

## Bystanders

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—Michael Beatty

“DOWNWARD FACING DOG.”

This is my life and I’m wasting it.

“Breathe in, slowly.”

Pissing it away, stretching myself into poses to tighten and tone. Yoga: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday – beginner’s yoga from 5:30 to 6:30 and advanced poses from 8 to 9, and on Saturday beginner’s yoga 1 to 2 and advanced poses from 5 to 6.

“Release your breath.”

I don’t feel enlightened... at peace. I feel like hurting something. I saw on the news last week that two teenagers were arrested for killing cats. They buried them up to the neck, and proceeded to run over the heads with a lawnmower.

Lawnmower blades spin at three thousand six hundred rotations per minute when they aren’t cutting, the resistance from blades of grass drops that speed to about three thousand rotations per minute, but imagine the dip in speed when those blades bite into the soft flesh and hard skull of a cat, imagine the small strips of trimmed grass leading up to the center of a nearly perfect circle of blood, plasma and viscera. The blades of green grass plastered crimson at first, but as the blood dries on the teen’s lawn – on their neighbors’ lawns – it metamorphoses from red to carmine and then the green and carmine blend together into a dank dirty brown, like a giant circle of bloody diarrhea.

Small chunks of cat brains loosely hanging onto the grass, spread like fertilizer on the lawn, grey matter dripping from chunks of skull still clinging to the blades of the mower, and in the center of each circle a headless feline body, a body whose adrenaline had caused the heart to race, caused

the blood pressure to skyrocket before being decapitated; once the head was gone all that energy caused the arteries to spray blood several feet into the air, leaving the body desiccated and buried; such a small amount of blood remains that they're essentially ready for a high school biology class to rip apart... I mean dissect.

Tiny mummified kitties standing on their rear legs, slowly becoming fertilizer as the worms and the bacteria and the ants pick away at them. Standing there until only a vertical skeleton remains, standing almost comically – their feet originally splayed in panicked positions as the kids buried them, but once all the flesh is removed, they look like waving, headless skeletons.

The pretty Asian lady on the news with the soft, calming voice said that when the police arrived they found a group of nearly 15 people observing the teen's violent behavior. Mostly other high school students, but several adults from the neighborhood had come out to watch as well, and I'm sure several were peeking through the blinds – secretly getting their kicks at the horror show. Both disgusted and aroused by the carnage. Diffusion of responsibility they call it. The kids murdered four cats,

and now anyone can watch a video of the whole thing online: 30,000 hits and counting.

“Breathe in, slowly, and when you breathe out transfer into plank position.”

This is my life and every breath brings me another second closer to death. I still feel like hurting something.

Everyday I wake at 5:00, so I can make it to the gym by 5:45. This leaves me enough time to swim for almost an hour before rushing to work. 6:41 I shower and get dressed. 7:03 I'm on the road. 7:23 I'm pulling into the school parking lot. 7:29 I'm walking into my office, grimacing at the brass plaque next to my door that says guidance counselor.

I know the kids from the news. Their twins, and they're tenth graders. Each counselor has one class they follow from ninth grade to graduation; my class is tenth grade. This policy is supposed to build empathy or something, but I just felt contempt, especially for those fucking open enrollment students who were ruining my school. I'd told their parents, Frank and Beverly, “Take those kids back where they belong. They can't handle it here.” Looks like I was right.

“Move from plank back into downward facing dog.”

This is my life. 3:00 my day is over. 3:10 I'm changed and starting my run. 3:15 school lets out. 3:42 I'm halfway done – four miles – and passing the pizza shop, still holding a steady eight-minute mile. 4:14 I open the school door and start my cool down walk to the gym for my shower. 4:25 the principle joins me in the shower, and fucks me hard against the linoleum before rushing out to the football game; family already waiting in the stands, son playing quarterback. 4:33 I slide down the wall, and sit on the floor, chest heaving, my tears lost amongst the water from the shower.

Speaking of kitties...

Do you remember Kitty Genovese?

Diffusion of responsibility they call it.

*The New York Times* said "Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police" leading after that, "For more than half an hour 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens."

Diffusion of responsibility they call it.

We still teach the story, a lesson about the callousness of humanity. It hardly seems relevant the story's been edited

in post to say only one man saw her being stabbed, that the initial stabs punctured her lungs, leaving her fatally wounded. That the wounds left her lungs incapable of properly taking in air, and they quickly filled with blood, which she would cough onto her chin and her soft blouse, blood which kept her from being able to cry out. She tried using the last of her strength to drag herself to a locked back door of her apartment complex. Her attacker, a man named Moseley, searched for her and found her lying there, gasping for air, and proceeded to stab her repeatedly, and then rape her while she died – robbing her of her life, her dignity, and \$49. Four years later – while imprisoned – he was sent to a hospital for surgery, where he severely beat his guard, took five hostages, and raped one in front of her husband.

Diffusion of responsibility they call it. In self-defense classes women are taught that if attacked and a group of people is watching they should not call out for help. A general plea for help leaves nobody responsible, and you're less likely to receive aid.

Instead, they teach women to pick one person, and tell them, "I need you to help me."

Make it that person's responsibility to aid you. Then it is harder for that person to shirk the responsibility onto one of the other witnesses. It's more difficult for them to justify their actions by saying others weren't helping, and telling themselves, "What was I supposed to do?"

"Breathe out slowly, and move into child's pose for a few minutes of calming meditation."

Lying with my face buried in my arms I try to keep from sobbing. Three years later, and I still sit staring at a bottle of sleeping pills at least once a week. Daring myself to finally do it. I can hear the breathing of the other students. Usually it's calming, but right now, I want to stand up and scream at their stupid, peaceful faces.

"Life sucks, and people are horrible, and you're all wasting your time."

Three years ago I decided to have a night out with five of my oldest friends. Friends I'd known since high school.

I can still feel their rough hands ripping my blouse off. Can still smell the whiskey on their breath as they bite and lick my face and neck. Can feel the cheap fake wood of the coffee table they threw me down on.

"Guys, what the hell are you doing. Leave her alone," Mark said to C.J. and John.

"Fuck off Mark, quite being so fucking gay. If you don't want to get your dick wet then just go watch T.V."

"Yeah, quite being such a faggot. If she didn't want it, she wouldn't have worn such a short skirt," said John.

Mark joined Gab and Benny on the couch where they watched television and pretended nothing was happening. That this was normal.

"Help me! Please help me! Please... please... please," I cried.

"Don't worry Baby. We'll help you." C.J. said as he yanked off his belt.

I just kept sobbing please and help. After ripping my blouse off, they carried me into the bedroom next to the living room, and abused my body for over two hours. My other three friends sat and watched television the entire time. They were still there when I stumbled out, grabbed my torn blouse off the floor, and waddled out the door. I'm sure they justified it, telling themselves that C.J. was right, and I really did want it. That it was all just an act. I could hear C.J. laughing as I tried getting out of the apartment as quickly as my battered body could climb down the stairwell.

"That bitch won't walk straight for a month."

I could hear all of them laughing at that.

I didn't go to the cops for over three months. All five of them had the same story when the detectives began investigating, and I was told that I should have had a rape kit done after it happened. Nobody blamed me, directly, but it was made clear that I shouldn't have waited. That now they would get away with it. Easy for them to say I should have done something right away, but admitting something like that happened to you;

admitting that you've been violated like that is something else entirely.

This is my life and it's wasted; it ended three years ago. Maybe tonight I'll finally have the courage to put an end to my suffering.

This is my life...

"Breathe out. Let all the negative energy flow out of you and back into the universe. Take a deep breath and bring in all the positive energy and love. Breathe out..."



—Lauren Upp, "Shadow Play"