



When the final crudded current first burst somewhere off the new coast of Oklahoma, I was seventeen and cross-eyed. The storm spread in a curtain. It came and cracked the crust that'd formed over the fields, the junk that'd moored up in our harbors. It washed away most everything not tied down and most everything that was. All those reams of ugly water. All that riddled from the sky.

My family huddled hidden under one another in the house our Dad had built alone. The house where we'd spent these years together. The old roof groaned under the pouring. The leaking basement filled with goo.

LOST: my gun collection.

LOST: every board game you can think of.

LOST: mother's bowling trophies (30+).

LOST: our hope for some new day.

For weeks after the onslaught, I spent each afternoon up to my knees, shoveling mud from off of what remained of our crushed huddle. The sun had come back black, redoubled. What hadn't sunk or gone to mush now sat neck-deep, blobbed and burbling. The earth was bottomless and greedy. It promised to swallow whatever stayed out long enough to glisten. Me and my brothers, though; we fought hard. It was the twelve of us, blonde and hungry, each often nipples-deep and digging through the night. In the mornings, in the dew light, with the sun so hot it singed our hair, the gunk would form a crust—then we could take turns together sleeping, though you could never fully close your eyes. The mud might shift or moan. I'd seen trees get sucked in suddenly like spaghetti into lips. Sometimes, in my basement bedroom, you could hear the screaming through the soil—the folks from other homes who couldn't fight the heave. I'd watched the Johnsons go down treading, their old muscles ripped and overheating. Mrs. Johnson's bright yellow noggin with curled hair ribbon bobbed on the surface a full day before it sunk.

featherproof BOOKS



www.featherproof.com

Hey, Thanks for reading this featherproof LIGHT READING mini-book. For more swell stuff, pay us a visit at:



This is an excerpt from **Scorch Atlas**, a novel of 14 interlocking stories set in ruined American locales where birds speak gibberish, the sky rains gravel, and millions starve, disappear or grow coats of mold. Rendered in a variety of narrative forms, from a psychedelic fable to a skewed insurance claim questionnaire, Blake Butler's full-length fiction debut paints a gorgeously grotesque version of America, bringing to mind both Kelly Link and William Gass, yet turned with Butler's own eye for the apocalyptic and bizarre. Out on **featherproofbooks** 9/9/09.

Blake Butler is the author of *EVER* (Calamari Press). His work has appeared in *Fence*, *Willow Springs*, *The Believer*, *Ninth Letter*, and many others. He is the editor of *Lamination Colony* and *No Colony*, two experimental journals of new prose. He lives in Atlanta and blogs at blakebutler.blogspot.com.

With no more brothers, nothing nowhere, I closed my eyes and waited, last of all of us, alone. I prepared to take my place, forthcoming. I lay in the mud and breathed and waited. I prayed and waited. I shut off lightly, without aching, without sting—that when I opened my eyes under all that deep mud, I'd see all my brothers' faces stretched with grins.

I knew she could still hear me. She felt my voice inside her head. We remaining went on working even knowing how the mud would never stop. In certain seconds we even maybe believed we could bear it, live forever. Soon, though, even George grew too tired. I kissed his forehead, just above the mud lip. Shortly after we lost Bill. Then Thomas. Freddy. Dennis. After Phillip faltered, there were no longer enough arms to hold the house. The windows popped and bubbled. The roofing puckered. The concrete turned to slick. The mud caked and swallowed over. Then there was nothing left but dark. I prayed Mother would forgive me. I could hear her just below the surface. Her together with the brothers. Then, soon enough, there was silence. Our home's foundation sat gashed and flat.

ZERRIT ITZ BLENN NOIKI FAHCH.
 gibberish, glassy-eyed: **YHIKE DUM LOOZY FA FA,** she said. In years. She sometimes croaked or cracked or gobbled, or spluttered *a girl.* She watched unblinkingly as I went on. She hadn't spoke up clear drowned baby: *Derry's gone to Grandma's, Momma. Phillip's run off with* didn't blame her. She'd lost the most of all of us. I sold excuses for each bedroom mostly: the ocean swelled inside her too. She are in misery. I fat she couldn't fit out from the house. Her gut had swelled to fill the under deep, their small heads gone.

It wasn't long before we fell too. One by one, I watched my brothers fizzle. Eleven boys, aged eight to eighteen, each so tired their pupils spun. You couldn't do much once it had you—the mud held tight and sucked quickly. I watched with sore hands as each one tuckered, went

Instead, that night I watched the moon rise. I rolled and slathered, squealing. I pushed my arms in up to my elbows. The mud stayed firm, an evil bed. The earth didn't want me. I screamed and nattered at it. I pleaded and I praised. I begged for it to open up. Overhead the moon burned through the ruining sky. I thought of heavy things, of ripping. I pressed for soft spots in the stink. I searched and cursed and, hungry, prayed. I let crap gather in my eyes.

Some sprawl later, still alone above ground, I got up and went to walk. I moved with nowhere settled in me. It was mostly cold out, despite the burning. My exposed skin gushed bright from the sick sun.

I thought about the week my family camped at the shore during the red tide with dead fish slushing up in piles. My father stood among the flipless bodies and picked the ones that had yet to go soft. We ate with our fingers and our mother sung and the ocean gurgled at the sky—like there was something living in it. Afterwards, with Mom still singing, we buried papa neck-deep in the sand. His gobby cheeks puckered and sand-dusted, as were his lashes, his thinning hair. He claimed to feel things moving near his knees. "They're biting," he said in smile. Years later, we buried him on that same shore, wreathed in crimped seaweed—as *I thought this thought for the last time, I felt it leave me and a new void birthed in my mind—*

I soon came to other places. The face of the earth sat spread like rotting mayonnaise. Such cities sunk under the surface. Ones I'd never see again:

LOST: our middle school.

LOST: the bowling alley.

LOST: the shopping mall where I'd been born.

In some places the shit was stacked so high you could not see where it stopped. Elsewhere, the divots broiled for miles. The mud had many colors. Mounds of blue; green slicks of lichens; gray gobs

the pummel of my blood.

I dug quicker now, something in me unsealing, seething, swum in with whom I'd never had a final word.

And deeper still, perhaps, my father—*Dawid*—that soft old man *Am*—her bad back creaking with the bruised spin of the earth.

And somewhere deeper, snug below them, I knew, my mother—Joseph, Richard, Sumner, Murphy, Jim.

Derry, Bill and George (wins), Thomas, Freddy, Dennis, Phillip, my brothers, whose names I could now recite in order, packed in clay: we were young enough for her to knead. They were in there, them,

I knew I knew. It was a hymn Mom had once sung to each of us when from below. Set in the gunk, the spacked crack of it, I heard a melody

Then, there, hung in the deepest mud, I heard my brothers singing heavy black, so thick and enriched I could hardly pry.

then into the harder crustings, where the soil slipped from brown to deadened roots; to the gray-blue glisten of long-hidden soil uncovered; where the earthworms had stopped wriggling; to the grayish murk of

The earth changed colors every inch: from one bright red bed layers, heaving the earth. My arms ached with the yearning.

She pressed a thumbprint into my neck flesh. I dug through deeper gut. The girl stood above me, looking over. She whispered little things:

Under the first surface, there was loam: sand, silt, humus, and I felt so numb I couldn't stunter. Something buzzed behind my eyes. I

With fingernails shorn and mud-clung, I scratched into the earth. I

ripped the grass away in handfuls. The gravel made me bleed.

With fingernails shorn and mud-clung, I scratched into the earth. I

inside me and compress and spread out and tickle the way it seemed to inside her. The way she winked and blinked in the _____ space I felt if I jumped right I might glide straight through, but each time I gathered the ignition, then she'd shift, she'd sweat around me.

I lunged angry, blind, corroding. I swatted at the sky.

I ran and chased her straight into that blob of nothing, into a leaning where all was still.

Here the earth lay flat and long and unrunny. I felt my thighs, now burning from output, suddenly solid and ready, standing on true dirt. A circle of clean trees appeared before me. I blinked and blinked.

Into the trees I trotted meanly, keeping them fixed center in my brain, fearing they would disappear again, some prolonged jinx.

Among the trees, though, in the center, the small girl sat on tufted grass. Her flesh pale as nothing. Her hair in steam and bright gown gleaming. I couldn't see to see her eyes, though, so glowing they burned my teeth. I could only look just off to one side. Overhead—the sky still scrunched and overrun. In my coal stomach—her lone voice.

Where are your brothers? she said, knowing.

What brothers?

The ones you had.

I had brothers?

You did.

She watched, silent, while I tried to remember. She looked sad.

Dig, she said.

She seemed to hover off the ground.

Dig, she said again.

I didn't have a shovel and I told her. Such things we'd all long lost, though now I couldn't think of what. My brain wormed in want of recognition, turning over and over in cold sputter.

She shook her head.

She spoke a language.

Some feeling brought me to my knees.

her language I could understand.
 kind of something. I had to trust, she said, to get anywhere. Not all of
 nearer. She reached in color and touched me on the neck. She said if I
 seemed like someone I had known. Or would know. Or could need
 and straight dark hair. She had eyes that spread all through me. She
 I met a child who told me to keep walking. She had a faultless face
 In the colors, I met a child.
 In the colors, I held no yearning.
 the plots of color grew and flew in glittered flakes.
 through my vision in clustered patches. All around, as in my memory,
 Colors. I knew such colors. That was mostly all I knew. They ate
 See my skin striped several colors like the mud.
 See me coming through the black fold with my hair all fat in knots.
 They should have it, they should see.
and lay me down. I couldn't think of what good my blood had done me.
 with strings of leeches. *Suck,* I thought, *suck me empty. Draw me out*
 in lure—my hum suspended in the sky, an atlas. My knees were hung
 of drips of dripping muddle, scratching the face of everything in long
 The clips
 I saw
 Other shit began to happen. Behind the sky, I saw
 bolts as fat as the back of my hand. And zapped in greggy columns
 things were melting out of nowhere, big rungs of hung gob spurting
 from sections overhead. And the skewed lobes of architecture and
 landscape bowled in rhythms clogged with problems, no repetition. I
 could hardly stick a foot straight; I was, like, wobbling hobbling through
 the dead grass. There was everywhere to walk now. Everywhere and
 none at all. I could feel my fiber peeling—my blood spread thin—my
 pupils slurred.
 There couldn't be much time. Time, the ship, the shit, the sentence.
 The earth still refused to suck me under. No, not so easy, not like that,
 it promised. It wanted to rest and tempt and make me beg, and even
 then just — inside me. I had a vision of the girl above, then to my
 left and to my right, each one silent and gorgeous, stringing me alone,
 to here or there. I no longer believed that I had something—that there
 would be better—that we could muzzle. I just wanted the air to fill

I said for her I would go on.
 I would go on, at least, until I found a way to join my brothers.
 My brothers, there'd been eight of them. Eight or seventeen or
 eighty. Some multiple of three.
 My brothers, they were good boys. They'd been...
 I knew...
 I couldn't feel my face.
 See the drowned field where once I'd thrown a wild pitch and
 knocked a kid between the eyes. He was never quite the same. He
 roamed the neighborhood undressed and eyes closed. He knew
 everyone by feel. He could feel your face and name you and then he'd
 laugh and laugh and laugh.
 That boy, his name was...
 We... I'd...
 See the rind of trees all crumpled. Combed to one side like the
 white hair of my father in his last days. Out in front of our house in
 shorts and dress shirt, a huge crucifix around his neck. Shouting in my
 mother's crippled language: what was coming, what would be.
 My father's name's... Troy. No, Tony. Robert.
 Robert's my name. I think.
 Shit.
 See my veins vibrating in their choked skin.
 See my brow meshed in lines of unknown light.
 See the caved-in parking deck where for several weeks the newly
 homeless flocked. Once in this deck, people left their cars and shopped
 for Christmas. The sound of its collapse that Sunday evening shook us
 even far away. Now that was over. All that was gone. I felt that sound,
 though, curled in my stomach, crudding over, washing out. I felt it
 replicate all through me. It brought cohesion in the color.
 The cohesion formed a lantern.
 The lantern lit a path.
 I walked the path with brain wide open, thinking through each
 thing I thought I knew one final time.

SIBBUM KLIMMITCH

I heard the cow say, in mom's voice: **YO VOT IXHT VOD**
 I felt their buzzing in me rupture, bubble.
 stung. I felt their buzzing in me rupture, bubble.
 old boys in those small bodies. We'd come into the world each already
 quaking, waiting for something to click or come undone. We were
 slow-sinking house—our mother on the floor beneath us, her body
 I felt the nights we'd all slept knee to knee in the same room in that

Up the yards then. Through the bogged lots. The fronts of houses
 stunned or smushed. The cob of old mud dried to figures, streams
 of dead beds in the earth. And the lost lamps. And the smeared hills.
 The sewers overflowed. Here and there, perhaps, a flower, its sad head
 puckered through the muck. The blacktop parking lots and cul-de-sac'd
 streets where once we'd thrown dice or chucked a ball—all so cracked
 now, rumbled wrong. There was something in the air in gloaming, a
 blistered chill even in the heat.

I walked across the roofs of many houses. The sun unblinking, on
 and overhead through evening into night. I knew night now by the
 stutter of warped insect critters crowing. They sung together, awaiting
 nowhere.

*OK now, I thought. OK. I thought: I am going somewhere. Somehow
 I will summer. I will find food and return. I will pluck sausage sandwiches
 from some strange tree and carry them back to feed my loved. My how?
 My who? My brothers. I kept saying it aloud: Brothers—those guys with
 eyes the same as mine. I felt them watching me from somewhere. They
 were waiting. All was fine.*

Through the pasture bright with blue mud, cracked so sharp
 in turrets, dry with tremor. Spores shorn endless in the raw light,
 spreading out in webs of gray, green, gold. I felt a small pop in my sock
 and started bleeding. The veins inside me screaming blue, red, brown.

Colors, colors. I thought to call the girl. She had not given me her
 name. I tried old names I'd once used for others: Freda, Franny, Fawn,
 and Farrah. I could not remember who they were now, though the
 words enlivened, short wires in my brain, leading nowhere, sparking
 out. I wanted to touch them. I wanted something.

Instead, ahead, I saw a cow. It stood blinking under an overpass,
 its enormous head cocked to watch me come. In its mottled side skin,
 I saw a face splotched. I saw someone opening their mouth. Inside the
 mouth, I heard my brothers screaming. I felt their tendons sizzle in me.