

THE NERVES

GARNET

Garnet almost convinces me that we might be exploded by the light of the tin plane in the day sky as we navigate the river beach. Yes, its lights are as bright as the evening star, and briefly they scare me.

Garnet talkily convinces me to leave my phone on the threshold of their rickety walkup so we won't be listened to while we ramble about what we both resist.

Garnet's charisma shines like their sunburn. Their cigarette is a burnt offering.

Garnet is phenomenal at what they do. I'm not vouching for them as a dishwasher, PR person, or perfect child, but the tattoos they do are perfect. Everything looks like some tiny crummy Victorian porn shredded by the oily surface of the skin it's pounded into, in the time we live in.

This habit of giving one another tattoos only works in times when you believe the love of the collective has to be offered sadomasochistically first, like an oath, like syncing periods. The rubbery blue tracings are as faithful as the September sun wearing them away, that fierce thing we'd misidentified together as a drone.

AYA

We're unavailable to anyone else after we've shut the door. There's fluorescence and railings framing blank sectionals. It's like a basement where two big collies got sent to bark, but we shut out their small dog.

Aya is like this: the braces reflecting on their teeth make them look sharp. They have an enthusiastic laugh. I practice my own doggy nature by leaping around on the couch and drooling. I bring my shoulder blades as close to my butt as possible when I get up on all fours. We drank pop to get this hyper. We make gymnast shapes. I want to lick their teeth.

Music videos on the corner TV, the only sign of life besides ourselves. I'm vaguely aware that I stink after our day of activity. Aya suggests I shower. I'm excited by the possibility of that dark glass shower, more signs of life in mould in the grout.

I wasn't expecting them to get in with me. Our hair needs washing, smells kind of green when the water hits it. They love analyzing problems and reaching inside my desk at school to write in wet pen on my hand. We don't look at each other under the spray but can't stop laughing so the shower water goes down my throat. I cough in minerals. Their braces are like dog's teeth, their moles like a spray of pop. My heart's in my squint before shampoo stings my eye. Their body is huge and new. It is not like something you read about. We're simultaneously small, come close together to contrast the coolness, get warm and sweat and almost fall.

We try each other's necks and there's soap mixed in. I taste their mouth and that inhuman quality of skin so clean the water's still beading on it, running off of it. We kiss like nothing's happening. I get down on my knees like nothing's happening. I've been waiting to do this my whole life. It is amazing to stop talking, stop laughing, stop waiting for something to happen and feel nothing happening. I feel their hair on my face. I'm calming down for the first time ever as I press them to my mouth. I taste more than water there.

YAS

They go off like an alarm clock. I like watching Yas. Juicy eyes and short shorts. Always kissing someone twice their size, climbing them like a zoo.

Yas takes me to the back field and mimes a blow job. It's an art: trying to reach their own eyelids and their philtrum with their tongue is what it seems like to me. Smelling the air like it's their own underwear, checking for how many days old. Blowing their bangs up out of their face in the pee corner, avoiding getting hair stuck to their lipgloss.

They ask me to imitate the shapes their mouth makes on the restaurant window, then cackling, hoard their fries. Their eyelashes make huge moons on their face.

They're gracious when the table shakes and a glass of water, knocked by a poltergeist, almost totals their computer. I love the whole span of their attention. In spite of all their partners, I admire them most walking away alone.

ANNIK

Annik gets excited covering other people's faces. Loaves of bread, silk scarves, their own with a hand if you try to get a picture. They have a sunny face, a bright face like a fried egg. It's fast to worry about getting caught. I consent to mugging in front of them when people want to take pictures of us together, matching sweetly as we do in gesture and concern. Matching hats. I've always loved the camera, the opportunity to briefly act with the viewer's knowledge. So often when you act nobody recognizes the performance.

Annik likes to acknowledge their performing too, but with props. They love their sunglasses, duvet pulled up over the eyebrow, laundry dumped in a boiling heap over them as they recline reading after work, will even grab my arm and throw it over their face when they're tired of speaking about a subject.

We dawdle on like this, me vogueing and them browsing, occasionally the reverse when their face is lit up by a vista they like, a photo of an open face they take, a turn of phrase in their ear.

One time I think I catch Annik lying about something important and I howl at them with my full force, waving my arms like a dance teacher, trying to unearth that anxious expression from beneath their rose-printed ball cap. With their big arms honed by pull-ups, they lift me up off of my feet, spin me to face the fluorescent light in the ceiling of their apartment, so even I'm backlit, howling and kicking at the artificial sun.

My pussy is a flashlight in a hole. My erection is a foghorn tucked badly. My asshole is the kitchen drain enjoying some spinach. My face might be stuck in the snow. I lie on my hand to make it numb then get myself to come a lot pretending my hand is anybody else's: the purple field of strangeness and desperation. The red field of will. In the wide space of dust, tools, bureaucratic forms, cruel beliefs, exorcisms and failures: the truth can be the wet spot in my underwear. I'm drawing a map to relief with my own hand. The relief is the non-toxic lake of a cartoon of heaven. The cartoon heaven where I lay to rest.

SLOO

We have something called closet time, slung in the absolute darkness over piles of fragrant old laundry with bottles of experiments lining the walls, bubbling inside. Let me be clear: it could happen at any time, this welcome darkness. In the high rise this is our mutual wilderness, leaning against crinkles of god knows what, unable to see our own fingers. Sometimes we just breathe. Sometimes they read to me from some novel we aren't allowed and I get curious in pure darkness, extend my small body wider, wiggle myself into existence. We never touch except the time where they drape themselves over me, make a blanket of their bigger body. Our bones are not aligned and so there's a weird mapping that goes on, an out of time attunement of our lazy breathing. It's as if they are a body without ears.

A bottle never breaks. Sloo's muttering and my tinkling mixes itself in with the ungovernable objects in our closet. We make an atmosphere of fume.

LISS

From the beginning I've been desperately attuned to their carabiner, their braces and their confidence of a horse. Our closeness is luck, holding each other with our new consciousness of pain and shared obsession with lying in grass. We have matching Batman shirts and proclivities for basements. I told them they have a heart like a big apple, and they held my ribcage like I was a guitar. We learned how to kiss like we were having each other for lunch.

When they summoned me to their steps and showed me with their most naive voice how big their lips had gotten from kissing someone else, I took a long way home. They had a gentleness that prompted forgetting and I had the blank joy of the recently electrocuted.

The road smelled like hot asphalt. I felt an inch long, total. I kicked garbage home in bruised sneakers with stickers on them from the bakery that said Fresh Baked Today. I held my pillow all night like I'd just given birth, imagining I might be that other person.

We still hung around. I found myself with them and the other person under the park bridge while it rained. We threw rocks that scattered the heavy ripples from the falling sky. They leaned into each other like smoke. As the two of them kissed, collapsing into each others' big hair, the water level rose around the repurposed cement dam. Rain slammed down and the river pushed its shoulders up over the bank. The three of us got kept under that bridge. Our personal

world, the two of them making one of their own like they'd found what they lost as children. I pinned myself against the wall, looking just past the lip to chin, the teeth to mouth, into the brown mirror of the rising water and the new sexiness of defeat. I was too still to skip another rock, enchanted by what I can't control.