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## Frank Wins a Staring Contest with the Universe

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**lighthouse keeper.**

stop me if you've heard this one before

a man lives alone on an island  
his life is rocks and salt and waves  
rain pounding on his marigold slicker  
nights bent over a meager wooden table  
small sips from a flask of brandy  
whispers in the candlelight  
stories that eat themselves  
only the tiny purple crabs  
that cling to the windowsill can hear  
aiming a bright beam of light to steer off  
wayward ships and wayward souls  
and chase off the winged things that creep in the rafters

and this is how he stays alone  
in the broken fragments of a life  
waiting out a storm that never ceases  
watching the swell and the spray for a wreck he'll never see  
if only one day he could turn off the lights  
and leave the flask on the table  
and murmur goodbye to the crabs  
climb into his crimson rowboat  
and paddle headlong into

**reckless behaviors.**

aching into the buzz  
of the needle until there's  
a second heart stamped on  
my skin--something blooming like

my heart at twenty-one, one  
thousand reckless behaviors in a  
tough, sweet pulp i don't want to stop  
myself from biting into cannabis

kisses and cloudy sea glass and  
fogged up car windows, i am  
a person, i am becoming, i refuse  
to be terrified, i am so very scared



**do you ever learn how to live with yourself?**

you would be content to be sad if you weren't afraid it would make you look pathetic  
you could be enthralled with telling lies if you didn't fear being caught in them  
but lies have a way of telling themselves,  
or maybe you're not as good a person as you pretend to be  
a storyholder not a storyteller,  
and every word has become so entangled you're no longer quite sure  
what's true and what you wish was the truth

here you are, in the parlor, seated on the floor by the fire, choking down scalding, bitter

here you are, in the kitchen, hair stuck to the sweat on your brow, listening to the

here you are, in the bath, pressed to the cold porcelain as the tap runs and the unsullied

here you are, in the bedroom, smoothing the duvet over a bloodstained mattress and

here you are, in the garage, taking a wrench to an automobile that wasn't broken

here you are, in the attic, back turned toward the dusty mirror where your reflection

here you are,

coffee like some kind of baptism  
simmer of another meal made to be eaten alone  
water passes down the pipes  
lighting a candle to burn away the copper in the air  
till you decided to fix it  
grins with painted lips and sharpened teeth

in the doll's house of the mind  
    asking that question  
        answering with a lie





**sonia lee.**

when i wake there's salt under my tongue  
and water in my bones  
waves roll through the brittle cavities  
that speckle the structure of me  
and keep me pinned to the mattress

or is it the seabed?  
there is so little light here  
so if i gaze up out the abyss  
what can i trust to stare back at me?

**ozymandias.**

tonight i am dreaming in armageddons

i am dreaming in the revelation of my own destruction

i have taken myself down to the pit

to my ugliest, basest part

the dirt freckles across my cheekbones

dried blood of scabs picked and repicked across universes

i am violence i do not understand

i am a tarnished golden idol

a sunken stone visage

legacy dismantled

every god cut off from his creation

volcanic ash and malformed bones

i am what is left

i am what beside remains

**heartache hayride.**

the moon in october  
is pockmarked orange  
this halloween i'm a ghost  
dressed up as a living boy  
going door to door  
searching for something  
to bring me back beautiful  
break my heart better  
sharpen my suffering to a point  
let the smudged autumn rain  
wash away layers of dirt and caramel  
until there's nothing left but bone

**yellow sunglasses.**

i want a saturated world, a cerulean sky tinted gold  
moments that can be browbeaten into metaphor  
the kindness of strangers, the simplicity of being seen  
the drive off into the sunset, oh, for a simple ending  
where i can't take my hands off the wheel  
summer lasts forever once the world turns toward apocalypse  
do you think it's easier to watch the world end if  
you could've saved it, or if you never stood a chance at all?  
my body leaves the shape of an angel cracked in the concrete  
i am surrounded by spilled lemon soda and shattered glass  
dinosaur bones make for excellent conversationalists  
swear the only crazy thing i ever did was repeat all the same mistakes  
but now i'm stuck in this elevator and it  
only                      goes                      sideways  
and this all makes sense—the boy and the bones and the sand and the sunset  
the wings and the wires and the cracks and the crumbling  
every good ghost story is unfinished business  
and i left a briefcase full of holy water under the bridge  
after the credits roll i walk into the night  
potential smoldering in my stomach  
amber lenses and cinema daze  
i can't remember what's real



**pancake breakfast.**

the deep irrepressible nostalgia for everything  
 that never happened tastes like maple  
 it sizzles in the air  
 grease from the frying pan,  
 the burnt caramel color of sausage fat

rings in swooping notes and vocal chops  
 a pop song that played at a dance  
 you didn't go to  
 cuts to the bone in sharp

slashes,

every choice you didn't make and  
 every choice you couldn't have  
 every ember of the person you might've been  
 had you been born browner-eyed,  
 ten years earlier, seven thousand miles southwest  
 ab instead of o negative, those attached earlobes

the other man squinting beatifically behind darker eyelashes  
 icarus drowned in the syrup and the feathers are stuck now to his lips

you  
 lean  
 in  
 to  
 kiss  
 them  
 off  
 but

sweet cream clots in your throat,  
 the iron pang of blood,  
 every flapping butterfly wing  
 threatening to slice at the softness  
 inside of you like so many delicate razors  
 you could have had the love of the whole world  
 then let it forget you, you could have, you could have, you could have







has the universe blinked back yet?

or

are you still waiting

**caldera.**

the rain dries everything it touches  
 didn't you love the symbolism, now                      lava pours out of your mouth, no,  
     sand, or salt,    vomit, detritus, liquid glass  
 everything you shouldered    or didn't  
 the wreckage and the wanting    maybe gasoline pooling  
     in darkened hallways    carve out your own caldera  
 count up the mathematics of your    hurt, smoke on the sweetness  
     things you can't take back    redemption you won't see  
     the rain dries everything it touches

**better strangers.**

this city is senseless and strange  
the harbor is empty and all the roads lead nowhere  
sweet plums rot in the wild grass  
the world has been rent and bound back together  
but there are cracks in the catacombs  
the dead never really leave, only roam the streets  
spectral fingers clutching hearts wrung free of blood and air  
lotus eaters chasing a phantom high  
tungsten on the tongue, cohosh, and the quiet fury  
that comes with knowing that you can't change anything  
the cost of power is too great to bear. the wheel's been set  
once the hanged man's neck snaps he becomes  
something else entirely and every night  
i go back to the lighthouse and i wait for the dreamer  
to wake—is the waiting worse than the wanting?  
you wouldn't recognize me under my invisible scars  
but my body is something that has never been mine  
and my heart is something that was never not yours  
and we can't go back to that antimony tuesday  
when the hanged man's neck snaps his face  
looks more and more like my own and every night  
i go back to the tower and i watch the fire

on the hill—is the watching worse than the waking?  
the wildflowers withered under your touch  
leaving behind nothing but disturbed earth  
a funeral with no mourners, a coffin with a rusted patina  
of regret left buried long before the beginning of the world  
when we lock eyes at the interment  
won't you tell me we made better strangers?  
we stand on the backs of great gnarled beasts and the sky  
is cobalt and cadmium and rains soot like a blessing  
once the snapped neck's man hangs he can see  
everything he wasn't looking for and every night  
i go back to the mountains and i wonder  
  
if we can never go back, would you like to know that?  
sometimes i prefer a fantasy where everything can  
still be undone, and a feeling might taste like bergamot,  
and nothing-else.



**palace of memory.**

portrait of a boy drunk  
on vodka lemonade  
and songs about sex  
possessed by a  
gripping nostalgia  
for everything  
that never happened  
and everything  
he could have been  
tangled, knotted up  
in a web of dreams,  
curled inwards on a  
sangria-colored couch,  
sunlight streaming  
across sealed lids, his  
slit throat scarring  
as he swallows down  
an open wound



**let's get a split-level in ojai.**

*what i found written at the bottom of a bottle of jim bean's peach whiskey:*

let's meet when we're both ready for it  
 somewhere inane like the supermarket  
 where i'll charm you being a little too excited over pears on sale  
 you'll put me in your phone as 'safeway pear guy'  
 i'll wait for your text thinking  
 they haven't come up with a word to describe the color of your eyes

let's go out to see the stars  
 we'll drink cheap wine and you'll  
 draw the shapes of the constellations in the air and i'll  
 watch them reflected in your eyes, let me  
 indent your forehead with the shape of mine, let me  
 swallow your laughter and kiss it back into you, let me  
 hold you like we're the center of the universe

let's get married in the courthouse  
 but not rush into it let's wait—years, maybe  
 let's be sure, let's be simple  
 and that night when the weight of what i couldn't have  
 settles so heavy in my stomach, draw me closer  
 and let me know you understand

let's get a split-level in ojai  
 we'll have two kids with curly hair like my mother's  
 who'll groan when you stop chopping vegetables  
 to kiss me as i stir the pot on the stove  
 let me sneak oreos into their packed lunch on fridays  
 and i'll turn a blind eye when you feed the dog  
 the ends of the romaine head



let me have the  
sunday nights with a glass of wine  
curled into each other on the couch  
let me have the ridiculously in love  
let me get this right  
let me learn how to love you

let me trust you to love me back  
let me grow into what you deserve  
let me lose that self-servingly self-sacrificial asshole  
devil on my shoulder, salt the earth behind me

things that aren't ghosts can still haunt you  
and they shouldn't have left me alone  
to dance with the dream of you  
in a house i won't be able to afford  
in a life i won't be able to live  
where everything i'm afraid of disappears  
when i roll over  
and fall into you

**hotel.**

it feels like i love a little less now  
but i'm not sure when i started being  
less flesh and sinew and pumping ventricles  
more cloudy marble and gold leaf  
the kind of art you could hang in museums  
the kind of boy who could tell you, *you're it for me forever*,  
in the pouring rain in the middle of the night  
make you think,     everything i was  
                                  everything i want  
                                  everything at once

and then eat that love,  
takeout and tangled white sheets in a hotel room  
checked out in the morning, hair bleached by dawn

somehow this is what i've become:  
i'll beg you to stay forever and always and all time  
and i'll be the one who leaves before breakfast  
and it's not about you, or me, or us  
just whose feelings get hurt first  
and it won't be mine. it won't be tonight.

**frank wins a staring contest with the universe.**

frank is 21 and life still feels like a hypothetical  
like an afternoon spent skipping stones in the caldera  
watching the way the smoke slowly bubbles under his skin

the blush of heat, the raw redness of his pores  
the hiss of steam curling upwards between his toes  
the scent of burning, blisters he can trick into looking golden-brown

he knows about being lonely, knows about being alone  
but now he's choking on the lack of distinction  
seared alive on an island of flowers

frank is 21 and life still feels like a hypothetical  
like the word 'man' is a pilling sweater  
that hangs too large off his osseous shoulders

gloms to his bones in the steel-cold rain  
rubberizes his face, lets him pull it into amusement  
bemusement, confusion, a single curated tear

dashed on the rocks as the lighthouse keeper sails away  
some fool-hardy escape, some light with the lantern out  
some, *hey, any sea in a storm, right?*

frank is 21 and life still feels like a hypothetical  
a blank-faced nomad wandering the terra-cotta desert  
conversing with the colossal carcass of an antique land

somewhere the light once spilled yellow  
over the still-possible future, but when he looks ahead  
it's split knuckles and jagged stone kneecaps

it's a pulse-pounding club beat, neon, liquor, and cigarettes  
a city in the sand, perched over the abyss  
fire and water and a stony brow drained away, long, long gone

frank is 21 and life still feels like a hypothetical  
amorphous snowflakes settled in his eyelashes  
the embrace of the wind and the kiss of the stars

still on this mountain as sunrise bleeds out of midnight  
knocked back on black ice, counting up head wounds  
torn between heat death and entropy, the future starts slow

starts with eyes blue-hot and blank, fixed onto cimmerian infinity  
fingers bent backwards and head tilted at a horrible angle  
reflections warped, light caught, cracks in the mirror

frank is 21 and life still feels like a hypothetical  
like a staring a contest with the universe  
like a man who's out of time

frank is a fractured multiverse of wish-this-were-different  
frank is waiting for something he knows isn't coming  
frank is something he doesn't know how to stop

frank is living life in imagined conversations  
frank can handle, he promises, not blinking  
frank is finding it harder to look up





**eurydice.**

every time,

she sinks her teeth into that ripened fruit

he can't wait long enough to kiss the poison off her lips

she only desires the crush of the train

he never stops chasing that green light

every time, every undoing

the boy always leaves the band, and the world mourns

the witch always loses her mind, and the world burns

the man can't love the monster he's made and it kills them both

we crash into the underworld, into the worst of ourselves

every time, every universe

the walls always come down, the empire falls  
the people hurt, they always build the bombs  
the butterfly shivers and she scrambles  
to put the pieces of his head back together

every time, every choice

and i always, always look back



**talking to the walls.**

i'm terrified of being misunderstood or is it that i'm terrified

i've never been understood but isn't that too bold? to claim

i'm somehow unknowable or aren't we all a little unknowable

is that just something comforting to tell myself

i just want somebody to listen to what i'm saying

i just

want—

don't be selfish, i am selfish, i whip myself every time i want

i am selfless is a lie i tell other people is a lie other people tell me back

i have never (i have tried) been able to escape the wretched wretched havoc of wanting

i don't hate (could never) i say, and they murmur softly how that makes sense

how i am not a hateful person (i hate myself rather badly)



and i lie there and i love him

and when the dawn peaks through the blinds i love him

and when he gilds me in black plastic i love him

and when he carries me to the bed of his truck i think

his arms are strong

he holds me gently

i love him

and when he drives me up to the pines i love him

and when he discards me rotting in the hills i love him

and the bloodloss i would've freely given

and he's the fucking man of my dreams



**never not yours.**

excuse me—my mind ran  
away from me last night—  
i followed it—out into  
the garden, fingers seizing  
in the cold—but lost it  
somewhere between  
—the wild grass—and  
the frost-slick stones

last night—it was all  
i could do to stand  
on the frozen earth and  
feel my bones brittle in—  
the heavy chill of the rain  
and—wonder—if to love  
someone was to give them  
the power to hurt you

last night—i dreamt i  
fell through a thousand  
worlds—my heart is still  
tumbling through the  
cavity of my chest but—  
now my eyes are drier—  
and there are gaps in the falling



**poster boy.**

i'm not there—

i was bent over the toilet bowl  
communing with the porcelain  
trying to expel, no, exorcize  
so much i think that if i'd coughed  
up my lungs they would've sat there  
pink and pale and bloody in the water  
and i wouldn't have noticed  
and i'd have kept not breathing  
tonguing at my teeth  
praying to keep my wretchedness quiet  
praying that i might have the dignity  
to die if i couldn't bother to be loved

—and say you hate what i've become  
well, take a fucking number

**knew him when.**

do you wish you were here  
sand in your mouth  
out in the desert lying with a stranger  
crushed under the weight of stars

do you hold a heart to break  
a future ends now  
sliced clean cut at the knees  
innocence and bloody hands licked clean

do you remember the bullish heart  
dreaming in the darkness  
cake crumbs and shattered china  
bending butterfly wings so gone for the summer

feels better to fuck with the  
devil you know though  
and fear that reaper  
dogs your steps  
so you bite your  
tongue you never  
go home



**man on the moon.**

meet me in the montage  
of crinkle-eyed smiles over someone else's happy ending

that grin i've perfected  
that just-a-little-wiser  
that *i knew you kids would figure it out*  
that distance

six degrees of fucking separation

i'm coolly detached.  
i know what i am  
i know what's going to kill me  
i'll see you at the wake

**surreal life.**

when i'm talking to you:

i'm talking to myself  
i'm talking to no one  
i'm talking to god  
i'm talking to fill up  
    the empty space  
    the dull buzz ringing behind my ears  
    the missing thrum of a heart beating

too apologetic to be sorry  
too miserable to be sad  
too fearful i have nothing to say

at all

**... and i'll buy myself flowers.**

it's that slow motion  
 crowd slows to a crawl  
 city fades to a hum  
 and i'm there, rolling the stem  
 of a softly wilting amber tulip  
 between my thumb and middle finger  
 it's that dawn breaks at noon  
 cracks in the kingdom  
 eyes squint staring in the sun  
 it's that heart skips a beat  
 and i can hear whole songs in the silence  
 it's that real, it's that here  
 denim and the linen breeze of march  
 rich coffee and citrus—bergamot—all those tidy devils  
 everything bound up in me  
 discolored rings and thigh tattoos  
 and the thrill of throwing a punch and  
 how does the water know how to flow through the pipes and  
 did the dinosaurs know they weren't really going to die and  
 whatever happened to the lighthouse keeper  
 it's that blood rush, so goddamn red  
 it's that warm, feeling of falling  
 cornflower blue sky and winning cowslip grin  
 it's that melon soda and samosas, and  
 cinema daze  
 and something finite  
 and something epic and,

darling,

well, you know:

when i'm ready to love him

