrum, face smeared with blood. He trilled, dove back in. Another scream, a hand squirmed between the Newts, trying to pry a gap. They crushed it between their hips, cackling.

You had seen a Newt kill circle before. Everyone had at some point. But you hadn't seen one for months. You had told yourself they finally stopped happening. You were debating telling yourself so again.

You were squeezing the sandwich. The tomatoes plopping onto your shoes.

You aren't a brave person. You just wanted to get through life with minimal suffering.

The Chief Newt flew into the air. For a moment he was still before twisting and jerking like a cat in the air, feet to the ground as he plummeted into the fight.

Whenever you saw a kill circle, you would walk away. Go home, perhaps then read a book or watch TV. You would go to bed, trying to forget the man's screams and the kill circle and the Newt's bloody face, tell yourself that there was nothing to be done.

If you dreamed, it would be of Newts.

This time you ran at the kill circle. You grabbed a Newt by the neck, felt rubber muscles squirm beneath your fingers as you

pulled it away. As if from a distance, you could only watch as you slammed the Newt into the alley wall, once and twice and again, until the body went soft.

The Newts screamed, unsure what was happening. The Big Chief rose onto his hind legs, mouth open wide as he yowled at you.

Then he choked. The victim's hand held a piece of sharp metal, and now that jagged piece was buried in the Chief's jugular. The kill circle broke, its members scattering to the alley walls as the victim stood, lifting the Chief Newt with them. The Chief writhed on the shiv, trying to roll away but only shredding its own throat.

The victim, now just a man, spat in the Chief's gasping mouth before dropping him. The Big Newt was dead, now just heavy meat in an abandoned alley.

And then you remembered the Newt in your own hands. You looked, saw the fat, flat gaze of the corpse look back. The corpse became heavy in your hands. You were a stranger in your own body, your lungs ached from shallow breathing

The rest of the squaddie were silent, crouched to the ground. A few crept towards their fallen Chief. The man kicked and they retreated.

There was a sound that could have been the wind, but slowly grew. The Newts were hissing, creeping to the mouth of the

alley. When they were a good distance away, they rose as one onto their hind legs, hands connecting fingers and thumb into a triangle. They turned their heads, huge black eyes gazing through their fingers.

"We see you," they hissed. "We see you."

The man tossed his shiv at them. The Newts scattered, spilling from the alley into the cold city night.

Your arm buckled, the Newt corpse falling to your side. There was an odd weight on your shoe. Looking down, you found a glob of flesh bleeding on your shoe. The Newt at some point bit off its tongue. For a moment the tongue seemed like a planet, the saliva and blood shimmering under the solar light of distant lamps. You felt like you were falling into those sour oceans, waiting for the slap of impact.

Fingers crept into your vision. Yellow nails. Dirt in the cuticle. They picked up the tongue and carried your gaze with it.

The man's face was dry, dander flecked. He'd shaved his head in bunches, uneven clumps broken with scabs. His face was round, the nose flat. His beard had been ripped out in the struggle, and now his long orange whiskers were tacky with blood. He opened his lips and popped the tongue into his mouth. He swallowed without chewing.

He gestured to the Newt you held, "You keeping that?"

You didn't answer. His fingers pried your grip from the Newt's throat, took it from you. He went back to crouch by the Chief. When he rose, you saw he tied the Newts' tails together, then swung the bodies over his shoulder. He gave you a sympathetic smile.

"Thank you," he said, voice warm with pity. "I'm sorry this happened to you."

He began to trudge away down the alley but stopped when you called him. You can't remember what you said, it sounded distant and sad and spoken by someone else. It lasted too long, but the man was patient. He smiled again before saying "Good night" and trudging into the dark of the city.

#

You live in an apartment building that used to be a furniture store. The showroom was now the "foyer." The offices above were now the apartments. You think your apartment was the Manager's Office, which was the only way to explain the rent. But that was unfair. It was expensive because everything was expensive. There had been a war very recently. There were parts of the city still collapsed and burnt. Nobody cleared the ruins. Underneath the bricks and pipes and glass were often Newt nests. The only homes available were the tenements rising at the city's rim.

Your window looked over the river. Rubbish and branches bobbed in the flow. Sometimes a scummy froth would twirl by. You thought the river might calm you down, your hands were still shaking from saving that homeless man. If they kept shaking you'd have to see if your neighbor would sell you some moonshine, which she brewed in her bath tub for her sole source of income. That was very much a violation of her lease, but it was DAMN good moonshine. The Super was her best customer, and also earned twenty percent of the profits. You could hear them laughing now, hiccupping through some of the excess booze.

What else could you hear? There was a baby crying several doors down. There were gunshots from somebody's videogame, emphatic garbles from another's TV. There were the groans of sex or porn. It was very noisy in short, and it usually annoyed you. Now it was agony. You needed quiet, you needed to meditate or astral project or bury the trauma. You couldn't do that with so much happening outside yourself.

The river. Think of the river. Look at the smoggy sky if the river is too much. The sky was acrid nothing. No stars, no break in the cloud cover. You hadn't seen the sky for a long, long time.

You try to remember the sky. It's harder than it should be.

You've seen the sky. What did it look like? Why did you forget it?

But you knew why you forgot it. You knew why you forgot all kinds of things.

So don't think about the sky or you will never calm down.

At this point it's clear the anxiety won't go away. You walk to your mattress, bury yourself under the covers. You close your eyes and remind yourself that lying very still with your eyes closed was almost sleep, and caffeine would cover what sleep it wasn't.

At some point in the night you heard peeping. You heard your Super mumble through his drink-swollen tongue. Either he was quietly scared, or too drunk to care. He stressed his words like a chant. As if the emphasis put distance between himself and who he spoke to. The Super was cut off by occasional peeps. Interrogation. Eventually both were quiet. Something was dragged on the floor, and you could hear your Super sobbing. Your neighbor, who almost never spoke, was speaking. The words were soothing, but the Super was devastated.

"Another drink?" your neighbor said.

"Another drink," your Super said. "I want to wake up dead tomorrow."

Glass clinked.

You fell asleep.

#

The next morning your Super tacked a notice to the communal bulletin board. His breath was cider fumes, and his shirt was stained with sweat and vomit. His fingers left grease on the paper. He took a step back to inspect his notice, before stumbling to your neighbor's apartment.

You read the bulletin. It said that the Super was going to retire, so he was considering giving the apartments over to the tenants to own as a collective. They'd all work together to maintain the building, and he believed in their ability to do so. Where would the Super retire? He had a family (Didn't he say something about them dying in the war one drunken evening?). That supposed family would care for him because, although he was only forty-five, his lifestyle had given him the body of a geriatric.

A paragraph of lies with a truth at the end.

For a moment you couldn't decide if you should forget the notice or think about it longer. You decided to meet it halfway: Consider how odd it was without drawing conclusions. Sometimes things were odd for the sake of being odd.

You didn't see any Newts on the way to work, but for once it was the truth. The streets were nearly empty. The people you passed were nervous, trying to figure out where the Newts were hiding. A few pedestrians ducked into any open door, hedging their bets that any catastrophe would stay outside. Others

seemed to decide fuck it, and turned towards home. Several times you almost did the same.

Life became normal at the office. You fell into routine, mind quieting into something like meditation. But, as soon as you walked back outside, you fell into that strange silence again. It wasn't so much the quiet that was unnerving, no one stayed out after dark if they could help it and you were often alone on your walk home. It was a difference in quality: it was a purposeful silence, the sound of someone holding their breath. Your breath. The cold air collected between your teeth and crept down your throat.

There would be a long lonely walk back home. Even if you skipped dinner.

You wished something would move in the corner of your eye. Then at least you'd know where to look.

After some thought, you went back inside and locked the door behind you. The front door was the only one with a functioning lock. Your boss believed that locks encouraged separation from your "Work Family." A lot of people would use that phrase as a cheap excuse for company loyalty. However, your boss was a deeply sick individual who truly believed that the office was an employee's second home. He believed it so hard, he didn't even have a lock on his door. You entered his office where there was a large comfy couch he napped on once in a

while. You laid on that couch and bundled your coat into a pillow. Your boss wouldn't mind you sleeping here.

Well, he'd only yell a little.

That was why you were there an hour before opening, when your boss was sure he was alone.

His voice startled you off the couch, but also drowned out the sound of your fall.

"Yes, yes. Well, as I tell you darling: We perform a vital service. A vital service. And after this maybe I could... Well, we have those photos in the basement. The ones of the lake. Maybe when we're done... So, I have to ask, why this desk? Not to say... I mean I trust you, but you understand, don't you? You do, don't you, sweetie-pie?"

Something knocked all the items off a desk: rattles and clink of supplies falling, rolling. Your boss was quiet. Something was dragged across the floor. A moment, more rattling as another table was cleared.

"I... I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

Silence.

Then a mocking, "I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

Another silence, then again, "I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

A crash as a desk was tipped over.

"I CAN'T HELP YOU," it screamed.

Another crash.

"I CAN'T HELP YOU!"

Something shattered on your boss's door.

It kept screaming, voice tightening in pitch like a whistling kettle. The office was a roar of shattered glass, ripped paper, ceiling fans ripped from their bolts. Your boss shouted, and you heard his skull hit the floor.

And with that collision the noise stopped. The rustle of paper falling to earth.

There was heavy breathing, a rhythmic thud of a tail pounding on the ground.

Your boss whimpered.

The squeaky voice hissed, "What do you do?"

Your boss didn't hesitate, "I help you."

There was a moment, then your boss croaked, "I always do, honey."

The moment hung. You listened for breathing, for snapping, for anything, anything to say what has happening on the office floor. Then faintly you could hear it. Sucking, smacking, then a gentle pop.

"Which desk, again?" it asked. "Good. Good. Good Bucky, beautiful Bucky.

"I'll see you at home."

Your boss made a confirming whimper. You heard the Newt crawl, the floor boards rasping as it rushed out of the building.

You and your boss were alone. You got up from the floor, opened the door as quietly as you could. The office was a disaster: A ceiling fan dangled from its wiring, desks were overturned, papers littered the floor. When you took a step forward, you nearly cut yourself on shattered lightbulbs.

Your boss lay on the floor, bleeding from a small wound on his head. He held a tissue to it, already stained from wiping what he could off his face. He was staring at the ceiling, or at least he stared upwards. You noticed his hands were shaking.

He looked to you. Surprised.

"Oh, you're early today," he said.

Yes, you were.

"Must've... must've been here before I came in?"

You decided to work late, you explained. You decided to nap on his couch.

"Good. Good. We appreciate it, you know? We appreciate the effort," he got to his feet, forced a grin. "I'm thinking... of calling it a day. I feel under the weather. Might have concussed myself on the way to work. Silly business. Think it was a baseball. Yes... And... well it looks like we were burgled."

You agreed, you hid in the office while they rummaged around, afraid for your life.

"Ah, yes. This is a... Well it's a good neighborhood, but I find good neighborhoods attract bad neighbors from downtown, not to be classist. Pooors commit crime. Not their fault. Not anyone's fault.

"These things... they happen. And you wish... wish I could just... tell those burglars how I felt. I served in the Army. I beat up all sorts of rough folks. I got a medal for courage. I'm very brave and I don't let anyone push me around, if someone lays into me," he stopped pressing the Kleenex to his cut, shook his fist. "I tell them 'Don't! Don't mess with me!' and I'd tell them they didn't scare me; that they're just a bunch of thugs, and I pay my taxes goddamit, I am a citizen goddamit, and I deserve better than this!"

He punched his fist up, reveling in his private triumph. The excitement had reopened his cut, the blood trickling to his eyebrow. He startled, touched his bloody cheek. And you saw his eyes soften as he rediscovered his ruined office.

He pressed the tissue back to his skull.

He turned to you, and you felt like he was about to tell you something. But he didn't. He didn't tell you anything for a while, then walked to a desk, began to pull it back on its legs. You helped him, and you spent the rest of the morning organizing

the work place. The rest of the staff filed in, eyes wide at the ransacked office. But none of them helped. They went to their desks. Went on with their day.

When everything was straightened, you walked to your desk to start your own day. Before you could sit down, your boss grabbed your shoulder. His eyes were wider than his fake cheesy smile.

"I think," he said, "you should consider taking a vacation. I think you should consider vacationing. Why don't you go home? Please... I feel I owe it to you."

His eyes glanced to your desk, you followed them.

Someone had etched a message in the lacquer.

But as you read it, you realized you had made an assumption. They were just scratches. They had no shape, no greater meaning to them. Must have been scratch marks from the fight.

Another part of you, however, couldn't stop believing they had a meaning.

A meaning for someone coming to meet you soon.

You thanked your boss and walked away.

He waved you off, then started another day.

#

The worst part of coming home was entering the foyer. It was a jarring transition between public and private life. Your

clothes would grow heavy, your pulse would quicken, and your brain would become an electric cloud of anxiety. Even in a week as awful as this your body began to exhibit these symptoms as you stepped on the carpet.

The foyer was far, far too large to be one. You suspect the name was supposed to be ironic. Most of the furniture the building used to sell was either in the apartments or burned for heat in the winter. But there was some furniture spared: circles of armchairs and couches waiting for a living room to grow around it. They were usually gathered around a coffee table or granite statuette. There were maybe twelve of these arranged across the three barren stories of the building. Everything else was distant, the massive expanse pulling you in every direction as you gazed at distant walls. There was very little carpeting left, most of it had been sheared from the concrete during the first few winters. But your Super, in another misguided act of hospitality, had kept a patch. This patch became a salmon pink trail coiling around the showroom floor. You could follow this path to either the stairs or a room, though the enterprising soul might step off to make a beeline to their destination.

You did that once and stepped on a tack. You stayed to the path from then on.

As you walked the rug, you noticed the unusual quiet had followed you in. You quickened your step hoping to outpace it, winding through the foyer to the far-off stairs.

You took the steps two at a time. The only sound you heard was your own footfalls.

Three flights up: the top floor. You had always wondered why the furniture store had needed so many offices. Twenty of them, with maybe a few storage spaces partitioned into apartments. You didn't want to call your home a tenement. Tenements didn't have mahogany doors. But it was hard to view it as anything else. The lights flickered, and the weight of your exhaustion was crushing.

You reached your apartment, and with a sigh opened the door.

Something was hiding under your covers, a mound bulging from the sheets. It tensed, waiting.

You didn't move. Neither did the mound.

You took a step back. The mound uncurled, stretching out into a log.

It squirmed and a round, rubbery snout poked from the sheets.

The shape was beginning to stand up as you closed your apartment door. You twisted about-face and doubled back to the stairwell. A little story was forming in your head already:

having reached the apartment, you had remembered you forgot to buy groceries. You didn't even open the door! Well okay, you did open the door, but when you did you didn't see anything really, just a strange horrible shape lying in wait, planning to crack your skull open to suck out the brains.

Well no, that thought was just a daydream, an idea for a horror story you might write..

Oh fuck.

There was a Newt in your bed.

Newts were real and they wanted to kill you.

You in particular.

Slimy hands clutched your shoulders. Panicked, you swung your arms, punching your Super in the face.

Your hand felt slimy from his grease. When you looked at him you saw he had stripped to his wife-beater and boxers, shinny with layers of unwashed sweat. His hair was a patina of oil. It looked like he had pulled chunks of it out. Despite the punch, he grabbed your shoulders again.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

At the same time, you asked why he was here.

"My family...," he swallowed air. "My family told me... Well, actually I just want to make sure you're okay." He wiped sweat from a bloodshot eye, "You look sick."

You walked around him and told him you were seeing a doctor.

"I'll call one, I'll call one!" he followed so close his smell clung to you. "You need rest."

You told him you needed the hospital.

You heard the neighbors' doors click open. People were peeking out. Some were wide-eyed, other eyes were calmer. These were amber eyes belonging to short things. Those short things growled and slapped their tails.

At the top the stairs your Super pushed you. You grabbed the railing, legs twisting for purchase. Your Super pried at your fingers. His nails broke your skin.

"I'm sorry" he keened, kicking you between the shoulders. "I'm sorry!"

You let go of the railing, let yourself tumble, tried to protect your head and neck. Your Super, caught off balance, rolled over you. He screamed until he slammed into the wall of the landing.

He broke your fall, and also his leg. You clambered to your feet and returned to the descent.

Behind you the Super was screaming, "You selfish fuck, you selfish fuck! You..."

There was a thunder of bodies falling down the stairs. Your Super howled as a tide of Newts crushed him. Newt after Newt

spilled onto the stair landing. They slapped each other, clawed each other, gouged each other as they tried to right themselves. And of course, the slapped, the clawed, and the gouged bit them in turn. Soon they were brawling, forgetting you as they tore at each other's bodies. You heard a Newt scream, "The bitch is scampering, scampering! Get up boys, get up, get up!"

You didn't look back to see if any obeyed. You just kept running, running, running, running, running until you tripped.

By then you were no longer in your apartment building. You were splayed in an alley, sucking down breaths. Looking around you realized you were ten blocks from your apartment. Too tired to run, you crawled to a dumpster, climbed into it, and shut the lid behind you.

And you spent the second worst day of your life hiding in the trash.

#

You had to leave the dumpster the next morning when the garbage men came. They were somewhat understanding, one even gave you his half-finished coffee. You needed it. You felt like you hadn't slept, though you were sure you had.

It was clear living in a dumpster wasn't the solution to your Newt problem.

You needed advice, but where could you get it?

You considered a bookstore but decided against it. There hadn't been a published book in years, because books couldn't forget their pasts. They could be stained or maimed or eradicated or buried in a box. Many books even lied. But none could rewrite themselves like people could.

And with a chill you realized that you had lost that luxury.

All because of that goddamn vagrant.

You stopped mid-stride. That vagrant. That homeless man was still alive, had been alive for however long the Newts prowled the city. He had apologized after you saved him.

He knew this would happen.

And maybe he could help you survive it.

But where could he be? What did homeless people need? Cardboard boxes. Cans or hats. Maybe a coat.

Many were homeless because of drugs. You didn't know where the exciting drugs were peddled, so you headed for a dive bar under a bridge.

#

It was called the Troll Toll, but someone stole the R. The Toll Toll was where people went when they needed to stop forgetting. It was a safe space where the mental gymnastics could take a break, and you'd state clearly how you felt these days. Maybe you'd bring a picture, post it to a wall plastered

with layers upon layers of missing family. It was the closest some would be to a burial. But then there was a choice: would you go back to life? Back to the burying, back to the smiling, back to the numbness of survival. Or, would you remember that the Toll was only a block from a high bridge over troubled waters.

When you approached the literal hole in the wall that was the Toll, you could see the waters surging. The river narrowed at this spot, smacking the walkways with spray as it slid along, slowed only by the mounds of Newt trash. Some of it was quite huge; there were rumors a tank had been driven off the bridge. If there was ever a tank, it was buried under scrap metal. That newer, sharper garbage breached the water like pikes hoping for a head. Once a year the city got the nerve to try and clear the waterway. There were always casualties: The Newts loved their choking river, and they noticed anyone who cleared it. But people did it anyway, for a thousand different reasons noble and ignoble.

Thinking on ignoble, there was a clique of teens smoking on the bridge. They leaned over the guard railing, watching the water twist and roar. They'd take turns saying, "There are Newts!" each time a little louder until one would break, clamping a hand over their fellow's mouth. They'd giggle and

smoke and toss heavy stones into the water. Kids these days were fucking crazy.

You went to the steel door underneath the scrap metal "T_oll Toll" sign. You knocked, waited, then realized there was no bouncer. Why would there be? There was nothing to hide.

You opened the door and entered.

The bar was surprisingly full for the morning. The patrons avoided each other, finding company in their mugs.

A TV hummed in the corner. The sound was off, and the video feed was gauzy. Everyone faced away from it.

Beneath the television was the bar, where the bartender doodled on a napkin. He was muscular. His nose was pierced with a long round stud. Recently he had cracked his skull, repaired with shiny new staples. His eyes drooped from sleep deprivation, and you wondered if the wound kept him up at night. The doodle was a self-portrait: "The artist decapitating a Newt." He was trying to draw the blood spurting from its neck, but it looked more like hairs sprouting from its throat.

His hand covered the drawing, lips curled a little to show a silver capped canine.

You asked him what was on the TV.

"Ambience," he said.

Had he seen a dark-haired vagrant covered in scars?

"Sure, why not."

The television sighed. Audio garbled as shapes formed in clearing static. The bartender reached up and smacked it. With a screech the television was white noise again.

Where would you find that vagrant?

"Understand," he said, "I don't make a habit of telling secrets. I don't endanger my folk."

You told him you had money.

He didn't comment, but he did lean forward.

You told him a number. When he drummed his fingers, you made it a bigger number.

The television hissed, but the bartender gave it no mind.

"You're bribing me," he said flatly.

Yes.

He walked around the bar, grabbed you by the scruff of your shirt. You squirmed as he dragged you out the door and onto the banks of the river. You were a struggle away from being tossed in.

"You are stupid and desperate," the bartender said. "I don't know which came first. Just know they'll go out together."

From this close to the river, you could see the glint of a razor wire reef. You started to speak your thoughts as they came, begging and dealing and apologizing as fast as you could, trying to find the words that would take his fingers off your

shirt. Instead, you felt the other hand dig into the hem of your pants, you were slowly tilted towards the waters.

You were beginning to scream for help though it was the worst thing to do.

You felt his grip tighten.

You were tossed. You felt cold as your feet left the ground.

But you landed on cobblestone. You swallowed a sob as you curled into a ball, skin tingling as the adrenaline hit you over and over.

His boots crunch on the gravel.

He was kneeling over you now, voice tickling you ear.

"You won't survive if you are a fucking idiot. Come back tonight and I'll make you less of one."

He then whispered a number bigger than you had offered and walked away.

You shivered on cold cobbles for a while before sitting up. On the bridge, only one teen remained, filming you with their camera. They smoked the dying bud of the cigarette, almost kissing the embers. The teen gave you a thumbs-up and a wink.

You gave them the finger and left with their laughter.

#

That night the bartender stood outside the Toll Toll smoking from a shorn PVC pipe. You couldn't tell if it was

recycled or some sort of kitsch. The rim of the pipe was black with soot, and the bartender's eyes were dewy in the moonlight.

He waved you in and locked the door behind you both.

The bar lights were still on. The TV was still fizzing. The only thing missing was the sound of breathing, the warmth of another body. You held your elbows slightly to warm yourself.

"Who are you looking for?" he asked.

You described the homeless person you had saved.

The bartender tapped the pipe on his silver-capped canine, "Oh," he said, then said it again, "oh," as if it was a puzzle. He walked to the back of the bar and entered a closet. He clicked on the lights, moved aside a bundle of mops and brooms. Behind them was a chest, which he unlocked with his keys. When the chest was opened, he pulled out its false bottom and hopped inside. He disappeared.

Then came the grind of his footsteps on dirt, somewhere below your feet. Something metal screeched open, then slammed shut. More dirt scuffled, he climbed out of the chest, replaced the false bottom, and locked its lid. In his hand he held a binder. His pipe was gone.

"I know who you're looking for," he said. "Oslo, irregular customer. Pay up and you get more than his footnotes." You handed him a thick wad of currency, which he checked before continuing. "Oslo, irregular customer. He drinks, but not as

much as most, I think he gets high on old opioids. When I was following him, he went to a street doctor to get injections. Doc didn't charge so I assume Oslo needs them to live. He plays backgammon with a couple folks at the end of the month, many times having sex in my toilets with whoever's the winner, man or woman or one time a Newt.

"Normal asshole, really. But sometimes, instead of backgammon, Oslo talks to his little club, his little study group."

He paused, gazing around in confusion, "Do you know where my pipe is?"

You told him downstairs.

"Damn it. Anyway. Oslo taught lessons. Self-defense," he opened the binder. "Took a long time to track him. He knew how to lose a tail, but I don't think he knew I was following in particular. I think he just assumes he's followed these days."

Your scalp began to prickle. The folder was filled with pictures. The bartender's words turned to noise as you glanced through the pictures. There was a bridge under construction, a Christmas party, a...

He slammed the binder shut. A glower. "Hey. Only your guy. Anything else? That's extra."

You apologized.

He put his fingers to his lips out of habit, sighed when there was nothing to smoke, "If I could give you advice? You are not for this, you understand? This is not a world your type is built for."

What type, you asked, would that be?

"Normies," he re-opened the binder. "Filler people. Faceless people. Quiet folk who don't rock the boat. But this goes beyond not rocking the boat, alright? You can't be filler here."

You told him you were just trying to survive.

The bartender nodded, tried not to sneer, "Good. Got you this far, normie. Anyways, Oslo. He was teaching these homeless. He taught them how to cut a Newt. He taught 'em how to cover their scent with home brewed musk. He taught them how to know a Newt was about to jump you. He taught them about the Junta. That was the problem. He said a lot about the Junta, told them how to jerry-rig radios to Newt channels, taught them Newt codes. He even told them where the Newts hold their spawn rallies. He told them where the bodies go. All sorts of dangerous things. All sorts of poisoned honey."

You asked what a Junta was.

"You already know," he rubbed sleep from an eye, "we all do, deep down."

"Oslo. I wrote down everything he said. And when I was done, I told him I did. He was a good man, he deserved better than a rabbit's death," the bartender winced and touched his cracked skull. "Don't remember what happened then."

Where was he now?

"If I was a guessing man? Dead in a pit with his study group, waiting for us."

The bartender winced again. He pulled up a chair and sat in it, put his head between his knees for a moment. Before you could ask if he was okay he sat up, his eyes seemed just a little more sunken. He burped, but otherwise stayed upright. He placed the binder on the floor next to him. When he looked up to you again, his face was a deep shade of blue.

No, he wasn't the only blue tinged thing. Everything was a little bluer. There was a blue light somewhere. Glowing behind you. It was only in that quiet that you noticed the TV had gotten louder. When you looked to it, you saw the static was no longer black and white. It was peach, flecked with a deep and sacred blue. A dark spot lingered in a corner. The bartender pointed to it, made a gentle slapping motion.

The point came across. You went behind the bar, beneath the television. From your position here, you could see the darkness wasn't just in the corner of the screen. Dark spread under the glass like mold. The static's volume was oscillating. Loud, then

soft. Loud then soft. Roar then hiss. At first you thought it sounded like a tide coming in, but then you realized that wasn't right at all. It was breathing. And the dark stains became a slender shape writhing in the static. Something shaped like a snake.

"Fucking smack it!" the bartender yelled, and you slapped the television.

The television screamed at you. Your arm flew up and slapped it again, so hard that your palm felt raw.

As if by a switch, the television went quiet. The snow returned to a salt and pepper flurry.

The shape was gone.

You looked to the bartender. If he was thankful he didn't show it.

"I fucking hate that fucking television," he mumbled. "I hate that they put it there and I hate that I let them."

You tried to ask why he kept it, but he chopped the air with his hand, cutting you off. "It's a fucking compromise, it's always a fucking compromise." He held up the binder as evidence, "Just the price of doing business."

What was in the television?

His eyes narrowed, "Don't you know?"

Know what?

"Who was on the other side of the screen," he studied you, looking for some sort of tell. "Do you really not know them?"

You told him no.

He laughed then. Big, deep. He choked on it but kept laughing, wincing as each guffaw hammered his migraine. Tears ran down his face, as he got to his feet.

"Get out!" he yelled still laughing. "Get out you fucking dodo. Get!"

He pushed you in the chest affectionately, enough for you to teeter not topple. He walked past you to open the door, its weight scratching on the floor. You took the hint, went to leave.

His hand reached out and barred your way.

"Never come in here again," he said, voice low, gentle. "This isn't your life, this isn't your corner, and I refuse to fill out a ledger on you. That said...", he looked you over again, made a decision. "You know, if Oslo still got some lives left in him, he'd always be moving. You feel me? Even sleeping he'd try to keep moving."

He raised his arm, and you left the bar. As the door closed, you heard the static begin to breath. No, you realized: it was laughing.

The Toll was closed. You went on your way.

#

You found Oslo on the Orange Line early in the morning. Moving even while sleeping. He was sitting in the corner, mouth agape, army jacket between his head and the wall. He was down to his undershirt, stained with dirt and grit and a little blood. His bare arms were covered in teeth and claw marks, enough that you wondered if he was as good a survivor as you thought.

You sat across from him, trying to decide whether to wake him or not. Here you were, scared for your life, smelling of trash and sweat, but still nervous about imposing on someone.

After two stops you decided to wake him. You said his name. Oslo's body tensed, he squirmed in the seat. You said his name again, and his eyes fluttered open. He looked at you, didn't move.

Hello, you said. Do you remember me, from a few days ago?

Oslo took in a deep breath, stretched in the seat, "Yeah."

You hadn't actually thought this far ahead. "Help me" were very hard words to say.

Before you could say them, Oslo said, "What do you need?"

You admitted you didn't know. Not to die, or be tortured.

"Alright, but that's not new is it? I think everyone feels that way already. So can you narrow it down? Have you considered running?"

You've been running so far.

"I mean... leaving the city."

You asked if there was anywhere to go.

"Kind of. You've lost everything no matter where you go. It would be hard to start again. Especially as a homeless."

You corrected him, you weren't homeless.

Oslo smiled, "Just between jobs right? Gonna get an apartment soon, right? Just a low, just a dip for the moment. Don't look at me like that, you wanted my help, this is part of my help. Believe it or not.

"But yeah, emigration. Leaving the city. Are you open to the idea?"

Silence as you thought about it. You never considered life anywhere else.

You asked him if he knew about a lake with boats and pine trees.

His brow furrowed, "Where you hear about that?"

You worked at a place where they had pictures. A little girl was hugging a dog.

He took in a deep breath. The train stopped, opened its doors. Nobody came, and the doors closed again.

"Do you have that photo?" he asked.

No.

"Good. Good, it's best, when you live this life... You stay in the present."

You said you were good at that and he laughed.

"Sorry, sorry. But yeah: that place. It isn't there. It's gone."

What happened?

"Bad things," he said. "Is there anywhere else you'd want to go?"

You asked what it would take to stay in the city.

"Well," Oslo leaned scratched his chin, "a lot. Too much for a train ride. Wanna stop by my place for the night?"

You thought he was homeless.

"I'd say seventy-five percent of the time," he winked. "But sometimes you just need a break."

Both of you stepped off at the next stop. The train rattled away, leaving only a distant rumble on the empty platform. Oslo smiled, gestured for you to follow, and hopped onto the tracks. The crazy bastard walked back the way you came, humming to himself.

"You coming?" he called, and you decided you were. You felt the hairs on the back of your neck goose pimple, acutely aware of how they shook with the rumble of trains. Oslo told you to hug the tunnel wall. "Don't breathe too deeply", he laughed, "or you'll lose a few pounds." So, you pressed against the cold, damp walls, breathing shallow.

When the first train sped past, you closed your eyes and tried to become a mural. The train-gust buffeted you, tugged at

you, and you may or may not have screamed. But you survived its passing, and you survived the next, and the next, and the next. Your body was wet from sweat and wall dew, your eyes itched from the grit kicked up by the train carriages. Then finally, as the fifth train flew past, you saw Oslo duck into a crevice. As you inched closer, the crevice became lit with an orange glow. A little trail of smoke puffed out.

You waited for the sixth train to pass, then squeezed inside.

The space was sizeable, about as big as your apartment, although the ceiling forced you to stoop. The walls were pasted with magazine photos. Most were from nature magazines: frost crusted taiga, wind-rounded stones in the desert, a temple falling from a peak. There were also a few exquisite bits of art from more classy publications. All of them were studies of the human body, specifically how the human body entwined with another human body, and sometimes livestock. At the back was a musty air mattress, next to it an old photo. Oslo sat in the room's center, where he had lit a fire in a circle of bricks. A kettle hung above it. The air was sharp with the smell of kerosene.

The kettle squealed, and Oslo grabbed it with towel wrapped hands. It was thin coffee, and he poured it into old soda bottles. He smiled, offered you one.

You turned it down, so he sipped a little from both.

Gesturing to the hovel, "It does the job. I have a couple little nooks here and there in the subway. The Newts could find it if they wanted. But the crevice is a bottleneck, and the trains prevent a mob from forming. So, I'll take a few bastards with me."

He sipped the coffee again, "If you're going to stay in the city, I'll give you half my hideouts."

You asked why only half.

"Because, no offense, but after you learn the ropes, we're through. You gotta travel light, leave no traces. That's more manageable on your own.

"But... it's a tad early to talk about that. First, we need to talk about your life."

What about it.

"It's infested," he said. "The Newts are festering in you. Don't panic. We're all infested by the fuckers. That's the clever thing about their little system: when you spend your days trying to forget they exist, you actually are thinking about them all the time. That's what they want, more than anything: to implant themselves in our lives like hook worms. Little fucking show boaters. What makes you and me different? We're Noticed, we are specifically targeted. That means they want us in agony.

"They'll take the things you love and turn them into instruments of torture. They want to take your home, and pervert it in their own image. They want to take as much from you as possible, before they take all of you.

"I recommend you make sure they don't get the chance."

At this, he passed you a dented can of kerosene. It was heavy in your hand, and your arms wobbled as it swished. You stared at the kerosene, then at him. Gently, you handed it back.

What was he saying?

"They love fire," he said. "And they lose themselves for a bit, in the crackle of it. That means, when you light your apartment on fire, your neighbors have a chance to run, and your home can't be used against you. Tell the Newts that you're offering yourself to the Chiefs, and they should let you pass."

You scoffed. Why not let the Newts have it? You didn't know those people. They were nobody, quiet, faceless. Oslo shoved the can into your chest, knocking you to the ground.

"Fuck you," he said. "That's how we got in this mess, by letting people drown hoping we don't go with them. You saved me, and I think I'm less than anyone in your apartment. Those people? They are SUFFERING because of you. They got dragged into your hell, and they're suffering in your place. YOU have to take responsibility for that. YOU have to end your old life, or it

will haunt you. I've seen it. Better for them to live as memories than as what... those things will make them."

Silence, underscored by dying flame. Oslo took the kettle-spit and poked the flame to life.

Could he help? Please. Could he do it with you?

"I'll be there to catch you," he said. "But nobody else can carry this. I'm sorry."

There was quiet. You laid the kerosene on the ground, stared into the flickering light.

And, you asked, after you burned down your old life, how long would your new one last.

"Awhile," Oslo said.

Wasn't there anything you both could do? Someway to, to kill all the Newts? Save the city?

"I tried," Oslo whispered. "God knows I tried. But this isn't something we can fight, not as small as we are. It has to be like the Revolution: we all need to decide the world as is, is inexcusable. The entire city would have to pick up arms and crush these Newty bastards underfoot. Nothing less.

"I've waited a long time for that day. Tried to make it happen. It hasn't come. But I think it will, maybe not in our life, but someday it will. Things end, that's the only constant. Things end, and someday so will this."

Quiet, then you asked about his army jacket. He was in the war?

He said he was, so you asked him to tell you about it. He stared at the fire, then cleared his throat before speaking.

"Me and the family moved here a bit after I could walk. I had a sister, greatest sister a guy could ever fucking hope for. Good enough that she came with me when the folks tossed me out. That was the first time I was homeless. There weren't any fucking Newts of course, but it was still... it was still being homeless, you know?

"I joined the Revolution when it was clear it was gonna win. Crazy times. Only had one tank in their goddamn army, but they had PEOPLE. They had entire cities, old ladies with hatchets, fathers with children strapped to their backs. And, more importantly, they had medicine. It was one of their big selling points: they had food, clean water, condoms, insulin, even hormone therapy. Did you know how hard it was just to get an anti-diarrheal, and these motherfuckers were helping people transition? Jesus it was... fucking great advertising. So, considering all that quality of life shit, I signed up. It was nice that I believed in what they were doing, too, but I'd be lying to say I did it out of love.

"My sister did it out of love. For me and country. And we were good. Really damn good. It was easy when the world beats

you every fucking day, to pull a trigger at the people behind the people who never scraped a knee. We didn't do good things, but those were my favorite times. Everyone was there, everyone the world had kicked, and I got to be there too. For so long it had been just me and my sister, and now here was this family. These people who could be fucking bastards, but only because they broke the same way we had. We were an army of cripples, even before they started laying out claymores.

"I wonder how many of them are still alive, things were crazy when the Newts came."

You opened your mouth to ask, but he answered first, "Yeah, I remember when the Newts came. Do you?"

You said no, you couldn't remember.

"There's a reason," Oslo said, sipped his coffee. "It was..."

He tried to find words, but instead lifted up the can of kerosene.

"You ever seen them at a fire before?" he asked.

You told him no.

"I first saw them in the fire," he said. "It was the morning after we took parliament. Us, the soldiers, we were gathered in Capitol Square, a mob. It was a rally, the commander, was giving a speech and we grunts were standing at attention or trying to. I had a hangover from the parties, it was all I could do to look at my feet, let alone up, where the

sun was rising. Because of that I didn't see the smoke. I heard the shouting 'fire fire fire' and all that, and I knew people were panicking, and I began to panic. It was noise, and I still struggled to tilt my head up to see. But then there was a real scream. Right next to me. The boy, he was a boy, had a Newt eating his head. I could see the crook of his nose bulge through its throat. More screams. There was blood on the ground. I looked to the commander, because we needed instructions, we needed an order.

"But he was gone. And the Capitol building was ablaze. And I ran away.

"They were dancing. The Newts. That's what they do when something is burning. They dance, and sing. And it was only because they were dancing and singing that I managed to get away."

Oslo poured himself more coffee, the brew slapping over the sides only a little. He clutched it tight but didn't sip.

"Keeps me up at night. How quick it happened. One day they are just there, eating people in the middle of the street, and nobody even bats an eye. It didn't... it didn't make sense. How... but here's the thing, the thing that gets me. Nothing comes from nothing. These fucking things didn't just appear one day, and I remember vaguely, so fucking vaguely, that even before the capitol burned we knew not to talk about the Newts. I don't

remember when that started, I don't remember how long we did it. How long did we know these fuckers were out there, and didn't do a damn thing? Happy to just let them do whatever the fuck they wanted to the people we abandoned? Was I doing it my whole life? Were there always Newts, but just never so many? And I think what if it's worse? Because sometimes, when I look at people passing by I..."

He cut himself off with a swig of coffee.

"I don't know what I think. I just try to live out the days, you know?"

Yeah... You knew.

He looked at the kerosene, looked back to you. "You're going to need sleep for tomorrow, you're going to need it all. But I think you can do it."

Really?

"What, you want me to say you can't?" he laughed, but you heard something jitter underneath. You expected it was what he really thought.

Despite it, you tried to sleep, wrapped in a musty comforter. On the wall was the photo. It was of a dark-haired woman, her eyes green with a ring of hazel around the pupil. She sat on a roof, awash in sunlight, sniper rifle laying in her lap. The woman squinted at the camera, smiling despite the sun-glare. You lifted the photo to see the back.

In cramped handwriting you read "Happy Birthday, from Oslo."

You heard Oslo's breathing, and sometimes you heard him choke a little.

Sometimes you felt him look at you in a way no one had since you were little.

And it felt nice, to have some kindness down here at the bottom of the Earth.

#

As you approached your apartment building, you noticed that everyone had covered their windows. Some were pasted with layers of newspapers, others draped with towels and quilts. One enterprising tenant had plastered theirs over with drywall. The only unobstructed window was your own. Something shifted behind it, watching as you walked to the front doors. You would be meeting it soon enough.

The kerosene felt heavy in your hands.

Inside, you thought the building was already on fire. Orange flickered behind a thunderhead of smoke. You stepped back, thinking you were too late. But as the smoke spewed from the open door, you could begin to make out the insides of the building. The fire seemed to be spread thin, was controlled. These were domestic flames. Hearth fires.

You pulled a handkerchief from your pocket and tied it around your face. You went in and closed the door behind you. You were home again.

The fires lit the foyer in wavering red light beneath a canopy of smoke. The fires stretched in front of you in neat little rows, each barely touching the other. They burned with disparate kindling: One flame gnawed on tires, another on furniture. A few burned on blackened flesh, and even less in cauldrons of oil. In other spots the Newts dug up the gas line and hatcheted its length, spraying fire from the old metal tubing. The way they had spaced the fires reminded you of something, something from your childhood.

Your eyes began to sting, and you realized you didn't know how long you could last. Who knew what poison was filling your lungs. Already nausea was radiating in your chest.

You looked down expecting to see the old carpet. But of course, it was gone. Instead, there was a thick tacky paint. Under the orange light it looked maroon. You followed the path through the fields of fires and realized what the flames reminded you of. Your mother had an old oven that had to be started with a lighter. You remembered peering in as the cookies browned, hypnotized by the rows of seedling flames trembling in the air.

They turned your home into a furnace.

Snuffling. You stopped, tried to hear it past the crackling and pops.

Behind you.

You set down your kerosene and turned.

Through the smoke you could see them circling you. They leapt through the flames, kicking up sparks with their grubby legs. Panicking, you realized how lightheaded you felt. The nausea rolled through your body. Was your vision blurring from the heat, or were you about to pass out?

The words Oslo taught you were gone. Emptied.

You had to get out of the furnace.

You unscrewed the lid of the kerosene. The shapes in flames stopped.

Hefting the kerosene, you began to pour. Step. Step. A trail of gas left in your wake. You could only pray a spark didn't light it too soon.

If you tried to shout, you'd probably vomit, so you kept the message to a whisper.

I'm here in offering to the Chiefs, you told them. I do your bidding in their name. If I'm going to die, serve me at the festival feast. If the Chiefs were given scraps, it would be their cronies who'd be the main course.

The Newts were silent. They took steps towards you, and you backed up on trembling legs. They didn't leap, they didn't

scream, they didn't make a noise. You backpedaled to the foot of the stairs, pouring the kerosene as you went. When you took the first step, they didn't stop moving. They were shepherding you. Despite the difficulty, you decided to try climbing the stairs backwards, facing the Newts. The creatures hissed, snapping at each other as they tried to squeeze into the crowding stairwell. Smaller Newts climbed the walls. Eventually they'd lose their purchase and fall to the writhing crowd. Bigger Newts snapped them from the air, swallowed them whole.

On the landing for the second floor, the Newts were waiting for you. Lined up to watch your procession. Behind them, candles flickered in the dark halls. Something was glinting in the flickering light, globules of mucus with black yolks. In one you saw a shadow like the shadow on the television, pressing against the surface of its globule. The Newt tadpole watched you, perhaps one of many stirring down the hall. You saw all this in a few moments, before continuing on your march.

By the final flight the air was blistering. The sweat soaked through your shirt, while the kerosene soaked through your pants. The Newts began to jitter. Their breathing grew rapid as cold blood percolated. You began to strip, you had to or else you would slip down the stairs to the Newt's hungry maws. No shirt, no jacket, they were tossed over your shoulder. For a moment you considered trying to remove your pants but

remembered to keep them. You needed the matches. It would all be pointless without the matches.

Behind you your clothes were ripped apart by hungry maws.

The third-floor door was closed. In a heat daze you grabbed the door handle, somewhat thankful it wasn't hot to the touch. A rubber texture pushed against your calf. The Newts wanted you to keep moving, not caring if instead they ground you into the door. It took your entire body to open the door. You kept it open with your foot, then your shoulder. It was a vice, and you felt the door catch on your joints. The Newts, realizing that they would not be able to follow you as they piled against the door, leapt atop each other. By now you had squeezed all but your left foot through the door. You yelled in pain as your ankle was crushed. You pulled on the door, pulled on your leg, listened to the kerosene bounce about on the ground. You could smell the gas puddling at your feet.

With a final tug you pulled out of your shoe. The sole almost snapped in the door crack. You heard Newts screaming as they were crushed by the crowd. Then the rumble of retreat, trying to create enough space for the door to open.

So maybe that gave you a couple minutes to finish.

You picked up your kerosene, finding it still had a little left. Hopefully enough to lead to the end.

They had kept the electricity on, but only just. They were oily bubbles of luminosity percolating in the dark.

That dark filled a hall paved with shit. Newt excrement, maybe human as well, slicked the hall like rain drenched mud. Above the putrid water mark, the sludge had been used as paint. You realized you had never thought of Newts creating, of bringing anything to the world but suffering. There it was, though: murals flaking on the walls. Newt art was abstract and intricate, the lines curling and parting from one shape to the next as if the artist began a portrait halfway through finishing the first. It was a tide of moments freed from space, from time, from reality frankly. It was memory as remembered.

A few images stuck in your mind:

- A) Newts hunting people. The Newts took great care and attention to their own physiognomy, but the people were stick figures. When a stick man was snapped, those lines exploded into meat and blood, lovingly rendered. The twigs of men were left in piles under skies full of organs.
- B) Newts forming an ouroboros of cunnilingus. Tongues licking cloaca, tails choking necks. In the center sat an egg and in the egg was a fetus. The fetus had turned its head to look at the viewer. Empty plaster eyes staring

into your own with something like lust. You couldn't tell if one of the arms was withered or reaching towards you.

C) A burning cathedral. Or a cathedral surrounded by flames. They were gentle flames portrayed with smeared lines, perhaps to mimic heatwaves in the air. The cathedral was made of Newts, their bodies marbled together to shape buttresses and spires. On the three tallest spires curled massive serpents. Or limbless Newts. Whatever they were, they were screaming at the sky, flames spewing from their mouths. Above them were the words "Burning forever, Newts now forever."

D) An almost black circle, surrounded by scratches. In your delirium you knew it was a lake with boats sailing across it. If you squinted, you could see a little girl hugging a dog on the shore.

You turned a corner in the hall. There were people here leaning against the walls. They were naked, drenched in sweat, and in their laps lay the Chief Newts. The Chiefs were sprawled across the tenants, as if the people were sunning stones. They looked heavy, and you noticed how the tenant's legs had turned purple from lack of circulation. The people had other things wrong. Their hair was thinning, their lips were stretched taut, their teeth seemed small, and their noses flattened against their faces. That was probably your eyes, because when you

blinked their faces would return to the ones you had seen every evening for as long as you could remember.

But when you blinked again, you couldn't tell what they were.

So you blinked again, returning them to their rightful shape, and didn't blink a fourth time.

The Chief Newts noticed your passing. Their nostrils flared at the scent of kerosene. But they didn't follow. They were too lazy, too content in the stifling heat to ever move again.

Behind you though: behind you was the scuffle of the Newt throng catching up to you. They had opened the door, and for a moment of panic you worried for the people in the hall.

You told the neighbors you were about to burn down the building.

If the tenants heard you they didn't acknowledge it. But you saw muscles tighten, eyes dart as plans were made.

Ahead you could see your apartment door. Beneath it was a sharp scar of sunlight. The entire door had a corona as the day attempted to cut into the hall. Just a few more steps, you realized. If you could do a few more steps it would end. One way or another. One way or another.

By the time you touched the door you were barely conscious, vision swirling in the heat. You felt the Newts around you, they had become the air. With every breath they filled your lungs,

burrowed through your veins. You felt a Newt egg tumor forming behind your eye, and you knew something worse than death was incubating inside it.

With the last of your strength you pulled open the door.

You were blinded by sunlight. The Newts trailing you hissed. Curled their tails over their eyes.

Cold air. The heat of the building swirled around you, and you felt senses returning. You could see again, you could think again. You were back in reality.

Which was of little comfort, when you saw what was waiting for you.

In the center of your room was something fat and undulating. Slime oozed from its body, reflecting the cold sunlight into a harsh beam. This grub-thing was keening, trying to squirm to face the opened door. You hesitated, but only for a moment. The kerosene you poured floated atop the ooze in puddles, vinegar in oil. Sickly rainbows glinted, and the diluted sludge lost a bit of its luster. You could finally see the creature.

It was a Newt, as always. It was incredibly obese, rings of fat coiling about its midsection and tail. Its skin was white, purple veins webbing below the surface. The grub Newt raised a chubby limb, a fat nub reaching for the sound of footsteps. At

the end of the nubs was a thick lump of scar tissue: they had amputated it.

You tried to ignore the creature, circled it in kerosene. It keened at you, wriggled sadly.

You found yourself at its head. Its mouth was caked with sludge, either vomit or dried food. The creature looked at you with sad amber eyes. There was something dark on its head.

When you looked closely you realized it was dark, thin hair, pasted to its scalp by its endless oozing sweat.

The Newt's eyes widened as it regarded you.

Then it screamed. Words slurred from its mouth inarticulate, shapeless. In the pit of its mouth, you saw a ragged wound where its tongue used to be. The grub Newt flailed in the sludge jaws snapping at you.

Outside the door the Newts began to cackle. They began to keen in turn, "You bitch! You bitch."

The grub Newt was sobbing now as you drenched your bed with the last of the kerosene. You tossed the can aside, dug into your pockets for the matches.

The fat Newt spoke, and its fellows yelled for it, "Look at me! Look at me! You did this! You did this!"

You didn't look, you took out a match. Your hands were shaking, you could barely hold it steady.

"Why did you do this to me?" the chorus of Newts wailed, breaking into laughter.

You dropped the stripped match, took out another. This one lit on the second strike.

You turned to the grub-Newt. Your eyes met and it quieted. Manilla pus was draining from its eyes: maybe tears or a stress-burst stoma. It was wheezing, hyperventilating under its heavy body.

You said you were sorry and dropped the burning match.

#

There was fire. A couple times you were nearly alight.

There was smoke.

There was screaming, Newt and human.

There was an exit sign, behind it the fire escape. It got you down two-thirds of the way. From there you had to jump to the street. The Newts were following you. They weren't physically following you, but you knew in your heatstroke that Newts didn't need bodies to chase you. They didn't need mouths to eat you. Newts were not real. It was so clear now.

Newts were not real, and that was what they counted on.

The epiphany was dragged under a flood of cold oxygen.

You were running now.

You were crossing a bridge.

There was Oslo, in an alley. He caught you in his arms as you began to faint.

He said something. It made you feel proud.

And then you felt nothing. And slept for the first time in so many days.

#

On the shore of the river, you and Oslo watched your apartment burn down. Black smoke pooled in the white sky, diluting to haze. The building smoldered like a cheap firework. Slowly, the tenants escaped. They were quiet, said nothing as they passed, walked away as if to an errand, as if they planned to return after a moment. You hoped they had the courage to buy new homes. You hoped other people would understand why they were naked and sweating.

The air was wobbling in the heat, turning oily and sick. But behind that sick air, the building shimmered with slick Newt bodies as they began to move. Newts entered through the windows, no matter how small a gap, their body for a moment becoming sludge. If the windows were shut, they butted the glass with their skulls, pipping and screaming with each hit. A few fell, concussed, and their brethren slithered in to continue their work. But no matter how many entered, there were more waiting behind, and you grew queasy realizing that they could do this for hours, cramming into the building until they crushed

themselves with their bodies. The halls would choke on charred corpses.

It was hard to breath. You coughed from the smoke even though it was downwind. It was hard not to be weak then, you hadn't been weak for so long. You had been terrified but never weak, and you knew this weakness would take you if you let it, and who knew what would happen then.

Oslo put a hand on your shoulder, the weight soaking into your entire body.

"This must be the worst day of your life," he told you.

And you let yourself be weak, and he was kind enough not to comment on it.

You were weak for a while before you emptied. The fire had grown, and you wondered how long it would burn. How fast do houses burn?

Oslo lifted his hand from your shoulder, "Would it help if I told you my worst day?"

You didn't answer, because you knew he needed to tell it.

He sat next down next to you and began.

"After the Capitol Square, I went looking for my sister. The Newts were everywhere, chasing people, trying to chase me. They were shepherding folks to the Cathedral on 8th Street, and everyone quickly knew that the Cathedral on 8th Street was the worst place to be. So they tried to run away from it. But every

road was clogged with corpses and beams and torn up cobblestones. I eventually climbed up a gutter to the roof of a bakery. I traveled by rooftops. I was a good climber and leaper and for whatever reason the Newts weren't up there. So I just made my way to the garrison, to see if any other survivors were there.

"The garrison, the soccer field where we pitched our tents and parked our tank, was empty but for the wind. Hot wind, blown from the fires the Newts lit around the Cathedral on 8th.

"I made it to my tent, the flap peeled open by the hot wind. And in the dark I saw something twisting. I never could resist a dangerous place, and if there were Newts in there I had my knife, and I wanted there to be Newts in there.

"I walked into a feast made of my comrades. Skinned. Each gnawed by fat Newt Chiefs, who wore those people's scalps as caps. In the middle coiled the largest Chief, less a Newt than an anaconda with chubby, near-vestigial arms. Small Newts rubbed viscera on its skin.

"That big Newt looked at me, lifting its heavy head. It looked at me with its tiny blue eyes that, when the light outside hit them, the eyes turned green with hazel round the pupil.

"My sister.

"I know it sounds...

"I know how I sound when I say it.

"But I knew those eyes...

"I knew them.

"My sister uncoiled herself and hissed.

"This isn't real, I told her. This isn't happening.

"She began to slither through the blood towards me.

"We won, this doesn't happen when you win, we were supposed to get our life back.

"And she rose her body over me, all Newts gazing at her with reverence.

"You can't be my sister.

"Her fat baby arms reached out to me.

"This can't be real.

"She cradled me close and swallowed me whole."

Here he stopped to pick at his thumb. It was awhile before he spoke again.

"I fixed the situation. I lit my own fires and listened to the popping ammunition. I drove the tank into the river. I was homeless again."

He pointed, "They're starting their dance."

You peered at the windows, but there was nothing to see. He took your chin lightly and tilted it up. And there, on the roof you could see shapes. Tales whipping, claws waving, heads snapping. A few could be seen by firelight, but it was hard to

say what you saw. Maybe they were Newts. But they were missing pieces. Their heads. Their tails. Their limbs. Or at least, that's how it looked through the flames.

You rose to your feet, and Oslo followed. Together you began the trek to the road, river breeze chilling your back. It would be a long trip to the subway.

And you might have heard a word, a hiss under the sound of wind and wave. If you wanted, you could have looked over your shoulder. If you did, there may have been a few small Newts crawling from the brush, hands in a triangle with their eyes peeking through them.

Maybe Oslo took your hand and squeezed it gently.

There are no Newts, you told yourself, and wished the words had meaning.

END