

Behold !!!

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By

E. D_{avid}

Lu O_{ma}

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* David Luoma's, "Behold the Body," is part neo-noir who-dunnit part Hitchcock's Norman Bates. As that detective cadence starts going through your brain you have to wonder if you're the psycho or if your delusions of conspiracy don't Chinatown you. The most important things to remember while reading this piece is 1) to breathe, 2) that everything that happens takes place within the

human mind, and 3) that Mona is dead. A premise setting the stage for some compelling explanation but also one that lurks behind the reader, reminding them that every breath of this story holds its own reality. In reading, we become the creators of the title, we become culpable, we soon find ourselves at the mercy of what our own minds make of the events unfolding before us. There is something almost Dostoevskian in “Behold the Body”’s tone of half explanation and half confession. Unable to trust the entire validity of memory, intention, or motive, the reader is not left wondering about the events that took place within but how to respond to the emotional hole created when the lightbulb goes off and the plan reveals itself. Blame who you will, but Mona is dead. Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)

Dangling spaghetti clings to the blue colander on the orange counter, a counter with so many chips along its edge. Immobile streams of red tomato sauce stick to the stainless-steel pot on the stove. Three wooden chairs surround the yellow table in the center of the room. Metal limbs bowing outward. Parmesan cheese crumbs mimic plump stars freckling the tabletop. Plates of spaghetti, cheese stars, broken garlic toast, bites taken, and Mona.

My cousin’s in prison. There was a blue Mercedes with the engine running. Nate figured why not. Sometimes life offers you a gift. So, get this. Christmas day I go visit. First time ever—Angie’s up on an elbow and grinning—in prison. Windows with bars. Plastic seats bolted to round tables. A cafeteria-phony place. Like kindergarten. Remember kindergarten? Guys start hooting once we sit down. Unbuttoning their shirts. Giant stripes, gray and white. This tall guard’s like thunder. Stop it! Stop it! My cousin’s patting my hand. It’s okay, it’s okay. Trying to pat my shoulder. Only I’m feeling flesh crawl all over my bones. He’s patting, I’m crawling. They’re hooting. I ran out of there so fast. Pure adrenalin. Bumping into more guards running in.

Her eyes are brown like broth in bowls and when she blinks it means she is weighing the relative worth of something you said. This is the same Angie who had laughed with such vigor at Sam on the beginner slopes that she made herself fall backward on the crunchy snow, making her skis upend like chopsticks in rice. Stomach shaking under her down jacket. Angie’s really an expert, weaving expert-fashion between skiers and pine trees. Blood flowing in arteries. But falling in the snow and laughing and looking like take out, that’s one polygonal image. Other skiers on skis pointed at her. Proof they viewed the episode differently.

Senior Editor CHARLES writes...Like, three quotes from the story...yeah, we like this.

Behold the Body

Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;

—Emily Dickinson

New Year's Eve, he's technically alone. Technically scrutinizing how this evening is supposed to transpire once he step-by-step sketches out its transpiring properties. He's scrutinized it down to three things. No easy matter. Anyway, these three things are now ping-pong-ball bouncing in Sam's mind.

Thing One, he breathes oxygen. Too blatant as far as the duh-factor but wait just one second. He means that sometimes Angie from upstairs has this look on her face telling the world he's just a smudge on the wall. A blotch to be improved by muscle and a damp rag.

Look, he says to her face video-perfect in his mind, I'm flesh and blood. And I breathe.

That's nice.

Witness how he's technically a guy classified by a stupid tire-shaped belly, thin hair, size-13 feet, everyday changing people's oil. A stupid list of awe-killing negatives way too long for someone yet to see the beginning edge of twenty-four.

Thing Two, nothing ever happens outside a human mind. A personal favorite. He means by this one that everything that's out there in the world one hundred percent transpires in someone's brain. Of course, this strikes suspiciously close to that soundless tree falling in the woods concept. He knows this. But then again, it's a concept swirling in his brain. Full-hilt wondering why proves it.

For instance, suppose I build a time machine—which means you also have to suppose I know how, Angie, which for argument's sake maybe I do—and I decide on caprice to travel to...yesterday. A question arises: Do I visit your remembered version or my remembered version? And if I do go back to my version, erasing tonight's gigantic problem while I'm there, don't I also erase everybody's yesterdays? Yank out all those memories by pulling a green lever marked global dementia. Really? And in these seven billion-plus cases of bygone inklings, where's the objective one to travel to? Where's its recording? Perfect way to describe these past memories: Bygone inklings.

Crazy weird.

Anyway, onward to Thing Three, which happens to be the most pressing on his list of pressing things.

Mona's dead.

See. There at the table. The backs of her ears poke through stands of blonde hair matted with red sauce. Head turned just so, on a plate of dinner. She wears a pink sweater. Both hands placid on her lap. Not moving. Huh... Her white napkin must've fallen to the floor, for there it is, collapsed. A flag unmoving. The fluorescent light seems to push Mona's shadow across the oatmeal-colored linoleum. It could be added and should be added, because such thinking traipses in his mind almost nonstop, that time will alter the scene. That Mona's

shadow—I can't change what shadows do—will soon move and stretch into an elongated version of itself. Seeping from the light.

Angie can't keep quiet. Excited, she repeats herself in his mind. I think she'll like you. Once I explain your rock star virtues.

So much can be squeezed from a body.

A quick survey of the kitchen adds piles of particularizing facts to this particular moment. The overhead fluorescent light groans. The refrigerator clicks on, gurgling for two minutes. Before going silent for another two minutes. A dripping faucet taps the metal sink. Turns out, Sam's spent way too many nights here, unable to sleep because of the places his brain dragged him. Listening in the dark to invisible music, keeping time with those discordant sounds. Above the window—a window covered with a curtain so thin it's hardly there, frail, mist on a mountain—up there hangs a Darth Vader clock. That gives ticking time a sinister sensation.

What else?

Observe.

Dangling spaghetti clings to the blue colander on the orange counter, a counter with so many chips along its edge. Immobile streams of red tomato sauce stick to the stainless steel pot on the stove. Three wooden chairs surround the yellow table in the center of the room. Metal limbs bowing outward. Parmesan cheese crumbs mimic plump stars freckling the tabletop. Plates of spaghetti, cheese stars, broken garlic toast, bites taken, and Mona.

Last night, when she hauled the rented Rug Doctor into the apartment, Angie called the stains polka-dotting the hallway carpet gravy-type. She offered to help because a year's long enough for gravy-type and as far as anyone's concerned happen to be clear evidence of

a neglectful spirit. Evidence Mona would take to heart. Sam pondered, the machine snarled. How could erasing one-year spots morph a neglectful spirit into a spirit that's been paying attention all along?

Angie shouted above the noise. Cleaning up speaks volumes.

That's Angie, scaling the distance between helpful and critical in a single sentence. How she ended up with Sanchez constitutes one of life's unreconciled wonders, Sanchez being unable to scale anything. Sam knows for a chiseled-in-stone certainty that the stains are technically size-13 grease smudges traipsed from the auto shop. Maybe a little clay mixed in from the field he shortcuts across to shave six minutes off getting-home time. Angie, visibly concerned that the Rug Doctor didn't sound right, leaned into the work. Putting pressure. The machine snarled louder.

Suppose, Angie, I dig deeper. Facts, those chambered mind bullets, are shot at a person to get him to toe some line or another. They may or may not correlate with what's happening at any given moment. In some people's eyes, so what.

One fact is Angie's boyfriend Sanchez found an Italian recipe online and passed it on. Sam made dinner, step-by-step following the recipe. Mixing in an additional ingredient that made the sauce more critical than it originally was. He finished at 7:00 o'Darth Vader. Mona knocked on the door at 7:06. He remembers how his eyes vibrated when he saw that pink sweater. They sat in the kitchen and Mona went on and on about the paint store where she and Angie both work. Her first job indoors. There's so much to learn. Angie's such a friend. Things look better for than they ever have. She was seeing blue skies. Sam listened to the crowded air and felt hungry—I prove it by rubbing my belly with my hand. They both made mounds of spaghetti on their plates.

Onward.

Or backward to Thing Two.

Sam predicts that what happens next has to happen because people trust clocks and calendars and schedules. Meaning what? Well...people create a locked future. Imprisoned by it. Picture a prison guard locking and unlocking cage doors. Keys rattling. Those trusting in captive-making clocks and calendars and schedules trust that they're locked into what's real. Progressing toward a coordinated future. Wow, masquerade of masquerades.

A dab of parsley rests on Mona's cheek.

The kitchen's numb. Either the numb kitchen makes Sam feel numb, or Sam's numbness makes the kitchen feel that way. It's a circle of numbness.

His head swims in numbness.

Isn't it also true that I can be locked up in a prison cell and tell myself over and over I'm god of the Milky Way? Rolling over on a squeaky bunk. Making a universe with a wool blanket. Hey, everybody, listen to my plan for taking over the world.

The prison guard rattling keys has other things tick-tocking in mind.

Yesterday morning, the second he walked into the auto shop—I didn't even have time to take off my coat—Lionel lights into him like there was no tomorrow. Sam once again had failed to tighten an oil drain plug. Step-by-step explained in plain sight on page twenty-nine of the third edition training manual. Irksome neglect. Irksome oil consequently had dripped on a customer's stone-white driveway. Consequently, Sam himself was now going to clean said customer's former stone-white driveway now blemished by Sam's irksome incompetence with a wrench. Lionel's voice echoed like a ballpeen hammer hitting a railroad rail.

Sam grapples with the ballpeen hitting sound and with images of closed eyelids, a jaw propped open, lack of movement, a pink sweater. He looks away from Mona, up at the clock. He doesn't need more to worry about. 7:42 o'Darth.

Angie says, Suppose you CPR her.

Last night, Sam phoned the landlord. Max Copper only shows up when a tenant complains, points out some problem with the building. Poor heat. Trash stinks. Drain not draining. Obviously, timing is everything. Max Copper's long chin and curved-tipped nose are all Sam really knows about him. A face on an old Roman coin. How can someone who resembles a dictator ever manage an apartment building?

In his mind Angie's mouth quivers.

And what's behind observable quivering?

It's not enough to say that dendrites connect with neighboring axons and in less than a second her lips react. Instead, the present quivering scene must connect with some distant cousin in the past. That's the way the body functions, storing its works and calling one forward when it needs to join moments together. Joining thoughts together. When the face needs a particular expression. Okay. How about this: Joining together memory molecules. Oxygen combining with hydrogen to create rainwater so that it drips down a window in front of you.

Last night, in the living room—the carpet's finished at this point—Angie handed him a book. Sam sat on the couch and read the title. Angie moved to the floor. She wore a red sweater. She, like a teacher, suggested there's more to understand. Mona has personal inklings that need understanding.

Think cat toying with a mouse, she said. Only the mouse has zero idea.

Angie was now on her back, knees propped up, hands folded on her abdomen. She looked at the ceiling.

Sam eyeballed the back cover. The book says she's a cat?

What it says is this cat has this mouse in its jaws and for some reason releases it. The mouse has this glint of hope in its eyes, coming from its happy mouse heart. Then Surprise! The cat gobbles the mouse.

So I'm a mouse?

No.

Yes, I'm—

Quit picking sides. Have you read the poem or not? It's famous. Angie literally talked to the ceiling. Her knees moved applause-fashion.

I read it. I guess. I had to. I just don't remember what it's about.

Ms. Barbados' English class. We read it in class. You forgot.

Sanchez was there too. I remember mocking books. In general. Whispering in the back of class with your boyfriend.

Angie steps up her talking pace. Still directed at the ceiling. What the mouse feels, what the cat feels, the whole class, you too. One word, inklings. Hey. Do you know my cousin's in prison?

You never mentioned that.

My cousin's in prison. There was a blue Mercedes with the engine running. Nate figured why not. Sometimes life offers you a gift. So, get this. Christmas day I go visit. First time ever—Angie's up on an elbow and grinning—in prison. Windows with bars. Plastic seats bolted to round tables. A cafeteria-phony place. Like kindergarten. Remember

kindergarten? Guys start hooting once we sit down. Unbuttoning their shirts. Giant stripes, gray and white. This tall guard's like thunder. Stop it! Stop it! My cousin's patting my hand. It's okay, it's okay. Trying to pat my shoulder. Only I'm feeling flesh crawl all over my bones. He's patting, I'm crawling. They're hooting. I ran out of there so fast. Pure adrenalin. Bumping into more guards running in.

What did Nate do?

Who cares. I'm the one getting hooted at.

Onward.

Because the refrigerator has clicked off, now he hears a fly buzzing and bouncing head-first against the glass window. No doubt it's been there the whole time. Buzz-tapping. What Sam means is this: Whether for food or for detective-based curiosity or an unexplainable instinct to escape a warm kitchen, the fly's flippant eye for detail and movement equals buzz-tapping on a different plane than prison guards. Existing simultaneously.

Scrutinize that.

Her eyes are brown like broth in bowls and when she blinks it means she is weighing the relative worth of something you said. This is the same Angie who had laughed with such vigor at Sam on the beginner slopes that she made herself fall backward on the crunchy snow, making her skis upend like chopsticks in rice. Stomach shaking under her down jacket. Angie's really an expert, weaving expert-fashion between skiers and pine trees. Blood flowing in arteries. But falling in the snow and laughing and looking like take out, that's one polygonal image. Other skiers on skis pointed at her. Proof they viewed the episode differently.

Sam decides it's time to phone Sanchez.

That and he revisits Thing One. Meaning he inhales as deep as he can. Holds it. Holding. Exhales.

Suppose I look at the kitchen again, Angie. Colander, pot, faucet, counter's edge. Things to scrutinize. Inklings. Each one containing its own history, colliding. Multiplied, to interject a bit of math. A hair on the oatmeal-colored linoleum is not just a hair on the linoleum. It once stood proud in a particular follicle, once waved in a breeze, once tickled an ear. Pulled from its habitat and now tossed aside.

At 7:52 o'Vader, there's a slow knock on the front door. One. Two. Three. Sanchez's leaning back against the stair-bannister. Arms folded across his chest. A heel resting on the bottom rail. Allocating his best James Dean impersonation

As Sam cracks the door wider, Angie's interrupting, Show him. Show him your evidence. That one processes zero-level thinking capacity without visual clues.

So Sam shows him.

Sneaking behind Mona, Sanchez lays a hand on the back of the wooden chair, tilts his head lower so his eyes are at the level of her shoulders.

Yep, he says. This how it starts. This is how the apocalypse begins.

Sanchez works at Pinner's Bowling Alley, making a living spraying disinfectant into rental shoes then organizing them by disinfected size in wooden cubby holes behind the counter. He frequently points out the fact that spraying shoes may or may not kill everything squirming inside. Some things end up in the mutated phase. According to Angie, they've been in a dogfight right from day one because he has zero ambition. According to Sanchez, arguing about their future is their drug. Angie's back with Sanchez never wants to better

himself, no matter how she feels about it. According to Sanchez, debating the future gets them so powerfully buzzed the future gets lost. Angie counters with, yeah, but I'm not rolling any dice and calling it progress. They're both skid row addicted to the same pleasure peaks of angry words about things that don't exist, Sanchez likes to say.

It should be pointed out that Sanchez fears the end of the world. Granite proof's everywhere. Open your eyes.

He says, What if she turns?

Settle down, Sanchezmo.

I asked you before never call me that.

Spaghetti sauce still lingers in the room, tinting the air with an acidic aroma. When spaghetti sauce burns, as it did on the side of the pot—this is not in the recipe—a body will taste the sweet charcoal in the back of the mouth before ever picking up a fork.

She'll wake up and start biting.

Sam allocates his most calming voice. That's possible.

Sanchez talks about proper precautions, Angie about spending the rest of our lives in jail. Sanchez mentions how we have to act before acted upon, Angie about acting versus being guilty, Sanchez about already being infected and how it's just a matter of time, Angie about living a lie. Sanchez about avoiding one.

Maybe you did this, Sam says. Where'd that recipe come from?

The undisturbed curve of Mona's back, her pink sweater rumpled at her waist. The faucet dripping against the metal sink.

Maybe you added a special ingredient, Sam says, and in time I'm going down too.

You're crazy.

Call 911 now, Angie says.

We should wrap her in a blanket, Sanchez points out.

You don't like her, right? Sam says. As a person, I mean.

Sanchez looks down at Mona. He puts one hand under her chin, the other on her forehead. Lifts her out of the spaghetti. Tilts her head back onto the chair. Wipes her face with a white napkin. Nothing quite equals red sauce dyeing Sanchez's fingers.

I just think it's interesting that you hated her.

Sanchez circles around the kitchen. The frail curtain moves when he passes because of the disturbing air. Evening slants through the temporary space. A chin-shaped moon on a gray horizon. He drops the napkin on the counter and lifts the half-filled colander and sets it aside. Back at the table he bends down in front of Mona, trying to look her square in the face.

Maybe you just held her under the spaghetti, Sam? You two were alone.

She fell forward. Talking about how good life was.

Sam wonders how it might look to an outsider. Reaching for Mona's wrist professional-like and feeling for a pulse. Anyway, the thought of feeling her wrist feels too dangerous. Instead, he clutches his own wrist and starts counting under his breath.

I'm right, you know I am, Sanchez announces. We have to do what nobody wants to admit needs to be done. We have to do it before she wakes up.

Sanchez starts working around her. Removing plates, dumping strands of spaghetti into the sink. Leaving behind a red thumbprint on Mona's plate.

A mass of burnt-charcoal clouds spread across the square sky. Sam pulls the frail curtain closed.

Remember Max Copper's coming.

Following Angie is like following a news report. She's not taking sides. She's chronicling catastrophic events. She's pronouncing facts. Maybe there should be the quivering lip thing again. What about Mona? Well...she started describing her new job. Now she was getting somewhere in life, now moving up the ladder. Now there was blue sky above her. She repeated herself. Deep blue sky. Bright blue sky.

Sam says, To think she would fall forward without a gasp or a cough at the very moment she was saying how great life was.

We have to be smart, Sanchez says. You know what I have to do?

Coming up with his own plan on the fly, Sanchez announces he's heading straight downstairs to dig a hole in the back of the building. Under the mulberry tree. Where that oleander creeps along the wooden fence and edges the parking lot. He thinks there's a shovel in the basement. His eyes glimmer like pennies at the bottom of the pool. He scratches his moon-shaped chin.

So much for date night, he says.

He leaves the apartment. His plan's in motion, under its own force.

It takes some time. Everything takes time. The strongest approach is to allow time to work its wonders on its own force.

Sam paces and paces the living room floor—timing is everything, Angie.

Finally, the front door opens—pause, wait for it—and it slams shut. Sanchez is back. Dirt blackens his face. Sweat stains his green shirt a shade darker in front. It's one of those blots of ink that the psychologist holds up and asks can you to describe what you see. That's...your diagnosis? Because he's seeing spiders lodging in webs.

Sanchez says, It's raining. And I saw the landlord. He swings at the fly buzz-tapping his head. I did the deed, he says.

You buried her?

No, moron. I dug a hole. The landlord stared straight at me heading down to the basement. I ignored him—he swings again—pretended I was going for the mailbox.

You saw him before you dug the hole?

Sanchez nodded. Coming up the stairs.

Running out of words, they both walk slowly into the kitchen. Silence speaks with tremendous volume. According to Darth Vader on the wall it's almost nine. Maybe the curtain moves, maybe the florescent light stops groaning, maybe the refrigerator clicks. Maybe, maybe not.

Sanchez says, I dug the hole and hid the shovel under the stairs. Right outside the door. I need to get a blanket. He heads off down the hallway.

Max Copper's coming.

Mona's red face, her hair, her neck, her pink sweater, her folded hands. She still feels warm.

Sanchez's back with Sam's sleeping bag, unrolling it as he walks. Here, we'll put her in this.

I need some water, Sam says.

In some instances of lightheadedness rooms spin in circles. But rooms never really move. Raindrops knock on the window. Touching the glass Sam feels the outside seeping in. Angie's saying they need to hurry. White marble shapes bounce off the freckled glass, vibrate the glass. Microscopic pulsations forcing water into crooked streams.

Sanchez says, You're not any help. Go make sure the coast is clear. I'll bag her. He opens a drawer. You know what needs to be done. He grips a knife, marveling at its tip. A careful surgeon. Laying a fingertip just right.

Come on, Angie says. Move it.

This cold's swollen, bleeding through the glass. Sam stands there. Hands pressing against it. Monotonous hail bouncing.

There's Sanchez's hole downstairs, now filling with rain while Mona waits to end up there. Imagine the horror of waking up buried. Imagine that. Someone puts you there, thinking one thing. You wake up thinking another. Sanchez is now sitting beside her at the table, holding her head to the side. Angie's tremulous voice speaking. Sanchez gripping the knife. There's sauce on his sleeve.

Into the living room, out the front door, facing the landing. Sam feels the floor's age.

No matter how much pressure he uses the floor won't give. He pictures footprints forming in damp earth behind the apartment building. Under the mulberry tree. His breathing's hurried. Rampant nerves firing.

Thing One.

Like a shadow pushed by a changing light, wearing a raincoat over his shoulders, Max Copper steps forward.

Maybe you didn't hear me earlier, Sam says. Timing's everything. Anyway, he's going to bury her. You saw him dig the hole. That's what I thought. He's in there now, as we breathe, preparing the body. Call the police. Have them check for fingerprints. There are plenty on the shovel hiding in the stairwell. More on the knife.

Thing Two.

You'll see. Mona's dead.

Thing Three.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I think it was Barthelme who said that modern writers can no longer be straight-forward in their writing. That space is already taken up, in other words, used up in still other words. Nothing happens in such a story. Conversely, realism as an art form tends to champion objectivity. What got me going on this story was this competing idea of subjectivity, subjectivity being anything but a bad word. I wanted to explore what goes on in a character's mind, not in any falsely constructed objective sense, not in any stream-of-consciousness sense, but in a more realistic sense. Humans, after all, are a mass of competitive subjectivities bouncing off each other. My fictional influences include Ursula K. Le Guin and Jose' Saramago. Within their fictions, their personality thrives.*

AUTHOR BIO: My stories have been published in *BULL*, *Book of Matches*, *The McNeese Review*, *45th Parallel*, *The Literary Review*, *decomp*, *Third Coast*, *Prism Review*, and elsewhere. I teach at Johnson County Community College. I live with an incredible wife and daughter just beyond the edge of Kansas City.