

FIVE POISONS
by aj earle

IDENTITY

The first time Bullseye sees himself - really, truly sees himself as a person, as the *universe* - he is splattered with someone else's brain gunk.

It isn't someone who matters, mind you.

It's some fuckin' pedophile-hobo-trash Bullseye picked up off the side of the road, big and burly and barely fitting in the passenger seat of Bull's car. And he didn't talk, no, not a word of thanks for the ride.

But Bull didn't mind at first, starting back down the lone stretch of highway in silence.

There ain't nothing for miles in Kansas. You could drive through the entire state without seeing another empty soul. It's an empty place, Bullseye thinks. Full of fuckin' empty people.

The entire goddamn state was a void, especially at night. Driving through the darkness for that long - well, anyone would start to slip.

"Where to, friend?" Bull said, one hand on the wheel.

The other rested casually on the handle of a pocket knife, hidden inside his coat pocket. You couldn't be too careful out on the highway, not these days.

No response.

Not that Bull was expecting one.

Another few miles rolled by, Hank Williams started crooning on the radio, and Bull's head was spinning from who-knows-what. Maybe the joint he smoked earlier, maybe the scotch he'd been drinking, maybe the adderall he scored off that kid back in Lawrence. But everything was getting fuzzier and the road kept getting longer.

Fuck.

The drifter's hand shot out from the passenger side, grasping the wheel and yanking hard.

"What the fuck!" Bull shouted, eyes snapping back to the road.

The man kept pulling, the car's tires screeching against the blacktop. The pocket knife was hot in Bull's hand as it shot out from his pocket and dug itself deep into the drifter's throat.

Blood splashed onto the windshield, covering the glass like thick paint. Bull stomped on the brakes, hitting the pedal on the floor. The car came to a harsh halt, the acrid smell of burnt rubber polluting the air.

The drifter gurgled, trying to speak, his bright blue eyes wide in panic.

“What the fuck did you do that for?!” Bull screamed, rage burning in his gut. “You almost killed *both of us!*”

The drifter’s eyes rolled back in his head and he stopped gurgling, slumping forward to rest on the dashboard. Bull’s knife was still stuck in the bastard’s fucking throat, this asshole’s artery caught on the blade.

“You fucking piece of shit,” Bull spat, grabbing the knife handle and pulling it free from the drifter. A spurt of dark red pathetically arced from the wound.

“You almost busted my car,” he continued to the corpse, wiping the blade on his pant leg.

He opened the driver’s side door, stretching his long legs out onto the pavement. The highway was dark except for the long beam of headlights, illuminating the void. “You piece of shit!” Bull shouted again, angry and pissed and covered in someone else’s fucking blood. He kicked the hubcap of his ride.

Well, shit.

His heart pounded hard against his ribs and he stared at the idling car. The hobo was dripping all over his passenger seat, the flecks of blood beginning to pool.

Christ.

He popped the trunk, unbuttoning his shirt. Where the fuck - ah, there it is.

He slid the handle of the hammer into his belt and tossed his shirt into the compartment.

He opened the passenger door, letting the burly man slide onto the gravel unceremoniously. Bull cracked his knuckles and grabbed the drifter by his armpits, slowly maneuvering them into the neighboring field. Breathing heavy, sticky with sweat, he pulled the hobo further and further into the surrounding giants of corn.

Once he was sure he got far enough into the stalks, and no one from the highway would see the pair, Bull plopped the man on the ground with a meaty *thump*.

Which is where he is now - heart no longer pounding inside his empty chest, hammer light in his hands. With a laugh, Bull raises it above his head.

Stupid fuckin’ fuck.

The drifter's face explodes with the force of Bull's swing, teeth cracking and nose breaking. Bull brings the hammer down again, exposing the man's brain through a hole in his head. Viscera splatters onto Bull's chest, bits and pieces of white bone scattering onto the dirt.

He pulverizes the man, again and again and *again*, a new rush of fire emerging in his stomach with each connecting blow.

Eventually, Bull tires.

He hunches on his knees, breathing hard.

He's covered in brain and blood.

Eyes closing, he sighs.

He is empty and full at the same time. A void open in his heart feels temporarily gorged as he inhales the copper and iron scent of the destroyed man, tastes the same on his tongue. There is a buzzing silence enveloping him like the night has accepted his deed as a gift.

His skin is burning from the exertion, his face and hands covered in sweat.

Sliding the hammer back into his belt, Bull returns to his car.

He climbs into the driver's side, wiping his face free of gunk. He catches his reflection in the rearview mirror and smiles.

The man in the field doesn't matter. He lived and died and none of it mattered. No one will come looking for him.

Bullseye adjusts the mirror.

No one matters, not even Bullseye.

He's nothing. He's everything.

He pulls out onto the highway again, grinning into the dark.

DESIRE

Bull heads south, towards shitty Wichita.

It's still dark when he pulls into a self-cleaning car wash, streetlights still casting a sickly orange glow on his skin. He parks and turns off the engine, resting momentarily on the wheel. The blood is caked onto the windshield and he'll have to cut out the fabric of the seat and floor. He'll also have to wash himself up, get as clean on the outside as he feels on the inside.

He gets to work.

The sun begins to rise when he is finished, the streetlights flicker off, and Bull throws the last bit of carpet into the dumpster.

He could use a beer. A six pack, maybe.

He turns back to the car, pauses as something catches his eye. To his left, a young teen girl sits on a rusted bike, popping chewing gum and staring with wide, wide eyes. Blue, like the drifter's.

He says nothing, does nothing, but stares in return.

"Kill someone?" she asks casually, nodding to his blood stained undershirt.

"Hemophiliac," he quips in response. "Too young to be out this late, darlin'."

"Early," she corrects, pulling her straight blond hair into a ponytail. "Texas?"

"Panhandle," he responds in the same drawl. "Topeka?"

"Derby," she says. She blows a pink bubble, lets it pop, keeps chewing.

Bull nods and begins to make his way back to the car.

"Where ya headed?" she asks, riding up to his passenger side window. He doesn't respond, climbing into the driver's seat. "Can I come?"

"Ain't wise to be asking older men for rides, darlin'," he states, turning the engine on. He levels her with his stare again. "Get out of here."

"That's what I'm tryin' to do," she replies, dead-eyed and unblinking. Pop-pop-pop.

Bull puts the car in drive and rolls out of the car wash, the blissful feeling dissipating in him. He catches her staring after him in the mirror.

He starts towards Derby.

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Derby is even shittier than Wichita.

Bull buys a six-pack, sits in his car on the edge of a park, and drinks.

The sun is high now. He has since changed his shirt, cleaned himself up a bit, slicked his hair back, hides behind sunglasses. He does not wonder about the drifter now baking in the Kansas heat, probably picked apart by crows. He does not imagine a hoard of vultures descending on the decaying carcass. He does not think about the girl and her thighs.

Bull's stomach growls, despite the six beers in it, and he realizes he has not eaten since the night before. "Fuck," he mutters, opening his wallet. Seven dollars will get him a decent meal at a diner, maybe.

He skirts out from the park, drives a wobbling circle around the shitty small town, and finally finds a rundown diner that boasts breakfast 24/7. He checks himself in the mirror again, seeing nothing but blank eyes.

Black, blank eyes.

The diner is almost empty. Bull suspects it's almost constantly like this, not quite full, not quite deserted, the same old fucks that have nothing else to do but sit and sip coffee in busted booths, probably populating the few tables to shake things up a bit.

He sits down at the breakfast bar.

"Coffee, hon?" a shapely woman says from behind the counter, holding a pot of shimmering black liquid. He nods and she pours a large mug of the shit. "Be with you in a second, sweetie."

She bustles around the diner, chatting with patrons and periodically disappearing into the back kitchen to retrieve orders. The coffee tastes horrible but Bull doesn't care. He watches this woman, who returns to him a few minutes later.

"Any food for you, hon?" she asks, leaning on the counter. Her cleavage peeks out from the buttons struggling to keep her tits covered; pretty blue eyes meet his.

"Eggs and bacon, if you don't mind, darlin'," he responds politely.

He flashes a grin. She returns a coy smile.

Hours later, he's waiting for her outside. Leaning against his car, Bull smokes a cigarette slowly, the tobacco warming his throat and lungs. It's late now, the streetlights are back on. He watches her through the windows, untying her apron, waving goodbye to the cook, kissing the waitress taking over her shift on the cheek.

She heads to the door, pauses as she spots a figure leaning against a car.

"I know you're not waiting for me," she says, approaching him. He can hear it in her voice; she knows he is.

He smiles.

"Seems like I'm a bit sweet on you," he responds, taking another drag on his cigarette. "Wanna get a drink somewhere?"

"Right now?" she says uneasily, checking her watch. It is almost midnight.

“Right now,” he echoes. He watches her expression, the blue eyes untrusting but daring.

A moment’s hesitation and then she’s in his car, smoking a cigarette herself. “What happened to your carpets?” she asks curiously, looking between her thighs. He glances down between them himself.

“My dog shit everywhere.”

“Oh,” she responds, a bit taken aback, still untrusting but still risking. “Is he alright?”

An image flickers into his brain of the drifter getting pecked at by crows.

“Who?”

One crow digs at a piece of brain.

“Your dog.”

Another crow swallows an eye.

“Mm, he’s alright,” Bull says with a knowing smirk. He almost laughs aloud, but controls the impulse. They pull into a local bar, still open at this hour, and nearly deserted, just like the diner. She hops out almost too fast.

He can taste her anxiety. She regrets accepting this invitation. She has no fucking idea how dumb she is.

“A Bud, please,” she says to the bartender inside. Bull mutters the same, lighting a cigarette again.

“You can’t smoke in here,” she says, an edge to her voice now. He inhales the smoke, blows it into the air.

“Can’t do a lot of things in Derby?” he responds. He nods to the bartender as two beers appear; the man goes to say something about the cigarette, notices the pocket knife handle in his coat and the black eyed stare, and decides against it.

“What’s your name?” she asks, almost pleadingly, as if knowing his name would help her validate her decisions. “I’m - ”

“Bullseye,” he says, cutting her off.

He doesn’t want to know her fucking name. It doesn’t matter.

“Bullseye,” she repeats, unbelieving. She takes a drink, contemplates something in silence. A beat. “I think I’d like to go now,” she announces to him.

He takes another inhale of his cigarette and smiles to her. "Sure, darlin', we can go wherever you'd like," he says sweetly, his voice coated in rotted honey. He pays the bartender and walks casually after the woman, who had hurried out of the bar altogether.

Back in the car, she's nervous. He can see out of the corner of his eye her fingers picking at chewed nails.

"Right here," she says, pointing to a house at the end of a suburban street. "This is me."

She gets out of the car before he's even come to a complete stop. "Thank you for a lovely time," she says politely, meaning none of it.

"I'll walk you up," he insists, stepping out of the car and gently grasping the curve of her elbow before she can protest. He leads her up the walkway and waits for her to dig house keys out of her cracked leather purse.

"Thank you," she says again, pretty blue eyes wild with panic. He steps closer to her, saying nothing. She freezes. He can smell her fear.

He kisses her softly and then steps back. She does not resist, but hastily puts the key in the lock and turns it, pushing open the door and racing inside. But when she tries to slam the door shut, his boot is there in the entryway, and he's sliding the knife out of his pocket.

Before she can even scream the blade is cutting through her carotid and she's tipping backwards, into the foyer. Blood begins to seep onto her hardwood floor as she stares up at him, eyes as wide as the full moon.

He smiles, dragging the knife across her throat.

Bull closes the door quietly behind him as he goes to work.

DOUBT

The water is warm as Bull washes himself in the dead girl's shower.

The sense of peace has returned, the void inside him growing smaller with each passing minute. Life in this realm does not matter; it can be taken away with one swift cut. No man is above the knife, no woman above death. Entire cities could burn and the universe wouldn't care, not one fucking iota.

Empty place, empty people.

Bull turns the water off and dries himself off with a pink towel, the scent of lavender filling the bathroom now. He wipes the mirror free of steam, staring at his reflection. Somehow he believes himself to be lighter, skin clearer, almost aglow. His black eyes gaze at him in return, empty.

He is almost finished. He is chasing something much too huge and massive to effectively capture, but still needs to pursue it. He has no other choice. The path is right in front of him, he can see it so clearly - cleansing his way through these shit states, through these shit people, is the final answer he had been wandering for all these years. The emptiness will be gone. The void, filled. He has to continue.

Bull dresses in his last clean outfit, buttoning his black shirt and slipping into his dark jeans. He pulls his boots on one at a time and checks himself again in the mirror. He needs to continue.

He starts down the stairs, heavy boots clunking against the hardwood. The dead girl comes into view, still lying in the foyer with a pool of beautiful blood that is turning black with exposure. She had been sweet, no doubt about that, but she wanted him; no need for more explanation.

He approaches the corpse, kneels on one knee to examine her face. He had lovingly made the slit along her mouth, sliding the knife up and towards her ears. A permanent smile for an impermanent soul.

“Kill someone?” a voice says behind him.

Bull pauses, waits for his heart to begin beating again before standing back up to his full height. He turns, pocket knife in his back pocket, hammer in the car.

The girl from the car wash is standing in the hallway, ten feet away. She is covered partially by shadows, making her expression hard to see.

“Hemophiliac,” he whispers in return.

They say nothing, staring at one another in the darkened home of a dead girl.

“I didn’t follow you,” she states simply, offering an explanation when he did not ask for one. “That one’s my sister.”

She points to the mutilated corpse on the floor, grotesquely smiling towards the ceiling. The pool of black surrounds her.

“The police are on their way, then,” he concludes, nodding. Another kill for tonight, another piece put into place to complete his path. No matter, nothing does.

“They would be if I had called them,” she responds, her voice flat.

Bull narrows his eyes and slowly takes the knife from his pocket. “Mighty terrible what happened to your sister,” he says quietly. “Mighty terrible what’s gonna happen to you, darlin’.”

She startles him by laughing, a full laugh from her belly. She keeps laughing, keeps on and on until he tells her to stop. She finally does, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Nothing’s gonna happen to me,” she responds with a smile, too big for her face. There isn’t any gum to pop this time.

He advances on her and she bolts, running through the hallway and disappearing behind a corner. He stalks through the corridor, sliding framed photos off the walls with his knife. The screeching of the blade tip against the wall makes him want to grind his teeth.

“Darlin’,” he calls, “I’m real sorry about your sister. Let’s talk about it face to face.”

There is no response and fleeting panic floats through him. This little bitch.

Bull turns the corner he’s sure she raced through, finding himself in the kitchen. He notices an empty space in the knife block and smirks. A worthy obstacle in his path.

“Come now, darlin’,” he calls again, “C’mon babygirl - I only wanna talk to you.”

Bull creeps through the kitchen and into the living room. He swears a curtain shifts as he enters and he stabs through the fabric, expecting a gush of blood. Instead, he breaks the glass of the window behind the curtain, no bitch standing behind it. Bull lets a groan escape from his throat, a frustrated growl.

She has to be somewhere close; he hasn’t heard any doors open or close.

Bull continues his quiet journey, having faith he will find her and release her from this world. “Sweet lil’ bubblegum darlin’,” he sings lowly, his boots clunking back through the hall.

She’s there, a blond ponytail disappearing up the stairs. He starts after her, taking the steps two at a time. Fuck, he’s lost her again, several doors closed on this level of the house.

Doubt begins to creep into his skin, settling at the base of his skull. No, no, *no*. He will find her. He has to.

He comes to one door and opens it, finding an empty bedroom. By the looks of it and the pink shit everywhere, it belonged to the dead girl lying in the foyer. It is crowded with awards and achievements, useless trophies fighting one another for attention on floating shelves. Bull turns away, disgusted. This girl is better off dead instead of worshipping and wanting these material trinkets.

He slams open her closet, filled to the brim with hanging clothes. Checks underneath the bed, overwhelmed with shoes. Bubblegum isn’t here in this room and he moves to another, searching and searching for the blond bitch.

He comes to a third door, the bathroom he had been previously showering in. This room is empty too, devoid of the girl and her blood. With each passing moment, Bull’s rage comes seeping back, his stomach burning with need. When he finds this little bitch, he’s going to skin her.

Frustrated, Bull rips open the next door, a linen closet with hanging coats.

He pushes them aside and there she is, all smiles and blue eyes and blond hair and orange earplugs.

EXISTENCE

Bull flies backwards from the force of the shotgun.

He falls to the floor, his knife skittering away, stars shining in his eyes and a harsh ringing in his ears. He can't breathe and sputters blood onto himself. The pain comes soon after as the shock trickles away, white-hot agony in the middle of his chest from where the round had decimated him. His shaking hands try to keep his organs inside, and he can feel warm liquid - his blood - seeping through his fingers.

He is going to die.

The realization strikes him and then ebbs, a dull knowledge in his flickering mind. He is going to die and there is nothing he can do to stop the march of death. Just like the drifter. Just like the curvy woman. He's going to perish by the hand of a teenaged bitch.

It doesn't matter. He doesn't exist. He never did.

He thinks of his past, of all the shit he's done to people, all the shit people have done to him. That old woman in Lincoln, Nebraska. That kid in Des Moines. Fuck, even that guy in Chicago. They all deserved to burn, they don't matter and they never did.

She appears before him, Bubblegum Darlin', and she kneels close to him. She's saying something, emptying the shells onto the floor near his head, pushing live rounds into the chambers instead. She cocks the weapon, smiling and laughing, a deranged woman after his own heart.

Crows peck at the drifter's eyes.

Rats come to gnaw on the dead girl's face.

What kind of animal will come for his remains?

"...Kill someone, darlin'?" he chokes out, coughing up blood and grinning up at her, teeth stained with copper breath. The pair laugh with one another and she takes his hand, warm and slick with blood. It is comforting to Bull, the human touch, something he never got enough of in his life. For a moment, they stare almost lovingly into each other's eyes.

But it doesn't matter, it never did.

"Hemophiliac," she responds, tilting her head to one side and examining his face. She levels the shotgun underneath his jaw and doesn't take his hand away when he reaches for the trigger.

NIRVANA

Route 35 out of Wichita, Kansas, is as desolate as any other southern highway.

One or two cars drive through the stretch every other hour, making this part of the route the most boring to patrol.

Deputy J.J. Terro sighs into his newspaper, waiting for another hour to pass before he can call his shift and hand it off to the new officer, who started two or three days ago. Terro didn't much care for the new kid, but if there's any assignment that could ease him into the policeman lifestyle, it was patrolling Route 35.

Terro gazes in his rearview mirror, lazily checking to see if another car was coming down the highway. He could've sworn he heard an engine.

A black car with its top down screeches past the patrol cruiser, making Terro jump. He acts quickly, firing up the sirens and pushing the gear into drive. He slams on the gas, tires spinning in the dirt, and chases after the speeding car.

Almost immediately, the black roadster slows and pulls over. Terro pulls up behind the vehicle and makes sure the dashcam is on. Stepping out of the cruiser, he hoists up his pants and rests his hand casually on his sidearm.

"Afternoon, miss," he says, approaching the driver's side of the vehicle. She smiles up at him, her eyes covered by mirrored sunglasses.

"Afternoon, officer," the pretty thing responds. "Was I going too fast?"

Her smile is full of straight white teeth and her hair is a shimmering blond. He sighs internally, too bad to give this nice young lady a ticket.

He takes his hand off his weapon. No use for that.

"Fast enough for me to notice you," he responds with a chuckle. She laughs along with him. "License and registration, please."

"Oh it's my boyfriend's car, I'm not sure where the registration is," she mutters, turning to the passenger seat and digging around on the floor. "Hold on, let me find my purse."

"Take your time, miss," Terro says generously. He gazes down the stretch of highway, waiting patiently for the young girl to find her license.

Then he hears a familiar sound, one he's heard at the station's firing range at least a thousand times. A shotgun cocking.

Terro finds himself lying prone on the hot road, his chest burning and vision blurring. Dark red stains his shirt, pooling out from his chest cavity. He spits up blood.

The young woman steps out of her car, reloads the shotgun, and rests it on his forehead.

She removes the sunglasses and Terro only thinks of how pretty her blue eyes are.

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Bubblegum Darlin' throws the dashcam from the dead officer's car into the side seat and starts off down the highway again, crossing the border into Oklahoma. A couple more hours until she makes it into Texas, and then into the panhandle.

She turns on the radio and smiles at the Hank Williams song she recognizes. She begins to sing along, her mind at ease and the void in her growing smaller. Bubblegum sighs, remembering the brain matter covering the floor of her parents' house, her dead sister in the foyer.

It don't matter. Nothing does.

Empty places, full of empty people.

Bubblegum Darlin' shrugs to no one, turns the radio up, pushes the car faster and faster down the highway.