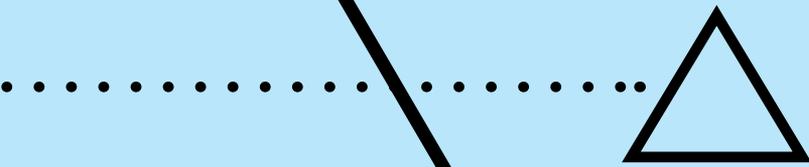


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Brute

.....
Sphinx



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Scott

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Hammer

Brute Sphinx

Scott Hammer



What happens when you do not extend past your fingertips. Close your eyes and the world is paste. Put your pointer on a pane of frosted glass and make an index. You get lost inside a window with nothing but the image to frame your microbiota. Words cannot explain everything that exists, but they have to be the fibers. You are still you inside your cells, but someday *cell* will split. Its walls will cave. You can find other words for it, but they are only exhaled threads, spun along out of orbit into a place where there is no echo chamber.

II

Brute Sphinx appeared as the fog rolled away from the bay bridge, among swirls and dark eddies in the mutant morning. Rain pings on rusting cables. What clouds were left condensed into Sphinx Mold. Nobody knew how to call it that. It didn't announce its name; instead, dug its claws into suspension veins and sat like a lion poised and lording. We had heard stories of the Reverse Sphinx, who would not leave until we framed the proper riddle for it. Its answer would be to disappear. In those days, humanity was trying to call out to itself. Now we watch signs in the spirals, the silence swelling in our tonsillitis.

III

Piece by piece, it took our language. It's so difficult to explain things when every _____ in a while you lose one. Word by word. Some thought it would drain our wallets, siphon our accounts in our sleep. Identity was over. Brute Sphinx had no reason for stealing our social security numbers because it was an idol machine. People can be comforted by something manifest. Where _____ they had an empty sky or a turgid earth, now there was a *thing*. When you look into its grey-_____ eye, it looks back. Even as it shrifts you of your human voice, it demands respect. I don't mean that. I mean blood: it demands that your heart pump for it. It demands a shrine. Flowers, _____, family photos. As if to say: take us, we're yours. Many brought their former religious identifiers to lay at its feet: crucifixes, prayer beads, mats, shawls. And then the clothing, all at the altar of Brute Sphinx: turbans, hijabs, robes, talits, vestments. But it never took them, never seemed to reward them with _____; it would just stare through that eye and issue the loss of another word.

IV

A few weeks ago I could have described it better. I was dropping off my rent check when it appeared. At my landlord's place, next to the drive thru, you get a good view of the bridge on a clear day. Most times the bay is calm, but even in the hulking waters of a storm, it feels

This day was quantum fog. It crawled in while we slept and hung over every stretch of sand. I could see only a few feet in front of my face. When the fog cleared, it cleared in minutes. It was like . . . had a big vacuum in the sky and flipped the switch and sucked the whole hazy mess away. And then, then it appeared. It was . . . and I don't know any other way to describe it. Some said it resembled a Cerberus. We didn't know whether it was *alive*, exactly. Its hairs were steel; its brains were bolted. No one would dare get too close. Its eyes existed as plaited cosmic layers. To perceive them was instant hypnosis. As the curtain of day lifted it sat, regal, like this was its home dimension. Like I was sewn to its side from the moment I learned to speak.

We use some words more repetitively now. For the pure love of their sound, for the feel of our mouths, for our tongue in a syllabic curl.

Say *now*

Say it many times in a row. After a few, slow down and be mindful of the muscles in your mouth. Experience the ways they work together to form even simple colliding words.

Now now

And my _____, the names for the extrinsic muscles that move and shape the tongue: genioglossus, hyoglossus, palatoglossus, styloglossus.

Some of us moved to a more lexicographical view of existence. Revelation through what has been lost in what remains. The compilation of what makes me. Others take pleasure in the _____ of simple repetition.

Now = now/ now.

VI

I am nothing without the word. I feel changes coming in the electromagnetic field. Before language ends, I want to _____ with my _____ . Brute Sphinx charges our particles.

It puts some $I = dq/dt$ into our cells.

My neighbor made a sign that reads YOU ARE LOSING YOUR NERVE, HUMAN.

Will he wish to see Brute Sphinx take us all away? What happens to the poetry of distance between words? What is the unit volume of our collective island heart? My position vector is a point in the charged object of the lion. I have only _____ for riddles.

I collect _____ , though it appears invisible. Because this is what you are used to. When the signs disappear we will only have plywood to build with. Empty castles, people polarized in their Φ

VII

I demand *love*

VIII

Brute Sphinx spun into me like a tornado. Some weather I had never seen. No one could escape the island because it blocked the bridge. Some tried to row out by _____, but those who didn't own one had trouble communicating the idea. We use signs. We use motions. In it we are more human, huddled together on this island, achieving universality in gesticulation. No one knows if people who don't speak _____ are affected, or if this is happening elsewhere. Brute Sphinx does not discriminate between dialects. I said _____ and then my brother said _____, the way it's heard in Boston, and then _____, with a twang and zzz of the deep South. All gone. Writing has changed, too. It is the same in every language. All tongues are mortal. Brute Sphinx will not let you spell the individual letters to form a word, let alone put your pen to paper. These things are not outlawed; there is no written decree. They are *demande*d, and then we lose all motor function. Farewell lips, farewell larynx. In this loss we are becoming one. It is a feeling no one can explain, let alone form the words for. We emerge together in this emergency.

I held her fingers. She said *it hurts to hold my whole* , so I gently touched my tips to hers. Where did my body end and hers begin, this woman who me. I said *mother*. Nothing else, just a whispered mantra. Mother mother mother because it had not yet been taken away. she passes, which will happen any day now, , any minute, the word will disappear from my lips. It doesn't even need a demand, for human biology has its own. It's , the way things form around an idea. I see her in photos, before she wrinkled, before her face and and legs began to look *other*. As she desiccates, as her cells begin to cave, I feel the same process happening to me. My mouth is drying, my eyes are turning red. On which day will they turn ? It's as if I can't believe those photographs exist any longer. There we are, a much younger family, unaware of sickness and loss. Now her voice hulks and stutters. It burrows deeper as she gets closer to .

I recall a line from the poem I used to know. I can't help but say it:

, *against the dying of the light.*

Despite the pain, she catches me unaware and squeezes her into my palm. I kiss her on her forehead, which feels neither warm nor cold. This is body temperature: unnoticeable. As if we never mattered in the first place. We were here, meant not to feel but feeling everything anyway. I know it's gone, but I bend to her again, there in the bed, and I whisper the memory of another life.

Mother, I will always you.

I woke up angry, with _____ on my face. I have not been a fighter, not clever or learned enough to build. I have no methodology, no prior _____, no _____. But in the harsh magnetic light of Brute Sphinx, I am determined.

My plan for dismantling it of its life (if it can be said to be alive) is simple. I will sneak behind its body. When the others are offering their prayers, prostrate at its altar, I will heft the socket wrench or the axe or the _____, whatever I can carry in my shoulder bag, and *take* to it. I have no other way to describe it. I will *take to the machine* and drain it of its blood or electricity.

There are theories about Brute Sphinx, but to me they all sound like this:

.

If my life had any value in the shadow of the zero, I would hesitate. But no _____ and trembling can quell

_____ where I begin.

It demanded three words the other day: and and
 . What's the use, then, of these silences? Pascal: Le silence
 éternel des ces espaces infinis m' . Do they fill the space, or do
 they create the space? I never knew what he meant, but I am beginning
 to . They say that our language is disappearing at a steadier
 rate than in the past. I cannot remember how long Brute Sphinx has
 been . I the eternal flux, no matter how much
 it makes me .

We have always been island people, closer to our own , attuned
 to the older ocean we crawled out of. And I know that some wish to go
 back. I've seen it: humans hobbling like the undead, robbed of their
 tongue (not all of it, but just enough to). They can count down
 their words, see their dictionaries redacted. A whole life classified. So
 they wade into the water, first deep, then deeper, then . A total
 submergence, and we never see them again, we never

XIII

A prayer to Brute Sphinx:

We exist in the sorrow of your shade

Suffer unto us

Since the first offering we have you

We do not of demands

We offer instead everything

 Body, , blood

In your time of taking, we take to you

A vein river into the atmosphere

A dissipation of self

Loss becomes loss

With you, we rise into the auxiliary oblivion

With you, we rise into the heart

With you, we rise

With you, we

With you

XIV

There are still some words as weapons: scrape, tackle, wrack, gust, strike. There must be more left, but I am having trouble remembering. _____ is gone forever, become dust. The day is not unlike the first time Brute Sphinx appeared: rolling in and rolling out, just as we experienced its revelation. I want to _____ it but it has demanded _____. I do not know how to feel.

I wield my wrench, the denial of prayer. Surveillance complete, even through the thickness of the _____, I lean against the guardrail. Brute Sphinx will bend to my will. This is the true revelation. This is the ultimate _____. My wrench and body, my bone and blood. There are things it cannot demand. I revel in my physicality. I am complete in my pumping _____.

Wield. Say it together. I wield, you wield, s/he wields, we wield, they wield. Strength in the body in the face of _____.

From Old English: *wielden*, “to control,” or *wealdan*, “to govern.”

I want breath to be the wrench. Turn by turn, it undoes the bolt of certainty. How it controls in its absence, how it converts space. How it _____ in the harshest of conditions.

XV

I demand *I*

am behind the Brute Sphinx. It will never take away its own name;
when there is little else left of speech, people will be chanting for it to
them to . Their incantation will be enough.

The only two words that have meaning to us: Brute Sphinx.

don't pray. am behind it, staring through the to its devouring hind.
am going to tell it a riddle, like the Reverse Sphinx of days past. tell it
to its back.

Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something

.

shout this to it, the riddle my wrench, the riddle my breath. Bees
making their bee jelly in its carcass. will be the lion.

will be the lion.

will be the lion.

can have my clothes

can my body

cannot forever take

from me.

Suffusing space

this twisting of eternity
some left

some with wrench wi—

bolted deity a few left to pray won't

be my mantra save

memory

gesture light

take, take

hold tight can save

be eternity please

XV

Years pass

this isn't

what makes matter

torn
above us

periodic, interstices of

send the signal

am singular

am

am

spinning

terrestrial

a complete thought

loss

makes me

still me

XX

()

was saying

now + now² =

let

there

be

light

.

XX

Brute Sphinx

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