

FrameWork 9/25

Stella McCaig on Yan Wen Chang

Hey love,
You're not crazy.

What a cool world we live in, one with beat-em-up video games and free private-browsing porn, one with love and landfills. This world has me. It has me lying back on my shitty, stained couch, exploring the entire city of LA with my fingertips - cosplaying a violently bricked man on route to steal cars, cat-call girls, and shoot any Cop that comes within shot range. I do this relentlessly, grotesquely, deplorably. I drink Diet Pepsi wearing only underwear. My nails are always gunpowder green with red tips, my hair a knotted mass, and most exceptionally, I'd say, is the steady supply of spilled McDonald's fries laced between, within, and around my crossed legs. The long acrylic of my nails bounce from toggle to toggle like they were born and bred to make it happen - quickly and precisely, with embarrassing muscle memory. I crave the world constructed by the little coloured bits of my Samsung TV screen, where whirring cars are just like hordes of cicadas over the nasty LA desert, where Franklin Clinton, Michael De Santa, and Trevor Philips rule the world, where Poppy Mitchell is. True love is burying my face in her chest of perky plastic pillows. I want to lick her purple eyeshadow off her lids and spit it back into her mouth.

It's my birthday, which always makes me want to snort an entire colony of ants. So, I perform the ritual, it's a celebration: 8 dedicated hours of GTA. The soft, gaping bags under my wide, blue-lit eyes hold only the sounds of shotguns and mufflers. The incredible mess of greasy fingerprints on my controller looks like a Pollock - Who's the fucking genius now? Though this time, I decide to replace the fries with a bottle of whiskey, the most ancient one I could afford. It's so charred in colour it's reminiscent of crude oil, perfect, it smells like a basement storing motorcycles with oil leaks, perfect. Swig, move, swig, punch, swig, drag, swig, kiss, and so on and so on. The bottle is nearly empty by the 3rd hour. Completely and utterly soused, alone, like a puppy, I wince as the last of the hard, dark water digs through me, all the way to my toes. Ambling to the bathroom, my vision smeared, I slather on cherry red lip gloss like it is the end of the world. I look in the mirror - *Who's in the driver's seat? I'm that girl* - Yeah I fucking am. I am sideways in the dirt. I drink whiskey straight from the bottle, and I make a masterpiece of myself doing so. I'm that girl. Suddenly urged back to Franklin Clinton by some obfuscated higher power, I crawl back to the couch on my hands and knees - and try to place myself upright, proper and poised, between my cigarette-shaped pillow, and the human-sized teddy bear I stole from one of those completely rancid rubber ducky games they have teenagers run at fairs. My neck keeps dropping, as if it's copying the movement of pixelated palm trees blowing in code-written wind - I'm praying, like they are, to the profane. Anytime my eyes twitch open, I can make out the controller resting on top of my hands, reposed and gentle, like a dead bird that has just flown into something it couldn't see, just a little guy diaphanous in death. As hard as I try, my hands won't move. I can still see the slivers of my nails lit up by the glare of the TV screen, 10 holy beacons, unmoving half-moons of girlhood.

Imagine a puppeteer's string pulling a dead weight straight up - my head lifts by some sort of miracle: I'm fucking working. Everything in front of me looks like it has been exhumed from an ancient pit, utterly illegible and daubed by a wet cloth. I see vast swaths of colour, each pixel pulsing to the beat of my hollowed breath. It feels like I've been plugged in, wired up like a toy. I feel parasitic, covered in fleas; the only audible sound is that dog-pitched frequency that tirelessly blares from CRTs. *Who's in the driver's seat? I'm that girl*. Snap out of it, asshole.

I shake my head, back and forth and back and forth, urging my brain to swing right way round. My eyes open now, fixated, and dutiful. I grip the controller, no bird, no death; just stunningly

manufactured hard-edged black plastic. I turn the volume up to max, so the speakers drown me out with the composed melody of dogs panting, bullets whirring and engines revving. Now who am I? Franklin. We're staring at a cherry-red hot rod just begging to be jacked. We walk towards the car, self-possessed and calm. Reach into the waistband of our pants for the Slim Jim, unlock the door, and drop in. Our hands are steady as we hotwire the beast, it comes alive with the engine singing smoothly, and its headlights bright and clean. Ripping out of the spot - pedal forced to the ground - we fly. A stop sign? Blare through it. A one-way? Slide up the side like a snake. A sidewalk? No, a road. We end up at Vespucci Beach. Pulling into the parking lot, we open our window and can smell the endless sea. Moving to open the door, our eyes caught by someone in the car next to us - wait, what the fuck? Franklin couldn't have been any less bothered. I can't get into the angel numbers, coincidences, or 'universal signs' of GTA. Not that there are any; it is utterly prosaic, written for men by men, a place for them to play bad guy and rip their clothes off. Little did they know I'd be one of them. I get to grip Poppy's prepossessing body, clandestine to everyone else but me. I masterfully play the game they thought I wouldn't enjoy. *Who's in the driver's seat? I'm that girl.* Anyways, it's fucking me! It's me sitting in that car next to us. Well, it's me-ish; she's something of me, as if bits and pieces of my human were Frankensteined together to create a version I'd recognize but never actually known. She is beautiful. She is lithe, exacting and precise. Her eyes are bluer than mine, like puddles on fresh pavement, those special ones that reflect the entire sky. Her hair is permed and pulled back, with two strands let out to frame her long, lasting face. Clear, sparkly lip gloss swims across her lips like resin. Her collarbones are two hand-crafted ceramic tools, the exact same shape and size. She smirks, a grin of bright white teeth and pink gumball-coloured gums. A gem is set in her right canine, like some sort of God. I'm completely fucking confused. Who wouldn't be? That is me, or *A* me. I hadn't seen this me before; I'd only imagined her, wishing she'd crawl out of somewhere and bathe me in salted water. I used to spend days wondering how much dread would flake off my skin and make little islands on the water's surface. Would the stagnancy of my being, grease-like, stain the tub's sides an awful grey-ish yellow? What a thought. We watch her hands curl into gentle claws as she lifts them to brush the strands of hair from her face. The way she moves is dutiful and graceful, like a ballet dancer. She dips one somewhere we can't see. Her window slides open, Ah, there's that sparkle in her eye.

I don't know why everyone isn't in love with you.

Can I eat a star? Yes, I will chew it between my canines like an omniscient god. I will spit the gritty pieces all over this place. I will create an entire universe out of red for you. The rain falling at sunset will move you to tears. I've deployed all my tricks, watch, you can enjoy what was once mine and is now yours. You can scream through me. I'll think of the pools underneath your eyes and your smile with its edges turned towards the sun. Did you know that our breath syncs. Did you know that our blood moves the same.

Okay.

And then nothing.

I wake up in the morning still on my shitty couch.

My shitty couch that is in my cold apartment.

My shitty couch that is in my cold apartment, my ears ringing with *our* sounding voice.

Have you ever been hit in the head and seen double?

Hey, Love. You're not crazy, we are.