

TITLE: LONDON-DONNIE AIR (YOUR SUNBLEACHING, THE PIPES)

The pipes are calling from glen to glen and down the mountain side. Summer's all gone and the roses are wilting; it's you, this you, must go. While I must bide. But, but, sometimes waiting can't be bared. This heavy pollutant comforter never leaves the shoulders, though the weight is felt in a way that suggests you could take it off. Heat makes warm bodies delirious. The blanket is never removed; you don't care to move it yourself.

Even when there are no poisons forecast over the city, the colours that shade the sky before night-time have become stained from the times that there were. A little circle window is by the bed, in the bedroom. In the house. Watching through to see the sun set isn't necessary anymore, or even enjoyable, because it will blast through all the same in the morning. Yeah. Whether it is invited to or not, it'll be there to remind you of your own halo. Your sunbleaching.

This is not how it looks. The little circle window is a liar, or was installed by some lying handyman, because this isn't how sunsets are made to appear. See? Delirious. It's the same sunset as it's always been, you'll pray. When god breathes again and your aunt leaves a pouty message for you to go to mass, you'll clasp your hands' fingers while the pastor howls a sermon. Pray for your family, for yourself, for the sickness. But you pray different, and your hymns will be requests for the sun to stop and never move again because there is a closet in the corner of the bedroom that cannot be reached by natural light, and you can't bear another sunset like this.

Of course, it and you will carry on. What should be sleep becomes time spent thinking about the delusions you've got left. The sun's absence lets the muscles that move your spine untense so you might become unconscious. It never loosens completely, but it's enough for the knots that were the past to reconnect to their associate memories. Your scapulae are tearing up. A dove is flying in your brain and every mistake makes the bird rattle its cage. Feathery apologies in your mouth are the only proof it is there. Otherwise, you'd not be able to explain the beak on your cheek and just who you are. Your wings are gone, become as naked as your unethical pet metaphors. That's why they're not there. The attachment is not so painful when you can take the squawking on your back, on the scar tissue.

Tomorrow morning repeats. The bird is asleep and the sun is already hanging when you leave the house. The weekend is over and acid rain is back. Reality has returned with your Monday, in part-time. An anchor-point for your world (one of very few) is the opening shift to an

In-N-Out off Highway One with a bathroom whose tiles are shit-stained enough to distract you from your thoughts. Getting somewhere before anyone else has arrived is nice, in a dissociative way. You unlock and enter the “restaurant” but leave the open sign off to give you the time you need to yourself. The bathroom (your bathroom) sanctuary is swung shut, closed. Also locked.

In the bathroom, a morning poop is surely one of the most common and tranquil human experiences there are. The silence filled with the sounds of shit. Morning poops are not just part of the cyclical digestive process, though: it’s one of the only safe spaces left. Isn’t that shitty? Haha. Adolescent prophets have scrawled the stall walls with drunk missives: messages like *Joe Comfort 1992–2013 (rip)* and *penis* have been left for the future to read. Once, while cleaning at the end of the shift, you remembered saying it looked like modern art in the accessibility stall. That got a laugh from the crew at the time, but it was meant partially in truth. The most public, collaborative installation possible might be the joint act of vandalism while shitting. How flush.

However, you’re yet to exit. There’s one more ritual for your latrine church. The disposable vape in your pocket beckons to the nicotine addiction you picked up to look cool for an ex-ex-ex-best friend. It’s not you, anymore, is it? No cough or choke once the artificial blue raspberry flavour hits taste buds, not after you’ve basted them so long in every chemical you could’ve gotten a hold of in chemistry class. Maybe smoking is better, you once thought, because then it would not be this easy.

Easy to what?

Your manager bangs the stall door thrice. Ariel’s nice for a manager, really, and they’re sticking their neck out for you by letting you do your weirdly ritualized morning poop in the first place. But the fact remains that Ariel always kind of smells like a pet’s paw (in a neutral way, depending on the kind of person you are). They’re not your friend. They’re older than you, but you can’t really tell by how much. Maybe a decade-ish? Still, you wonder whether it’s more of a cat-paw smell or dog-paw smell while talking random shit—sorry, stuff—over your break later.

There are just enough desperate high schoolers in the area that both of you can take lunch at the same time, so timing it out didn’t matter much. The In-N-Out was miles from the nearest actual town and always empty, so leaving three or four of them alone wasn’t a big concern for Ariel. In-N-Out was basically McDonalds for this stretch of road, and McDonalds was basically the king of road trips, Ariel had once rationalized. They left the answer hanging for you to answer. The syllogism didn’t work out and Ariel kicked a rock off the restaurant’s pitch parking

lot and into the dust that framed the establishment against the tarmac of the highway. Usually, you and Ariel loitered around while you hit your disposable and Ariel talked at you. Today, the vaporizer in your hand is cheap ocean blue with a white plastic nib to suck the smoke out of. Last week, it was a perfect lime green square. The person who smelled like paws opened their mouth to speak.

“You’ve been workin’ here for, what, eleven months now, right? Since the beginning of last summer, so—”

“What? What the fuck?” you cough between unfinished clouds. You couldn’t help but feel like Ariel was going to fire you. “What kind of question is that?”

“Question? You—what?”

“What? What is this, like, a, a confrontation?”

“Confrontation?” Ariel’s face was still confused, but their teeth peeked out from their lips in amusement before they continued, “for what?”

“For, well, smoking inside, right? In the washroom. That’s fine, it’s cool, I’ll stop.”

As you make your excuses, you slide your little vape into your pocket. Confusion and amusement have married on Ariel’s face in the face of your own line of questioning.

“Fuckin’, what? No. I don’t really give a shit about that. I was just gonna ask how much longer you were gonna keep working here.”

The air is uncomfortably dry today, though that isn’t anything particularly new. In your car earlier, while you were driving to work today, you remembered hearing a mature voice on the radio warn you of rain in the afternoon. There’s not a single spot on the disgusting green sky, and the sun overhead casts strange shadows on your faces. But the only reason the sky is disgusting and shadows are strange are because of you.

“I don’t know.”

Ariel bursts out in laughter, and the force of their lungs’ premature expulsion sends them into a half-coughing/half-chortling state. It’s a lot higher pitched in comparison to their usual speaking voice. The thought that Ariel looks like a crooked chimney, bent over in their fits, briefly passes your mind.

“Haha! Ha. You spent way too long thinking about that. Sorry. Sorry, it’s not funny,” your manager manages, eventually composing themselves.

“What?” your voice cuts, a bit sharper than intended.

“So confrontational. Damn, kid. You’re too young to be making that kinda face, saying those words.”

“Fuckin’ sentimental today, Ariel?”

“Rude? But not anymore, nah.”

“You don’t even know how old I am.”

You and Ariel always keep a familiar physical distance between each other while chatting. As both of you wander about, one orbits the other before pulling them along in turn. One of you has begun to broach that.

“Still your boss. ‘Course I know. Even if I weren’t, I’d be able to tell anyway.”

The radio station must have been lying earlier, because it feels like the air that leaves you is tearing your throat up even without your nicotine. There are still no clouds in the sky. Your break is almost over, and your steady game of revolving around one another has brought the both of you before the In-N-Out’s backdoor. Maybe only five feet apart, now.

“What’s that mean?”

Again, Ariel starts to chuckle, but they stop quickly when they see your hand raise to the door handle. You don’t actually have the intention of getting back to work right away, but it’s the easiest way to tell them to shut the hell up. Ariel continues to fight laughter while you stare at them.

“Fuck,” they begin, still keeping their diaphragm from betraying them, “I’m sorry for laughin’, but that was actually funny. You a comedian?”

You don’t respond. You think Ariel looks somewhat hesitant to explain further. You’re remembering why you don’t consider them a friend.

“You’re still a brat to me.”

“Okay.”

After a deep exhalation (of smoke, of course), both you and Ariel just sort of stand there while the conversation disappears with the vapour.

“I kinda wish you’d bitch more about it.”

“Yeah, me too.”

The both of you re-enter In-N-Out as you exchange your last words to one another. Ariel takes two red aprons off a wall rack beside the backdoor and tosses one to you. A customer

enters, the high schoolers fall into line, and you hide your face as you slip the smock over your uniform.

People said the word *brat* outside of the sadomasochistic context? The fact that Ariel had been the one to use it made it doubly-odd. And why was it funny that you couldn't tell what made you young, but Ariel could? It's not as if Ariel ever grew up themselves. Every judgment you could levy is born to die inside your brain.

This was exactly why Ariel was not your friend.

Later, you think you say *bye* as you leave the restaurant, and the high schoolers wave you out by stretching their arms all the way up. Through the In-N-Out's storefront windows, you see them laughing as they turn and crumple into each other. The back of Ariel's head is staring at you through the kitchen pass-through, prodding you with another question as you leave. For some reason it's so infuriating that you shout in your car once you've managed to get inside. You hit your vape. It does nothing anymore.

The car peels out of the parking lot. Every square foot of the acid sky has become dark green, and your wipers begin to clear your windshield as it begins to drizzle. Stray headlights pass as blurs in peripheral vision. Fuck—it's Monday. You're not supposed to feel like this on workdays. The road ahead of you begins to blur until you realize the muscles around your eyes have clenched. You let go and something hot runs down your cheek. *I've been working here for a year and a half, and I don't know how long I'll be working here because I don't know what else I'm supposed to do. I graduated and never talked to anyone from my class afterwards; half of them moved to other cities and the other half are just gone, and I moved here to rent a townhouse from my aunt. To just. Just...*

You use your wrist to wipe the heat off your cheekbones until you get home. Even when you whisper it to yourself out loud, vocalization doesn't get you the answer you want. Need. No, want.

"I'm quitting," you mutter the next time your breaks are scheduled together, a couple days later. You're out on the lot again, and the sun has returned to its usual place in the world; directly and mercilessly overhead. Thankfully, there's a slow breeze keeping strands of your baby hair off of your forehead. Ariel's whole upper body twists quickly to face you, body still turned out towards the highway.

“Is that your two weeks’ notice?”

“What? No. Sorry, I meant vaping. I’m not quitting here.”

“Oh!” laughs Ariel. “That’s good. You’re the only one here who I can chat with without feeling like an old fart.”

“Thought I was a brat?” you demur.

Both of you stop talking, for a second. You’re wondering whether the whistle-howling of Ariel’s mockery is going to start back up before a breeze carries the sound of their gentle sigh to you. Your prohibition started a day or two ago, sometime between now and your previous break together.

“I’m sorry if you thought I meant I was sayin’ somethin’ mean about you. I just meant that about your face,” they explain. You blink a couple times before speaking to try and catch your train of thought.

“What the fuck?”

This time, Ariel’s high laugh rings true against the asphalt. Its tone isn’t as harsh as you expected, though.

“No! Not like that, like— your expression, not your face, sorry. Ha! Sorry. It was all scrunched up, like this.” Your manager crunches their eyebrows down so three shadowy lines form between them and squints their eyes forcefully. Their bottom lip quivers for a second, as if Ariel is deciding to include the pout, but they refrain and stick with the wince-y gaze. Ariel is only able to hold it for a moment before breaking into a grin.

“You make this look sometimes. It’s not like you’re pissy, god, no, but... I dunno, I’ve seen my sister’s toddlers make the same face when she tells ‘em it’s bedtime.”

“That’s—” you begin, interrupted by a series of chest-clearing coughs and grunts.

“That’s—”

Again, your throat betrays you. The second time is worse than the first and you find yourself struggling for air. Ariel’s hand is clapping on your back, and you eventually spit out a loogie fat enough to darken the dusty tar of the parking lot in the shape of a blood splatter. Modern art.

“Ugh, sorry. I don’t know what you mean by that, though. Like, that I’m not gettin’ something I want? But what is there to want? My rent’s cheap as hell, I’ve got a job, and... and.”

It’s quiet, again. No rain today. Just a small chance of wind.

“I’m fucking way happier than I was when I was those kids’ age. I went to, well, it doesn’t matter, but... I’m not unsatisfied with anything, about anything,” you continue. You’ve caught yourself by surprise, and the slight sting at the back of your windpipe seems to be the cost.

“... I’ve got no clue where *that* came from,” you hear Ariel murmur. You’ve never heard them speak at any volume than their usual, which was never a murmur. At this low, though, you can hear a telltale scratch to Ariel’s voice. Their hand feels warm on your spine.

“You’re a good friend.”