

Syllannibal

by Marc Lowe

"It is of course meaningless to wonder who wrote these words."

—Mieko Kanai: "The Voice"

Part I: The Past

They called him a syllannibal: a person who eats his own words. The only words he ever ate, however, were the ones he had written. He was a deaf-mute, and did not speak except by way of subtle body gestures, or—but only when consorting with his fellow deaf-mutes—in a sort of self-constructed sign language. His first book was a collection of poems entitled "Existence." As soon as he had finished compiling the 23 hand-written poems into a publishable manuscript, he began, one by one, to eat the words off of the page. How he was able to eat only the words without doing any damage to the paper was a mystery to all but him. In any case, he only ever ate the words, never the pulp on which they were printed.

His second book was a collection of three novellas, entitled simply "Three Novellas." The first was about a detective who could not solve the crime he was hired to solve, and who, during the novella's penultimate scene, was revealed to be, simultaneously, his own pursuer and victim. The second was a tale told by an unreliable narrator, and was filled with lengthy footnotes and asides that further confused the narrative. And the third... He devoured the words of the third before anyone (including himself) had had a chance to read them, then proceeded to eat every last sentence, down to the punctuation marks of what he had written of the former two. His closest friend (more correctly, his only friend), Velma, caught him in the act, and hence rumors about his unique ability to eat words were quickly spread throughout the small town in which he lived, though most people thought the story less interesting than what was currently showing on television.

His third book had the distinction of being his first full-length novel, and was also his last-ever fictional conceit. It was entitled

Syllannibal, and was, without a doubt, his most autobiographical work to date. It closed with the words: "This novel shall remain duly obscured, unpublished and unread." The book took him a full three years to write, and when he was done he hesitated to devour his words straight off, but instead put the completed, handwritten manuscript in a drawer to sit—"Just for a little while," he told himself. Time passed. He went about his life in the normal way, eating three times a day, defecating once every morning, going into the office Monday through Friday to carry out his mindless daily tasks; however, he did not dare put pen to paper again, except to remind himself of important appointments, or to write up shopping lists. Eventually, the hair at his temples began to turn white, and his doctor told him that he would need to start wearing special glasses for reading. He was neither content nor unhappy. He just was.

Part II: The Future

One day, he accidentally happened upon a thread on the Internet about someone referred to as "The Syllannibal," who had purportedly written a novel of astounding imagination. How could they know about...? he asked himself. Had Velma leaked this confidential information to the online community? Those who had contributed to the thread expressed fear that the work was no longer in existence. anon203 wrote: *the syllannibal has historically eaten all of his words. why should we believe that he made an exception with this novel? im sorry guys, but there's NO hope of its ever seeing the light of day;* while jimmyx wrote, as though addressing the author directly: *Dear Mr. S—, if you have not yet eaten your own words, please consider sharing your novel with the public. Don't you want to be recognized for your original work like everyone else? Don't you want to be considered a **real person**?*

For many nights thereafter, the syllannibal could not sleep. He kept thinking about the novel over and over. Should he publish? He had always eaten his own words, but now there were people *out there* who apparently wanted to read them, as many as six or seven

of them! Never in a million years could he have imagined such a thing. His mind raced, his body trembled...

One chilly morning in late February, at five past three, he got out of bed—where he had been sleeping fitfully between nightmares in which his past words had come back to eat him alive—flipped on the light, and hobbled over to the creaky desk drawer where the manuscript lay. He picked it up as if handling something delicate and then immediately dropped it onto the top of his desk with a resounding thud. A plume of dust rose from the pages like a giant cloud, and when the dust had cleared he leant forward to have a look at his words. He no longer remembered how long he had left it in this drawer. Three years? five years? more? Things had changed. Would the words on the page still appear as fresh to his unfocused eyes as they had when he'd first penned them? He went to fetch his glasses from the small table beside his bed, and then returned to have a look.

At the top of the first page, which was slightly yellow, he saw the word *Syllannibal*, and under that the author's familiar name. He turned the page, which fell to the floor. And then he turned another page (it, too, fell). He kept turning pages. Suddenly, he felt unbearably hot. Lines of sweat began to glide down his face and back. He stripped down to his briefs, still turning pages, a dry wheeze caught in his throat. After a time he came to page 299, which, like the others, he let fall to the floor. He then let out a laugh that can only be described as hollow: this laugh became a guffaw that became a moan that became a wail. The syllannibal wept and wept, his tears mingling with his sweat. Finally, when he was done weeping, he opened his mouth wide, coughed three times, and then vomited up all of the words he had ever eaten onto himself. He died with his mouth still open, a tangle of indecipherable words stuck to his skin, 299 blank sheets of paper at his bare feet.

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