

LIGHT CONCENTRATIONS

Cancer flexes the plastic gauntlet on his wrist, a badge rotating into place like revolver rounds. A narrow light shines through the crystalline badge, projecting it on the wall, branding folded hands onto this mossy bunker wall.

The Prayer Badge

The Entomology Badge

The Boycraft Badge

The colors blend with the throw-ups on the walls, swollen intestinal graffiti in the names of sinners who deface the honorable ruins. He would never do something so vulgar. The others could get away with it, but in him it would be a sign of his urchin origins, an ugly atavism. So he sprays his name in pesticide, dark letters of bug corpses, CANCER PRIZE in ants and flies.

Another disc hits the wall, the ghosts of warring suns. He's with the other members of the Halo Club, comparing each other's badges. There is a competitive pleasure in debating the virtues of badges and the plans for getting new ones. Each has a different value. Some are like pennies, others almost mythical.

Each badge is a shard of the iridescent halo of the fallen angel this atoll is built on. True or false?

Badges allow you to contact angels. True or false?



Cancer is surrounded by too many friends, smiling and laughing insufferably. Their limp straight hair smells like hair spray and bug spray and bleach and they are like ripe fruit coated in chemicals and it makes Riparian sick. This would have been perfect. A remote area of the beach, shielded by ruins.

He walks away with a virgin trash bag in his clutches, still flat and compressed. It looks so small like this, until knees and elbows are straining at it, stretching the black until it turns lighter, stretches until you can almost see their disgusting flesh through it, just the outline, the perfect trapped soul of them, and their lips, sucking the plastic into the hole of their mouth like a blow-up doll—

He wanders the shore and the atoll melts under his eyes with a century of erosion, isles flickering and palaces sloughing like bad teeth, a palimpsestic palimpsest.

He remembers when this ocean was blue. Now it is pink, and the algal expanse is like the surface of the sun, erupting with gruesome solar flares of bacterial plume. A

human would see a gorgeous day at the beach, tranquil water lapping at their feet. He sees hellfire in every direction, a slurry of death blazing from the ocean floor.

The biologist in him knows, *trichodesmium*, a cyanobacterium that ekes out an existence in starved waters, sucks nitrogen gas from the air and turns it into ammonia, a highly efficient fuel for marine algae species. *Gymnodinium breve*, the red tide. Our red carpet.



Cancer fidgets, boots squeaking on the shiny plywood floor. His bare legs gleam as if coated with the same polyurethane gloss, sweating in the grip of his tight red bloomers.

The other scouts are lined up in the gymnasium like a row of picked flowers, sweating as if spritzed for freshness. The blond boy in front of Cancer stands prouder than any of them. The gap between shirt and shorts exposes the sweat running down the groove of his foster brother's spine, pooling in a golden nest of vellus hairs.

Cancer is reminded of the humiliating difference between him and his brother. Even his name, Trembleuse, is a delicate counterpart to Cancer, that ugly word that makes people think of lost loved ones or the punishment for the pleasure of smoking and drinking and dancing in the sun, or something cheap and girly, the bubblegum-snapping horoscope you read in the supermarket checkout line.

His new family did so much for him, and he's so grateful. But all the nutrition and steroid creams and scalpels and drills just made him an imperfect copy, a stretched puppet. If he was clearly smaller, that wouldn't be as bad. But from a distance, they are nearly the same height and build, so it invites comparison. Glasses with one lens out of prescription.

He doesn't need glasses. They burnt his eyes. Photorefractive keratectomy. They melted his cornea with a laser. He's seen halos ever since. But no angels. They only left their great works behind, their hopeless tasks and his small bones to bear them.

The laser gave him the vision to see at a distance, but multiplied the moons. Each moon is a moon where he died. And before this there were four suns and he died under those too. He is the false son of a true family, a scion of astigmatism. He is the optical trick blurring to the side of his brother. All he became was a brighter shadow.

Every time he changes in the locker room, he feels like prey around the other boys. The gym is bright and exposing, a parade of puberty. He was born small. Fetal alcohol syndrome. Thin upper lip, smooth philtrum. It normalized eventually, and he got surgery for his cleft lip and palate, but that tightness still exposes his upper teeth. He was denied the thoughtless mistakes of childhood and adolescence, the promise that everything would get better. With every fuck-up, he asks himself, am I ruined? Is it hopeless to try, is there an invisible limit that will prevent me from becoming a full human being? The slightest stumble feels like a scar he received before he was born.

He does planks, dark hair falling down and covering the blond streak in his hair. As he lays on his arms and pushes up with his feet, ass in the air, he stares down the tunnel of his body, toes straining white at the other end, kneecaps clenched, shirt hanging and forming another tunnel dark across his damp chest and onto his taut abdominals.

The dark reflection of his body on the polished floor is like a breathless shadow seen from above, and he wonders if this is how adults see him. His desperate movements make the shadow seem almost feminine, his hair flipping like a bouncing girl, his loose shirt like a skirt whipping up. Without color and detail he seems so scrawny, a vision of his true biological inferiority like those silhouette height charts comparing animals to humans. His rape whistle clacks on the floor as he drops harder with each plank, knees banging and face slapping onto the shock-absorbent urethane top coat, sticky from the perspiration of so many panting sweating boys crashing across the years. He can't stay up a second longer but he has to, or everyone will see what he is

The other scouts stand up. He pushes on his heavy limbs and spirals upright, too dizzy to see the ball before it slams into his spine. His legs fly up, boots in the air, crucifix charms flung into a blasphemous inversion. His reddened knees, sore from planking, burst like ripe fruits on the floor. His next breath is full of dirty rubber, the feet of his brother, blond, boots, a bouncing ball, BO. Dodgeball rains around him, vibrations that punch his heart and buzz his sticky thighs.

Come on, you're embarrassing yourself. His brother helps him up and Cancer laughs it off. It would be pretty bad if he couldn't take a joke. He's deep inside all the jokes, every joke ever made, can't crack them like a diver's helmet, and at least his brother is touching him. The touch that says, I can bully you, but the others can't.



He has to urinate alone because all the boys bumping their hips into him makes his urethra stutter. He finds a stall and locks it and listens, bladder full, waiting for everyone to leave.

Someone is missing. Boys whisper it so they can laugh at their own foolish fear. *He's just home sick. He's just jerking off. What a faggot.* They want everything to be okay. But Cancer knows the boy is in a bag somewhere, all alone.

When they're gone, he finally gets to release his pent-up bladder. Then he kneels down, using the rancid smell of his dehydrated urine to trigger his nausea. He's got a system. This is when he eliminates the harmful toxins (food) from his stomach, and no one is around to hear him. So when he exits from the gym, expecting to be alone, he is caught in the act of tugging his bloomers from his sweaty cleft.



Riparian smells him a bile away, wearing his stomach for lip gloss. In a shaft of atoll sun, merciless except where the trees cut it, bleeding shadows across those slender legs. A tight little backpack throws his back back, leather straps with steel snaps digging into the soft wet clam meat of his armpits. His ribbon-bound neck is sweating from gym class and throwing up. The rape whistle sticks to his sweaty white shirt, clinging to the hollow of his sternum. On his hapless tanned face, a little

cusps of overbite exposed by his surprise. Then his thick dark eyebrows dig into his skull.



Cancer can't hide the resentment in his face, two shades of red. Pride from his new family, rage from his foster days.

Riparian, in a fresh and identical change of clothes that make him look even more like a shadow against the crisp white button-up and brown slacks. He says, "How's the wrist." As an olfactory being, he opens with comments that attack the sweat glands and tear ducts and coax out the ammonia. He speaks to their scents and they respond until he sees everything, a map to their insides.

"You shouldn't have done that. Don't you know who my parents are?"

Cancer learned this phrase from his foster brother and he has even more to defend, the latest princeling on the scene and caught in his sweaty gym clothes, not his carefully ironed uniform or Sunday best.

Riparian in fact does not know who his parents are. He doesn't even know his name. But, he reminds himself, he can freely request that information. So he does, in a voice that suggests a juvenile name is not worth remembering, that he will forget it immediately, but that he needs just enough handle to deal with Cancer, like a tuft of hair to grab.



His name spits out automatically, the way he's been trained by stronger men than I. But there's a care in it, self-conscious of the nasality of his cleft palate, blunting the knife of his voice, letting it drag before it breaks my skin. I bleed sweat.

"Cancer Prize."

Riparian stands downwind, a slow shift like he's only trying to keep the sun out of his eyes. His smile is a sickness, brief and feline, in this face with nothing human under it. "And me just a humble Capricorn."



Cancer keeps adjusting his backpack like a bomb is about to go off.

"What's in the backpack."

"Chocolate bars."

The parasite has seen the wrappers everywhere, a constant bitter smell underfoot.
“What happens if you sell them all?”

“I get a badge.”

“What happens if you get the badge.”

Cancer wants to believe the crystalline badge, one of a kind, would grant him access to a secret place. But even if it's just a rock, it's very important for him to be the best. He is pulled between the battle of night and day, and each one makes the other seem unimportant.

Riparian says, with a dark rust or whine at the edge of his voice, “I don't want us to be enemies, Cancer.”

“Okay.”

“You have a lot of potential.”

“Really?”

“You've got this in the bag.”

Cancer flinches. “Thanks.”

Riparian reaches into his pocket and takes something out. “Let me make it up to you.” His bill and Cancer's bar exchange places like versions of each other, transfers between the second and third dimension. He peels the bar and the dying sun glints on the foil. Money has a shitload of germs, don't you know, and that bill he handed Cancer has more than most. He hallucinates a flash of Cancer's sweaty palm, his disease kissing the boy's life line and hissing out like sparks in water. He is crushed in it. Not the strongest grip, but tense, wired like those braces.

Riparian takes a deep bite from the chocolate bar, tearing through the soft brown mass which was melting in Cancer's backpack. His teeth come up for air, stained brown. Salty. They put salt in their bars. Something charming for the tourists. A taste of the sea.

But despite that heartwarming, magnanimous act, Cancer still doesn't trust him, is still hanging back. It shocks and offends Riparian.

He wants to say, you should be grateful for the pain I inflicted. It prepares you for slavery. It won't be a ruler next time. It will be every one of you in the hot sun, impaled or chained and every inch of you bug-bitten and lash-licked until you're not a child anymore, not a human, just a piece of scar tissue to be worked until you fall and another takes your place. And on this atoll, the only animal big enough to make

whip leather is the slaves who fall behind. I'll make a cat o' nine tails from nine of your friends, and every second you falter, sweet reunion.

Instead, as a cunning act of subterfuge, Riparian says, "What's that you got there."

Cancer grips the notebook tight. "Uh just some uh

IDEAS AND THEORIES ON THE BLACK BAG TORTURES

To his surprise, Riparian doesn't laugh at him. On the contrary, a most serious shadow, brown eyes emerging from under those purple lids, peering through long lashes. Cancer's bloomers have ridden up again, uncomfortably clenched between his sweaty cheeks, but he doesn't dare adjust them.

The shadow says, "Maybe you can tell me about your theories."

Cancer tries to look through his notebook without revealing it, thumbing through the edges for something that won't embarrass him. A breeze flaps it open and Riparian sees a drawing of golden hands and red teeth, and his poisoned blood frosts over.

"What's that."

"Just a dream I had."

Another page flips in the wind, and this one has a map on it. Crude and incomplete, but Riparian recognizes the DaAt, the labyrinth familiar as the twisting of his guts. A deep slavequelling gene throbs. The parasite is a whip. This boy has to be made an example of. Suffocate him in a bag with his childish drawings and stolen lore.



Cancer sniffs, and suddenly I'm mortified. Mort is right. I smell like death. I tell him it's my cologne. Just a word is enough to change what people are smelling. They fill in the blank, just like every other part of me.

"What do you think it smells like."



"Jasmine?"

If boys could have a favorite flower, Cancer's would be jasmine. Unlike so many flowers, it actually smells like something, it gives pleasure.



“That’s right, Cancer.”

Everyone has a different path into my smell. I like the one he took.

Skatole is responsible for the smell of feces. But in light enough concentrations, it smells like jasmine.



Cancer tells him about the pseud and how they’re going to catch it and the man listens very carefully, not interrupting him once. He didn’t expect to be taken seriously. He still feels small, but in a different way. Not swatted, but inspected. An insect on a pin. The man must be admiring his work ethic and ingenuity, that is to say, his specialness, no other word can encompass this unexpected warm feeling.

Riparian is thinking, what time do you walk home. Do you look at the scenery or down at your feet. Do you wear headphones. How much sun shines through your thigh gap. How thin is your wrist and how strong are your lungs.

He is startled by the sudden strength of his own odor as it intrudes on the cold calculation of the parasite, an arousal that was secret even to him.

The shadow says, “I’m going to go now.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s talk about your theories sometime.”

“Really?”

“Who else have you told about this?”

“Just the Halo Club...”

“What’s that?”

“Um. You sponsored it, remember?”

“I know. I just didn’t hear you.”

“Oh. Of course! Sorry!”

Riparian is incapable of not hearing everything perfectly. He is cursed with a perfect nose and perfect eardrums and perfect eyes that will never age, all wrapped around a brain like a fistful of rotten flesh, thoughts like maggots, blindly devouring.

The Halo Club makes another set of bodies to bag, but it's not urgent. They don't have an angel. If Riparian has one consolation, it is that hope has died, and this greatest and last wound of his need not be opened.

"Goodbye, Cancer."

"Bye!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Cancer is acutely aware of how many exclamation marks he used, but it's hard to handle a small word like that, with so little room for adjustment. With a full sentence, he can amend and correct and smile and fawn, but *bye* is a ledge with just enough room for his toes, and his toes are sweaty and they skid and the word hangs like snot.

Cancer goes to the foliage and pulls something out and sits on it. Riparian thinks of the wooden horses they would make captives ride. The long triangle with a strip of copper on it, and they would let it heat on the sun, and this is what you will ride, chevalier. You are a long way from home. There is no use for horses on the atoll. We have plenty of you.

It's not wood, it's some kind of machine. Two breaking wheels and a blunted traitor chair and handlebars like a slave might push on.

Cancer tugs his white shirt down, feeling exposed up on the seat, the way it pushes his ass out. He coasts away, dark foam grinding into his red bottoms, heart pounding before he even pushes a pedal.

As he flees the dark hairy mountain of the park, the atoll opens up and the sky hits him like a splash of cool water on his itchy flesh. This inferior body is washed away and he is weightless and he can't stop smiling and for a moment the braces are gold, before the sun sinks and turns them to bloody wires.



Didn't know he had a fucking bicycle. This changes everything...not really.

Riparian watches the red petal of the boy flutter down the hill. When the boy is gone, he looks around for witnesses, that is to say, he shuts his eyes and smells for the rat stench of anyone who would dare look upon him, and this rage is unusually strong. It is the rage of, never look at me. And the rage of, every person on earth who is not looking at me and worshiping me deserves to die. It is fire made of kerosene, incapable of going out.

He bends over and throws up the chocolate bar, which after being in his stomach is like throwing up wet feces, and flies swarm to it like magic and die as soon as they touch it, until it has a tarry, bubonic aspect, a black bubbling.

He stands up, stomach empty again, knowing nothing good and sweet can fill it for long. He searches his pockets for a marker and bites the cap off and spits it out. It clatters on the concrete smelling like a shitty cigarette butt, and he writes on his arm,

KILL CANCER