

Catastrophic, and Not Above Bad Puns

by Anthony M. Powers

What's the difference between being a victim and being a witness? Society these days tells us that there is no difference. Say you see a father beating his child in a public place, or a woman robbed at gunpoint, or a 747 crash into one of the tallest buildings in the world. Mentally, we're supposed to be just as affected by the events we've happened to encounter as those within the encounter itself. There's no such thing as a third party anymore.

We have all seen terrible things. And we have all had terrible things done to us, more often than not by the people we love the most. But keeping your friends close and your enemies closer has become so engrained in us, it takes us a long time to realize the truth. One day you wake up and you look your roommate in the eye while walking to class together, or your lover turns over in bed and nuzzles your neck as if to say good morning, and it hits you like a baby grand piano hurtling forty stories down. I feel nothing but contempt for you.

They say that there's a thin line between love and hate. But they also say things like every dog has his day, that patience is a virtue, that ignorance is bliss.

I don't think they must have graduated from high school.

Most dogs never have a day—they barely get more than a few moments. Patience isn't a virtue; it's a waste of time. And if ignorance really is bliss, why aren't there more happy people in this world? I suppose it doesn't really matter.

So when they say that there's a thin line between love and hate, what they really mean is that when it comes down to it, there's really not much of a difference. What they really mean is that one day, you'll stop loving someone, or they'll stop loving you, and when that happens, you'll have no choice but to hate them. And when one

of you goes running back to the other, chances are that hate will just fizzle away into nothing, and the time you spent drinking to forget and cutting yourself to make your heart stop hurting—well, it'll be like that never happened. But chances are, they're just going to leave you again.

So when do you go from being the victim to being a witness? How many times does a friend have to stab you between your shoulder blades, or how often do you have to be left because you were never really who your wife or husband or dominatrix thought you were, before you're just a witness? Is there a number of disappointments and rejections any single person can take before they stop feeling? Because then you can't be a victim. You can only be a witness. Or worse.

I can't remember the last time I wasn't just a witness.

It was sophomore year of high school. I usually got a ride to school with my friend John, but for some reason, that morning I'd been left behind. I sat in the front seat of my mom's green Chevy Lumina, my eyes barely open. This was before I'd discovered coffee.

We were driving down Rocky River Drive, a fairly busy residential street, during morning rush hour traffic. Suddenly mom gasped. My eyes snapped open and looked out into the street in front of us.

A black cat ran into the street at full sprint in the middle of traffic. He managed to dodge the first lane of cars, but then he crossed the center lane and ran directly into the hubcap of the car in front of us. When he hit, his body spun in the street like a top. His tail waived limply in the air in a circular motion opposite to the way the rest of his body was revolving.

I could hear him meowing in pain as we drove past where he was in the street, a sound that still sticks in my head sometimes, shaking me to my spine. I have to believe that the driver of the car saw what happened, just in his rearview mirror if nothing else. I also have to believe that we weren't the only people to see it. The drivers must have seen it. And they did nothing.

In this instance, I always believed myself to be just a witness, but according to modern principles of psychology, I was as much a

victim of this scene as the cat was. Proof of this is that I still think of the cat, I can still see him spinning in the middle of the road, and I can still hear him scream.

Maybe it's important because that's the last time I can really remember being a modern victim. In every instance since then, I've only been able to stare with unblinking eyes at the events that unfold before me. Nothing registers. Not the death of my great uncle, who, when I was a child, used to dress up like Santa Clause on Christmas Eve and who once playfully tricked me into eating a dog biscuit because he claimed they were delicious. Not the bar fight I stood ten feet away from in Columbus, which I later would find sent a handful of OSU students to the hospital and a few less to jail. Not the Alexandrias, the Alis, the Amys, the Rachels, Katies, Therasas, or Bridies.

Nothing.

Was it the cat that did this to me? To be fair, when I'd taken the bus home that day, I was careful to look for the poor creature in the road, but there wasn't so much as a crimson stain on the pavement. Had he survived? Had someone stopped to help him? Or had the street sweeper gotten an early start that day?

I suppose I'll never really know. Freshman year at Wittenberg, a black cat that lived somewhere outside the New Dorm used to follow me around sometimes, usually when I would walk to the radio station late at night because I couldn't sleep. I'd like to think it was the cat from before, that he had simply picked himself up off the street and found his way to me after all this time. But that's just the psychosis talking.

The truth is I'd always been the cat.

Sophomore year of high school was one of the worst years I've lived through so far. My two best friends and band mates abandoned me; my girlfriend at the time left me for one of them. (This would be the second time we'd broken up, and far from the last; she called last week and says she misses me. I lied and said I miss her, too.) The three of them alone managed to foster a hatred of me in all the friends I'd made in high school. I would spend most of that year

either in school or locked away in my room, playing guitar until my fingers bled and singing until my voice could only scratch its way out of my throat.

I laid in the road, broken and alone, until I had no choice but to pull myself together and get out.

Since then I've detached myself from everything. I've managed to surround myself with people I usually feel I don't fit in with just in case they decide to get up and go one day, too. I stay with girls I don't have feelings for just so I will never get too attached and it won't hurt as bad when they're gone. I patiently wait for the day when I can get in my car and drive away, never to be seen or heard from again by anyone I've ever known. I am a driver.

But who would you rather be? A driver, or the cat?

Probably not the cat.

