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Shellshock

Harris Coverley

The boy is on the beach, dressed in jeans and a fleece, and has wandered into an alcove out of eyeshot of his resting mother.

The rocks of the alcove form black-grey walls, and above the brown sands there is a flat shelf of rock of the same hue, sprinkled with seaweed and layered with shallow troughs, their edges potted with shells deposited by last night's tide.

The boy with his little blue boots on stomps a shell, and then another, and another.

They are long and thin, like the fingers of a mannequin, black on the tops and bottoms, and silver-white on the rims and on the insides.

Looking at his handiwork, the boy sees the pink flesh of shellfish exposed within the flakes, torn, dying, dead.

He keeps on stomping, trough by trough, shell by shell, dozens at once, the *crunch-crunch-crunch* of chitin and calcium carbonate, although he does not know these terms, and would not care to anyway.

The boy finds a small oyster, and attempts to open it. The rim of the shell cuts into the soft skin beneath his fingernails, and he yelps. In anger, he throws the oyster across the rock shelf. It cracks on its first hit, smashes on its second, and then its milky carrion contents splatters across, leaving a whitish stream of tissue and fluid.

The boy is pleased with his mess, and crushes some more of the long shells before he becomes bored with his carnage. He hops off the rock shelf onto the sands, crushing some last shells along the verge.

He climbs a short hill of sand beside a pool of water, and looks back.

The boy sees the stretches of death he has left behind, and a nausea blooms in his stomach. He feels like he is about to throw up, and he swallows hard to force anything back down. He leans over the pool, and tries to have it over with, but he retches and retches and nothing comes, not even a slither of vomit.

The boy stands up straight, still feeling ill, and tries to walk away, out of the alcove, but something new seizes him. A sharp, hot, throbbing pain fires through his gullet into the rough of his mouth. He chokes and coughs, and leans back over the pool, but still no vomit, just heat.

The pain is like a second heart in his throat, pumping agony from one end to the other. It begins to migrate from his gullet into his brain, and then into his forehead. A new pain also spawns in his chest and spreads out through his arms and up to his fingertips.

The boy cannot figure out what is wrong. He cannot be sick. He has eaten nothing that could be making him sick. He has not been injured or prodded in any way by anyone or anything.

As the pains sit in his skull and arms like indignant squatters, they slowly come to reveal their purpose. Bit by bit, the boy realises he feels not mere *physical* pains, but the pains of death, the pains of destruction, the pains of terror, the pains of innocence vanquished. And these pains come from nowhere but within him, deeper than flesh.

With the revelation, the pain now spreads across his entire body, and he is certain that for a whole minute, he is more pain than boy. He holds out his arms and fingers straight, and it gradually exits out of his torso and through his arms into his hands and away from him, into the soft salt winds.

When he is completely drained of suffering, he breaks down and drops to his knees, dirtying his jeans. As he wipes his eyes, he gets sand in them. He tries flushing them with water from the pool, but that only makes things worse.

With his scleras pricked with rageful veins he finally leaves the alcove and returns to his mother, who is reading a magazine in her deck chair. He asks her if they can go home, and she, with a mild protest of huffing, consents to his request and pops her deckchair flat.

Their car is not too far away.

“Your jeans are dirty,” his mother says as they go through the dunes, both of them with canvas bags carrying the remains of a picnic. “Been up to boy stuff?”

“Yeah,” he replies, distracted by more transcendent matters. “Yeah...boy stuff...”