





## The other

Ivan de Monbrison

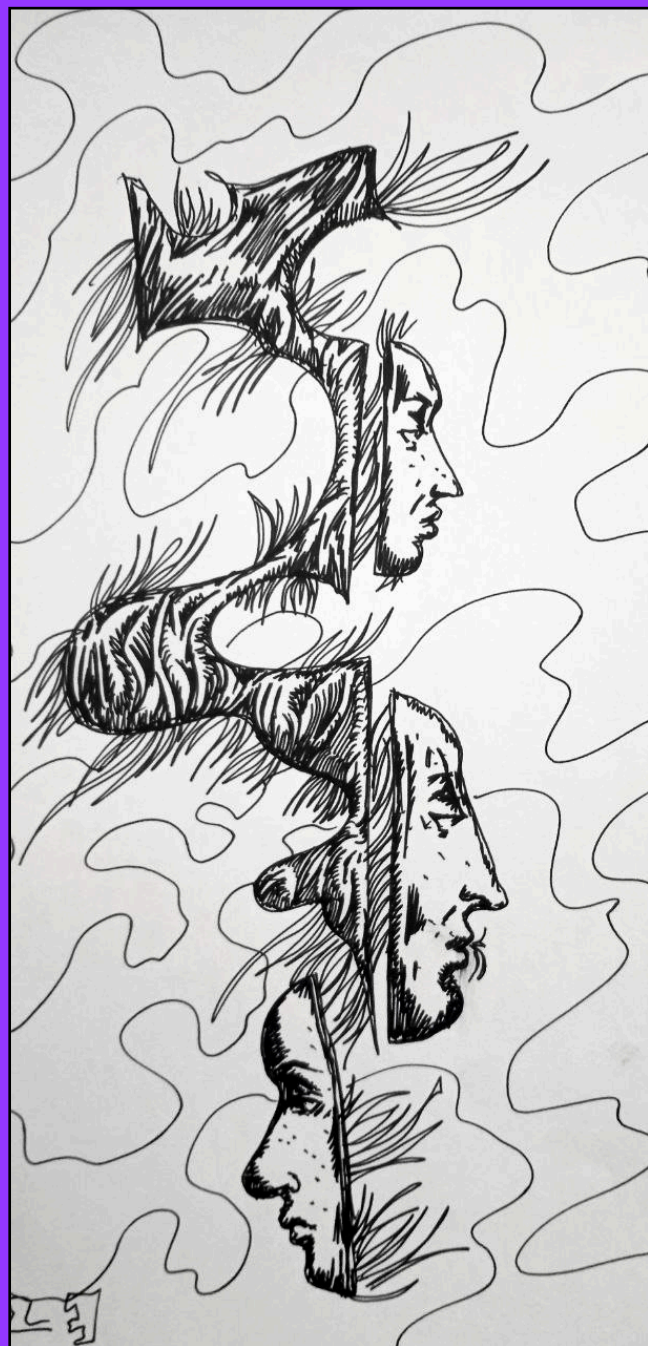
You no longer think the dead are everywhere someone moves forward and dies and wanes away silence falls down you break up but it is not you who's speaking to me in the dark it's your death you're scared of everything you won't go further away someone is swimming in an aquarium but it is not you there's a fish too but it is not you there's a man also swimming you don't say nothing anymore you go away the night is closed there are walls everywhere I'm scared I fall back someone speaks to me but it is not you it's not your father's shadow either but it is not you remain silent you won't say nothing go away forget me close the door turns the light off but it is not you I am scared to die my shadow stays glued on my back but it's not you you don't say anything anymore shut the door the aquarium is empty there are dead everywhere in the room the aquarium is slowly getting empty I'm afraid of you but it is not you don't tell me nothing anymore don't say anything anymore shut the door outside it's cold you lie down in your bed you dream you keep the lamp lit near you because you are afraid in the dark and I am also afraid in the dark you remember that as a child you were always in pain you remember that as a child you always suffered all the time in the darkness like in the daytime but it is not not you who's speaking to me in the night when I'm naked and nullified because with the years the pain nevertheless is still inside of me.



## Cyprus

Bradon Matthews

The bark noose you wear  
Is of your own  
Your gravestone  
Is your birthplace  
You're impossible  
To reason with  
Sitting peeled  
And thickening  
Your connection to  
Rot death wriggling  
Inconsequential seasons  
Free from their moorings  
To fall on swift waters  
Carried away  
By your height  
You make love  
A flag waved  
In a vacuum  
And I need you  
To stand  
For a permanence  
I  
mortal and breath-dependent  
Can touch  
And so gaze  
A moment only  
Scorched  
By your shade



# The Ketchup Stain

Barlow Crassmont

On the day my father vanished, my mother dramatically feigned concern, my sister Joanne hid her giggles under disingenuous tears, and our neighbor Donovan Merkel called the police after realizing no one else would. But Merkel's regard was aided by self-interest more than he cared to admit.

*We suppos't to go fishing t'murrah.*

The beer can dangles from his slimy hands over our fence.

*And 'ee still got my fishin' pole from las' tyme. You wou'n't happen to know whur he put it, wood ya?*

I shake my head, playing the dumb role, the bottle of ketchup in my hand turned upside down and dripping, leaving a red trail in my wake. It takes skill to make something so deliberate appear clumsy and careless. My mother notices it after her slippers incidentally smear the stains on the beige carpeting, mixing with other similarly colored blotches that weren't there this morning.

*What is all this? And where the hell is your father?* She screams, yells, nearly howls. Her eyes locate my hand's contents.

*If you don't know up from down, maybe you shouldn't be holding an open ketchup bottle!*

With a swift motion, she swipes it from me, closes the plastic cap, and throws it across the living room in a frantic fit of rage.

*Look at this mess!*

She stares at the scattered stains, besmirched and embedded in the decrepit rug. Steam evaporates from her nose like a bull's before it strikes a red cape.

*People might think we got blood stains on our carpet!*

If she only knew.

\*\*\*

That morning, mom and Joanne go to cousin Earle's for coffee and rolls, leaving father and myself behind. I play mindlessly with the new hammer. Mother thinks little of it (*he's just a child without a mean bone in his body*). And father, well, he scarcely engages with extended family, especially if they aren't from his side of the tree.

When he wakes up, stinking of last night's booze, he growls and complains at every irksome sight and sound.

*Why the fuck is there no hot coffee?*

*How many times do I have to trip over your shit, boy?*

*Which sum'bitch left the radio playin' all mornin'?*

His screams turn into torturous sounds that ache my inner drum like a thin screwdriver pierced deep into my head. Story of my life.

Although he sees my agony while spewing hateful remarks for all his kin, the sight of my hands over my ears only riles him up more, increasing my anguish. As he bends down on the carpet, stooping to my level, his lips move violently, particles of spit raining on me like lukewarm rain of stale whiskey residue. When he shakes me, my blood turns to a near boil. This is how my father deals with his agitated offspring: by scaring the shit out of them. I can imagine him pouring gasoline on a flame in an attempt to put it out.

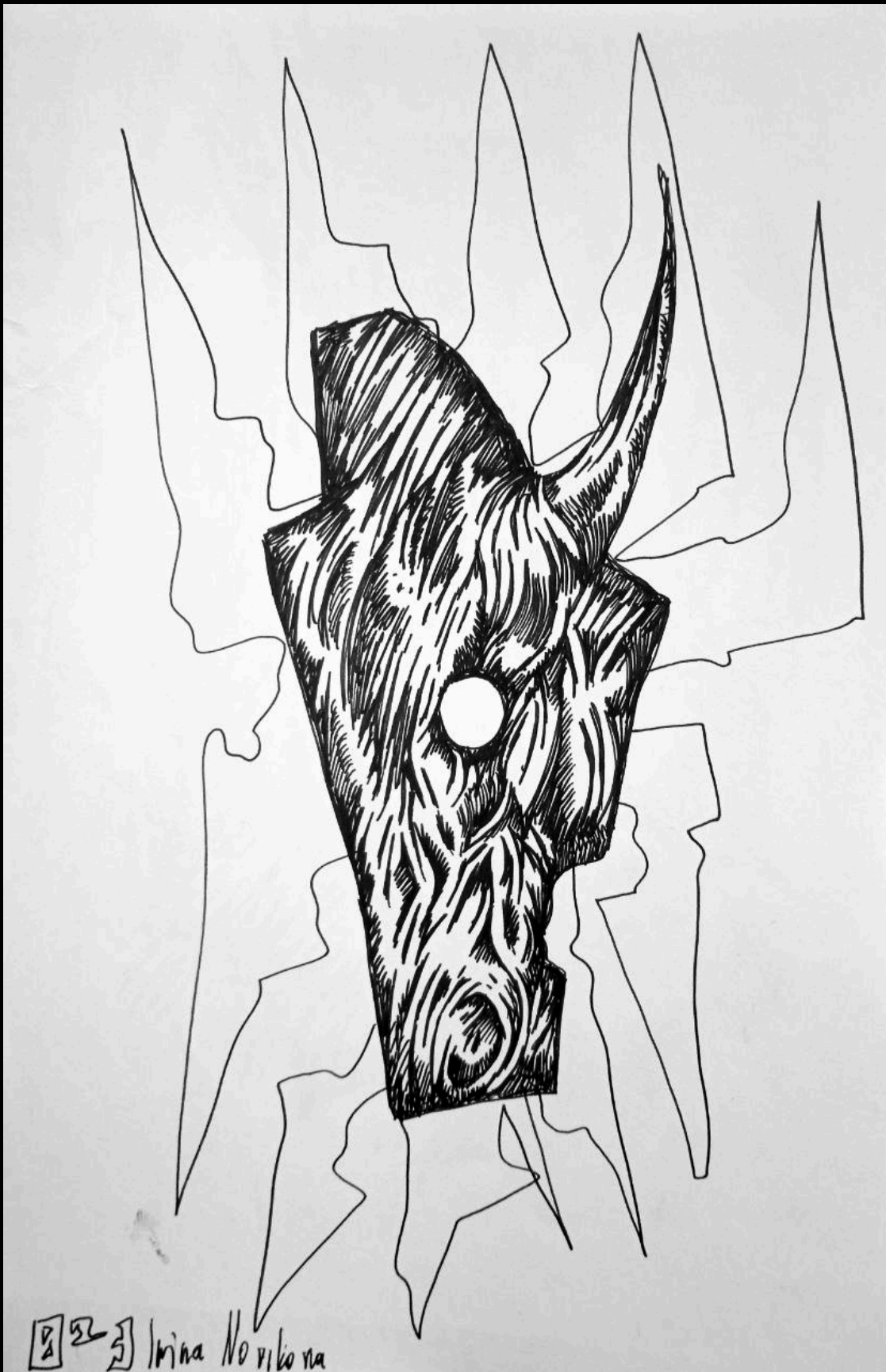
I scream for my mother, tears rolling down my cheeks. But my words barely echo across the deserted house, falling on no one's ears. Father squeezes my arm, and my right hand panics. It grabs the hammer laying on the carpet. I swing it upwards, until the pointy end strikes the soft exterior, then pierces the brittle interior.

Father's fading eyes stare at me, without blinking. Likely pondering how his slow witted child is capable of this.

If he only knew.

\*\*\*

Police cars' lights illuminate our house at dusk like a lighthouse flashing red and blue intermittent signals. An officer takes Merkel's



testimony from our side of the fence, visibly bored from hearing about fishing poles.

*But what if you don't find 'im? What happen' to my pol's then?*

A detective with a red goatee questions my mother and sister as the stale cigarette smoke twirls upwards from the grubby ashtray. Both are disinterested, occasionally glancing at the red stains below to better pass the time.

*When did you last see your husband?*

*Yesterday morning.*

*How did he appear?*

*Hungover.*

*Anyone see him afterwards?*

Mother shrugs. My sister unsuccessfully covers up a chuckle.

*Something funny, miss?*

Joanne waves him off with her hand. Her suppressed jubilation is off the charts.

The detective turns to me. I play with the wooden train, lost in my own world, disconnected from their reality.

*What's your name, young man?*

No answer.

*Nice locomotive you got there.*

No answer.

*When was the last time you saw your dad?*

My mother walks over, whispers into his ear. He then nods apologetically.

The cop stares at the red stains across the rug, suspicion growing in his inquisitive mind. But mother preemptively answers.

*My son spilled ketchup yesterday.*

*Ketchup? All over the room?*

*He's a special child. Gets clumsy.*

The elderly detective observes the rug, furrows his brow, emits a muted *Hmm*.

*You sure this ain't blood? Kinda looks like it.*

*You're welcome to test it.*

The man ponders, then shakes his head.

*Nah. Don't feel like writing the extra report.* His wink lands with an embarrassing thud on all present.

The police gather, huddle, and discuss among themselves. Soft murmurs reverberate across the soft carpeting, the echoes which reach my keen ears.

*Seems like a missing person case.*

*What about the blood on the rug?*

*What blood? She said it was ketchup.*

*We're just taking her word for it?*

*Why wouldn't we?*

*The boy prolly knows something.*

*That retard? Not a chance. He don't even speak English.*

*He was the only one home when his father was last seen.*

*So? You think he killed him, then buried the body? Ain't even sixty pounds on 'im.*

*I agree. Kid looks dumber than a bag of hammers.*

The young officer stares at the hammer on the rug next to me with acute, incredulous eyes. Then...

*Yeah. We're done here. Unless a body turns up in their basement or cellar or backyard...*

If they only knew.





## deep enough down

K. West

When he emerged  
from his grave rotted  
I asked myself  
if I had buried him properly

My dear fur baby  
kitty boy  
I hadn't buried him  
deep enough down  
in the pouring rain





## Made to be Something Else

Megan Diedericks

I made it my mission to look like a bog creature;  
a woodland menace, if you will—  
I want to be the fiend that haunts your nightmares  
and jumpscares you in broad daylight.

Being human isn't what this mind was made for,  
yet my brain is trapped inside this skull  
and the horrors leak through my flesh  
as I pretend that viscous, vivid, vivacious vibrations  
don't call to me in the midnight hour.

I want to break out of this body  
—a boney egg cracking and crashing—  
before I slither back to the forest  
and wait.

Join me?

# Hunger

HK Novielli

They wouldn't let me sharpen my teeth. You can eat without such sharp teeth, they said.

Frustrated, I stomped through the wet streets. As I drew closer, the puddles grew brighter with the reflection of the purple and yellow lights outlining the fast-food restaurant. There were two places to hang out late in this small town and the choices were dull teenagers or greasy truckers. It was easier to fit in with the teenagers. Most of the time, they didn't understand half of what I said, but they didn't realize it and resent it in the same way the adults did.

I scanned the illuminated windows as I approached trying to get a handle on who was around. None of my crew, but lots of kids all the same.

My usual order was ready before I'd finished saying hello—cinnamon twists and water with lemon. My friends sucked down neon soda after neon soda. I would have preferred the coffee at the diner out by the highway. No one ever wanted to hang out with the old people, though, so I was confined to the corner booth waiting for someone I knew to show up.



Cars peeled out of the drive thru. Kids laughed raucously as the sugar rush hit. I watched the rain pick up, obliterating the trash cans at the back of the parking lot and making the shabby town sparkle for a fleeting moment.

There was nothing redeeming about this town. We'd been here for nearly a year. It was easy enough to make friends. Everyone was starved for attention and easily impressed by stories of huge cities and international travel. I could teach these kids so much if I wanted to. I was more exotic here than I'd ever been, and I didn't even have to try. I was bored to death.

"Jessa! Sorry we're late." Jack, Emily, and Mickey slid into the booth. Droplets of rain spattered the table and ran in rivulets down Emily's jacket. I dabbed at the mess with a few napkins left on the table.

"I had to watch my brother." Jack rolled his eyes and sighed at the injustice. I wondered where my brother was. He hadn't come with us when we left Europe all those years ago and we hadn't heard from him in decades.

"We had to wait on my dad for dinner," Emily whined. "He's been picking up extra shifts." She was put out by the change in her routine, but the reason for this disrupted schedule was lost on her as she flitted from dance class to cheerleading practice to shopping center.

I waved them all off. "Better late than never."

Mickey jumped up to get drinks. "The usual?" he asked, not even waiting to hear our responses. Five minutes later, I had more cinnamon twists.

"Why don't you ever eat anything else?" Jack paused in his chewing long enough to ask. "The tacos are good." He always ate at least three when we met up here.

"I don't really eat meat," I said. "But the cinnamon is all right." My palate much preferred the crunchy pseudo-churros to the syrupy soda. They shrugged and went back to their sugary drinks.

Around us, the teenage conversations swelled, laughter breaking over me like waves. None of it pulled my attention. No voice, no story held anything of interest that I hadn't seen or heard a dozen times already. So much of life was waiting for a worthy distraction.

"Should we rent a movie?" Emily asked. "We could watch in our basement." The boys started throwing out titles of action movies and horror flicks.

"What about that 'true life' story about vampires?" Mickey asked. "Remember how dumb the werewolf one was?"

"That was terrifying," Emily retorted. "I'm not watching another one of those."

“Oh, come on, you big baby. It’s not like it’s real.” Jack rolled his eyes at Mickey, and they started laughing, reciting ridiculous parts of the movie to each other. Their voices trailed off when I didn’t join in their teasing.

“Those types of movies are always completely unbelievable. They almost never hit on anything plausible. Who’s driving tonight?” I asked lazily. I wasn’t interested in getting soaked wandering the empty streets looking for something to do. They’d showered me enough when they showed up and everything around us smelled like damp fabric and unwashed teenagers.

“I’ve got the car for a while,” Jack replied. “I just can’t leave town, y’know,” he said sheepishly. Rules and curfews ran rampant in this small town but had no use in my house. As long as I showed my face a couple times a week and didn’t cause anyone to look at us too closely, I was free to do as I pleased.

I picked up my packet of fresh cinnamon twists. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” They scrambled to follow me, the noise rising again as they burst out of the side door, and then falling gently silent as the door slowly closed.

We piled into Jack’s noisy rust-covered sedan and pulled out of the Taco Bell parking lot. Emily and Mickey joked together in the backseat while we aimlessly drove through town. The stoplights all flashed red even though it was hardly late. There wasn’t anyone to see us and no one for us to see. Silent. Sleepy. The most lifeless town I’d ever lived in.

“Let’s go wander the cemetery,” I said. I stuck my hand out the window, playing with the slight breeze the car created as we drove. No one objected. No one ever did. But the air had been sucked out of their carefree sails.

Jack headed for the cemetery on the edge of town. After the library, it was the most interesting place to go. Corn stalks rose in fields surrounding two sides of the monuments, their dry, rough leaves rustling unceasingly. The third side fell away into a thickly forested gully. As we pulled down the long driveway, the moon struggled to shine out from the quickly moving clouds but couldn’t find an opening.

“Jessa, where are you going?” Emily called quietly. I turned and wasn’t surprised to see the three of them huddled close to the dilapidated old car.

“To explore. Haven’t you ever come out here?” I asked. “There’s so much to see.” I spread my arms out to encompass the quiet tombstones all around me. The cool breeze was refreshing, invigorating. I was finally starting to have some fun and I wasn’t interested in these three kids encroaching on what little relief I could get from the endless boredom.



They still hadn't moved. "Just go," I said. "If you're going to ruin it, just get out of here." I turned and started to drift among the rows of headstones toward the oldest sections. I could hear the three of them



debating what to do. I didn't hear the car door and a quick glance showed me their trailing figures trying to follow me in the dark.

Well-worn stones near the gully marked the oldest inhabitants. It was hard to make out any words in the gloom of the overhanging trees. I'd been here often enough that I knew what most of the legible stones said anyway.

"My grandma is back over there," Jack said flicking his thumb over his shoulder.

"I think my grandparents are, too," Mickey said, peering back toward the car. "Or maybe over there." He shrugged.

"Go look," I said. "It's important to know where you came from. You should come out here more often."

“Why do you come here? Your family isn’t here,” Emily said petulantly. The boys hesitated for a minute and then faded away to the newer sections. Emily crowded close to me when they were gone.

“My family is buried far, far away,” I replied. “But they feel closer when I’m here.” I grabbed Emily’s hand and wound through the markers. My free hand trailed along the cool, rough surface of the taller stones. The rain had stopped but the bony fingered branches still dripped sporadically creating tiny, wet echoes.

“Jessa, come on, let’s go,” Emily whined. I didn’t answer, just kept walking. The cemetery wasn’t all that large. Even in the moody dark you could see the far side and the corn fields.

A flash of white swooped over our heads. Emily choked on a scream, too afraid to move. I turned and watched as an enormous owl dipped between two rows of headstones. Almost immediately, it rose gracefully, noiselessly and flew to the low branch of a stately old oak in the center of the cemetery. There it sat, methodically tearing at dinner clutched in its talons.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” Emily said. Her voice wavered, but she didn’t pull her hand away.

“It’s only a cemetery. No one is here. What are you so worried about?” I asked. I stopped by two tall headstones, stone statues on top of tapered rectangular plinths.

“It’s so creepy,” Emily shuddered. Wide-eyed, she stared up at the statues.

“It’s just death,” I said.

“That’s awful,” she gasped. I let go of her and she wrapped her arms around herself.

“It’s not awful,” I replied as I circled the two statues taking in the worn features. “It’s a fact. People live, people die.” I shrugged. She shivered.

“Look at these two. The stones say they were young lovers, married a couple years. They died in a horrible fire one summer.” I came to stand with Emily and put my arm around her. “Things happen and you can’t always do anything about it.”

She stared up at the statues again, lulled by the story. “How terribly sad,” she whispered.

Carefully, quietly, I moved ever so slightly closer. Her head was bent back looking at the stone faces of the young couple. Before she realized it, my mouth was on her neck, teeth grappling for purchase on her damp skin. She yelped and wrenched away before I even got a taste.

“Gross,” she shrieked. “What are you doing?” She flailed at me and pushed past trying to get away. I grabbed at her arm, but she was stronger than I’d anticipated and yanked away from me. She ran for the



car, yelling the whole way. I heard Jake and Mikey catch up to her. The old car sputtered to life.

I gazed across the empty cemetery. I'd chosen poorly, and it was only a matter of time until we would have to find another town, another city to blend into. It was getting harder and harder to survive, but my parents said we'd be fine, we'd been fine all these decades, we'd make it together.

The teenagers were easy to fit in with and didn't ask a lot of questions. But maybe it was time to find someone closer to my own age. I started walking to the diner where everyone was older and just a little bit slower.



## VAMPIRA

David Thomas Jenkins

the fire you ignite  
consumes me  
until the darkness  
is no longer afraid  
to show his face

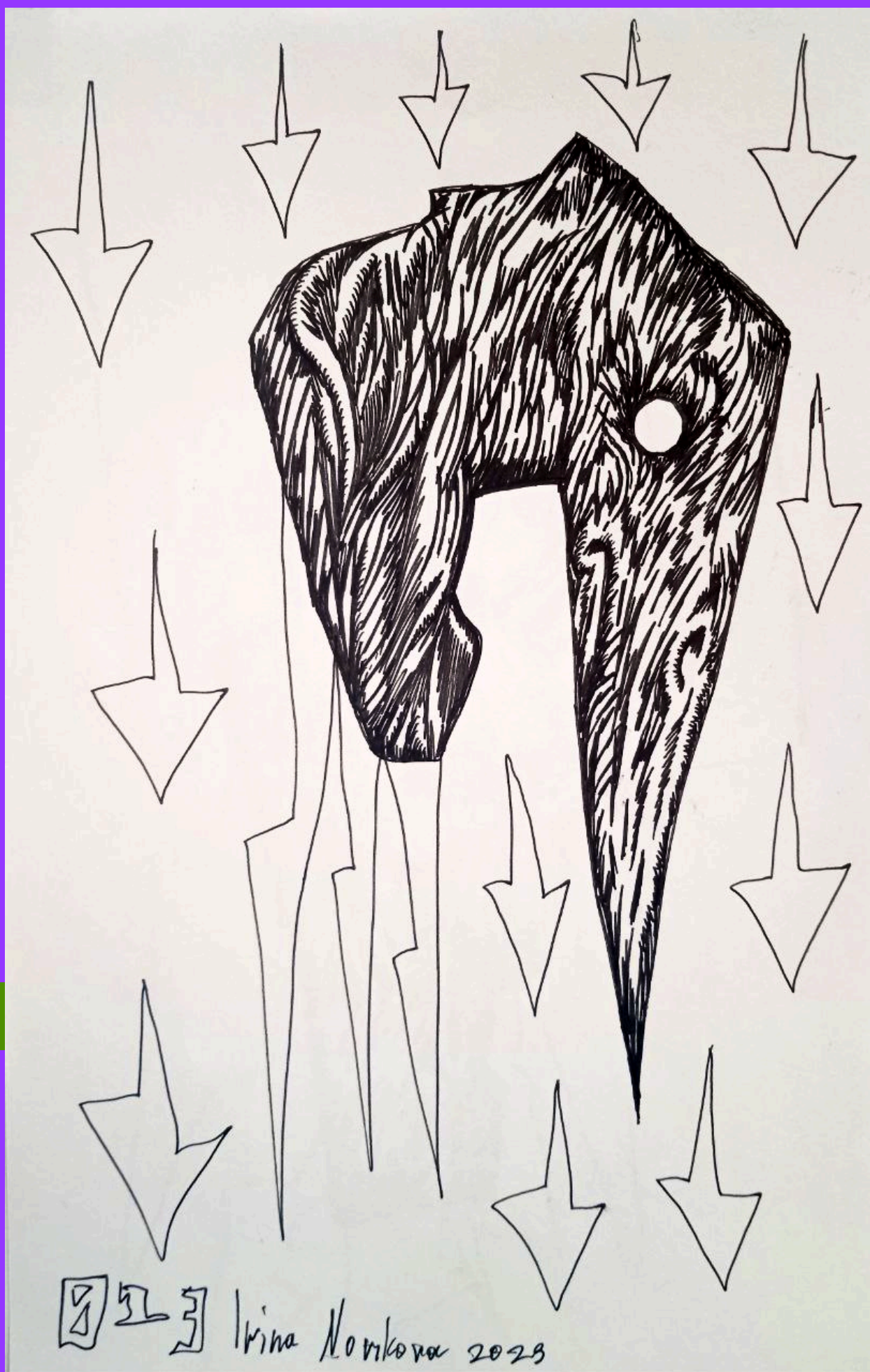
the way you put  
your hands on me  
as delicate as  
that dress

that dress  
not as red  
as my blood  
on your teeth

tear at my body

make me your own





## a hunt

O.P. Jha

only a deer knows  
the sleeping lion may get up  
any moment and run after it

it learnt this before its birth  
when it was in the womb  
of its scared mother.



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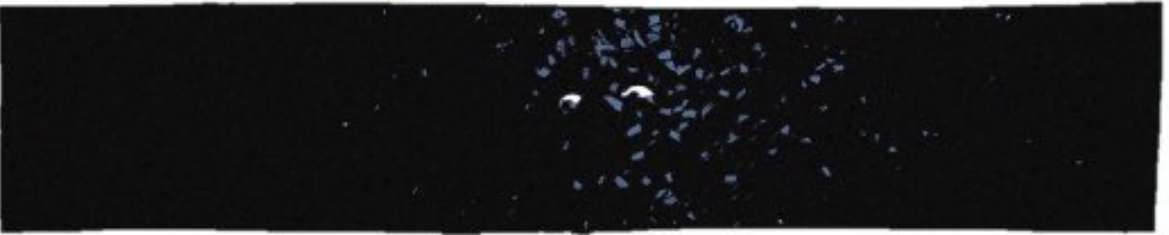
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