

## ORANGEWHITE

ALEX TRETBAR | FICTION

*...there was the traffic, a thing  
coming at us with its mouth wide open, and in back  
the two of them  
whispered in their corner,  
taking up very little space,  
less than was right,  
and then less and less, gasping at the joke he'd set in motion.*

*—Jana Prikryl, "Ontario Gothic"*

One block away from the stoplight, Red started telling Blue a story.

Last night I was outside McDonald's, Red said as he yielded to a yellow yield sign, and I saw this guy get stabbed in the face with a screwdriver. It was like

Blue was staring at the reflection of his cigarette cherry in the passenger side mirror. It always struck him as something that was alive and very intelligent. The passenger window was all the way up. All of the windows were up.

or more so his mouth. He was sitting on a curb eating a hashbrown and the other guy just took this big, like, backswing, and drove it down

What was it about.

his face. Money I think.

I wonder when they're going to destroy your face, the song on the radio said.

Can you change the station.

What was really fucked up is I was so spun out I thought the dude was wearing an earring for a second, but it was just the way the screwdriver was coming out of the corner of his jaw, like his mandible haha, the tip of it like caught those crazy bright floodlights in

the parking lot. Kinda like, Jesus why the fuck is this person going ten in a thirtyfive, ah, kinda like he was wearing an earring haha, the way it was glinting you know.

Blue could picture the floodlights, and the earring.

Who was it. Do I know him. Blue remembered when McDonald's didn't have floodlights.

I never seen him before. Had this weird vest on, and a feather in his mouth like it was a piece of grass. Dolly said he was a tourist but looking

The veins on the backs of Red's hands were trying to depart his hands as they gripped the wheel. Blue could see the floodlights, and the earring, a redness covering it quickly. He was not alarmed by what he saw. He permitted his eyes to roll back into his head.

so much speed, along the fence, and we waited there for hours I'm telling you hours.

At Blue's feet were some glossy orangewhite packages. He held one up.

How we gonna get rid of all this fiber. Dietary fiber.

He threw it into the backseat where there were lots of other orangewhite packages and a deconstructed cardboard box. Red depressed the brake as the car approached the light turning yellow. The car that had been driving slowly in front of him sped up and ran the red light. The camera affixed to the stoplight flashed twice.

I texted Dave and he said he thinks he knows someone.

Why'd you start driving away at first, when I was coming down from the porch.

Cause I saw the guy opening the screen door behind you. You would've driven off too at first probably.

If you'd driven off I woulda been fucked.

Blue's veins were all over the place and he smelled unwell. It was the same with Red.

I know, it was crazy. I was really scared.

Then why'd you stop.

Because I saw the guy coming out behind you wasn't as fast as you.

Someone was walking backward into the middle of the intersection holding a sign that seemed to depict a death's-head moth and an empty speech bubble.

Do you know how hard it is to sprint while carrying a fifty-pound box. You can't do it.

You were still moving faster than that guy though. Anyway I think we should stop fucking around with porches. It's always just useless stuff like this fiber. But I

Blue was watching the person with the sign. He saw that the person in the left turn lane on the opposite side of the intersection was also watching the person. No one else was at the intersection.

finish telling you about McDonald's. The guy stood up and was walking around with this little bit of screwdriver sticking out his jaw. We were right by the walkup window and a bunch of squares were there, probably tons of cameras. But the weird thing is that the feather stayed in the tourist guy's mouth, so he had this like red plastic screwdriver handle coming out of his mouth right next to the feather. Dolly went over and started looking at him but when she tried to take the feather out she

Why the fuck was Dolly downtown at all.

because the screwdriver had like nailed the end of the feather into the guy's mouth. He was banging on the walkup window which was locked at this point of course.

Red had lit a cigarette and was drinking a can of caffeinated water. All of the orangewhite packages were now piled on the floor of the backseat. In his dream Blue had many arms but no hands. A thousand veins but no way to access them. All of the windows were up.

but the vest was actually like super easy to grab onto unfortunately haha. He got dragged away from the window. Not sure where they took him but the cops never showed up anyway. And that's when Dolly borrowed a phone to call you.

Blue came to. Can you change the station.

Red had turned off the radio a long time ago but he knew what Blue meant. He turned the radio on and messed with the dial as Blue fell back asleep.

Can you get to that, the song said. Red blew smoke at Blue's sleeping face. All of the windows were up and the car was very smoky. Red poured the rest of the caffeinated water into his stomach and put the cigarette out on the windshield.

I'm awake.  
No you aren't.  
Yes I am.  
No you  
Hey wake up.  
What's going on.  
I fell asleep too and don't know how long we've been here.  
Just pull off to a side street.  
No we're still at the red light.

Pull over.

We're not moving and there's a cop behind us.

Red and Blue looked into the rearview mirror.

There was indeed a cop car behind them. The officer appeared to be looking into their lap.

Well I'm sure it'll turn green soon.

But look how many cars are here. I think the light's stuck or something. And that guy's still in the intersection.

Red and Blue weren't able to see what color the light was for the cars on the other sides of the intersection, but there were many cars and trucks and motorcycles idling.

Red and Blue unspokenly assumed it was red all around.

God I can't stay awake even with the drink.

Dolly's shit is fucked. I can't stay awake either. You're really fucking pale.

Red started looking at his face in the rearview mirror.

Don't do that, the cop might think you're looking at him.

Before Red stopped looking in the mirror he saw that the officer was indeed looking at him, or appeared to be looking at him. The cop car's windshield was tinted so it was hard to tell.

Damn he's looking at us.

Blue tried to look at the officer in his passenger side mirror but could only see

the side of the cop car and a long line of vehicles stretching down the street. It almost looked like the line was bending onto an intersecting street in the distance.

How long have we been here. Why is no one honking.

Red pointed at the person in the street with the sign. What does that sign say.

Blue squinted. Some kind of roar shack maybe. I only have one contact and it's not even my prescription. No idea. Hey wake up.

God. Red slapped himself a few times and lit a cigarette.

Don't do that. Not right now.

Red put the cigarette out on the windshield.

Red and Blue were quiet and still for a while, unable to check on the officer in their mirrors, and unable to move forward. The person in the middle of the intersection would pivot from time to time, advertising their sign to all of the vehicles. There were people now, too, standing on each of the corners, pressing the walk buttons and waiting for signals that didn't appear to be coming.

This is fucked. Blue slapped himself a few times and opened the glovebox. He busied himself with something in there.

What are we gonna do.

Just sit still and wait for green.

The officer was standing outside of the car, in Red's blind spot. They were wielding a massive flashlight (it required two hands and had to be mounted on a shoulder) and the officer turned it on and pointed it into the backseat, but because it was a sunny morning the flashlight wasn't really doing anything. It took a while for Red to notice.

Blue.

What.

The cop.

Blue turned his head and saw the officer. Mechanically and overcasually, he turned his head back to the glovebox. He gingerly tended to something inside before closing it. A starving moth patrolled bright columns of dust in the cabin.

Red and Blue stared forward and watched the person in the middle of the intersection. They tried to stay awake. The light of the officer's massive flashlight was reflecting off of the orangewhite packages, caroming around the car's interior, like when sunlight plays with a swimming pool and makes the walls all wavy. Phosphenes. It was like that.

Should I roll down my window.

No.

The officer walked forward but paused at Red's window. The officer's body was facing the intersection, but because the officer was standing erect, Red and Blue couldn't see the officer's head or where they were looking. The officer's technicolor gun was ribbed like a heavy insect.

The officer stepped forward into the intersection. The person in the middle of the intersection had set their sign down and was wrapping something around their neck.

Blue opened the glovebox again and set about his work.

What the hell is going on. Red lit a cigarette.

Just give me a minute.

Red looked in the rearview mirror and the officer was still in the cop car, looking at him.

Dude the cop is still there. I think that's a different cop in the intersection.

Blue looked up.

Red and Blue could see the second officer's whole body now and they were wearing a strange white helmet that encompassed their entire head and neck. The person in the middle of the intersection had finished wrapping the thing around their neck and was holding the sign up again. A moth and an empty speech bubble. Hundreds of people were on each corner now, waiting to cross but also watching the person in the middle of the intersection. There were schoolchildren, businesspeople, the homeless and ailing. Some of the people were half asleep, half awake, and the old were there too, and babies, all of them milling about in troubled peace. It was three minutes after eight.

Almost done. Blue was very pale.

Blue I'm scared.

Blue was also very scared but didn't say it. Blue was in fact more scared than Red.

Do you have a lighter.

Red pulled a ragged yellow lighter from his pocket and handed it to Blue. Red was watching the second officer, who was walking slowly but deliberately toward the person in the middle of the intersection. The person in the middle of the intersection was showing their sign to the opposite side of the intersection. Their back was to the officer.

I think I figured out what's wrong with Dolly's shit.

Blue flicked the yellow lighter and the stoplight turned green.

It's green. Blue it's green.

Red's stolen car lurched forward and something clanged around in the glovebox.

All of the other cars at the intersection lurched forward, and the pedestrians began to walk across the street.

Blue said fuck and looked up. Through the eye with the contact lens he saw many people and many vehicles, and through the eye without the contact lens he saw darkly.

Red's foot was on the gas. The stolen car was accelerating.

The second officer placed their left hand on the right shoulder of the person standing in the intersection. There were far too many vehicles and pedestrians in the intersection. The pedestrians were strangely calm. Walking, not running. Two helicopters would be arriving at the intersection soon, one military and one from channel twelve.

Blue turned his head around. The cop car behind them was also lurching forward, accelerating, and he saw that the officer was looking in their own rearview mirror.

Dolly, finally waking up in the back seat, a feather behind her ear, opens her eyes. What's going on, she says.

The orangewhite packages begin to fly.

Where am 