Struthio
By: Mark Taylor

They called him Os.
He left work that day after he clocked out, but not before agreeing to help shift stagnant product. This took enough time to finish the daily drowning of the sun.

His coworkers believed he led a quiet life of work and wife, while his wife believed he lived a quiet addiction to work. In reality he did not live in either, but rather hastily slid between both. They did not know about the in-between.

He calculated his earnings in his head while he waited for the bus. If he was accurate, he would have enough income for the boys to eat well for five of the fourteen days between that moment and the next pay. If he staggered those days between two days of bread with filler and water for himself, he would be fine.

He felt the cement city hum through the hole in his left heel and felt it snarl through a hole in the front of his right. The large toe of the latter probed eager at its opening. The cold had numbed most feeling from the toes, so he had blocked those nerves off from his mind. As he waited, his toes getting nipped by cold wind, he knew the heavy snow would fall this year, sure as anything.

His boss called him Os, his friends called him Os, even his wife called him Os. His wife was a beautiful woman, who filled him both with heated coils of love and the coursing venom of cynical, bitter roots. She had eyes that swallowed light. Their ebon glow smoldered and flickered in her fair face. Her soul licked at the edges of those eyes, tasting freedom through the purgatory of taunt, supple flesh. Her intelligence flickered as readily as her passion, which bested her patience in baffling ways. She was shrewd, but not overly observant. He had pursued her relentlessly, taking great pains to impress her.

He assumed his friends were truly lovely people, as he didn’t really know them.

His name was not Os. He had a nose like a quill. He smoked Classics, puffing smoke greedily in a hollow sort of way. It rose in and around that nose, immersing him. His smoke was as empty as his name. His real name was Bill. He had been named after his father, William, but
even his birth certificate said Bill. His friends often playfully asked if he was sure his real name wasn’t Os, and sometimes he joked that it wasn’t.

All his life he only had pieces of a name. In his now suddenly distant youth he had been given a fake health card with OS engraved right into it. They all joked, saying it was the only way someone would ever be able to actually identify him if something happened. Everyone was quite funny.

He smiled and noted its realistic quality before putting it in his wallet, over his actual driver’s license. His eyes rested briefly on the eyes of the man in the photo before covering it. He wondered what could be seen in those eyes, and hoped nobody saw what he could. The warmth of the bus as it embraced him brought feeling back to his toe, and he pushed its damp, infectious implications away.

His father had been dying for some time. The Parkinson’s was drowning him. Os had hardly known the man after he got back from the war, and then he must have just decided to die, he supposed. He couldn’t imagine what his father was like, behind his small, simple features.

His father was a book man. He had not amassed a collection of rare, well-cared-for books, but instead had opted for faded, hand-me-down copies. His work-worn fingers were like needles, pulling thread delicately. He would strategically remove the books from their folded, crumpled covers, unstitched them from their fragile frames. His tired palm would carefully heat the bent spines until they shed their worn features, until the pages would bloom and flower in his hand. He would never change the pages on the inside, though. He left the greasy fingerprints, the sad dog ears of hasty closure, the coffee stains of sudden surprise. “Look at all those stories!” he would say. “Look at all that character…”

Os saw only the character the author illuminated, saw only the plot thrust forward as a story.

His father was not a very wise man, did not make much money, lived alone, widowed. His mother had died giving birth to Bill, but William did not blame him on the day she died. Years later when the question rose he told him, “She was something…sure was something.” William never spoke about his wife again, but still only offered a half smile of disinterest to passing spinsters. He stayed on his own, kept buying those old, sad books.
The bus jerked to a stop, and Os wearily rose and got out at The Home. He looked at its squat foundations, at its half-hearted windows, curtains covering death lazily. The code to get in changed every month, and most times when he got there, some of them were waiting at the doors, trying to get out. They all wanted to smoke. Even the ones that didn’t before, they did now. Instant gratification was more understandable with death dancing so merrily about the building.

When he got to the third floor, the elevator opened to a naked Alzheimer’s patient wandering the hall. Their memories had been stolen, stripped of stories, barren of even their own tale to cover themselves in. He curved his eyes to the ground, and wondered what his old man thought about all that.

When he got in the room, they were cleaning his tubes. The phlegm had clogged them again, filled them with green, rancorous bile. Os hated to watch, but found he was compelled to by some unnatural certainty that turning away would be the worst thing he could do to him, now, like that. William Lee Faucon Jr. lay on his side, in a body that seemed dead but with eyes that were alive, swirling in unseen nightmares. The tubes running in and out served various functions, yet all seemed tainted in malign ways that made aches echo in him. Os lowered the bed side, took his father by his light, sharply jutting shoulders, and laid him gently across his knees and chest. His father remained tense and rigid at first, but eventually was at ease. His body seemed to shake, as if weeping, but nothing left those swirling, twisting eyes.

““I know, Dad… I know.”

Os sat rocking his father for a while, praying to anything listening that they would kill him now. To kill him now would be the thing. To make him be like that… that was a crime which had no face, had no name. It merely sat at the bedside like a raven, waiting for his father to die. To feed, to snatch the escaping soul, fresh from its prison. Whatever was in charge should kill him then, right then, and it would be just, it would be right. He would go to the woman who had given him something. Os wondered whether or not that was right at all, if he would go anywhere at all, but he knew that even nowhere must be better than this. It must be better than this. But he did not die, not then. Os slid him back onto his pillow, and winced at the ease of it.
He thought about the words ‘dead weight’ over and over; they flashed in his mind,ickered in his peripherals. There was nothing he could do with them. He slowly rose and touched his father’s hand for the last time.

He stayed alive for several more months, in which the dwindling flickers and sparks of his life kicked against his ribs in bitter contempt. In which his mind ate itself daily, consumed nothing but raw, marbled, pink flesh. When they called Os in the early hours of night to say he was dead, he told them to leave him where he was until he got there himself. They told him he had already been moved. When he got there, the nurse whispered softly to him, “The last thing he said was ‘Tell Os I love him’. Real soft, real honest.” She smiled and his glazed eyes peered blankly back.

After Os left a second nurse asked the first why she had lied. She responded sharply, saying, “Telling him what he really said wouldn’t have done anyone no good.” When the assistant wondered aloud how the nurse had known his name, she told him sharply that she had seen his health card.

When Os got home from the hospital, eyes red and chaffed from the night drive, his children were all asleep except Malachi, his oldest. He sat down beside him on their sagging couch. “It’s late,” he said.

“I know, Dad.”

“Why are you up?”

His son sat still except for his hands, which were a constant blur of motion on his cellphone. After a time they stilled as well, and he turned and said, “Mom said we’re leaving. That we’re not supposed to tell you. Mom said you see other women.”

Os stared at him in silent bewilderment. His son stared back at him, contempt openly worn on his face. “You’re always late. It makes sense.”

It did not make any sense.

“Malachi, go to bed. I will talk to you in the morning.”

His son gazed at him still, on that sagging couch, and responded. “I don’t think you will.” He rose, and went to his bedroom.

Os stood and walked into the kitchen, where his wife Laura sat waiting.
She was stroking her temples. Her raven hair had begun to grey. He had not noticed before then. “I knew he would tell you. I just knew it. He was always too close to you. The other two, they knew it already, and they’re younger than him for... it doesn’t matter. It all doesn’t matter now.” She looked up at him, and he looked down at her with empty eyes. “I’m taking it. Half of it, at least.”

“Half of what?”

“All of it. Everything.” She raised her hand, let it fall loosely. “All this... the kids, too.

His anger flashed deep embers in him, but he said nothing. Instead his throat croaked, “Not them...”

“You’re never home. You’re always not here, and even when you are, you’re somewhere else, hiding. You’re somewhere we can’t come, Os, somewhere we can’t get into. Why do you go there? Where are you? Why don’t you love us enough to let us in? What are you so fucking afraid of?” He watched the words twist out of her mouth like wrought metal, reaching for him.

He could not apprehend his thoughts swiftly enough to conjure a response, to forge interaction that would pass as suitable. He simply croaked, “Not them...” once more.

“Oh yes, them. You just don’t care. You don’t want me, you never wanted me, you never wanted any of this. You’re a goddamn cheat, goddamn cheating trash. Never in my life, Os, never in my life would I have thought. It’s the only thing that makes sense though, right? Will you tell me, Os? Will you tell me where you’ve been? Who was it with? Please tell me Os, now or never.”

Os glared at her, his throat filling with invisible cement, his eyes filling with invisible wavering images. He groaned, “Not them...”

She eventually left the table, left him sitting in that chair. He continued sitting there in the steel frame of the kitchen chair well into the night. He fell asleep in that chair.

When he woke up his family was gone, though their belongings still lay scattered throughout the half-naked, dishonoured home. They took his dog. He supposed it was their dog now. Os walked among what was left, touching it gently with trailing fingers, when he stopped suddenly and realized his son had been right, he had not spoken to him before they were gone. No one had woken him. He continued, raising
sweaters to his nose, consumed the scent while it was fresh. He stared at the streaks on the mirrors, ogled at the fingerprints of hands he had once held. He raised his own fingers and hovered millimetres away from the fingerprints, never daring to erase them with his own smudged mark. They never came back for what was left.

He packed everything into a box and hid it away with other boxes, but what was left still throbbed in morbid harmony among the boxes in his attic for many years. He never saw his wife or three sons again.

For a time, Os became an addict. His drinking was the only thing he owned. It helped him, warmed him. He no longer counted the days he ate or did not, as long as he could drink. He would wake and pour a screwdriver. He would eat lunch with gold label, would pour any bottle he could acquire at dinner. His debt meant nothing with that warmth. His emptiness was filled with already swiftly steaming liquid. Whenever he was drunk enough, if he could not stir up action, he would promptly return home. He would daze alone into a stupor in his large, worn chair, fogged eyes glaring un perceptively at his sagging couch.

He met women that loved him that he couldn’t love back. They slept with him, they screwed him in the boathouses of their country cottages, they made love to him in a ferocious plea for kinship, they called in the middle of the night years later, still searching for his soul. The cold in him let him really touch no one; he felt no warmth but the tendrils that slid down his throat. He frequented anyplace where he could not be heard well. He sought out the dark places, concealed himself in long shadows in any well-lit place he found himself.

One day, he was deeply invested in his drink at The Cock and Pheasant. The bar was owned by two men, one who ran the bar, the other who kept the books. The man who ran the bar never spoke, simply nodded, smiled, and served. He had teeth like a wolf, his fingernails were like spurs. The bar he worked on was always polished, but never empty. The man who ran the books was a drunk, and was marked by laugh lines that etched geography onto his face. It was rumoured that once he had been a fierce boxer, but had become blind in his right eye. He enjoyed fixing each stool with his own hands, in his own way, so that each became unique.
Upon entering, a man situated himself beside Os, ignoring the customary one seat distance. He kept half-turning his head, attempting to be seen. Eventually, he said, “Don’t I know you?”

Os shook his head, did not look at the man, drank deep and responded, “Nope.”

“Say, I’m sure I do, pal. Sure, I know it.”

“Sorry, don’t think so.”

“You’re him, ain’t ya? I remember you... I went with your friend, that Jaimie girl, back in White Oaks. Wasn’t she a friend of that girl who—”

Os put down his drink. He felt the man circling the story like a vulture sent from his past, ready to pick its bones another time.

The man continued, uninvited. He had large oval eyes that bled.

“Yeah, hey, I was there that day. I saw the ambulance that took her away... why’d you have to bring her out there, hey pal? Why’d you do it? She was just a tiny thing! You musta known she wouldn’t have been able to handle it...”

He peered through the darkness of the bar, and saw waves. They rose out of the water, rode the surface like mounted riders. Jaimie had introduced them to each other, when they were young. She had always blamed herself. The froth of the waves formed in scythes, fell down in gritted teeth. He heard her yelling for him. He was a young man again. He remembered peering down, reeling. Even now, even after, it was still wild in his mind. In the winter the waves rose so strong that they froze there, a giant one way into the water. They had walked it together often, but no one really knew that. He walked it alone more than often, daring it to drop him through, daring life to strike lightning twice. Nobody really knew that either.

The man had been smiling, but then said, “Hey, she lived though, if you can call that living. It wasn’t your fault or nothing.” The man pawed sheepishly at his drink. “You got your nickname that day, didn’t ya?” The man’s face lit up. “Yeah, hey, sure! They couldn’t find ya for days, nearly starved. Hid in that park, like your head in a hole... hey, its Ostrich, ain’t it? That’s what it was!”

Os could see her, legs submerged, cold already licking her thighs hungrily. He remembered running, heard a voice screaming. It was his
own young throat, betraying him. He remembered hiding. He remembered shame.

The man smacked his hand down on the bar, lightly shaking the empty glasses. “I couldn’t remember, bothered me something fierce. It was Os, wasn’t it? Excuse me, Os, I gotta see a John about a horse.”

The man stood, extending his hand for a few silent moments, then headed towards the dim hallway that lead to the facilities. Still Os sat, watching the waves.

It would be impossible to express. It would be unlikely he could ever wrap a cold clutch on what had really happened. He could still see Jaimie’s face in his mind as she passed him in the hospital outside her room, weeks later. He was on the way out, head down, she was on the way in, with flowers. She had looked at him like he was a dead dog. Sad, but empty. They never spoke again.

He did not face those waves again until years later, when she finally passed. He spent the night face down in his own vomit, and when he woke, he was sure he could smell her, just for a second, among the rank stench of putrid, frozen sweat. His suit never recovered, had to be burnt in a trashcan, crisp to ash among the debris. This cremation woke him in his skin. He felt his height, stretched his timid soul within its cage. He remembered her hand in his, remembered her glistening skin, remembered her eyes last. This shook him, ruined him, called him to himself. He did not recognize himself, felt estranged. He felt the mirror must be lying to him, attempting to dissuade him, attempting to convince him of the authority of things that were not.

Os stopped being an addict after his suit’s cremation. He strained himself, wrung himself out. He drugged himself, outran himself, purged himself with vicious intent. He was hoping he’d die before it happened, but somehow he didn’t. It took three years of crawling forward, being dragged back, being thrust forward again, losing it, gaining it.

He found himself standing outside the small storage unit, casting glances over his shoulder out of habit. There was no one left who wanted to know, but he felt ashamed of his secret nonetheless. The door jostled and clanged upwards into the dark ceiling of the unit, and he slid into the darkness himself, sealing the door. He stood in total black, absorbing the silence, nose lightly picking through any nearby scent. Woodchips, sawdust, paint, lacquer. He smelt the birthplace of ink.
He pulled the dangling, garish cord that hung from the ceiling, and revealed the room in stark, unforgiving light. He seemed at odds with the draped mystery in the middle of the unit. He stood to the side nearest the entrance, like a wallflower at a dance. He did not move, he seemed to tense even being here. His throat cried silently for its familiar warmth as the cold took him, but he could not shake the imagination of those waves. Chopping up in the sky, reaching out with fingers that spindled the froth. They swept from within him, rolled out of him, washing away his resistance, drowning him as he watched his fears float and bumble harmlessly in the turmoil. He wondered if she was there, spinning in those waves, caught in those depths. He jerked back the dusted cover, throwing up particulate and ash. When it settled, the water in his eyes was both rising and being dried at the same moment. Each speck in the light was a choice, spiralling in the chaotic way it does. He stood still again, letting it settle around him, wondering where his place among the dirt might be.

The desk gleamed. Its polished sides whispered, its sanded curves moaned, its drawers silently exposed their organs. He walked around it, circling it, stalking it. It remained unfinished, still, but hummed. It remained lifeless, but murmured to him. When he touched it he felt flashes of life in the dark places within him. He felt his half-buried stories begin scratching against the lids of their coffins. He felt the confused soul calling him, begging him to pick up a pen, a pencil, to shed his fingers down to bones and draw himself, if he must. He felt it all, howling at him, silently culled for too long.

The writing desk that he and many hidden hours had made, carved, sanded, oiled, stained, lacquered, now throbbed, beat like a wild heart, yowled a soul shredding symphony. He felt it and removed his hand. He returned the dust-covered tarp.

They did not know about the in-between. They called him Os.