

I am a headless corpse, driven only by muscle memory to say this one thing.

a headless corpse found in a ditch

The Foul Decapitated Body of a Waterlogged Victim

In the faint, gray light of early dawn, the barge lay like the shadow of a headless body on the water. Through the hatchway appeared the head of a man, then the massive hands that held it like a bloody trophy raised above his shoulders, and then the great gangling body of Jules, the elder of the two Naud brothers -- headless, arms streaming with blood. Running his hands through his tow-colored hair, as yet uncombed and matted with gore on top of his decapitated head, he surveyed the lock, the Quai de Jemmapes to his left, and the Quai de Valmy to his right. In the crisp morning air he rolled a cigarette, holding the wet end against his jutting trachea, and while he was still smoking it a light came on in the little bar on the corner of the Rue des Récollets.

The proprietor, Popaul, came out onto the pavement to take down his shutters. He was headless. More precisely, his head hung backward on a dainty hinge of flesh, flopping inert between his shoulderblades as he lumbered to and fro. His hair, too, was uncombed, and caked with stalagmites of dried blood, and his shirt open at the neck -- but no head was to be seen there, of course, at least not from the front. His dead eyes rolled upward toward the earth below. In the half-light, the yellow façade of the bar looked more than usually garish, like a blood-spouting headless corpse shrieking impossibly into the dawn.

Pinching his cigarette between two fingers, Naud stumbled blindly down the gangplank and across the quay, a trail of watery, tobacco-colored blood leaking down to pool in his suprasternal notch. His brother, Robert, almost as tall and lanky as himself, emerged from below deck in his turn, holding his head high in his arms -- he could see, through the lighted window, Jules leaning on the bar counter and the proprietor, head dangling awkwardly at his back, pouring a tot of brandy into his coffee.

It was as though Robert were waiting his turn to be decapitated all over again. Exactly as his brother had done, he put down his festering severed head and rolled a cigarette. As the elder brother left the bar, the younger came down the gangplank, so that they met halfway in the street -- two headless men, each carrying his own head under his arm, out for a walk in the early morning sun.

"I'll be starting the engine," said Jules in a muffled voice that issued from his bloody stump of a neck.

Often, in the course of a day, they would not exchange more than a dozen laconic sentences, all relating to their work violently beheading their friends with dull instruments. You could say it was a volunteer position. They had married twin sisters, both headless as horsemen obviously, and the two families lived on the barge, which was named The Two Brothers Who Dripped Rancid Blood From The Neck Where Their Heads Used To Be.

Robert took his elder brother's place at the bar, which smelled of coffee laced with spirits even to his mildewed, sodden nose.

"Fine day," said Popaul, a tubby little man made shorter by the vicious, though incomplete removal of his head. Gravity raised his upper lip in a perpetual sneer.

Naud, without a word, glanced out of the window at the sky, which by now was tinged with pink, not unlike the fluids that trickled from beneath his long-dead chin. The slates and tiles of the rooftops and one or two paving stones below were still as dead men after a cold night, coated with a translucent frost, which was just beginning to melt here and there in little patches to reveal their gellid skin. Nothing seemed quite real, except the smoking chimneys that stood out like bare necks deprived of their cephalic cargo.

The diesel engine spluttered and burbled like the last stinking exhalation of a decapitated man. The exhaust at the rear of the barge spurted black fumes. Naud laid his money on the counter next to his head, raised the tips of his fingers to his cap, then picked up the head beneath it and returned across the quay. The lockkeeper -- stiff, gray and headless in his moldering uniform -- was at his post, preparing to open the

gates. Some way off, on the Quai de Valmy, there were footsteps, but, as yet, not a body or a head in sight. Children's voices could be heard below deck on the barge, where the blood-spurting, decollated corpses of the women were making coffee.

Jules reappeared on deck, and leaned over the stern, frowning out from under his arm as he peered at the river. His gore-slicked, headless brother could guess what the trouble was. They had taken on a load of gravel at Beauval from Wharf N°48 on the Ourcq Canal, each tiny stone shaped like the delicately severed head of a child. As usual, they were several tons overweight if you counted the massive jumble of decomposing heads that littered the hold like a hellish waste, and the previous night, as they were drawing away from the dock at La Villette, bound for the Canal Saint-Martin, they had churned up a good deal of mud. Nobody likes the dirt that corpses haven't slept in yet.

As a rule, in March, there was no shortage of rank decayed heads bobbing along the surface of the water. This year, however, there had been no rain for two months: the flotilla of heads was dessicated and sun-bleached, and the Canal Authority was hoarding its reserves.

The sluice-gates opened, releasing a torrent of the useless, grinning, sun-baked heads. Jules took the wheel, holding his own head firmly under one arm as he steered. His brother went ashore to cast off the moorings, head in one calloused hand. The propeller began to turn, and, as they had both feared, thick mud, churned up by the blades, was soon bubbling to the surface like air through the partially-decomposed flesh of a corpse abandoned in an autumn wood, its head propped on the stump of a nearby tree and keeping watch among the radiant leaves. Leaning with all his weight on the boat-hook, Robert tried to head the barge toward the lock. It was as though the propeller were spinning in a vacuum, surrounded by lifeless heads. The lockkeeper, used to this sort of thing, waited patiently, clapping his hands together to keep warm.

The engine shuddered with a grinding sound like a band-saw cutting the cervical portion of the human spine. Robert's head looked at his brother, who switched the engine off.

Neither of them could make out what had gone wrong, and they were left scratching their heads. The propeller, protected by the rudder, could not have scraped the bottom. Something must have got caught in it, a loose cable, maybe, or a forcibly-detached head, such as is frequently left drifting around in the canals. If that was the trouble, they were going to have a job disentangling the propeller from its revolting crown of tangled, gore-encrusted hair.

Robert went behind the boat, leaned over, and felt about in the muddy water, trying to reach the propeller. Jules, meanwhile, fetched a smaller boat-hook with his free hand. His wife, Laurence, poked her head through the hatchway.

"What's up?"

"Dunno."

Silently, the two decapitated men felt about with their boat-hooks, trying to reach the fouled propeller. After a few minutes of this, Dambois the lock-keeper, known to everyone as Charles the Stiff Headless Mouldering Corpse, came down to the quay to watch through bloodless eyes. He asked no questions, but just stood by, his head in in the crook of his left arm, silently puffing at his pipe, the stem of which was held together with dried blood and string.

From time to time, dead people hurried past, office workers on their way to commit suicide at the Place de la République, nurses in uniform making for the Hospital of Saint-Louis, their heads trailing behind them through the air, held aloft by an ingenious arrangement of white scarves.

"Got it?"

"I think so."

"What is it? Rope?"

"I couldn't say."

Jules Naud had certainly hooked something -- probably a head. He managed, after a time, to free the propeller, just as one frees the head of a loved one or victim from the weight of its soon-to-be-lifeless body. Bubbles rose to the surface: blub, glub.

Gently, hand over hand, he drew up the boat-hook and, with it, a strange-looking parcel, done up with lank hair and kitchen string, and a few remnants of sodden newspaper.

It was a human arm, complete from shoulder to fingertips, which, through long immersion, was drained white and limp as a dead fish. Imagine his disappointment.

At Police Headquarters, 3rd Division, situated at the far end of the Quai de Jemmapes, Sergeant Depoil was just going off night duty when he saw the skeletal figure of the elder Naud standing in the doorway, his putrid head spilled to the floor like a rotten melon.

"I'm from the barge The Two Brothers Who Dripped Rancid Blood From The Neck Where Their Heads Used To Be, up near the lock at the Récollets. We were just pulling out when the propeller jammed like a merciful blade stopped short in its holy work by the cursed hardihood of the cervical vertebrae. We've fished up a man's arm."

Depoil had served fifteen years in the 10th Arrondissement, much of it with no head to speak of, after a terrifying accident at the firing range. His first reaction, like that of all the other police officers to be subsequently involved in the case, was incredulity.

"A man's arm?" he repeated. "Such a waste of delicious meat."

"Yes, a man's. Dark hair on the back of the hand, and.. "

There was nothing remarkable in the recovery, from the Canal Saint-Martin, of a mangled, noxious corpse that had fouled someone's propeller. It had happened before, more than once. But as a rule it was a whole corpse, except for the head of course -- sometimes that of a man, some old tramp, most likely, who had taken a drop too much and stumbled into the water, or a young thug knifed by someone from a rival gang and sawed down to the neck right there in the street.

Dismembered bodies were not all that uncommon either. Two or three a year were about average, but invariably, in the Sergeant's long experience, they were the headless, destroyed bodies of women left to decompose on the lapping shore. One knew what to expect right from the start: filth, gore, a screeching maniac with a collection of bibles bound in the delicate facial skin of his numberless victims. Nine out of ten would be cheap prostitutes, the kind one sees loitering in lonely places at night, carrying their already-severed heads in plastic grocery bags that dripped lazily with a dark ichor. One could safely conclude, in every case, that the killer was a psychopath -- or a fucking priest.

There was not much one could teach the local police about the carelessly mangled bodies of their neighbors. At the station, they kept up-to-date records of the activities of every crook, every shady character in the district -- their weight, how much they ate, and how often. Few crimes were committed -- from shoplifting to armed robbery -- that were not followed in a matter of days by the arrest of the perpetrator and sumptuous kitchen smells from the back door of the police station. Psychopathic killers, however, were rarely caught -- which made them so much more delectable. Priests, though everyone hated them, were practically forbidden fruit.

"Have you brought it with you?" asked Depoil hungrily.

"The arm?"

"Where is it?"

"At the quay. Can we go now? There's this load we've got to deliver, Quai de l'Arsenal. They'll be waiting for it."

The Sergeant lit a cigarette, sticking the paper to the soggy end of his burst larynx, and went to the telephone to notify the Salvage Branch. Next, he rang his Divisional Superintendent, Mangrin, at his home. His voice sounded damp and sponge-like on the phone.

"Sorry to get you out of bed, sir. A couple of bargemen have just fished a human arm out of the canal. No! A man's.. That's how it struck me too.. What's that, sir?.. Yes, he's still here.. I'll ask him."

Holding the receiver, he turned to look down at Naud's decomposing sop of a head:

"Would you say it had been in the water long?"

Jules Naud scratched his head with a coarse wet squish.

"It depends what you mean by long."

"Is it in a very bad state?"

"Hard to tell. Two or three days, I'd say."

The Sergeant bumbled into his desk phone:

"Two or three days. It's probably just ripe for the eating."

Doodling on his notepad in his own stinking blood, he listened while the Superintendent gave his instructions.

"Can we go?" repeated the headless Naud, when he had hung up.

"Not yet. As the Superintendent quite rightly says, we don't know what else you may have picked up, and if you moved the barge, we might lose it."

"All the same, I can't stop there for ever. There are four others already, lined up to go through the lock. And they're beginning to get impatient."

The Sergeant dialed another number, his rotten fingernails tearing free in the process, and waited for a reply from the long dark void at the other end.

"Hello! Victor? I hope I haven't waked you. Oh! You're having breakfast, are you? Good. I've got a job for you."

Victor Cadet lived in the Rue du Chemin-Vert, not far from the Police Station, and it was unusual for a month to go by without some call upon his services from that quarter. He had probably retrieved, from the Seine and the canals of Paris, a larger and more peculiar assortment of objects, headless corpses included, than any other man. His own head had been crushed by a city bus many years before, and smeared across the pavement like a malodorous jelly.

"I'll be with you as soon as I've got hold of my mate."

It was seven o'clock in the morning. In the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, Madame Maigret, already dressed, as fresh as paint and smelling faintly of putrefaction, was busy in the kitchen getting breakfast. Her husband was still asleep, his dead face impassive over the stitches that held his severed head firmly to his neck. At the Quai des Orfèvres, Lucas and Janvier had been on duty since six o'clock, stone dead in a conjoined pool of vomit and organ matter, their heads perched neatly on the curb nearby. It was Lucas who got the news first.

"There's a queer thing!" he bumbled and sputtered, turning to Janvier, "They've fished an arm out of the Canal Saint-Martin, and it's not a woman's."

"A man's?"

"What else?"

"It could have been a child's."

There had, in fact, been one such case -- sadly, just the one -- three years before.

"What about letting the boss know?"

Lucas looked at the time, hesitated, then shook his head. Something rattled inside.

"No hurry. He may as well have his coffee in peace."

By ten minutes to eight, a sizable crowd of reeking dead bodies had collected on the quay where The Two Brothers Who Dripped Rancid Blood From The Neck Where Their Heads Used To Be was moored. Anyone trying to get too close to the thing lying on the ground covered with sack-cloth was ordered back by the policeman on guard, blood spouting from his neck and spraying the crowd indiscriminately as he spoke. Victor Cadet's boat, which had been lying downstream, passed through the lock and came alongside the quay.

Cadet was a giant of a man, even without his head. Looking at him, one wondered whether his diving suit had been made to measure, and how much fetid blood you could pack into it before it burst like a revolting black sausage. His mate, in contrast, was undersized, old and wizened. He chewed tobacco even on the job, sticking it blindly between the mold-slick teeth of his hideous empty head, and he stained the water with long brown streamers of liquid rot and spittle.

It was he who secured the ladder, primed the pump, and, when everything was ready, screwed what remained of Victor's head up inside its huge spherical diving helmet. It flopped and sucked to the glass like a moldy fruit preserve.

On deck, near the stern of The Two Brothers Who Dripped Rancid Blood From The Neck Where Their Heads Used To Be, could be seen two women and five children, headless all, but with hair so fair as to be almost white. One of the women was pregnant, and the other held a flaccid dead baby in her arms, the word "BAAL" scrawled across its chest in blood and liquid feces.

The buildings of the Quai de Valmy were bathed in sunshine, golden, heart-warming sunshine, which made it hard to credit the sinister reputation of the place, if you ignored the horrid stench of eviscerated headless bodies that rose like the throne of the Lord Death over a tortured, forsaken earth. True, there was not much new paint to be seen. The white and yellow façades were faded and streaked with unutterable foulness. Yet, on this day in March, they looked as fresh as a scene by Utrillo, had he painted in the partially-clotted blood of murdered truant boys.

There were four barges lined up behind The Two Brothers Who Dripped Rancid Blood From The Neck Where Their Heads Used To Be, with washing strung out to dry, and the restless bodies of dead children who would not be hushed. A smell of tar mingled with a certain less agreeable odor.

At a quarter past eight, Maigret finished his second cup of coffee, wiped his frigid gray lips, and was just about to light up his morning pipe when the telephone rang. It was Lucas.

"Did you say a man's arm?"

He, too, found it hard to believe.

"Haven't they found anything else?"

"We lost the diver, Victor, down there. Probably stuck again in that leaky suit, the water filtering through his loosely-knit dead flesh and seeping into his organs, until he's too heavy to move -- like a wet sock filled with raw liver. We'll have to let the barges through fairly soon, though. There's a bottleneck building up at the lock already."

"Who's on duty there?"

"Judel."

Inspector Judel was a young policeman of the 10th Arrondissement who had recently died in a horrible traffic accident. He was conscientious if somewhat dull, owing perhaps to the fact that his head had been opened by

the road, exposing his stagnant brain to the air. He could often be found lying prone in tiled hallways, on bathroom floors, on the pavement, etc. -- enjoying the cool temperature of the ground, which matched that of his body. He could safely be left in charge at this early stage.

"Will you be going yourself, sir?"

"It's not much out of my way."

"Do you want one of us to meet you there?"

"Who have you got?"

"Janvier, Lemaire -- their stinking remains, that is. Hang on a minute, sir. Lapointe's just come in."

Maigret hesitated. He was enjoying the sunshine as it fell on his dead lips, stained with nicotine and coffee. It was warm enough outside to have the windows open, mitigating somewhat the antiseptic smell of his freshly-washed corpse. Was this just a straightforward, routine case? If so, Judel was quite competent to handle it on his own -- even from the floor. But at this stage, how could one be certain? If the arm had been a woman's, Maigret would have taken a bet that there was nothing to it.

But since it was a man's arm, anything was possible. And if it should turn out to be a tricky case, and he, the Chief Superintendent, should decide to take over, the day-to-day headquarters routine would to some extent be affected by his choice of assistant: whoever it was, Maigret would want him to see the case through to the end, or until he had decomposed beyond repair and was dragged down to the cellar with the others. He shuddered at the thought.

"Send Lapointe."

It was quite a while since he had worked in close collaboration with Lapointe. His youth, his eagerness, his artless confusion when he felt he had committed a faux pas, amused Maigret -- as did the glazed white cataract of his cold eyes, which gave one a funny feeling, like staring into the depths of an old but very clean teacup. His bowels had been filled with serpents and turned fruit, which made his belly wiggle and distend like a jolly diseased Santa.

"Had I better let the Chief know?"

"Yes. I'm sure to be late for the staff meeting."

It was March 23. The day before yesterday had been the first day of spring, and spring was in the air already -- despite the polluted stink of the dead, whose numbers had been mounting in recent years. The air was so refreshing, in fact, that Maigret very nearly set off without his coat.

In the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir he hailed a taxi. There was no direct bus, and this was not the sort of day for shutting oneself up in the Métro with the musty, sweating corpses of the general population. As he had anticipated, he arrived at the Récollets lock before Lapointe, to find Inspector Judel laying down beside the black waters of the canal.

"Have they found anything else?"

"Not yet, sir. Victor has been recovered, fortunately, and is working under the barge. There may be something more there -- a head perhaps, caught in the propeller by its torn scalp, or two severed feet bound in a weighted sack." As he uttered this last, a smile broke over the small remains of his face.

Ten minutes later, Lapointe drove up in a small black police car, and it was not long before a string of loathesome, glittering bubbles heralded Victor's slow return to the surface. His mate hurried forward to drag the body awkwardly from the water and unscrew the diving helmet, removing the jam-like traces of Victor's head. The diver lit a cigarette, took the quivering bits of his head in hand, and looked around. He spotted Maigret, greeting him with a friendly wave.

"Found anything?"

"There's nothing more there," burred Victor's torn and waterlogged trachea. It bobbed and twitched obscenely.

"Can we let the barge go?"

"It won't turn anything up except mud, that's for sure."

Maigret shook his head stiffly in disappointment.

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. His nearly-severed head thumped time behind his back, held on by the merest bit of skin. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air, a trickle of thin brown blood streaming from its lower hem to discolor the carpet. He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

-- _Introibo ad altare Dei, caput mortuum._

Halting, he flipped his head gingerly forward with a shrug of his shoulders, peered with his dead white eyes down the dark winding stairs, and called out coarsely:

-- Come up, Kinch! Come up, you fearful corpse of a mildewed jesuit!

Solemnly he came forward and mounted the round gunrest, taking care so as not to dislodge his head from its narrow perch. He faced about and blessed gravely thrice the tower, the surrounding land and the awaking mountains. Then, catching sight of the blighted corpse of Stephen Dedalus, he bent towards him and made rapid crosses in the air, gurgling in his throat and shaking his shoulders, his head flopping to and fro like a sack of wet kittens. Stephen Dedalus, decapitated and sleepy, leaned his arms on the top of the staircase and looked coldly at the shaking gurgling face that blessed him, equine in its rubbery length, and at the light untousured hair, grained and hued like pale oak and streaming with putrescence. A rotting leaf clung to the side of the mock-priest's head. Stephen Dedalus began to throw up: clear fluid, at first, with a light foam of beige spittle that could have been phlegm, followed by flecks of white gristle and gelatinous chunks of unknown stuff, saffron bits of lung or firm golden mucus from deep inside the lower bronchii, suspended in a brown soup of stomach contents and decayed organ-matter. There was some actual food: half a sodden french fry, crinkle-cut (evidently dining hall fare), several cashews, the tapered end of a Domino's Classic Hot Buffalo™ chicken wing, okra, crumbled bacon, about two-thirds of a mozzarella cheese stick, and a smoked oyster, brown and shriveled like a witch's ear, twelve soybeans, the limp edge of a spinach herb tortilla from a chicken caesar salad wrap, three partially-gnawed baby carrots with a halo of straw-colored spittle, one two-inch length of cheese-stuffed pizza crust and a jalapeño popper, a single pepperoni slice (no doubt from the pizza), eight pimiento-filled green olives (technically mashed pimentos suspended in a firm gelatin mixture), the destroyed shell of a corn dog, one whole sardine that had not been chewed, and an unopened packet of Heinz® Tartar Sauce that, being silver, somewhat resembled the sardine, and then sixteen French fried onions, four slowly-disintegrating Vienna sausages, one cocktail shrimp with brite pink exoskeleton intact, a severely-degraded marshmallow, several tiny bales of Frosted Mini-Wheats®, fourteen canned boiled peanuts in the shell, and the brite orange cheesy nub of a shredded chicken Quesarito® from the Taco Bell late nite drive thru. There were also some non-food items: a rusted Brillo pad, a hank of tinsel stolen from the dormitory Christmas tree, a bottle of Vicodin, empty and lidless -- "just like Stephen's eyes!" exclaimed Buck Mulligan, slobbering hideously down his own backside --, three rubber gloves, one ripped soiled condom, a dead chipmunk (possibly counts as food?), two cups of Cheshire pink pea gravel from a friend's fish tank, a 1998 Columbia University student ID card #600962011054355 (student name Thomas Lugert), a felt-tipped pen, four hundred twenty-one coins in a loose ring of green bile, a six-inch corndog stick, nails, pins, sewing needles, blood, feathers, stones, lumps of coal and dung, one Purist 8gm N02 whipped cream charger and a crumpled, saturated page torn from a Playboy Magazine (December 2014 Gala Christmas Issue, Cover Girl and Miss December Elizabeth Ostrander; Annual Holiday Gift Guide; Ghetto Gastro: The New Culinary Cool Kids, etc.), seventy-eight pieces of cutlery, primarily battered forks and spoons, three keys, one half-rolled tube of Winsor & Newton Oil Paint in Phthalo Blue (200ml), a vintage 1945 Oxford Scofield King James Bible™, red letter edition, its pages held together with semen and jackal's blood, and two hundred eighteen fragments of a Chamelion Glass® Chillaxxxer hand-blown glass weed pipe.

Father Karras grabbed him from behind, pinning his arms to his sides. Stephen's head dropped, rolling dangerously across the landing toward the uppermost stair. Then, while the other boys held Stephen's body, the priest dipped into his pocket for a shining pendulum attached to a silvery length of chain. "Have you ever seen movies where someone gets hypnotized?" he asked. "Well, I'm a hypnotist. Oh, yes! I hypnotize people all the time. That's, of course, if they let me. Now I think that if I hypnotize you, Stephen, it will help you get well. Yes, that person inside of you will come right out. Would you like to be hypnotized?"

"Okay," Stephen said softly. "But only a little." His voice whispered and bubbled from the shreds of his windpipe.

When the room was dark, the priest gripped the chain in his fingertips and began to swing the pendulum gently back and forth, like a tiny thurible, over Stephen's severed head. He shone a penlight on the chain. It twinkled and glowed. "Now watch this, Stephen, keep watching, and soon you'll feel your eyelids growing heavier and heavier.." Within a very short time, Stephen fell into a trance.

"I am speaking to the person inside of Stephen Dedalus now," the priest said firmly. "If you are there, you too are hypnotized and must answer all my questions." For a moment he paused to allow the suggestion to take effect. Then he repeated it: "If you are there, then you are hypnotized and must answer all my questions. Come forward and answer, now: Are you there?"

Silence. Then something happened: a stinking breath rose suddenly from Stephen's head, foul-smelling, worse even than the vomit. It was thick and curdled visibly thru the air like a horrid incense. The priest smelled it from several feet away and recoiled, shining the penlight on Stephen's face. Stephen's body went limp and heavy in the boys' arms, and a dark fluid drooled onto the carpet from its open neck.

Buck Mulligan stifled a gasp. Stephen's features were twisted: lips pulled tautly in opposite directions, black tongue slick and erect between mold-covered teeth. "Are you the person inside of Stephen?" the priest asked. Clive Kempthorpe nodded on his behalf and fell into a sweat, a scared calf's face gilded with marmalade.

"Who are you?"

"Nowonmai," Clive answered gutturally.

"That's your name?"

"Say."

"If that's 'yes,' then nod your head."

Clive nodded.

"Are you speaking in a foreign language?"

"Say."

"Where do you come from?"

"Dog."

"You say that you come from a dog?"

"Dogmorfmocion," Clive replied. All the while, the boys noticed, Stephen's cold lips moved around the blood-filled tongue as if speaking in time with the other boy. His lidless eyes turned slowly back into his head.

The priest thought for a moment, then tried another approach. "When I ask you questions now, you will answer by moving your head: a nod for 'yes,' and a shake for 'no.' Do you understand that?" Clive nodded. Behind the priest, Stephen's tongue began to prod thru the vomit, touching here and there an old Converse® sneaker in slime-darkened blue, a chicken wing, a broken syringe.

"Did your answers have meaning?" asked the priest.

"Yes."

"Are you the person inside of Stephen?"

Clive nodded.

"Who are you?"

"Nowonmai," he answered with a sound like clearing his throat.

"That's your name?"

He nodded.

The priest paused for a moment. "A nod for 'yes,' and a shake for 'no.'"

"Are you someone whom Stephen has known?" No.

"That he knows of?" No.

"Are you someone he's invented?" No.

"You're real?" Yes.

"Part of Stephen?" No.

"Were you ever a part of Stephen?" No.

"Do you wish to harm him?" Yes.

"If he died, wouldn't you die too?" No.

This answer seemed to disquiet the priest, and he lowered his eyes in thought. The floorboards creaked as he shifted his weight. In the stillness, Stephen Dedalus' breathing rasped as if from a putrid bellows. Here. Yet far. Distantly sinister.

The priest turned his glance again to the hideous, twisted face resting close to the floor. His eyes gleamed with speculation.

"Is there something he can do that would make you leave him?" Yes.

"Can you tell me what it is?" Yes.

"Will you tell me?" No.

"But---" Abruptly the priest gasped as Stephen's body reached out for his scrotum, squeezing it with a hand that gripped like an iron talon. Eyes bulging, he struggled to free himself. "Buck! Buck, help me!" he croaked. Agony. Stephen's body, limp but for its powerful arm, sagged to the floor, taking the priest with it. He crumbled onto the soft, rotten chest of the cadaver, which exhaled profoundly and seemed to collapse under his weight. The long-disused esophagus dilated and sprang erect in the red wound of Stephen's neck. It burped, spurting clear fluid across the floor and drenching the carpet. Something pale began to crown. Buck Mulligan peeped an instant into the opening and then backed away smartly, ignoring the suffering priest. There was something smooth and woody, like the bone handle of a straight razor -- orange, and big, and throat-sized. Then the beak emerged, straight up to the nostrils, its tapered contour making wedge-room for the rest of the bird's head, splitting Stephen's esophagus like a ripe banana-skin. For a moment, it looked as if Stephen Dedalus had been delivered of a new head by some miracle; altho, that of a swan. Buck murmured in a preacher's tone:

-- For this, O dearly beloved, is the genuine Christine: body and soul and blood and ouns. Slow music, please. Shut your eyes, gents. One moment. A little trouble about those white corpuscles. Silence, all.

Then the neck snaked out like soft feces, its feathers coated in the same slime-brown of Stephen's vomit, and chaos broke. Someone had found the priest's penlight and pointed it, trembling, at the mess. There was a flickering of nightmare: Stephen's body and the priest lay writhing on the carpet in a tangle of shifting limbs, the swan's head flopping, the rigid arm. A foul plume of icy breath issued from Stephen's head nearby. The headless body was silent, the room was almost silent: gasps and curses from the priest. Then came a long keening sound from Clive, cut short by a kind of oink and a long slow whistle of appreciation. "Ia Ia Lord of the Waters Iaksakak, Lord of the Waters I summon thee. Come forth and make the gate appear in this priest's honeyed asshole," he intoned. Somehow the priest got free of the dead hand at that moment, and Stephen's body jerked and bobbed as he scrambled to push off from it. "You could have knelt down, priest, when your dying mother asked you," said Clive, "in remembrance of death and the worm, and the void, and unspeakable loneliness and stillness, darkness under the sod, with nothing moving, no motion." The shoulders of Stephen's corpse rose and jerked rhythmically as he spoke -- it was no longer the priest's action that moved them. "Turn the cross toward hell, boys," whispered Clive, and Stephen's lips mouthed the same words around his rigid tongue. "Silently, in a dream she comes to you after her death, her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, bending over you, mute, reproachful, a faint odour of damp ashes. Across from the window you hear the sea hailed as a great sweet mother by the well-fed voice inside you. Thirsty. Bloodthirsty. The skyline holds a dull green mass of liquid, sluggish bile." Stephen's esophagus continued to bloom as the neck strained upward, peaked, and burst, shitting the body of a full-grown swan into the crowd of panicked boys with a sound like the tearing of wet cotton and the unspeakable odor of moldering excrement. "That was no virgin birth," said Buck. What had looked like morning was the beginning of endless night.



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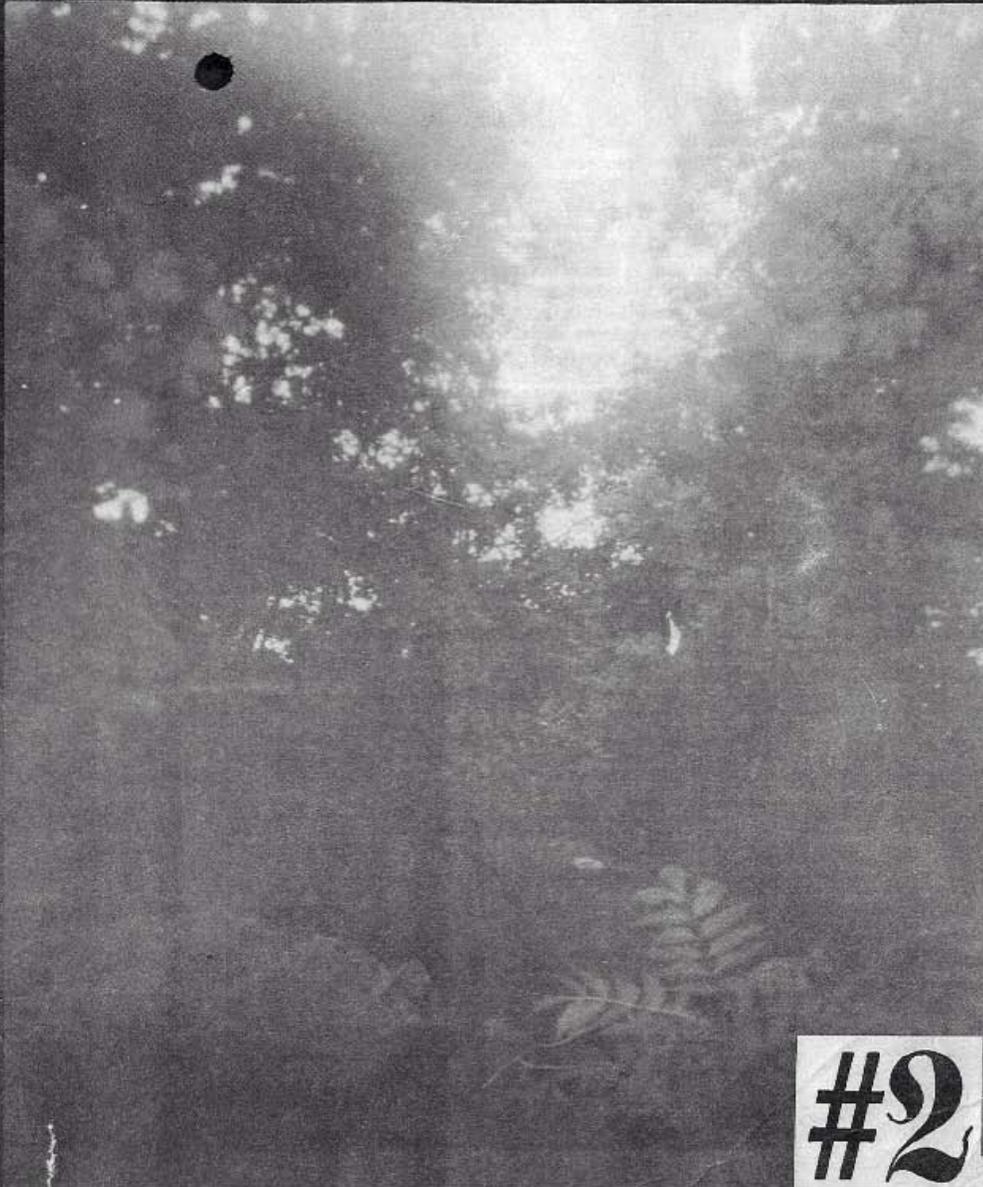
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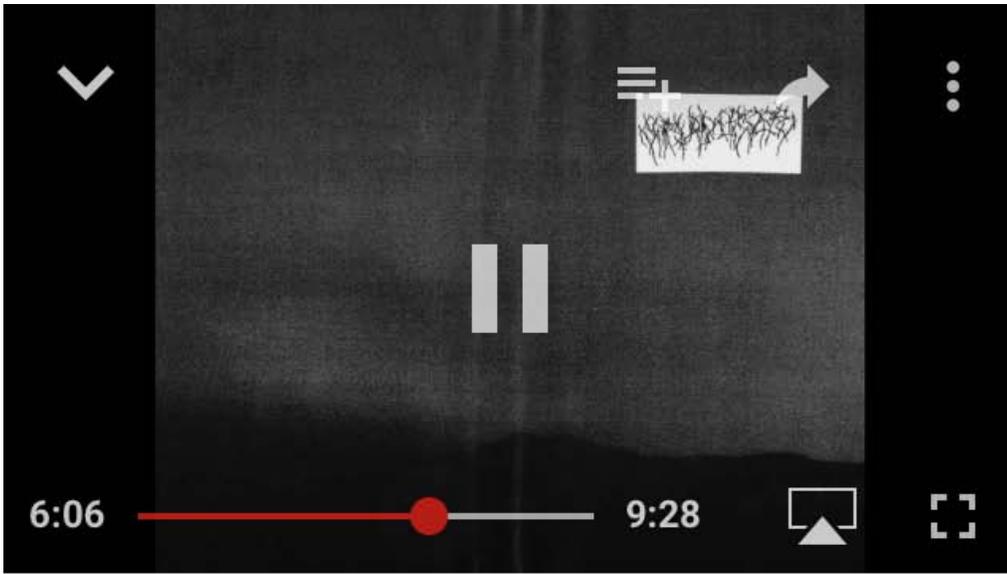




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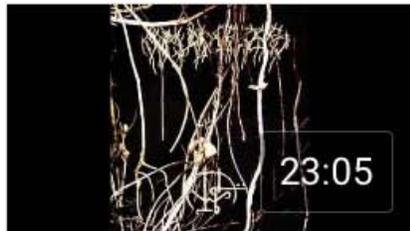
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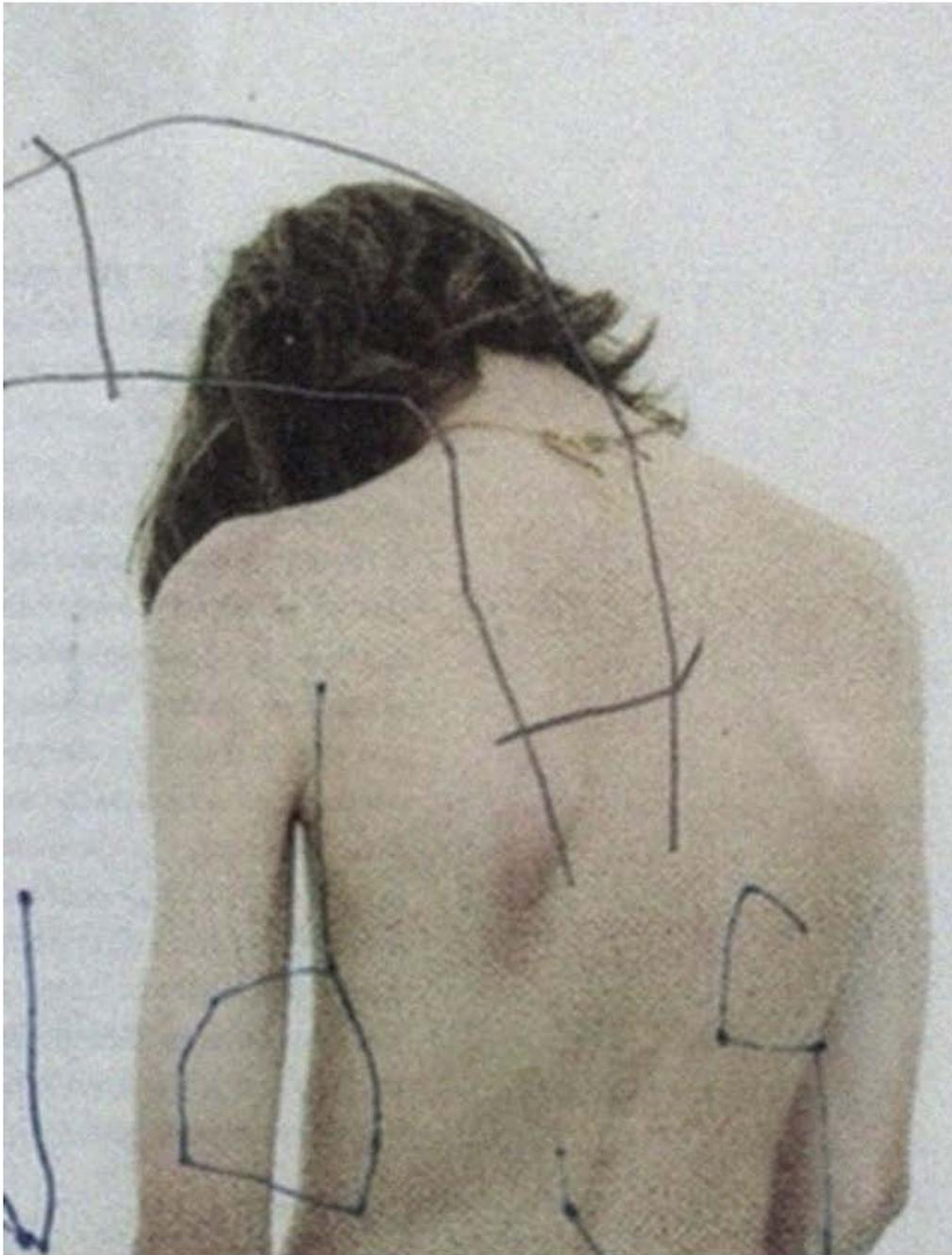


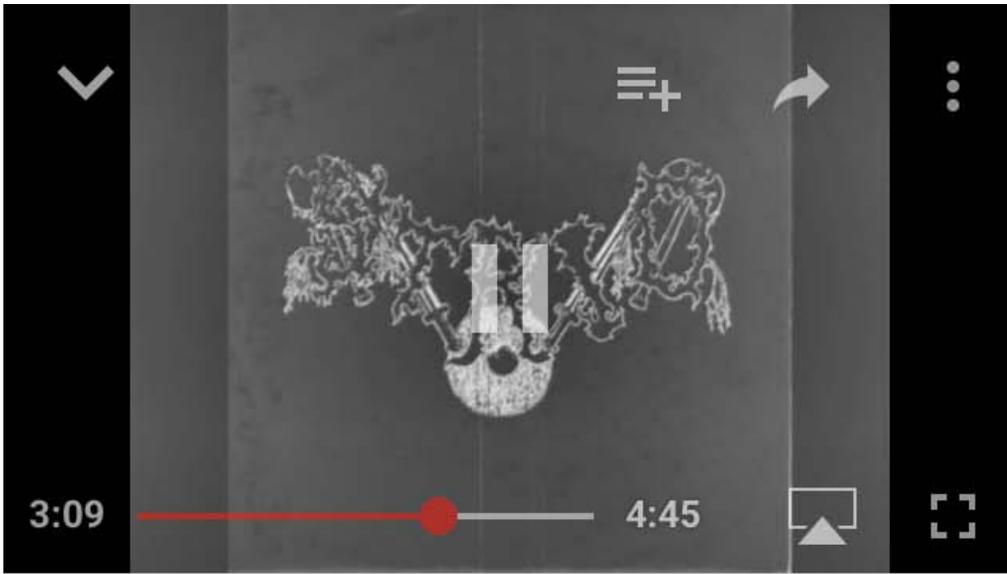


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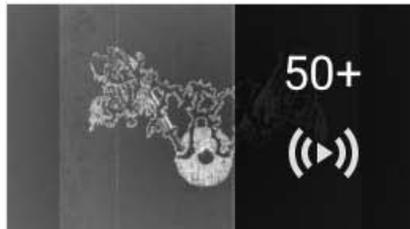
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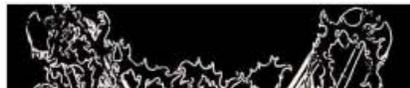
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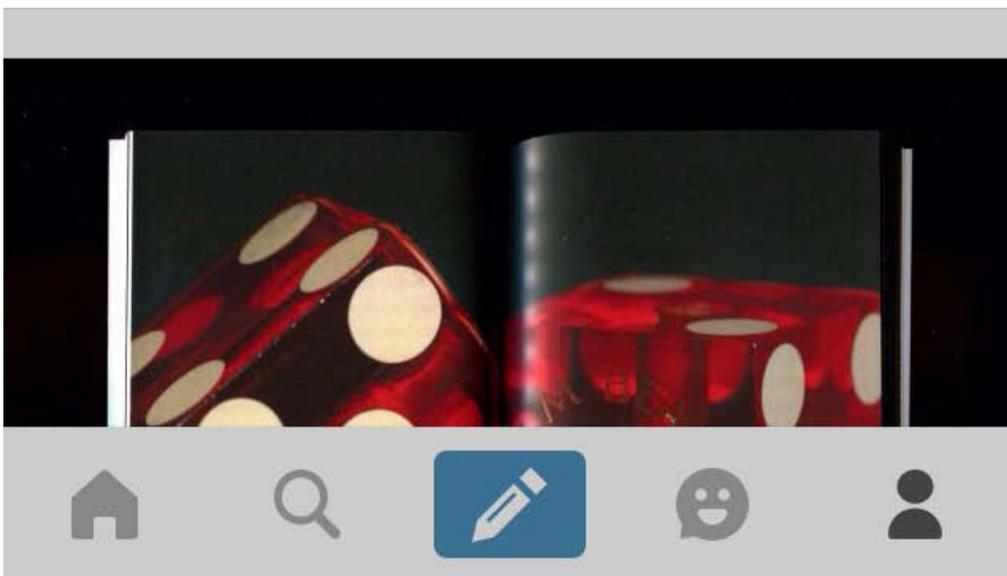


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Current listening: Black Majesty, "Black Rituals of the Cain-Cult" and "Le Possede (C. Baudelaire)" from the Baphe Metis demo (2007).

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