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Uzodinma Okehi
Colostomy

1:

Apropos of nothing. Big grin, then pause. Then as usual it was, *yes, yes*, he knows what I mean, if for no other reason than they were always trying to get me talking about it. A loud cough rattled in my chest and I rolled around on the slats of the skid, which had them both laughing again.

"No, man." I said. "You may have taken some rough shits, maybe, but this was a whole other thing. I must have been curled up on that bathroom floor for six, seven hours; hallucinating, crying, praying to god. I saw myself as a child, standing in the sunlight, smiling. I was afraid to do it, but after a while I got one of my girl's hand-held mirrors and actually looked down my own asshole, for the first time ever. Yeah, I don't know either. But, mine was all blown out and pink, monkey's ass, like some kind of weird blossom . . .

And it *was* hilarious. They'd send me and those two Salvadoran guys up to the tenth-floor warehouse on Saturdays for time-and-a-half pay. This was when I was at the bookstore on Wooster Street. At first I'd been in there shelving books, but maybe I didn't fit the mold, so then I was down in the bowels, in the back rooms, sorting and busting into the cases and cases of used books that came pouring in every day. Could be that I just don't have a head for business, because it never seemed to make sense the way we'd open up the cases, resort everything and then they'd have us shuttle them right up to that tenth floor which was like a block-long wasteland of boxed books. At any rate, I suppose the real question is why El Salvador, or rather, who was doing the real work? Those guys weren't idiots either, they had the system down long before I arrived. We'd go up, spend an hour or two pushing boxes around, stacking, rebuilding the different pyramids so it looked as if we'd made a real dent, then we'd be up on that mountain of wooden skids for most of the afternoon, stretched out under the skylight. Sometimes we'd doze off. But then, those guys were also wild, impressionistic talkers, even in broken English, not only that, there were also these jags they'd go into, laughing, a bashful nervous about it, and they'd want to hear me keep rethreading parts of the same story again and again.

"There's a lot you take for granted, that's what I mean. Not just your ass, about the world. Or maybe that's too easy! I guess I can admit, I thought a hemorrhoid was a kind of festering sore or something. But seeing that blossom down there, pulsing with blood, well it took me back through all those times I was sauntering around, acting cool. All those breezy moments. And back to that now, like: Wait a minute . . .

2:

In life, but especially while working nine-to-five, there are times when the past is inescapable. For me there were phases. That summer, for whatever reason, I kept drifting back to grade school, where I was once tight pals with a guy who supposedly had a colostomy bag. The word was that he'd been born without an ass, or something, or that it was sealed up,

no crack, and obviously that image alone was enough to make the guy a pariah. I say “supposedly” because it was only here, decades later that I started to peel apart some of the mythology. What I did remember was the first day starting at that school. Like with all the schools and programs and other places I’d ended up, there was that first day where gravity itself seemed to lump me in with the outcasts at the bottom of the barrel. It was an effect I never questioned, nor did I much regret it, insofar as I was still able to talk to girls. On the other hand I did feel miscast. Anyway, I’d already gotten the story about the colostomy when we met on that first day. From there we were more or less fast friends for about five or six years, and I spent most of that time half-hoping, waiting for him to snap, to crumble; anything. At the time, like with any kid that age, it wasn’t cruelty, I was just unconcerned. That is, I’d never asked him directly about it, and even in my own mind I’m sure I was exaggerating the few instances of any actual bad smell. More visceral than that though, was the degree to which he was ostracized. Of course no girl would talk to him, but as time went on I also noticed the reflexive way people’s expressions would begin to curdle whenever he joined a group or entered a classroom. Again, this was almost always without a whiff of anything. Even teachers would check the seats after he got up. They were discrete about it, but then that was the weight of the past, the lodestone around his neck. More than anywhere else, the irony, the truth was there in the permanent cast of his face, because it wasn’t a guilty look he carried, but an irritated one, almost petulant, as if *he* was the one always recoiling from some putrid thing.

This was also the chord of my thoughts on those Saturdays beneath the skylight. It was barely a few hours of real work, but I’d be exhausted, listening to the wind through the seams of the building. I had no clue, but it was the fact I’d felt so easily superior to the guy that made me wonder where he’d ended up. And no doubt fate has some role to play with one’s lot in life. That livid feeling leads you out into the world, to break chains if you have to. With luck you can start over.

3:

“On every comfortable surface! I’m telling you; chairs, the sofa, the dining room, the kitchen, his bedroom . . . That’s right buddy, ‘bolsa’, I’ve told you about that guy I knew with the colostomy bag. I mean, his family had dogs too, but come on, that’s pretty horrific. And I’m saying, everywhere, little shit-stains, shellacked into the upholstery and carpet with furniture polish. Obviously he and I never talked about it. Though I’d always be thinking: how does this guy live with himself?! How does he carry that baggage around wherever he goes?”

Doval was really the attentive one. Rapt, glassy smile. That is, to separate those two Salvadoran guys. As usual I was mainly telling it to him, *different gloss*, but the same fable, if for no better reason than his fat cheeks, balding pate, the yellow in his teeth. And sometimes that itself is the only secret . . .

“But no, that’s my thing and that’s why I say this whole city is my colostomy bag! In fact, deep down I’m sure it’s why man builds cities. Why we need them, not to discover ourselves, but as cloud cover while we’re all down here, flailing

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around. I won't even hide that it's based on my own problems, my own POV, but I've always tried to imagine

that the guy was finally able to reinvent himself somewhere, or at least get enough distance between those days where no seat was safe. Maybe he had to change his name or move overseas. Maybe he wanted to erase those days, burn the memories. I know I do. Sometimes. I can tell you, especially while we're up here, hauling boxes, sometimes I have to stop dead and cringe at the thought of some stupid thing I did or said way back when . . . But maybe the guy made it to Brazil, where I hear they specialize in prosthetic asses. Maybe that guy is walking around now with brand-new, pristine cheeks. Two apples, with shine on them. Or maybe even here, in the city, as good a place as any to start fresh. I suppose I wouldn't recognize him if we passed in the street, any more than I'd recognize my own self years later, after countless epiphanies and whatnot. What I tell myself though, is that you have to remember, you have to hold all those terrible, filthy images of yourself firmly in mind, because each time you realize what you look like it's as if you just came up with a newer, better you right on the spot. Of course you have to do other things too—quit smoking, eat healthier, bowel control, or whatever it may be. As time wears on though, it's the power of an army behind you, and that's the guy you were back then, and before that, and before that—each next guy smarter than the rest, just a little bit, but with drum-tight assholes, waiting to be reborn . . .