

*The Drowning Dog*

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1.

On the morning of May 19 1921, George Willard Thrush was arrested at his home in Knox, Indiana. The initial charge was for the possession and attempted distribution of obscene material.

It stemmed from a story Thrush had written a year earlier under the pseudonym, R.F. Thicke, entitled; "The Drowning Dog".

Setting the events into motion that morning was the discovery of a carbon copy of the typed manuscript found a week earlier. Carolyn St. James, who had been Thrush's waitress that morning, said she had found it wedged between the seat cushions of a booth in a local diner. Upon reading a random passage from it, she was reportedly so disturbed that she left the diner, Thrush's bill still in her apron, and walked the 1.3 miles to the police station.

The case and the ensuing arrest became a national story, enveloping the city and state in scandal throughout the following summer.

Much of what happened the morning of Thrush's arrest is still under debate, with a subsequent 7 year federal investigation that was quietly closed on September 21st 1928 with no broader criminal charges ever brought.

The "St. James copy", as its colloquially referred to, was the only known original copy in existence at the time and it is unclear how it eventually made its way into the public domain in the years that followed as its whereabouts are still unknown.

According to a deposition given in 1996 in an unrelated criminal case, it was said to be owned by the great grandson of Governor Warren T. McCray, who was serving in the office at the time of the scandal. Though much has been written and speculated about in regards to the governors fixation on the story during the ordeal and in the following years, there are no records or evidence substantiating its chain of custody. It had long been rumored that the Governor had obtained the St. James copy after it had went missing from a storage locker in the police station sometime in early 1922 and had held it privately for the remainder of his life.

After his death, a note card was found in his desk drawer with a quote he had written from the book;

*"I used to wonder why he treated me as he did. I would try to anticipate his moods, studying tiny changes on his face or small shifts in his gait, but he gave away nothing. He was like a picture of himself, frozen and focused. There was no pattern to the plot, or at least that I could understand. With time, I learned to accept our relationship as it was, and take whatever pleasure I could get from it, whatever pleasures he would allow me. I would have to think about pleasure differently. Pain was a true reflection of the world, so in that way, he gave me the world- and so much more! Love and tenderness were stories for young stupid pups and in those awful fantasies lay my true anguish. His pain washes over me. He gave me life, and even now, continues to. Who am I to question such grace?"*

Its first legitimate publishing was in December of 1957 by a small book publisher and purveyor out of San Francisco who specialized in works of text and images on the fringes.

Of the 433 known pages, only 387 were ever found, with a chapter and a half still missing to this day. It has since become legendary in transgressive and extreme fiction circles and is considered a corner stone of the genre with a whole separate sub-genre of fan fiction devoted to the missing 46 pages.

Modern criticism of the book focuses on the vivid but clumsy writing style as well as its gratuitous and unflinching portrayals of sexual violence and animal cruelty. It is also since been seen as critique of the violence and barbarism of the first World War and the nascent hegemonic roll of the United States that would occur in the coming decades. Thrush himself served in the U.S. Army from 1915-1918, and spent most of the war fighting in the French countryside.

The story begins from the perspective of a cottonmouth snake who had just bitten a puppy he had found drinking at the edge of a lake. The snake, who is also young, watches as the pup struggles for air and quips wryly about disguising himself as the puppy by wearing his fur home to his mother in order to kill her and the rest of the family. As he plays the scenario out in his mind, He instead imagines himself being embraced by the mother, who seems not to realize his cruel ruse. He pictures himself drinking milk from her underside and sleeping in a warm pile with the rest of the his siblings. He closes his eyes and imagines the warmth of the mothers body on his own- picturing her intense love as a vapor being released from their bodies.

The scene is abruptly interrupted by a man who brutally stomps the snake to death, sucks the venom out of the dogs neck and carries him home wrapped in his jacket.

The story then cuts forward in time to the now-grown dog, trying to remember where he had come from. Though the man is quiet and emotionally distant, the dog is grateful for the meals, water and shelter that he receives, though pines for the man's praise and attention.

As the story continues, the man becomes increasingly cruel and sadistic. Initially meals are skipped, but soon lead to strange happenings, which the dog is left to interpret. For instance, the dog notices the head of a duckling in his water dish one morning. Initially shocked, the dog takes it as a reward and enthusiastically eats. For much of the abuse throughout the story, the dog makes excuses for the man, blaming himself for much of what he endures.

Most of the book is told through the perspective of the dog, except in some of the most graphic scenes of violence when it switches to a third person narrative. Thrush's descriptions of violence are often ornate and go on for whole chapters. For instance, in one notorious scene, the man forces the dog to eat the rotten corpse of a neighbors Rottweiler, named Simone, while the man rapes him. The scene goes on for 61 pages with many passages devoted to detailed explanations of the materiality of Simone's corpse- on which both the man and the narrator seem fixated on.

This scene in particular was read out to the jury during the trial, causing one juror to vomit in the court room.

As the story continues, the man's brutality becomes more extreme, moving from sexual violence to torture and mutilation. The man begins removing body parts, sometimes presenting them back to the dog as gifts, sex toys, or meals for the dog to eat, which in an attempt to please the man, he does.

In the final chapter, it is revealed that all that is left of the dog, is a single eye with the optical nerve still attached to his brain. The dog, unaware of his physical state, watches the man stand over as he reads from a piece of paper.

Again, switching from a first to third person narrative, the unknown narrator recounts a poem that the man reads to the dog. Entitled; The Drowning Dog, the poem is about a man who comes across a dog struggling in a lake near his house. The man stops and watches the dog and imagines himself in several different scenarios such as, swimming out and pulling the dog to safety, shooting him with a rifle from shore or stealing a boat and riding off with the dog never to return. Ultimately, while musing over these options, the dog eventually drowns.

As the dog lay dying, having the poem read to him, he imagines that the man is reading him a story about a young pup reuniting with his mother after he's been lost in a terrible storm. He imagines the mother as a giant snake, with fur just like his own and pale blue eyes like the mans. He pictures the mother and pups long embrace with her wrapped around his body with a tight, gentle squeeze. As the dog drifts off, he imagines the love and warmth generated by the two of them as a thick billowing smoke rising from their bodies and disappearing into the atmosphere.

2.

As the two officers stood at Thrush's front door at around 7:58 am that morning, they both thought of the report they had received about Thrush and his story in the morning brief. The older officer seemed personally offended by it. He had once had a dog he said, when he was very young. He told the story of his father putting his dog, Gussy down with his Winchester one summer in the late afternoon. The heavy drone of crickets weighting the memory down, further flattening the old officers folded grimace . He had tripped on an exposed root from a Scarlett oak in his front yard and lost control of a small hand axe he had been carrying and it found itself in the neck of old sweet Gussy. There was nothing to be done apparently. The old officer had been stewing ever since then, mumbling under his breath about love and respect- though the old officer seemed to have neither with him there on Thrushes front steps that morning. The other officer, who was considerably younger, seemed ambivalent about the whole thing... slightly amused even. He had reread the report several times, quoting passages out-loud in a sort-of mock horror. Once, when the young officer was a boy, he drowned a wounded finch he had found in the field next to his childhood home. A part of him considered it the humane thing to do, as the finch was very young and had probably been left there by its mother. *If not I, he thought, then surly by the fangs of an indifferent world. We all should be so lucky,* he thought. As he held the little bird below, his thumb on its chest, he felt its heartbeat go from a flutter to a void and the rush of power he felt in that moment didn't just come from the sheer physical advantage the he had over the tiny bird, but rather, the self-satisfaction he felt in taking its life as an act of mercy that only he in that moment could delineate. The boy imagines himself a man just as the man imagines himself a boy. Then, a hard knock on the door.

The house was unassuming, a simple one story structure with an ashen green facade with a hazy brown membrane of moss, mold and mud. It sat about an 1/8 of a mile off of what would later become S 700 E in a heavily wooded area between Eagle Creek and the Yellow River.

Even the house itself seemed suspect, though this is often the case in these matters. The house always seems to reflect he inner workings of its occupier. It had the signs of a slow and steady death that come from holding in the type of trauma that infiltrates your chemistry and reshapes your body accordingly.

The young officer knocked again.

"I can't wait to cave this piece of shits face in", the old officer said with the tenor of an old grizzly bear. "You just take my lead, kid".

The old officer knocked this time. A loud staccato that only police officers seem to be able to conjure.

"Yea well, let's see what he's gotta say first", the young officer said. "I wanna speak to this dog fucker myself. You can't trust a writer, ya know- especially today. They're born liars."

And with that and a quick look shared between them, the young officer pulled his pants up just past his waist, took a measured step back, and kick the door in. The dissonance between the power exerted and the ease at which door flew opened, as if held together with a loosely tied shoe lace, caused the young officer to stumble as his body propelled itself through the threshold. "Jesus H. Christ?!" The young officer squealed as he caught his balance on an adjacent wall.

Still standing in the door way with his pistol drawn, the old officer began surveying the space.

"Get your goddamned pistol out", the old officer said as he passed the young officer, who was still brushing himself off.

"I'm fine thanks for asking, the young officer said under his breath". "And why do we need our pistols out"? He doesn't know we're coming, and he's obviously not home. Let's go wait in the car till he--"

"Quiet!", the old officer hissed with a strained whisper. "Did you hear that?" Both men stood quietly, listening.

“I don’t think so”, the young officer whispered back. “What did it sound like?”.

“Like a goddamned chicken shit pervert hiding in the walls, that’s what it sounded like”. The young officer chuckled. “OK then... let’s have a look around”

The interior was modest, plain and tidy. Not at all what the officers were expecting. Well kept hardwood floors. Minimal furniture- just the basics. Everything was placed thoughtfully and ordered.

On the walls were hand painted murals. Some were small, no larger than a matchbook, while others took up entire walls. In the hall way connecting the living area with the water closet and bedroom, Thrush had painted an expansive pastoral scene, taking up the entire length of the hallway. A long panoramic view of a meadow in what looked like a late spring afternoon. Way in the background, sat a figure. Their head turned away looking off into a distance only partially rendered. Due to the way the image surrounded the viewers bodies, taking up their full visual fields, it gave the painting a slightly voyeuristic point of view. As if they, the viewers, were watching this person in the distance who had not yet realized their presence.

On a wall shared with a small kitchen table was a painting of a man seated, as if at the table. A skillfully done trompe l’oeil, the man sat with a mug in one hand, with his other pressed open on the table. He was leaning forward, slightly wild-eyed with a big gaping smile, frozen, in the middle of a jubilant story or a dirty joke.

In almost every room, Thrush had painted these murals. Some were done in a highly realistic style while others were more expressive in their brush strokes.

Opposite the toilet in the water closet was a small painting, about the size of a post card, of a dog and a boy. They sat on a small hill together. The dog laying lazily on the grass while the boy sits next to him, his shoes off with a small pile of dead pheasants to his side.

“OK, now see... I actually like this one”, the young officer said as he got up close to study it.

The old officer left the room and walk into the kitchen. He opened the icebox, an old cream colored steel cabinet, and inspected it.

“Still ice in here”, the old officer said to himself. Inside was a jar of rendered fat and a small jug of milk. He brought the milk to his nose to smell if it had turned. Unsure, as the smell of animal fat lingered on everything, without thinking about it, he brought it to his lips and took a sip. He instinctually spit back out realizing what he had done but then upon further inspection, concluded it had not spoiled. He took another long drink from it, this time finishing it in a series of loud booming swallows.

“Hey”, the young officer said from down the hall. He put the jug back in the icebox, wiped the milk from his chin and left the room. He entered the bathroom, but realized that the young officer had left. He walked over to the wall and examined the small painting of the boy and his dog.

“You’re not gonna believe this” the young officer was shouting from the bedroom.

The old officer liked the painting as well. It reminded him of his own pheasant hunting trips he took as a boy. The old officer remembered one trip where his father seemed unable to kill a single bird, while he brought home seven or eight- he couldn’t remember exactly. His father was seething by the end of the day. They walked though the forest in silence, back to the house never speaking once. The old officer remembered the feeling of shame that he had made his father feel so inadequate, but also embarrassed for him. By the last leg of the walk home, the embarrassment turned to a deep sense of anger towards his father. How could he let himself be made to look like such a pathetic creature?! Like the now visible scrawny contours of a wet cats body, his father’s vulnerability and hurt feelings enraged him.

“Actually-”, he muttered to himself, “fuck this painting”.

He spit on it and left the room. A stream of saliva, veined of cream slowly made its way down the painting, the clouded sputum obscuring the boy’s face as it passed over it.

As the old officer turned to enter the bedroom, he found the young officer standing in the doorway of a closet, looking in.

“What?”, the old officer said.

The young officer didn’t respond. With his back to him, he stood motionless looking in. The old officer walked up next to him and followed his stare from his face to its point of focus. Standing just outside of the closet, one would think it to be a tiny box, maybe only 5 or 6 square feet. But inside to the left was a long passageway, obscured by an old pine wood panel as a mock wall. The young officer had moved it to the side and was staring into the darkness. A slight musty breeze crossed their faces.

“What am I looking at?” the young officer asked.

The old officer stepped out of the closet and scanned the bedroom. Above the bed was another mural. It was a painting of Thrush’s house, with the front facade taking up most of the foreground. The grass, the chicory, the oaks that were scattered through-out the property- everything else was only hinted at from the edges.

The old officer abruptly left the room. The young officer walked out of the closet and sat dumbfounded on the bed. A minute or so later, he returned with an oil lamp and a book of matches he had found.

“Let’s go” he barked as he walked back into the closet. The young officer rose and moved slowly to the closet, feeling slightly off-balance. Standing at the mouth of the tunnel, he watched the flame from the lamp light the edges of the space. The old officer stopped to look at the young officer, who was quite a ways back now. They stared at each other for a moment, saying nothing. The old officer turned back around and continued walking. The young officer steadied himself, and then followed behind.

The hallway was tight, as it was the width of the closet it was hidden in, which was no more than 2’ or so. Two adults would be unable to stand next to each other. After about a minute of walking, they came to a staircase leading down. The old officer didn’t even see it till the toes of his left foot hung over the edge of the first step. Though, the length of the hallway didn’t seem to make spacial sense within the bounds of the house as they perceived it, they both felt a sense of relief in the assumption that it was the basement they were approaching. It also explained the change in humidity, the heavy air thickening with each step.

As they neared the bottom, they noticed the faint outline of a doorway possibly. The old officer inspected it, lightly putting his open hand on the surface. “Its not a door” he said. “I think it’s another sheet of wood” With a minimal amount of pressure applied to it, the thin panel fell forward exposing the space on the other side. The panel caught itself on an adjacent wall, maybe 3 or 4’ from it. The young officer swatted a length of thin cord out of his face. Focusing on it, he pulled down on it and with a click, a light turned on.

“Wait- we’re in another closet? The young officer said. The old officer lifted the panel of wood out of their way and leaned it up against the wall to their left. Taking in their surroundings, it did appear to be another small closet, very similar to the one they just came from. The two men positioned themselves in front of the closed door and the slowly opened it.

Stepping out of the closet, they found themselves in a bedroom. The room seemed to be set up exactly as the bedroom they had just left. The bed was neatly made, as the last one was. The same light blue quilt lay over a hard mattress. The young officer sat down at he end of the bed, just as he sat confused on the last one. He took his hat off and placed it next to him. The old officer was looking at the painting above the bed.

“This painting is different from the one upstairs. This must be a spare bedroom or something.” The young officer stood up and walked to the painting. “And there’s no window here”, the old officer said as he inspected the wall where it had been in the upstairs bedroom. “C’mon... let’s have a look around”.

The old officer left the room. The young officer was still examining the painting over the bed. It was, again of Thrushes house, but much closer. An open window took up the entire painting, possibly the one from the bathroom, as you could see straight through to the bedroom across the hall. The young officer stepped closer. He squinted as he strained to see the scene. Directly in the center of the painting, framed by the bathroom door, was the closet that they had entered from- or possibly just left. The door was partially ajar. He stepped even closer, his nose a couple of inches from the surface now.

“Hey”- the old officer said cutting through his concentration. “You need to see this”.

The young officer took one last look at the painting and turned to leave. As he stepped through the doorway, he noticed mold working its way up from the floor, slowly eating away at the plaster above the trim. The wall was beginning to dimpled and crumble under the assault.

In the kitchen, the old officer was sitting at the table, staring at the wall across from him. “Theres a window right there in the kitchen upstairs.” the old officer muttered.

“You ok?” The young officer said.  
The old officer stood up and rubbed his temples. “Do you hear that? That rumbling?”

“I’m not sure” the young officer said. “You know, maybe we should get back upstairs and call in for some help?”

The old officer shook his head and waved him away as he slowly got himself up. He was walking with a burdened heaviness that concerned the young officer. He went to grab his arm to help him along, but the old officer pulled away.

As the old officer started down the hallway, one hand running against the wall as he walked, the young officer stood over the now empty seat and pushed it back into the table. He was standing in front of the painting of the laughing man seated at the table. It too was different. The scene and style were the same, but the man in this one seemed to be laughing even more hysterically, practically falling out of his chair as it balanced on its back two legs. His expression was frantic- his face toeing the line between dumb bliss and blind rage. His expression was slightly blurred- like the drag of a shutter.

As he turned the corner into the bedroom, he found the old officer sitting on the bed. His shoes and socks removed. His head was raised up towards the ceiling, his eyes closed and his mouth slightly open taking in slow measured breaths.

“Hey... what’s going on? Are you OK? Why are your shoes off?” The young officer asked.

He gave a shrug in response to the question. He was sweating heavily, the shape of his undershirt was now exposed by the damp uniform around it. The young officer bent down on his knee and stretched the socks back over his feet and gently put his shoes back on, instinctually tying them with the double-looped “bunny ears” method he used to use to tie his children's shoes when they were younger rather than the no-frills, single-loop method he would do for himself.

“Let’s go” the young officer said as he helped him to his feet.

As they opened the closet, the young officer noticed that the wood panel was propped back up covering the entrance to the stairway. He hadn't remembered doing that, but he only gave it a passing thought. He was now focused on getting the old officer up and out of this house. He too felt out of sorts. He was light-headed and a bit disoriented. Even more troubling to him was the slight blurring he was noticing on the periphery of his vision.

The young officer found the gap between the wall and the edge of the panel and pulled the panel from the wall. To his shock, there was no stairway. Just another long dark passageway like the one above. The officers stood at the mouth of the long cavity and stared into the darkness. A warm, wet breeze hitting their faces. The young officer began to choke up. "What's happening?" he said through a strained tears. The old officer pushed his body off the wall he had been leaning on for support and started down the hallway. The young officer followed, his soft whimpering echoed through the space. They both slowed as they anticipated the stairway, inching closer to the first drop. As they both began the descent, the old officer leading again, there was another measurable change in atmosphere. The humidity thickened and felt as if it was wrapping itself around their bodies, trying to choke them. The young officer began to feel a deep throbbing pulse. He felt it as much as he could hear it. He wondered if this was the "noise" the old officer was asking about.

The outline of wood wall panel below became visible as their eyes adjusted to the darkness. The old officer stopped suddenly, leaning his shoulder against the wall to steady himself.

"Hey," the young officer whispered. "Are you OK? I'm not sure this is the best place to stop". The young officer could barely make out the shape of his body.

"I forgot the lamp" the old officer said- his voice weak and wobbly. The young officer helped him down the rest of the stairs and entered the next room.

Again, they entered the same bedroom. The young officer broke down in tears, this time in an unguarded sob. He sat down on the bed, crying into his hands. "Where are we?" He pleaded. "I wanna go home". The old officer walked to the other side of the bed and sat down on the floor beside it. He began to unlace his shoes. The young officer turned his body to look at the mural over the bed. This one was of another house, though not Thrush's. It was set back in the foreground, completely ablaze. Thick clouds of smoke wafted into the pink sky above. The young officers growing fear suddenly turned to frustrated anger. He stomped out of the room barely noticing the old officer struggling to remove his sock.

The floor boards were warped and contorting themselves out of place from the moisture. Knotweed, now 2 or 3' high, made its way through the exposed cracks. Black mold covered the lower half of the walls, which were so swollen with condensation, they rippled like soft butter.

The young officer grabbed at the plant and pulled it up out of the floor with a frantic howl and whipped it behind him. The long hallway mural was set in the same pastoral scene, but was now from the direct perspective of the viewer as if from their point of view, which was that of person standing over a young boy as he looked up at them, their body casting a shadow over his. His gaze is open and friendly. The image sent a rush of revulsion through the young officers body.

He ran into the kitchen, again identical to the last two, swung the ice box door open and stuck his head inside. He felt as though his skin was burning. The pulsing was getting stronger as well, as if a turbine was buried deep inside him. He could feel his teeth rattling through his gums. The vignetting blur was also closing in.

He pulled his head out of the fridge and sat down at the table across from him. The painting beside him was now of the laughing man with his arm around the head of a goat. The head sat sideways on the table in a small pool of blood. It's gaze fixed outward towards the viewer. The man, who was now sullen in his demeanor, seemed to be in the middle of a serious conversation with the animal, speaking in hushed tones with his attention mostly on the head but with one eye looking out as well- as if only half-noticing the viewers presence. His left hand, stained with blood, rested on the severed neck.



The young officer shot up and stumbled his way out of the kitchen and back towards the bedroom.

He found the old officer naked with his body pressed against a wall, his back facing out. The young officer could feel his face frozen in horror.

“Im gonna leave through the window”, the old officer said. “You should come.”

The young officer opened the closet door. It was once again back to its original configuration. The young officer wept as he removed the wood panel and looked once again down the dark passageway. He walked back out of the closet and up to the old officer. He grabbed him by his shoulders and gently turned the old officer around to face him.

“Listen”, the young officer said through sobs. “I’m gonna keep going down. I don’t know what else to do. So I’m gonna just keep going down. And down and down till something happens. I mean... this pounding. I can hear my children I think. I’m just gonna keep moving, OK? I’m gonna keep going down. OK?”

He turned and walked back into the closet. His cries slowly fading as he went down further into the passageway.

The old officer stood naked against the wall for some time after. Eventually, he walked towards the bed and put his hat back on and then slowly moved to the closet. As he stepped inside, he sat himself down on the threshold. *It felt good to sit*, he thought to himself. His bones were aching and he had a splitting headache from that constant deep throbbing he felt moving through his body. As the old officer sat naked, rubbing his temples, a memory suddenly entered his mind. It was of himself and Gussy, who was still a young pup at the time, maybe 2 or 3 years old. They were sitting together on a neighbor’s property. They had been running around and playing all morning and were resting on a patch of soft grass warming themselves in the sun. Suddenly, something caught Gussy’s attention and he took off galloping into the woods just off the property. The old officer remembered yelling for him. Crying hysterically and pleading for him to come back. A few minutes later, Gussy returned with a dead cat held tightly between his jaws. He dropped it right down in front of the him, wagging his tail in excitement. The old officer remembered looking at Gussy’s face. He had this wide bloody smile that shocked him. He remember jumping up and trying to run away, but under the impression that a game was being played, Gussy easily caught up and pounced on him, licking his face and leaving bloody strokes of saliva all over.

The old officer shook off the memory and slowly rose to his feet. He stared down the passageway for a long time. It was a relief to do so. A sizable black hole had formed in the center of his field of vision, and looking into the passageway eased his anxiety about it. It made it disappear.

“Im coming”, he said to himself. He adjusted his hat, wiped the blood away from his nose and slowly made his way down the passageway and into the darkness, following the faint sound of crying from up ahead.

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