

Lobster Shy

“Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you're a man, you take it.” - Malcolm X

Being surrounded by people fills your stomach with stones.

Before you're done typing: “is Flower—”, an algorithm guesses what you mean. Is Flower, the skunk from Bambi, a boy? You have not seen the film since you were a boy yourself, but now you know, and the fact that the algorithm exists connects you to the thousands of other wondering souls. Flower's primary character trait, you'll recall, is bashfulness.

You mouth the words written in your journal: an animal's significance is its body. The larger the better. The most consequential change an animal can make is to derail a train.

Kentucky, 2008: you're training to be a manager. Seafood Department. The lobsters' claws are rubber-banded shut. This prevents them from killing (and eating) one another. A lobster's death, whatever the cause, contaminates the water. When one lobster dies, it becomes a movement. All the others follow, the water.

You buy a book on shyness. Early on, it notes that shyness may be genetic; even as a baby, you may have had trouble looking strangers in the eyes. You call your mother. "Oh yes," she says and you both move slowly on.

Mercury collects over time in the body. It's a bit like a Southern flea market, where any number of stalls happen to look like your grandmother's living room, with one, but only one, of everything. One old walnut chair, one ring-stained side table, one tin sign advertising flour, but dozens of Confederate collectables: a flag, a tin soldier, a gleaming belt buckle, a brand new jacket. It's like back pain that manages to stores in the whole trunk of you. Animals

that eat animals that eat animals are most susceptible to carrying large amounts of the toxin—of mercury.

The second amendment favors apex predators and carrion-eaters. It favors certain men.

You try sports for years. Basketball. Baseball. Soccer. Football. Boys are never kind to the body that drags them down because you are never truly playing a game. Shouting from the sidelines. Someone yells for you to turn around. You turn around. You turn around.

Everything reduces to feeling. Your baby brother tries to get a dead hamster to play; he drags it through the cage, pushes its head in the water bowl. He can't understand. You ask your father where meat comes from. He won't say.

There is a machine that rides along the train tracks with an arm the size of a man. On that arm is a barrel and on that barrel are teeth that shred the trees that hang too close to the tracks. You watch it on your lunch break and right now, when you are sixteen, you feel nothing.

A lobster's teeth are in its stomach. There is something significant in this. Your teeth, as well, are in your stomach.

On September 17, 2004, Edward Furlong is arrested in Florence, KY. Furlong is caught pulling the lobsters from their glass tanks and setting them on the ground in order to free them. He does this at the sea food department of the Meijer where you are working. Furlong is most famous for his role in Terminator 2. He played John Connor, the savior of the human race. Kentucky is landlocked. Lobsters can't breathe out of water. The world is round. You miss everything. You work in the back, in the trucks, away from the customers. You lift a box and turn around, set it on a conveyer, which moves it away. You lift a box, you turn around.

No one else in your family is shy.

When your father watches sports, he is loud when his team scores and louder when they do not. You stay in your room, which has a TV set, and you read, or you write, or you eat spam with crackers.

Not in theory, but in watching them in the tank: you are taken by the anatomy of the lobster. The crusher claw is massive, but the ripper claw is cuffed anyhow. When they're picked up, their whole body curves like a cat. Sometimes, you find a swimmeret—one of the tiny legs that flutter with tiny, eyelash-like hairs—floating in the water. With no teeth and no hands, who knows how they lose them.

In summer camp, you are eight and some teenagers walk into the locker room where you were showering. They ask you why you have tits.

You and your father watch movies. His favorites are Braveheart. Rob Roy. Gladiator. Movies about men that are unflinching in their willingness to die. They do it for honor. There is something beautiful about this relationship, and you feel you can almost say it.

In a consignment store, you reach out and touch the glass eye of a taxidermied deer. You run your fingers along its eyelashes. Its eyes are dry and fine. They are glass, but they are also brown, like yours. You stop yourself. Whether or not you feel it, by now, anyone would recognize you're a man.

Historically, it is always the end of the world.

Whenever you consider killing yourself, it's on the tracks behind the grocery store. But the freight train is molasses, and sometimes, in some other state.

Another thing about honor: The first time you have a tooth pulled, you brag to your girlfriend. They give you a prescription for hydrocodone. You throw it away. You refuse aspirin. It's not that bad, you say. You have nightmares about the blood clot falling out, and suffering dry socket—the excruciating condition in which the bone of your jaw is exposed through the open wound. You never ask your parents for the money it would take for a cap, for a root canal. This way, you only lose the teeth. Besides, they are in the back of your mouth where nobody sees.

You search the internet again. Erethism, or Mad Hatter's disease, derives from mercury poisoning. One of its symptoms is extreme shyness.

When you are fourteen, the white girls on the bus sing-song about your skin, which they say is dirty Mexican skin. They pretend as if they've touched you. They act as if they might die. You press your forehead on the glass. They're in middle school. You are thankful you're not allowed to hit them. You never say

anything. You are not Mexican. You are the only Mexican they have ever seen. On the news, a white man your age is wearing a MAGA cap. His smile is a wall he wants between America and Mexico. He lives in the Midwest. He's never seen a Mexican. Or maybe he's seen you.

There's a science to it. When you go to buffets, your mother eats only the most expensive foods. If there is lobster, she will eat only lobster. She will eat shrimp. Right now you're thinking about mercury. About build-up, which is harder to imagine as a pool in the body than it is as a structure made of bricks. One brick of liquid after another. You imagine her growing up, the magazine of her poor stomach.

Your mother's mother, your nana, keeps her teeth in a jar beside her bed. She shows them to you sometimes, if you ask.

Your girlfriend tells you men leave things behind for women to carry.

Other symptoms of mad hatter's disease: Red fingers. Red toes. Red Cheeks.
Loss of nails, hair, teeth.

Lobsters are believed, by some, to be immortal (under the circumstance of not being eaten. Under the assumption they are not cracked in half). You know this not to be true.

Perhaps you have seen the open revulsion in a man who receives a weak handshake. You might have met the kind of man who moves his face into the frame of yours to ensure the steel of his eyes are met—as if your face is taking an important snapshot but cannot aim itself properly up from the ground. These inadequacies feel to you more substantial than mere flaws of character. Anger is a character flaw. You are good at that, and men understand—some to the point of full honor. In any case, if one man's anger begets another's anger, or his violence to more violence, everyone will more or less agree in the predicament of these personal failures. Shyness is not that. Anger or violence should be tempered, but shyness is a Scarlett letter.

How you stand, how you hold your hands, how you lift your voice, what colors you wear, who you spend your time with, and finally this, your shyness, are all presumed evidence of a particular kind of shame which has, of course, to do with the sexual preference other men think you ought to have. But even men who say they have no problems with gay men, men in your family, are quick to curse any man who seems to align himself, physically, with motions reserved for women.

Every gesture is a fingerprint that floats over the world. Swallow: even that is a manner of speech. i.e.: A lobster never stops growing. They have two stomachs. No vocal cord. For those who care and are able to discuss it, there is a lot of talk about the lack of complexity of their brain. Even though you draw from a deep well of depression, or introversion, or intense social anxiety, nothing might stop you from interpreting the noise of a lobster entering boiling water as a cry (they can't). Consider the jewel of cortisone, like yours, found when a scientist breaks them open. They are so alien. One hardly finds time to think of what a lobster might feel for all the talk of whether or not they ought to be able. Every either-or enterprise is impossible to actually consider. Your suffering is no different. It means absolutely. Maybe nothing.

Introversion is described as a preference to keep to oneself. Shyness is an anxiety. A fear of judgment. You can be one or the other. You can be both.

Everything is a slight blur. There's nothing more to say. You are not allowed to express your pain through your eyes.

Trump, on women: "I just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it." Later, Floyd Mayweather, 50-0, says in response to the now sitting president, "People don't like the truth*** He speak like a real man spoke." Mayweather says, "Right? So he talking locker room talk." You've played with athletes who don't talk like that. The athletes who don't call you a bitch when you drop the ball are the ones that keep you in the game. None of them are famous, but you've played with them.

When you are arguing with your girlfriend, you believe you can leave the conversation because it is your right as a grown person. As a man.

Common insults for men who cry include gay, woman, baby, and girl. One can measure general revulsion by the number of slur-homonyms attached to each term that are not actually just a cross reference to another term: perhaps none for baby, for instance. Hundreds for woman/girl. Hundreds for gay (it's hard to calculate; many of these are cross-references to femininity). These insults, minus their slurs, minus their negative connotations, are descriptive of the actual self-identities of the vast majority of every human body living on the planet—of most the humans who are not straight men—of the women and children that catch the fists made by the world, who carry the planet upon their backs, who manage it and are blamed and given new names when it is said to spin wrongly. They are descriptions of those who hold, statistically, almost none of the positions of political power, who raise each other and raise men, who survive and have survived—somehow—the death sentence of being not truly a man.

As it turns out, lobsters are safe to eat. Like shrimp, they carry very little mercury. They are bottom feeders, eating only the dead. It was never something you worried about seriously. It was a fantasy.

On generosity: if you type "I'll give you something" into Google, the top guess for what you mean is "I'll give you something to cry about."

You're at your cousin's funeral. A gun went off. A box of his favorite candy, Mike and Ikes, are pinned to a bulletin board by the casket. The pastor speaks for twenty minutes about the danger of teenage mothers. To distract yourself, you read the Bible, and because you don't know anything about it, yet, you start from the beginning.

Especially when you are upset, but also any other time, you are not qualified to tell when you're being stubborn and when you're being sexist.

You are on the bottom, like a stone in a lake. The shooters at Columbine are your age. It is easier to get a gun, to accidentally find one, to fire one (you have fired them), than to vote. You go to school. You have no choice.

You press a flower in a book with your mother. You put it under a half-dozen others. It is another dead thing in a book for you to love, but this one remains hidden until, later, you remember to find it.

A man invented murder. Eve eats an apple. Perhaps she was hungry. What is the natural desire that tends a man toward murder? It is easy to find women who were told by a man what apple to touch. What apple not to touch. It is easy to make them.

Flowers cry. After nothing, they cry. After elections.

The lobsters keep their backs against the glass. Even given their pseudo-brains, David Foster Wallace believes they exhibit preference. He believes they might suffer. Facing that way, eye-to-eye, everyone to each other, what else could they be feeling?

Upon reflection: you agree: you do not need to think about anything to feel pain.

Perhaps in response to the wavering in your eyes, you grow the concrete stomach of a man. You watch people hurt other people for no reason. You'd rather be a bullet than a compromise.

When an animal looks at you it is never judging. It seems that it waits for your judgment.

Anytime you voted, you were convinced into voting.

Only women work in Seafood. You can see the white tile under the swinging door as you hose down the bone saws in the Meat Department, where only men work. You love how solitary the pork saw stands. The nubs of skin look uncannily human. You consider how pig valves work for human hearts. Look at the tits on that one, your manager says, over and over, as women pass by the window. The room looks exactly like a locker room, except there is blood smudged on the white aprons, beading on the glasses of water, blood on plastic trays, blood on the cell phones, the towels and bags of M&Ms. You last like this a long time.

You transfer.

Whenever your cat cries, you scratch under her chin and say I know, I know.

It may not seem like it to the outside observer, but you care deeply about things. You send emails, every week, to your professors. You move your car from your parents' driveway. You sneak back into the house and lay for hours under the bed, crying as quietly as you can. When your classes are over, you climb from under the bed, move your car back into the driveway. Eventually, you're taken to the hospital. You are taken. You do not drive yourself.

Because I'm a grown fucking man, you say.

Your girlfriend says you talk about marching but you never march.