

# Petrichor

*The refined one and the lumpen-proletarian  
in the same hierarchic order of feeling,  
both outside history,  
in a world with no way out  
except through sex and the heart,  
with no profundity except in the senses.  
In which joy is joy, pain pain.*

*Pasolini*

I had decided to walk over to the bar and grab a Topo Chico a few minutes before Manny stopped cleaning the ceiling, because he slipped from the prep table he was standing on, and his leg went into the deep fryer. I was thirsty, but walking to the bar was mainly an excuse to get out of the heat of the kitchen, away from the smell of grease that sometimes surfaces from where your mind keeps it for hours on end. I washed the dirt and cleaning agent from my hands and exited the kitchen into the dimly lit dining hall where a few servers were bending under the tables with short brooms, blindly sweeping up crumbs in the near darkness. Massive amounts of glossy wood composed the floors, ceiling fans, and table tops, giving the place an expensive feel. The cheap landscape paintings on the wall, however, gave it away. I stopped for a second and stared at a familiar one, sensing an opportunity to waste some time. It was an impressionist take on a field of bluebonnets and a wooden wind mill in the background, signed with a scribble in the bottom right hand corner. Smooth Jazz played quietly in the background since there was still a customer sitting in a corner of the restaurant, picking slowly at his chicken tender plate that I had made for him. He was talking on the phone, laughing quietly every few seconds while his server stared directly at him from about twenty feet away. The kitchen had closed 45 minutes ago.

I made it across the restaurant to the bar and found the bartender. I asked him for a Topo with a lime and he charged me the discounted two-dollar rate, which I paid for in cash. I'm sure he pocketed the bills without ringing it up on the POS, just as I would have done. We weren't good enough friends to openly acknowledge such arrangements, but we were getting there. I had only been working at the Grill for the past two months, and had yet to enter into any meaningful relationships with the front of house staff. However, I did sell drugs to a few of them, including this guy. He asked if I had any bud on me, and I said yes. I would meet him out back after the shift. He bought about forty bucks worth from me once a week. He handed me the bottle and I forced the lime wedge that sat on its lip into the carbonated water, so that a little shot out of the top. I sat at the bar for a second and talked with him about the shift, about how slow it was, and about how we were going to get our asses kicked during the rush tomorrow night. To make things worse, the health inspector was coming tomorrow. Ah shit, he said, so that's why Ted was here earlier. Yep. He poured me a good bit of cheap whisky in a to-go cup and said that Ted must be the biggest asshole he's met in the industry in a while. I agreed, grabbed the to-go cup, poured the Topo in it. I put a couple more bucks on the bar, said cheers, and walked back toward the kitchen. I would give him a little extra later on.

As I made my way back I passed a group of servers who had finished cleaning and were sitting in the lobby, counting cash and drinking beer where the last customer couldn't see them. I looked at one of the waitresses whose name I didn't know. She was newer than me, and had only been working here for the last two weeks. I stopped in front of another landscape at the doorway that separated the dining hall and the kitchen. This time it was distant view of a beach checkered with striped parasols and the ocean stretching beyond them, a gaudy sunset transpiring at the world's end. I stood there briefly, drinking my

cocktail, and glanced at the waitress a few times. My eyes paused on her face while she talked to one of the others. I noted her over-red lips, her hair dyed-black, her purple eye-shadow. I listened for her voice against the others. Her sleeves were rolled up, and there were a number of tattoos on her right arm, but I couldn't make any particular one out. I wondered how old she was, thirty-two, older? A good deal older than me. Sadder, it seemed, too. She looked me in the eye for an instant, and that's when Manny's scream pierced me. Another came immediately after.

I entered the kitchen and ran toward the back, thinking of all the ways that someone could get mangled back here. I thought of the giant knives that hung on magnetic strips on the yellow walls. I thought of the small knives that could hide in the dish pit and clip you. I thought of the pans of boiling water that might slip from a burner, of someone falling and slamming their head on the prep tables. I thought of blood mixing with grime on the floor, of a severed finger sliding under the ovens, getting stuck in fat and crumbs where rats could get it. I turned a corner that separated the kitchen from the prep area and that's when I saw Manny's leg hiked over the edge of the deep fryer.

His face was agony. Wild, red agony.

"Fuck, Fuck." I said.

His left leg was in the fryer, and his right leg was still on the other side, his toes touching the kitchen floor. He was scrambling to get his footing, trying to push himself out but his shoe had gotten stuck in the fryer, caught on something. He was screaming over and over and over. I rushed over to help him. I took one look at his face, wrecked by the sound coming from his body. I placed my arms under his arms and pulled back. I kept yanking on him but I couldn't get him out. I was making it worse. There was no language here. I didn't know why I couldn't get him out. I thought he might die. I yelled help, help. My calls blended with the screams, the loudness of the rock music coming from the radio, the constant whirr of the oven vents.

After a few seconds some waiters arrived and so did the manager. One of the older servers with a string of piercings running up his ear found the dull rod that we sharpen knives on, stuck it in the fryer, and somehow freed his foot. We took him out, and laid him on the floor, he was weeping, yelling, locked in an ocean of hurt, I stayed back while some other people took over, and looked at him. I began to notice the smell, somewhere between fried food and scorched hair with a chemical after burn. I began to feel sick, and I thought about how particles of Manny's cooked skin were entering my nostrils, being absorbed by the soft parts in my nasal passages. I turned away from the scene and opened the back kitchen door to let the air in, which was a mistake, since the only thing that came in was the smell from the dumpsters out back. I wanted to throw up. I closed the door and sat in the kitchen trying to adjust and force the scene away.

I didn't know what would happen to his leg, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. One of the servers tried to take the shoe off of his foot as Manny screamed *No, No, No*. I was standing nearby watching and realized that the shoe, and his socks, and his pants, had been cooked and fused into his flesh. I could see the top of the sock taking skin with it, a pink lesion winking between the cloth and the middle of his shin. I stepped in and hit the guy hard on the shoulder. What the fuck? He said. I pointed at the amalgam of shoe and flesh. The guy stopped and walked off. Someone finally turned off the radio.

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Earlier in the day the owner, Ted, had come in the middle of the dinner rush, and told us that the health inspector was coming tomorrow. Ted was an asshole. Asshole was in the way he walked, quickly and with false purpose. It was in the blue button down shirt he wore with the sleeves rolled up, and it seeped out from under his armpits, from his grey slacks and dress shoes. Asshole leaked from his eyes, as he looked back and forth looking for something to complain about. I had heard him say *I'm detail oriented*. Whenever he would show up he would walk around the kitchen looking for some benign

discoloration in the wall, or for a cup someone had just finished drinking from. Once his eyes were finished, his voice would take over. *Would you mind stopping whatever important thing you're doing and please do some completely pointless shit for me? Like dusting this up over here, or rearranging this shelf?*

It was far worse when Ted tried to speak Spanish. Every time he came in he would go directly to one of the guys from Mexico or Guatemala and say *Como Estas? Que Paso?* before laughing and giving one of them a manly pat on the back. A few seconds later, having spotted something, he would rush up one of the guys and say something like *Martín, Martín, what is that? Que es?* Then the guys would vigorously clean it up and then Ted would move to the lobby and give the servers the same treatment. I would watch him leave through the back door without saying goodbye to any of us. I like to imagine that he would get in his new Acura, lock the doors, and sit in the parking lot while he jerked off and listened to Christian rock.

Today Ted looked flustered and I braced myself for it. He walked over to Manny, who was in the dish-pit, scrubbing at one of the big gravy pots. He put his hand on his shoulder and pulled him aside, looking around the kitchen the entire time. A few of the kitchen guys took note at what was happening and we tried not to look at each other. A nearby busser whispered *fuck* very quietly under his breath. Ted yelled at us to stop what we were doing, to come over to where he was, and to listen. So we left our places on the line. Over the sounds of the sizzling pans we took off the heat you could already hear a few of the servers on the other side of the window, swearing under their breath, waiting for their food. That's when Ted told us that he wanted the place to *look immaculate. Really, really clean.* After announcing everything in English, he spoke to Manny, José, and Martín with his accent. *Todo Limpio. Todo.* Toe-Doe Limp-eeo. Toe-doe. He guided Manny to a place where he could see the spot behind the oven. The owner grabbed a rag, stood on a step stool, and gently wiped the greasy ceiling. Then he motioned to an area over the ovens, reaching as far as he could. He started to climb up on the table, getting his left knee up there and reaching toward a distant corner behind the oven vents before stopping and standing up straight. He made eye contact with Martín and pointed with his index finger at the impossible to reach spot. *Todo Limpio.*

Once it slowed down we flipped some coins and Me and Manny ended up having to stay after the others left to clean the ceiling. The Manager didn't want to keep everyone on because the labor cost would be too high. After everyone else left Manny changed the channel on the boombox we had back there to some classic rock station.

Goddamn it, I said

Don't like? Manny said.

It's whatever, I laughed.

Manny would've changed it if I asked him to, and that's mainly the reason why I didn't ask. Manny was a nice guy, quiet, even when around the other guys who knew Spanish. He was probably the oldest one of us back there, I imagine in his late thirties or early forties. He smiled and joked of course, but you rarely heard the guy really laugh. He kept things to himself. When he did speak, people tended to listen, and even if said something crazy (*Manny told me he saw a big ass snake in the parking lot, better watch out*), people would believe it. The guy was short, like 5 foot 2, and buzzed his hair every two weeks, clean shaven except for a little mustache he sported. He had dark skin and eyes that looked like he had seen some shit, which I don't doubt. He worked with purpose, and there were only two times I ever heard him complain. Once he walked in from biking through the mind warping heat of Texas in August. He was coming from his other job across town at the IHOP, where he also washed dishes. On the way over he got hit by a car who should have broke sooner for their red light. Knocked Manny right off the bike into the street, scratching up his arms and back, ripping up his shirt. Apparently the guy came out to

help Manny up but he was already back on the bike, now with crooked handles (that were never fixed) and took off to work. He showed up sweaty and bloody and I asked *Como estas?* one of the two or three Spanish phrases I know, in a really worried way, it looked like he should have been in the hospital. His reply was *Muy Consado guey, muy consado*. He went into the restroom, changed his ripped up shirt for his black work shirt that had The Grill printed on it in white block letters, and started setting up his dish station.

The second time I heard him complain was when he pulled Sam over to the manager's office, a 19-year-old hippy kid who was the only guy who could really speak English and Spanish, and told Sam to tell the Manager that they had scheduled him Saturday but he could never work Saturdays. The Manager told Sam to tell Manny that he was going to have to show up. Manny then told Sam to tell the Manager that he would quit and work full time at the IHOP, and, by the way, he needed a raise to from ten to eleven dollars an hour. Without answering him the manager said he had to get back to work and went into his office. Manny went to the dish station. Two hours later the Manager fetched Sam and said that he agreed to the conditions, and from that moment on, Manny was the best paid guy in the kitchen. The truth is that guys who work as hard as Manny and show up on time are in short supply and high demand, especially when you don't have to pay insurance surcharges to hire them.

One time Sam and I were smoking a joint together before work, and I asked him about Manny's story. Sam told me he didn't really know the details. Apparently he came over from Guatemala a while ago. José, a young guy in the kitchen, was actually his Nephew, and Manny got him the job about a year ago. Manny was saving money. For what? No one really knew, but Sam had understood that there was a family somewhere, and that Manny was sending a lot of it back home, but not all of it.

Manny never drank, as long as I knew him. But I had heard that once, long ago, a guy from the kitchen, who no longer worked here, saw Manny sitting on a curb outside a shitty little neighborhood bar, completely wasted, with his face in his hands. The guy went up to him, to check on him, make sure he was okay. Apparently Manny said nothing, and kept pushing him away with one hand while he kept the other one covering his eyes. Eventually, after pleading with him for a while, the guy left him there on the curb in the orange light of the street lamps, and continued with his night. Manny showed up to work the next evening and no one talked about it. When I heard this story I realized, for the first time really, that Manny was far, far from home. That he was running away from something there, and that, in reality, he didn't belong here. I thought about what would've happened if a cop picked him up for being drunk in public. And it was then I had a second realization, that Manny wasn't protected by the law, but could be completely fucked by it. It felt strange to think of him as an outlaw of sorts, who showed up at the Grill five days out of the week and scrubbed shit from the dishes of people who would never know he existed. People who wouldn't care if he died or lived.

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After a while we all stood there and looked at him writhing on the floor, waiting for an ambulance to show up. He was in the same black kitchen clothes he wore every day, covered in flour and faded sauce stains. He was clutching José's hand hard while he turned around on the floor like a restless man trying to fall asleep. I imagined his hands were raw from all the dish-washing, which he always did without gloves on, because they slowed him down. I wanted to put my hand on him, to comfort him. But there was no way to do that. I don't think he wanted anyone else's hands on him while he wept and yelled. I crouched down beside him with Martín and José for a while, before getting up and looking around. I saw the waitress that I had been looking at earlier. She was biting her thumb, looking down. I didn't say anything to her. At some point an ambulance arrived and took him away. The paramedics exchanged a few words with the Manager, Frank, checked Manny's vitals, and loaded him on the

stretcher. Manny just sucked in air through his teeth, sobbed occasionally and cursed while they tried to maneuver his body through the kitchen, into the dining room, and out the front door.

When I showed up to work the next day I went to look for Frank who was the manager on duty again. He was sitting in the office that's attached to the kitchen. The door was closed, I knocked and he told me to come in. He was in a chair, looking intently at the computer. On the desk there was a giant Dallas Cowboys mug they sell at convenience stores, along with a scattered array of papers, sticky notes, an empty plate marked by dry food stains. There was a family portrait sitting in a cheap, stand up picture frame, and I noticed the vague shapes of a woman and children, and I didn't take the time to focus on the image. Sitting on a cabinet, next to a pile of manila folders, was a camouflage John Deere hat that Frank would take off in the parking lot before coming into work.

Hey Frank. How's it going.

Not bad, yourself? Frank didn't take his eyes off the computer.

Alright. So when is the health inspector coming?

He turned and looked at me, sighing a little. He grabbed the Cowboys Mug and took a swig. As he took the fat, plastic straw from his lips I noticed his teeth were very yellow, and a chill went up my back.

He's not coming anymore. I think Ted managed to get him to come another day.

Okay. Hey. Is Manny gonna be okay?

I don't know. He's not gonna die, if that's what you mean

I paused for a second and started to make a face, before thinking better of it.

Well, that's good.

Yea.

Frank turned in his chair and looked at the computer again. It was open to his facebook page. He moved the mouse and brought up an excel spreadsheet. I could give a shit if the guy was on facebook. I had just finished smoking from my pipe on break in the back by the dumpster. I wondered if Frank could smell it and if he would care.

What's he going to do for money?

I don't know. He's not going to make it here, though.

No shit huh. Are you guys gonna take him back when he gets better?

Not sure yet, guess we'll find out.

I took my baseball cap off that I had to wear in the kitchen and felt a wave of heat come off the top of my head. I looked at the hat in my hand and put it back on.

Well, Manny's undocumented right?

Yea. Why?

What's going to happen to him at the hospital?

No idea. Not our problem.

I laughed a little. It crossed my mind to walk out of the place.

Alright, let's get to work, it's Friday. Can you start peeling the potatoes? There's a party of 16 at 7.

Friday is our busiest day. I was working the Sautee station when the rush hit. I tried to focus on the work, to put Manny's pain out of my mind. Someone ordered a chicken fried steak. It was my job to put flour on the beef, and then pass it over to José at the fry station. When I picked up the meat I thought of Manny, of the dead flesh that must have come off with his shoe. I hoped they gave him a bunch of drugs, a whole lot of morphine or something. I wondered what the hospital did with people who were here illegally. Would he end up getting deported? That seemed ridiculous. But it helped me understand why Martín and José didn't look at all relieved when the paramedics arrived, why they looked off at some random pot or pan while they were strapping him into the stretcher. I felt stupid for knowing nothing about it. I had never thought about how he got here, about what his life had been in that other place. Hell, he could've been in a million other places before this one.

I put the flour on the meat, I tried to stop thinking about it. I looked over at José at the fry station, and I felt awful for the kid. It was the same fryer that ruined his uncle the night before. I finished flouring the meat, rushed over to the station and gave José the steak. I don't know why I didn't go to him earlier, and say what I had to say right then. But here I was.

Hey José, I'm sorry about Manny.

Que?

Lo siento for Manuel.

Oh, si, gracias. Gracias.

I went back to the station and didn't think about much and tried to move fast while kitchen guys yelled and waiters yelled and Managers yelled and the heat flared. I tried to keep the sweat from dripping into the food in front of me. I kept saying to myself, life goes on, life goes on.

After the shift one of the waiters asked us kitchen guys if we wanted to come out for drinks. Martín declined as usual, and of course Sam and José weren't old enough to drink. The two other guys that were on had left an hour ago. I looked over at the black-haired waitress I had been staring at the day before. She made eye contact with me for a second. I asked who all was going out, the waiter told us that everyone was going. I said I was down, just had to finish cleaning the kitchen. They were going to a dive bar called lulu's that was just down the road.

I went back into the kitchen and stared around for a minute, wondering about the girl, wondering about Manny. José was mopping, I was cleaning the line, and Martín was getting ready to go since he was opening tomorrow. I had this wave of bad feeling come over me and I thought about telling José to go home with Martín, that I would finish it all, that he should go help out Manny if he knew where he was. But then I thought about going out for drinks, of maybe talking to that girl again. I thought of her body. Of laying next to her in the dark, staring at the wall with her in my arms. I wanted to know where she came from, what she did other than serve. I thought about the blankness after, the empty goodbye and agitation when one of us didn't leave early enough, the avoiding each other at work. But I wanted that too.

So I let José mop the floor, and watched his eyes trained on the tiles while the manager walked around with a clipboard in the vast silence of the kitchen where he said we couldn't listen to music anymore. In this white quiet we felt like shit. The time went slow. I finished up before José did, and I went over to him and said *buenas noches* and he said *buenas noches* back. I told Frank goodnight, and he told me he'd see me tomorrow and I said yep. Frank was counting money. I looked at his red, collared shirt with the big stain on it, and the black, rumpled tie that ran down over his stomach. I wondered if he

liked coming home to his family after work. I wondered if he really meant what he said about Manny. But then again, what could he do? I left.

I went outside into the January cold, into the smell of the coming rain. I closed my eyes and took it in. The scent comforted me, summoned thoughts of wet stones, dark, smooth and pointless. It gave me the vague sense of having had this experience many times before, recurrent shadows of me standing in doorways and smelling stone, listening to the distant thunder break like boulders of parting ash. The memories went nowhere, belonged to nothing other than this vacant repetition.

The parking lot was empty and the dead, frosted grass that lined the restaurant cracked beneath my shoes as I cut across it. I tightened the hood on my jacket and looked at the sky. It was half covered with thick clouds, and where there was space the moonlight exited the starless black, mixing with yellow light from street lamps and the sound of cars on the highway. People were going downtown on Saturday night, probably already a little drunk, heading into the night. I lit a cigarette when I got into my car, and sat there for a minute and smoked. I was thinking about how I must smell, like grease and sweat, steak seasoning and weed. I had a change of clothes in the trunk, so I got out again and pulled out a shirt and put that on. I sprayed on a little cologne that I kept in my car door. I pulled down the little mirror in at the top of the windshield and stared at myself. I looked at my ovular face, at the lines under my eyes, at the razor burn on my neck. The tan I had from California had disappeared, leaving me pale.

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Two months ago I was sitting on the street looking up at the cold autumn sun in San Francisco when it occurred to me that I might come back home and live with my mother, maybe get another restaurant job. I fucked up over there. I had dropped out of school and took off with nothing in mind but the beach, my now ex-girlfriend, and the prospect of selling dope on the West Coast. It was a party for three months, a nightmare for two, and complete boredom and discomfort at the end. Not that it was going to be much better with my mom. She lived in a two-bedroom apartment with my younger brother who was still in high-school, and her boyfriend who drove a school bus. But I couldn't sit on the street any longer and hope that my ex would take me back after what I did, which I don't like to talk about and see no reason to bring up here. I don't know myself after it, I can say that much. Not much pleased with what I am, with what I guess I always was. In the end I didn't know if I would be able to eat the next day, if I wasn't going to get stabbed or shot by some crazy ass in the dark, or one of the guys I used to buy from. So I asked my mom if she had three hundred bucks for a plane ticket. I told her I would pay her back when I started working. She told me she would have it when she got paid in a week.

That week before I came home was probably the worst of my life. I was hanging around the Mission district, homeless. My phone service was cut off, and it was cold. I was wearing the same clothes for a long time, after my suitcase was taken from me. Cops kept coming up to me, telling me to move. No loitering here, there. I never said a word, I just listened and moved. It felt like shit. The last night I was there I stayed with this girl that I met at a club, where I was planning on spending the ten bucks some guy had given me on two beers and a bus ticket, since I was leaving the next day. She was making her way up to Portland from Santa Fe, trying to get away from some shitty boyfriend back there. Her name was Melody. I told her it was a pretty name. She invited me over to this flat across town where she was staying with a man she met on a couch surfing website, but he was gone for the night. We ate some food he had given her, and we smoked the last of the little weed I had. We took a shower in the guest bathroom. She pressed her naked body against mine, and her kiss felt like a thing I had lost. But I was taking something from her, from the guy who lived in this place. We tried sleep together, but I couldn't get it up. I told her I was sorry, she said it was okay, and I held her for a little while before turning around and falling asleep. In the morning she gave me a couple of bucks and I got on a city bus to the airport, and I was on the way back home.

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I shut the mirror on my face and started up the car. I pulled out my phone and checked the map to make sure I knew how to get to lulus. As I pulled around the back I saw José waiting in the back of the restaurant, standing outside of the wooden gate the blocks the dumpsters from view. He was wearing a black cloth hoodie, his baseball cap peeking out in front. The rain had started softly, and the security lights behind José filtered through mist of droplets that streaked diagonally into view, encircling him in a vague glow. I stopped. I felt compelled to offer him a ride in the cold, to make up for the fact that I didn't mop the floor. I knew that since his bike got stolen he usually rode with Sam or one of the other guys. But they were all gone by now but I guess José told them he would be okay. I figured he couldn't live that far away. and even if he did, what did it really matter?

"Hey José, you need a ride?"

I was surprised by the reluctance I heard in my voice. José looked up, and I asked him again. He understood. He came up to the window. He was shivering.

Gracias. I take a taxi. Frank called para mi.

At least Frank wasn't a complete ass.

Okay, buenas noches.

Gracias guey, buenas noches.

So I drove off. I looked back in the mirror and watched him standing there by the dumpsters in the cold. He was small figure against the space of the parking lot that separated and joined The Grill to the other beige buildings in this worthless, suburban shopping center. His breath was visible in the rain light. The cold went in, and the breath out. I matched my breathing to his in the distance, and stopped at the stop sign before the parking lot bled into the freeway access road. I figured the cab was going to pull around the front, not the back, and I wanted to put it in reverse, and tell José to go stand on that side of the restaurant. He would figure that out, though. I just wanted to tell him something. But there wasn't anything to say, and the few words we knew wouldn't get us anywhere. So I put it out of my mind, let go of the brake, and thought about the other side of the night.