

**POEMS IN WHICH I AM  
CHOPPED UP, STEPPED ON,  
AND SLEEP DEPRIVED**

**Zack Rearick**

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Doctor: What is it you strive for?

A. S.: Someone to look at me and tell me I'm all right — or to hit me.

*-Taped therapy conversation between Anne Sexton and Dr. Martin Orne,  
January 16, 1962*

## Shoebottom Solstice

This is not the summer of self-hatred  
(though if it was you'd be the first to know).  
The late June sun, when it is at its apex,  
predicts its nonexistent afterglow.

I've heard it said that being stomped to death  
is the most brutal way a man can die,  
the flattened lung's last begging, coughing breath,  
the pulpy face, the heel against the eye.

The gruesomeness is attributable  
not simply to violence of the scene  
(for other deaths have fractured ribs and skulls  
and every murder is, of course, obscene),

but to the repetition it demands  
to bring one's foot down on a human frame,  
to gaze upon a halfway mashed-in man  
and to persist with equal force and aim.

I've been the man in question more than once,  
have laid down often by my own design  
waiting for a pair of boots or pumps  
to notice me and feel this way inclined.

I'll trick you into filling that position  
if you don't keep an eye on where you step.  
I'll use you to further my condition  
and my own aesthetic of helplessness.

You mean so well that you miss the unspoken,  
irradiant will to die with which I beam.  
I am so lonely that it lays me open.  
Your friendly toes reduce my heart to cream.

So as I foam and spill on your shoelaces,  
ignore my feigned, misleading cries for help.  
This is not a moment of self-hatred,  
it is the searing twilight of the self.

## **Instead, the Stick**

I have a big, black spider on my brain.  
He spreads himself like a crack or a raincloud.  
He drizzles venom.

At first, I thought to ask for help.  
I told my friends and parents how he'd talk to me.  
Spider speak in an evil baritone with a high-pitched echo.  
It sounds how you imagine a tornado would if it were speaking.  
I journaled his words and observations like they asked me to.  
He would tell me things that were wrong with me.  
He would never stop.

They sent me to a therapist.  
She told me I had made the spider up.  
She told me I had many positive qualities.  
She told me not to think badly of myself.  
The spider snickered, danced around.  
He said that, if anything, he had made me up.  
He knew a lot of words I didn't know.

My therapist was fooled by my perceptivity.  
She thought it meant I was learning the truth about myself.  
I only did what the spider told me to do.  
He was very clever.  
My therapist declared me fully healed.  
The spider was proud and puffed up like a cat.

I still thought maybe I could get away from him.  
I had to plan in secret.  
I knew my only chance was to see a doctor.  
I had a routine check-up planned already,  
so the spider was not suspicious.  
When we got there, I screamed.  
The doctor was afraid of me.  
He opened up my skull with a shiny knife.  
The spider never panicked.  
He scuttled to the underside of my brain.

The doctor couldn't see him, even with his flashlight.

When I got home, the spider said I needed to be punished.

He made himself twice as large.

The reverb from his voice gave me a headache.

He told me that I had to hurt myself.

He told me no one cared about me anyway.

I have a big, black spider on my brain.

He's been there longer than I can remember.

He coughs loudly when people try to say nice things about me.

He uses his fangs when I try to help myself.

He catalogues my failures.

I don't suppose there's anything to do.

I don't suppose you'll ever see him either.

## **The Heavy Heart, Heavy Head, Ingrid Bergman Blues**

I've been killing myself  
in poems  
for over a year now.  
I think about it  
during class.  
At the end of the day,  
I bike back to myself  
and spread four or five poems  
on the floor in front of me  
and set them off  
simultaneously.

I don't keep them  
in my bedroom  
for this very reason.  
Once they've been started,  
they jump at my neck like rottweilers.  
I get on my knees to let them at me.  
They chew on my jugular forever.

Later, I watch the whole affair again  
with a bowl of popcorn and a drink.  
I like that it's in black and white.  
I like that the great actresses  
of the 40s and 50s  
come in at the end to dress  
my wounds. I like that  
the scraps of me are wadded  
and stuffed in a corner.  
I like that no one is quick enough  
to save me.  
you you you you  
as joan of arc  
lending me your sword  
lopping off your hair  
leading me to fire

cher ami, bon soldat  
dear friend good soldier