



The Lingering Effects of Pre-Natal Violence

HERE I AM. I bring you blood. I bring you droplets and puddles and buckets and oceans of blood. Spurting like cum shots. Falling like rain. Slashed bellies and severed limbs. Brains just blasted all over the walls and carpet and furniture, gooey strawberry-swirl chunks sticking to lampshades.

You want it.

Need it.

It's why you came here.

Don't lie to me. We both know why you came.

You need that violent jolt, that sense of mastery over the chaos. You fucking cowardly spectator. You voyeuristic rubbernecking hypocrite, watching the gladiators through binoculars. You want bad news and dead bodies, but from a distance. You crave cinematic blood, the kind safely encased within a TV screen. Oh, isn't that horrible—I hope they show it in close-up. It's awful what he did to that little girl, and they're going to show the autopsy photos after the next commercial.

Really, they can't give you enough blood. You sop it all up with a dinner roll, and while talking with your mouth full, you beg for more. The professional dream-weavers struggle to keep pace with your appetite. Writers and film makers serve you sumptuously gory buffets, but honestly, what do they know about it?

How many of them have been convicted of assault?

They bring you red food coloring.

I bring you real blood.

Some of it flows from my victims.

Some of it's dripping out of me.

My face has been cut open and stitched up so many times, it's like getting my teeth cleaned. I've been peeled apart and sewn back up like a rag doll. Stitches have crisscrossed my mug like train tracks. My nose has been smashed so many times, I had it fixed. I have chipped teeth. A broken toe. Scars on every limb.

I've been bitten. Kicked. Punched. Smacked with blunt instruments. Never been stabbed or shot, although the night is young.

My face has been swollen like a multicolored beach ball. Like a bloody pink pumpkin. I've had painful knots all over my skull. Hair matted in blood. Scabby red latticework covering my face.

I know the process so well. First the swelling. Then the bruising. Then the pain, so acute that it hurts to talk.

Bandages and ointments. Icepacks and hot washcloths. Cotton balls and hydrogen peroxide. Antiseptic creams and about ten aspirin to kill the headache.

The purples and magentas and reds fade to browns and greens and yellows. The scabs shrink, dry, and fall off. The stitches sting a little when they pull them out, but not too bad.

And then you're fine again. The pain never lasts. It's no big deal.

I've endured so many brain-loosening head shots, it's a miracle I can spell my name. A wonder I don't see cuckoo birds and exclamation points spinning around my head continuously. I haven't seen stars, I've seen constellations.

Sometimes I repeat myself and don't even realize it.

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I'm not particularly strong. Not especially quick. Not even six feet tall.

But my skull is made of brick. I've never been knocked out. Or even knocked down. Never been punched so hard that it knocked all the bad memories out of my head.

And physical pain doesn't scare me.

So if you wanna go, let's go.

On flick my brain cells like stadium floodlights. Each blood cell is a flashing red siren. Plasmatic excitement. Sweet adrenaline. Hyperventilation. Rapid pulse. Throbbing head. Buzzing ears. My vital signs are all more elevated than during sex. There's no greater high.

Fuck, yeah. I love it. I enjoy it. It turns me on. I'm ready to smash. Ready to win. Ready to defend myself. Ready to prove I'm alive.

I've knocked people unconscious. I've broken noses. Caused skull fractures. Bruised ribs. Loosened teeth. Forced an ambulance to be called more than once. I've provided great business for emergency rooms from coast to coast.

I'd love to slam your eyeball so hard that it's a bloody glob of jelly crawling down your face like a lava lamp.

I'd love to punch your kidney so hard that you'll piss blood into a catheter from a wheelchair the rest of your life.

I'd love to crack your ribs so hard that they pierce your lungs like popped balloons.

I'd love for you to be swallowing your own teeth while telling me you're sorry.

I love violence. It's a universal language. It has a purity which words can't approach. There is no ambiguity. No danger of misinterpretation. The shortest distance between two points is a fist to the face. A black eye speaks for itself. Blood doesn't lie.

Some would like to pretend that violence is unnatural.

Idiots.

Violence is not an aberration, it's a rule. It governs big things and small ones.

Astronomers theorize that all the matter in this universe was compacted onto a pinhead before exploding in a divine orgasm of almost inconceivable violence. From the Big Bang onward, violence has been a constant. Predatory black holes swallow galaxies. Asteroids vaporize planets. Supernovas blaze and destroy. Violent, violent cosmos.

Gravity chains us to a violent earth with an angry molten core. The earth's howling, shifting crust raised mountains and opened valleys in staggering strokes of violence.

The animals which cling to this earth for life are relentlessly, remorselessly, deliciously violent. Violence brings life—for the violent. It brings death for the victims, but that's their problem.

Zoom in on high-magnification footage of an insect killing and eating another insect. Watch the triumphant insect in full battle armor suck the life from the smaller, weaker bug. Watch its mandibles rip into its prey. Watch the victim helplessly twist, turn, and finally collapse.

Is remorse involved? Or is it strictly a matter of survival?

There's a balletic beauty when a great white shark tears into a smaller fish and how the red blood softly billows into blue seawater.

But not from the smaller fish's perspective.

The animal predator exults in its own life, not its victim's death. Violence is more closely linked to self-preservation than to the destruction of others.

You, too, are an animal. You have teeth with which to bite and hands with which to strangle. You piss and shit and breathe and fuck like all other animals. You bleed, like all "higher" animals do.

You are also something more than an animal, but your nervous system is encoded with all of evolution's harsh lessons. You don't have one brain, you have a layered series of nerve clusters with different evolutionary instincts and priorities. Part of you has evolved beyond the reptiles, and part of you is right down there with them. Your brain has not evolved beyond the need to crush and smash and dominate. And that

brain fantasizes about the death of your enemies. Don't even try to deny it.

Violence is inside you. It cannot be created, only awakened or suppressed. You were born violent and had to be taught otherwise. You had to be spanked, or at least punished, before you stopped hitting other creatures.

Homo sapiens. King Carnivore. Human beings did not invent violence, they merely perfected it. We did not ascent to the top of the animal kingdom through charm and diplomacy. Our dictatorship over other animals was not accomplished with prayer beads and drum circles.

Violence never solved anything? HA! It solves everything! It always has. Violence makes the world go 'round. It is an inescapable historical principle. There isn't a nation on earth that wasn't built on its enemies' corpses. Each word in every history book is written in the losers' blood.

Torture dungeons and gas chambers and hot molten lead poured down heretics' throats. Firing lines and death squads and masked guerrillas pouring down from the mountains. Mustard gas and Agent Orange and little vials of anthrax. Ethnic cleansing. Ideological purging. And pure holy pillaging. Barbarian hordes crushing everything in their path. Draining life from the victims and injecting it into the conquerors.

Violence is only "senseless" to the losers. To the winners, it makes perfect sense. It gives them life. Societies only condemn violence when it threatens the idea of their own safety. And they applaud whatever violence alleviates the threat. Kill the killers. Assault the assaulters. Rape the rapists.

It isn't wrong when we do it. It's wrong when you do it.

There are two types of blood: mine and yours. Ours and theirs. The good kind and the bad kind.

That's why Christianity has such a perennial appeal—someone else's blood purchasing your eternal life.

We are all born covered in our mother's blood.

I was one of the few who managed to stay covered in blood.

My parents gave me life and then tried their best to snuff it out of me.

My childhood's defining moment came before I was even born. There I am, Jimmy the Fetus, enjoying the lightless quietude between zygote and infant. Little pink stumps of hands and feet. Tiny pepper-speck eyes. More like a sea shrimp than a person. Yet a cloudy, jellyfishlike web of veins is building me into a human being.

And as I'm happily curled in a ball within that warm amniotic sac,

dad hauls off and punches mom in the stomach.

Since then, things just haven't been the same.

While I don't consciously recall the incident—my brother told me about it—I sense I retain it on a much deeper level. I'm sure it rustled my placenta. I had to have felt it in some way.

While mom's umbilicus is feeding me all the nutrients necessary to build skin and bone, that blood-filled SCSI cable of hers is also sending me distress signals:

YOU'RE UNDER ATTACK.

YOU'RE SOMETHING TO BE DESTROYED.

Love and fear. Nurturance and violence.

I'm unable to defend myself. To hit back. I'm under siege and helpless. My sanctuary is a killing zone. My safe place is a torture chamber. I'm backed-up against mom's uterus like a cornered rat. If you can't hide in the womb, where can you hide?

Dad's punch partially aborts me. It kills whatever sense of safety I had. His fist shatters my infant reverie. He sprays graffiti on the altar of my innocence. My "childhood" was the wormy, embryonic spate of quiescent darkness preceding that punch.

After that, I'm no longer a child. Dad put a black eye on my soul.

There's something intensely deliberate about a punch to a pregnant woman's belly. Was he punching my mother...or me?

My parents had been together for eighteen years before I started swelling up inside mom's guts, and my arrival meant they'd be forced together for another eighteen. This was in the days when Catholics didn't get abortions and divorces.

But then again, miscarriages aren't a sin, are they? The Pope didn't have to know it was intentional.

Feel dad's misery as he cocks his fist to strike. Another unplanned fetus. Another squalling mouth to feed. Another reason to drink. Another reason to tense up and get violent. He's mad at mom's unexpected fertility. Mad at the lump of protein growing inside her. Mad at himself for not jacking off and shooting me down the drain. And so I become the fetal shock absorber for his resentment.

Prior to my arrival, dad's favorite punching bag was my brother Bucky, who was seventeen years older than me. Bucky was a spindly, bespectacled, emotionally tortured deaf mute. The old man made certain that Bucky knew he was an unwanted annoyance, too.

Less than a week after my birth, my father and Bucky brawl near

my crib. As dad's pummeling his disabled son, Bucky grabs an ashtray and smashes it in dad's face, raining glass fragments all over me.

It's a fractured lullaby. Just when I should be hearing the tinkling music-box sounds of a mobile whirligig spinning over my crib, I hear a violent shower of glass and angry barking men.

My sleek, shiny nerves probably writhe as if poisoned. I'm sure I cry. When you're an infant, crying's easy. Not so much anymore.

I'm baptized in broken glass. After that, I never see the glass as half-empty or half-full—it's shattered to pieces instead.

Bucky runs out of the room, out of our house, and never lives there again. Dad follows him out of the room, his face cut-up and bleeding.

Once out of our house, Bucky runs straight into trouble. Violence is his only inheritance. He drifts in and out of prisons in the South. He languishes for fourteen months in a Florida jail facing attempted-murder charges which are finally dropped. He spends over a year in a Texas prison, where he is raped. Back in Pennsylvania in the late 1960s, he plows into a man with his car, killing him. It is ruled an accident.

Bucky usually dresses like an undertaker in a black suit, white shirt, and skinny black tie. In 1969, he takes a vacation to Paris. The morning after his arrival, his corpse is found in a ditch a hundred yards from his rent-a-car. He had been stabbed over thirty times and strangled with his own belt.

Imagine the horrid last moments when you realize your vacation is turning into your murder. As a deaf man, was Bucky able to hear his own screams? Did his killer remind him of our father?

Early on I learn that families are groups of humans who bruise each other and draw blood from each other and scream like foamy-mouthed dogs at each other. I watch my father kick my sister as she lies in the fetal position on the floor, crying. Dad likes to hit the fetuses he's created. I see blood drip from my sister's mouth into the toilet and how she blames it on my father. I watch each red drop dissolve into the water just like it does when a shark attacks a smaller fish.

By the time I'm six, my siblings have grown up and fled our cozy gingerbread house. So it's just me, mom, and dad.

My parents are a pair of mass-produced, infantile, working-class nobodies caught in the mouse trap. Dad is a raging, drunken werewolf with slicked-back hair and stained work clothes. Mom is a shrieking, coldly sadistic opossum who counts on her fingers and stares warily behind thick glasses.

Dad is fire. Mom's ice. And I'm wedged in between them.

Mom slaps me while driving and scolds me in supermarkets and tells

me I'm the Bad Seed.

Dad teases me until I cry, scalds my wrist with hot teaspoons, and tells me I have no heart.

Your parents are supposed to keep you safe from the monsters who chase you and hurt you. They aren't supposed to chase and hurt you themselves.

Oh, the helpless feeling of running from your towering, Tyrannosauric progenitors.

I'm seven or eight and alone with dad in the house on a bright Saturday afternoon. He chases me down into the basement and wallops me with his hairy backhand, giving me a bloody lip. After he walks upstairs, I grab a sheet of paper and spit my blood onto it. I mark the date on the paper with a pen, figuring I'll need this evidence at trial.

It isn't the first time dad has made me bleed. It isn't the second or third time. It's happening so much, I fear I'll wind up in court over it.

But this is during an era when the state rarely meddles in family violence.

Around the same time, mom shuffles me off to a psychiatrist because, well, I've been acting a little weird, and my behavior must be my problem rather than an organic response to my surroundings.

The headshrinker gives me a little game to play.

Here's a picture of a room in a house. Let's say it's your house. Here are some little stick-on figures of family members. Let's say it's your family. I want you to use these figures and make a family scene for me.

And so I do.

What does the scene show, Jimmy?

It's a mommy and her little boy. They're walking in through the front door. Daddy is lying on the floor in a pool of blood. Somebody killed him with a machine gun.

I'm only seven or eight, and no family portrait would be complete without some blood.

Then I'm a little bit older and much more rebellious—probably twelve, although I still have no pubes. I come home late from school after my parents had warned me not to dilly-dally. Dad tackles me on the stairs and pins down my ankles with his knees. He takes off his belt and begins whipping me. As I'm trying to wriggle loose and run upstairs into my room, mom yells at him to pin me down tighter. I'm howling in pain while dad keeps thrashing me and mom keeps encouraging him. Dad's snarling, mom's screaming, and I'm crying. It's a deliberate, prolonged beating, not just one frustrated blow. It's lash after lash after lash, mother and father ganging up to whip and destroy the little boy

they'd created.

The bruising on my left outer thigh is so extensive that my thigh is more purple than white. Just a big, ugly, meatloaf-sized bruise. Down in the basement bathroom of the church hall where my Boy Scout meetings are held, I drop my pants and show the bruise to the other Scouts.

The oddest thing is that I feel entirely normal while showing it to them. This is how it is for everyone, isn't it? You defy your parents, they beat your legs another color, and you show your friends. This is the way life is. This is what families do. Family life is a bad thing, but bad things are normal.

As I'm cruising through suburban Philly with mom at about age twelve, Barbra Streisand chirps on the radio about how we choose to forget the pain and remember the laughter. I tell mom that I'm the opposite—I remember the bad things.

I feel the bad things more deeply. They sink further into my skin.

There's a joke about how beauty is only skin deep, but ugliness cuts to the bone. Same goes with tenderness and violence. Pain cuts deeper. It weighs more. Trauma lasts longer than euphoria. Intense pain is always more extreme than intense pleasure. Love is a feather; hatred is a hammer. The sound of a bomb exploding drowns out a symphony. The smell of shit overpowers the smell of roses.

Love should be something you feel, shouldn't it?

I didn't feel it from my parents.

When my dog licked my face, I felt love.

But on the rare occasions when dad hugged me, all I felt was his coarse stubble like little black cactus needles.

When mom would hug me, she'd pat me on the back as if she was uncomfortable and couldn't wait for it to be over. There was a stilted insincerity to her hugs.

But she hit me like she meant it.

All the nice things of my childhood, all my books about dinosaurs and saber-toothed tigers, my stamp and coin and rock collections, my pet hamster Itchy, the baseball cards and Hank Aaron's autograph, my World Book Encyclopedia and science-fair trophies, the Quisp cereal and Zotz! candy, the Silly Sand and Sea Monkeys, the Fuzzy Wuzzy Bear soap that grew "hair" after you used it, the boxes of Mr. Bubble, the Candyland and Operation games, the plastic soldiers for Christmas and Tweety-Bird costume for Halloween, all of it seems drowned and smashed and overwhelmed by the blood and bruises and screaming.

I remember dreaming about how a little plastic toy I'd bought from a gumball machine grew into a giant plastic monster that started stran-

gling me.

Several experiments were conducted in the mid-1900s wherein orphaned babies kept in nurseries were given everything they needed except affection. In some studies, up to ninety percent of the infants died. It has also been established that affection-deprived babies are much more likely to become violent adults.

Neurologists talk of the myelin sheath and how it wraps around nerve endings like the rubber coating around an electrical cord. Infants are born before the myelin sheath has formed, and their raw kiddie nerves become attuned to the emotional tenor of their surroundings. Early experiences are crucial in the development of a baby's neural circuitry. After the myelin sheath forms, one's nervous disposition is pretty much cast in metal.

My parents wrapped a tight splint around my emotions and made them grow a certain way. Early traumas hard-wired my neurological motherboard for violence. Every nerve cell generated in my body since infancy has retained those memories. Trauma is a unwanted guest that never leaves me. My brain holds those memories in tiny little jail cells. The dark corridors of my mind are haunted with screams and kicks and bloodshed. Violence is woven into my identity. Welded into my physiology. Imprinted on my character. Rubber-stamped on each neuron. Intracellular. Ingrained. Indelible.

Perhaps it's just an epileptic fluke, some easily explained neurological affliction cured with a scalpel, electrodes, and a barrel full of pills. Perhaps it's dad's black leather belt or mom's plastic lavender enema bag or my brother's murder or the nuns smacking me in the face.

You can talk all you want about free will and ethics, but I swear on my life that my parents placed a violent force within me that all the Ubermenschian ass-clenching I can summon hasn't eradicated. They planted something in me that grew along with my muscles and bones.

No, it's just a coincidence that my parents were violent to me and I became violent.

Just a coincidence that molestation victims are fucked-up about sex.

Just a coincidence that adopted kids tend to float through adulthood feeling disconnected.

Just a coincidence that drunks breed drunks and junkies breed junkies.

Even though drug addiction is a "disease" and violence is a moral failing.

I have a nagging feeling that I'd look at life differently if my parents didn't want me dead. I've only recently realized how deeply sui-

cidal those early punches made me. My parents' hatred for me made me want to die.

But my hatred of them was the only thing that kept me alive.

My death instinct and life instinct are arrayed against each other like black and white chess pieces. Life and death struggle for primacy within me, waging a custody battle over my soul. Tectonic plates of self-preservation and self-destruction grind against each other, giving off sparks. The clash of these primal instincts has lent my personality a seismic intensity. I suffer from an internal energy of a magnitude that is by turns homicidal and suicidal, but never both. I have become obsessed with my own survival and destruction to the point where I view life as something to be won or lost, not merely lived. I feel that if I'm not constantly vigilant, death will win.

So I will confront death and subdue it. I will run into the darkness and call death by name. I will show no fear, because fear is capitulation to the forces that want me destroyed.

Either implode or explode. Either succumb to your destruction or fight back. This massive destructive force inside me has to be aimed in some direction, either inwardly or outwardly. It won't just leak out casually. It won't melt. I've tried relaxing—it doesn't work.

There I am, very young—pre-kindergarten, definitely—and I chance upon some other kids in our back alley. They begin taunting me.

I flex my scrawny biceps and boldly proclaim that I'm Superman, so they can't hurt me.

They laugh at me like I'm crazy and walk away. But they didn't hurt me.

And so I became Superman because that's what it would take to overcome not being loved. I would become my own superhero, the one who would lift myself by the scruff of the neck and fly over all the adversity. I became omnipotent-by-necessity, sensing that I'd have to be the one to solve all my problems. I would rise above it all, that's what I'd do.

A boy lets his parents beat him.

A man hits them back.

A boy cries over his wounds.

A man wounds others.

Becoming a man meant scaring away potential predators. It meant, as Nikita Khrushchev said, kicking off the head of whoever slapped me on the cheek. It meant never backing down. Never. Even if you got beaten into unrecognizability, you don't back down.

Something more than my body is at stake here—self-defense means

that I'm fighting in defense of my very self, of my whole existence.

I can fight the death inside me. The only way to win is by fighting it. So I will approach life as a military campaign. To live is to fight against those who want me dead. To live is to never forget what they've done to me, to never let it happen again.

Polishing my boots. Oiling and buffing my leather jacket. Cutting my hair military-short. Lifting weights so I can form the mighty exoskeleton of the insect warrior.

I will show no weakness.

I will not let you crack this shell.

If I can appear meaner and stronger than you, maybe you won't try to hurt me. If you think I'm able to shatter your jaw, maybe you'll keep your distance. So I will radiate intimidation like a cloud of bug spray. Keep away.

To protect myself from ever being hurt again, I will erect a wall of angry fire around myself. Anger is more dignified than suffering. Anger is a reaction. A battle plan. A way of assuming control.

In a choice between open wounds and scars, I'll take the scars.

So rage became my mother's milk. You become addicted to the poison. You go with what you know.

It is easier for me to punch you than to cry in front of you. To yell at you than to hug you. To insult you than to ask you for what I need.

But I'm not a rude person. In fact, part of my problem may be that I'm too polite. I don't fuck with people. I keep to myself.

I don't get in people's faces. I wait until they get in mine.

I don't go hunting. I set traps.

I don't start things. I finish them.

I'm very respectful of others' boundaries. I don't go anywhere I'm not wanted and don't even go to half of the places where I'm wanted.

But sooner or later, somebody tries to step inside my oxygen tent.

When I bump into someone, I say "excuse me." But not everyone is so courteous.

The person who deliberately cuts me off in traffic or bumps into me on the street without apologizing behaves in a way that I'm too considerate to act. I don't feel as if it's simple disrespect. I feel as if I'm being choked to death. As if they're challenging my right to exist.

Once they've trespassed that invisible force field I've constructed around myself, they're in trouble. I feel as if they've entered my amniotic sac and have to be banished through violence.

If you are foolish enough to wrong me in some way, I will get more than even, don't you worry. I will hold a grudge and clutch onto the

idea of vengeance like an oyster wraps around a grain of sand and turns it into a pearl. I won't forgive you. I can't. I can't "let go" when there's a score to settle. When the account isn't balanced. I will never forget what you did to me. Never. Never. Never. You may think you've gotten over, but I can be very patient. I'll wait YEARS. I'll bide my time hiding behind the soft underbrush, looking for the perfect moment to strike. Just when you think it's safe to breathe, I'll find a decisive, terrifyingly dramatic way to make you regret what you did.

It's only fair.

Blame yourself. If you hadn't fucked with me, you wouldn't be in this predicament.

I never see myself as a predator. I see myself as prey getting even. The world threw the first punch, and the first hundred after that. Everything I do is just retaliation. Just playing catch-up.

I'm not fighting against you; I'm fighting for myself.

It's isn't the killer instinct, it's a survival instinct.

When ignorant peace punks say that violent people wouldn't be violent if they knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end, my reaction is, what the fuck do you think made us violent in the first place? Has there ever been a victimizer who didn't start out as a victim and decide that he or she liked it better on the other side of the fence?

Watch the little abused child beat the stuffing out of his teddy bear when he thinks no one's looking, and you'll understand everything.

Violence is tres glamorous when you're winning. It only becomes ugly when you lose.

I've hit a lot of people and I've been hit by a lot, and I can tell you this much:

It feels better to hit them.

I've been on top and on the bottom.

Top's better.

It feels better to punish than to be punished. To control than to be controlled. To hurt than to be hurt.

Your pain never hurts as bad as mine. Your pain relieves mine. My pain is the only pain that matters.

The ebb and flow of violent tension follow an orgasmic pattern. Day after day, month after month, the strain builds as I weather life's ceaseless indignities. The petty insults and major frustrations are like electricity I absorb to be used at a later date. It piles up like shit in my colon. Like piss in my bladder. Like sperm in my nuts.

After a while, I have to release it. If I keep it inside, it'll corrode my liver.

Anger management. Bite it. Swallow it. Shit it out. Toss it away like a pipe bomb, or it'll blow off half your hand. Push and squeeze it away.

So when I'm beating your face in, I'm releasing bad memories through my fists, which are curled tight like scared fetuses. I'm just discharging a bit of this pent-up energy. Just letting off some steam. I'm transferring my frustrations into your body. My cup runneth over, so I'll pour a little into yours.

But it's only a partial catharsis. I couldn't beat you badly enough to get it all out of me. Even killing you wouldn't do it.

A jailhouse joke runs something to the effect of, "I caught AIDS three times, but I'm OK, because I gave it away each time." Same with violence—you can give it away and still not be rid of it.

I have a secret: I'm very sensitive. I take things hard. Harder than most. I didn't want you to know about my pain, but sometimes, well, it just spills onto the table.

If you think it's unpleasant to be around me, imagine how unpleasant it is to BE me. I torture myself, and you don't even give me any credit for it. I've been in constant emotional pain since before JFK was shot, and still you wonder why I'm cranky.

The pain cuts so deeply, I'm driven fairly fucking mad from it. I could scrape out the last fleck of my bone marrow, and it would still be in there. I've never stopped hurting. I may go numb sometimes, but the phantom pain persists.

After a while, you've felt so much blinding, blinding pain, the systems just shut down. It's the emotional analogue to your body going into shock. My apparent numbness doesn't mean I'm unfeeling. It means I feel too much.

Monsters don't have emotions; I have too many. Violent people are supposed to be dead inside. I WISH! I'm a little too much alive. Bad guys—at least as we've been led to understand them—don't feel pain like this.

Maybe violent people are the most sensitive people on earth. Maybe they're attuned to everyone's pain, while the "victim" is only in touch with their own. Maybe those who are able to just let things roll off their back don't feel things as strongly as I do.

Did it ever occur to you that if I was happy, I wouldn't be smashing things? Has it dawned on you that maybe I'm in more pain than the people I hit?

Like my parents used to say, this is going to hurt me more than it'll hurt you.

Well, that's not entirely true. When I finally hit my parents back, it

probably hurt them more than it hurt me.

I hit them back when I became strong enough to do so.

With mom, I was about twelve...

She's chasing me in the hallway outside a salt-sodden old beach apartment we've rented for the week. Suddenly I decide I don't want to run anymore. I spin around and slap her on the cheek, knocking her goggles askew on her face.

You don't realize, mommy—I have hands, too, and I can hurt you, too. And the way those glasses are hanging off your face really makes you look stupid.

Mom stops in her tracks, startled. She retreats and goes crying to family members that I'd attacked her. She tells the same story to the neighborhood gossip Guernseys. She omits the part about randomly attacking me during the first twelve years of my life.

Everyone thought I was evil for hitting my mother. No one seemed to care that she'd hit me dozens of times before I finally hit her back.

I never hit her again. I didn't need to. She never hit me again, either. She was afraid to.

I hit my father when I was seventeen.

I'm alone in the house, talking on the phone with a female friend. She's not a girlfriend, but she's my best friend, the first pseudo-adult relationship I've had with someone where I can discuss pseudo-adult problems. She means a lot to me. She has recently moved out of town, and the phone is the only contact I have with her.

Dad comes home, his brain a drunken stew of rotted vegetables. He rips the phone from my hand while I'm talking and hangs it up. He chases me upstairs and then back down again. We square off in the living room, face to face. He raises his hand to hit me, and I grab it.

I can almost see the alcohol vapors rising from his head. Big oily nose with craterous pores. Tan, leathery skin. Bloodshot, drunken eyeballs.

And then he gives me that smirk, amused that I'm trying to defend myself. His expression says so much. It says,

You're a stain. A slug. A germ. A speck of lint. You're nothing. You don't count. You don't even register on the scale. I erase you. I wipe you away. You're an object. A prop. You're not real. You're dead.

So I show him I'm alive.

I clobber him with a left hook and knock him to the carpet.

My spirit soars to see him crumpled on the floor like an aborted fetus.

I think,

Now you know what it feels like, you cocksucker. And if you ever hit

me again, I'll collapse your facial cavity. You preyed on my weakness. But now it looks as if I'm stronger than you.

That one punch was so hard that it breaks his dental plate into two shiny pink-and-white pieces. He's so plastered that he ambles down to the basement and tries to glue his false teeth together again.

Dad wails to the rest of the family that I assaulted him. And just as mom did, he neglects to mention the part about trying to hit me first and his history of drawing blood from me. And the family believes him. My brother and brother-in-law threaten to kick my ass.

But dad never hit me again after that. He was afraid to. And I never hit him again, either. I didn't need to.

The day of dad's funeral, after they lower his pickled cadaver into the soil, me and my friend Steve are panhandling outside a subway station so we can buy weed and beer.

A thuggish Italian metalhead who had persecuted Steve in high school passes by us. Steve asks him if he'd sell us a joint.

"No, I don't sell weed to punk-rock faggots," he dismissively says over his shoulder, walking into the station.

I follow him in through the doors and confront him.

WHAT did you say?

"You heard me, fag."

We assume boxing positions, and I land a quick jab to his nose. Blood jumps from his nostrils with a comical spritz. He looks so silly. He touches his hand to his snout and feels the warm stickiness. Realizing that a punk-rock faggot is poised to physically humiliate him, he stops fighting and disappears through the turnstiles.

My father is dead, but I'm not about to let anyone else treat me like he did.

Somewhere around the same time I'm riding with a goony middle-aged man who'd picked me up hitchhiking. He touches my knee and coquettishly asks if I like to "fool around." I tell him no and demand to be let off at the next corner. He drives a block past the corner before finally letting me out. I grumble something about how he drove too far and slam the door as I leave. I walk back to my corner and resume hitching.

A minute later he's running up behind me, screaming and bearing down as if to attack.

He runs straight into my left fist and falls to the blacktop.

I feel powerful. Justified. How glorious to see his body fall. How sexual it is to be standing over him, dominant. So in a way, we wound up having sex, only not the way he'd intended.

About a year later I'm sulking alone at a New Wave club and decide it's time to leave. Lonely and angry, I walk outside and begin hitchhiking home. People lob smart-assed comments at me from passing cars.

I swear to myself that the next person who says something will regret it.

A stocky drunken Guido leans out the back window of a cab and shouts something flippant at me. The taxi stops about fifty yards down, right in front of the club.

He gets out, a girl on each arm. I run up to him and dare him to repeat what he said. He shoves me instead.

I flatten him with one shot. He falls backward, the back of his skull slamming onto the pavement.

He lies there motionless. A crowd forms around us.

Blood starts flowing out the back of his head. It's more blood than I've ever seen at one time. A syrupy red halo at least two feet in diameter expands around his cranium.

His eyes are rolled up in the back of his head. He looks peaceful. He looks dead. He looks unable to insult me anymore. It isn't pretty, and yet it is.

His tarted-up girlfriends are gasping and gesticulating and probably in some way turned-on by what I did.

I just stand over him and think,

You should have kept your greasy mouth shut. You shouldn't have shoved me. Now you're unconscious on city sidewalk, your head cracked open and blood pouring from it like soda from a spilled can.

The club owners run out and start to revive him. They tell me I'd better leave.

About ten years later I'm married and living in Brooklyn. My Russian landlord calls my wife stupid.

You shouldn't do that.

She's the only person who ever loved me.

She's essential to my survival.

I tell him to apologize. He doesn't. He calls me stupid, too.

I start punching him. I keep punching him. He stands there, taking it. Blood splashes from his face with each shot.

Within fifteen seconds his head is bloated like a big bloody wad of bubble gum ready to pop. The swelling turns his eyes into thin razor slits.

Who looks stupid now?

Almost a decade later I'm driving in Portland when some skinny

slacker geek in a little bunny-rabbit car nearly runs me off the road. He flips me off in his rear-view mirror and laughs.

To other drivers, you're just a car, not a human being encased in two tons of steel and glass. The car is another unsafe womb.

I catch up to him at a red light. I jump out of my car and run up to his. He quickly rolls up his window, frightened.

I smash through that window with one punch.

I rain glass into his crib.

Suddenly he's respectful. He apologizes and pulls away at top speed.

I don't want to give you the wrong impression. I don't win every fight. I'm not even sure if I've won half of them.

1979. Hitchhiking again. Blazing on acid. An old Impala containing four drunken teens stops to pick up me and Punk Rock Steve.

I sit up front, in between the driver and a neckless, dark-browed fire hydrant who calls himself Cosmo. Steve sits in between the two hoodlums in back. We do nothing to provoke them. They're just looking for prey. They attack while the car's moving. Cosmo's first punch crunches into my face so hard, I can HEAR my nose being broken. His fat working-class knuckles pummel my face over and over. In the back seat, they're beating up Steve.

The driver pulls into an abandoned dumping ground.

They're going to kill us.

Cosmo drags me out of the car. I break free and race home, blood showering from my nose with each desperate stride I take.

By the time I get home, I've bled so much that my jeans are more red than blue. In the mirror, my face doesn't look like my face anymore. My nose is the size of an orange. It looks like a twisted, inflamed scrotum.

Dad reluctantly takes me to the hospital, scolding me the whole way. Bright lights and black stitches and the worst acid crash ever.

Then there's the time someone bashes my face with a steel beer-keg pump. More blood. More stitches.

There's the drunken brawl with my friend Bruce where I tackle him over a cement wall and split my coconut open on black asphalt. More blood and stitches.

There's the black guy in South Philly who socks my jaw just to impress all the black people around him. Yet more blood and stitches.

And every time I get beat up, I think,

STOP! Stop! Cut! Cut! This isn't what the screenplay says should happen. It isn't supposed to work this way. I'm just standing up for my right

to exist, and that's a noble thing.

Then there's the domestic violence.

That's why I'm writing this from prison.

It makes a sad sort of sense that when I grew up and tried to recreate family situations, they'd include violence.

The first incident was with my first long-time girlfriend, with whom I shacked up in college.

I say something that pisses her off.

She slaps me. Once.

I slap her back. Once.

And just like my parents, she runs yelping to everyone that I'd hit her, splicing out the part about hitting me first.

Same thing with the girl whose testimony landed me in prison. To this day, she denies punching me first on the morning of my crime.

Throughout my life, I've been punished by being hit.

And now I'm being punished for hitting back.

No one wants to accept guilt besides me, and so I wind up getting blamed for everything.

It's like I'm the only one at the restaurant table who reaches for the check, and so I pay for everyone's meal.

The parents I hated built every cell inside me.

And now I sit inside a cell.

Shadows of cell bars fall on gray paper as I write with a hand that has knocked people senseless. A dim yellow light bulb casts scant rays on the page. Through the meshed wire and frosted glass across the hall, I get the blurry idea that the winter sun is setting.

This building was erected right after the Civil War, and its walls are soaked with desperate generations of male sweat and urine.

I sleep on a two-foot-wide plastic mattress and brush my teeth with baking soda. Three times a day, the cart comes along and dog chow is delivered through a slot in the bars. I'm allowed out of the cell twenty minutes a day to shower and then climb back into the same dirty orange jumpsuit.

I share this six-by-nine-foot cement igloo with a convicted killer about whom there's been a book written and a TV movie made.

He beat his wife to death with a flashlight.

This place is the worst of the worst, a prison within a prison. Its official name is the Disciplinary Segregation Unit, but everyone calls it The Hole.

The most dangerous womb of them all.

An electric fan roars down the block. The drone. The hum. The deceit-

ful peacefulness of the birth sac.

It would be hard to conceive getting any lower than this. Rock-bottom, literally. I've fallen through the cracks and fluttered down to the sewer.

This isn't the best place to nurture my soft side.

I have black bruises inside my lower lip. Scratches on my nose, cheek, ear, back, and stomach. A bump on the back of my head. A slightly chipped tooth. Smears of blood on my shirt cuff from dabbing a facial scab that keeps bleeding.

There's a little red swirl in the white of my right eyeball. A big shiner surrounds that eye and hurts when I squint. I see constant white flashes in the corner of my right eye. I see a jagged ridge of blackness along the bottom of that eye when I first open it. The nurse thinks I might have a detached retina.

My opponent's face was so puffy, other inmates said it looked as if he'd put on weight. Some of them said that his black eye looks worse than mine.

A guard saw our black eyes and charged us with assault.

But I hurt myself on the weight pile!

And he got elbowed playing basketball!

Nevertheless, they put both of us in jumpsuits and handcuffs, sending us from our minimum-security kiddie camp to The Hole inside Oregon State Penitentiary.

On the way over here, our transport vehicle passed a motel where my ex-wife and I had stayed five years ago while moving up to Portland.

She had a black eye then.

Come a little bit closer, OK? I don't want to shout.

Since you're the only one listening, I'll tell you: I'm scared. Scared of what has become of me. Scared of what might yet be.

This violence is a part of me. It is not all of me. Yet it threatens to swallow up all of me.

On my eyes' periphery, way on the furthest fields of my vision, I see a badly beaten corpse.

Did I kill it?

Or is it me?

Will I die violently? Will the mortician have to touch up bruises on my face? Will I die before you read these words? Shortly thereafter?

Twice in my life I've beaten someone so badly to where if I kept going, I would have killed them. Both times, the sight of their grotesquely swollen faces is what stopped me. I found myself perched on that

thin gray sliver between simple assault and murder, yet I was able to throw a leash on my rage and yank myself back.

I'm afraid that one day I won't be able to stop.

In the smudged glass of a prison mirror, I look my enemy straight in the eye.

I'm in prison because of the fists I thought would protect me.

Oedipus didn't realize until it was too late that he was fucking his mother.

I didn't realize until it was too late that I was beating up myself.

Each layer of protection only made me more vulnerable. Becoming a tough guy was supposed to signify that I wasn't affected by what my parents did to me, but all it did was prove how deadly affected I was. Limping along crippled, I thought I could win the race. I keep punching back, but it's never enough. I could give the whole world a black eye and still not get even. The violence protected the wrong parts of me. It killed the higher parts and left the caveman intact.

And that's how the winner of his grade school's Spelling Bee wound up in prison for assault.

I could have just walked away and let the shit be on my parents. Instead I kept fighting and got the shit all over me.

The always loud, always boisterous Negro convicts are shouting from cell to cell about their violent escapades. Dark, nappy men with street handles such as Cherry Bomb, Time Bomb, and Trouble, joyfully ululate about slashing other cons with razor blades in the day room, about swinging socks stuffed with combination locks into other inmates' faces, and about how when they punch you, they're trying to break something on the other side of you.

Down the block, a gargantuan Afroman mentions some brutha who beat his pregnant girlfriend so badly, she aborted the baby.

In that case, mission successful. And maybe the best thing for the baby.

My parents let me live, which may have been the cruelest of their tricks.

