

HOW TO BREAK A ZEBRA

I want to pretend like you were right.

You drilling into me what to think, what I am, what to buy; How to apply my mascara in the morning.

It's 7:00 AM on the dot, the sun is rising and reflecting in this perfect way onto a mirror that makes me look perfect, too.

Between you and I, it's always been about perfection- until it becomes a dark obsession. And even then, you welcome it. I'm applying cheap mascara on a full sun Tuesday. I am a breaking mirror refracting your sun in all of your directions. I've become entombed in the body of something refined, dressed up nice to meet your quota. Pushed on, chewed on, I marched toward it.

I want to choke you. I want to tell you "Shut the fuck up and look at me."

This is the story of how I, an animal, was convinced I was not, and how I am damned to undo my pelt's acrylic stitches at the same pace they're sewn in.

"Gas is at \$4.03 at Shell." He murmurs as we pass their entrance.

I'm ticking toward empty, but too stubborn to pay four dollars and three pennies to a power up top who sucked that juice out of a well. Somewhere. In an ocean or a sand pit that once in another life, belonged to an evil, faraway land called Mexico. But we don't talk about them anymore; even they were not powerful enough distractions.

"You ever been to Mexico?" I ask him. We keep riding, he keeps breaking, I keep waiting, the gauge keeps falling.

"I think I did," he eventually recalls.

When I was 17 and got my license, I went on Google Maps, calculating the various paths and costs

of North American road trips- all too expensive and far for my wallet. I always wanted to see New Orleans, Houston, Nashville, and make my way south to the wall that separated us from them. My world, from another world. One price of sludge from another.

The car's gauge goes red and the metal bodies pulled over start showing themselves, piled up on both shoulders.

"Why couldn't we just get gas?" He asks.

The car lulls under its own weight, cruises another hundred feet before it meets its final resting place.

"We can either stay in this car, roll into a gas station, pull out our wallets, and pay for gasoline- a product our lives have been designed around, and pushed around by. We can keep giving them our money, our support, and stay in this death roll forever just to keep this car moving.

"Or, we can pass the station. We can burn the last drops and see how far we can get. Look at where we are, we're here. Now, we can get ourselves the rest of the way- And believe me, we'll find a way. We always could, and we always will. It might be longer and harder, but it won't hurt us. It won't use us, abuse us, or poison us. It'll be just us, making our own way" I get out of the car. He does the same.

And so we start walking.

Weird of course, relying on systems of bolts, wires and invisible waves. Invisible money, invisible power. Determine everything I touch. Determine me, myself, and my destiny. Kind of like the air moments before a stroke. I smell you there, but I don't. And then the world goes dark, as if I've just discovered something I shouldn't have.

I think the world is bigger than just my mother who wants to control me. And you. And the things we do. The people we love. The people we become. The things we buy, the places we go, the places we're afraid of- A quiet gas that fills the room which controls all the moving parts inside of it. Nerve gaseous state of mind placed in your test tube crawling up the walls only to be hosed down back to the bottom where it's a different world, and that world is darker. Part of its design is the

dark, isn't it?

The most beautiful machines are the ones we don't quite understand. I look at my calculator; It tells me the answers and I don't know how. My popcorn in the microwave-

Somehow the food is hot but the chamber is not. People are more beautiful when they have secrets, too.

What are you hiding from me? What can I learn about you next? Where are you going when you look out the window? Where is that mind of yours burying you? What is this machine doing to me in the dark where I can't see it?

The country gets very small when you can cross it in a day. A trip that killed people once upon a time, conquered in an afternoon.

To SFO and back from EWR. From EWR to MCO, not to be confused with ORD. Ports as portals. Does it really happen the way they say it does when the plane door closes? Am I really going alone, are you really coming with me?

We talk a lot about the parts of the country as if they're other parts of the world. This country, and its corners, and its problems, get so small when you can conquer them in an afternoon. No one ever talks about that. Once at a party the men holding Coronas agreed the lime is for show and not for flavor- they're wrong.

"Way out west"

"Down South"

"Over East"

"Alaska"

As if it's not yours- it's *all* yours.

You. American. You're entitled to Hawaii just as much as you are to Virginia. Your bombsquad hits its shores in an afternoon, afterall. As if the politics of a country could kill a capital. All of the sudden I feel like I own this place, and it owns me. Your problems are my problems as your shores

meet my seas. All the more reason to leave you, or to break you into what I want.

About systems I criticize and condemn. I understand their uses, power, and why they work. They achieve their goals as secret accomplishments.

To break something perfect to make it beautiful. To break something beautiful to make it perfect. I don't know which it is more, but it must change, and for everyone's sake not at my hand.

I'm sitting outside of my house- my own house, tonight, the porch light glowing in a way that brought me in, like a fly to a torch, like a boat to a port, there lay a body on my porch. Yes, I own this, I bought it, it's mine, but I'm sitting out here under this light on concrete because I lost everything that would prove it so, today.

Little black box in my pocket, a glass trinket of despondency that earlier unlocked all doors presented to me- that was my master key to everything. Everything that I've bought and owned proves I am here, and that all here before you in mine.

Somewhere between buying all this shit, and sitting on my porch, there was a flood. The city is like a machine that keeps on. A beast that's never satisfied. A pit with no bottom. I am a racehorse with no finish line. Before today, I thought nothing would slow me down or shut me up.

I was walking downtown when the water rose up from both rivers, passed my ankles to my hips and carried me off that drowning island all the way back home. Somewhere in that water now is my phone.

Funny how a phone has changed. Something that used to have a real touch down to Earth that bound me in a room, to a wall, to talk to you. Now they operate off invisible forces to what, release me?

I am sitting on my porch, soaked down to my bones, unable to get in as the lock's screen reads "No Key Detected" in a perfectly logical, emotionless reality that is all mine. The crickets are chirping in the bushes that have always been there. I cannot see them, but they see me, and they know I don't belong here anymore.

If I break the windows the alarms will sound, and when authority shows up how will I prove the glass and the porch and the house and the light that brings them in is mine? Without my face digitized into an ID vertically on said master key, how could anyone know but me?

I sprawl out on my porch looking into the bushes for what I hear but cannot see, something opposite of a light beckoning me. Like a dog, I wait for an order without realizing I am not cast out, but freed.

Was I supposed to take out the trash?

Everyone in the office came in early today because it's Friday and they want to leave early. I like this job because the manager lets us leave early on Fridays if we get here early, too. In this way, we have more determination over our time, and I like that. I feel so grateful.

Paresh sits next to me Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays between the hours of 9-5. Every day he eats a grilled cheese sandwich that his ex wife makes for him. By the time 12:30 rolls around the cheese has gone cold- just how he likes it.

Every day he throws the tinfoil that wrapped his sandwich in the waste bin that divides his desk from mine.

Really, I just can't seem to get my ass out of bed early enough to get in here before 9 to leave before 5, so, every Friday I spend the last hour in the office alone.

In this office, there are manners.

Last to leave runs the dishwasher, closes the blinds, kills the lights, locks the doors, burns the trash. I think. Maybe these manners are exactly why everyone is trying to get out of here early. But I can't remember now if I'm supposed to take the trash out, or if the Sunday cleaning crew takes care of that.

Paresh's tin foil has been talking to me for the last half hour of the week.

"So what kind of work do you guys do around here?"

"I'm not really sure, I just copy and paste emails and hit 'send'."

“And they pay you for that?”

“Yeah, and it’s still not enough”

“Do you like sending emails?”

“Do you like being the temporary exoskeleton for a sandwich?”

“I guess I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I.”

I wrap it up along with the rest of the trash in the office for the incinerator.

“Why do you have an incinerator in your office?”

“It’s just what we do with everything that serves no purpose, once that purpose is through.”

“Do you really believe I can’t do anything more?”

“I really believe that.”

I throw the bag in the fire, and it is done.

The room is dark and smells like shit, and it stings my eyes to be in here. The fire rips up and up the chimney, and slows back down to a scowl before me.

This is where I take off my socks, my shoes, my shirt, my pants, my underwear, I force the overhead open, and myself climb in.

“What do you think would happen if someone actually tried something?”

“What do you mean?” The aisle is empty. Who flies red-eye anymore?

Jose taps the pen again and again against his podium. “You know what I mean.” “What, like bringing something big, loud, and deadly?”

“Or something small and deadly.”

Sure, yes, that can happen. Anything can happen if one is determined enough. The thing is, air terror is just so passé. And besides, you’re going down too, aren’t you? “People willing to die for

their causes are in short supply, these days”

“No one is dying, these days”

Jose lost a majority of his bowels in the war out east when he served the airforce. His food is now digested externally and then moved along into a bag strapped to him, where it waits as shit at body temperature.

He turns the microphone on and greets the passengers who will be boarding their 3:30 flight to wherever, good morning. Don't be fucking late or this plane will leave without you, for better or worse.

“Where was I going with this?” Jose is mostly asking himself. Was it a love of travel, a love of aircraft, or a love of people that brought him to serve in both places? Jose makes a noise like he's remembered, “So do you think it's really worth it? Still practicing security to board an airplane? It looks like it only takes 20 minutes, but think about it. 20 minutes compounded by the thousands and thousands of people who walk through, day after day, year after year- Think of all that time wasted.”

“Yeah, it's a real tragedy for productivity. But people would say yes, it is worth it to make sure everyone gets to their destinations safely.”

Jose keeps on tapping his podium.

I had a dream of you the other night. We were together. I've never been pregnant (as far as I know) but you were there in my arms. I was so in love with you.

And then I woke up. My alarm lives to kill me.

You were not real, but this absence is. Is that proof enough? Kind of like believing in God. Is the most irrefutable proof not the belief itself?

I am a ratty American girl dreaming again that I gave birth to a beautiful baby who loved me, and I loved back. And then I woke up.

What is it that we dream of? The things that dangle in front of us? The things we can only hope to

achieve. And dreaming about them is the only thing that allows us to pull through the right now. But the loss I feel puts an acid on my tongue. It feels like someone stole you from me, and then I realize- It's because you have been.

In another world I could have you, name you, and raise you with dignity, prosperity, and security. But in my world, that dream can not exist.

But they keep me going on the dream that it *can* happen someday. I open my eyes. I swallow my baby. I kill the alarm and I get out of bed. I lace up my boots. I get on a train. I get my ass to my desk and I dream of you.

Without you there would be none of this. You are a carrot on a stick.

And then once you're here, they'll use you as a bargaining chip.

What we had was as real as a car crash.

What we had was true, it was everything I dreamt of, and still dream of.

I am in this world with the memory of it, and the anger of how it all ended. Two children holding onto something bigger than either that came to kill them.

I remember being in your bed with you. We were naked, it was winter. We were warmth, and everything was okay. If I held you and closed my eyes, everything would be okay- They would never find us.

(But of course, they did).

I'm sorry for everything after that. Children are so easy to bind because they are so small. They grow into adults who don't know yet how big they are. Like how a circus will tie up a baby elephant, and when it's older it still does not try to break free.

I didn't know what to do. I had to believe it couldn't happen to us. How dare anyone question the morale of *our* fucking love. It was ours, not big enough to share with anyone else. And yet they still took it away. They burned it in front of me and said "You'll thank us later."

Now I lay here in the arms of someone who repulses me. I do not love them, they do not love me,

and I dream of the memory of what it was like to love, and be loved. I dream of freedom to love.

I feel nauseous.

It started as a harmless uncomfot that makes you think you need to change your underwear stat. Back in college I would keep an extra thong in my bag for the unexpected, like laughing with my friends so hard I would piss myself. Or, overnight stays at my then boyfriend's apartment- Evan.

I loved him because he was handsome, and because he was getting a degree in Pathology. He had dreams of working beside detectives; I loved him for his dreams.

I wanted a man who could provide, offer security, and toss around the idea of a family with. Also, the idea of a boat, and a house on the lake.

We got married after college, the wedding was exactly how I wanted it. We got a border collie that was too smart for its own good. We bought a house on the lake. We bought a boat for the nice days, all at the cost of Evan surrendering himself for a high paying gig as the county undertaker.

It seemed for the moment only part of Evan's dream was coming true. The county did not need more lab techs running prints, or blood splatter patterns. They needed people in the morgue, draining the fluids from bodies on a slightly downturned table into a suspiciously normal drain. They needed people willing to screw plastic buttplugs into corpses after flaying them open like cattle. Someone needed to scoop out the bullets from their carotid arteries, so they offered Evan six figures to do it. We said "It can just be for now".

As it ended up, he kind of liked it. He told me his favorite part was doing the makeup on the women before their services, which I had to teach him for the job.

It's not normal to work in a basement all day with the dead. It's important work, of course, but it's not okay for someone to do that for a living, not to be ironic. Evan would tell me about the ones that bothered him, sometimes the funny ones, too, but mostly the cumbersome ones.

Car crash victim in her twenties. Suicide victim by autoerotic asphyxiation. Overdose on opium- the baggie broke inside them. Stories like that.

There was plenty to love about Evan. But of course, there were the hard parts. On more than one occasion I caught him cheating on me.

The first time I knew because he would always be on his phone, happy about nothing. It took me longer to because he never went anywhere, and never stopped having sex with me. So, when he was asleep I took his phone. Maybe it's not cheating to some people because "the other woman" was not within possibility, but it still felt wrong. I had discovered my husband's virtual relationship with an artificial intelligence bot.

I confronted him. He deleted the app, he used it to vent about the worst parts of his job. He apologized, and then I caught him again two years later.

I didn't know what to think at first about this uncomfot that was growing by the day into something unignorable. I bought a gallon of cranberry juice to flush out what I thought could be a UTI. Then ointments from the pharmacy when that didn't work. Then the day came when I woke up, and discovered white and green puss leaking out from inside me.

I started screaming. Fear, yes, but this was rage. I immediately thought of the gonorrhea pictures they flashed for us in highschool.

I took the can of hairspray and threw it at him from across the room. Then the garbage pail. Then the artful freestanding toilet paper holder. He stopped me when I reached the chair at the vanity. "What the fuck did you *do*?" I lunged to claw out his eyes, but he held my arms down. Eventually I stopped screaming, and started crying into his chest.

"What are you *talking* about? What is all this?" He asked me. I explained. He said that there was no way this was an STI. He swore on his mother that there was no one else. He even made the gyno appointment for me.

So, I sat there with my legs open to my choice of gynecologists- A gynecologist that was also a lesbian. I figured she would know most about the hardware, and maybe that was an ignorant thought. All I knew was that compared to the straight ones, she was the most considerately gentle.

"I'm sorry if I'm being cold, I just need to know what this is."

She shrugged, and to my gratitude cracked a joke: "Men." That was all she said, and needed to say.

Two rounds of antibiotics later, Evan is moving out. Evan has a court date in three month's time. The New York Times fact checkers won't stop calling. The Baptists are outside picketing against all things unholy that have happened in this house.

I stay in the basement where I hear nothing but the TV rolling The Twilight Zone. Season one, episode seven: The Lonely. It's set in a future where they send their convicts to live in isolation on scattered asteroids. The court pities the main character, and sends him an android woman companion to keep him from losing his mind.

She is not viable, but he falls in love with her anyway.











