

RUNG

By Blake Butler

The mass of unwed men together ate the baby in the street. They'd gathered below the enmossed chapel window, through which, at an angle, beyond many perfect pews, one could see where the altar's red shredded velvet drapery had caught fire, burned. The flames had spread in long thin gray-greenish sheaths throughout the room, across the choir pews and up the cross into the balcony where for years the tithing families gathered in laundered folds on the hard wood, this wood now skunked in excoriated lines of dark contusion in which no birds or tapeworms would burrow homes. The men had pissed in all the aisles, the racks of hymnals, the pulpit. They'd ejaculated on the altar stair, the carpet marred with smudge marks not from burning but from years of kneeling knees. There were claw marks on the wax Christ. The awnings had blanched white. There were fuckholes in the organ bellows, which once had filled the room with sound

Through the half-shattered picture window—a portrait of a purple man with bread for eyes—the remaining men humped and brayed at one another. Their teeth, semi-soft and long undentisted, dented the baby's skin before it broke. A stink burst from the young meat. The men were nude, their thumbs were missing; they had lesions on their eyes. In the lesions were further lesions, uncountable, compiled, and in the chalky mouth-washed blood that ran between them, soldered into cricking plastic tubes around their bodies, thrumping at the seams—from when, years back, the city had mandated all one blood among ex-felons—*these men must share and wear their plasma*. Within the rancid blood, the grit amassed: grit of terror, grit of sad breath, grit of swelling and recession, grit of sky crease, grit of wanting, grit of nowhere, grit of grits.

The burped blood of the baby burned the men's tongues in their mouths and in an instant, once ingested, flowed to throb the veins of their ring fingers missing rings, as all mandated unions had been dissolved. The child's flesh was dry and ratty, and it caused raspy sores along the throat, but the vomit could be reswallowed, and for many this would be enough. The men were starving, their ribcages mottled in long aggregates of color that had formed makeshift tattoos across their chests,

their new skin as long as wrecked as the lamination of the smashed sky's constant night. The men were thirsty. The men licked each other's sweat, taking care to stay clear of the wounds. The men's nipples drizzled a quasi-milk that if ingested would cause hallucination and/or massive, swollen hands—*this fact had been made flesh the hard way, and would not stop many from still drinking.*

The baby, in its wriggling, half-gone by weight now, still could move its eyes. Through its eyes, swollen in socket, it could see the lidless lid on the horizon, and there behind it, the dark weight of some impending heave, a load mistook through telescopes as nowhere. The baby could not speak. The men's nails raked the baby's organs, the slick of teeth ending the cells. The baby inside the baby had begun coughing up a ream of cloth—its moth-eaten baby blanket, the would-have-been bandages, the suit it would have worn for graduation, marriage, burial—the child had worn these things inside it.

The men's bodies increased in mass as they ingested the mass from the baby, increasing the field of pressure around their bodies at a rate too incremental for them to feel, even in their eyes, while in the chapel's forehead one bell rung.

The men, inside them, for their part, had panels of light switches that would affect the homes in regions on a coast now underwater, under tissue, under mud.

The baby's mother watched on through her bruised lids from the high ridge of the cracked chapel sidewalk—here where post-sermon congregations once had gathered with their mouths, where the reek of port wine and turned pages could still be sensed by inhalation. The men had come across the mother hiding in the church's belfry. She had hid the baby in her belly with her arms, as if by cloak of thin wrists and her hope alone they would not see the swelling of her flesh. She had managed to keep the child these five days—the incubation terms having been recently chemically reduced down from one week—and she had already named the child using the same name as her father.

This name had not, though, stopped the men, who spread her wide across the ripped ridge around the church. They'd pulled, in the way of pumpkin innards, the silent cordless baby out from inside her among a spill of saggy loin. Preceding the child's exit, there with the spew of blood and lubrication came out a string of deep black eggs, theretofore hidden unknown in the mother, though the taste of each were so encrusted, dappled, sour, that the men could not gnash through.

Some continued to try, their white eyes pressure-creaking, down on their hands and knees like dogs—the eggs each contained a mass they could not lift—and yet the mother had carried the eggs all there inside her upright all her life. Discarded, the seamless eggs still lay in glisten under the marbled moon removed from orbit, its massive spot stuck in the same coordinates for days uncounted, seeming inches from all shoulders, the night a tiny, rashing room.

Through the eyes left where her eyes were, the mother watched the men gnaw at the remains of the child, the slough of juices slapping the pavement underneath them in no rhythm, her pallid cheek skin stretched in an expression some from other years would have termed *smile*.