



Compass Rose

Literature and Art Journal

The Dying Sounds

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The light from the TV made Jason's face look biliously gray, anemic. "I didn't think you could get through the biological clock anymore. There just aren't those kind of loopholes. That's gotta be faked. There's no way."

I shrugged. I didn't know for sure. I knew what I had been told; I knew what I had been lead to believe. Just like anyone else. But I trusted my source. "It's real, all right. Look at the film quality. Grainy. Static-y. Old. Must be from, what, like 1997? Ages ago. They could do shit like this back then." I was not as confident as I sounded, and I think Jay caught on to that pretty quick.

"You're full of shit, Audrey." But he was nervous, too. The excitement was on the surface, in the sheen of sweat on his neck, the pink of his lips. I knew how to identify it. It looked a little like the skin of the man on screen: full with last night's wet dreams and this morning's realizations.

I grinned up at him, "They didn't perfect the process of protection until at least 2093, right? People back then could die of anything. *Anything*. Can you imagine? All it would take was some psycho with a knife – and then poof. You're dead. Ha-ha. Game over. Biological clockwork meant nothing to these people. It meant babies, a metaphor, not a *lifespan*. Nothing was certain. This is totally real, no kidding. "

Jason was staring at the old VCR. “Where did you even find this outdated piece of junk? Can we rewind it? I want to see it again.”

I pressed the little button with the triangles pointing to the left and the picture lurched and backtracked in a sickening whirlwind of static and image. The man with the grubby sweatshirt erased the gaping cadmium smile from the boy’s neck. The boy’s sunken eyes widened and twitched and rolled forward to look me in the face once more. He had seen the camera then. I hadn’t noticed that the first time around. My stomach made a flip-flop and my thighs warmed a little. I tasted bile and smiled.

“I got it from the guy who sold me the tape. Real creepy fellow, too. Said to come back and see him after we watched it, wanted to know what we thought.” He had also grabbed my ass a few times, snaking his tongue into my ear and joking around about movie dates and hot-blooded youngsters. At least I *think* he was joking. I left that part out, though. Jason wouldn’t have been too happy to hear about me flirting around. He was a protective boyfriend, which was flattering, at least. “I think he was a little on the crazy side. He looked like he had just climbed out of a morgue somewhere or something. Real pale. Maybe his Time was coming up soon, but then, someone with tapes like this probably counts down, so...”

Jay wasn’t listening to me anymore. His eyes were fixed on the sickly greenish screen, his skin waxy and mouth slack with concentration.

Back inside the little basement room, the boy was backing out the door in a strange stop-motion walk. Grubby Sweatshirt was touching his arm like it was a disease, guiding him lovingly in a true perversion of a gentlemanly gesture. The door closed on the boy and the gentleman looked at the camera with a plastic smile that was slow to grow and cut off

prematurely by a black screen. I pushed play, and the smile appeared readily and premeditated, quick to fade, as the man turned to open the door.

He guided the boy into the dark little room, saying things like: yes, this way. and: yes, yes, I swear, it'll be the best fix of your life.

“You know, I heard on the news the other day that someone over in London or something reportedly broke a finger by accidentally slamming it in a door. No one knows how it happened. They're not even sure they can treat it. I mean, I think the woman was faking it, personally. And if she's not, she's screwed, right? What can they do?” I said, more to myself than anything else. Jay was way out of range. “But, if they did break it, then, I mean, wow. That's huge. Terrorists maybe? There's no explanation. There's no way...” The man in the grubby sweatshirt was smiling again, and it made me pause mid-sentence. There was something huge happening here and I had to pay attention – this was something I would never witness in person. This was about as close to it as I would come, and I wanted to make as much of it as I could. Jason was somewhere on another planet, watching people fall like wounded birds, holding his breath, drawing knives. “...There's no way that could happen, right?”

The boy sat on a bare little stool, rusty or bloody, I couldn't tell. His skin was drawn and he was thin as a rail. Yes, yes, sit just like that. Yes, yes, I keep my promises. Yes, yes, my love, my little love. The boy looked confused at this last one, but the man was behind him now, and the knife was reaching, an angry tooth waiting to bite.

Those sunken eyes looked at me again for a split second.

Then the smile was back, hugging this young and starved throat, gaping and gushing, a strange mockery of red on this discolored film. The sounds he made were incredible – wet and alive, desperate, disgusting. Then he was on the floor. Then he was dead. All it took.

Poof. Game over. The boy didn't get up and wipe it off and regenerate. His clock took no responsibility at all for what had happened. It didn't matter if he was actually supposed to live for another forty or so years. It was all over now. Just imagine.

Jay was rocking forward, legs crossed, one fingernail between his teeth. His eyes were wide and dry looking. The man on the screen was cleaning up the mess, hugging the body like a deranged child might hug a broken doll, and the tape ran out. Static took over the screen and the light in the room shifted and shivered. Jay glanced from the TV to me and back to the white noise.

"How do you suppose something like that happens?" he asked, and spat a bit of fingernail. He never took his eyes from the screen.

"What? I guess the kid was just real unlucky, I guess," I said. "And stupid. I mean, I would never fall for something like that. You know?"

Jason looked at me gravely. "There's no way you could know something like that... And besides, what would it matter if you did? Not like this could happen, anyway, right?"

My breath gathered at the back of my throat, a not quite sigh waiting for release, waiting for fulfillment. "—Right." I said, staring into middle distance, wondering. There was that warmth again, in the pit of my stomach and the base of my spine. Warm and buzzing, like life should feel. "Right. I know."

And I knew. I did. I had been attacked before (most girls have at one point or another these days) and, honestly, it really didn't live up to my expectations. The threats were political, it was no more than blackmail for flesh instead of money, and my secrets aren't really worth keeping. Too easy, but what else could he have done? Held a gun to my head?

But watching this, seeing this real thing – it made me wish for danger. I know it’s stupid, but it made me wish for a threat. Something in me yearned to go outside and see the sky for the last time. Too much safety can be a bad thing, too. I wondered what it would have been like in those last integral moments, when you’ve heard the gunshot, when you knew it was over. To be able to know that you were about to die, be denied years and years of mundane life: never be married, never have kids, never get an office job or a raise. Imagine how much these people appreciated things, to what extent they needed each other. I shifted onto the couch, rested my head in the crook of Jay’s shoulder, desperate for contact. His skin felt clammy. I wanted to be someone’s life-altering impulse. I whispered, “But what if --?”

The static from the television swallowed the ensuing silence whole. There was nothing awkward about this pause – it was merely dramatic and appropriate.

“What if what?” Jason asked, an edge to his voice.

“I don’t know... Imagine the rush you would get from something like that. To *kill*. You could be a disease, a virus. You could be a cancer no one could cure. You could be unignorable. Is that even a word?” Suddenly, I was trying to convince him of something. I had no control over the words pouring out of my mouth. I wanted him to want me that badly. His hand was stroking my hair, so comforting. I listened to the beat of his heart underneath his red flannel shirt, an erratic, hammering force.

“You have got one hell of an imagination, Audrey.” But I could see his color rising. I could smell his interest. He wouldn’t look at me. He usually didn’t – not when he was excited. Jason would always be too embarrassed to really look at me during anything even remotely intimate. Hugs were done with closed eyes; kisses, too. And sex happened with a faraway gaze into that middle distance of remembering, focus on the posters on the wall:

Man of La Mancha was not as personal or threatening as my face all screwed up and gasping. He never looked, never saw. I tolerated and it felt like masturbation.

I thought of those eyes, staring. I felt guilty, but not as much as I felt turned on, heavy, interested. I imagined myself on the little bloody stool, waiting for God.

Jason's eyes were mad, staring with a halogen bright gaze, but not at me. He was rewinding again, and pausing every so often to examine something in the little world inside that box. I tried to imagine life ever being that transient, that fragile. I tried to imagine the passing of time being that meaningless. "I wonder if people were afraid of getting old, back then," I muttered.

Jay grunted an agreement, but kept on staring. He was busy opening and closing the little red line with the merest push of a button. It was enthralling and strange to watch it in repetition like that. How easy it looked to slice through skin! Hard to believe that the steel wouldn't bend. Hard to imagine flesh parting, so simple, so willing. It seemed natural, like it was just doing its intended purpose. There was a sense of overwhelming destiny here. Strange that we should have changed something that used to be so graceful; now it was clunky and awkward, that resistance.

"I mean, if anything could kill them, no matter where they were on their time chart, don't you think they'd be too busy worrying about that to worry about old age? I guess they probably died young," I said. Jason couldn't hear me. He was busy listening to the dying sounds. I was busy listening to his heart race. "It must have felt terrifying to be alive. I wonder if that hurts?" At that moment, though, I think I knew exactly how it felt. Jason's heart was the drum rhythm that drives men to the gallows.

Jay looked up at that. "You want to try it?"

A wave of relief swept over me. It crested and broke into a thousand tiny pieces of hope and anticipation and fear. My fingertips tingled, as if they had spent too long a time out in the cold, and I suckled on their tips, trying to pull the blood back into them. Jay got up and stretched, hands reaching high above him, face flushed, hair ruffled into a matted golden halo, back-lit by the death of a boy on a stool. I watched him from my seat on the couch, curled around a throw pillow. He looked capable of anything.

I let the pillow drop with a dull thud. We both found ourselves staring at it, as if it were a weight that had just been dropped from the sky, allowing blueness through again. I wiped at the film that had formed at the corners of my eyes and swallowed the orange in my throat. I coughed out, "I'm getting hungry. What do you think of burgers?"

Jay nodded and I stumbled to my feet, unsteadily turning on the lights on and tugging at my newly blind eyes. We shuffled out the door and dropped to our seats in Jason's car. I let myself drift, settled in the passenger seat, while Jay drove through stop signs and took wide right turns. The little cardboard Dalmatian dangling from his rear view mirror had just enough perfume left in it to give me a slight headache. The man in the radio was swallowed by static, and I didn't even notice until Jay cut the engine and we made our way into Jack's Place, the little greasy spoon diner we had discovered the day I found out I wasn't pregnant.

"What'll it be, kids?" the waitress asked, tapping a pen against her thigh. Her eyes were drifting up and down one of the guys sitting at the counter. Her voice was flat with boredom and want. Jason blinked a few times, looking at me, lost. I managed to grind out, "Two burgers, please. Pickles." She nodded without bothering to write it down. Then, Jay and I were alone again. He was picking at the paint on the table, chipping away banana yellow flakes, unearthing cheap pressed board and plastic.

I unrolled my silverware from its napkin and fiddled with the strip of paper that held the packet together, picking at the little clumps of dried glue. Jay's eyes were fixed on my knife, and I was aware that he knew I was watching him. It felt like the whole diner must have heard our thoughts, asking the question: would it bend? I watched as my stubby pink fingers wrapped around the handle. We held our breath. Even the back of the man at the counter seemed to stiffen. Traffic outside slowed to a sluggish whirr, the clanking of dishes in the kitchen found a rhythm, no one coughed or blew their nose or said a word. It was just my hand and the knife, just Jay's eyes and that glinting, promising surface. I tightened my grip. Jason licked his lips.

"Two burgers." A set of plates laden with heavy meat and dripping pickles forced their way into my field of vision, rapping that moment. I shifted the knife behind the red napkin dispenser, out of sight, its virgin edge marred by our meal. The man at the counter paid his bill and left. The waitress huffed a sigh and plodded back into the kitchen. We were left alone in the aftermath of almost.

As we ate, the grease from the burger dripped down Jay's knobby fingers, pulsing with every bite. He didn't bother to wipe it up, it just kept gushing. I dipped my pickle in a glop of mayonnaise and chewed, willing myself to do the same. After only two bites, though, I wiped my hands on my jeans, leaving finger trails, and trying not to care. Jay was massaging the juices from his meat into his palms like a salve.

On the way out, I let the door swing shut on my hand. It was heavy and sharp, but it bounced harmlessly, creating a hollow feeling in my fingers. I knew they wouldn't bruise, but I shook them anyway, stimulating blood flow.

Once we were belted in in Jay's car, he looked at me, eyes glazed and fixed on my eyebrows, creating the illusion of eye contact, and said: "Maybe we could try a tire iron."

I nodded, whispered, “I want to go home.” Whispered, “Tire irons don’t slice.”

We drove the rest of the way in silence.

Once we were back inside the living room, everything imploded. We sat back down in front of the television: Jay on the floor, back against the couch, fiddling with the remote for the VCR, me curled around my throw pillow, buried in the couch cushions. The boy was inching towards the stool again, and I watched his chest rise and fall. I counted his breaths, even as I held my own. I only gasped for air once the boy had stopped breathing and the man in the grubby sweatshirt was walking back through that basement door, a satiated Dionysius whose wine was the reddest of reds.

I was vaguely aware of Jason’s hand rubbing at his groin, of his labored breathing and that ruddy smell that happens when he’s like this. The only words that managed to filter into my head through the hazy light from the video, from Jay’s lithe form tensing and shifting in front of me, from the unsettled feeling in my gut, were: How strange. I never really thought of my life as ironic. Boring, maybe. Certainly not bizarre. And yet here we were, planning to do what was, quite safely and happily, impossible. “How do you want to try it?” Jason pried, voice strung taut. Even stranger, I felt that Jay loved me more in that instant that he ever had. Even at prom, all primed and glittered, our first time (cliché, I know, I hated that) was nothing compared to this feeling. And yet he wasn’t even touching me. We were separate, but together. Closer than before. So strange. “...Audrey?”

I didn’t know. It was too massive a decision to make so quickly. He shivered, a benevolent force, waiting, wanting. I needed time. I hadn’t given this enough thought. It was only an abstract, only an idea. I mean, I had heard about people who went a little nuts and tried to commit suicide, tried to make themselves die, but, secretly, I didn’t think anyone ever *really* tried – not seriously, anyway. Not with any real notion of achieving success. I

didn't believe, but I did hope. There must be something on this earth that makes us precious. And here I was. Here we were. I felt Jason take my fingers in his other hand and kiss their tips with lips dewy from exertion.

But this wasn't the same. I didn't want to die. Just to see – experiment. See if I could. See what it would feel like. To be threatened, to be seen. To have someone who cared enough about me to go so far as to even hurt me, even achieve the impossible. It would be like a fairy tale, like a legend. Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, maybe Neverland was closer than I thought.

I wondered where all those nuts ended up, if any one of them ever got anywhere with it, or if they were all just as crazy as our comfort zones dictated. Were there ever flukes? Did I want to be a fluke? My nose was running, my eyes stung. Everything itched from sweat and nerves. Jason was murmuring my name, as if in a dream, but his eyes were following the boy again. The knife was tracing his throat, pressing in, drawing out droplets like a baby sucking mother's milk. I felt my guts flutter.

“Well?” Jason murmured, just above a whisper. I imagined him saying to me, “Yes, yes, love.” His eyes drifted from the boy to my ankles to my breasts. I watched him watching me. The boy was sitting on the stool, slumping on the stool. The man was looking lovingly down at him, admiring his work, admiring the color and smell and sound of a young and fruitful death. He gathered the body into his arms again, as he had over and over this evening, as he had every time someone watched this tape, every time someone touched themselves to these images, this grotesque and lovely story.

Jason let go of my hand and hit the stop button. He began rewinding again, moving against himself slowly, as if he had all the time in the world, just waiting for my answer.

“I don’t know,” I whispered the lie with ease. It felt like silk on my tongue. “How do you want to do it?”

He smiled, satisfied, suddenly transformed into the man I knew and loved, for whom I bought pralines and crème ice cream, who tickled me when I didn’t want to wake up the morning after. “I don’t know either, but we’ll think of something, right?” He looked right at me, made actual eye contact. I never noticed how small his eyes were before this, beady and wide-set, dangerous and beautiful. How could I have missed that for so long?

His fingers slipped and the remote dropped with a thud.

On the screen, the boy was backing out the door, the man in the grubby sweatshirt was smiling again, small white teeth in two sharp little rows. The door closed. The tape ran out.

I picked up the remote control and hit play.