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The term et al. was made for me. But I can't remember how.

– Barry Hannah, “Nicodemus Bluff”

Don't you want to have a body?

– One chatbot to another

Organs

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Star Thrower-Thrower

FRAG AND WATT HAVE WORKED ALL MORNING ON THE GHOST ENGINE.

Neither of them is mechanically trained or inclined, but here is the wrench and here the rag, and between them they've got the bolts tightened, the surfaces sparkling. After several hours' tweaking and buffing, the Ghost Engine finally looks like an engine. It looks exactly like a ghost engine.

And yet, when Frag switches the switch from off to on, the only result is the sound of the switch switching. Frag switches the switch from on to off, back to on, off again, faster and faster as frustration mounts. The sound, at this speed, of the switch's switching, is something like the click of an engine, but a small, simple engine, nothing so grand as you'd expect from a machine as magnificent as the Ghost Engine. And supposing, Watt thinks—Watt is free to think as he sits beside the engine, rag in hand, watching as Frag switches and switches, sweat beginning to bead at Frag's hairline and around his upper lip—again, supposing, Watt thinks, that this rapid clicking were the true and appropriate sound of a functioning Ghost Engine, that still wouldn't suggest that the engine was functioning properly as an engine. It requires altogether too much

effort from its operator to be worthy of the name engine, much less Ghost Engine.

The engine's operator, that is, Frag, no longer looks frustrated. He's angry now, shirtless, face a wet red. There is a scent of hot metal in the air around the engine. Look at Frag, a moving portrait of impotent rage, Watts thinks, but too late; Frag already has the wrench in the air above his head, and the wrench is not small.

Down it comes, and up again and down, battering Watt about the shoulders like a pain engine. This is not, thinks Watt ... but the word won't come. His last thought, as consciousness fades, is: relatable. This is not relatable. But can that be right?

Watt comes to, finds Frag seated beside him, elbows on knees, using his shirt like a towel to wipe the slick from his skin as he stares at the horizon. He hasn't noticed Watt's waking. The wrench is on the ground between them. Watt reaches out, grips the handle, slides it toward himself slowly, silently. Frag rests forehead on forearms, spent. Watt rolls onto his side, conceals the wrench behind his back.

"Frag," he says, "what do you think they mean by 'relatability?'"

Frag raises his head but doesn't turn.

"They?" he asks.

"The kids," says Watt. "The children."

"The youth, you mean. Easy. The youth want to watch Hermione Granger order a cup of coffee in the Starbucks language."

"Hermione Granger?"

"From Harry Potter. They want to watch her place the order with the girl at the register while, in her head, she tries out the

word barista... barista in a variety of accents, never settling on a single pronunciation, never working up the courage to say the word aloud," Frag says. "They want the barista to understand exactly what Hermione means when she orders in the Starbucks language, and to know how to spell the name Hermione with a grease pencil on an empty paper cup. They'll want to watch Hermione move to the other end of the counter where she'll unlock her phone and look up the pronunciation of barista, but, unable to decipher the phonetic symbols, will shortly swipe her thumb across the screen and scroll through still photos depicting the magical adventures she's had with her friends. These photos will produce in her a melancholic nostalgia, a nostalgic melancholy. It's been so long since she's had an adventure! But then she'll remind herself that those adventures were trying; she didn't exactly enjoy adventuring while adventuring. She prefers having adventured to adventuring, prefers it by a long shot. In fact, this nostalgic melancholy, or melancholic nostalgia, is the closest thing to actual happiness she's ever felt. And besides, isn't ordering coffee in the Starbucks language and then receiving the exact coffee that you ordered a kind of adventure in itself? At the precise moment this thought occurs to her, the youth want another barista to call out her name —"

"Hermione Granger."

"No," says Frag, "Just Hermione. Recall she didn't give the girl at the register her full name. The youth expect the girl at the pick-up counter to say, simply, 'Hermione,' and then to hand Hermione her coffee, which Hermione will accept, also with a smile. I guaran-goddamn-tee you that, at that moment, the youth will smile as well. And sigh."

Watt doesn't follow.

"She'll drink the coffee, of course," Frag tells him. "The youth will want it to be hot in the hand but to land lukewarm on the tongue. They'll want her to have the sense of acute focus that they think they get from coffee, but not the dirty jitters and pungent sweats that come at the bottom of the cup, to say nothing of the crankiness, the eventual weight gain that, outside the world of relatability, comes from consuming the heaping piles of processed sugars and artificial sweeteners that they wanted Hermione to request in the Starbucks language in order to disguise the bitter flavor of actual coffee, which is all the more bitter when it comes from Starbucks. But in the Starbucks of the relatable, everything is as you'd want it."

"I'm not sure this example is quite illuminating," says Watt.

"No single example is going to illuminate any phenomenon worth examining. So consider Wolverine."

"The mutant."

"That word sounds so filthy coming from your mouth," says Frag. "Say it again."

"Mutant," says Watt.

"Mutant," says Frag. "I love it. Wolverine the mutant. Canadian-born super-soldier-cum-vigilante anti-hero. Bad attitude. Bone-blades in the backs of his hands. Adamantium skeleton. Ability to heal his own injuries almost instantaneously."

"Canadian?" says Watt. "I recall, from my own youth, an Australian accent."

"Non-canonical," Frag says. "What is canon is that he is more than a century old now, and it's time to put his brawling days behind him. The youth would like to see him choose vegetarianism."

They want him to choose veganism and stick with it this time!”

“That won’t save any animals,” says Watt, “or improve his health. Wolverine’s a fiction. He doesn’t exist.”

“Do not inform the youth,” says Frag.

“And if he did exist,” Watt says, “how could the youth relate to his hanging up the superhero leotards at the age of one hundred forty?”

“It’s the veganism, and the struggle with veganism, that they wish to relate to. But if that doesn’t help to clarify, take Garfield.”

“What could the youth possibly want from Garfield?”

“The youth, my friend, desire Garfield and Odie to announce their pregnancy at last. They want weekly updates. ‘At this point, your fetus is the size of a .22 calibre bullet.’ ‘By now, your fetus’s tale is shaped like a cartoon heart.’ ‘Toward the end of this trimester, your child will be capable of trimming its own mustache in the womb.’ The youth emphatically do not want to be present for the labor and delivery, but they do, all of them, wish to watch the happy couple tend the tray of lasagna that Garfield will give birth to, lovingly, for all of eternity. That lasagna will never be consumed.”

“I think I’m starting to understand,” Watt says, “but I doubt I’ll ever relate.”

“It’s just another engine,” says Frag, “a static engine.”

“Like our Ghost Engine,” says Watt.

“Wrong,” Frag says. “The Ghost Engine is not meant to be static; it’s simply broken. The relatable engine is functioning exactly as it’s supposed to. It gives the appearance of dynamism by turning in on itself when confronted with a more complex phenomenon. It’s built to deny that anything can happen, to give the illusion that what it’s already doing constitutes the only possible action.”

“Like in the story of the starfish,” says Watt.

“I don’t know any starfish stories,” Frag says.

Watt reaches subtly behind himself, pats around to confirm that the wrench is where he left it, leaves his hand on the handle.

“Everyone knows this story” he says. “An old man and a little boy, his grandson probably, are walking along the beach, and they stumble on thousands of starfish, scattered and piled over the shore — left behind, I guess, by retreating tides.”

“I think maybe I have heard it after all,” says Frag.

“The kid runs up to the starfish and starts throwing them into the water, eagerly if not frantically. The kid gets winded after a while, and the grandpa says, ‘Give it up! There’s thousands of ‘em. You’re never gonna make a difference.’ The kid looks down at the starfish in his hand, tosses it into the ocean, smiles, and says, wisely, ‘I made a difference to that one.’”

“Nope,” says Frag. “Never heard it. The story I know concerns a sage old grandpa and a cynical brat.”

“There are different versions” Watt says. “They can be arranged to flatter the teller or the listener, depending on who needs flattering.”

“When you told the one about the kid just now, I wanted to throw the kid himself into the ocean, possibly hold him under a while. I think you threw that ‘wisely’ in there specifically to stoke my rage.”

Only now does Watt realize how tightly he’s gripping the wrench. His palm is damp and his knuckles ache.

“I intentionally told it in a way that flatters neither of us,” he says, “to show that the way the story is told misses the larger point.”

“Which is?” says Frag.

“What difference does it make?”

“To the starfish or the kid?”

“What difference could anything make to a starfish? A starfish is unequipped to understand or to sense difference,” Watt says. “Starfish have neither head nor heart.”

“So the only difference is that the kid thinks he made a difference” says Frag.

“Not much of a difference at all, is it?”

Frag is staring at him now. Watt doesn't recall exactly when Frag turned his way, can only hope Frag can't see what Watt is doing behind his back. What he's doing is stretching his fingers, trying to shake some feeling back into his hand.

“You sound like the cynical grandpa,” Frag says. “You'll never make a difference because there's no difference to make.”

“But there's only difference to make,” says Watt. “Difference is a people thing, and only people are capable of gaining anything from parables. So how could the parable be about making a difference for people?”

“If the starfish were people...”

Watt can practically see the real point of the starfish story washing over Frag's face, gentle as a low tide. Frag is beautiful, he thinks. Frag is his friend. For a moment Watt has the feeling that, together, they could actually make this Ghost Engine work, if they could just stop beating each other with the only tools they have. But there isn't much chance of that. He wipes his wet hand against the seat of his pants and grabs the wrench stranglingly as Frag says:

“Why the fuck are all these bodies washing up on the shore!”