

Ever since I heard Don Reakes say that the beauty contestant deserved to be raped by Mike Tyson, I wanted him dead. I wrote this in a letter to Dread. I wrote a lot of letters back then. Some of them I even mailed. I wrote them in my notebook. Later I'd tear out the pages to stuff in envelopes. It was all sort of satisfying: writing, tearing, licking, stuffing.

This happened in the spring. That I wound up in a psych ward. I guess it had to be the spring. I remember the oppressive way the sun would hit the windows at midday. I felt tragic, we all did, and the sun had a way of interfering with the narrative.

Anyway it was better that I was inside writing in my notebooks hearing kid squeals from the playground below. The muffled noises of New York City traffic.

I needed to be contained, Roger explained. I had energy and a focus that he assured me he wouldn't confuse with well-being. A mark of drive or ambition. It was something, he said. It increased the odds of a good prognosis, he said.

It was all written in my charts. Which I later read. There was a short biography on the first page. I remember that most of all:

*Roman Catholic, Irish, articulate.*

I'd never thought of myself as Roman Catholic. Which didn't mean it wasn't true. Still, it was surreal. I'd try to imagine this person they were talking about, as if I were an actress and she was a role to play.

Most of the time, it all felt like a dream. I didn't know if it was my dream or someone else's. Maybe I'd ended up in Don Reakes's dream. Maybe it was Roger's. This would explain things. The dream protected me—the ghosts, the possessed feeling.

It was the worst thing I could imagine and I couldn't even imagine it. That's how bad it was. If I could imagine it maybe it wouldn't have scared me, wouldn't promise obliteration. Plus it had to be the worst thing or else why would I be in the worst place in the world. I mean you have to be really desperate to be on a psych ward. I guess that's obvious. But it only occurred to me later. Like when I'd hear people make jokes—you know, about crazy people or loony bins. Nut jobs. There are so many words for it. I'd realize they were talking about me. I was the worst-case scenario.

It was a long time ago.

I wasn't supposed to write or I was but the doctors wanted to read what I wrote. I would write in my more careful penmanship, like I learned in school at Our Lady of Perpetual Suffering, with Dr. Tufo.

Dr. Tufo taught Palmer Method. I loved Palmer Method. I loved all methods. I still do. I found comfort there: holding the pen, forming the words, filling the page with words. Everyday I'd copy something from a book or the newspaper or the words Sr. Gretta wrote on the board. It gave me pleasure.

I thought of it that way because the doctors had asked me if I could still take pleasure in things.

The other thing was that I'd discovered I was a cipher.

"I am an empty thing. A fragmented mutating subject."

"No, you just feel that way," they told me.

"What's the difference?"

Anyway now I don't care about having a voice. Maybe I cared too much back then. About everything.

Writing in the notebooks filled me up and calmed me down; the world was something I created. Which made it less terrifying. Even if the words were not my own. Especially if the words were not my own.

Don Reakes was forty maybe and from the Bronx. He wore T-shirts and baggy MC Hammer pants. Red and black in a shifting block pattern that made me dizzy. He had glasses and the scruffy beard that inpatient men tend to acquire before they are allowed to shave. Some never get shaving privileges. Don was chatty. Most from the rehab program were chatty. The addicts were generally more fun than the unipolars or even the schizophrenics

but Don Reakes disturbed me no end. I didn't try to understand my reaction to Don Reakes and I couldn't even explain it if you asked; I simply wished him ill.

There was this one unipolar named Derek. We had sex. We got caught but that was part of the thrill I guess. He taught me something about sex. He'd slam me against the wall, tear off my shirt. Later after we were both back out on the street he invited me to his parents' house. He lived with them on Long Island. They told him I was pretty. I guess that made it okay that we'd met in a psych ward. Their house was really dark and felt sad in a way I couldn't understand. When I slept over I woke up with this sharp feeling of terror in the middle of the night. I couldn't breath. I went to the bathroom to puke and ran into his dad wearing boxer shorts. After that I stopped answering his phone calls. I wanted nothing to do with Long Island.

Don mostly didn't talk to me was the thing. Maybe he sensed my hostility but that morning he asked for half of the banana I'd left on my tray.

“If you're not going to eat it?”

I didn't answer. I just looked away. The doctors told me that one of my symptoms had to do with food. I could not watch other people eat. I didn't want to imagine anyone eating either. It disgusted me. The last thing I wanted to think about that par-

ticular morning was Don Reakes or his appetite. I could not bear to hear the sounds he made when he ate my banana, which I could see him peeling. I focused on my notebook, on the page, on my perfect penmanship.

*I think I want to kill Don*, I wrote. I'd forgotten about the doctors reading it later. Or maybe I hadn't forgotten. The thing is when you're sick or when they call you sick you start acting like that. I guess everyone knows that. But I didn't know it, not until later. Not until I'd wasted a good part of my life in that place.

I continued my letter to Dread, who was now in Prague. It had gone this way: a failed suicide pact, me on Ward Six and later on the S.S. Roger, Dread in Prague. In his last letter, he told me that all of Sarah Lawrence was in Prague. It was disgusting, he said. He thought he was getting away from Sarah Lawrence, he said, only to find it there in Eastern Europe.

I knew that I would not kill another person. Not even Don Reakes. I knew that back then. Maybe I didn't tell anyone that. And I only half tried to kill myself, only sort of swallowed a bottle of Prozac but didn't expect to die I don't think. I called my sister. For one thing. They gave me Ipecac, pumped my stomach, brought me to Ward Six. It was all so stupid and boring.

There was this other guy James Augustine. One day he sat down next to me at the table. I thought I emitted a kind of do-not-sit-here invisible shield but it didn't always work. These were crazy