

Smudges



The thing with these goats is the limit of their perception. Flap an arm, scatter nothings to the breeze, these goats will perplex, faint knock-kneed to the brush, wait locked in contracted cartilage for the ruin to pass them over. But the audience sees them, tense, rigid as a handle for their taking to the mill or griddle, easy to carry as a wooden stool. Do the goats think nobody is watching? Do they think? Do they think, suppose, perhaps, hope in contraction that there is no taste for the rigor in their meat? Do they suppose, think on it, that their audience is perplexed, stunted too in their panic, do the goats not know that in the electrified stick of their ganglia, that in their panic, people have discovered not prey, but simple delight? *These goats*, said the limpid boy at the schoolroom desk watching the big luminescent glass at the head of the classroom, slumped in amphitheater with the other boys, *these goats faint at nothing. Very funny*, he said.

The boys could see their reflections when the glass darkened between replays of the fainting goats, so they knew their company. Once when a half circle of the goats bucked then fell to the choreography of their owner's

caterwaul, the boy in short sleeves with trousers tied in a scarf around his neck erupted in a gasp. Then at the theatrical collapse of another pot of wool – legs stretched to splinter – the boy with his arms crossed in casket pose under an old t-shirt invoked the placeholder god, giggled, *oh my god!* The third boy in the half circle, likely not sentient to the uncareful breeding of what should have been an evolutionary divot, nodded in testament to another piebald ungulate going down. *Cute*, he said.

At the back corner of the room, the video of the lady who slips in the grape vat was in heavy rotation. Here, three girls – one shivering in doubled shirts, another hunched in the fold of her neck, the other cozy for legs folded in the gut of a sweatshirt – these three girls watched the grape stomping lady in the small glass they cradled in their hands. Each could tell when the others reached the tipping point, when the lady stomping grapes tilts her head to beam a broadcaster's grin at the camera. Then something in the mash, a lattice of the flesh, a hearty grape, sets off a slip within the beat of a crashing symbol until, in hilarity, the lady who stomps on grapes falls hard to choke on the wind, gasping in dreadful premonition for the end of the blasted broadcast. The giggle between the girls was proof of their company. They'd slide their fingers across the smooth glass

to the point of the grape stomping lady's collapse. Then they'd watch it again. The boys in the front with their goats, the girls in the corner with the girl flat out: they watched repeatedly.

An audience of the grape stomping lady might wonder if some peeled off film of her replays, some peeled layer of the woman's conscience might suspect she would be watched repetitively in the small luminescence of girls' hands. Does she think like goats in the singularity of her world? She must know an audience is there, she panics in high pitch to cut the camera, to end the broadcast while the mash peels off her heels. Certainly, in her business, she must know that the audience must, absolutely must, have its entertainment.

For this, everybody was watching something in the replay of their glass, save for one in the group: the girl at the window who was watching something else, far outside of the classroom. Something live. Unrecorded. She was calculating it. Measuring it.

Most popular of all, though, were the miners. If not the falling goats or falling lady, the sad fate of the miners played to the rapt delight of most in the room. Black in the fold of a lithium mine a mountain below the surface, festers

eleven galled miners: perfect! Trapped in a quaint chamber by a cinematic collapse in the tunnel, they make do with flanks of beef. That plus all the componentry that could fit in the small holes bored down to them by their managers above. They watch the Copa America on the glass of tube-sized handhelds, while broadcasters on the surface wonder aloud if they'll make it out by the final knock-out rounds; on another channel they watch themselves watching the match while chewing on braised loaf. Just everyone wants to know where the trapped miners defecate; it is in fact in this ecstatic reverie of impolite curiosity that keeps most eyes in the classroom weighted to the glass. They're amused to wonder this, to wonder, too, what it might be to find themselves trapped in a chamber with nothing to do, but chew, stare in the glass. Some chortled, shivered; a few pulled tight their trousers around their necks, some pulled tight their arms inside their t-shirts, their legs up into their arms. Every day it was colder.

The girl measuring at the window noted the temperature, too. Out of them all, she could see the link, maybe, too, the causation between the incremental coldness and the object she was measuring with marks on the window. She was the slightest in the classroom, so the most sensitive. She had torn free strips from her sweatpants to wrap her palms, her

fingertips kept bare to do the measuring. On the glass of the windowpane were black rungs of lines squeaked out of a permanent marker. After each that she had drawn — each one daily — she had turned on her dusty heels to see if the others noticed her marking the ruin that was clearly happening outside.

Too busy, the others watched the falling goats, the lady who slips on grapes, the sad state of the miners. A whoop from the side of the room carried at once some news: *Scarlett takes a tumble*, a new video. Nearly all fingered the glass to focus their flat eyes on Scarlett: her skin the delicate wrap of unscorched foodstock, she leads with her leavened thighs singing a love song to a lens in an empty room. The treadmill, the elliptical trainer, rings of rubber bands pushed resolutely to the wall, she sings a song of commas to a balanced lens, alone in the extravagance of a moment but for the permanence of her signature recording that to this day 311,284 would thrill to, repetitively. She swings out her untapered calf, steps up to the lonely stage of an unwilling coffee table. Does she wonder, does she think, does she see warning in the unsparing interval of the recording lamp before her? She bends, pivots in the second verse, cups her stomach in the pedestal of a thigh, steps a half-foot forward—unforgivably—onto the outer flap of

the table. Incensed, had enough, it juts, cavorts forward, spins her back on an invisible hinge: the back of the table bobs up to send a shot of flesh through her falling body. She lies there. Moaning, too, promising to never again. All in the glass of 311,593 viewers, 18 of them sitting in this room with hysterical smiles, eyebrows pulleyed by unmatched delight.

The goats fainting in the big luminescence. The broadcast of the lady slipping on grapes to lie sucking broadcast air. The miners watching themselves delight in Arturo Vidal's scoring a goal in the replay of their rapture.

The girl at the window measured. She marked the windowpane. Yet another notch lower. She gasped at the revelation.

Would anybody notice? How would she tell them? Some have brought in socks this week to seal their ears against the dropping temperatures. Some use socks for gloves until a finger is required to apply pulsing flesh to hit replay, a long sleeve instead to insulate their ears, muffled to her live, wondering voice. She checked the marks. Each day to scale they have dropped on the glass. It's really happening.

She looked over the room. She must tell them what is happening.

She dropped from the window ledge to the half circle of slumped over boys watching the falling goats in the big glass. She pointed to the rungs of black marks she'd made daily on the windowpane. Nodding, she explained in emphatic whispers what the pattern must have meant to her. But the boys tipped slowly to the side – tilting slowly – to see around her. There was an educational film on the selective breeding of this particular style of goats: the boys waited out the talking heads to see new footage of the locked knees vibrating in the wind. One of the boys tipped back to sit on a fold of his pant leg to cut off the cold from coming in. He brought his cold hand underneath to hold close the fold as he tipped back over to see around the girl gesturing urgently in front of him.

She tried, then, to warn the girls in the back. They were in pairs wearing each other on their cold shoulders, watching linked videos of the grape stomping lady in other, less catastrophic broadcasts – maybe to see if she's real, the same woman they'd seen in the grape stomping segment, maybe in one of these she'd collapse to the ground again. The girl trying to warn them of the ruin coming for them

pulled at the cloth around her fingers, flipped to the marks she had made on the glass, each black arc clearly lower than the marks made earlier. A brace of girls simultaneously brought up a brace of glass squares with a replay of the woman collapsing to the dry sod below. *See?* they said.

The miners would eat long tubes of watery red sauce on gray noodles to the semifinal against Peru. More wires were snaked down the static boreholes to channel a higher bit rate for the tournament. To capture, too, better streaming of the plight of the miners, greater portions of food would have to stop. One of the miners – he could be seen in bony infrared slumping at the collapsed entryway – stares into the dark emptiness. Some of the audience in the classroom wondered what it would be like to sit in the near dark, with nothing to tug whimsically at their eyes. One looked up to wonder, to see, to think.

He saw a girl he could hardly remember talking to him earlier, gesturing to the window. He squinted as if it were morning. He took the shirt from his ears. He seemed, to us, *to understand*. He stood. She explained her measurements, nodding her head to the tempo of her flat hand to show the descent of the marks. He raised his own hand to touch the chill of her elbow.

We had seen enough. We breached the protocol of our passive observation, left the glass booth that played the goats on the other side repetitively for them. Sent one of us in to show the distracted boy who paid notice to the alarming girl a video of the championship round that the miners had spent their last days alive watching. Look, they're watching themselves before the carbon monoxide critically accumulated in their wired chamber. Set the boy to watching. Pulled the girl from the room.

She was in the research booth with us for several minutes. She saw us in our uniform pullovers. Saw, too, the panoply of screens showing the archived loops of goat herds falling in unison, the journalist who once slipped on a mash of grapes, miners who died on a live broadcast, poor massive Scarlett bucked repeatedly by a coffee table. She saw, too, the invisible gas we were tracking on radar: our greatest fault, our last occupation, concentrating now in murderous falling drafts in the foothills. We didn't know how much longer it would take, but we had taken it upon ourselves to be the only ones to wonder.

We had to ask – it was in fact part of our research to know – why she didn't watch the videos. We were pleased by their effect on everyone else. We had pacified them against

their doom, kept them cool. We had entertained them from the past, kept them in moments, detached them from a future they would not want to watch. In high dosage, we had anesthetized their memory, detached its mechanism. We had made them laugh instead. We wanted to know: *why didn't you watch the videos?*

I noticed, she said with all the earnestness of a believer, that the sun one day didn't reach the middle bar of the window. It had the day before. So I made a smudge. I marked it with a marker, as high as the sun would go every day. The smudges got lower.

We all turned to look at the multiplex of glass screens in the classroom. They were watching. They were huddled, watching. Everybody except the boy who had taken notice of some girl warning him of the end. He slumped away from us, staring into the emptiness. We would have to watch him.

I gave the girl an extra pullover. Pulled the badge from the sleeve. Sent her out into the poisoning air, where she had mistook the wintering sun as the end of light.