

Pregnant Seahorse

by Keeley Young

In high school, it was Forrest and Gregory. The two met in the eighth grade, the flung-together way two twelve-year-olds would meet one another. A boxy seating chart projected out onto the whiteboard with their names side by side. Forrest had braces. Gregory, with worse teeth, would mention *Minecraft* in passing and come late to class once in a while. He would stutter through an explanation. Most of the time, it was his mother's fault—she would make them run late, she would eat up time in the morning struggling to get out of bed, although Gregory would frame it as *the late shifts made her exhausted*. She was raising three boys. One of them liked *Minecraft*.

Forrest and Gregory started dating in the tenth grade. It was strange for them, to be out in their sexualities, holding hands as they walked down the undercover pathways from where Gregory had bought a meat pie and an orange juice, to the crop of concrete that constituted somewhere to sit. Somewhere to notice. Be noticed. Sometimes a classmate would shove their teenage-greasy hands against Forrest's shoulders, slamming him into the tiled walls of the toilet block. He started to avoid them. He started to train his bladder to retain the need for him to go to the bathroom until he caught the bus home, and he'd wail out, internally, when he sat at home on the toilet. Like the homophobia of it all clung to his skin regardless. He was fourteen and he felt fourteen.

Billy was a friend, then. No one spoke of their sexualities unless you asked them about it, but Forrest and Gregory and Billy would have infrequent sleepovers at that age, since the three of them met at twelve. No one questioned boys, no one thought boys talked about kissing and what it meant. When Forrest and Gregory started to date, Billy readjusted. It was comfortable, then. He had other friends, in other classes, but he was oh so sweet on the friendship he had with the two boys who were falling in love with one another. Billy thought himself *lucky*. He was weaving for himself a transition from hanging around the primary school friends that couldn't quite *get* him—they talked so much about the shit he didn't know anything about, and by fourteen they just wanted to *fuck bitches* (or something a little less crude). Billy looked at them like they looked at him. One of us is a freak, and it's not me. He couldn't have the freedom that Forrest and Gregory had, but he could ogle it. He could bear witness to it. This ritual, this stance of accepting that the crushes on girls were just truces with his old friends, could be possible. He figured he would have to persevere until after graduation, but that thought hadn't come to him yet.

It was late in the year, the weather beginning to warm. Forrest and Gregory and Billy overlapped, then quietened down as they prepared for a series of exams each dreaded for different reasons. Forrest spent a few sleepless nights running ideas through his head, falling back on old memorising techniques. Gregory studied until nine at night, then shut the lid of his laptop and collapsed into bed. Billy furiously masturbated, paused to drink a glass of milk, then opened his notes and stared at them with an overwhelming headache. Sometimes he woke up in the morning and he couldn't remember if it was Forrest or Gregory he'd been kissing in his dream. Sometimes either Forrest or Gregory would wake up and send a sleep-around-the-eyes selfie to the other.

It was late in the year, the weather beginning to warm, and the three boys were figuring out how to be men. Forrest had this ambition: he wanted to get through high school, get accepted into university, go through the motions of becoming qualified to teach. He saw himself in a classroom, younger children than he is now, little minds inside little legends. The thought of teaching high schoolers, remembering what he thought about at sixteen versus what they would be thinking about while they stared at him half-unfocused, petrified him. Billy would study. Something like a gap year sounded promising and exciting but his parents would shame him for it. A silent shame, really. They'd wonder why he couldn't make it work. Vacation plans would revert into getting hooked on the latest RPG and drinking at parties. Gregory took a career-aptitude test and it printed results labelling him the dream crematoriumist...he just thought he was making up words in his head. A scene replayed in his head for an hour or so, jerking a silver metal tray back and forth, back and forth, watching the lifeless corpse of an old woman like a distant cousin to his grandmother become a lit cigarette. Gregory took the test again. It said: slacker. He liked that.

Gregory quickly realised he was this time just playing *The Sims 2*. His little humanoid figure had left the sofa, moved to the computer, and spat *job search* from the menu. The slacker career had a little symbol of a coffee sitting on a saucer. He salivated.

During an exam, the three of them glanced up at the exact same time. They all took note of the time on the clockface: half of the test time had elapsed.

Their relationship was the typical high school fanfare. Forrest and Gregory fought over the mundane things, but neither ever cheated. On graduation morning, Gregory dropped his pants and sent a picture of his semi-hard cock to his loving boyfriend. Forrest was already dressed, tying his shoes in the hallway. He'd already seen Gregory's cock plenty of time. He was pissed this was his boyfriend's reaction to the last of their fights, which had ended sourly the night before. Forrest still salivated.

A year passed, and Forrest was celebrating four months of being single. Although celebrating was an awful word for it, as he stared at his naked body in the mirror and couldn't remember the last time someone really took in his assured-beauty and complimented him genuinely on it. Every little text message flirt could only be taken on its face value, and sometimes he would read a comment about how gorgeous he is, how pretty his face is, and think it was just something they regurgitated to anyone they wanted to sleep with. Like an -insert name here- phenomenon. Forrest and Gregory kept in touch, but there was no touch. A brief hug, a drunken handshake, maybe. They went to the same university, they were still friends, they were still devastatingly attracted to each other. Gregory was always sitting in intimate cafés, stealing the WI-FI, reading up on mind-numbing texts about marketing strategies and target demographics. He'd convince himself he liked this sort of stuff, and if it killed him, it killed him. He bought so many condoms after the break-up and barely used any of them. Gregory's depression stunk like the cum-stained sock underneath his bed in his room in the cheap student housing he moved into to outrun his mother's depression. He'd go to therapy if he could afford it.

Billy wanted Forrest so bad it haunted him like a poltergeist. They'd slept together once, about three weeks after the breakup. Billy burned the memory into his brain. Jokingly, they laughed off matching on a dating app, and conversation sprung again. Billy was surprised Forrest wanted to date again, although if he checked the time spent apart it would clock in at four months and eight days. He navigated talking to them both, dangling a carrot in front of the boy he thought he would never have a chance of being with, and distracting the other with a good time so he'd go off and be distracted in someone else's bed. He thought he could love Forrest forever.

In university, it was Forrest and Billy.

The thrill of the pursuit was never lost on sweet, charismatic, down-to-earth Billy. He stayed in the same boring, exhausting, necessary job to support himself, to take his new boyfriend out on dates, and to plan for whatever future he could position himself for. One without pause, maybe. He gushed over Forrest in front of a half-made presentation, the look of pure excitement giving him anime eyes. They went on a romantic getaway for Valentine's Day, stayed in a cute bungalow with views of the mountainous horizon, and tried to one-up each other with their I-love-yous. They had sex underneath the faux-rain of the showerhead and it was only slightly awkward.

Gregory started to like their Instagram pictures out of genuine support.

At some sort of family event, perhaps a birthday or an anniversary, Forrest's aunt asks the pair if they have any plans to get married. It's the refreshing sort of thing neither expected from their relatives. They were a homosexual couple mingling with Christian, faith-based people, who devoured pigs-in-a-blanket without question, and now seemed genuine about Billy's involvement in the family long-term. Forrest and Billy had been together for two and a half years. There were complications, delays: Forrest deferred his studies for a year when his mother got sick, and he wore the stress of waiting to lose her plainly on his face. She recovered, briefly. Billy failed his way through a semester, then slapped himself silly to recuperate. Redoing the subject meant redoing his personal torment. He'd stumble out of a late-night essay-writing session using his phone as a torch while he searched for something to drink. He liked vodka, gin, rum, bourbon, beer, Baileys, red wine, honestly he didn't discriminate too much. He would pair the alcohol with squares of chocolate, uneven slices of cheese, grapes, Easter eggs from six months ago, or he'd bite straight down on a carrot. He liked to think of it as late-night grazing.

Gregory was in another relationship, and he hadn't spoken to Forrest in months. They were feuding exes, without the speaking. In university, it was Gregory and Lee. Gregory worried talking to Forrest could look nefarious, a spell to incite angry, bloody sex—bloody because it would scar and slice and ruin the pretty complexion of his partner, Lee. Forrest was peeved at Gregory. If this were some overdramatic television show from the nineties or the naughties, there would be a print-out of Gregory's lovely face on the backside of the bedroom door and Forrest would take shots at the eyeballs with red-and-blue feathery darts. What was Billy to do but show him some support? Gregory gave Lee the sort of orgasm you'd write about fifty years from now in your memoirs. Lee went home to his parents' place and journaled all the details, but he wrote about something else too. The affair he was having with the pretty boy who mowed the lawn, shirtless, three houses down.

Billy would have collapsed to his knees to propose the moment Forrest made offhand hints he wanted to be swept off his feet. Did gay men want sparkling engagement rings? Billy had to remind himself he was twenty-two, barely employed, and spent so much of his paycheck on alcohol. He went cold turkey immediately. Friends sent him messages in all-CAPS: COME OUT BRO! DRINKS ARE CHEAP. He wanted to be on his knee for Forrest.

Forrest booked himself a solo vacation overseas and went silent for two and a half weeks.

Gregory wanted to kill Lee. He felt like a dumbass.

He messaged Billy, again: *I want to talk to you and Forrest again. Please.*

They were all twenty-three. Billy was in the middle of vacuuming the kitchen when arms snaked around his body and he jolted upwards, almost flinging the vacuum out of his hands. Gregory had gotten a haircut the morning before, was shirtless already, and had the stupidest grin on his face. He was the happiest he had been since he was sixteen. The two rented out a flat together in an inner-city suburb they could hardly afford, but there were plenty of things they rejected needing: alcohol caused problems, going on vacation was time-consuming anyway, they could just share each other's clothes, and neither of them felt like bothering to go to the dentist. Some nights Billy would flash his coffee-stained teeth and ask his roommate-slash-partner if he needed any work done. They just bought teeth-whitening toothpaste at the supermarket instead. Billy and Gregory had been living together for three months. About a week into living together, they stripped each other naked and "explored each other's bodies", which was true code for licked every single inch of skin and flip-fucked for what felt like four days straight. Gregory called in sick to work one morning so he could suck Billy's cock and they could binge a season of *Taskmaster* in bed together.

Forrest was a little distant, at first. He'd panicked and fled a two-and-a-half-year relationship because it started to get too serious, and now he watched his two exes flaunt their healthy co-dependency the few times they all met up to reminisce about high school. One dreary, rainy night, they met in the city in a restaurant a street away from the waterfront, and Forrest scratched at a rash developing on his left thigh as Billy and Gregory sat in front of him, more normal than possible. They weren't lovey-dovey romance-y. They didn't hold hands at the table. They didn't even kiss in front of him. Forrest was frozen in his seat, unnoticeably so, picturing their dicks and their firm asses, himself completely retracted from any and every picture. He retreated to his apartment and stalked the dating apps for someone to remind him he could be loved again...someone started asking him what he was looking for, and he felt his face flush and warm up. A panicked scream escaped from his lips and he tossed the phone across the room. It landed face-down in the middle of his bed. Lonely. Sinking into the divot made by his body.

BILLY: I know this isn't a serious thing – we're just having fun.

GREGORY: It's been freaking Forrest out. Maybe we should stop.

It was like protecting the heart of a sensitive child. Don't confuse him, don't confuse this. They would have their fun in private. Gregory was too depressed for a relationship anyway. Billy didn't want to feel like the relationship would have to take a side-step once he started to work more and prioritise a better future for himself. It would just be him now, he knew that.

Forrest was so addicted to *RuPaul's Drag Race*. It used to be their thing, the three of them. They would watch reality television together; it was an attempt to keep the friendship alive once they stopped seeing each other every single day in high school. Graduation happened, four days later they were marathoning a season of *Big Brother* they'd found on YouTube. They all got something out of it, something different, but something similar, too. Now he was obsessing over lavish gowns and comedy challenges and watching the mouths of these drag queens move along with the lyrics of whichever song was selected for the week. He started focusing too much on the movement of the mouths. He was rewatching a season he'd already seen. The queen was poorly rehearsed, flubbing the parting of her lips. Forrest mouthed at the television. His phone buzzed beside him. It was Gregory.

Billy and Gregory kept living together for the split rent, but they moved further out from the city, trading proximity for space. There was a new group chat. The three of them texted every so often, but communication had its rules. They didn't dredge up the past, they didn't go around fucking each other just because it was a convenience. New beginnings or something. Gregory liked to try inviting Forrest to see movies with him, or otherwise they would sit in the park in the city and people-watch. Forrest would pack himself a sandwich or a strange assortment of snacks, like muesli bars and packets of sultanas and wholemeal rolls with nothing on them and tins of tuna. They saw horror movies together and brushed arms, accidentally. Forrest was trying to convince Gregory to start a Letterboxd account and write reviews for all the movies they saw together, or saw apart, but Gregory only nodded along and winced internally. It's all just more effort for him, and he was so sleepy a nap could happen every time he rides the train into town. Billy dated someone named Troy for five weeks.

There was a romance drought. Forrest and Gregory and Billy seemed to align at once, a harsh snap that saw the three of them each delete any dating app off their phones and spend the weekends making their spaces pretty and tidy, and saving money so they could all afford a planned holiday to Sydney. Forrest reconnected with someone he met in his first year of university, and they kissed. It was brief, fleeting, and Forrest rejected him when he attempted to tug at the waistband of Forrest's pants. Gregory was eating up his personal leave days, and this was even before the weeklong vacation in the New South Wales capital. He cancelled appointments at the last respectable minute. He broke a dinner plate. Billy stumbled forward for what he thought was the miraculous appearance of a mirage but all he lapped up was the miserable memory of how life could be absolutely fucking cruel. He was good at bouncing back, though.

At twenty-four, it is Forrest, Gregory, and Billy. A string of names separated by commas.

A patch of sunlight finds itself a new home on the carpeted floor of a twenty-something-year-old's bedroom. The curtain was left open just to peek, doubtfully on purpose. Gregory sits cross-legged on the bed, the sheet loosely draped over his hairy legs. He has a pair of scissors in his hands. In his head, he pictures himself sharply impaling his stomach with the blades, twisting to elicit a more pained scream. He can't move his eyes off the scissors. They're a light blue pair he bought from a stationary supplies store three months ago, in some phase of attempting to get back into art. He would draw whatever it was he thought of drawing, either something helplessly sombre or a realistic rendering of someone's penis, then use the scissors to cut out the image in a square box. Trapping it, or releasing it. He pinned a hurried drawing of a penis to Billy's bedroom door one morning, before he slumped into the kitchen to pour himself too much of the full cream milk.

The scissors.

Gregory's got nowhere to be. He could take the train into the city, wander the cobbled paths along South Bank listening to an assorted playlist that he'll frequently just skip through. He thinks about the cost of that: a zapped payment for the train ticket, straight off his card, then the cost of lunch, or else his stomach growls like The Hungry Tiger from the second or third *Wizard of Oz* novel. He can't bend to his knees and nibble at the ground, he can't so pretend to be the grazing gazelle now half-limp but completely eager. Worst case, he ducks into the local Woolworths supermarket and hopes they have something for like, \$4.50 that'll sustain him until Billy screams out his name hoarsely from the kitchen in the evening. They've taken to eating dinner together, an old married couple without the sex, or the sweet nothings, or the true bickering. He loves that. Not wanting to tear his best friend's hair out. They adopted those monikers together, *twinsies*, a rite of passage for twenty-four-year-olds who live together for long enough. Who remember teenage versions of themselves, of the other, how simple and idealistic and quaint and less volatile they were. Gregory holds the scissors.

He doesn't think about the movements. It could be swift in one direction, or the other, but he'd gurgle at the blood and clutch at his *wherever* and yell out for Billy and realise the very next step would be for someone to lock him in a mental health ward and prepare him for improvement. The scissors still feel warm in his grip. Pretty scissors.

In the living room, he collapses down on the couch and begins flicking through the only streaming service he pays for. The boys look beautiful. Gregory is half unclothed, still, and occasionally reaches for the bulge in his skimpy pyjama shorts to readjust his cock. He thinks about pulling them off, the shorts, and masturbating right there in the living room. It's not like Billy would care very much.

About a week earlier, they spent one late, late evening on this very couch completely naked, sharing between them a bottle of Sprite and a packet of Crispy M&Ms. Occasionally they would allude to this freedom, this nudist-colony lifestyle that sparked all of the sudden. The temperature explained very little—it was comfortable clothed or not. They weren't thirsting desperately for one another, times like those had passed some months ago. Gregory never made suggestive glances, and if Billy made them, he wasn't paying enough attention to notice. They skimmed for the gayest thing on the streaming service and pressed play. Maybe subconsciously they wanted to be hornier. Maybe subconsciously they wanted to be rejected by a screen, by actors in character. It was one in the morning and Gregory edged himself. He glanced over at Billy, who was passed out in an uncomfortable position on the couch.

'I'm fucking pathetic,' he whispered to his ex, his friend, his ex's ex, his friend's friend.

On the sofa, Gregory left the pair of light blue scissors beside him. Half-tucked underneath a pillow, their curved loops poking out like a childish W. He hit play on the next episode of an adult-animated show about government conspiracy theories. His morning made for an awful teleplay: an uninspired episode of *Gogglebox*, a life-drained portrait of modernity, one male of the species in close quarters with a papercut on his finger and a gaping hole in the space between his ears. Not even the energy to point at something hilarious. Gregory laughs, as if on cue, then realises he doesn't even know why he's laughing.

There are beautiful memories. A few weeks before the break-up, when things were content with Forrest. All is fair in love and university. They had dinner plans, in the sense that it was Forrest's brother's birthday and the parents had made a reservation. Sitting in a booth, leaning against the plumped wall, their hands clasped together, it had every right to be a normal memory. A forgotten thing, because they would say *happy birthday, Cohen*, and forget about the evening. It's easier to remember something when there is less complication, less adult-world seeping in. Forrest's mother was in the bathroom. Cohen was only half paying attention. The happy couple got lost in each other's eyes. They were, what, eighteen-years-old and could forget for a moment that time would pass them by. That mistresses like past, present, and future would come into their beds and seduce them with forehead kisses. Forrest leaned close to whisper in Gregory's ear.

'My brother is frustrated he doesn't have something like what we have,' he said, talking like a teenager who couldn't possibly see the future.

Gregory is on the couch, watching television, overwrought with dreadful thoughts. Billy is awake now, busying himself in the kitchen. Brewing a coffee. Looking at pictures of men and women sitting around

in half-filled cafés, hands petite on oversized coffee cups. Mornings unsettle Gregory. They must be an almost unnoticeable part of the day for Billy.

Two hours pass. The television glow competes with the picture rectangle of his phone, but Gregory remains on the sofa, after an approximate half hour back in his bedroom, splayed out on the bed trying to convince himself to get the energy to masturbate over pictures of his exes. There is still an unhealthy collection of Lee's nudes on his phone, but sometimes he passes them over for pictures of Lee in an immaculate suit for a cousin's wedding, or, rather, the singled out image of him waking up from a nap in an apartment that becomes more and more unfamiliar by the morning. They ceased any sort of contact not long after the breakup. As opposed to the sometimes-symbiotic relationship he maintains with Forrest. Beautiful Forrest. All those trees. The lanky branches swaying blissfully in the wind, now not at all lanky but the perfect size, the perfect shape, nature that will evangelise.

His mother would have something to say: do something else with your life, Greg. Get out into the sunshine and imbibe the rays, stuff any of the excess into a hollowed-out pit in your stomach for the wonderful sort of pick-me-up you could find yourself needing on those rainy Brisbane evenings. Get out of the house. Like a lingering ghoul is plaguing your walls, and giving into these thoughts only makes the it/them latch on stronger.

He could photoshop pictures of himself at the park, or the beach.

If only he had skills. If only he could prove successful, with such a lie.

An hour passes. Gregory watched the first twenty minutes of a movie called *Never Been Chris'd* before he realised he still had a brain and could actually do something more exciting with his life than watch something constructed out of arts and crafts supplies and the algorithm. He was knee-deep into an episode of *Snake in the Grass* instead. The general concept of the show involved one player deceiving the three others during a series of challenges. A blonde-haired woman dangled from a cord, flinging her arms out towards something tied in the canopy. Gregory thought she looked a little familiar. He brushed his hand against the pillow beside him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the pair of scissors, slightly less obscured now. He scorns looking at them. They are ugly. They are the worst thing in this apartment. Or. The worst thing in the apartment when he leaves it.

The host of the reality television show is on screen, blurring into the background. Gregory isn't paying attention, playing a mindless mobile game that requires him to flick his finger back and forth, up and down, on the screen without requiring much brain power. The morning is becoming much of a repetition. Gregory is wasting his time. Gregory is loving it...the slipping away feeling of barely paying a moment's notice to the minutes passing him by, the casual comfort of a ceiling fan's breeze tickling the hair on his chest.

It's 12:12pm and Gregory stands at the bathroom sink with two pills in his palm. His head is only half-convinced of a headache, but he aches, or he complains of the aches. The Panadol will soothe. The Panadol will at least convince him it soothes. He pops one of the pills in the back of his mouth, staring at himself in the mirror. The gluey consistency of the coating of the pill mixed with the water he also tipped into his throat sticks to his teeth. The pill sits in the back, wedged between his tongue and the gum. Something today is prodding at him. When he was younger, his mother spent precious time training him on how to swallow down pills with relative ease. It's a gradual thing, sometimes. Practice makes perfect. Swallowing down a pill. He would never get in his head about it, but he would be too flippant, too adventurous, and try to slam down the pill without any water at first. The scrunched-up look on his face meant he'd been unsuccessful, then he'd gulp down a mouthful of water and feel the pill slide down with the smooth belly against the front of his throat. His mother would scold him: next time, just do it with a glass of water, Greg. Her scolding would be playful, light-hearted. She would wink when she said it, then turn on her heels and move toward the kitchen, where she'd find the bottle of wine waiting for her in the fridge.

Gregory gags. Swallows down the pill. He raises his hands to rub both temples, but instead his hands seem to react on their own, planting themselves over his eyes. The bathroom, from his perspective, becomes muted in darkness. He doesn't have to look at himself, see himself, acknowledge any part of himself. This darkness, it is peaceful. The slight aftertaste of the Panadol tablets is the only thing reminding him he is on Planet Earth. Otherwise, he can picture himself whenever he likes—a void will do, not an outward escape from everything he's feeling, but a hole in the wall of space and time. Surely. There's a quiet knock at the bathroom door.

'Gregory,' Billy says, knocking once more.

Behind closed eyes, a mask made of his hands, and a hole in the *wall*, Gregory lets out a polite response. 'Occupied.' There's no sound or movement for a few seconds. Gregory is doing his best impression of a patient stranger in a public restroom, determined to be left uninterrupted. The door is locked, or he thinks it is. The sharp adjustment to paying attention to his roommate's voice has shaken him out of things, and he lowers his hands to his sides and recuperates with the mirror. This is a face a mother could love. Not a boy, not how it seems. This is the face of someone who has to reject absolutely everything to be happy, and yet, what the hell does he know about *happy*?

At the door, another repetition of that name— 'Gregory.'

Billy sounds confused more than anything. 'A package came for you.'

Propped up in front of his laptop, Forrest is like a marionette. If directed, he moves his head this way. With a fling of a string his arm comes into frame, and he takes caution to brush his fringe back without lingering too much, without seeming disinterested. This is a therapy appointment. The last six have been entirely online—he suddenly lost the ability to travel the distance to the appointment, or that is the story he compounds at the end of every session. Forrest does want to quit. Stripping off the expense from his bank account summary would be brilliant. He'd only been seeing this very therapist for a couple months: the first three sessions happened over a span of two weeks, a flimsily-arranged schedule so he could attempt to combat an anxiety attack. Now he feels weighted. He would spend entire sessions talking about one conversation, something that had barrelled out of a few choice words he said to his then-partner, Billy. Forrest to Billy: I was just surprised you're so committed to us. Billy to Forrest: I love you, dumbass, and we've spent conversations alone, in the dark, talking about working on this future together. The silence would then clear its throat. If it had lips, it would take a drink. The silence to Forrest and Billy: love is just a word people say to excuse themselves. Did you mean it?

Forrest listens to his therapist. He is a tall, light-haired Scandinavian man. Tall, Forrest remembers from the in-person sessions. This towering figure extending out his hand. Forrest had swiftly buried any sort of attraction—the first appointment came at a time where he couldn't rise out of bed without having some sort of sexual fantasy, jerking off his cock with some lube from the bedside table. The night of the first session he tried picturing the therapist in the nude in that office, straddling a wheelie office chair, still wearing his socks. Forrest was horny until he wasn't. Eventually the projected image became too sterile. Too Sigmund Freud. The therapist was rejecting his process of thoughts, running a hand down his thigh and communicating to Forrest that it was problematic to set the wrong boundaries with your exes, even your friends.

With a healthier perspective on imagining his therapist sexually, Forrest thinks he's waned off needing this therapy. He doesn't want to leave the apartment for it, he doesn't want to get dressed for the laptop sessions. Sometimes he's completely naked below the waist and he never feels strangely uncomfortable, or wildly inappropriate. Mostly he covers his entire body in a blanket, though. He hates his skin. The light brown hair on his arms and legs. The freckles. The scales that have formed on the underside of his knees. The apartment is too miserable sometimes to only wear long-sleeved clothing, or slather himself in fabric, so the thin blue sheet from the bed is sometimes the most reliable fix. During a therapy session, he has a distraction. He positions himself in front of the webcam, flicks the

annoying switch in his brain, and figures out the responses he wants to give, but also the ones everyone expects of him. He treats this session as the grand finale—loose questions to be resolved, a winner to be crowned, a lengthy hiatus. He'd tell the tall Scandinavian this would be the last of their sessions, and he'd pocket the cost of therapy from now on. Like a squirrel and nuts.

Forrest briefly bends out of the view of the camera. He scratches at the patch of skin on the left side of his left ankle, aggressive, unsettled. Fragments and flakes cling underneath his fingernails. His therapist's voice is still in his ear, following through with a short monologue about how to combat anxiety around getting into another relationship. Forrest had made a passing comment about his loneliness—a probable mistake, he thinks, contorting his body to continue on this tangle of himself.

'When you meet the right person, that's a complicated narrative, isn't it?' The therapist says, as Forrest freezes awkwardly in his place. 'If you spend all your time looking for this so-called right person, are you judging a potential partner on how you feel around them, about them, or the boxes that they tick for you?' Forrest adjusts himself back upright, like an unfurling of a dusty Moroccan rug. He tries to avoid making eye-contact with the video footage of his therapist. He has to wonder how his image reflects back on the other screen, in that office room he loves no longer frequenting. Although was he ever really there? There's a brief moment of lag. Forrest scratches his knee.

When the appointment begins to wrap up, and the therapist reminds the patient he'll send the invoice through to his email, Forrest adjusts in his seat and taps the screen of his phone. He notices the small string of messages, including a couple from Billy. Ex-boyfriend Billy, close friend Billy. Billy who posted a shirtless picture of himself the other week as if Forrest wasn't supposed to thirst over it. Thirst but do nothing. He lets the screen plummet into darkness again, gathers his nerves, and begins a new sentence. 'I want to find a new therapist,' he lies, avoiding eye-contact. There's no plan for anything. Forrest hasn't started searching the internet for someone else, nor has he returned to his doctor to reject the initial suggestion. He doesn't even dislike this therapist. But if he said *I don't want to be in therapy anymore, it was a mistake, I reject unpacking my problems and the faults in my relationships and whatever is coursing through my body, trying to undermine me* he would be judged. There would be a stern look plastered on the computer screen, no mention of lag or an end to the appointment. He could lie. He could say he had been slowly packing away his life into cardboard boxes this whole time, anticipating a move to another state, another bustling city, where he could find another therapist he could actually visit in person. He would make it sound like visiting an elderly relative in hospital, fearful of an afternoon nap becoming eternal, but that would just be his tone. Inescapable. He would make it sound promising, albeit uncomfortable, because a therapist was losing a patient, a patient who certainly needed the grounded support of a medical professional. Forrest scratches his knee. 'You've helped me a lot. Truly.'

Forrest is lying on the floor, draped only in a towel. After a shower, he scraped at the flesh of his legs for far too long, scratching until he drew blood. They look worse, to him, his lean, long legs. He can't be the only one who notices the seaweed-green scales, but no one else really visits him in the apartment. The border of the towel is stained red. He took the edges in his hands and wiped at the little mess he made. The ceiling fan above his head is stilled, mucked in dust, and displays back to him a warped reflection. His legs aren't too noticeably green, not yet. The scales began at the ankles. Or, more technical, the scales began first in an uneven patch on his back. As if they had a twisted sense of humour, rearing themselves someplace he wouldn't notice until he was posed in the mirror, admiring his figure.

He has become increasingly self-conscious. He wears long trousers most days, even in the warmer weather, or otherwise he draws the curtains completely closed, sits in the dreary darkness, and wears only a pair of grey underwear. It takes every ounce of self-control to avoid staring at the scales all day. Forrest is already dipping too much into his savings. Last night, he ordered Chinese takeout and groaned at the price of delivery, but he was certain to not leave the apartment. He barely inched the door open to accept the food. His entire body cloaked in a dressing gown, the fuzzy fabric belt strangling his waist. In the towel, he feels like a murdered beach-goer. Or else a drowned child. Undried hair, a shaved face smoother than ever, the towel scratching his nipples.

Billy had sent some message about wanting to make sure he was okay.

Forrest responded after the appointment, before the shower. He tried drafting a response four times, continuously typing then deleting, shaking his head fervently. At one point he audibly gasped and thought of simply typing *SORRY*, like that, all capital letters and bolded if he could. No period, or three in quick succession. *SORRY...*

Instead, he sent: *BILLY!! Sorry! I just broke it off with my therapist!*

Then, after briefly considering himself insane, he typed: *Is Gregory okay?*

Sometimes he told people he thought about them more often than he thought about himself. Billy's first response to this had been: *that's awfully sweet of you, Forrest, but take care of yourself too, hey.* Forrest said it to him again, when he was drunk and clingy, and Billy changed his opinion entirely (he was also drunk, but sobering): *you know you don't have to just say that to make people care about you.*

Forrest sits up, off the carpet, the towel falling off his chest. His torso is clear of seaweed-green, at least for now. The room is still blanketed in darkness, and he fumbles around for wherever he flung his phone before he started daydreaming. A few days earlier, he'd downloaded an app that surprisingly helps soothe him. You sort various assorted items into various assorted tubs, calmly and

serenely picking through a mountain of someone else's treasure. He swipes a perfume bottle, breakable but inexpensive, from the centre of the screen into a baby pink treasure chest in the lower left corner. Forrest's mind clears. For a moment, he gives himself over to this new lifestyle, one suitcase heaped closed on a Thursday morning and a flustered drive to some inlet up north. There, barely unpacked, he folds his legs underneath his butt and begins this process, sorting an assortment. An estate sale means there is a cardboard box, poorly packed, of an old woman's unwanted trinkets. Pure sentiment. Gripped by oily hands and musty perfume. The moonlight trickles in from a dining room window and he realises a handful of hours have passed and he's been in a trance of admiration. One moment please. The overhead lamp is switched on. In this fantasy, he's not unwillingly morphing into a sea monster. But he sniffs the salty air, at ease.

Over the course of a month, Forrest had nineteen nightmares about *pursuing the dream*. In some, he would be standing in front of a classroom of ten-year-olds and one of them would politely raise their hand and question why sir's feet were bare, and why his hair was falling out in clumps, and why there was a piss stain the size of a family meat pie in the front of his pants. In others, truth would bleed: he would bend down and the leg of his pants would rise and one of the seven-year-olds would startle and scream. *SIR YOU HAVE SCALES LIKE A DINOSAUR!*

He would wake in sweats, but instead of trying desperately to fall asleep again, he would climb out of bed and eat something from the fridge. Or the pantry. Sometimes he'd think about ordering something, but then glance at the time, startled not by the thought but by the *deja-vu*.

His dream is losing steam as his dream. The framed degree is now tucked underneath the bed—he occasionally checks it, running his palm over the clear plastic, making certain it isn't cracked. Occasionally someone will ask him how life is like post-university. It will come through as a text message, of course, and he will give pause as to how to respond. It's an uncertainty, sitting in this room, trying to mobilise. Trying to outrun things, like the fear that gills will be next. It's late afternoon on a Wednesday and Forrest is lying in a three-quarters-full bathtub, most of his body hidden underneath bubbles. There is a good distraction: a little white Bluetooth speaker is playing music from a playlist he has titled "Settle In". Music to soothe, music to transport him someplace else. Here's to hoping the next number in the playlist can force those thoughts of his future to retreat...

In the bathtub, Forrest eases himself down until his ears are just above the surface of the water. His legs are bent, knees crowning high above his body, but he feels content in the position. Content is a strange word to him. So he's *managing*. So, he's in the bathtub. His skin is breathing. This is the closest he can come to the ocean.

A crowd has gathered in the street, swerving out of the way when a car at last approaches them. Billy figures it's too early for all of them to be plastered, but at least one pre-gamed harder than anticipated, especially for a Wednesday. They'll regret it, he thinks, stifling a laugh that'll just read as confusing. Gregory is silent beside him. The crowd, albeit a smaller one than the word implicates, starts to disperse when three of them turn a corner and disappear. Presumably there was a goodbye, maybe even a good luck, but only Billy could have been aware of it. Gregory is staring at his phone, occasionally lifting his head to make sure he doesn't get ploughed down by oncoming traffic, or headbutt into a roadside column of some kind—be it streetlight, metal post, or tree. Billy likes to think, in a worst-case scenario, he could patch up Gregory's split forehead and try to coax out something else from him. A reason for the scissors on the couch. An explanation for the earlier-than-usual nights, and the half-eaten bowls of oatmeal left in the sink, and disappearance of his ramblings.

They are on a collision path for the gay club, not that Billy is looking for the attention from other men, and he doubts Gregory would even notice. A night out, a bit of excitement, it seemed necessarily, but now in this quieter side street he's hesitating. They should've gotten off a couple stations later and found a restaurant empty enough for a hushed dinner between them. They could have shared a bowl of chips. If Forrest were here, things would be more assured—this is the rhetoric he tells himself, rehashes it in other words, but it doesn't plainly ring true.

What the fuck does he know about rhetoric anyway, he thinks, nudging Gregory to cross the street when everything is still, dead, lifeless. Billy begins to drag Gregory along like a toy on a string, wheels clicking against the concrete of the sidewalk. After some time, they end up in the middle of a park, standing underneath the gaze of a statue. Some historical man, a figure whose name makes little to no impact on Billy. Gregory sinks into a park bench. Plans cancelled. Billy feels himself buried inside of his body. He doesn't know why he thought a night out, on a fucking Wednesday, would do either of them any good. They couldn't even get to the door. Billy lets out a muted groan. He's got work in the morning, not until ten o'clock at least, but he'll wear this sort of shame regardless. Back in that apartment, he fought to nudge Gregory out the door. Pressed his hands on Gregory's back. Dug around in his head for words of motivation, found a couple curse words, a couple of grovelling pleas. It was the least romantic thing they had ever done together. This back-and-forth bargaining. Billy just wanted one night. Here's to hoping one night could spiral into another, and another, and there would be brightness on his best friend's face again.

They grab something to eat, Billy housing a slice of pizza while Gregory sits opposite, taking slower, more empty-eyed bites. He's not the zombie of trope. He's a little vague in the eyes, but there's still some life to the boy Billy's known since he was a teenager. Meatlovers pizza smell wafts around their bubble, the one park table they could find, coincidentally vacant. Gregory's phone is face up beside his elbow.

Billy wipes sauce from the corners of his mouth. 'You don't need to talk,' he says, biting into the crust of the pizza. 'But I just want to say to you that I'm concerned.' He tries to find the way to navigate a conversation like this, teetering between sounding compassionate and sounding like he's reading from a memorised pamphlet on intervention. Not that he thinks he could be wholly successful in intervening.

Gregory finishes a slice and immediately takes another into his hand, letting the tail hang awkwardly toward the table. Toppings threaten to leap off in an act of rebellion. He doesn't respond immediately. He doesn't make a whole lot of eye-contact with Billy.

'Concerned about what?'

'You, mate,' Billy replies.

'I'm doing fine.'

Billy bites down hard on the pizza—largely impossible, given the weak base, but he feels it in his teeth. He hates being any sort of angry, bitter, frustrated with Gregory, and he isn't, but this moment gives him all the conflicting thoughts. He wants Forrest there, sitting beside him, his head on Billy's shoulder. It would be awfully strange, true, almost an embarrassment in front of Gregory, but the support would be slightly revolutionary. He knows he can admit feelings don't always die.

'I don't wanna overstep, Greg,' he says, setting down the slice of pizza back in the box. Out of some sort of reflex reaction, Gregory stares at the half-eaten slice like it is an interrupting intruder come to stink out the rest of the pizza. 'I just want you to know we can talk like we used to. Open up about what's going on in our lives, our heads. Forrest is worried about you.' He plants the latter as his secret weapon, and it disturbs him to be weaponizing this mutual friendship. This mutual, tangled love for the missing party. Neither of them could actually claim to *have* Forrest in their pocket at this very moment. Neither of them knew what was going on.

'Tell Forrest to come see me in person then,' he fires back.

Billy searches for the right response. Of course he wishes one swift text would change their circumstances. Forrest sits behind his closed doors. Like clockwork, these boys fall into an uncertain silence. Billy takes the half-eaten slice out of the box once more and eats the rest of it, keeping his attention on a distracted Gregory.

'You look a complete mess,' he says, trying to convey all his sympathy in a crooked smile.

Gregory takes another slice of pizza but doesn't bite into it. The narrow end limply hangs before he lets the slice slip out of his grip, landing face-down on the concrete. He barely reacts. No frown, no killer smile. His voice is low, disruptive, bitter. 'I did another terrible, terrible thing.' He mimes as if he is about to pick up the slice off the ground, as if waiting for a response telling him to do such, but Billy is slack-jawed, confused, exhausted. There are obvious bags underneath his eyes. 'You don't want to tell me I'm a fuck-up, because mess is a basic fucking word?' Gregory spits out his words, his back slightly hunched, an eyebrow tilted higher than the other. 'Forrest hates me and I do not blame him.'

Billy closes the pizza box, slides it off to the side so the space between the two boys is emptied out. If he were wanting this vibe to be shifted to complete comfort, to romance, he would extend his arm across the wood and try to convince Gregory to hold his hand. Something like that didn't feel like it would be a success in this moment, so he folds his arms on the table instead, softening his expression. 'You're not a fuck-up, you're just a mess, Greg.' Billy says, closing his eyes for just a moment, to see the two of them in the past, in a healthier state, frankly when they were teenagers and they didn't have to put exact labels on every single one of their problems. When he opens his eyes again, Gregory has his face buried in his hands. 'Can we just go home?'

They leave the park, Billy carrying the unfinished pizza, his mooney friend beside him, distracted once again by his phone. Every once in a while, Gregory glances up at the world around him, catching a view of a shadowed bat cross the moonlit sky, and murmuring something under his breath. At one point, he says, 'Thanks for not taking me into the gay club, you idiot.' Although Billy wonders if he heard all the words correctly.

Gregory disappears into his bedroom without another word, a burdened monk. The living room light is glaringly bright, and Billy checks the time on his phone. It's late. Far too late to be making house calls, to be expecting tea and biscuits, which makes it the perfect time. He idles for a moment, tapping the bristly carpet beneath his feet. Tomorrow, he'll vacuum it. Tomorrow, he'll dump every chore onto himself, leading the frantic sort of life he's growing accustomed to. He needs to go buy new coat hangers, which makes him feel truly like a flummoxed adult. Never enough.

He requests an Uber and waits outside in the humbling darkness, scrolling through the varied reactions to a movie he hasn't seen, probably won't see for a couple of months now. Sometimes someone with an actor's portrait for a profile picture, a clear-as-day glamour, will announce spoilers in a sentence without commas or periods. At least Billy gets the gist.

The ride pulls up in front of him and he repeats his name out to the dark-haired man sitting in the driver's seat, who has just begun adjusting the volume knob on the stereo. The driver nods, repeats his own name back. It's a weird sensation, an introduction with all the formality already stripped away by a mobile app on a phone. Billy makes himself comfortable in the backseat, sending a text message to Forrest. It reads: *I don't want to startle you awake with a knock. The low thrum of your phone is better.*

I'm coming over.

At the door, Billy leans his head against the frame and knocks, politely. He thinks himself stupid for expecting to be let in immediately, to be embraced and explained to, as if the events of the evening hadn't already happened. He is squaring off with two people hellbent on brandishing their silence, weaponizing their desires to ignore him, ignore his obsession to help them. 'Forrest.' He says, croaking out a note almost to the wavelength of begging. 'I don't want to berate you anymore.'

There is a brief silence, before Forrest's voice is heard from the other side of the door. 'Give me a second.' Billy closes his eyes and pictures himself seeing Forrest again, the first time in at least two months. He would have to root around in his memories, in Forrest's calendar, maybe, to find the last time they looked at one another. Time's a drag, anyway. Time just happens.

Billy hears a short reply, an 'Okay, come in,' and he opens his eyes, turns, finds a strong grip on the handle, and turns it, and opens the door. He is greeted immediately by darkness—there aren't any lights on in the apartment, the curtains are drawn completely, and he can only barely make out the silhouette of his close, close friend. Forrest is stagnant in the room. As the door clicks behind him, Billy's confusion becomes a form of uncertainty. He thinks, Forrest can't afford power anymore. He thinks, I've been lured into some trap, some seductive semblance of an apology meant to make me forget how distant he's been acting, and reacting, and toying with our feelings. He pauses by the door, trying to remember where the light switches are in the main room of the apartment. Forrest takes a single step backwards.

'Can we just talk in the dark, please?'

'What's happened to the power?'

'Nothing,' Forrest says, clutching at the dressing gown tight on his body.

Billy fumbled in his pocket for his phone, the bright white light of the screen scarring his unadjusted eyes. He couldn't see how Forrest reacted, but he would've seen this: a quiet, restrained shiver, a boy trembling, some courageous part of himself wanting to edge towards the light. Billy switched the phone's torchlight on and screened the room, adjusting the both of them to its gaze. The glow found Forrest, found skin poking out from behind the fuzzy robe, found the glimmering scales.

He could have gasped. He could have been mortified.

'I don't understand either of you,' Billy says, inching himself forward.

WATER AS A FORM OF HEALING

They rented a place that sat on the water on stilts. By they, what was meant was this: Billy searched the internet for somewhere close to the water, or on it, and bundled his stuff together, along with enough clothes, underwear, and toiletries for Gregory, who at this point seemed almost catatonic most mornings. It was like smuggling an illegal package out of the city with Forrest: he refused to wear anything that could reveal any skin, so he was swaddled in blankets, wearing squarish sunglasses that hid his crazed pupils. They left in the dead of night. Billy had expansive dreams of the three of them submerging in a submarine, living out peace on the bottom of the ocean. Playing house without windows. Forrest able to live his two lives. Gregory left to whine about the lack of good cell service. How the internet had been his one escape, how *mingling* with the boys he was supposed to still love felt hopeless, in the end. *'Don't say that, don't say supposed like that,'* Billy would interject.

One of the bedrooms overlooks the shore. It isn't anything to marvel at—Billy stands there at the window, staring at sand, dirt, grass. He spent the car ride distracting himself with the road. If he thought too clearly on anything else, he'd have attempted to convince Forrest to move out of his apartment, or Gregory to go see a therapist, and he felt he would be pretty worthless on either front. He is having those wicked thoughts: Forrest will be evicted first; Gregory will drain himself of blood first. Worrying about the both of them this much is extraordinary new territory.

Billy closes the window and leaves the bedroom, listening out for the other two somewhere in the house. There's a tapping from the kitchen, the flush of a toilet from the bathroom. Forrest opens the bathroom door, a beaming smile on his face. [Is this a trap?] Billy hesitates.

He could say: 'You're awfully chipper this morning', spoiling the game. Instead, he adjusts his mindset, which feels vaguely impossible, and says, 'Hi.' Forrest leans back against the door, most of his skin covered by one piece of clothing or another. His pale hands settle against the frame, his nails chipped and uneven. The smile softens.

'There was a bird at the window,' Forrest begins. 'I whispered to it, I don't have anything for you, bird. Fly off.' He recounts the slight hopping motion the bird made, inching back and forth on the terribly-thin windowsill. 'It flew away, eventually, and it was the first moment I realised the curtains were drawn open, because you must've been in my room during the night.' Forrest's eyes didn't tear away from Billy's stare.

Billy straightens himself out. 'I thought you'd like the sunshine coming in in the morning,' he explains, unsure whether to step forwards or backwards. 'No one would have been out on the water so early as to catch a glimpse of how uncovered you were fast asleep...'

‘You are bold,’ Forrest says, scratching at his forehead.

That was to be the end of his response, as for the next thirty minutes the two spoke of many other things, but not the bird, the windowsill, or the parted curtains. Forrest permitted Billy to take a closer observation of the scales, although he wasn’t any sort of specialist himself, and was largely perplexed. They continued to keep Gregory largely in the dark. Gregory, seeming at least a little more content away from everything, is enjoying his solitude. In the half an hour that passed, he only once made it known he was there. Passing Forrest’s bedroom, he poked his head into the room and asked Billy why the internet was becoming increasingly spotty. Billy just shook his head. In the corner of the room, slinking back into the dressing gown, Forrest was beginning to blend into the cream-coloured wall, or that was the intention, at least. His movements when the door opened were frantic, springy, a blighted field mouse. Billy kneeled beside him afterwards and kissed him on the forehead, whispering, ‘Being terrified of him knowing only makes you nauseous, you grove of trees.’

This must be what fatherhood is like, Billy thinks, after having forced Gregory out of the house to go for a walk through the beachside town they were staying in. With Gregory, at least he could stress less about the lingering stares of these ordinary people who didn’t know his life, this life. There is a corner store, he can purchase some more food for this family of his. Infantilising the problems of his closest friends doesn’t give any reparations. Gregory is walking beside him, the mobile phone left on a bedside table the colour of muddied sand. He wears a grey baseball cap with an insincere message of positivity stamped onto it. It may as well say *breathe air*.

‘You know, I keep pausing before I almost ask you if you think there’s a point to me,’ Gregory says, without making any glance upwards from the gravelled road. ‘I want to say, am I just wasting time while I waste my money? I want to say, this is just my life now, and I hate it.’ A small child on a bicycle with training wheels rides past them, performing a dangerous balancing act as they pat down their wet swimsuit and giggle at the squelchy sound it makes. Billy shifts his eyes from the kid back to his friend. Gregory doesn’t seem to expect any sort of response.

Billy doesn’t know how to be a therapist, he’s struggling to even be a proper damn friend to the boys he really, truly loves. A few cogs, a few springs, are coming loose inside his brain, and he fights against the urge to stop the pair of them in the street and just...what the fuck is he supposed to do? Make an ass of himself and kiss Gregory, try to prove something romantic is the reason he should continue on living? *Pointless*. Gregory is telling him he feels oh so pointless. Billy continues along the path, footsteps on the road, and tries to hide any expression of his complicated thoughts on his face.

‘There’s a point to you. You’re not a piece of code, sure, you’ve got freer rein than that.’

He catches himself—there is fear in telling someone they are worth the world, that some greater purpose exists for them if they just persevere and persevere. Billy could admit to Gregory that he would be floating in an ocean with no raft if he lost him, but what good could that accomplish? Make a person guilty. Make a person feel themselves splintered, bound, set onto the water with a bamboo shoot poking out of their back. A wave of a white flag in another sense. Billy feels like he is flipping through the pages of a book extraordinarily fast, desperate to find the sensible sort of ending. He's choking on water.

Imagine the tide for: *if you took your own life, I'd understand.*

He has to refocus things. Too many of his arguments have skewed to how he feels, or how Forrest would feel. Billy clears his throat, shoving a cough into his confidence. 'I could stand here and tell you everything will change, but I don't know. It is impossible to know what to say to you to make a difference, but you should feel comfortable to just talk.'

Gregory briefly shifts his glance to Billy.

'This weather isn't horrendous,' he says, smirking self-consciously. This begins a series of spoken-aloud thoughts, haphazard in their delivery, nestling into the breeze like they were greeting old friends.

'When I was fifteen, I had to bury feelings I had for someone. Ended up hating him for it.'

'There used to be a song that would come on in my playlist and I'd remember how *good* things used to be before my parents divorced.'

'I've sucked both of your cocks, and I can't ever tell you whose I like more.'

'One night, when I got blackout drunk, I offered to spank a friend. I can't remember how he reacted to that. Never have the guts to ask, or even mention those nights. Just stew.'

'There's something Forrest isn't telling me, and I wish it was polite to just shake the fuck out of him because it.'

Billy had remained silent. They are still wandering, meandering, really, towards the small general store, avoiding any courteous conversations with the locals. Gregory rubs his right eye with his palm and feigns winding himself up again, like a toy with only so much energy. When they enter the store, a middle-aged woman blocks their path as she bends down to retrieve a rolling tin of baked beans. Billy and Gregory look at one another, and this is when Billy gives his response only in glances: *I like this weather. I'm sorry you couldn't confess your feelings. Don't you wish music could fix everything? It's perfectly fine to tell me my cock is superior.* Billy winks. *Want to spank me to forget about it? Forrest will come to you in time.*

The middle-aged woman straightens herself out with the tin in both hands, an uncertain smile on her face as she passes the two men heading for the rear of the small corner store. Billy lunges forward at the sight of a packet of marshmallows, completely overtaken by his inner child. He starts to

picture the three of them forcing out the words ‘chubby bunny’ with a mouthful of gluggy, quarter-chewed marshmallows in their mouths. Something they’d done as teenagers, when Forrest and Gregory were still dating, so their taken glances always hid a flirty playfulness. When Forrest spat out a marshmallow onto the carpet, desperate to contain some laughter and not choke, Gregory wandered a hand onto his thigh and Billy tried to pretend he wasn’t hopelessly attracted to this charming silliness. Marshmallows digested, Forrest’s head on Gregory’s chest, something so unbroken like a chain of paper-people with drawn on faces, and no fear and loathing.

In the aisles, so unlike the sprawling ones of any suburban supermarket, Gregory is eyeing off the tinned tuna, tinned chicken, and SPAM ham. He’s unemotive, his eyes flicking from side to side in slow motion. Billy’s hands grip to the cold plastic of a milk bottle. ‘We could be hunters, cast out our lines and catch our own tuna,’ he says, leaning the milk against Gregory’s bare forearm. The other male reacts, shivering at the touch, but he doesn’t budge from his spot in front of the tinned goods. Gregory pushes against the cold plastic, a polar bear on its iceberg. He let out a quiet grunt.

An hour or so later, they are in the water, sinking to their bottoms. Billy and Gregory are shirtless, slathered in sunscreen. Forrest wears a wetsuit that leaves only his head exposed. The neoprene is the colour of an oil slick. Despite this precaution, the three of them are in a more isolated area of the beach, keeping an eye on one another. A seagull purveys the world from overhead, its voice boisterous and frankly somewhat alarming. Gregory cannot keep his eyes off Forrest’s figure in the wetsuit, eyebrows slanted on angles, lips parted. For all he is concerned, he believes his former boyfriend to be suffering from some mysterious form of skin condition, or else absolutely terrified of getting bitten by some mysterious fish swimming around in the ocean. Or of getting sand in all the crevices.

They sit with the water to their stomachs, a poorly-formed circle leaving room for the waves to lap in around them. Forrest runs a hand through his hair, a new expression forming on his face—it’s freedom, to some, but ecstasy to others. The invisible gills start to breathe again. Billy reservedly places his hand on Forrest’s shoulder. To any onlooker, this intimate ring would appear cultish. From the first sentence spoken, the average onlooker would realise there is more healing needed in this trio than the uttered runes of witchcraft, or the manipulative speakings of a charismatic white man.

‘I know I dragged the both of you out here pretending we’d just ignore our troubles,’ Billy says, smiling first at Forrest, then at Gregory on the other side of him. He removes his hand from Forrest’s shoulder and places his other hand on Gregory’s. ‘I’ve never properly been like this, like some sort of mediator, a moderator of inner feelings and exhaustion.’ The water is cool against his skin.

'I'm not paying you for this,' Forrest mutters, making brief eye-contact with Billy, then Gregory. At locking eyes with his high school boyfriend, he shies up, bashful, retracting into himself. It's noticeable, but only because the other two men are standing right beside him, scrutinising the tiny movements. Billy feels the cold of the water lap against his belly-button and has to condition himself to not simply expect either of them to be changed because of a hug, or some sort of physical moment of comfort. He nods at Forrest, ever the support-group-circle leader. With the soft bobbing movement of his head he is saying, *go on, tell him. Go on, be unafraid. Monster is only a word written into our language.* Of course, he's no English scholar, but it's something Forrest would say to him, and this symbiotic relationship of theirs needs to come into certain existence, right in this moment.

Under the golden sun, Forrest picks at the wetsuit's edges, pulling the neoprene off his neck. 'This guilt is painful, incredibly so,' he begins, licking his dry lips. 'I should have said something to you, Greg, at the same time I said something to you,' and he glances over at Billy, those sweet, admirable eyes that are truly reminding the two boys in this moment how difficult it is to not fall hopelessly in love with this wetsuit-wearing grove of trees. Forrest fights the tears welling in his eyes. 'I, uh, have started to morph...' On Gregory's confused face, he tenses up, afraid of his own words. His left leg begins to itch. 'I don't know if I can call it morphing really,' he continues, splashing at the water as he scratches at the scales hidden underneath the neoprene. 'There are scales on my legs, on my back, I am deathly afraid of being away from water for too long, I think I should expect to have gills soon enough, and crave living sheltered with all my fellow sea beasties.' Forrest sets the teen-beach-horror-story of the first scale he noticed, becoming slightly hyperbolic on the startling moments, watching Gregory's face for some indication he's losing the connection they share between them. In old mythology, sea monsters resembling humans, to an extent at least, lured men to their deaths with vocal strummings. Forrest's voice is beautiful enough to be alluring.

'Did something bite you or?' Gregory utters, biting his lip.

'I live in a city apartment, rarely go to the beach, and don't even think conversion like this is possible that way, so...'

'You were born like this?'

'Could it have really laid dormant until I turned twenty-four?'

Forrest thinks aloud about his mother, first. She isn't the sort of woman to wear a wetsuit to the shoreline, he says, or the type of woman to last an extraordinary length of time in an underwater breath-holding competition. His father, similarly, doesn't itch at invisible scales, or crave shredding the flesh off a saltwater fish, or a human, at least not noticeably so. Gregory's eyes narrow at a point on Forrest's wetsuit. His two friends seem to deduce he's zoning out, hellishly thinking on something just said.

‘It doesn’t matter where it comes from,’ Billy interjects, half-confidently.

There is some silence, a lingering kind, as Forrest sinks down into the water and submerges his head, letting the salt cling at the roots. Billy glances at Gregory. Forrest splashes back up, shaking his hair off in the opposite direction from the boys. He’s got the sensibilities of a freed dog, or an escaped one, careless and lapping up the nonchalance of being without a fence, a barrier, even for a moment. When he returns his focus to the boys, there is a stern, almost mournful expression on Gregory’s face. Billy’s shoulders are tensed.

‘I’ve thought about killing myself,’ Gregory says.

Without thinking, Forrest bounds through the water and wraps his arms around Gregory. It is the first time the two have hugged like this, embraced one another with this amount of compassion, in who knows how long. Gregory forgets himself and places his hand on Forrest’s lower back. It’s a romantic hug, the sort to silence its only observer. Billy, slick with flicked-up water, inches himself backwards. Strange, how old habits die hard.

They part, although the circle remains broken. Gregory, a tear sitting in the crease underneath his eye, lowers his voice and begins to talk about his depression. ‘When you start to fear less, about death and everything, you don’t realise the misery you’re just welcoming in.’

Forrest makes a passing glance at Billy, apologetic eyes and the slightest frown, and inches backwards in the water, kicking sand up with his feet. The circle reforms. Despite nudges, comforting smiles, Gregory is more subdued in his discussion than expected. He jokingly refers to the therapy exercise of digging around in one’s past for the first example of both the cause of one’s depression and the first depressive episode. He doesn’t mention his parents, his series of breakups, or the light blue pair of scissors. His skin is wrinkled, and his shoulders shake as a shiver trails down his spine. Staying out in the ocean is wearing itself down on the three of them, but like a captive audience, Forrest and Billy await for *something else*. ‘I just don’t know how to help myself,’ Gregory finishes, falling silent. He severs their little cult circle and begins wandering up to the cluttered heap of beach towels on the sand. Forrest shrivels up inside the neoprene as the cooler afternoon wind whips against his body. Billy is left alone in the water, a headache forming above the eyes.

A sea monster, a walking rain cloud, and a man walk into a bar. Only fifteen nanoseconds pass before the bar is immediately flooded with water. The glass windows had splintered, shattered, and now tiny imperfect-shaped shards swim around the darkened space with the sea monster, the walking rain cloud, and the plain, boring, ordinary man. A cheek is sliced. A stomach is sliced. The man, unable to breathe underwater, feels his lungs become new vessels. Vases for seawater.

PAPIER-MÂCHÉ AS A FORM

It is a patchwork. Forrest is in the upper left corner, dressed in greens and muted blues, a sliver of gold careening from under his armpit down to his toes. Something so loose on his body, something so flowing, makes him appear jellyfish-like. There is a pregnant seahorse at his feet, turned away from him. Coral is bleached. A sea turtle is chewing on the fabric billowing off his right arm, an unnatural scene, a voracious creature with bloody murder behind the eyes. It is an underwater bridal moment, the thin golden band of a wedding ring on Forrest's finger. Left at the altar, unfortunately. Left to defend himself, unfortunately. Darker waters paint the recesses of the patchwork. If this were a tarot card, and perhaps it is, it would heed a warning: *maybe you will not die, but you will attract those who benefit from death.*

In the bathroom, with the wetsuit slung out over the bathtub, Forrest can feel how dry his skin is. His lips are chapped. This mirror is thankfully too small to perceive his legs, his scaly legs, but he can notice the discolouring of his stomach. A blueish-green tinge, something sickly, like a bruise navigating the body. Spreading. He quickly dresses, slipping a black turtleneck over his head. The weather will mean he's uncomfortably warm the moment he wanders into the sun, but he no longer plans on leaving the holiday dwelling, at least not until true darkness blankets the streets and he can wander down to the sands and pick at seashells.

Gregory is napping on the couch, Billy is sitting with his back to the world, staring out a window. It's a fascinating tableau—no one will pay much notice to Forrest as he opens the refrigerator and takes out the milk and pours himself a glass of it, not that he expects or wants them to. He's grateful for now to not find human creature comforts, like drinking milk from the udders of cows, repulsive, or gag-worthy. There is an evenly-stacked pyramid of tinned tuna on one of the kitchen counters, tucked in the corner against the beige walls. He can't make out whether it's a supportive, considerate gesture from Billy, from when he and Gregory walked down to the store, or a cruelty meant to taunt him. Sent from a god of the sea. It is 5:52pm. Forrest carries the glass of milk over to where Billy is perched. He sets the glass down on the faux-wood floorboards and sits on the ground beside the chair, folding his legs underneath his butt.

'Can I ask you something?' He says, trying to will Billy to look at him.

'Of course you can.'

For a brief moment, they smile at one another.

'Can you tell me what it's like living with him? I want to see the patchwork of it.'

‘With Greg?’ Billy pauses, rubbing his right eye. ‘It’s lonely, sometimes. When I don’t know what demons he’s dealing with, and I’m just watching him lull on the lounge, forgetting about everything else. We don’t bicker like roommates, only like friends.’ Billy swivels his body so that he is sitting on the chair sideways. Forrest pivots on the floor to face him. ‘I didn’t know how to help him properly. Most of the time I think there’s something like the dream you have when you’re a kid, this idea of moving out from you parents’ place and living with your friend and having the right amount of freedom when you clock off from work. It’s peeking out. Except I come home and find Greg pissed at himself, and at least he’s not pissing himself, you know?’ He stifles a laugh, twisting his head to catch a glimpse at his sleeping friend of the couch. ‘He doesn’t talk about it, he just makes quippy jokes about what good it would do the world if he killed himself. Until the next bright spot. Then, he kisses my shoulder like we’re lovers again and makes an apology so brief I can tell he’s only doing it because he thinks it’s what I expect, that he is part-depression and there is no helping that.’

Forrest extends his hand out and grasps Billy’s.

‘I find it hard to imagine him kissing your shoulder,’ Forrest says.

‘Usually he slaps my ass.’

‘There’s my Gregory.’

They take turns projecting an image on the beige walls in front of them—happy, elated Gregory, and then his miserable side, limp and vulnerable. Then, as a shadow flickers in the corner of the room, the resentful Gregory from after the breakup, the very first heartbreak in the trio. How it hadn’t been the fault of this boy, or that boy, but something had shattered so effortlessly between them. When constructing a house, you begin with the foundation, the slab of concrete poured out from the cement-mixer. Or there are other steps, too. The levelling of the land. Finding your pipes. Purchasing the land. Forrest and Gregory had fallen in love when they were in the middle of pouring the concrete, waiting for it to set. The era of his life defined by this love for Gregory was littered with sickly-sweet love texts, and bites, and folders of nudes taken with the precision of a teenager. Like tracing your initials into the drying concrete, his adoration for Gregory is set underneath the frames, and the hardwood floors, and the bathtub in the guest bathroom. This aching he feels for the boy he loved, hopelessly loved, until seventeen, or eighteen, maybe nineteen, it is like rattling the tiled roof of a one-storey home built in a flash, in a rush. It is like driving your car through the closed garage door, headed straight for the guest bathroom. *[I can draw you a blueprint of this hypothetical house if you would like].*

Reminiscing, it’s like seeing old friends. It *is* seeing old friends, inviting them inside for coffee. Billy finds a Saturday six weeks ago, him and his roommate out shopping for new clothes, new socks. New underwear. ‘There’s nothing so incredible about that day, though,’ he says, and glances away from Forrest for sixty long seconds. Maybe more. Probably more. Forrest is just enjoying that thought.

There's a clear memory of childhood, his own body almost buried underneath the sand. Head poking out. His cousin, only two or three years old at the time, wets sand in an upturned sandcastle-making bucket, firming up some sort of paste. The little kid slaps this on Forrest's face. Right on the cheek. It's melodrama at eleven. Forrest's mouth forming an over-surprised gasp, as if this didn't happen the last time the older kids had buried Forrest in the sandy beaches of whichever coastal town their grandparents lived in at the time. Frequent movers, frequent deserters. He was never left in the hole, torso thrusting against the tented-on sand to wiggle his way out. There's no residual trauma from grandparents finding no reason to stay in one place, stay planted like growing-out palm trees. In a sense, there's a sort of accuracy to this mutation—a family of sun-ripened, salt-water drinkers. The backseat of the family seven-seater constantly requiring the closest thing to a gurneyed hose-down without damaging the leather entirely. Maybe he would have preferred morphing into a wood sprite, finding the first of a series of 'shrooms and fungus sprouting out of his ankles. The insane waft of being alone in a forest. Maybe he could have found comfort in retiring to the middle of somewhere dense, unafraid of the groans of bears. Plant himself in a dampened square of dirt and maybe understand where Gregory's slow welcoming of death comes from...

There's dried blood on his legs. His nails are growing too long. He scratches too deep on the scales, peeling them back without noticing, chipping back at this alternate hybrid of flesh and fish. His body makes little sense to him. There's a speck of dried blood underneath the fingernail of his left-hand thumb. Someone will notice, if not the fingernail, then his legs when the pants he's chosen to wear do drag upward when he bends down to do something. Glance at a seashell. Tie his shoelaces. His clothes are starting to look wrong on his body. Too ill-fitting. He's too ill. A sickly little baby boy. A creature from the fucking ocean!! Drown him already.

'Forrest?' Billy says, leaning against the door frame.

It's mid-morning, and instead of staying on his feet, staying in a semi-alert state, Forrest is back lying down on the unmade bed. His feet are hidden underneath the sheet. There's a novel on the bed, a bookmark in the shape of a nurse shark poking out at the top.

'Can I ask you something?' Billy continues, poking out his tongue. It's a gesture that is largely unnoticed—Forrest makes a brief attempt to look over at the boy he once dated, but the weight of his head slumps him right back into planking position.

'Sure.'

Billy takes a solitary step into the bedroom, leaving ample space between the two of them. If he were more vigilant, Forrest would sense this space, consider whether to shorten it or widen it. Instead, he's working on the patchwork in the lower right corner, stitching new ideas seamlessly with a thought. Symmetrical pregnancy seahorse. His stomach making him so proud.

'We've talked about it before. How I would mention our future together and you would tense, seal yourself off like a clam.' He laughs, barely, like a drag queen bombing a comedy roast. 'Terrible timing. Sorry, Forrest.' An expression registers on Forrest's face, something in the middle of flatness and consternation. He wants to say, *where is the question?* He wants to say something else, too, but doesn't. Billy rests his hands on the rail of the bed frame. 'Sorry, I'm getting to the question, I promise you. It was always important to me that we could talk about everything. You told me things about being with Gregory that I didn't want to repeat, or make those mistakes, and my friendship with him evolved, I guess, because I could watch him clearly fucking regret ever hurting you.' Billy sighs. Billy seems to break a little. Billy takes his time. 'I...I could ask any question right now, and I'd feel like I was clobbering you over the head instead of making sure you were okay first.' His shoulders slump. A frown creases. From his wooden position, Forrest inches up into something of a sitting-up position—his body is contorted, and he leans back into the head of the bed potentially hoping it will create deep divots in his back. 'I'm a dumb bitch for thinking I'd ever get a chance to try for some future with you, because it has always been about Gregory, and now it's about you completely closing yourself off from us because we don't have an exact solution to the sea monster problem.'

'You don't have to call me a monster too,' Forrest replies, hollow in the eyes.

'You don't have a tail.'

'I wish I had a tail! At least I would fucking know something about myself!'

Billy stares at him. 'Forrest...'

'What? You don't seriously think I can exist like this,' he says, gripping onto the right leg of his trousers. He drags the fabric off his skin, rolling the pant leg up uncomfortably towards his waist. He grimaces as the pant becomes taut against his thigh. A shimmering sea of scales rises from underneath his sock, emerald-green and sapphire-blue, ending abruptly just above his knee. 'You still want to marry a fucking freak of nature. When I'm filing any sort of paperwork from now on, I'll have to write into a little box 'absolute disaster' and 'identifies as a sea creature' or else what? Some hospital nurse will think I'm dedicated to the art of tattooing my body, or I should be taken to the damn zoological society and have someone test my DNA to make sure my mother didn't fool around with Charybdis in the late 90s.'

Forrest takes a breath, a droplet of sweat on his forehead. He rolls down the pant leg again, his lip quivering. Without warning, he crawls across the bed and folds himself in Billy's arms.

Imagine if this was everything. If they continued in this moment for another hour, longer, if one enveloping embrace could shatter this conception of a human-fish-something...for who can be certain what a body can do. In a few days, they would become dehydrated, starved, lethargic, aching in the body. Oxygen would never be a worry, but unless someone came to feed them, to dampen their tongues, they would wither away in time, so the tableau could not last for months, or years, or the next twelve decades. Imagine if it could, briefly. How in *The Sims 2* they could consistently reset the needs of the household they had control over. Billy played too; Billy had the cheat codes scribbled down in a notebook he hadn't used from a year of school. He had a handful memorised, and maybe he'd be whispering them in his head in this moment, or maybe his head would be entirely empty of thoughts. Maybe the chaotic demon thoughts would take over and he would weave his fingers along the skin and the scales on Forrest's back, finding the grooves and the sharper edges. Searching for everything that was once Forrest, as the caterpillar becomes the butterfly. It's a slow process.

As quick as he had scampered, Forrest retracts from the end of the bed. 'There aren't places I can go to even get a semblance of an answer,' he says, beginning to unbutton his pants. He shimmies on the mattress, wiggling out of the tan-coloured pants. Comfortable, now, there's an element of beauty to the scales, that much he can recognise. An element. If only they were temporary, if only they could be scrubbed off in the shower. 'You know the stages of grief, yeah? I don't care about the order, I go through all of them in the span of an hour. Miserable because I look like a freak show act. Pissed because I can't expect to ever be naked in front of a complete stranger again, or even one of you two, without knowing the despised sort of look is going to be on that man's face. Bargaining, always, for an anti-anxiety medication that rids me of hallucinations. Acceptance of what Gregory barely fucking talked about. Suicide. Just getting away from everything.'

Billy hesitates.

'I don't want either of you giving up on everything,' he says, weakly, like a frightened child.

Forrest shakes his head. 'It's only a passing thought for me...I'm too committed to living out my suffering, I think. Hopefully less alone, too.' He knocks the tan-coloured pants off the bed and glances at the open door. 'Can you close the door and just crawl into bed with me? If you're afraid to touch my skin, the...green and the blue...I can wrap myself in the sheet first.'

Billy climbs off the edge of the bed and approaches the bedroom door. Somewhere in the rented place, Gregory is likely alone, stuffed with the crepe paper of his thoughts. Glued to his phone. Billy lingers with his hand on the door, staring down the hallway. Forrest wants to scream at him, *isn't this what you've wanted since I decided to run and hide? Isn't this how we solve all the riddles left unsolved between us?* But he doesn't budge. There are complications. His own heart will swear to tell the truth, only the truth, then confess he would linger in that doorway too, magicked towards the boxed-away.

Billy closes the door. He's climbing in beside Forrest as he whispers, 'I'm not afraid of your body, no more than I was the first time I realised I didn't have to just admire you from afar.'

Forrest smiles, becoming a tad more at ease. 'Thank you.'

He shakes his head before Billy can make any sort of reply.

In high school, it was insane to think he'd found someone that wanted to date him. Gregory felt, at first, like a flirty whim, a check-box to further the realisation that he was gay and comfortable with it. They'd kissed at some party. Looking at him now, Forrest is routinely cleansing the part of his mind that is determined to see the depression. To see the broken, crumbling figure from profile-view only. Those little stories—Gregory unable to lift himself out of bed, Gregory grumpily dirtying up the place without thinking about Billy on his heels—feel like new fictions invented to reconcile the pure, vengeful anger he sometimes felt for the boy he'd loved. To say, look how he suffers now. Look how desperate he is to repent.

They're on the couch, watching an episode of a house-hunting television show on low volume. Gregory is paying extraordinary attention, pursing his lips at one decision, breathing out a sigh of relief for another. People age, their faces change over time, but if Forrest squints, he can still see his first boyfriend sitting shirtless beside him on a Saturday morning in the house on Garven Street.

'Truthfully, I feel hopeless around you right now,' Forrest says, staring at the curve of Gregory's nose. On the television screen, a white couple peeks into the too-small bathroom of a two-storey home well within their budget range. 'Like I can't ask how to make your life any better, because you and me both, we *get* depression. We get how everlasting it can feel.'

Gregory scratches his forehead. The white couple on screen deliver a few choice statements to the camera on a presumed-green-screen. *My husband is just going to hit his head on the showerhead every morning before work, so we'd have to bargain with what's cheaper: hiring someone to change the fixtures, or taking him [she points to the bald-headed doofus beside her] to the hospital.*

'Help me kill myself,' Gregory whispers, then pauses, laughing it off. 'I'm kidding.'

'For a split second, I considered it.'

'We could do a suicide pact.'

Forrest sets his palm down on Gregory's thigh. 'You don't want that.'

Gregory glances over at his ex-boyfriend. 'I want more of this,' he says.

PASSION

It's natural to clasp onto feelings. Natural to feel an overwhelming grief, natural to gasp as the pang of the heart for the love left for an ex-partner. It's natural to be think about your foreshadowed death.

Gregory and Forrest sit at the edge of the world, at the end of the world, sipping on their glasses of orange juice with the pulp. With a quick, sharp revision, Billy is there too, an extension added to the wooden bench. Their pupils burn. Their nostrils quiver from the smoke inhalation. No one is thinking about how to approach their life, or how to make money, or what to do about the plethora of issues that sprang into existence when it was no longer just an assignment that needed to be written. Gregory closes his eyes and listens to the piano of the wind, delicate keys. It's natural to want to say goodbye, sometimes.

In the rented place, he sifts through his luggage, the shoved-together heap Billy arranged for him before they left their home further towards civilisation. None of this makes him feel desirable, or beautiful, but in the throes of any sort of depression does he want to be? He felt beautiful the moment Forrest's eyes were truly on him. Something about the way a person can reconnect with another's soul, like plugging in the charging cord for a mobile phone. He felt desirable because the miserable bleakness of what he had become wasn't the loudest thing dwelling in that room, in that moment. Gregory hadn't thought to look down at Forrest's legs.

He isn't packing away anything, nothing so certain. There's an old grimace lying around in the bottom, giving him a new appreciation for *being*. He doesn't feel certain about this staying alive thing—one hand on his thigh doesn't change an entire world. There are still the earthquakes. There are still nuclear codes getting shuffled into the wrong hands and atomic bombs being wedged into the empty space between his heart and his lungs. But. *You cannot be depressed forever, Gregory*, he hears himself mutter from a recess in the brain. A tiny politician man in a mesh-and-wire suit stands to attention at a podium and delivers a newer, updated address. *Be chirpier, maybe*, or that's something the bluebird nestled behind his mother's ear would say, the tattoo she got when she was in her late twenties with the kids already a nuisance, the husband already a fucking nuisance. The world at a stage. Whatever stage it may be. Peaks, valleys, the desire to be in love again with the boy, or boys.

Gregory wipes a stupid tear from his eye and thinks about the logistics of crawling into the luggage and zipping himself up inside of it. There, he will be hidden, a decision made for him. Whether he commits, or doesn't, someone will take him home, wrap him in silk, and tell the stories of how he is loved. It's a morbidity. Having feelings.

After another afternoon swim, the glazing sun reddening Billy's pale shoulders, Gregory draws down his shorts and stands completely naked in the doorway to the bathroom, eyeing off the both of them. Seawater is in his ears. Some of it has seeped into his brain, altering his perceptions—he doesn't see himself as a morbidly-worrisome creature out searching for meaning, he sees himself as a spritely young man with an interest in his own happiness. Naked is happiness. He wants to say, *we don't need to pretend there are rules anymore*. That this spark of something in him exposes Billy's concern as an attempt at having it all, and Forrest's fear of his transformation as his attempt to be complimented again. No cruel negativity to either, Gregory thinks, gently taking his semi-erect penis in his hand. Don't people deserve to run headlong out of the torments of their minds?

Three naked bodies crowd the shower. It's almost the equivalent of hosing down the kids—they take turns underneath the scalding heat of the water, giggling as it prods the flesh. Occasionally, one will lather their hands in soap and smudge it down the back of another. Forrest is a startling display of blue-and-green, more than previously noticed. Three slits in his neck breathe in, breathe out. Gregory places both of his hands on Forrest's waist and thinks about kissing him, making so much of his desire so obvious. But in this moment, he's not unequivocally horny, lusty, wanting to rewind to those foolish times where he thought going to bed frustrated and despondent was better than going to bed with a raging boner.

If anything, they save some water.

Maybe.

The decision to stay naked is an uncomplicated one, although Forrest tugs at his flesh as if he's already wearing an uncomfortable outer layer. Billy and Gregory kiss in front of the bathroom mirror, their reflections fogged up. Forrest's hair is still drying, and he leans the side of his body against the bathroom wall, eyeing off the boys in front of him. Was there much of a conversation for this moment? No one seemed to have found the need. Their lips part, and Gregory glances over at his first boyfriend, the beautiful slow evolution of him. Those gills are an adjustment, but he feels the same way he has always felt—how on earth do I get to exist at the same time as someone who makes my heart flutter like I'm a chubby baby preschooler?

Gregory is sprawled out like a starfish on the bed. Forrest's body weight presses down on his. Their initial kiss is awkward, reserved—Forrest retracts briefly, sporadically, to apologise for his nerves. There doesn't seem to be any chance of his forgetting. He occasionally flings a hand off towards his legs, scratching at the scales—he never once draws blood, but Billy watches on, and Gregory inside of

himself realises this isn't a passion of perfection. Billy is kneeling on the edge of the bed, steadying himself. He fluctuates between gently jerking himself off and looking on with uncertainty.

[Are we making a mistake, they all collectively think.]

They stop. They inch forward together, a tight and enclosed circle, of the sea once and of the land now. Of the sheets. Gregory clears his throat, for once a sweet smile on his face. 'I can go back to being a grouch on the couch,' he says, making the other two laugh without question. They don't laugh at him, but with him, picturing the version of events where Gregory slips into an aluminium-grey onesie and manspreads over on the sofa instead, watching puppies lose their lives in car accidents and teenage girls slowly tumble down flights of carpeted stairs. Forrest shakes his head, a hand covering his noticeably-discoloured cock. No one can really imagine what the genitals of a half-human, half-sea-monster hybrid would look like...but Gregory can notice the tinge of self-consciousness that remains.

'A person hasn't told me he wants to fuck me in so long,' Forrest says, his chest rising and falling as he too attempts to maintain his balance on his knees. 'It almost feels too late for all of this.'

They don't speak about this other what-if: the three of them so in love with one another they deny the ways of society and just accept what was staring them in the face this whole time.

Billy runs a hand over Forrest's chest, a stark contrast to his own. Hairless, slim, the figure of a once-upon-a-time swimmer, that is Forrest, beautiful Forrest. Billy's skin remains burned and tanned and speckled with freckles. Worn down by the sun. 'I brought you both out here because I don't believe in too-lates. Just not how I see my life.'

'I'm just hurting my knees,' Gregory says, his voice cutting into the space.

Forrest pokes out the tip of his tongue, a lightning-speed reaction. 'Our bad, daddy.'

It's organic, this reunion of bodies. Billy's hand on Forrest's thigh. Someone's breath punctuating silence. Gregory's nipple being bitten. When Forrest repositions himself, the room repositions itself too. When Billy moans, the floor heaves its sigh of relief, the ocean tides make a galivanting thrum against the walls, or else that is how it appears, with eyes closed tight. Or else a narrow blindness, lustful, oystered, pearled. When Forrest orgasms, he clicks from the back of his throat, the high-pitched intrusion of dolphin noises, but neither of the other boys disarranges to notice. It all feels so very Old Hollywood...*then you mean, all this time, we could have been threesome-fuckers?*

Lovers. In some holy queer union beyond the complications of thinking this way or thinking that. Yet while Billy penetrates, he doesn't think of his regrets, of his missed opportunities. Yet while Forrest feels the pleasure of a six-and-a-half-inch erect cock in his boy pussy he doesn't think of a seaweed dinner or the worry of an abandoned life if he had held commitment those years ago. Yet,

while Gregory wiggles himself backwards and steps down off the bed, he doesn't think about the future he wants to exclude himself from. Doesn't think about the past. Just thinks about *them*.

An hour or so later, in bloated darkness, Gregory lies awake in the queen-sized bed, taking up the least amount of room. Beside him, peaceful bodies—Billy, asleep, and Forrest, asleep, their limbs arrayed underneath the sheets. He doesn't want to wake either of them, and for a moment there's an addendum. An extra word, an *ever*. He doesn't want to wake either of them, ever, for in the moment he's the sort of precise and unrelenting god people in a congregation could talk about. Someone who is loyal and observing. Protective. Doesn't want the harm of an unforgiving life. Time passes, though. In school, he'd gone through his parents divorcing. He was troubled attempting to understand every little fracture, like chaotic bone shattering once a skier had tumbled from way, way up high, perched not so carefully in the chairlift. Becoming his own man, growing up and falling in love, meant he made a handful of dumb, shithead decisions to bear his own trauma. He couldn't say, *I'm so sorry Forrest, I made those decisions because I frighten myself*. He didn't have language like that at sixteen, seventeen. Gregory thought he could make mistakes, make as many as humanly normal, then patch them together with some super-strength glue and be like the role models. His parents, sifting through cardboard boxes. Television characters reading off scripts. Forrest and Billy. Boys who had better dreams.

He tries to slink silently out of the bed, tries to keep from disturbing either of them. He goes to the toilet, pisses in the bowl, then flushes and washes his hands in the sink. The overhead bathroom light glows against his skin and he sees two versions of himself—one who thinks himself so suicidal, the other who dances to the music of thinking himself so in love it could only possibly be gay. To think if he took his own life he couldn't be hopeless in adoration for his men like this. In his challenging ruminations on the afterlife, he couldn't comfortably envision a heaven that didn't present him an immediate escape. There would have to be photorealistic dreamscapes of a life: him, Forrest, and Billy, conjoined and yet comfortably apart, harmonising to the tune of a world without death. Without scales. Without the societal pressure to make sure your friends and your lovers aren't drowning in their own existential dreads.

These are the things Gregory would want to take with him to the grave: his phone, comfy clothes, a toothbrush, pocket-sized versions of his boys, a copy of *Interstellar*, a packet of Sour Patch Kids, a picture of himself when he was five. It's like going off for an overnight excursion, bringing the strange essentials, except there's no anticipation he'll ever come *home*.

He finds a quiet corner in the rental and sits down, phone in his hand. One night he'd written a note in the app where he's supposed to store passwords, reminders, incoherent lines of (maybe)

dialogue from a movie he had been watching. It wasn't *Interstellar*. The note could be considered incoherent too, a smashing-keys memoir he could have pasted to his forehead if he went out some kind of way that didn't obliterate his body. Now, rereading over the words, this obvious suicide note, Gregory can't help this exact feeling he feels. This exacting feeling, really. That he **should** do away with himself, because the note is so compelling. Because the truth exists outside of the void it was written in. He was in his bedroom, then, the look of a painted gothic night without the black makeup that would make the sky. He was thinking about how good endings come sometimes when you least expect them. Hell, people can't always control their orgasms either.

In the corner, Gregory sees his suicide note like its own kind of poetry. Harshly beautiful. Hardly beautiful, too, as he describes the way he could evaporate from life and leave only the better people to carry out the better duties. Things like loving, watching an intense game of a sport like tennis, if you're into sports or like the movie *Challengers*. Things like loving, watching birds fly overhead in their pointed arrow, watching a young child, your niece or nephew or cousin-nibbling run around with an unripened orange in their mitts, rolling it down the slope of the driveway of the home you spent nine years of your life growing up in. He has half the nerve to scrap the whole note, delete it twice so the machine can't keep its soft recollection of it, and pretend going forward that he wasn't so perilously on the edge. On the verge. He used to have an old friend he met through Forrest who would perform at poetry slams, sporadically, dependent on whether she was in the country. She had the savings to go travelling plenty, and sometimes she would write about what it felt like to discover a person in a foreign place. Or discover a feeling, too, because she would set out this account of losing her broad-brimmed hat to the wind on an August day in Fiji. The feeling would not stem from something so material as losing the hat, but there would be the briefest of pauses while the poetry took a moment to mourn it. See, this friend of Gregory's and Forrest's, and maybe a little bit Billy's, she'd always reminded them of searching for your freedom. Taking life in strides, sure, but searching for the eclipses that weren't the signature for a soon-to-be dull moon. You're living on a dull moon, she might say now, finding an insert into this thought. A thought which for Gregory has only been spurred on because he is sitting on the floor in a place that is not his own, bathed in some moonlight, wondering why, out of everything, he can't be alive *and* dead.

'Greg?'

From the darkness peers back a shadowed figure. Billy is carrying a water bottle in his right hand. With his left, he wipes at the corners of his eyes. 'What's going on in that head of yours?'

Gregory, having finished with squinting at the glow of his phone, looks up and is greeted by a sight he's been too critical of lately. One could say he's been a little blinded, is all.

‘It’s going to take me a lot of time to ease away from this,’ he says, briefly glimpsing down at the words on the screen. Words that aren’t known to Billy—won’t be known to Billy, surely. Gregory will cast a protective hex around himself if need be. ‘Thank you. For kidnapping me.’



Gregory ties his shoes while Billy bites into a slice of toast while Forrest runs a finger along the edges of his scales. They are beautiful, he said to Forrest while they showered together that morning, while they reminisced in glances about knowing each other for years and still not being tired of one another. Billy had showered alone. Maybe there is some part of him that sees the sand dunes beyond the emerald palm fronds. He who sees the realism, then. The eventual factory smoke clogging the arteries.

‘I’m starving,’ he says, miming bites into the toast in Billy’s hand. The boys all laugh. No one goes to feed Gregory, though, and Billy only offers the slice jokingly. He resigns into a sigh—they’d told him to eat fifteen minutes ago, and he’d declined it, typical, standard Gregory sort of behaviour. He who just ignores the world to be uncomfortable, then. A rumbling stomach like a storm cloud.

Gregory takes one of the tuna cans and spins it round in his hands, almost admiring it as if an abstract piece of art. A squat cylinder of greens and yellows and whites. He’s completely dressed, completely laced-up, a startling image for a change—Gregory of the prepared, and yet not quite. There are crackers in a red cardboard box, a knife in the drawer, something like ammunition in his head. Just eat some tuna already and make at least one day of the month not about your depression, not one bit.

The other two just stand around and judge. He shoves a tuna-topped cracker into his mouth and grins at them, a cheeky little kid. ‘I thought you were going for a walk,’ Forrest says, perched on the sofa. It’s the old handmaid’s tale—walking is good for the mental health and all that. The three of them could go on walking forever, and maybe one day they would finally outwalk the ringing bells in their heads. Gregory digs the knife around in the tin of tuna.

It’s kind of funny, how we don’t realise how obvious the stomach is about its hungers. Like it’s practically screaming out for what it wants to chew on.

One day Forrest and Gregory and Billy were hungry. So, they ate.