



MAKE A FIST & TONGUE
THE KNUCKLES

EMILY O'NEILL

Make a Fist & Tongue the Knuckles

poems by Emily O'Neill

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World's Smallest Woman

Keep her to yourself. Let truth fester
into a stranger creature.
There's a Florida
midway (here I go
stealing your tangerines
again) with Cuban sandwiches
& Argentine barbecue next to
elephant ears & kettle corn. Where it's hot
this constantly, anything can be easily had.
(that's how you tell it) String of sideshows
for a dollar each. Mirrored dark
bending shame into a glove
for your greasy hand to try. I wonder
where I'd live on the panhandle. Am I as secret
as I think I am. Stockings striped to the hip & how
you learned to cradle bone before biting
a wing. Maybe I'm the woman
marked *smallest in the world*,
one you thought a hoax for sure.
Or I'm the yelp you became when
she waved as you turned the corner.

You can't explain surprise
to yourself. Somebody else has to.
In the mirror your hair gets longer but
your eyes remain the same depth. Keep that
gulf to yourself. Juice spilling into your beard. Can't
eat anything without a mess. (citrus or me)
You're swimming away again. Scared
of what's purer than. Crawling back
through the mangroves. Lies too dense
to pick clean of meat.

Your Boy Came By

He's a little bit red from rehearsal
but sweet enough it can't matter.
Knew you wanted to ruin him
that morning on the mountain.

He says you've got a burner coat on.
Says you seem blinded by twisting
pretty & not meaning it. Recognizes
quiet, licks the seam. Some river
shocking your states apart.
Your boy came by & won you

over. Didn't buy you a drink because why bother
bartering. Your boy, for free or you
won't risk it. Bet he knew the cliff houses
same as remembering the exit,
the tokens for toll money.

You want to wreck the foxgloves.
You want to un-layer for spring.
Unburden your knuckles
of expectation. Undress
to your ankles & bend.

No Flinching

It's April & snowing in Wyoming
& you could see the storm

tumbling closer until Trevor was first
my friend when he wanted

to sell me a bicycle, when he told me
about Albrecht's angel etching, when

I told him the birds I've fed
bloodworms, when we cut lines & smoked

blunts in the walk in freezer, when
I was two dozen pink grocery store roses

when Jaeger at lunch & no flinching, when
he heard them shoot 8 Bells & cashed in

his ticket for her broken front legs. Poor
horse only knew tumbling around the turns

ignoring pain. Trevor wants to name a baby
Rumor. Wants every julep in Kentucky. Wants to know

if I know any girl just like me, gives me his jacket, snaps
teeth off my jeans' zipper, doesn't pay for the repair

doesn't see me again after his birthday, after reciting
Coleridge shirtless on his porch & believing me

capable of the same. I lean into the turn. The pocket
knife he slipped into my palm. Daniel Boone. Reminder

of the hat I wore every day after Montana. He'd pull the tail
or maybe not. Maybe he told me he had a kid

with my name. Maybe lying is a kind of wishing. Sugar
I can taste the toothpick in his teeth. Can fly

away from fire before I'm finished.

Lucky Like That

A lot of women love you, mad
little thing. Pistol shoved in your pocket
like a wallet. Can't be poor when you're a killer.
Can't be poor when there's fish in the river
standing still after the hammer falls or the girl
you picked up off her porch like a milk bottle.
She's freckling in the front seat. Reading aloud.
Rumor: Frank Sinatra & Rita Hayworth are in love.
Fact: They are, but not with each other. Imagine them
dancing in salvaged boots or bare feet. A lot of women
never read the comics. Can't say no to strays.
If Daddy shoots her dog. If the house peels apart
as it burns. Can't be poor when there's a Cadillac
waiting for your hands on the wheel. See what you want
& it's yours, easy. Talk your way across the prairie.
This isn't Texas anywhere except at your temples.
Where the sun lives. Where the smoke gathers.
Your redhead unraveling in handcuffs, in the salt grass.
Your apple chucked over your shoulder, half-eaten.
Your frown lines. Your James Dean. You're bad enough.
Can't be poor when even the cops beg for a souvenir.

Always a Sinner

I kiss knives hollow
of purpose. Leave me warm
in my faith. Car alarms & the lonely
boy. Another baby
needs baptizing. Simple.

C'mon, Jesus. Pay my bills or return
me to dust. I lick the phone
receiver of your light. Slip
tomorrow from her leash,
invite 24 more hours in.

Yes, a spell. I fester slow. Hollow
lust. Sharpie skin. What's the point of denial
when it washes off with water. Take me
(hopeful) to the sewer. Blame rotten echo
on this spine without a voice.

The best epistles weren't
properly transcribed. Underneath the manuscript,
look for lovers. Their weakness.

Save me from
your shaking head. I can be
bone borrowed from stereo.
I can be Christmas. A lie, falling.
Your new reputation.

What's the point of love if it won't break me
an angel. C'mon, Zookeeper. Give me a choice
better than razor or grave. Better than singe.
Leave marks or I won't learn.

Soft Monstrosity

It's Sunday & the sirens come louder
without bodies in the way. I'd ask you
to bring out your dead but they're here
already in the street. When I was young I ran
away from feeling better. I expected to be married
to a ghost by now. Our vows were the howling
space between my body & me leaving it.

I can't lie about my violences. One traffic
light. The number I tuck behind my ear.
I've intended to leave. To carve me
open like a smiling impulse. I hid
the knives in dirt & planted trees above them.
Burial is the strongest spell. If you seed
a name in soil that's a hex better than salt.
I was rarely happy in New Jersey so
I buried it in me. Dragged my o's
until I was a corn queen. Told people
I come from a different nothing. Soft
monstrosity. Chaotic neutral. Not steel cable
dancing another bridge up out of the river.

Last time my hair got long it was by force.
I was killed. Kidding. My eyes snapped
open in the final frame. I survived bodily
restructuring. My mind changed so I call it new.

Have I said I keep dreaming we're snake
tangled on a bus through years I didn't know
what to call myself. Gram cut down the oaks

so they couldn't kill us if it rained too hard.
The front yard is waist high with flowers now.
My grandpa chased a tornado down the driveway
just to save the aluminum siding. That's how loud
my people are. How loud are yours. Is your voice
an echo too. Do they trust you with keys.

I'm new here. So are you. Welcome to the stable
where we keep hay but no horses. Come
itch your way to sleep with me. Isn't it great
to still have skin. I'm new at loving with both feet
planted. I miss teeth cracking as they kiss curb.

The story goes that two neighborhood cops
pulled me out of my mother
when I was born. Perfect emergency.
Children rush. I'm a child. A monster
small enough to hold so hold me.

Cave of Wonders

I order plantains, ceviche, another Old Cuban,
sugar dates & figs & a spoonful of forget-me-not blue.
Walk a long flight of stairs to a view we never see: where
the rich write checks to assuage guilty wallets. Watch them
bid on seasons away, on wine at the feet of mountains, on imaginary
luxury. I know where the gold really is: lift the carpet & gather our dust.
Ash & blush & what a greedy mistake I am. Pass your hand
over the belly of the lamp; the air will taste sharp.
Shaved fennel & pistachio. Three wishes dangle in the air.
Each of them imperfect. The first one turned out all wrong:
my heart too grown & weighty for a girl my age / not unlike
waiting for my name to flood back into a dark room
in a city, say Vancouver. Say he planted me
in foreign soil / invasive species / & I grew there
like hair. Swung from ceiling like a chandelier.
Second wish: I want to be a chandelier. I want to be
a chandelier, to know you can't touch me like I won't shred your fingers
velvet. Blood thinned / we go soft in the post-midnight shift
from shade to secret. Here is the ghost composed of what I thought
important: that freckle colony across your shoulders, the quickness
of your fingers. I'll never know what you thought when I slid
along the wall—a passing headlight—& vanished out the window,
tiger-style. My paws fat & quiet. Every bird in the menagerie robbed
of scream. I've stolen bread from rougher men & both my hands remain
my own. I've stolen bread to bury my bones deeper than they belong
but there's no cave sleep in this desert. No wonder to swallow
me in a gust, no apt punishment for my greedy open mouth.
I haven't wished for worlds undone. I haven't wished at all
in years. There's one more oasis waiting in the belly of the lamp
but there are no right words to summon it. Say the rains
come early, leave late. What then? Could I beg a boat
out of thin air? Would it leak if I trusted it too much?

Orioles

There is a system of caves I depend upon
to keep the winter out of me. I pour wax into them,
watch the weather melt. I pour bass into my body,
get slippery with shake. This is to say—I am blanketed
in small sounds & small movements, covered in birds
cracking echinacea seeds in little knife-beaks. I'm skinny-
dipping in corn silk. I'm buttered with light from the windows
& the shadows cast on the ceiling are skulls & isn't it portentous
to tease the dark this way? You were falling asleep on camera
as I was waking up on camera. We are recorded or recording always.
We are flooding with future. Unlock the door, check for mail,
buy a sandwich, back in bed, ride my mattress like a kite
to the wilds of Iowa & by wilds I mean anywhere
we can take our shoes off. In the time it takes to dry my hair,
it'll be spring & we'll be over-caffeinated in the grass.
I'm buttered with light, savoring the sweet & salt.

Need to Know

I

I've burned the dress I never wear & taken back my summer plumage. We're both hollow boned & ribs floating away from tiny coals. Confession: I've never not

wilted under somebody's thumb
but lately there's a woman with an ax
& a floral jacket & I'm her. My trash cigarettes,

chipped teeth. Trick knees. Green & gold & needle & thread
& here's a song I don't sing to anyone. Welcome to the garden of cats
wound & hissing. Welcome to headstones falling

through my fingers like Pez or pennies. I've always been
sweetly useless. Confession: I'm afraid of kissing
you like a cherry pit, like a crab unstrung from his shell.

I practice on my hand. Make a fist & tongue the knuckles.
I don't know what certainty tastes like
but do know there's spit & blood. A slick wrong

Minnesota lake. Let's go swimming. I'm not embarrassed
of having a body or what she wants without asking
permission. Confession: I'm more unholy than you've imagined.

Blasphemy's the dress I can't remove. Freckle & needle
& Dalmatian jasper & here I am salting my shoulders, telling the truth
too soon. Confession: you keep your eyes closed

& it feels modest which is sometimes perfect.
Also, something I've never been. I don't know how
not to live in filth. Welcome to the room I can't clean.

Welcome to the shy insides of what no one bothers keeping.
I've been collected silver & snuffed candles & seen too much
of myself charred with want. Confession is a sacrament

& I still believe in those. I still believe my knees
could offer who to be. How to fold. I'm trying to listen for once
when I hold the umbrella over us

because it's always raining & I am never clean.

II

Because it's always raining & I am never clean
I've decided to stop disguising me. Here are the claws, me
teething where your neck turns, me spilling

then bubbling like an egg broken on a flat grill.
Me unbuttoning you with my mouth because I'm good
at mouths because you say so. You close your eyes

when trying to remember. Remember me to sleep & I'll wasp
burrow into the ground. Welcome me to swallow you
whole & I'll do it. Call me a fish gone blind

at the bottom of everything. Lighted lures
on the ends of every hair strand. I'm soft & glowing.
Wish you'd tell me where you keep what you know.

Is remembering a muscle? I think so. I strongly regret
not bottling our Sundays for future use. Welcome me
back to the table, unshowered. I'll crack

an egg or six, poach them into soft orbit. A planet
for your thoughts. Nickel for your slotted wrist. Wind up
& count by lumens. One firefly in the garden is a moon to somebody

small enough. The water piles up & stands in a crescent.
A city you know I've not met yet. Have I known you years
without realizing? I think so. I'm good at predicting

who will matter by how the thought of them spreads.
We have a fevered future. Welcome me to hunger wisdom.
I wish you'd tell me where you keep me. If

I'm really the sugar in how you say my name.

III

I'm really the sugar in how you say my name
but more desert than dessert this time. Rock & salted
chocolate. The long blue line to Wonderland. Where

are you? Buried? Bitten? How thick
is the blood today? How little do you notice
the difference in heat? What's it like to come

from sand & hate glass? What's it like to scream
only with the corners of your mouth
eyes rolling because I say so?

I took my dress off for you—an invitation
to keep seeing what you shouldn't take.
You won't just take & I like that.

You hesitate & I bite harder. I want you
stuck like river bending in a valley.
What's it like to hate sand & shatter

anyway? I want to push the stove & fill you
like an alley. Here, my fingers. Little ghosts. Here,
your fingers troubling me like rain

haunts the freeway in a dream. Confess
your sins like you don't sin
properly. I'm rotten

in ways you can't stand reading.
Lips. This. Hips peeled from denim.
I want to sweat your sound. You, loud

in a haze of smoke I'll braid into a crown.
Happy birthday, flower spine. I'm your plaster
sieve. I leak & catch & leak & leave

without wanting elsewhere. Without losing you.

IV

Without wanting elsewhere. Without losing you.
Without the usual serrated exchange of invasions.
You know. The dance nobody teaches.

We're all just magnets waiting to be dragged
somewhere different, yeah? Just little poles
one wrong breath could manipulate.

I won't breathe if that's what air means.
I won't breathe or ruin anything.
I'm not fishing for affection or playing

towards entrapment. Let it all be voluntary.
No declarations made beyond what skin remembers
& wants us both to keep. More time as a souvenir.

A second round. No shot glasses.
There are ways to get lost properly. Muddled
sugar & peel against the bottom of a tumbler.

Our thumbs dancing across each other.
A little ice & two fingers more. Wine wine
wine then the warmth is a cab & me ribboning apart

before you've pushed past my clothes. I'm aware
how impractical it will be to revive a sense
of what's possible. To tell every story.

We skinny. We simmer. We strip
slow. Take weeks to find a bedroom.
Haven't drunk myself sick since or cared much

for spreading thin on toast at anyone's request.
You, the only one asking if I'm okay without pushing.
I could go & that would be fine. Close the door

before pressing into a new mattress. Escape.
But I return to see where this will land. Your hand on my knee
at the movies. Your mouth open when

I changed clothes on the street
without blushing. Confession: I'm glad
you didn't laugh. Glad you haven't left.

I won't breathe a word until you're done with me.

V

I won't breathe a word until you're done with me.
(I'm lying) I've told absolutely everyone
who needs to know I don't have time for them

because I'm eating French fries in bed, writing
you another letter just so I can lick the envelope.
I keep my corners folded in because it's practical

& name only the worst parts because it's not. Who can say
what rots? Who could tell me what I need if I don't know myself?
The trick to belief is avoiding questions. Never ask

for what you don't already know. Honesty isn't complex
but it is difficult. My first kiss hinged on a boy not believing
my age or inexperience. I've tried to be older & open

ever since. A man told me it's impressive to get engaged
then fail to wed. According to strangers I'm twice as impressive
as girls my age. A trick to play in conversation. If I told you

I could love you, what would happen next? I'm terrible
at math & monogamy, but I try exquisitely. We don't have time to worry
what this looks like to anyone. I had to be here in person.

To steal an eyelash & make a wish. Happiness belongs to June
& I live in September. What if I show up pink & restless?
What if I've told you far too much? I want

more freckles & a cup of Assam tea & you
you you drowsy, teaching me to lie still
through noon. I want eggs even though I hate them

& to take you to breakfast in Minnesota. I want you
to hear I'm glad that you exist. I am. So glad.
To meet you again. I wasn't ready the first time.

I've burned the dress I can't wear & taken back my summer.

Dress Up In You

I need to come see it, our unlucky
horseshoe. The future is dripping
out the ends of us. There's a lizard
& ginger in your bedroom. Ginger & blood
falling towards my feet when I sit down
to say this. How many cities I've written
you from. Our shoulders & low pool table lighting
the summer we lived together interstitial
in your cave. Returning a heart. Key to slice
open the skin of an apple I can't eat. Make up
the living room sofa bed & don't leave it
for a week. I fell asleep on you between sentences.
I fall asleep & you're reaching towards me
in a lecture hall. My father is speaking & keeps up
the conversation when his ear breaks off into his hand.
Mutiny, placed on the table. The story continues.
We bought veils secondhand & a red dragon kimono for \$5
& fried golden grease at Chicken Delight.
I miss there being nobody else. Those stolen yellow shoes
we volleyed between us until they rotted
apart. Do you forgive me, button?
I drove the long way past your house
to be sure you weren't a paper doll.
Dress me up in you again. Turquoise
pendant & black denim. Lapis you
uncoiled from your wrist & crowned me with.
I wear blue every day. I see you grew but still fit.

Poem for Brunch with Your Family Where They Asked When We'd Be Married

It wasn't that they asked what I did for work & choked
at the utterance of *waitress* or your mother's insistence
on grad school as unfortunate or your uncle demanding
a second glass for the beer in front of me. The rule among drinkers
is it takes 3 toasts to forge a friendship & while we were toasting
I remembered the table as the same one Derek & I ate at
the night Wellbutrin swelled me rosy & raw, night he
demanded I put on a wig *bitch* & come to dinner anyway
& I bet you don't know how long it took for me
to make a home that wasn't for a man. I bet
your mother got mad when I said I came
to Boston to get engaged & stayed to take up space
as my only alimony. Mothers don't want to hear
their possible daughters have already been daughters
all along. Yes, I have parents. No, you can't meet them.
My father is dead & my mother needs coaching
on how not to kill what she loves. I hate the staying
it takes to make a home. I hate what I can't tell
these people needling me. I hate the frown
riding every mouth. The disappointment I am
for not dropping everything to stand by my man.
You wouldn't let go of my hand. I drank
two bottles of wine after work trying to break
my fist open. I knew immediately not to
order tartare if I wanted to keep my favorite
mine. I bet you thought it strange I had grilled cheese
instead of something actually dead. Part of me
will never wake up the way you want. Part of
the vagina is called *vestibule*. Part of womanhood

is waiting for your turn to speak & they wouldn't
give me one & that tells me everything about weddings
I couldn't already imagine as I coughed the wine back up
as if pregnant with the wrong future. I am raw with rose
& ready to kiss somebody else at the bar where
your family insisted that *they're huggers* & I'm theirs
now if I'd just melt a little or file off my edges & it's your job
to tell your blood to fuck off & let me have the home I built
for as long as I keep my claws in it. It's nice you want
a vacation place but cozy's not spelled like colony.
Tell them never. Tell them traitors don't get to stay.

Last Year's Blues

My mother bought me a television
& we shot tequila to doctor the ache
of walking without crutches.

My monster threatened
to wander into traffic & I hung up the phone.
Dreamt next to my doppelgänger. Never bought a snake.
Never went to New York. Remembered the morning
I puked in the office stall & walked out early,
bought matzoh meal, made soup & returned
to the stance of one about to leave through a window
& by *window* I mean *mouth*

& by mouth I mean I closed mine
before it wandered away from me & across
a fretted neck. Never liked men with guitars.
How they need constant noise keeping them
still. I don't know why Greg had it
with him or if the sad story is always true

or if I would've kept a secret or scalded
the soup or kissed him back if he tried
thieving or recorded an LP of yowling
mistake & by *mistake* I mean I limped
past that opportune window. Didn't sing
at all when coaxed to. Cooked
chicken thighs under the broiler. Seared flight
into my fingers. What if I left every time
the door opened. Can you
imagine the ruin of that
freedom? Or holding a crow
with only two hands. What if

I could hold a crow
& call its arrested eye
the trophy I deserve?

Neon Cacti

Little devil
doesn't dance
outside of snakeskin
boots or off the cliffs
of shoulders. There's red
rock to crush into your cheek.
So many names to plant
where they can drown.
If you bury the horns
they'll push up like trees
through wildfire ash. Bright
as the sting from slapping
a thigh in time. There's red
smeared where the road ends
& we're driving there.
Swimming in lipstick & neon
cacti. Used to think I was
spiny & wild. Used to screw
my heels into the wooden floor
to keep the lightning back.
When you get struck
the burn scar is star-shaped.
You can pretend
you aren't touched
by an evil. You can blame
the drained Gibraltar glasses
still slick with firewater.
There's an excuse to make
on your way out, a story
about the cape color
that gets a man gored.

Don't Know How Not to Beg

I'd like to propose toasting
every slice a second time
& scratch tickets when night grows ungodly

frozen on the trek I've only done in reverse
Rat City never a sleeping place until
I spend the night on his shoulder, a bird

he always thought me taller
blame stilts or volume of my unbridled
voice & I don't know how

not to beg me to slow down a little
to rest, to consider, to be nobody
awhile & hide what I know

of his back when the sweater comes off
dragging t-shirt with it every time
this, a summer gesture misplaced

I remember nothing I can't carry
with me & night sneaks out of the party
& I sneak out of asking for seconds

Rat City near the old place I would stay
up too late on the porch couches kissing
boys without last names or intentions

like this boy kissing the girl I had been
instead of kissing me & aren't I older
than the owner of this tremor

& wasn't the girl anybody's to take
home anyway no one owns satisfaction
or Allston or what changes without warning

this spit, the constant memorization
of who has danced with whom & what
might happened if somebody cut in

How to Whistle

Shoes makes the man aware
he can leave at any moment.

We're affectionate strangers
because we're aware of the alternative.

It's enough to buy the first round. To look away
& feel your wallet thinning. It's beyond plenty

to chew a lip that isn't yours, to lace your body
into the scar of another's recent longing.

I'm sure I've bled on sadder men. For this one
I apologized but meant you needed this. He's sick

& starts the shower for the third time, says
I'm amazing for not churning at the sugar

we swallowed like new birds. I guess
I forgot to eat dinner. He told me to be quiet

but revised silence with want. Cracked
pepper over me & chased the grit

through every corner. Pinned me
at the elbows & broke a finger

holding on so tight. A February holiday
seems a cruel joke. Let's celebrate loss

instead of love. I'll eat a single pill
for breakfast & feel wild from un-sleep.

I can't act any kinder than I have
already. I find rough, pretty men hysterical

& they find me old at the corners
of my eyes & older still in the way

I walk home holding my own hand.

Not So Fast

And they're off, or we are, or our shoes
at least. I'll pay upfront. Feel the price hitch in my knees

when I clear the starting gate. *Affair* is a stupid word
for waking up under a new ceiling. What is a cloud

but an excuse to look up. What is a kiss but a shadow
crossing your mouth just long enough to borrow

heat. An *affair* never happened. February. Breakfast. None of it.
The city was confused, so it pretended spring. All museum bones

romantic, though I can't say what kind. Cherry or warm
laundry or the hookah coals glowing like happy little gods.

What is a promise but thread no one sees until it's broken.
Who are we to protest. When we were hungry

we imagined a mother slicing mushrooms
into a saucepan. Sweating the onions. Humming

a levy up to where we evaporated. To the open air
where we never happened. Where we wanted nothing.

Where I took my medicine. Where we clapped
for illegal fireworks. Where I landed

lightning high. The script was less a script than a suggestion
for how to avoid haunting the next ten decades of maybe.

Drive a spike into the ground. Wait for it to draw a spark.
Fill the bathtub with water. In case of unseasonable heat,

knot the curtains back. Take the doors off their hinges.
Drink cobweb gin where you can get it. Say it wasn't easy

laying down in the dirt. I wore too many clothes for it.
None of them fit. I'm no good at shrinking so I painted my face

in your mirror. Tied every stick of furniture with silk.
I never saw a spider in your house but I felt legs

grown from all possible corners. A restlessness.
What is slowing to a walk but another excuse to not touch.

Don't answer me. I won't stand still long enough.

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Emily O'Neill is a writer, artist, and proud Jersey girl. Her recent poems and stories can be found in *The Journal*, *Redivider*, and *Washington Square*, among others. Her debut collection, *Pelican*, is the inaugural winner of YesYes Books' Pamet River Prize. She is the author of three chapbooks: *Celeris* (Fog Machine, 2016), *You Can't Pick Your Genre* (Jellyfish Highway, 2016), and *Make a Fist & Tongue the Knuckles* (Nostrovia! Press, 2016). She teaches writing at the Boston Center for Adult Education and edits poetry for *Wyvern Lit*. Follow her online @tabernacleteeth.



*Confess
your sins like you don't sin
properly*

The boys in Emily O'Neill's poems are softies but act like they're bad. The girls, however, don't pretend: "Leave marks or I don't learn." These poems fill with sensory data, knives and joy and fury, then zip past you at breakneck speed like the brightest fastest ride on the boardwalk. There is no standing still.

–Niina Pollari, *Dead Horse* (Birds LLC)

"There are ways to get lost properly." But intimacy isn't as simple as a freckle colony or a hip surfacing from the tightest pair of jeans. The want or need to hold that stranger's hand as they lead you further into the bar. What I mean is O'Neill isn't the tongue or the fist. She's the hand. To properly read these poems requires an honest look at yourself with no apologies to be made.

–Alexis Pope, *That Which Comes After* (Big Lucks)

N!P