

SAMWAI LAM

Graceless

Translated from Chinese by Natascha Bruce

HE PRESSES AGAINST ME and for a moment I feel the weight of him. It's something real, then it's gone.

My Lord.

His movements stop and his eyes widen. He stares at me in alarm, as if he's suddenly realized I'm his best friend, or his ex, or maybe his daughter. Panic dilates his pupils and I am flooded with compassion.

He looks scared, like a newborn baby the moment it opens its eyes and encounters the world for the first time. I reach for him. I have an urge to stroke his cheek, to bring him hope. My palm presses against his face. His skin is rough and his breath smells of meat. His hand is on my stomach, the palm calloused. With his back to the light, his features are obscured and rays emanate from his body, like an image of God.

That's why I say: My Lord.

He pulls away from me and rushes out of the room. To ask the shopkeeper his results, to subject himself to the scrutiny of the shopkeeper's artificial eye. He won't dare express doubts in the presence of that eye; he'll confess them later, to his Google search bar.

The shopkeeper's eye will roll back in his head, scanning the man's data.

According to the wrist monitor on my left arm, my mental and physical performances have been good. Five stars on all counts. My oxygen saturation level was satisfactory and, most importantly, my memory did not glitch. My tears, expressions, and reactions were all exactly in line with the man's advance requests.

Storming out to consult with the shopkeeper could also have been an advance request. Some people like to see themselves as the injured party. Between those who inflict harm and those who receive it, the receiver is always the more easily satisfied.

My wrist monitor shows full marks, a perfect score. I'm not surprised.



IN HERE, they call me God.

The door closes, and all my attention is on them. I let them do whatever they want, make all their desires come true.

WHEN I HAVE to work, it's daytime. When I don't have to work, it's night.

My eyes open, the light is bright white, and my wrist monitor tells me there's already someone outside the door, waiting. The room next to mine, as always, is quiet. Outside my door, I hear shuffling footsteps and nervous breathing. They're entering the presence of God; of course they're afraid. Afraid, humbled, awed. And then they step in here, into this blankness, this room with only a bed, and the dynamic flips. Then I am in complete service to their every desire.

There's nothing sharp in the room: the one condition is that they cannot harm me. Or, to be more precise, they cannot leave visible marks on my body.

My body is a temple, the place they come to worship, repent, pray.

THE WRIST MONITOR informs me that working hours are over. I open the door and wander down the street, feeling the heat of all their gazes. They're like ant people looking up at a deity. They stare at me, every one of them, with a combination of sadness and joy, as though struggling to believe the image conjured by the light rays against their retinas—a flawless body, a body with hands, feet, and intact facial features. Eyes, ears, nose, mouth.

People able to remain in this city are almost all missing something. Arms, toes, ears. No one has done much research into why. Out on the street, everyone I encounter has something gone from their body, mostly legs and arms. I try to blend into the crowd and lopsided people sway around me, tilting forwards, tilting backwards, using one another for support. Bodies bump into bodies, shoulders rub against shoulders, like it's the most natural thing in the world. I keep my head down, speed up, move with the flow of the crowd, one step, another step, my limbs stiff. My stiffness is a weakness. When the other pedestrians detect my body among theirs, they move aside, clearing a path for me.

Their appearances don't hinder their daily lives too much. They go to work as normal, get off work as normal, go to eat in local diners, upload photos and videos to sharing platforms, make new friends

online. Their mutilations are jigsaw puzzles: a cavity will always find a protuberance to fit it.

“A defect is an identifying feature. We upload the details to social media platforms and find others like us. If you haven’t been on the app, maybe you don’t know. I met a woman there who wouldn’t even adopt a dog unless it had one eye, like she did. No other defect would do. Even a prosthetic eye was too much for her.”

The shopkeeper chuckles to himself, his false eye observing me keenly, illustrating the city’s hidden logic.

ONCE I MET a man who, after he took off his shirt, suit trousers, and gloves, turned out to be mostly bone from the head down. Almost all his flesh was missing. He woke up one day to find he had somehow peeled it off in his sleep, although his backbone stayed strong enough to support his movements. While he slept, his sternum rose and fell protectively with his breath, the rhythm steady. His heart was big and powerful, sending blood to every far-flung corner of his body; I traced the lines of his arteries with my eyes, all those delicate streams of bright red blood. If you peeled the skin off a pig, the pig’s heart would probably look much the same. I poked a finger behind this man’s sternum and probed gently. What if one day, fast asleep, I inadvertently squeezed that lively little organ—would the man survive?

The wrist monitor strapped to his ulna said: Respiration rate average.

OVER TIME, to be lacking something has become the defining feature of a person from this city. My intact body is increasingly conspicuous. My flawlessness has become my biggest flaw. I am obviously different, even if all people do is worship me for it.

They say I am grace.

“Impossible, just impossible.”

The first time I met the shopkeeper, he was not yet a shopkeeper. Back then I called him Doctor.

I sat in his pristine white clinic, waiting. He was scrolling on his phone. His head remained lowered but his false eye rotated, scanning me, carrying out a series of checks. The computer was connected to my wrist monitor, scouring its stored data for signs of hidden illness. The screen showed that my heart rate and respiration were normal.

“There must be some mistake.”

The shopkeeper (who was at that time the Doctor) ran the test

again, his false eye spinning rapidly in its socket. Later, once I got to know him, I understood his spinning eye was like the wagging tail of a dog, speeding up when he got excited.

He reexamined my data several times. Then he asked me to lie down on his couch.

“It’s simply miraculous. We’re all losing things, and yet here you are, your body completely whole. Not a single mutilation! But you must know that people without defects cannot remain in the city.”

He declared every single part of my body a miracle, worthy of a place in the record books. He asked me to leave, saying there was nothing he could do to help—not unless I myself knew of any hitherto unnoticed defect.

His right eye twinkled encouragingly. His left eye was unnaturally wide. When I replied to him, I focused only on the right one, on the eye I assumed he was born with, completely avoiding the left side of his face.

His eyes revolved towards his nose, as though following an invisible orbit. He reached a meaty hand to his right eye, his thumb and forefinger curled into a C, and then, without saying a word, as if all he were doing was taking off a pair of glasses, he plucked out the entire eyeball and dropped it into a glass of water.

I almost screamed. Not because his action pained me, but because it aroused in me an instant, thrilling sense of satisfaction, the opposite of fear.

“My vision was getting blurry.”

The shopkeeper finally noticed my reaction. He glanced at my wrist monitor, looking a little apologetic.

Technology is too advanced, I thought. A false eye looks more natural than a natural one.

“You might not know this, but most people here refuse to wear prosthetics. They would rather preserve their damaged parts. Sometimes they even get satisfaction from them. They’re not afraid of their defects; they’re afraid of losing the desire to seek out what they have lost. To wear a false limb is to accept reality, to acknowledge the lack. Most people in this city still have so much hope. They’re looking for you. You’re their hope. They have hope that a body like yours still exists.”

The shopkeeper’s false eye blinked twice in the water, then revolved one hundred and eighty degrees, twinkling even more than it had earlier.

I suddenly felt exhausted, but my watch wasn’t telling me to sleep.

It had no instructions for me at all.

I said: "I'm lacking a job."

HE GAVE ME a room that was all bed, suitable for working, eating, sleeping. When the door was closed, the light was white and clear, penetrating every corner. The filth and the sordidness had nowhere to hide. I pressed my ear to the wall, hoping to hear giggles from next door, or even just rustling, but after fifteen minutes, I hadn't heard a single sound.

"Is the person next door someone like me?" I asked the shopkeeper, a little embarrassed. "I mean, is their body like mine?"

"No," he replied. "You're the only one like you. One day you'll get the chance to go next door."

I IMAGINE I'm a doll. A doll for one hundred twenty minutes.

The man with the long face turns me over, then takes out a ruler. He's not here in pursuit of pleasure; he's here to experiment. In accordance with his advance requests, I lie on the bed without moving. Back to the ceiling, face to the floor. My vision thus restricted, I have to rely on the sensations when he touches me and the flickering of the light to guess what he's doing.

The pain is like sandpaper over my smooth arms. From the wetness I can tell it's a tongue.

His touch is like a cat's tongue. The man is crouched beside me with his tongue extended halfway. He's a cunning reptile, getting ready to swallow me whole. The faint stink of a stranger's saliva creeps over my body like an invisible snake. My back feels drenched. In accordance with the man's advance requests, I lie on the bed without moving. His tongue inspects the peaks and valleys of my ear, then slides inside it, glacier sleek. His tongue reaches my pelvis and softens, dabs at my hipbones, slips lower. Then his tongue stops. He retracts it into his mouth. He stands up and takes a sip of water.

The shopkeeper calls this halftime, a malicious grin twitching at the corners of his mouth. In the second half, the man will get straight down to business.

The man does not expect resistance. I repress the urge to do the unexpected, waiting. His tongue grows more familiar with my body, sliding over me again and again, like an autopsy knife over a corpse. Before finishing, this stranger's tongue returns to my ear and swirls,

one loop, another loop. The long-faced man's body heat steams up the room, and his moan of satisfaction echoes in my ear canal. I'm still lying facedown on the bed, but I know he's made it, sunken now into murky white fantasy.

ONE TIME, the long-faced man doesn't leave when he should. I sit up. My neck cracks as I turn to face him and he instantly retreats, pressing himself into the wall joint like a lizard, turning away, refusing to look at me straight on.

As I put on my clothes, I see him in my peripheral vision, hunched over, hugging his knees as if trying to fold himself up.

When I go to open the door, I realize he doesn't want me to see his face. Both sides of his head are smooth as back muscles. The long-faced man has no ears.

People who have lost things always imagine that my body has something for them. That they'll find something here. A temporary prize.

THE MAN with the long face never comes back, but the cat-tongue sensation remains stored in the memory of my wrist monitor. My skin still feels moist. Every now and then I open the saved information, to relive the experience.

I don't get the chance often, because here the days are long and the nights are short. Whenever I step outside on a break, the room next door is locked.

MORE PEOPLE COME here seeking help than go to doctors. They come to see me and project their hopes onto my body, lodge their hopes inside me, and then they wait eagerly for grace to be bestowed upon them.

After the black blindfold comes off, there's fluorescent white light. In it, I follow the instructions on my wrist monitor. I receive all manner of guests, and I satisfy all kinds of demands.

I lie on my back with my arms and legs in the air, pretending to be a dog in need of a belly scratch. I hold a middle-aged woman to my chest, allowing her to scrunch up her mouth like a baby and seek out my breast, nuzzling my areola. Over the course of sixty minutes, I promise her sixty times that I will never leave, that everything is good and whole. And with each reassurance, the first as much as the sixtieth, she lets out a mewl of satisfaction. I maintain the same intensity and

posture throughout, re-creating precisely the same stroke sixty times over. My wrist monitor shows a satisfaction rating of 100 percent.

“WHAT ABOUT AFTERWARDS, do you ever think about them?”

I’m on a break, and the shopkeeper is asking me questions.

“For example, do you ever wonder why an old lady would want to bury her face in your breasts?”

I say that I don’t.

“What about a grown man scratching your belly? Don’t you think about that? You never want to ask why?”

I shake my head. Not only have I never thought to ask, I’ve never even thought about it in the first place. Until all these questions, I’ve never thought about much beyond the screen of my wrist monitor.

The shopkeeper isn’t usually so chatty.

“Don’t you think they’re strange?” he continues. “They could do something about their defects, but they choose not to.”

He’s serious now. His eye socket is dark.

He follows me across the room. Closes the door. I adjust my monitor. The screen enters flight mode; this data is going unsaved.

I know what the shopkeeper wants. I’m not afraid he will hurt me. The mutilated dark hole on his face gives away his desires. The cavity is an endless gaze, concealing infinite yearning.

Inside the room, I believe I can do it. I can give him everything.

I hold my breath and open my eyes wide. With every touch—of his hands, of his tongue—my eyelids grow heavier, to the point that his satisfaction seems to decrease, even though he’s smiling from ear to ear.

“You could try using your hair. The strands are so fine and your response reception area would be very large.”

He stares off into space for a moment, then continues: “Your eyeballs would hurt, but with your hair you won’t feel anything. Hair grows from follicles inside the skin; we have hundreds of thousands of strands of it, and inside each strand is a hair bulb which connects to our nerves and blood vessels. That’s where hair comes from, and the hair bulb never stops growing, never stops producing new cells, never stops squeezing old cells out through the follicle.”

I don’t understand a word of what he’s saying.

“Shall we keep going?”

He shakes his head.

“Your eyes are red, all full of veins. There are pluses and minuses to

mutilation, you know. It makes certain things easier to handle.”

He gets up to leave. He only has one remaining eye but, in it, his grief is plain to see. He’s rushing now.

“Sometimes,” he says, “I want to be like them and try to find pleasure in the absence. Maybe you’ll start to feel this way too. You won’t want to be left out anymore.”

The door closes, and I’m alone in the room. My torn-off wrist monitor is silent. I lie blankly on the bed, staring at the ceiling, the shopkeeper’s voice in my ears.

“Maybe you’ll start to feel this way too. You won’t want to be left out anymore.”

PEOPLE COME AND GO, and the wrist monitor listens. It records their prayers. They squat beside the bed, they kneel at my feet. It isn’t me they’re seeing, even if their eyes are focused on me, gazing earnestly into my pupils, filling my eye sockets with all their hopes and emotions. In my body, they glimpse the possibility of wholeness, of no longer lacking anything.

The thought comes to me that, maybe, I want to feel something of the same consolation they derive from my body. That would be something real. Miraculous. That would be grace.

NEXT THING I KNOW I’m standing outside the room next door. As I hesitate over whether or not to try the handle, I notice the door is ajar. A gentle nudge, and the room is revealed before me.

The same four walls. A floor plan exactly the same as mine, a mirror image. The same bright light. But there’s nobody here, nobody at all.

On the bed there’s a knife. Exactly the kind of sharp implement that would never appear on my side of the wall.

I pick up the knife. I pinch my eyelid in my left hand, pull the lid up, bring the knife in close to my eye. I hold my breath, stretch the lid out with my left hand, attack with my right hand, pierce, pull. My vision blurs, and the eyeball I have unmoored from my body bounces into the corner of the room.

I’m weaker now, but I keep going, keep cutting from my body—a little bit here, a little bit there, until the knife falls by itself from my hands.

I DON’T KNOW how long I sleep.

A familiar voice pulls me from the darkness. The shopkeeper isn't talking to me; he's in the room collecting my hacked-off flesh, discarded arms, the soles of my feet. He's clutching all four of my limbs, muttering to himself.

"How careless! The empathy setting was too high, it tipped into self-mutilation mode, a desire for approval . . . now, where did that eyeball get to?"

I want to give him one last clue. To tell him that the liquid seeping from that eyeball in the corner is tears.