

# PLOUGHSHARES

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*Pinhead, Moonhead*

Last week my head was too small. This week, it is too big. My face in the mirror is a picture of dismay. If I try to correct the disproportion with baggy clothes, I will look not only moonheaded but squat, Charlie Brown—esque. When the head is too small, I fare no better: tight clothes serve to distract the viewer's eye downward, but to a double-A chest.

There is only one thing to do, and that is not to go to Erling's house. It is to stay home with my enormous head and wait for it to correct itself. I lie down on the bed and rest my hand on the alarm clock. I stroke its smooth face with my thumb. I find comfort in objects—they are unchanging and useful. In the laundry room down the hall, I hear the telephone ring and ring.

It stops, and I hear my mother say, Yes. Just a minute.

I lie very still and close my eyes. Anya? My mother knocks on the door, but is already pushing it open. She says, Sigrid's on the phone for you.

I moan sleepily.

Oh, she says, and then says into the telephone, I think she's napping, Siggie. Pause. Okay, then. I'll tell her to call.

She turns off the phone but doesn't leave. I can feel her standing there. I open one eye and say, What?

What's the matter, hon? She picks up the small wooden box with all my baby teeth in it from the top of the dresser and fiddles with the lid.

Nothing, I say. I was sleeping. Put that down.

No you weren't, she says. What's wrong? Aren't you getting along with Sigrid?

No, it's fine, I say. I just didn't feel like talking yet. I sit up on my elbows and put on a smile. There's no use in trying to explain the head again. They are blinded by parental love, or parental vanity, and refuse to see it.

I am that most unfortunate of creatures, the homely child of attractive parents. My parents are a perfectly coordinated set, one

fair and one dark, one petite and one grande. They have proportionate bodies and oval faces with regular features. My younger brother is the mirror image of my father, and all of them photograph well. I, on the other hand, have thin, flat, white-blond hair and grayish eyes with yellow flecks, and not a single facial feature is correct. Without going into minutiae, the basics are: my chin is too sharp, my jaw is too soft, the angle of my nose is too acute, my nostrils are too oblong, my eyelashes are too sparse, one eye closes more than the other when I laugh, my skin is so thin the veins show through, and it burns easily, and my smile is asymmetrical, the last of which I discovered when drawing age lines around my mouth for a school play. I have since quit the theater.

Secretly I think that my imperfections are not accidents or coincidences. They are manifestations. As a child I was more or less symmetrical and pleasant-looking with only the traces of what was to come; then as I got older, hit puberty, my flaws started to surface and move into my face and body. By the time I am an adult they may be uncorrectable. They are not always definable, but I have figured out what distorts my head. Worry.

I worry about losing things. I worry about throwing things away. I worry about forgetting things. I worry about the abandonment of useful things. I worry so much my head swells just to accommodate it all, and then shrinks to squeeze it out. The swelling is a wild uncontrollable twitch, worry growing and growing. The shrinking induces crushing headaches and a sense of dread, the inevitability of unnamed worries to come.

And I worry about my head, so the whole thing perpetuates itself ad infinitum.

The few times I have tried to explain the head condition—first to my mother and then to my father and then to Sigrid—they each scoffed and told me that I was crazy to think it. Either my head was at an in-between phase or they were trying to reassure me. I know every inch of my body, and I know when something is wrong.

I don't even call Sigrid back, but she walks into my room at four o'clock, car keys in hand. Her thick brown hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and she's wearing an old denim jacket the same color as her eyes. I am still lying on my back on the bed.

Hey, Onion, she says. You ready to go? She frowns theatrically

and says in a German accent, You do not look rheady to go.

I put a pillow over my face. I don't feel up to it, I say.

Aw, you can't be serious, she says in her normal voice. You stayed home all last week. What's going on with you?

I don't know, I say. I pull the pillow down below my eyes. I don't feel right. I don't know what to wear.

Come on, baby, she says. Get up and get over here. Let's find you something.

I trudge over to the closet and stand behind her in my T-shirt and underwear, massive head bobbing on my shoulders. She pulls open the door and draws her head back.

How is this arranged? Color-coded?

I did it yesterday, I say. It's much easier like that.

How did you have it before?

Organized by number of pockets.

You are not for real, she says.

Where did you get that? You say it to everyone now.

Shut up, she says and hits my arm. She holds up my new Beavers Hockey 1990-91 sweatshirt. Here, wear this. It's going to be cool out.

Sigrid hauls me out to her mother's old wood-paneled station wagon, the same car that drove us to kindergarten together. We roll down the gravel driveway and onto the road.

Need soundtrack, Sigrid says. She never calls it *music*. She digs through the clacking tape cases and pushes in a cassette that crackles and pops like the vinyl it was recorded from. The soundtrack is a thudding drumbeat and snarling guitars as we drive through town, where half the stores are still closed for the winter, and then over the dirt roads that cut through fields and woods. Spring is brief and uneasy here. Finally the snow seems to have left for good, and all that's left are small cold puddles in the ruts. The world looks exposed and a little awkward, like when my father shaved off his beard. His chin and jaw looked weak and naked. I felt embarrassed when I looked at him.

We come to fields of short, conical evergreens, evenly spaced, all the same height. The fields are surrounded by untamed trees, dark bristly pines shot through with silver birches. This is the Christmas tree farm where Erling lives.

We pull into the driveway in front of the house, a stern gray

split-level. Five or six cars are parked at the edge of the lawn. In the open garage, four guys are playing pool.

Fuck, I say. There are so many people here.

Not that many, Sigrid says. You're in quite a mood.

Sorry. It's hard for me to be social in this state.

She pats my head, and I flinch. You'll be fine, she says. She turns off the car, and the music stops.

We get out of the car and hear Guns N' Roses, tinny and distant, from the pool game in the garage. An adolescent chocolate Lab bounds up to us, wriggling and jumping. Sigrid coos, Hello, Bailey! and we try to pet him and kiss him while he bounces around us.

Erling comes out of the house carrying a case of Mountain Dew. Bailey, get down! he calls to the dog. Hey, guys, he says to us. We wave. He stops and waits for us to reach him. His hair is the same caramel brown as the freckles that blanket his cheeks and nose.

Sigrid pulls back his open flannel shirt to look at the T-shirt underneath. I can't believe you're wearing that, she says.

Erling looks down at his chest. The T-shirt is crisp white, with a tank and an eagle and a Scud missile and an unfurling starred-and-striped banner that says OPERATION DESERT STORM.

This shirt kicks ass, he says. They're on sale at Pamida now. Only five bucks.

Sigrid pulls the flannel shut but holds on for a second, fists resting on his chest. You are not even for real, she says with a grin and releases him.

Is the fire going yet? I say.

Gorbachev's working on it, he says. Let's check it out. The three of us walk around to the back of the house.

On the wide bare lawn behind the house, back by the edge of the tree fields, is the bonfire spot. It looks like a bomb hit the lawn, leaving a six-foot circle of ash and unidentifiable charred chunks. It is fed like an insatiable pet every weekend. Three old couches border it, stained and worn, one of them pocked with bullet holes.

Gorbachev, whose name is really Steve, turns off the chainsaw when he sees us. He is lanky with dark hair that curls over his collar in the back. When he gets nervous or embarrassed, a key-

shaped purple stain creeps out from his hairline by his temple and spreads. In front of him is a dried-out balsam fir hacked into foot-long sections.

How's it comin', Gorb? says Erling. He stands next to him and looks down at the dismembered tree.

Gorbachev wipes his forehead. Pretty good, he says. This is the last tree, y'know. After New Year's, he and Erling drive around town in Gorbachev's pickup and load it up with discarded Christmas trees, which they pile behind the shed and chop up one by one every weekend for the fire. Even in the icy depths of January the blaze is high and hot enough to stand around it, one side of your body freezing while the other side roasts.

Erling nods and says, Yeah. We'll figure something out.

Gorbachev looks at us and says, Hey. He looks at me for a second longer and smiles weirdly. Hey, Anya.

I smile back warily. Is he mocking me? Hi, I say. I take Sigrid's arm. We're going to go inside for a minute.

I pull her into the kitchen and say, Sigrid. I have to ask you something.

Okay.

You have to promise to be totally honest with me.

Of course.

Is my—is it so obvious and hideous that my head is hideously too big?

What? she says. I see her glance behind me for a second, and her mouth turns up in the slightest smile.

My head, I say, feeling panic. I know it's enormous, but can you—

I'm cut short as a pair of cold hands clamp over my eyes. I jump and let out a squeak, but the hands press tight.

Who is it? I say. I sniff deeply. No cologne or perfume; clean T-shirt smell; faint hint of mild, almost sweet sweat. Hiiii, Erik, I say with extreme patience.

The hands drop, and I turn around to see Erling's thirteen-year-old brother grinning, as pleased as he was the first twenty times he did that.

What's up? I say, tapping my foot.

Not much, he says. I'm kinda bored.

Why aren't you downstairs kicking some Nintendo ass?

He shuffles his feet. I don't have the Nintendo anymore.

What? What happened to it?

My dad smashed it with a hammer.

For real? says Sigrid. Shit.

Why'd he do that? I ask.

I refused to say grace, he says. He lifts his chin a little.

Shit, Sigrid says again.

It's okay, he says. I'm gonna be out of here in five years.

Sigrid and I nod and look at each other. Five years, I say.

It'll fly by, Sigrid says, unconvincingly. You know, I'm kind of hungry. Do you guys have any chips or something, Erik? He digs two bags out of a cupboard and follows us outside to the bonfire.

Sigrid and I sink into a battered plaid sofa and eat potato chips while we watch Gorbachev stoke the fire. Erik tosses Bailey a Frisbee. Guys wander back and forth between the bonfire and the pool game in the garage.

Damn, we're the only girls here, aren't we? Sigrid says as she cracks open a can of pop.

Uh-huh, I say, and I take the can from her and steal the first sip. Sigrid makes protest noises until Erling looks over and smiles. I secretly prefer it this way, just us two. I feel uncomfortable around other girls. I have read the teen magazines they read, and I know how they—we—are trained to scrutinize and compare, develop a shipbuilder's eye for measurement and proportion. Sigrid doesn't do that with me.

The fire climbs. I catch Gorbachev looking at me, and I feel my head swell a fraction of a millimeter on the spot. I try to convince myself the growth was too minute to be visible. Note to self: invest in hooded sweatshirt. I turn to Sigrid and try to manufacture a vigorous conversation. I manage to get her going on Quayle. I focus my eyes intently and nod with concern.

Erling and Gorbachev go out to the garage and come back totting a shotgun and a box of clay pigeons. Sigrid stops for a second.

Maybe you shouldn't do that now, she says. It's going to be dark soon.

That's why we're doing it now, says Erling. Sigrid frowns at the gun. I uneasily watch him open the box and pull out a stack of reddish clay disks. Erik drops his Frisbee and jogs over, delighted.

I hate it when they do this, Sigrid says without bothering to

lower her voice.

Me, too, I say.

Erik says, What, are you scared?

No. I just don't like guns, Sigrid says.

The guns don't bother me, I say. It's . . . the noise.

It's not the noise. It's the clay pigeons, stacked calmly in their box. I know they're made to be destroyed, that their usefulness lies in their demise. They fly once and shatter and fall, their pieces sink into the ground. As intended. But I can't shake the feeling that every object has a life, not like ours, but a strange parallel object-life, and I desperately, absurdly want the clay pigeons to remain whole.

Erling lifts the gun to his shoulder first. Gorbachev tosses a clay pigeon like a Frisbee up and out over the field, a dark slot in the yellowing sky. Boom, crack, suddenly it's gone, and the pieces rain to earth. The shotgun and the shooting look strangely simple and primitive now—a lead bullet, a direct arc to its target. In the war everything shifted. Nothing moved as it should: targets darted sideways and backwards, missiles wiggled and swerved, televised in eerie green digital light. Out here in the cold spring evening, the shooting—with metal and wood and clay, the loud crack and smoky smell—is too real.

The boys whoop and give Erling five.

Gorbachev takes the gun, and Erling tosses the clay pigeon up into the air. A second before Gorbachev pulls the trigger, I see the dog tear across the lawn, eyes on the soaring disk, and plunge into the tall grass in the field. Bailey! I yell. The gun fires.

The clay pigeon glides undisturbed through the air and descends gracefully to earth. The dog continues bounding through the field, impervious to our shouting. He stops and dips his head and then comes trotting back with the disk in his mouth.

Jesus Christ, says Gorbachev.

Erik, put the dog in his kennel, says Erling. His voice is low but a little shaky.

You do it, says his brother.

Just fucking do it, Erik.

I jump up. I'll do it, I say. Come on, Bailey. I pry the clay pigeon from his mouth and slip it into my jacket pocket—one saved—and grab his collar. His head is big and blocky, and his paws are

enormous, while his ribs are puppy-skinny. I feel a surge of affinity. Hey, buddy, I say. Let's go.

Suddenly willing, Erik joins me. We go around to the far side of the garage where the chain-link kennel is built against the wall. Erik opens the door, and Bailey balks. Come on, puppy, I say.

A gunshot echoes, and I decide we can take our time. I kneel down to scratch the dog's silky chocolate head. As he licks my chin, I glance up at the corner of the garage and notice a chunk of bright peach-colored wood chewed out of the gray paint. I point at it and say, Hey, Erik, what's that?

We got a porcupine, Erik says. Dad's been trying to shoot it for a week now, but we haven't seen it yet. Get in there, Bailey. He gives the dog's butt a firm push and latches the entrance behind him.

I don't look forward to returning to the bonfire and the clay pigeon massacre, but I can't just hang out by the kennel making small talk with Erik, and I suck at pool. So we go back. Erling is sitting by Sigrid now while the other guys take turns shooting, so I sit next to him and half-listen to their conversation. I draw my knees up to my chest and watch the clay pigeons soaring, blown to pieces. Someday archaeologists will find the shards buried deep and imagine they were art, pottery, tools.

By the time the box of clay pigeons is empty, the fire has burned down to a low, tame flame. My head is throbbing faintly, threateningly. I finger the disk in my pocket.

That fire's getting low, says Gorbachev. We're out of wood.

Let's burn that old green couch, Erling says.

Don't burn the couch, I say.

It's a piece of crap.

Someone can still use it, I plead.

Who would want it? It'll do us more good as firewood than furniture.

There's no stopping them. They get a guy under each corner, and they lift the couch up and drag it over the fire spot. Erling pulls a branch out of the fire. The tip glows orange, and flames wind around its dark midsection. He holds up the burning limb.

Stand back, he tells us. He turns to the couch-bearers. Ready? Okay. Let it go.

The couch drops onto the fire with a heavy thud and crack.

Embers shoot out from underneath, and a cloud of soot and ashes puffs up around it. Erling touches his torch to the arm until the flame catches, then to the back and the cushions.

The flames eat away the canvas and burst high into the air when they hit the stuffing of the cushions. A sweet, sick smell fills the air. The wooden framework will burn long and slow.

My head throbs. I feel like I'm watching a whole life burn. If the clay pigeons had brief, naïve object-lives, this couch is like a generation, like a library, like a history of someone's basement. It is a grandfather or a bull elephant or some battle-scarred ship sinking fast and without dignity. The pressure mounts in my head. I can't watch anymore.

Are you crying? says Gorbachev.

My contacts are burning from the smoke, I say. I hear the dog barking and say, I'm gonna go check on Bailey.

As I round the corner of the garage, the barking and snarling turns to frenzied squeals. Bailey is hunched and twitching, tail tucked between his legs, yelping and whining. He tries to paw at his face, then lick his paws, and scurries back and forth in the kennel.

White-tipped quills protrude like stiff whiskers from the dog's entire face. His muzzle, damp mauve nose, lips, eyebrows, chin, throat, are pierced and swelling. Quills stick out of his chest and neck, his forelegs, his shoulders.

On top of the doghouse, the porcupine glares down at him, bristling, its tail a stiff spiked paddle. When it sees me, it clambers with surprising speed up and over the kennel fence and staggers swiftly into the trees. Bailey whines pitifully.

Erling! Erik! I yell. Get over here! Quick!

Erik comes running, with Erling walking behind until he figures out what happened.

Oh shit, oh shit, he says, over and over.

Erik looks panicked. That must be a hundred quills, he says.

It's like *two* hundred quills. Erling paces along the side of the kennel. What are we going to do?

I know how to get 'em out, says Erik.

Can you do it before Dad gets home? says Erling.

I think so, says Erik. You guys can go back to the fire.

You're going to need some help, I say. I'll hold him still.

But I can't. The dog wrenches away vehemently. For a puppy he's astonishingly strong, and his squeals and yelps are ear-shattering. I have to go back to the bonfire to get help.

Erling's pushing at the blazing couch with a pitchfork, and the flames climb higher and higher. Gorbachev volunteers to go, and I throw myself back onto the sofa next to Sigrid, who puts her arm around me and says, You okay?

He looks awful, I say. I've never seen an animal in so much pain.

No, I said, Are *you* okay?

I look at the flames leaping out of the sofa. Can we go home?

Okay, Sigrid says. I'll take you home.

As we stand up we hear a car door slam. Erling jumps back from the fire and drops the pitchfork. My dad's home, he says.

A moment later his father comes walking over the yard toward us, arms swinging. He wears a cap and a gray down vest. Hey, kids, he says gruffly. Quite a fire you got there. He squints. You burning that old green couch?

Yeah, says Erling nervously. We figured it was shot.

About time, says his father. That thing was a piece of crap. He laughs, and the boys echo the laugh, and then we hear a sharp yelp from behind the garage.

The father looks toward the garage. Is that Bailey? He smiles. Bailey! C'mere, boy!

A second later the dog comes bounding around the corner, Erik and Gorbachev stumbling after him.

Hey, there, buddy! says the father, and suddenly he sees the quills and steps back. What the hell happened here?

The porcupine got him. It was in his kennel, says Erling. His voice sounds different—higher, quieter. He says, Erik's working on the quills.

I got some out already, Erik says, breathing hard.

Goddamn, says the father. He bends over, hands planted on his knees, and looks over Bailey's ruined face. You'll never get those quills out. Dog looks like a damn pincushion.

Don't worry, Dad, says Erik. I'll fix him.

There's only one way to fix him, says the father. He straightens up and walks toward the garage.

Come on, Dad, says Erling. Don't shoot him.

Dad, we can fix it, says Erik. I can get them out. I'll stay up all night if it takes.

He doesn't respond, but goes into the garage and comes out with the shotgun. Erik starts to beg, and his father holds up his hand and says, Don't be a woman.

We all stand there, unable to watch, unable not to watch.

Come on, Bailey, says the father, and starts walking out into the field. The dog trots beside him, hobbling a little. The sky above the trees is citrine pink and orange and yellow, behind us a cool deep cobalt.

This is not for fucking real, Sigrid says.

Shut up, Sigrid, snaps Erling. He turns his back to the field and stares into the fire. The rest of us watch, transfixed. Erik is trembling. I feel oddly nothing but a tiny, steady pulse in my temple.

The man and the dog walk through the field, growing smaller and smaller as they move toward the woods at the far end. Soon we can't see Bailey anymore, just the father's head and shoulders weaving through the Christmas trees. He stops at the border of the woods and raises the gun.

Sigrid covers her ears and looks down at her feet. I stare at the fixed point of the father's head and wait. The lone shot sounds soft and faraway. No yelp, no crack, no thump. The father bends down for a minute, then stands and turns back toward the house. He grows larger with each step until he is back in the yard, life-sized. He doesn't look at us. In his hand is the dog's red canvas collar, tags jingling softly. He stops for a second and drops it on the ground. Then he goes on into the house.

Erling reaches down and picks up the collar. You fucker, he mutters. Fucking asshole. He pulls his arm back to throw the collar into the fire.

I can't take it. I say, No, Erling, don't, and I step toward him. Why don't you give it to me.

Why?

It's almost brand-new, I say. It'd be stupid to ruin it when you could still use it.

Use it on *what*, Anya? What the fuck are we gonna use it for?

Give it to me, Erling, says Erik. His eyes are full of tears, and somehow they make him look not younger but older. Erling looks at him for a second and then tosses him the collar.

Erik catches it. He rubs his thumb across the metal tags etched with vaccination proof, his phone number and address, the word *Bailey*. He looks up at all of us looking at him. Then he throws the collar into the fire, onto the blazing sofa.

I feel an almost audible snap as my scalp contracts. I feel my skull tighten and my brain begin to squeeze and condense. Ow! I cry, and grab my temples. Everyone turns to stare at me.

Are you okay? says Sigrid.

I try to shake my head, but it seizes sharply, and I double over.

Anya? says Gorbachev.

Everything is flashing—the flames, the faces, the fields—and I can't focus my eyes. I need to find a way out. Erling's parents are in the house. I can't possibly drive the car like this. I can't stand here with my head shrinking in front of everyone.

Instead, I turn and run into the field, out into the Christmas trees. Everything grows larger as my head shrinks and shrinks, and I navigate with my tiny head this unwieldy body through the weeds and pine trees and the shards of clay pigeons. In my head everything strains to escape.