

Dirt

by Oliver Hunt

And I'm the fire o' life- The Stooges, Dirt

Benny McGuinness held the thing aloft then pressed it to his lips. See that? Benny said. You see that shit? I'm more punk rock than fucking middle fingers and neck tattoos. I'm more punk rock than pulling knives on babies and shoving people in wheelchairs down stairs.

We'd been drunkenly staggering around the weedy banks past River Market. Kansas City, mid-April, the days warming up but spring held an impending snow or two yet. Boris Johnson grabbed the bone from Benny and licked it- a slow, lengthwise tracing of the bone with his tongue. There you go, Boris said. I outpunk you, motherfucker.

Benny looked at Boris and laughed. Okay then, I guess so.

What?

That was just gross, dude.

Yeah, see, that's how you operate. Somebody beats you and you make it out to be a Pyrrhic victory.

A what?

Nothing.

There you go, I said to Boris. Maybe you're too smart to be too punk.

Maybe he just tries too hard, Benny said.

He tried a notch harder than you, I said. And he won.

Psshhh... Benny thumped his chest and jutted his chin.

Benny was convinced the bone by the river- a femur- was human. It's too big to be a dog's, too small to be a horse's, he reasoned. Timmy Morton showed Benny the bone, Honey Frank showed Timmy Morton. It had become a thing among a certain sect of Kansas City scenester in the mid-nineties: go out past River Market, check out the bone that was hidden in the weeds. A couple serial killers had targeted prostitutes in Kansas City in the eighties and nineties. We imagined the killers maybe dismembered the hookers then tossed

their body parts by the river. Or acid-bathed their body parts, then tossed their bones willy-nilly every-which-where, like some demented Johnny Hookerseed, telling himself he's planting a hooker tree.

Either way, I never kissed the bone. I didn't even touch it. This field trip to the bone was all about Benny and Boris one-upping each other. I was just a witness. They wanted me along because I was always a little outside of everything anyway.

A day or two later, for some reason, I decided I wanted the bone. I rounded Benny and Boris up at Broadway Cafe. I said Dudes, know that bone you showed me? They said Yeah and I said I want it.

We trekked back to the spot, grabbed the bone and caught the bus back. An overweight black woman at the front of the bus asked Is that a *leeeeg*?

We're students at the Art Institute, Benny said, unsure of himself. This is from a project.

That seemed to satisfy her. Benny and Boris both looked pale and queasy. They may have just been hungover, but they seemed squeamish about the bone. It was different now that they were sober and the thing was actually with them. I don't even think it was a human bone, to be honest. There are animals, size-wise, that compare between dog and horse—lamb, sheep, veal calf. I'm sure if it were really human cops would've found out about it by then.

The kids believed it because they wanted to. They wanted to entertain the notion of a man—one they imagined as normal looking—going around in some normal late 80s car—a Granada or something—offering these haggard, used up women a ride. Maybe, if popular imagination is to be believed, launching into some portentous bible talk before murdering these women in some gruesome manner—strangulation, stabbing...guns would be too quick and neat. Maybe doing the woman first, maybe doing her after killing her, maybe both before and after. Maybe talking to her before or after fucking or killing her. Maybe talking dirty, asking her or asking her body if she liked his cock, if he felt good inside of her.

Maybe trying to make some connection with words, knowing that alive or dead these hookers really didn't give a shit about him and vice versa. Maybe feeling that nobody gave a shit about him or the hookers or anybody else, and the only way to make anybody care was to exchange a dollar and/or take a life.

And now here it was: a cheap thrill for a bunch of snotty scenesters, a darkly comic idea made physically tangible, so that we could touch it then pull our hand back.

We took it back to our house on Bell Street. We lived in a punk house, where local bands practiced and lived and where touring bands sometimes played and crashed. We built a little makeshift shrine for it- out of a crate, some old pictures we found, and some porn mags we dumpstered- in the basement by the storage stables, away from where the bands played or the kids hung out.

Drama happened at that house. A few people blamed the bone. Some were under the impression that the house was haunted anyway. That the bone aroused the ghosts or mixed with the ghosts or brought 'bad juju' into the house and that's when things started going haywire. As if faulty wiring and plumbing, longstanding personal histories and the arrogance and narcissism of youth had nothing to do with it. They ultimately blamed me, because it was my idea.

Maybe I don't all the way disbelieve it myself. I didn't go looking for the bone after the house burned down. But then, I didn't go back looking for anything.

