

Grafts

an excerpt from a work in progress

Michelle O'Brien, 2004

For the last two years, I've been working sporadically on a new novel. It's entitled Grafts and features a small subculture of people interested in extreme body modification. It takes place in an economically desolated Philadelphia, around 2035. This is an excerpt I'm reading in Feb, 2004 at an event in New York. It comes about a third into the story. Idie, our emotionally disconnected protagonist, has been adopted by a strange young girl who knew her brother from California. The girl, Haz, is quite sick, suffering from increasingly frequent epileptic seizures. Much to everyone's surprise, they are starting to form a connection, just as lost memories from Idie's childhood in a war-torn California start to resurface.

"Damn, you're one fucked up boy." Idie's eyes flutter open at the words. The back of Luce's hands grace her chin, a caress to go with the cruel calm of his voice. She tries to untangle herself from the gnarled traces of her dream. She is breathing hard, her body trembling. She must have been screaming. One of Luce's hands rests against her chest, his fingers spread out across her lateral scar. The air is thick and warm; they both are wearing only boxers and a layer of sweat. Her hands reach up across his back; her fingers tracing the raised thick skin of the grafts where his wings meet shoulders. He smells of his sweat and a faint trace of chamomile.

The images of her dreams are still thick in her thoughts. Shouts, a cacophony of bodies, an acrid burn against the back of her throat, in her eyes, in her lungs. Hands grabbing at her, pulling her away. The dreams are coming every night now. Idie breathes, feeling Luce's familiar mix of condescension and concern. "There, there boy," he whispers. "You're quite a mindfuck, you know that?"

She doesn't want to hear Luce's shit right now; not after sex last night and the nasty edge of that dream. She breathes, twisting away

from Luce's touch. She rises as she turns, so the razors across the back of her neck don't catch and tear the mattress. Luce's wings fold in and close as he brings himself up, the bottom feathers barely touching the sheets. The afternoon sun shines golden through his white plume. His feathers are new, top of the line. Luce was rebuilt as an angel, having his wings and muscles grafted only 18 months ago. He seemed to be effortlessly slipping into the role. She breathes again; a thought catches and she searches the room.

"Where's Haz?" Idie is surprised by the tense anxiety in her voice. Luce glances at her again, his eyes lined with contempt and sleep.

"The kid? Oh, sure she's around somewhere." Idie finds her in the next room over, a large space littered with a handful of overturned desks and the shattered glass of broken florescents. Haz is staring out at the view, her hands pressed up against the transparent membrane of the polymer, looking through. The jagged teeth of Philly's torn scrapers are spread out before them. Last night they climbed 29 stories up the dark stairwell of the Arch to Luce's apartment.

"This place before," Haz says, her voice steady and flat.

"Yeah," Idie nods. A quiet moment later she realizes Haz was asking her something. They still haven't figured out how to speak with each other. "They used these towers for offices, like the arcologies. People worked at those," gesturing at the remains of a desk, "Arch is named for the street it's on. The scrapers were all abandoned a couple of decades back. The angels moved in, covered the whole thing in this dynamic polymer growth to make it inhabitable," touching the dark vein pattern of the thick plastic window, feeling its lumpy texture and the warm air seeping through its pores. The nearly-living epoxy covers the building: preventing collapse, blocking out the harsh winds, channeling the sun's warmth along its veins, slowly breathing air to keep the building ventilated. "These days, the angels are the only ones that want to live this high. From up here they can catch the wind currents."

Haz nods. "Idie, your dream. You were so scared."

Damn the kid's uncanny. Idie feels herself tense up, slipping back into the confused nightmare. She doesn't say anything, can't quite remember. Just knots of fear and confusion, chaos and noise. It's slipped away. Idie shakes her head, turning away towards Luce's bedroom. "You ask too many questions."

Luce is standing at the doorway, looking them both over, smiling. He is wearing a black spandex get-up, a crisscrossed lattice drawn tightly against his chest and thighs that contrasts with his pale skin. Idie can't help but to think he looks hot. "Hey girl," Luce calls out to Haz, "you mess with this boy a little, you hear?" gesturing at Idie, "He's a bit of a mess. Probably as crazy as you are. Maybe having a kid like you around will shake him up a little. We've always wondered what he might be like inside if you broke him open. He's a great fuck, for a damn girlfag, but not exactly the motherly type. So tell us what you come up with, eh?"

Idie shouldn't be surprised at Luce. Idie is beginning to unravel at her edges. Luce sees it, her opening emotional vulnerability; and he hates her for it. She fucks angels because they don't ask what you're feeling, for their cold disinterest in romance or sincerity. Among the subcultures of grafts, the angels are the most honed and uniform. They angels are boys who rebuilt their bodies along the hyperaestheticized standards of their scene: following euro-grecian corporeal ideals, evoking ironic apocalyptic Christian imagery in their majestic wings and flights above the city, matching their personalities and desires to the harsh emotional absence and anal-sexuality of their brothers. Angels know how to keep their distance. But there's always an edge to that space; it fills with their mocking cruelty, vicious stabs and casual condemnations. She's never minded much; found their company a relief more than anything. But since yesterday afternoon, Luce is starting to grate on her.

Idie glares at Luce, pushing him aside. She throws on her clothes, collecting their bags. Luce watches, the smirk on his face following her around the room. She doesn't recognize her unfamiliar feelings at first; realizes with a start she is angry and defensive. She checks the sensation, lets it rest for a moment to try to get a sense of its contours and texture. She stops, pauses at Haz's expecting, nervous

look. Idie touches the tangled dreads of Haz's hair. Her hair is greasy, and smells like dried leaves and rotten fruit. She reaches to take her hand, "Come on, it's time to go."

The crowd at Chrome is roaring. Idie and Haz can hear their chants, pounding down through the concrete, echoing up and down the long corridors. The two of them hustle by rows of bored men selling data chips and hats spread out on blankets. One points at Idie as she passes, spotting the razor lines across her neck and the slowly shifting tattoos. He says something she can't hear, then another responds with a loud rant she recognizes vaguely as a south Philly dialect of Malagasy. They turn down another corridor, Idie pushing through an orange service door and into a narrow, bright hallway. The noise of the crowd is deafening as they make their way down and out the last exit.

"Oh my," Haz let's out a startled sigh. Idie clasps her hand, and pushes forward.

Chrome is absolutely packed. The crowd fills the stands, a sea of bodies rising curved into the sky. The gladi fights are already well underway. Two of them are in the main ring. Idie looks up in time to see one rise into the air from a throw, the flood lights refracted through translucent plastic arms. He falls, and at the thump the crowd cheers again. The gladis are both giants, some twenty feet high, and both surprisingly fast. Idie recognizes the other one; dressed like a Roman soldier in armor fashioned of interlocking burnt iron plates.

Haz and Idie are close to the pit, down low and on the same level of the main gladi ring. Idie leads Haz up a flight of scaffold stairs and across a platform ramp. She nods at Rick, the security and a former gladi who retired a few years back. He wears turquoise shorts and an auburn plastic windbreaker. He shifts on his thin metal legs, and raises a hand in an acknowledging wave. The noise of the crowd is close by, just above their heads. The air smells of mud, hydraulic fluid and engine grease. The two drop down another flight, down amidst the dense maze of mechanics and medtech boys working on gladi bodies, getting everything ready for the next round.

Idie spots hir, the platinum buzzcut caught through the crowd. Kelly sits on a bench, watching the fight. Ze has a dented stainless steel mug clasped in hir hands, and Idie can smell hir tea as they approach. English breakfast. Not easy to find. Kelly's bundled up, in a thick grey plastic coat, jeans, hir cutoff gloves and work boots.

Idie turns to follow hir gaze, seeing the Roman as he slams the other gladi's body against a metal scaffold to another round of cheers.

"Nice work," Idie calls. Kelly glances up at her, steel eyes and a stubble beard.

"He's function," Kelly responds. The Roman is one of Kelly's, a young boy named Dale from Tennessee who showed up a year ago with a crushed spine and five years of mech corp security training. Kelly looks over Haz, watching the kid's gaze flutter across the space, not able to rest on anything, showing a tense nervous flight reflex Kelly recognizes from the veterans ze wires. "Izzie's looking mad skelter for you Idie-jo," Kelly continues, "Just a breath ago. All freaked."

"Messmess. Where's she-run?" Idie asks.

"Derby pit. Still lookin."

"Thankya much Kelly. I'll be finder. I's need your help, little biotechtech," Kelly doesn't say anything at the request, just waits for Idie to go on. Kelly's been there for them a few times, once to wire Hank's prothesis. But ze's not the friendliest. Idie needs the help: Haz has had four seizures in the last two days. Something is very wrong in her nervous system. With Kelly's equipment, she can figure out what was going on in Haz's body. "I's desire de use you's bioscan unit," Idie continues, "Prompt."

After a moment, Kelly nods. "My flat in a turn, I's be there. Nows Dale's be needing a little techtech." A crescendo in the crowd's cry signals the end of the fight. Dale's raises his huge iron arms above his head, slowly turning. His face is lifted to the audience, obscured beneath the curved plates of his helmet. A cleanup crew uses a

forklift to move the other immobile gladi onto a truck bed. His clear plastic hull is splintered, shattered fragments of his chest scattered across the mud floor of the ring. Haz's eyes finally rest somewhere, seeing the gladi's skin-face through the cracked shield of his transparent face plate. Idie watches her looking, the kid fixating on the gladi's mauled body. Haz's fear is more focused now, honed from a general nervousness to a certain specific, unstated questioning.

"Don't worry. The gladis rarely end up dead," Idie tries to reassure her, of what she isn't certain. Is it the violence that bothers her? Some familiarity of the gladi's young face? The anxiety of watching a murder? "They're rebuilt with a lot of redundancy. His people will techtech, and put him back together. Just take a few weeks, real prompt. An almost all new body."

They find Izzie coming out of the demolition derby's car repair pit. Kelly's right -- she's totally panicking. Her makeup has run, then dried and caked in blue and red streaks against her face. She's wrapped in one of her long leopard-print furry jackets, but beneath Idie sees her torn fishnets. She's with Jake and Chris, two derby techs and both old friends. Izzie grabs Idie, wrapping her arms tightly around her waist. Idie tenses up at the hug. "Oh honey, so glad you's here."

They don't say anything more. Chris takes them back through a service entrance, down a flight of steps. They push through another orange door into a small break area. There are a couple green plastic couches, a coffee machine and a sink crammed into the brightly lit room. Idie makes Iz sit down, tells her to take a few slow breaths. She is nearly hyperventilating. Chris perches up on a counter. Haz stands, her back against a wall and eyes watching the ceiling.

"They're dead Idie. They're all dead," Izzie's breath quickens again, she is trembling. Chris sits down, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

"What happened? Who's dead?" Idie pushes.

"Everybody! Fucking everybody! All of Darby Circle, Idie. Rashida, Noel, Sarah, Esware -- I don't know who else. They're fucking dead!"

The room is nearly silent, the crowd above heavily muffled. Idie doesn't say anything; Izzie starts sobbing again. The both of them live together, in a complex with nine others. Izzie just listed off their food sharers. Darby Circle is the name of the complex. Idie has been living there four years.

"What happened?"

It takes several minutes until Izzie can begin to talk about it. Chris ends up calming her down enough, rubbing her back as she cries. Idie is not one to be able to easily give much in the way of calming emotional support. Izzie's story comes in starts and silences, but slowly she pieces it together. "There were four of them. Ohmygod it was so scary. So scary. Top of line runners. Vat-grown, Argentine design, incredibly fast. They slipped by the security net, no one saw them coming. Out of air. We were in the living room, up late. The room just went totally dark -- they must of cut the power to the whole complex -- and two of them appeared. When I saw one slice Esware, I went dead. That was our training you know, for us army brats. Just played dead -- dropped my vitals down to near zero, shut everything extra down. It worked, they left me, thought I was dead. Just listened and watched what I could from the floor. It was hard to tell what was going on. But they kept Rashida and Noel alive, and were interrogating them. Fucking torturing them. It was so awful to listen to! Kept asking them the same questions, over and over. It went on for an hour before they killed them both. They would come and go, usually only one would be in the room. They must of gotten everyone else too, I don't know. Finally, they left. I laid there, for a long time, then rebooted, grabbed my coat and came to find you."

"When was this? How long were you down?"

"22 hours. They hit at 1am."

"Why were they there?"

"The girl Idie. They were looking for girl." Idie looks, and she's gone. Idie bolts from the couch, into the corridor. Running around the corner, she finds Haz struggling in Jake's arms. He was standing

outside the door, and caught her as she ran. Haz is screaming; she bites down hard on Jake's hand. He curses, slamming her against the wall.

"Haz, calm down! Calm down!" Idie grabs her wrists as Jake pulls back, clutching his bleeding hand. "You can run if you want. But I'll help. I'll help. I don't know what the fuck is going on, but I'm here."

Haz's struggling gives way into another seizure. Her body starts shaking violently. Her eyes roll back into her head. Idie forces her mouth open, sticking a folded plastic sheet between her teeth. Idie holds her head in her lap as the kid shakes, trying to keep her from knocking herself against the concrete. Idie feels tears in the edges of her own eyes. Like in the dream from last night, when the tear gas hit her and she cried. She doesn't notice Izzie and Chris around, holding Haz's body down as the seizure washes over her. Idie is remembering the dream, feeling the images and context rush back around -- it was a strike, her mother's union. Idie must have been about eleven or twelve. They blockaded a road leading into the silicone chip plant her mother worked in, barricades made of air shipping crates and polymer glue. They lived out at the barricades for weeks, until one morning the military hit. Tear gas, plastic bullets and batons. It turned into a brutal melee; Idie remembers her father grabbing her close as they watch people fall under police clubs with screams and blood. Her mother. She watched her mother die.

The seizure passes; Idie realizes she and Haz are holding each other. Haz's arms are wrapped around her shoulders, the ends of her fingers just shy of the razor lines running down her neck and back.

"Idie? Gotta bookbook love. The runners are after."

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This text is posted on the author's website, at www.deadletters.biz. The author can be reached through her site.