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The History of Luminous Motion

By Scott Bradfield

Alfred A. Knopf

A child travels through California with a mother who's hunting for a man to take care of them. Nothing new there; Mona Simpson recently used that premise in *Anywhere But Here*. The child is a boy deeply attached to the mother, fearful and resentful of the men she meets; not new either, Tobias Wolff wrote on that theme a few months back in *This Boy's Life*. Yet Scott Bradfield's powerful novel and its unique seven-year-old narrator, Phillip Davis, are among the most original creations in recent fiction.

Phillip's mother finds her ideal man early. Bernie Robertson, who calls himself Pedro, is a kind, unimaginative man who welcomes the pair into his home. "My home is your home," he tells them repeatedly. He gives Phillip his own room, watches ball games with him, offers him fatherly attention, treats the mother gently and plans to get the boy a dog. For these attentions, Phillip kills Pedro with his own tool set.

Feeling his mother's love increase as a result of the homicide, Phillip hops in her car once more, and they keep themselves alive by petty theft until settling again in a home where they are eventually joined by the boy's father. He too, as are all of the adults in Phillip's world, is benevolent, sympathetic and indulgent with the boy. Phillip decides to poison him slowly with sodium compounds in his food, almost succeeds, is put in a youth correctional facility, and eventually returns home.

Phillip takes his mother's Seconal, drinks Jim Beam and smokes pot. He steals. He kills small animals with a friend's chemistry set. Yet he is no typical delinquent. He is brilliant and deranged in equal measure.

It is not difficult to see how he got that way.

He is completely enthralled by his mother, and her idea of parental aspirations for Phillip finds voice in, "You'll be free to be anybody you want to be. You can go to medical school. You can be a rock star. . . . You can shoot drugs or hire hookers. You can become . . . a hired assassin. It's your life, baby, and you live it anyway you choose. . . . You are immaculate. You endure for numberless centuries. . . . You are like light, baby."

She tells Phillip that the only reality is the one inside of him, and he joins her joyously in their shared free inner space. "I was filled with Mom's voice and the very light of her. We were moving again. We would never die. We would travel together forever in the world of inexplicit light."

He does not cope well, however, with the less subjective world he must share with others. His first experience of school was "harrowing"; he found "there was something nightmarish about the actual absence of terror in that place." Faced with Pedro's plan to throw him a birthday party, he contemplates suicide. As Pedro suggests getting Phillip a dog, the boy greedily fantasizes kicking, starving and ultimately strangling it. When a precocious pre-teen girl lets him hold her breast, he finds it makes him

long not to "procreate" but "to uncreate . . . to penetrate life in search of the unliving. . . . to exonerate the fundamental and fragmentary lifelessness of things."

Phillip, at seven, reads the dictionary, Wittgenstein, Plato, biophysics and Freud. In the act of killing Pedro, he says, "Death is the hard song, Pedro. . . . We only sing it once, and none of us ever gets it right."

Gradually and subtly Bradfield edges us from a realistic drama of mother and son into a surrealistic world where Oedipal longings lead to psychopathic cruelty. There is no room in Phillip's world for competitors in his mother's life. She grows in his eyes from the beautiful woman who takes care of him to someone who is "very real and immanent all the time. She was a vast incontrovertible force, extensive like gravity or sound. She was like God, she was like air. And she was always in perfect control, especially when she wasn't in any control at all."

As they steal magazines and televisions, Phillip's mother assures him, "Value's generated by the world, not consciousness. . . . The trick is to take the world and its values and generate better worlds inside. . . . Either remake the world, or allow the world to remake you." Later, when she comes upon Phillip attempting the murder of his father, finally willing to draw a disciplinary line, even as she kicks Phillip out she tells him to take the car and all of his father's money.

A Second-year eight-year-old student of Wittgenstein and biophysics killing grown men while uttering epigrams worthy of Raymond Chandler. Clearly, Bradfield has not set his sights on realism. Rather, he is as much a champion of the grotesque in fiction as Flannery O'Connor. It was O'Connor who said, "I am interested in making a good case for distortion because I am coming to believe it is the only way to make people see."

Bradfield makes us see here with a shuddering sense of recognition. Rather than providing the safety of distance, his distorted portrayal of Phillip's schizophrenic love and measured brutality strips the luxury of comfort away.

Its publisher has great hope for the success of *The History of Luminous Motion*. After giving away 3,000 copies at June's booksellers' convention in Washington, Knopf has issued a 50,000-copy first printing, extraordinary for a literary first novel. The decision, however, seems justified, as 34-year-old Bradfield is no ordinary first novelist. And *The History of Luminous Motion* is a haunting and brilliant first novel.