

HYPERSTIGMATA

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PUBLISHED BY GOAT MILK PRESS LLC

www.goat-milk-press.com

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CAST

THE SLEEPER

A DEAD MAN

SHAME MENDEL

A SEVERED TONGUE

PORTER

<ACT ONE>

A hotel, ROOM 309. Night.

The SLEEPER awakes upon a bed in ROOM 309. There is a door to the bathroom, a door to the hallway, and a single window. The ROOM also contains an armchair, a writing desk with chair, a small television set, and a nightstand with a telephone. The television is tuned to static.

The SLEEPER rises, kneels on the floor and closes his eyes as if in prayer, and rocks himself forward and backward.

SLEEPER: Curse our bodies, burn them to ash. Curse our bodies, burn them to ash. Curse our bodies, burn them to ash. Turn them to salt...

His voice trails off but he remains kneeling and rocking, eyes screwed shut. The phone begins to ring and he freezes, then opens his eyes. The phone rings six times, but he makes no move to answer it. When it stops ringing, he rises from the floor and exits through the door to the bathroom. After several moments, the toilet flushes. The SLEEPER re-enters. A DEAD MAN is lying on the floor.

The SLEEPER notices the DEAD MAN and stops, surprised.

DEAD MAN: [*Unmoving.*] Sometimes the grass is tall and I can't see anything. Other times it is a desert and I can see to the ends of the earth. What does it matter?

SLEEPER: I suppose that depends on your situation. Someone who is alive can turn his head and look wherever he wants.

DEAD MAN: Not so, not so. Although I understand why it may seem that way. But in truth the living are bound by the same immobility, the same despair. The only difference is I have the time to wait for change. But I ask again—what good is change?

A knock at the door to the hallway. Enter SHAME MENDEL. He wears black robes and his skin is incredibly pale.

SHAME MENDEL: [*Looking at the DEAD MAN, then at the television.*] I see you have found some companions since last I saw you.

SLEEPER: The dead one is newly arrived. But I've always needed the static. I can't bear the nights alone.

SHAME MENDEL: I see. Have you been to the doctor? What did he say?

SLEEPER: [*Angrily.*] The doctor! He said I was in perfect health, as always. I don't know why I waste my time.

DEAD MAN: You shouldn't blame him. He isn't trained to deal with sickness of this caliber. No doctor is—they are only human.

SLEEPER: What would you know of it? [*Pause.*] But maybe you are right. I'm losing the distinction between pain and relief.

SHAME MENDEL: That is to be expected. You are experiencing transmigration. Have you looked in the mirror? Do the colors run in your eyes?

SLEEPER: You always speak of color. All I see is poison.

DEAD MAN: The waters were turned bitter...

SHAME MENDEL: Only a third part.

DEAD MAN: What's the difference? If you are holding a glass of water and a third of the water in the glass is poisoned, you are in effect holding a glass of poison, are you not?

SHAME MENDEL: Do not be obtuse. In any case, he is in need of a bezoar. [*He produces a small box from his robes, approaches the SLEEPER and gives it to him with both hands.*] Do you know there is a group of autochthons in the Gobi who are able to produce bleeding sores upon their own bodies merely by contemplating the senselessness of flesh? Anthropologists call the wounds "psychic stigmata".

SLEEPER: You direct me towards an amalgamation. [*To the DEAD MAN.*] Tell me, corpse, are you familiar with these contemplations? Would I breathe easier in the desert vastnesses?

DEAD MAN: I'm afraid I don't know what you need. There is never space enough.

SHAME MENDEL: But once they bear the marks they say they can no longer see a human face.

SLEEPER: I don't think that would be so bad.

SHAME MENDEL laughs and exits. The DEAD MAN rises and exits after him. The SLEEPER places the box on the nightstand, then phones the hotel front desk.

SLEEPER: Yes, hello. Could you please have someone bring up another television set? [*Pause.*] No, there is nothing wrong with it. I just need another one. [*Pause. Then, nodding.*] Yes, thank you. [*He hangs up the phone.*]

The SLEEPER stares at the box for a few moments, lost in thought. Then he opens it. From the open box he lifts a SEVERED TONGUE.

SEVERED TONGUE: Don't touch me! Put me down!

The SLEEPER, in consternation, tosses the SEVERED TONGUE onto the bed.

SEVERED TONGUE: Fine, that's fine. Now, sleep. I have names to tell you.

SLEEPER: [*Haltingly.*] Of course, of course... But first I must wait for the TV.

He sits down in the armchair. The lights go out.

The next night. A second television has appeared in the armchair, also tuned to static. The SLEEPER awakes upon the bed to a knock at the door. He rises and opens the door. SHAME MENDEL enters.

SLEEPER: Ah, SHAME MENDEL! I didn't expect another visit so soon.

SHAME MENDEL: Yes, well... Time wears thin. Tell me, what did you learn from my gift?

SLEEPER: Horror. How it feels to wake with wet squirming in the ear. And names—Abraxas, the Confused Mass, the Flooded Mouths... It spoke of the stones, the permanent rain-lashed holes, of he who wept and opposed the vivisection of the Worm. It would not tell me what you touched when you reached through the Annelid Veil, but I notice now that you returned with a heart that sounds like locusts.

SHAME MENDEL: You still know nothing of my heart. But if you have heard names... then name me.

SLEEPER: [*Eyes downcast.*] I'm afraid I cannot.

SHAME MENDEL: [*Smiling.*] Not to worry. We will go below soon.

SLEEPER: It has to be soon. My heart feels as though it will burst! My hands won't stop shaking. A

few months ago I was afflicted with perpetual urination—I drank nothing for 40 days, but there was a constant stream of piss. I had to lie in the bathtub the whole time so the room wouldn't flood!

SHAME MENDEL: [*He grins wider. His face resembles that of a skull.*] And now you understand, yes? You have felt the pressure that relocates consciousness. Or rather, I should say, it has taught you that the home of consciousness is a deception.

SLEEPER: Yes, I understand what you mean. Our ordinary impressions, sight and balance, for instance, lie to us and make us believe, incorrectly, that the mind is located in the head.

SEVERED TONGUE: [*From the bed.*] But we are acephalic, like the Abyssal Angels. I, too, pissed for 40 days and nights and in this fashion I communed with the parasites inside me and learned of the meat nailed to the walls in the Temple marketplace—the walls which were stained black with the speech of flayed skins. And I was forced to lapse in gutters lest my body flood the rooms in which I slept.

SHAME MENDEL: It is the grand piss mystery. The baselessness of the affliction, and the impossibility of its assuagement, testifies to its sublime nature.

There is another knock at the door.

SLEEPER: [*Loudly.*] Enter!

A PORTER enters, carrying a full-sized female mannequin. It is missing its right arm, and wears nothing but a pair of black lace panties. SHAME MENDEL's grin disappears.

SLEEPER: [*Sheepishly, pointing to the corner.*] Just put it over there, please.

The PORTER nods, stands the mannequin in the corner, and exits.

SHAME MENDEL: [*Pointedly.*] I thought you would know by now to avoid this sort of thing.

SLEEPER: I know, I know. It's just... I get so lonely.

SHAME MENDEL: You are justly ashamed of your degenerate human appetites. But you have merely traded flesh and blood for simulacra, and open indulgence for secret.

SLEEPER: Please don't think ill of me. I'm struggling.

SHAME MENDEL: Man must rid himself of want if he is to resemble the abyss. Imagine that you are merely a gland, and exult in your release from having a face, and a voice.

SLEEPER: Before the 40 days of drinking nothing there were 40 days of drinking mercury. I couldn't bear to swallow that poison they call water any longer. But the mercury made me see things. It made me hollow. And I found myself chasing a dark-haired woman through the streets, into a wide meadow. I was going to fuck her until she too was carved out empty. I tore her clothes off, but then some men appeared with knives and stabbed her to death. I was distraught—I wept as I carried her body to my room. When I put her on the bed I saw that, on the inside of her thigh, the men had carved the word “ASPERA”. And when I looked into her eyes they were not the same as I remembered.

SEVERED TONGUE: I performed similar experiments. The mercury dried up the black humors coursing my useless organs, my holes were sealed, I became sexless and forever erect. My fingers were stained dark with the intoxicants of the dreaming soil; I left my faltering flesh and my hurtful sleep and I seeped into the earth. The rain came with plague and its words were bitter, the language of nature's ancient betrayal howling and ailing in the dust... but by then I was privy to higher lies.

SHAME MENDEL: Be sure to eat that Tongue soon.

SHAME MENDEL hesitates, then exits. The SLEEPER approaches the mannequin.

SLEEPER: I've failed. I can't be a god, and I never could manage to be a man either. It all moves on without me. But maybe we can listen to the echoes together, before I'm too sick to hear.

He puts his arms around the mannequin's body, his forehead against hers, and closes his eyes. He smiles and hums a tune. The lights go out.

The third night. The SLEEPER sleeps on the bed, lying with the mannequin. The SEVERED TONGUE has disappeared. The DEAD MAN has reappeared on the floor. Both TV sets are where they were before, still emitting static noise. SHAME MENDEL enters, roughly hauls the mannequin from the bed, stands it by the window, opens the window, heaves the mannequin out of the window, and then closes the window. Meanwhile, the SLEEPER rouses himself and gets out of bed.

SLEEPER: [*Agitatedly.*] What are you doing?

SHAME MENDEL: I am clearing your path.

DEAD MAN: [*To SHAME MENDEL.*] You have forgotten that he sleeps in ether.

SHAME MENDEL: I forget nothing. [*To the SLEEPER.*] How goes your practice?

The SLEEPER puts his hands over his ears and turns to the wall. He stares at the wall silently. Through the wall the sound of distant machinery is heard. SHAME MENDEL approaches the wall and notices a small, circular hole. He bends over to look through it.

DEAD MAN: What do you see?

SHAME MENDEL: Only an empty room.

DEAD MAN: Then you have seen GOD.

SLEEPER: [*Taking his hands from his ears and turning from the wall.*] I can't stand it anymore! I'm cursed, I'm collapsing!

SHAME MENDEL: Have you yet tasted of the Worm? Of the Black Milk?

The SLEEPER shakes his head.

SHAME MENDEL: Then speak not of curses—or blessings. My mercy is not one of salvation, but

scarification.

DEAD MAN: [*To the SLEEPER.*] Let me tell you what will happen after you die. The medical students cutting you open will find you swelling with black cores, marks of a disease that engenders fears of faces and of fluid that has escaped its vessel. And these students who have no concept of sickness will cut the tumors and sing with them, distracted from their studies in the trajectory of cancer and annihilation as they imbibe the darkened blood, and beneath their revelry they will wonder how a person could live so full to bursting with suffering and its signs.

SHAME MENDEL: [*Beckoning the SLEEPER.*] Please, come with me to the elevator. We should descend now. I have worlds to show you.

DEAD MAN: SHAME MENDEL lies. There is nothing down there but derelict roads in the cold and dark, and the bones of the long dead, collapsed into infertile dust. Mankind has left its fields barren.

SLEEPER: Don't tell me that. I don't want to hear it. There must be some hope.

DEAD MAN: Don't be naive. You have taken the stars for promises, but they too will die and forget.

SLEEPER: Then I am a martyr to the void. Does this all truly mean nothing?

DEAD MAN: Listen—when GOD was born, three kings came bearing three gifts. The first king bore Tongues; the second, Soot; and the last, Wounds. A surgeon came and the child's chest was split apart, so that these gifts could be sewn into GOD and carried near to His heart. And when the kings looked into GOD's face they saw only a blasted waste, burnt and scoured. Look at SHAME MENDEL's skin—it is just the same.

SLEEPER: [*Anxiously, to SHAME MENDEL.*] Is it true? Do you hurt?

SHAME MENDEL: “Non, mihi si linguae centum sint oraque centum...” [*Pause.*] But you neglected to mention the multiplying of the loaves and fishes.

DEAD MAN: Utter nonsense! Two fishes cannot be made from one.

SHAME MENDEL: That is why they called it a miracle.

DEAD MAN: I'll have you know, before I died I was a professional fish mathematician.

Suddenly the PORTER enters, carrying another television set. He puts it on the floor, plugs it in, and turns it on. The screen comes to life. Like the other two, it is only static. The PORTER exits.

SLEEPER: [*Exhaling.*] Oh, thank God. Maybe now I can finally sleep.

DEAD MAN: Is this the end, then?

SHAME MENDEL: The end is everywhere, everywhere you look. Frankly I would prefer if the earth fell into the sun. They call me a monster, but this— [*He points to his mouth.*] —is just a mouth. There is nothing inside.

SLEEPER: So I am alone after all. I should have known. What do I do now?

DEAD MAN: It doesn't matter.

SLEEPER: Then I shall sleep.

The lights go out.

SHAME MENDEL: Grant me an eye with which to weep. Grant me a length of string to tie round my finger, to stymie life's incursion and blacken the flesh. I shall teach thee to pray: be thou shriven, and mine finger thy catechist and absolver.

CURTAIN

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April-July 2018