
TROY DAGG

SINS OF THE LEOPARD V

Sins of the Leopard
Noons of dryness find you fed
By the involuntary powers,
Nights of insult let you pass
Watched by every human love.

Lullaby, W.H. Auden

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I thought I had finished with Harold and so resolved my need, but tonight he has returned as if seeking shelter from the cold. I know he is here because when I close the front door behind me his jacket is hanging there, a sombre dun thing with fleece tufting its collar, damp waxy leather giving it the appearance of a pelt turned inside out. For a moment I can do nothing but stand and shiver and stare as if it were not really there, or as if I had entered somebody else's home by accident. But no, our entry is unmistakable. It's so cold here there seems no point heating it or even switching on a bulb, a kind of dead space we only ever scuttle through.

So before his jacket with brittle frozen fingers I prise the buttons of my own coat, pull my stiffened arms from the casing of sleeves. My body shrinks with cold. From upstairs warm TV sounds beckon, another sign of Harold's return. You don't like TV, you frown and sulk when I watch it, preferring your books or music. I haven't arrived home from work to this sound for more than six months. It's homey and familiar, velvety with your absence, Harold's return. He's upstairs nestling in our comforts, which are not entirely ours alone, but his and mine to me still. Wet and frozen and shaking, I hook my coat next to Harold's on the peg you'd normally use and then creak up on the give of the carpeted stair. As I softly open the door at the top I try not to think about the spectres of those two jackets suspended down there in the gloom.

I find Harold mixing pumpkin risotto in the kitchen. Everything is on, all the lights, central heating, extractor. He's found your antique transistor on top of the fridge, the one you were so excited about finding in Notting Hill. The telly is going in the living room. He's taken possession again just like when he used to live here, as if he'd never left. The whole flat is zinging and my amphibian skin glistens and tingles in the warmth and light and life.

Harold hasn't heard me come in, he doesn't realise I'm here leaning against the door frame observing him. He's humming to the radio, concentrating on folding clods of bright orange

rice. The rattling extractor slurps and shreds huffs of steam released from the pot. "You still have your keys then," I say and Harold starts. I see the suave words he has prepared evaporate with surprise, but he recovers quickly, leans into a practised grin. "You're early," he replies cheekily.

Sometimes I see two things at once, in this way a flash of bone in flesh, discontentment in desire, compassion in self-interest. At this moment Harold beautiful standing there with all the insouciance in the world, even a little comic holding a spatula; behind him the cold windowpane, in it the reflection of the kitchen light smeared by steam and beyond black wind, night and mizzen.

Harold remembers everything, like where the glasses are kept. He is pouring me red wine, telling me I've time for a hot bath before supper - with a greasier smile nods in the direction of half a spliff he's left perched on the edge of a saucer. Recovered from surprise his words bubble evenly like the stock in the rice. Energy and ease, that's Harold's strategy. I'm hustled into the bathroom juggling glass, joint and my handbag which I've still not put down. "You'll catch your death," he says and grins - always grinning Harold, always renewing his smile. He clicks the bathroom door closed behind me.

I do as I'm told and run a bath. I peel off damp clothes and while the tub fills look at myself in the mirror. I'm bloodless and gaunt, my ribs looked disordered. Steam clogs the bathroom and my reflection clouds over.

When I step into the bath the hot water scolds my frozen feet. I lower myself gingerly. The heat burns at first, but then slowly diffuses as the pores of my skin relax, and I sigh and sink into liquid warmth suffusing through me. I am trying not to be angry or excited or desirous or to picture the black pane framing Harold. I stretch into liquid, let my body steep until I can no longer distinguish the boundary between skin and the little eddies which unfurl along my thighs, tummy, ribs. I reach for the spliff, watch smoke coil through pruned fingers. I know this is the worst kind of forgetting, but I fumble for my glass, smoke and drink. I poke my toes out, slide deeper. I'm almost dozing when I hear Harold sing for the second time that supper's ready.

I emerge gooey and snug in my bathrobe. My head is pleasantly muggy with pot, wine, and warmth.

We eat at the kitchen bench. Harold has turned lights and appliances off; folk music I don't recognise strums in from the living room. His risotto is gorgeous. I don't remember him cooking, maybe this is something new. When I'm done I spoon more from the pot. Harold opens another bottle of wine and when we're done eating rolls another joint which passes between us while we talk - while Harold talks - his banter is organic, fugue-like, that hasn't changed, and I can't help smiling, laughing. I sip more wine and listen to his blarney while he washes up. He is being painfully polite but I don't mind and really, so he should be. I hardly

contribute anything, just let the rhythm and music of his voice wash over me.

After, we move into the living room. Harold puts on another disc I don't recognise. He sits and I huddle on the sofa and we talk more. Outside anonymous traffic sloshes up Friern Barnett Road. The rain is heavier now, sluices down the window next to where our heads recline towards one another. Another bottle, another joint and Harold's talk spirals around me. I want to know where he's been, why he left, why he's here now, but I can't keep up with his quips and puns, his verbal ducking and weaving around the looped threads of anecdotes.

Finally Harold comes out with it. "Trace, I need to stay. I've no place else to go. At least for tonight." I sit up, suddenly realise how pissed I am, how late it must be. I've work tomorrow. "Of course," I say but my head spins thinking "where?" Although it used to be his, and right now nothing would seem more natural, I know there's no question of his sleeping in your room. That morning suddenly comes back to me – you know nothing about this – a morning with that then girlfriend of his, Bronwyn was her name. She emerged softly from his room, your room now, in almost transparent underwear. Obviously she thought I'd left and that she and Harold had the flat to themselves. When she saw me she pulled bed hair back off her face and smiled sheepishly, asked whether I'd like a cup of tea. Already late for work I snapped something horrid back which she never forgave me for, but all the way in on the Tube I couldn't stop thinking about her glow, her unmistakable trace of satiety. "I'll get some blankets, you can doss here." "Hey," Harold smiles and looks as humble as he can, "thanks Trace."

In bed my sheets are freezing. I'm shattered, but remain awake long enough to hear the wind outside, rain against the window, beyond expansive falling in the night. I fall asleep to a phantom voice in the dark or my head telling Harold "no" but sensing his presence heavy in the flat, his breathing in the walls, and of wanting so much to be in Bronwyn's place that for a moment I believe it's she who I desire more than anyone.

That's how Harold re-enters my life. He has come while you're away visiting your family in Spain. Perhaps his timing is purposeful, although how could he have known you'd not be here? I don't know why he needs to stay or why he's nowhere else to go. I know I should demand an explanation, but I carry earlier impressions, other events and moments which you know nothing of that twine with his sudden reappearance now. You'd say I should scorn a confidence trickster, instead I'm entranced by the dark which frames him.

The next morning I wake with hair crumbling around my face and a hangover grafted to a horrid cold. I call in sick and bury myself in bed.

Later during the morning I wake again and hear Harold conducting an uneasy telephone conversation in the living room. Intervening walls muffle his voice and the only word I make out clearly is "baby". When his voice suddenly cuts off I turn over, wishing I were asleep or deaf.

At noon Harold knocks tentatively and enters my bedroom carrying a tray with toast, fruit, and tea. It's as if his grin can suture time as well. "Rise and shine sleepyhead." We eat in bed, me a congeries, cross-legged in skewed pyjamas, Harold slick as ever prattling away sat on the edge of the mattress as if he could be anywhere. My head's stuffy with flu so I don't taste much, but I sip my tea with relish, let the warm sooth my throat. We get bread crumbs all over. Unruly crumbs in my bed, I like the idea. I think of you and your orderliness, but you are such a long way away and there will be time for me to clean and adjust so it will be like this never happened, isn't even real. "Harold," I say abruptly cutting him off, "Harold you know you have to leave before Eulalia gets back, don't you?" "Yeah no problem." "I'm serious. She's back Saturday." My words acquire sudden, unintentional venom. "I mean, what are you even doing here?"

Harold bends forward, takes my left hand in both of his. He has corded hands, strong hands. When he looks into my face his eyes are wide and dry and clear like holiday air. "Look Trace, I really appreciate this. Don't worry, I'll get myself sorted. I'll be out of your hair before you know it." That irrepressible grin splices the tatty edges of his promise, but I smile and then I'm laughing and suddenly he is hugging me and saying how good it is to see me again, and I don't mean to but I press closer to him than I should. With gentle force he pulls back, grin shading to guarded smile. "Trace, you ok?" Shameless I'm trying to cry on his shoulder. "Trace, what's the matter? What's wrong?" "Sorry, no, I'm fine." I wave my hand in front of my nose. "No, really, it's a cold is all, I'll be fine, sorry." He squeezes my hand. I sniff. My head is clogged. "Look Trace, I gotta go out for a bit. You rest up, alright. I'll be back later. Don't worry about supper, yeah, I'll take care of it."

I wait for him to leave. When I hear the front door close I call work and tell them that I'm really unwell and will need the rest of the week.

These November days subsist on gloomy dregs of sunlight, they are cold and miserable, but mercifully short. They don't belong to me nor am I a part of them.

While Harold is gone during afternoons I hunker under blankets here on the sofa coughing, dozing, blowing my nose. I live in pyjamas. Time slides by, weather and gloom rubbing against the window like cats. I try to read but can't concentrate. Without Harold the television is inane racket beyond endurance. Alone here it feels like everything is assembling around me, furniture, books, conversations, music, spaces evocative of bodies and voices, moments, routines and gestures, yours, Harold's and mine all mixed up, all those things mutely staring at me, heraldic artefacts biding and vaguely minatory. They want me gone. I bury myself in pillows and wretchedness. Were I able I'd oblige them, I'd step clear and float out there on the other side of the window, a bodiless observer looking in. Out there I am nothing more than compassion, but utterly helpless to pass back through the window. A cold gust to scatter me blissfully upon the weather.

The thud of the front door and the sound of Harold struggling up with shopping bags full

of vegetables and clinking bottles of wine rouses me. The house comes alive again. After all it is his bravado and his talk, his cooking and his desperate grin which pours into the airless recesses banishing ghosts. I emerge like a snail and trail blankets into the kitchen to watch him prepare our dinner. While he works and chatters I sip wine and smoke with flagrant disregard for my health. We laugh at one another then, when one of us finishes what the other wanted to say, playing at resuscitating all those little contiguities two people who once lived together might still share, a private idiolect. I know, I should be livid, passionate, I should be pulling my hair, screaming hysterically, demanding to know where he's been, who he's fucking. But I don't. I go to bed drunk and cry into my pillow before falling asleep, and then wake the next day to Harold's tender knock and breakfast in bed.

One afternoon I follow him. It's all a terrible failure. I wrap myself in coat and scarf, partly so that if I'm seen he won't immediately recognise me, but also because my cold is worsening and it's still wintry out of doors. I have been inside so long now that out here on the street I can hear the rush of the air and sense the magnitude of sounds. Other pedestrians seem to rush at me and icy spits of rain numb my cheeks. I trail Harold, making certain I'm well behind, but as soon as I come round past the pub on the corner he's right there waiting with a handful of other people huddling about the bus stop. He recognises me straight away. My naive attempt at furtiveness so summarily exposed, I make something up about needing him to get me cough syrup from the chemist. From across the road and down the embankment comes the crash and rush of the overland passing. Thankfully the bus arrives and Harold boards. Sensing something, other passengers stare at me through foggy windows, then the bus pulls away and I'm left alone, shivering in layers of clothing.

The ceaseless push of traffic up Friern Barnett Road, in the Banker's Draft old men with rheumy eyes drinking pints of bitter without savour, grey sky, monotonous, glaucous rows of terrace housing, Ladbrokes small-time wheeling and dealing; there is nothing left but to go home, roll a joint from Harold's stash and retreat into my blanket cave. Heavy vegetable smoke ravages my lungs provoking deep hacking coughs. My chest is undoubtedly infected, but in a fug of wheezing and sickness I eventually succeed in falling asleep. When I wake it is dark and I hear Harold working in the kitchen, singing out of tune to the radio.

Friday. The final evening before you arrive home. Inevitable spillage.

Harold comes home drunk. Without his grin he looks haggard. We're in the kitchen but he doesn't cook, just opens a bottle of red, rolls a joint and pulls his stool up close to mine.

By now I'm seriously unwell, feverish. I feel clammy and hot and cold – I need antibiotics. I haven't bathed for two days. I draw deeply on the joint Harold offers, let its carcinogens scold pneumonia into my lungs. I can see so my eyes must be open, though they feel gummed shut. I fumble the cork from a second bottle and slop wine into Harold's glass while he slurs, "I don't know what to do Trace. When I met Sarah I just knew, you know. Just knew dead certain she's the one, know what I mean. She and me, we're made for each other." My ears ring and the

content of my head heaves and folds. Harold has his head in his hands. I try to focus on him, on what he's saying, but all I can see is the black out behind and all around him, and all I can hear is the hollow strike of rain. Weirdly, I am thinking of Bronwyn standing there ridiculous in her see-through underwear and that she probably doesn't think any of this, that there are other ways of being. "Thing is she's married. She has a husband. A h-u-s-b-a-n-d. I think he knows. Christ Trace what am I gonna do?" Rain sparks against the window - we live in a bubble - the undersides of drops gleam like ice-cinders. Is Harold crying? It's my turn to take his hands, strong corded hands I can't enclose in mine, it's my turn to hold him. This time he doesn't pull away. His hands disengage, move up under my pyjamas, across my breasts down my back. My skin is burning and Harold's fingers slide in poisonous sick-bed sweat. We kiss hungrily, mouths waxy with booze, tears and mucus. In my room I undress in hot shivers and draw Harold into my bread crumb bed. When I wake in the morning, he's gone.

You find me under covers. "What happened? Tracey are you ok?" I nod but I'm not. My head is ready to burst and my ears ache terribly. You take one look at me and like a corporal with a fresh commission swaddle me in shawl, scarf, jacket and bundle me into your car. While you drive I press my head against the cold plaque of the passenger window and watch rain drops splatter and amoeba-like wobble and fuse. I shut my eyes and pretend to sleep. I don't want to talk, not even to you.

The waiting room wait is interminable. I shrink into myself, don't look at anyone and try to refrain from contact with the air. Eventually a gruff Indian doctor with a solemn face and the softest hands I've ever felt presses the freezing brand of a stethoscope to my chest. I gasp in shock and succumb to a violent fit of bronchial coughing, my chest deep as a well. With calm rhythm the doctor repeats the procedure three more times before snapping the ear-pieces behind his neck and craning around to probe my ears. I have bad chest and ear infections. You escort me home, install me in bed as if I were a child, and dash out to the pharmacy. I burrow into blankets, drift in and out of sleep. At one point I wake and hear you clunking around the flat, cleaning; after that first night Harold never washed up anything else, so there are bottles, ashtrays, encrusted plates strewn everywhere. I wonder guiltily whether you've had time to unpack, but then fall asleep again.

It's dark when I wake. I wrap myself in my doona and pad into the kitchen. I'm woozy and my ears are sore, but I feel a little better. The flat is spotless again, you have reinstated your sense of order and it spreads through me like a balm. How could I have so willingly surrendered this? A ravishing woman's voice singing at low volume in Spanish yearns in on violins from the living room.

un haz de manos es la muerte
yacimiento de manos es el tiempo
debajo de la tierra no hay saludos
los muertos no conocen a los muertos

I lean against the kitchen door frame. You are at the stove with your back to me, stirring a pot of soup. For a moment you don't realize I'm here and I can observe you, the way your shoulders bunch and then un-flex with the motion of stirring. It seems like something in this movement is redolent of your ancestry. There you are, on the ever advancing front of a lineage immanent and vital within you from which I'm excluded, which I don't share. Tenderly I wonder if you're aware of this incredible stability within yourself. My own is a snail's bequeathal.

"Tracey, you are awake. How are you feeling?" I smile because you smile naturally. I apologise, for my state, the mess, the hassle, all of which you dismiss with one of your "pffs". "You must eat. I made you soup." I sit and watch you ladle thick broth into a steaming bowl. You sit opposite while I blow across spoonfuls and take tentative slurps. I can sense its goodness, my body's greed for nutrients. The warmth relaxes my throat. While I eat you watch with low eyelids, and I sense movement in your thoughts, a growing distance. When I finish I push the bowl away and for a moment neither of us speaks. The empty bowl is between us. I try to smile my gratitude, but you're analysing it for something more. "So, what happened Tracey?"

Sometimes I see two things at once, in this way a flash of bone in flesh, discontentment in desire, compassion in self-interest. At this moment a chink in your implacable earnestness and forthright concern, a fleeting glint of loathing.

You know. You know full well but you want to extract it, you want to draw the actual words from me. Instead I offer you loathsome emotion. Impossible to damn, my need burbles forth. I'm crying, distraught, and you've come around the table and you're hugging me and stroking my hair and permitting me to bury my wailing in your clothes, your soft body. But even here, in your kind embrace, there's a pragmatic limit, you'll permit me my outburst but afterwards you'll have me speak. Eulalia, you know you will only fail to understand, were I even able to provide words you could not understand. I clasp at you imploringly, but as my reserve of tears abates the irrevocable moment approaches when we must go through the process of tallying and accounting, you furious at explanations I can't give, and just like anyone else we'll sort the remains into their crass piles. But just for now, holding and being held by you, there are tears left.



The song quoted is sung by Mayte Martín from the poem 'Al sur de los limones' by Manuel Alcántara.