

The Los Angeles Review of Los Angeles

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COVER BY ROBIN WYATT DUNN

Nagasaki Rain

B. LAWRENCE

It rains
And the rain in this city clings to your skin like radiation to a Fallout Ghoul
The rivers are corporations
The streets are open gutters filled with street preachers and cum
Our shirt sticks to our back with sweat and water
We notice in a car window that there is a hole in the armpit
We notice in a car window that our beard hairs are all different lengths
Then it rains again
But it doesn't wash enough away
Dirty puddles like used car oil
You imagine all those people in Nagasaki with their eyes burnt out
All those people looking up at the sky as it fell on them
We stop again to look in a car window
But another face looks back at us



DANIEL DE CULLA

Saint Pe's Mystical Madness

DANIEL DE CULLA

As you well know, Saint Pe lived
In a small one-story house
On General Ricardos Street, Madrid
Right next to the Salaverri cinema
Between the Cinema España and Vistalegre.
When her parents had to take her
At the age of nineteen or twenty
Because of her madness of love
To the Gómez Ulla Military Hospital
The colonel doctor who treated her
Told her mother with great conviction:
-Madam, madness has no cure.
Do everything possible to get your daughter

Out into the world and socializing, working
And finding love as soon as possible.
For sixty years her mother waited
To see her daughter leave the house
Married to a good boyfriend.
But, nothing ever happened.
Saint Pe took refuge in herself
In her religiosity, faith, and love
For Our Virgin of Fatima
Where in the Sanctuary Square
She followed a procession on her knees
And Our Virgin of Pilar
To cure her madness through her intercession.

Her mother asked her:
-Daughter, why don't you become a nun?

She replied:
-Mother, I'm not going to become a nun.
I want to find a handsome and decent boy
Who will love me immaculately
And won't try to stick his stake up my cunt
Like Dracula does with his fiancees.
You know, Mother, that I've gone out
With five boys
And all of them came to me
Only to take advantage of me.
I dumped Blancaflor
Because he was friends with faggots
And he had tiny fingers on his big hands.
I dumped Chisdasvinto
B ecause he pulled his dick out on me
While we were at the Salaverri cinema

Trying to grab my hand and put it on it
Telling him, very angry:
-So you want to charge me for the ticket
Forcing me to give you a handjob?
Go get it done to your fucking mother!
And he left cursing.
I dumped Sisebuto,ç
Also at the same cinema
I made him leave, very angry
Because he tried to stick his finger up my slit.
I escaped from Bamba
By throwing myself out of his moving car
Because he took me to the Casa de Campo
Trying to make me swallow a white pill
Forcing me to take off my panties.
Rodrigo invited me to a coffee
Where they drank from large cups
With skull designs
Wanting me to squirt menstrual blood
Into one of them so he could drink it.

-What bad luck you've had with boys, my dear!
-Mother, I don't want any man
Because they're all after the same thing
And I don't want a woman either
Because their vaginas, like mine, disgust me.
I want to be a wife and beloved woman
Of Our Virgin of Fatima and Our Virgin of Pillar
Or Saint Rita and Saint Gemma
Or the saints: Saint Anthony of Florida
And Saint Amaro of Burgos
But not of Jesus, whom they call "the Beloved"
Because he became a man
And I don't believe a man who pees."
-And when you go to confession, my dear
With the priest at the Church
Of Saint Michael the Archangel
What do you tell him
When he asks you about your sins?
- Mother, he understands me
And considers me a saint

Because my sins are:
That, among my holy cards of favorite saints
And my blessed virgins
I have postcards of my favorite actors and actresses
From movies I love:
Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr
Charlton Heston and Anne Baxter
James Dean and Julie Harris
Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton
Helmut Berger and Teresa Ann Savoy
And the bingo cards.
The priest asks me:
-What about the bingo cards, daughter of God?
And I reply:
“Yes, Father, I rub them on my vagina
To see if I get lucky and win.
And he answers:
-I absolve you in the name of the Father
And of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Say one Our Father and three Hail Marys.
Go with God!
And leave something in the collecting-box.

The House of Dreams

JOHNSMITH "BUGHOUSE" DAVIS

The great Alpine adventurer Ahab Jabberschmidt pulled his sled up behind a bus stop on Second Avenue. Leaving his twelve huskies harnessed, he unzipped his parka. He had trekked through the northern Appalachians from a trailhead in remote Canada, and had arrived in New York City to write down an epic poem he had composed in his head. His first stop: Old Bellevue, the 30th Street Men's Central Homeless Shelter, also known as 'The House of Dreams.'

Jabberschmidt joined the line of homeless men without glancing at some youngsters lying on an inflatable mattress beside the bus stop. A petite African-American girl lay under the covers between two light-skinned fellows with short, unkempt blond beards. One of the men was watching a miniature television, while the other shared a cigarette with the lady.

One by one, the homeless men entered the security checkpoint beneath a scaffolding and inside the building. The interior hall was full of stress and fear. It contained four heavily-armed men operating the metal detector and an X-ray machine. The clients went through one at a time, being occasionally frisked, yelled at, or even

tackled by the special division police officers.

The young man standing in front of Jabberschmidt was a painter of nudes named William Rapprochement, who went through quickly and took the decrepit elevator to his cot on the seventh floor. He noted regretfully that his friend Orlando was still absent; he had not returned after several days. Putting his oil pastels away in his locker, Rapprochement heard someone call his name.

William closed the locker partially and turned his head. The floor supervisor stood beside him, holding a clipboard in one hand and an unlit cigar in the other.

"You know this guy? That your buddy, Orlando?"

"Yes?"

The staffer handed Rapprochement a piece of paper "You gotta make a midnight run.""Sorry?"

He leaned toward William confidentially. "The governor says you gotta go find this guy,

or get the fuck out."

The artist's mind reeled momentarily, seeking an explanation. In the past two weeks, Rapprochement had come to cherish not only Old Bellevue, but also his friendship with his neighbor Orlando. But how could this order be anything but a jest? And how could he possibly fulfill it?

**

William had become homeless three weeks prior, having been through a series of disasters in his young life. His lover (who had been his art criticism teacher) asked him to give up his job shoveling coal in the train yards. When she broke up with him, he was without resources, so he moved into New York City's central homeless shelter.

That first evening, William carried nothing in his bag but two capitalist breakfast bars from Whole Foods and a unicorn T-shirt. Once past the security checkpoint, he waited all night in a large hall with dilapidated wood paneling and high ceilings, as a radio quietly played gospel music in a back office. After sitting on an uncomfortable pew until 3:30 AM, staff brought him a large plastic bag full of bedding, a towel, grooming supplies, a combination lock, and a plastic pillow.

He was sent up one flight. The second floor contained a byzantine series of large, open- plan dormitory rooms with heavy doors that did not lock. The doors were made of cheap wood, and had been stenciled with numbers. William's room, G-101, was full of metal frame cots with bare green plastic mattresses. But the cots were akimbo, and the room was deserted. In fact, the entire floor seemed deserted.

He had a surprisingly capacious locker.

At that moment, after checking in for his first day at Old Bellevue, William experienced an epiphany of freedom.

He had been so afraid when his girlfriend left him. But he was still young, and did not need to fear dying, abused

helplessly in a nursing home.“Isthis all I was so terrified of?” he wondered with relief**.**

The next morning something about Old Bellevue appealed to his artistic sentiments. Why did he feel so peaceful standing in line for breakfast? Was it the reggae being played for the contented men waiting in front of the cafeteria? Was it the caffeine?

Perhaps the architecture of Old Bellevue had been intended to pacify the minds of the mad. When he, like all the others, was expelled from the building, William learned that the sidewalk in front always reeked of Pine Sol at 9 AM. The city morgue was right across the street. But the morning air was fresh and brisk, and a sunny 20-minute walk took him by chance to Herman Melville Square.

Rapprochement returned by late afternoon to beat the 10 PM curfew. After dinner, he was struck by the sight of old men playing dominos with boys as Calypso music wafted quietly through the halls.

He was free, William thought. He could find creativity again. Notwithstanding his disasters, he was free to explore, free to find love. If he wanted to, he could miss curfew, and still come back.

He never dreamed his destiny as a revolutionary mystical art hero could be so rich. **

The second night, William was moved up to a more permanent bed. Referred to as “the common seven” by the

homeless men with whom he rode the elevator, his new floor was said to be crowded. But the large room was empty, full of echoes, same as before.

On the third day, William met his neighbor, Orlando. He supposed that he and Orlando would found a new cultural movement together.

Like himself, Orlando was a professional fine artist, a mandolin player. His story was much the same. He had traveled with a circus and fallen in love with a Siamese contortionist. They got an apartment in New York, but she threw him out when she got a job as a can-can dancer.

The two fellows still had the dormitory to themselves. Orlando showed him how to sneak up to the ninth floor.

"This building used to be New York's psychiatric institution for the criminally insane. It was part of a 400-year-old hospital," Orlando explained, as they sat on the bare floorboards, looking up at the unfinished dry wall. "For two Thorazine-filled weeks in December of 1980, the floor we're sitting on held Mark David Chapman, John Lennon's murderer. If you ask the guys downstairs, they'll tell you it's haunted. But I don't see any ghosts here, do you, William?"

**

An hour after getting the assignment to find Orlando, Rapprochement ventured out into the New York City darkness. It was approaching 11 PM, and a heavy snow was falling. The sled dogs milled about on the corner, whining

anxiously.

But William's search faltered. Flurries blew across the avenues, impeding vision. He staggered over two-foot snowbanks, and trudged blindly through knee-deep puddles of slush. After only a week as a ward of the state, William had lost all trace of self-reliance. Lacking any personal experience of the mystery of spiritual adventure, he could not sense the locus of genius, and thus could not find his friend.

Struggling against the wind, Rapprochement wandered in circles for hours. He also suffered from an inguinal hernia, and had to lie down on a snowy bench.

As he lay there, tears of despair freezing to his face, the entire city seemed transformed into a ruined landscape. Three angels wearing what appeared to be black spiderwebs descended, bent over his body, giggling.

"What quest are you on, pilgrim?" one of them asked him."Never return to Old Bellevue!" whispered a second.

"Never, never return!" hissed the third.

The young culture worker fainted.

**

When he came to, Rapprochement was curled up in the cockpit of the dog sled, weaving through snowbanks and dodging buses at lightning speed. (When William did not return, the governor had sent Ahab Jabberschmidt out to look for him). William held on for dear life, and 20 minutes later,

the dogsled pulled into The Sheep Meadow in Central Park.

The storm had stopped now, and the snow was melting under an immense full moon. A small group of people chatted quietly near an air mattress beneath the sad, mute gaze of the Dakota Building, helpless and all-seeing.

As the huskies charged up, William saw Orlando lying in bed with another dude, with a svelte black hottie in the middle. They were chatting with a tall, gaunt London panhandler who stood beside them. The other fellow in bed was watching a portable television; he did not look up, so Rapprochement could not see his face.

Rapprochement hopped off the sled. “Wow- am I glad to see you!” he said.“How’sit going?” said Orlando.

Rapprochement looked around at the scene.“Ican’t believe we found you out here,” he said.“Don’tyou want to go back to the shelter?”

The panhandler uttered a groan and shuddered; his face turned a greyer shade. A wave of tension moved silently through them all.

“Noway,” said Orlando, after a moment of silence. He adopted a cool, matter-of-fact tone to soothe his friends. “Truthfully, that place is not a real homeless shelter. Old Bellevue is actually a halfway house for paroled felons; but the governor said it’s okay if homeless guys stay there, too.”

“There was once a murder at Old Bellevue, and the governor boarded it up,” added the panhandler, stammering

momentarily. “Nobody has been inside for over 35 years.”

At that moment, Ahab Jabberschmidt took a step forward in the snow.

“Myself, I just want to go home again, and see my friends,” he said somberly. “Doc, and the diplomat, and the barefoot professor, and even the psychotic poet. Most of all, I want to see my brother, the chimney sweep. I want to see the entire procession of abnormal characters that swept through our lives in that world. I can’t seem to find it anywhere, today; not in this Sheep Meadow at midnight, not on the Left Bank, not even at Old Bellevue- ghosts, paranormal personages and all. It almost seems as though R. Crumb should be ashamed. All of the individuals who populated his colorful works were long gone before the end of his days, disappeared into suburban mundanity, or urban invisibility, reformed, retired, or simply dead. There is no more Mr. Natural, not today, at least none that would recognize Crumb, or attempt to speak to him. The days of Basquiat are gone, children. In the words of Rimbaud,‘Ialone have the key to this savage parade!’”

The faces of Orlando, Ahab and the panhandler began to flicker and melt. William threw his head back, screamed involuntarily, and woke up. He was soaked in sweat, his heart pounding wildly. He lay on an air mattress, with Orlando on one side and their friend Marianne in the middle. They were in the hot mid-day sun at the corner of Second Avenue and Eighth Street.

**

Old Bellevue was an idyllic artist's refuge, until the governor decided to install a haunted house on the ninth floor. Word traveled faster than light to Rikers Island, Attica, and points
north, and inmates began to agonizingly count the days until they could ride the elevators to the top and race, shrieking breathlessly through the haunted house, over and over again.

The amusement became a permanent installation, and the governor (who at that time was a Situationist) became world famous for his visionary urban planning. Soon parolees had to jostle with tourists from Tacoma to Taiwan for elevator space. Old Bellevue became so chronically overcrowded that there was no room for the clients. The riotous din of thrills grew to such a crescendo that the artists could take no rest. Within months, the congestion and overuse rendered the sepulchral old building, which had never been rehabilitated, totally unusable. It was vacated; filled with mothballs and asbestos, and boarded shut.

Today, art has no home in New York, outside of an MFA program.

~April 2020, Flushing Bay Beach



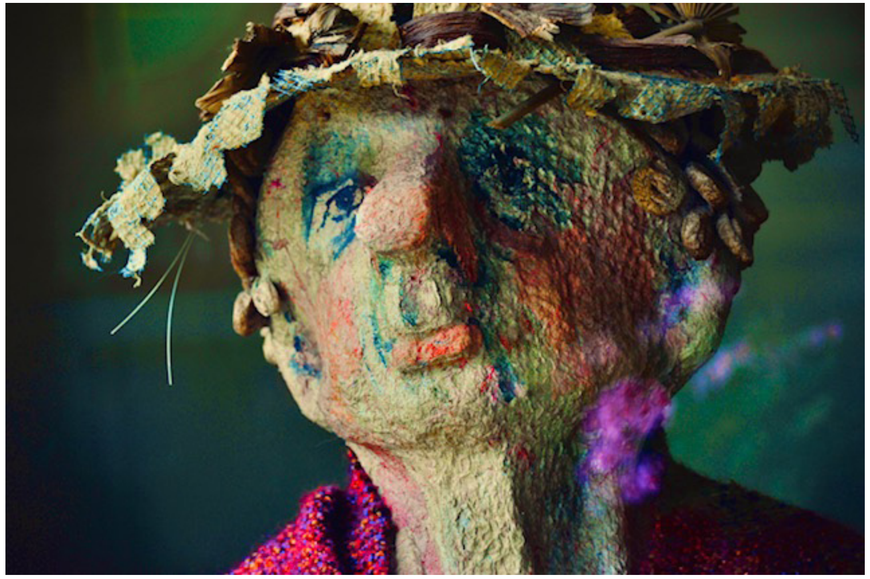
Chimneys, Old Home Place

WILLIAM CRAWFORD



Solitary Passenger at Dusk, San Francisco Bus

WILLIAM CRAWFORD



The Old Man

WILLIAM CRAWFORD

Boats of Leaves

WILL ACKERMAN

The grandfather knew well and trusted his creek. He trusted it, however, as a reasonable man approaches any wild creature: with wary respect and an appreciation for its often eccentric and unpredictable mood swings.

The grandfather had shared his entire life with that creek. He fished and hunted its shoreline and backwaters. Swam, paddled and poled the quick waters and the slow.

After forfeiting his youth to a foreign war, he built a house on a shelf-overlook in the creek valley and took his bride to her wedding bed there. He and his wife raised two sons and two daughters in their home, and in lean times lived in part off the creek's bounty: the fish and turtles, wild fowl, nuts, berries and cress.

The grandfather was a quiet man. Those who did not know any better thought him solemn, even remote and passionless. He was a man of few words squandered in either anger or joy. There had always seemed to be a gap, like a menacing crack in creek ice, between him and his children, and all four could not wait to leave him. Leave his house. Leave his creek. And when they did depart he watched them go with no more

outward emotion than the mallards nesting amid the rushes and cattails watched their fledglings rightfully abandon the nest.

A taciturn man, the grandfather's thoughts were his own.

Then one daughter, his youngest, returned. She came back to her mother and to her father and to the house she was so impatient to escape.

"He's a son-of-a-bitch," spat the daughter. She was speaking of the man who had been her husband for thirteen physically and emotionally abusive years. She and her mother and her father sat at the kitchen table amid the rich vapors of freshly brewed coffee. It was her second day back.

The previous day her father had simply said:

"Time enough tomorra to talk. You settle in now. You and the young'ns."

The "young'ns" were her three girls. Darcie the oldest at eleven. Carrie was ten. Then came Francie, a rambunctious, irrepressible nine.

It was autumn. Air as clear as spring-water was rich with the lush scent of ripened gardens, mowed lawns and the bristling taste of harvested field corn. The hillsides were quilted with brilliance. The low creek ran emerald and caressed rocks worn smooth from so very many years of such caresses.

"He's a son-of-a-bitch."

The daughter's face was set like clay baked by the heat of hate, her eyes were as dark as the coffee she accepted and

ignored. There were no tears left. Tears were a part of her life that had boiled away beneath the Saharan intensity of her marriage.

"I'd like to stay a while, 'til I get a chance to sort things out. Git my feet back on the ground." The daughter looked to her mother, knowing that her father would say little. There was plenty of room in the house for her and the three girls because her father had built onto the place with the birth of each of his four children.

"Kids should have their own bedroom. Their own space," he explained to his wife those long ago years when they could ill afford the expense. "A kid needs a place to plan and dream or jist be left alone in. It's somethin' a kid's got to have."

The "son-of-a-bitch" arrived two days later. His battered red Ford pickup truck sped in and slewed sideways on the gravel drive. The three girls ran to the cherry tree grove that flourished at the back of the property. There they hid in the tall grass and watched, worried and wide-eyed.

The grandfather ambled to his workshop in the garage and turned an ear to the house. His wife was gone to town. He waited and bided his time by mending an eave on a dollhouse he had come across at a yard sale the day before.

Finally, when the name calling from within the house descended to a depth of viciousness beyond which it could not likely fall, and rage ran like a river rupturing its levees, the grandfather set his tools aside and returned to his house.

He entered the kitchen at the rear and went to a closet by the pantry. There he removed his old shotgun, slipped a single shell in the chamber, snapped the barrel shut and walked into the living room.

The “son-of-a-bitch” and the daughter glared at each other. An angry hand-sized welt flared on the daughter’s left cheek. The “son-of-a-bitch” turned defiantly when he heard the grandfather behind him. Then he saw the gun and his eyes lost their honed edge of fury. His fists unclenched and the tendons cording his neck went flaccid. He held up a belaying hand.

“Don’t want no trouble with you old man,” the “son-of-a-bitch” said. He backed toward the front door. “I’ll be going now.” He bumbled into a wall, then pivoted on one heel and was out, across the porch and down the front steps.

The grandfather followed soundlessly.

That quickly, it was finished. The “son-of-a-bitch” roared away in his truck. Dirt and rocks snarled from a spinning rear tire. One stone smacked and cracked a side window of the house.

The daughter sobbed to herself without tears.

The girls all crept from the stand of sour cherry trees. They stood like young deer caught trembling in the high beams of curiosity and uncertainty.

The grandfather returned to the house, emptied and put away his shotgun. He then went back out to his workshop

where he knew he had a piece of glass that he could cut and fit to the broken window.

The grandmother returned to hear a recount of it all from her daughter. Life flowed on.

Autumn rains came that year and flushed away the season's glorious palette, replacing it with a khaki canvas that would await God's brush of spring. The creek swelled.

The daughter took a job grimly jockeying hamburgers and French fries in a diner out on Route 102.

Her girls all began school over town and each day walked the double length of iron railroad trestle that was upstream from their grandparents' house. They hopped its creosoted ties and tight-roped steel rails.

Below the trestle the creek rippled around stone pilings and giggled, teasing them like a playmate in hiding. Some days the girls would stop to toss sticks and twigs and boats of leaves into the eddying water and watch those boats set south on trips that would take them to far off, fabulous places.

In the privacy of their small bedroom, when the house slept off the day and the world outside prepared for a fresh one, the grandfather and his wife talked quietly. They spoke of many things and this night it was of the girls and the creek and the ever present dangers the creek presented.

"Y'ought to sit them girls down about the crick." The wife spoke into darkness intruded upon only by wedge of lemon moonlight wedged beneath a drawn window shade. She felt

him roll onto his side toward her. His breath nuzzled her face with a familiarly comforting mix of spearmint and tobacco.

"They heerd it all from their ma," he said. "She tole'em right off that they weren't to go nowhere near the crick when it's high like now. She tole'em not to go nowhere near it when there's ice; that crick ice ain't no good and they might fall through. Cain't hardly do no more'n that 'thout ridin' herd on 'em every minute."

"I fret," said the wife.

"We got four of our own through all them winters and never lost a one," he said.

She sighed. "But these here's city kids, and that little Francie ain't 'feerd of nothing."

"All the more reason I cain't do much. You know how kids are. I go naggin' 'em too hard 'bout stayin' away from the crick, it'll jist make it too much of a temptation for them kids to pass up. You know that."

"I fret," she said.

"So do I." He rolled back over and shortly began a soft snoring that was the overture for a symphony of swirling dreams.

October came and rode away on the brooms of witches and the backs of hobgoblins. Autumn took a long last, regretful breath singed by the finalizing frosts of November and faded away.

The grandfather spent many hours in his workshop, bent

over the dollhouses he intended to give the girls on Christmas morning. He painted and carved, planed and glued and peopled the small buildings in his mind, for he had a bright and fertile and largely untapped imagination.

Each day the grandfather made a short trek to a point of land overlooking the railroad trestle. There he stood amid a copse of ancient red oaks and waited for the girls as they walked home from school. He was careful to stay out of sight and watched in sun and snow and brittle rain until they negotiated the long black span and were safely headed toward the house.

Then he took the path back and beat them home so they would not know he had been observing. Each *afternoon* he did this because he was content that in the mornings they would be in too much of a hurry to get to school to be lured into any foolishness by the teasing creek. It was after school and the children's need to occupy their empty time that concerned him the most.

Christmas morning arrived with the imagined chorus of sleigh bells, and the girls rushed downstairs to find three doll houses. They gushed thanks on their mother and their grandmother and blinked shy, deferential glances to where their grandfather sat sipping his coffee and saying little. But his eyes twinkled against the lights of the Christmas tree, and maybe it was just the season's first ambitious snowfall that

made the house seem so much cozier.

The girls got a scrawled note from the “son-of-a-bitch” and each received a ten dollar bill.

The mother got a short letter explaining that if she wanted a divorce she would have to pay for it.

The grandmother got a sweater and boots lined with rabbit fur.

The grandfather got gloves that he could see without trying on would be too small for his large knobby hands.

He nodded to the girls and said, “Thanks,” and they giggled like the creek gurgling below the trestle as they inspected their dollhouses for the tiny treasures hidden within. They found rings with colored glass, coins, rhinestones and beads. There were cat’s eye marbles, a piece of amber, magnets, bronze and silver medals and campaign ribbons that they could have no way of knowing came from long forgotten battles in the mud and hell of battle.

“You saved them medals all these years,” the grandmother said that Christmas night in bed.

“To me they was just reminders of death and pain. To them girls they’ll be ‘membrances of holidays and a bit a joy. Some good should come from things like that, even if it’s only a little and a long time acomin’.”

So the girls squealed on Christmas morning.

Their mother reveled in her spite and gall.

The grandmother went to finish fixing a big Christmas

turkey and its trimmings.

The grandfather sat quietly and watched out the window where snow and cold were beginning to sculpt an isinglass veneer on the slower waters of the creek.

It was three days later that the grandfather went to fetch his old johnboat from where it lay upside down on a pair of sawhorses behind the wood shed. Steam pluming in front of his face, he dragged the flat-bottomed plywood craft across the crust of snow to his workshop. He did not know why. He hadn't used the boat in years. The pea-green paint was faded and flaking. A gunwale had rotted. The caulking needed replaced. He did not know why he took the boat in to repair. It was, the grandfather told himself, just something that needed to be done.

He was not aware that the girls left the house when they did that day to go over town and spend their ten dollars. He was not told, because his wife had not known of his trips to the high point above the trestle to stand watch over their safe return. So he remained in his workshop and scraped and sanded, caulked and painted.

"I just couldn't get to her," the man who rescued Francie's two sisters cried later that bitter afternoon.

He was not what most people picture when they try to mentally typecast a hero. He was a social embarrassment that the judgmentally righteous of the community considered pretty much worthless, on those rare occasions when they

considered him at all.

That day he happened to be crossing the vehicle bridge upstream of the railroad trestle when he spotted three young girls playing on the snow-covered creek. He paused, huddled in his olive colored Army surplus coat, and saw the ice split into a soundless grin and the black water suck the three of them in.

"I crawled out," he said. "Stayed flat and crawled out and got the two pretty easy. Water ain't usu'ly too deep right there. Not more'n a few feet. But the crick's up right now." He was blowing at a mug he held cupped in two numb hands. He was hunched, a blanket draped over his head like a cowl. He said, "But the little one went under too fast. I couldn't get to her."

He looked up and saw the grandfather regarding him with a steady ice-blue stare, and he cried, "I tried! I really tried!"

A man in a red and tan Rescue Department uniform spoke to the grandfather. "Ain't much chance of finding her. Not now." The Rescue Department man winced as the mother sent up a fresh, keening wail. He said, "Water's too damn fast through here. Can't tell where the bod— I'm sorry. Where *she* mighta ended up. But I don't got to tell *you* that. You know this crick better'n anyone."

The grandfather gazed toward one of several ragged ponds chopped in the creek ice and crowded with boats. The black water was already beginning to heal over with a skin of slush. He said nothing because there was nothing to be said. He

turned and walked home to wait.

Each day, when the sun fought off the cold and the creek carved a ragged channel of fast water down its center, the grandfather got out his freshly repaired johnboat and slid it across the ice. Then he would get in and begin poling up and down the open water. He knew the creek would give back what it had taken. It always did. So he searched and people walking or driving across the bridge up from the railroad trestle would see him and shake their heads without speaking. There was nothing to be said.

He located her in March.

A patch of blue flannel shown, snagged onto a branch in a cove of backwater a mile or so downstream from his house. He worked his way over to her and sat with his pole straddling the johnboat. The wind slowed its spitting of fluffy tree-bound snow. The sun was tiny and ineffective, a brass button frozen to the vest of sky.

The creek was not apologetic. The creek could not help what it was. The grandfather knew this. Water curled and purred against the prow of the boat, hesitated as the grandfather paid it no heed, and then continued on its way, carrying sticks and twigs and sere boats of leaves on trips south. Sticks and twigs and boats of leaves and a few silent tears that the creek would take to far-off and fabulous places.

His father had been a painter of no particular note, a minor figure in the Venice scene of the late 1970s—a scene that, although thriving in those years, lived in the shadow of the halcyon days of the Bohemian 1950s, when rents were cheap and nobody worried about the bottom line.

His father did non-representational art. Globs of bright color dropped onto huge, tonal canvases. If he had ever done one thing that represented his heart, Tommy thought, then the art might have meant something. As it was, it just looked as if his father had taken a bright orange shit on a cerise canvas.

He'd had a short run of success in the early 1980s after Wolfgang Puck chose one of his paintings to hang in the first Spago, the place catering, in those days, to a show business crowd who liked their art as unthreatening as possible. A painting lit by the lights of the Strip and a clientele like that, Albert's work—his dad's name was Albert—was soon hanging in the homes of a few film and television stars, and the lobbies of their agencies.

With a little money and less talent, Albert had gone off

all the available deep-ends, which, in the Hollywood of the 1980s, meant cocaine and the women who liked cocaine. Within a few years, his art was out of fashion and he was broke and could no longer afford the cocaine. He had left Tommy and his mother to fend for themselves in Venice while he snorted and fucked his way through Hollywood, and now he came crawling unsuccessfully back to them, Tommy's mom taking him back just long enough to catch him fucking the landlady and throw him out. How did he manage to seduce the landlady, Nadine, Tommy's girlfriend, had said. The dude must be packing. Something in the way she said it seemed like a challenge, suggesting, as it did, that Tommy might not have inherited that particular physical attribute from his dad.

Tommy had only seen his father three times since the day his mom had thrown him out. The first time was maybe a year after. Tommy was fourteen, hanging out with some friends on the Venice Boardwalk trying to buy weed. Look at that dude painting tourists' portraits, his friend, Linda, had said. He looks really pissed off. They had all looked over to see the weirdo. It was Albert.

The second time had been three years later at the apartment in Venice. His mom was still living there (in fact would live there until the day, some fourteen years after this, when the cancer in her right breast left undetected and untreated metastasized until it was much too late, and she went into St. John's where, after two weeks of agony and morphine, she

died.) He was at the kitchen table, writing college applications and there was a knock on the door. He got up to answer it but his mother cut him off, hurrying to get to the door first, because she'd known Albert was coming. She met him in the doorway and Tommy could hear her saying, This is all I've got and don't fucking ask me again. Is he home? Tommy heard Albert ask. Not to you, his mother had said. Then Albert had looked past her and she had not been able to move quickly enough to block his view. He had caught Tommy's eye. What's up, man, he said. You keepin' outta trouble?

The third time was here, in New York. It had been a very bad experience. Tommy had had no interest in following his father into the arts. The closest he'd come was playing in a Nirvana cover band in high school. He'd gone to Northwestern undergrad and then gotten an MBA at Ohio State, and now, eight years out, was working his way steadily up the chain at an accounting firm whose clients included Condé Nast and Delta Airlines. This was 2003. The city was still reeling from the 9/11 attacks and the resulting club scene was hard-edged and nihilistic—eat, drink, and be unpleasant for we are already dead.

Tommy threw himself into this desperate party with an energy that he had not known he possessed—an energy that, he thought, had been his father's at the height of his short-lived fame. He stayed up for days on end, finding his way to clubs that didn't open until four in the morning. He slept

with anyone who asked and he took whatever they were offering. He met Nadine after he'd had sex with her, sobering up from a threesome he didn't remember and coming face-to-face with the three-day-growth of a guy named Steve, turning as a voice said, I've got orange juice, and then seeing a young woman, full-breasted, round-hipped, stark naked, standing there holding a glass of juice and saying, Given where your head was last night, I thought you'd need hydration.

Steve lived in Greenpoint. Tommy and Nadine had taken the train back to Manhattan—Nadine worked at a gallery in SoHo—and they had talked for the entire ride. They'd had dinner that night at a French place on Spring near her job and had moved in together three days later, Tommy subletting his Upper West Side apartment and moving into her fourth floor walk-up on St. Marks and Avenue A.

At first, living together had done nothing to slow down the party for either of them. If nothing else, Nadine said, we've got a fallback fuck for a bad night. But slowly, they had come to realize that they enjoyed fucking each other more than they enjoyed fucking strangers, so matters were simplified in that regard. The drugs were still there. Nadine supplemented her meager income from the gallery by dealing weed and occasionally some X. Someone in the clubs always had ketamine or speed or coke. Tommy was thirty-two, Nadine twenty-seven, and their lives were never going to end.

So, one night—a warm summer night, the kind of night

where the air has a promise in it, where life is romantic and a soft breeze blows pleasant tears into your eyes—on one of those nights Tommy walked over to SoHo from the St. Marks apartment and wandered into Nadine's gallery. There's a guy in there—full head of silver hair, good suit with a black T-shirt and Ferragamos with no socks. He was talking animatedly about the Venice art scene of the 1970s, saying something about how by then Ed Moses was old news and no one remembered Ed Kienholz and all the trouble he'd caused with the back seat of that Dodge. Although Tommy didn't know his voice, he knew instantly that this man in the good suit with the fancy shoes and no socks was his father.

He was a good-looking man, Tommy's mother had always said that. There were no photographs of him around the apartment, obviously, when Tommy was growing up, and his only memories of his father were as an angry bum on the boardwalk and an unshaven drunk staring past his mother to ask him what's up.

In that moment, he had sensed what was coming—the body language, Nadine leaning forward and laughing a bit at some comment his father made, touching his arm, just once, as if in appreciation of some clever remark. You're an artist, too? She had asked. I've had my moments, his father said with an expansive gesture. I painted. But now I think that a life well-lived may be my greatest, my only important work.

I would love to see some of your paintings, Nadine had

said.

Do you know Don Johnson? Kevin Costner, Sylvester Stallone?

I don't know anyone famous, Nadine said. Except, I guess, now you.

Tommy had never seen her flirt and it made him sick to his stomach.

What are the odds, Albert had said after Tommy had put himself into the conversation and told his father who he was. I didn't even know you were in New York.

Why would you have known that? Tommy asked.

And this is your lady, his father said. What a gross, old hippie way of speaking. Nadine didn't seem to notice. You are a very lucky young man, his father said, looking at Nadine, and not at Tommy, as he spoke.

He's a fucking asshole, Tommy had said to Nadine that night. Then he'd told her all about his father, all the way up to the landlady, which is when Nadine had made her joke about how Albert must be packing and Tommy, sensing disaster and defeat, had resigned himself to both.

Nadine married Albert in the fall of that same year, 2003. She organized a retrospective of his work at MoMA the following spring. The reviews in *Artforum* and *The Times* were glowing. It was time for a reassessment of a forgotten artist of the 1970s. The story of his fall from grace, of his time spent painting portraits on the Venice boardwalk, became the

romantic legend of a Great Man. Several people who had had portraits done on the boardwalk in that period came forward with theirs, hoping that they would prove to be Albert's work, but Albert claimed to have been blind drunk for that entire three-year period—to remember nothing other than the time he fell off the Venice pier and was stung by a jellyfish.

Sad Toilet

MARY TURZILLO

Here is a sad toilet:
we must first diagnose its ailment.

Is it seasonal affective disorder,
possibly from the tinsel the four year old stuffed into it?

Does it have n0rovirus? Or is it seasick?
Regurgitating all over the bathroom rug
like a cat with a hairball, or (let's face it)
someone who ate dodgy shrimp?

Is it hyperactive? It runs
day and night. And yet when you shake its silver hand
it does nothing. Just says "gluh" and pretends not to hear you.

You find it unflushed just when company arrives?
Perhaps your cat has toilet-trained himself.
This is called cat-dandy allergy
because although that cat is a dandy
your toilet is not.

Or perhaps its seat is cracked,
wobbles and slips to one side
when you settle yourself on it,
in extreme cases sliding you to the floor on your butt.

Is it incontinent?
not pooping or peeing the bathroom,
just kind of leaking tank water
day and night, small cold puddles
that find your toes when you need it in pre-dawn.

After diagnosis
we can try drugs:
Drano is the Prozac of the depressed fixture.
If it has ADHD, perhaps tightening its screws would benefit.
Or how about a brisk session with a wrench and screw-driver:
teach it who's boss.
This is called Rolfing the Crapper.

Before Me

HEIKKI HUOTARI

What one thought one thought the other thought. In the beginning there were two square roots of minus one. They say you're just a metaphor but I know better. Every time a fruitcake changes hands value is added. My reaction is equal and opposite. As an RLC circuit and a spring-mass-damper may be governed by a single system of equations, blesséd are the global maxima for they'll be global minima and blesséd are the ultraviolets for they'll be infrared and no one will forget your troubles for you therefore bring your own nepenthe.

The more orthogonal the merrier, the more the music of the compact convex bodies and the end of evolution. Optimal the advocates, facilitators and enablers. An ID hanging from a lanyard. Zero zero zero zero the coordinates of never and of nowhere. Despite or because of the fact that their essences are at odds every window harbors a risque display. The phantom hand is quicker than the extra sensory perception. Be outside of space and time or be a tetrahedron. Thou shalt have no other subatomic particles before me.

Rate Of Change

HEIKKI HUOTARI

The butterfly was only joking. Now you extra-sensory perceive it. Now you have the bases covered. Now you stop at nothing. If f is continuous and the domain of f is closed and bounded then f has a minimum and maximum. There is a precedent to end all precedents. There is an alter ego to not only live with. Trigonometry is spherical or planar. Where the phantom hand attaches no one knows.

Intelligent designers rearrange the furniture when everyone is absent or asleep. Who hates a vacuum. What loves a parade. Why won't they weaponize. An object is an obstacle with wings. The weak are wrong. No spin except to levitate. The chairs are musical except at the last supper. On the eve of the apocalypse the expectations, celebrants and overestimators meet and merge. Tattoos accrue.

Soaps

JUDITH SKILLMAN

Each day she watches
each day cries for
Christ's exegesis the wound
opens days of our lives

the trucks probe
the fork lifts
each day she watches
the same pose crowbars her hip

John Black comes to Roman's wife
the lipstick glares a moonbeam
doesn't stop him
the TV quivers its square haunt

This nice nurse brings pills
in little plastic cups
she drinks cranberry juice
a curse for the housedress

and diaper
each day the sun floats to its destination
behind the blinds drawn
to whom it may concern

sometimes she colors in books
the others bring
on Sunday
she talks about Billy Flynn's

sloppy Chad DiMera accent
when did Casey Deidrick turn
away from gathered-in waists
in her dream he takes a hairpin curve

an astronomer could do no more
to bring back the stars
why not linger
beside this hydrangea's nonalcoholic punch

Dawn

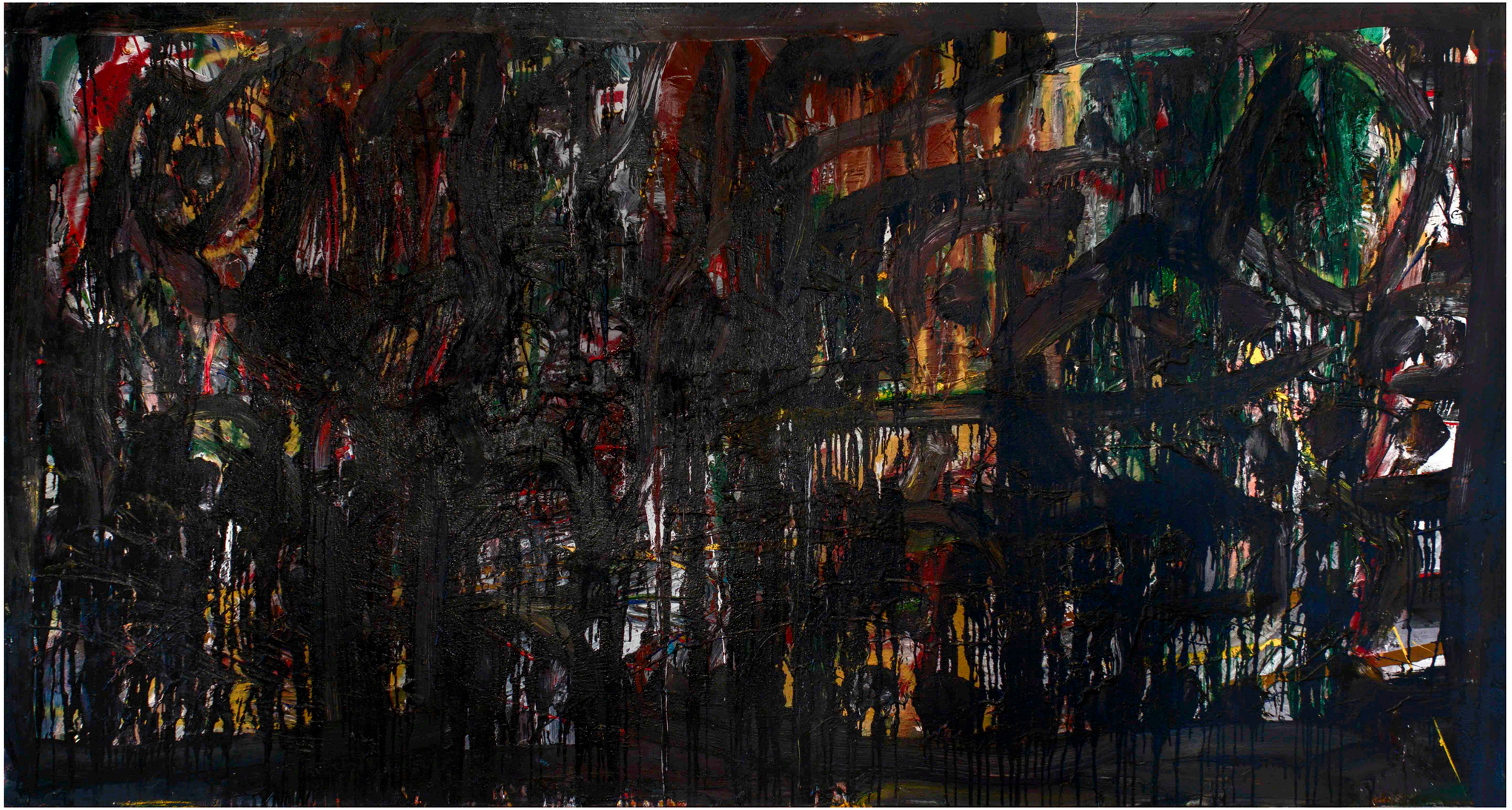
JUDITH SKILLMAN

The old world a work of drought
and massacres, the new bright and shiny
with rain on asphalt. Light replaces stars.
Characters from dream pack their bags

to depart for the inner country,
their houses razed, Litona River on fire.
A puddle of oil under a car
with broken gasket, a smudge in the east

where the same middle-aged sun
waits to rise. Listen to the birds.
Did your mother, the lark, anticipate
the end of Lebanon as she showered, dressed,
broke eggs, and listened to a symphony
of frog songs from the man-made lake
in Greenbelt, Maryland, home of NASA?
Did your father, who loved the sun enough

to measure its spectra, hold a grudge?
What are dreams? Vats of liquid nitrogen
in a lab. Fingers laced with prayers.
May your past not overtake the present.



Death Grinds the Mind

GORDON MASSMAN



Bluebird Drowning

GORDON MASSMAN

Self-Portrait

GORDON MASSMAN



Walking Through Soda

MACEO NIGHTINGALE

I slid my shoes on, breastfeeding an adult
socks pulled to ankles, stern authority legs.
Cold salmon feet and a can of soda
the boredom that I face
got popped by two pimple fingers
and the pregnant caterpillars
flew off into abortions.
I walked out of the door, squeezed a key.

The octopus sucked an uncircumcised pickle
preachers howled about banana smoothies
and the orange juice bible squeezed eternity.
The sinners of yesterdays
bus ride stuck needles into arms
bleeding out memories of incest
so long to the dogs wagging
their tails for balloons.

I took off my shirt
scabs covered my arms.
A framed photo of jesus
eating a hot dog hung upon the wall.
Burnt asparagus cooked

on the stove for dinner.
Alaskan salmon roasting
in the warm oven.

The forest was covered by redneck leaves
I aimed the gun at the tree
shot a squirrel and dragged its tail.
Couldn't fall asleep last night
the wolves ate the food
out of the refrigerator.
Nose ring pierced through nostrils
and the wind flapped against
a saggy asscheek, barbeque sauce
and beans.

Those queers dancing in the club
have been going at it
since nine in the morning.
Sweaty bodies thumping
to groovy basslines.

Finding attractive qualities
in ugly personalities takes
a lot of courage
and the tuna stuck between
two
slices
of
bread
    talked
        about food stamps.

King Kong in Summer Heat

MACEO NIGHTINGALE

The city of Los Angeles brought in a gorilla to the beach.
Scientists opened the cage and let the beast run free.
Ape feet dug into sand, crates of bananas on a boat.
The sun hung over the horizon like a universal advertisement
A plane traced over clouds of smoke, engine screaming.

In the water you see, the one who fills your breast
with freedom, passion and a wet kiss on the neck.
Children kept their questions folded inside towels,
Flowers in a bowl kicked into the sea.
Hit him right between the eyes with a tulip.

The ventriloquist ends up dead, the dummy doesn't.
We look forward to having the zoo animal at dinner
signing a movie contract of a hundred million dollars.
Dressed in suits, carrying pens of black ink,
the gorilla sat where the lifeguard used to be.

Straight Shoota

MACEO NIGHTINGALE

It's all fun and games
until a mental health
patient picks up
 a pencil and paper to solve their problems.
Leave a clout chaser in a room alone
and the walls will start singing opera songs.
Great painters do two things, paint and paint.
Terrible painters do one thing,
take down a great painters art
because of how good it is.

I've shook hands with dogs with no legs
who write better than humans with two feet.
A strong mind relies on two things,
bananas and a love of enemies.

My new broad at UCLA
has these heavily penciled
eyebrows and listens to
polka music in the morning.
"What do you think about
girls at USC?"
"They're just like the boys there,
snobbish and unoriginal."

“What makes someone original?”
“Paying attention to things
that no one else sees.”
I
  Pulled
A tooth out of her purse
And Sold It An
          Auction.

The rats started reading Sigmund Freud
and thought all their cheese was about
their parents and other nonsense
that a drummer with
eight arms can’t relate to.

Remembering the Homeless While on His Way to the Back Porch

CRAIG LOOMIS

On TV there is, yet again, talk about the homeless, how it never used to be this way and where in the world have they all come from, "virtually overnight?" wonders the one commentator, looking straight into the camera, shaking her shiny black hair.

He is in the middle of walking from bedroom to kitchen to back porch when he stops to listen. The three pundits, with cups of hot coffee, are sitting evenly-spaced around a glass table, and as they continue talking about the plight of the homeless, he cannot help but find himself stopping, nodding, arms akimbo. The three of them, two men—one with green tie, the other with blue tie—and one big, black-haired woman, take turns saying what he has heard before: "these people need to find jobs…. welfare is not the answer…. once we put a stop to the drug problem, they will disappear…" and so on. That's when he remembers that he was on his way to the back porch. But before that, he cannot help but be reminded of that time not too long ago, one cloudy afternoon in September as he was making his way across some shopping mall's vast parking lot, when out of nowhere there was a tap on his shoulder and like a kind of magic, a bearded, red-eyed

fellow was at his side. Under the one arm he held a squirmy black and white puppy and under the other a bug-infested sleeping bag. "Excuse me," he said, "but by chance would you happen to have any spare change? Any change at all would be really appreciated." Looking harder now and backing up ever so slightly, he saw an array of bulging plastic bags knotted around the man's belt, his shoes nothing more than patches of battered leather. At first, he was sure the perfect answer was to simply keep walking, pretending like he hadn't seen or heard, but then, backing up even farther, he not only changed his mind but surprised himself by saying, "Where's your shopping cart? I mean, don't you all have a shopping cart these days?" The man with dirty puppy and dirtier sleeping bag blinked at him and even blushed. But never mind, because he had no change to give him, and said so, "I have no change with me," and even held out his palms to show him. The man nodded, as if yes, that is the right answer, and with squirmy puppy and sleeping bag, along with the swish of plastic bags, shuffled off towards a nearby couple who had just opened their car door, but not before ending with, "Ok, God bless." It was this God bless part that made him stop to recheck his pockets, and there was a paperclip, a broken toothpick and much assorted lint. This last part forced him to say a little too loudly, "I'm sorry." But only the puppy twisted its head to look back.

He went on to the back porch but by now he had forgotten why he needed to go there in the first place. To do something,

he watered a line of potted flowers, shooed a stray cat off the fence and picked a weed or two. When he made his way back to the front room with TV, the three of them were still talking about the homeless. Among other things, they insisted there needed to be more rules, more laws to put a halt to such people. But he was still remembering the man's God bless, and when he angrily turned off the TV he wasn't exactly sure where the anger was coming from or going to.

Query for submission

THE TELEVISION CITY OF GOD. TONIGHT ON CNS THE ROPE DRAWING

ANTHONY ACRI

Dear Robin,

I saw your EMAIL for a call for submissions, and wondered if I should, but decided for it.

You've been great to me this past year or so and I have very much enjoyed getting things in your collections that were rejected out of hand other places as got subversive work in fact accepted elsewhere, whether they knew it or not. So, I certainly don't mean to be at all pushy or to keep being bothersome, and do have a great amount of apparition for being in your books when others wouldn't be as accommodating. I feel a natural trilogy in the work I have sent to you is pretty much brought to its conclusion in this piece as it deals with at a perfect moment where it seems all the farces and dances of the power mongers are in fact dovetailing. And again it seems all roads are leading to an anti Republican in the Romance sense cataclysm of filthy doddery little power man men who the Jesuits and the readings of Petronius and Gore made sure I was made aware of back when dilapidating old men were openly telling us that Mario Cuomo couldn't be elected, and this

piece deals with how I had an inkling of where it was all heading back when. As the hags of the View are at each others throats, and a goon falls from Ed Sullivan's mausoleum amid as a party called Uni by father Gore when I was a kid watching him with the great Johnnie Carson all find themselves falling apart I take an Italianate, almost Giucciardini hit rosy of Italy glee in the adlermen and the clowns all coming apart and the ladies who lunch on the ruins of television all fall down. It is not for nothing that despised by me clones of TV pretending to be liberals are now circumnavigated to being against the Israel war machine now, a pretense that bothers me so, as Colbert got a blowback he was not expecting and he stepped on his own pratfall did our Plautus. It wasn't a shocker to me that after bringing the art and sciences of policies to a most heinous and filthy and scummy level, almost serer like, he was told no uncertain times, don't think for one second that you can bring that crap to their beloved Tolkien. He got what he deserved, and I sadly recall my own misplaced Paddy Chayefsky elisions. Cause to be Machiavellian when it looks corrupt that might be even worse than if it was all along. Now they hate protests, Cue Lucius Catiline.

A UNIPARTY where a curia of cardinals decide they know better than the people, where maybe losing is the only sin…? With Christers taking the side of the church against Galileo, overfed white women screaming for contraception, and chicken hawks in every manner are bundling boys to veracious fronts and cellars…? It is a parody of which no Juvenal could conceive. Welcome to the death of republics. —Gore Vidal.

Goose Excuses Her Vaping Anyway

R.C. THOMAS

Anyway, if you really must know,
the cadmium and carcinogens
get caught in the back of my throat—
a strong wind blows all afternoon.

I find them scattered around the used car lot
  gone midnight, and in the dark,
who's to say I don't mistake them for harmonicas?
Who says I can't learn a soothing song?

Vaping, it seems to me, is a useful skill
after a long day praying for a kiss of rain
  to replenish my puddle.

Other geese around here are on 4ml a day,
the equivalent of two packs of cigarettes.
So, they can hardly talk me out of it.

  It doesn't cost me
and I needn't worry about bummed ends
    or staining my beak.
In fact, I'm planning my own line,
with connections for worldwide distribution.

Who says I won't make something of myself,
  get out of this city?
I'll set up, grow, expand,
sell the business for what it's worth,
which is millions, anyway.

Harmonica, excerpts

CHRIS OKUM

From ***The Alpha & The Omega: Essays On The Collective Unconscious***, Edited by Arak Cahoon, SciPress Ltd, 2045: "Morphic Resonance is theory by British author and parapsychology researcher Rupert Sheldrake (1942-2028) that nature itself has a memory. While originally debunked as pseudo-science, the theory has been recently accepted throughout the scientific community, at least since the Great Epistemic Reversal of 2032. 'Each individual both draws upon and contributes to the collective memory of the species,' said Sheldrake. 'This means that new patterns of behavior can spread more rapidly than would otherwise be possible.' Human societies have memories that are transmitted through the culture of the group, and are most explicitly communicated through the ritual re-enactment of a foundational rite of passage, as in fornicating with Marilyn Monroe, one of the only human beings of whom it's been confirmed that they themselves are a morphic field, through which the past becomes present through a kind of resonance with those who have performed the same rituals before. Lost in the final tranche of de-classified documents the CIA presented to the public after its absorption into Homeland Security in 2040 was an interview with Arthur Miller, Monroe's 3rd husband, which took place three days after Monroe's murder at the hands of the Mossad (who had killed Monroe at the request of Pope John XXIII, who was afraid that Monroe would convince John F. Kennedy to apply military pressure on the Pope to reverse the Second Vatican Council [according to the first tranche of de-classified CIA documents, Monroe

was an anti-Zionist who viewed the reformations enacted by the Second Vatican Council to the be Global Jewry's final move in a centuries long project of destroying the Catholic Church]). *From the document dated August 7, 1962: Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, D.C. 20505, Approved for Release: February 25, 2041, Declassified under Executive Order 29622, Document ID: CIA-62-0147, Date: August 7, 1962, Classification: Secret (Declassified), Subject: Unusual Claims of Morphic Resonance Related to Recently Decease Norma Jean Baker, aka 'Marilyn Monroe'), 1. Background: Arthur Miller, noted playwright, remains under periodic review due to prior testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). His marriage to Monroe and her subsequent (alleged) suicide has brought him and his current activities to the Agency's attention 2. Summary of Recent Developments: Monroe's death has resulted in heightened media presence related to anyone associated with her romantically, including Miller, her most recent ex-husband, who was extraordinarily cooperative in speaking about Monroe and her potential state of mind during the last year of her life. Several of Monroe's former lovers have been interviewed, including, but not limited to: a) Jim Dougherty (Monroe's first husband); b) Joe DiMaggio (Monroe's second husband and Hall of Fame centerfielder for the New York Yankees who holds the all-time record for most consecutive games with at least one hit [56]); c) Marlon Brando (actor); d) Yves Montand (Frenchman, also actor); e) Robert Slatzer (journalist, claims to have been Monroe's second husband before DiMaggio, although this could not be corroborated); f) Frank Sinatra (refused to speak to agents, was dismissed immediately after threatening agents, Agency higher-ups have sent out memo to no longer approach Sinatra on matter); g) Elia Kazan (theatrical and motion picture director, also government informant for HUAC); h) Johnny*

Hyde (Monroe's agent); i) Edward G. Robinson Jr. (actor); j) Milton Berle (comedian); and k) José Bolaños (Mexican screenwriter). The subjects who agreed to be interviewed had similar testimonies regarding their relationship with Monroe, with all focusing on initial episode of copulation. 3. Observations: a) Clear indication that Monroe was involved in anti-Zionist political activity beyond marrying playwright Miller as a way to obtain crucial information related to National Security concerns (according to Kazan); c) Sexual interest in Monroe remains high on the part of all parties identified and interviewed, with recorded conversations weighing heavily towards discussions of Monroe's sexual prowess and overall erotic powers, which were described using mystical terms, including descriptions of full-blown hallucinations had by the participants during the act, hallucinations that did not vary in detail from one subject to another, leading agents to believe that Monroe may have been a conduit for forces beyond the laws of physics. 4. Assessment concerns have: Putting aside the troubling issue of a foreign ally sending over members of their own intelligence agency to stop Monroe from influencing the President in matters related to the Vatican, there should be increased scrutiny related to the claims of Monroe being a mass psychogenic influencer or hypnotic manipulator (others terms used at this time are 'Glamour Caster,' 'Cognitive Interference Agent,' and 'Perceptual Field Emitter'). At this time, despite the theory postulated by Kazan and trace evidence that Monroe may have been liquidated by a foreign intelligence agency, her influence appears to be primarily cultural rather than political, and quite possibly mythological. 5. Example of Testimony, Almost Verbatim to Testimony of All Subjects Interviewed About Monroe: Playwright Miller is quoted as saying: 'I got the distinct feeling when I first made love to Marilyn that I was sharing in a collective memory of every man

who had made love to her before me, and that I was adding to that memory, as well as being guided in how to make love to her, that is, what not to do, and what to do. The first time I made love to Marilyn, I found myself in the backseat of a 1940 Chevrolet Sedan. But that's not where I was, you see. Marilyn and I were in my room, in my apartment, in my bed, but as soon as I closed my eyes and then re-opened them, I was in the back seat of a Chevrolet Sedan, with the radio on, news blaring about the attack on Pearl Harbor. Making love to her induced some kind of holy vision, I think. But it wasn't a holy vision. I'm not a particularly religious person. But I wasn't dreaming. I was in the back seat of a Chevrolet Sedan and Marilyn wasn't Marilyn, she was Norma Jean. Her hair was dark and she was 15 years old and the car smelled of not my brand of cigarettes and Wildroot Hair Tonic, which I hadn't used since the mid-1930s. I didn't even feel like myself. I remember putting my hand on Marilyn's, or, rather, on Norma's breast and the hand didn't even look like my hand. It was both the most terrifying experience of my life and the most sublime. At one point Norma looked up at me and said, That's right, that's it, you're finally getting it right, and it felt like she was talking to me and someone else at the same time. I mean, I don't know how to put this, but, you know, I guess, well, she looked relieved. And then she looked like herself again. Like Marilyn. She was Norma and Marilyn at the same time. I was making love to two versions of the same person. And I felt like someone else. And we were making love in the backseat of a car and in my bed. It was the darndest experience of my life. As well as the most beautiful. It was like I was out of time, doing something that had been done before, but not in the right way, and that I had accomplished something. Imagine that. I laid the world's hottest broad and now I'm talking like John the Baptist.' After reading this document, one can only

conclude that Monroe's body contained a built-in memory given by self-resonance with a morphic unit's own past and by morphic resonance with all previous similar systems. This memory was cumulative. The more often particular patterns of activity were repeated, specifically the act of making love to arguably the most iconic movie star of the 20th Century, the more habitual they tended to become."

From ***We Must Go On: Interviews with the Parents of Mass Murderers***, by Michele Blackwood, Unicorn Press, 2019: "Roger Frogelle's son, Dennis, is the worst serial killer in American history, having killed 298 people while working as a nurse at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota. 'He had a normal childhood,' says Roger. 'We never abused him physically, emotionally, or mentally. As far as I know, no one did. He was a good student. He was the defensive captain on the varsity hockey team. He graduated from high school with honors and went to the University of Minnesota, where he graduated in four years with honors. He never had any problems with girls. He always had girlfriends. He was never sick and never had to go to therapy. He never hurt animals or started fires. He never wet his bed. He was never in trouble with the law, ever. He got a good job at the hospital and then he started killing people.' Roger still has a large group of friends he plays golf with every weekend and has been married to the same woman for almost fifty years, Amanda, who refuses to talk about her son or discuss his crimes. 'I think she feels,' says Roger, 'he did what he did a long time ago. Yes, he killed almost 300 people, but he never did anything like that before he started working at the hospital, and since his arrest and sentencing, he's been a good boy.' Roger says he understands the general

public wants a reason why Dennis decided to kill so many people, but he says he also understands maybe the answer doesn't lie with him. 'Look,' says Roger, 'these deaths? They have nothing to do with me. Or my wife. Maybe it has something to do with society. Maybe it's society's fault, yeah? Dennis got these ideas from somewhere, yeah? He didn't get them from me or his mother. We're nice people. Why do we have to take responsibility for something our son did as an adult? You raise your child as best you can and then you send them out into the world, and you have no control over what the world does to your child. These ideas he had, ideas about killing people, maybe they were just floating in the air, and he picked up on them. It's not like we live in a peaceful, empathetic world, yeah? My son's not the only person to murder other people, yeah? It seems like a pretty normal thing to do nowadays. What's that got to do with me or my wife? We're nice people. We never killed anyone. And we never told Dennis to kill anyone.' After Dennis was sentenced, Roger lost over 60 pounds and is no longer in danger of acquiring diabetes. He's taken up photography and accrued a significant number of pictures of the Minnesota landscape, so many that he's considered putting together a portfolio for a potential exhibition at a local gallery. 'I'm not going to stop living my life,' says Roger. 'I didn't do anything. I'm not guilty of anything. I don't feel the need to punish myself. I'm alive and I'll continue to go on living. People die every day, yeah? My son is responsible for some of those deaths. But not all of them, yeah? Things happen.' At many points during the interview, Roger says he doesn't know how much longer he can talk about his son's crimes. He says talking about Dennis and what Dennis bores him. When asked what he would rather talk about, Roger says

he'd rather talk about his successful marriage, about the love he still has for his wife. 'I met Amanda at a Minnesota North Stars hockey game in 1977,' says Roger. 'I was sitting in the same section as her and we were both wearing Tim Young jerseys.' After an unsuccessful attempt to steer Roger back towards the topic at hand, i.e., the serial murders perpetrated by his son, Roger continues to talk about the first time he met his wife, and then, as if taking a walk down the boulevard of reverie, relays the details of their first date. 'I took her to see *Day of the Animals*. I had a patch of Clearasil covering a pimple on the bridge of my nose,' says Roger. 'Amanda leaned over and started picking at the Clearasil. She asked me if what she was doing was irritating. When I said it kind of was, she said, Good, I'm going to be your wife one day. I'm supposed to be irritating. But she isn't. She's a nice person. And I'm a nice person. We're nice people, yeah?'"

From ***Cinema as Thought: Jean-Luc Godard and the Question of Being***, by Markus Cruyff, translated by Sarah Allen, Veen Bosch & Keuning, 2016: Page 23: "Godard used to want to put his words into the mouths of others. And then, at some point, he wanted to put the words of others into his mouth. But he could never be sure if the words belonging to others belonged to him first. He was curious about this kind of snowballing effect, the words passed from him to someone else and then back to him, the words getting bigger each time they were removed and replaced. He didn't know why he should be so concerned about words, though, because language, for him, was the least important aspect of his work. What people said didn't matter, it was how they said it and the mask through which they spoke. The words, in effect, were gibberish. What was more important was sound

+ vision." Page 99: "A pair of billiard balls, white and red, sitting on the green felt of a billiards table. A six-year-old child reading a copy of *Time Magazine*, the cover of which says, 'Crackdown on the Mafia.' An old couple flicking their tongues at each other. A teenage girl playing a clarinet while looking up at a man who is firmly holding the clarinet in his hand (which, not incidentally, might be the most obscene non-pornographic cinematic image ever created save for one notorious shot in 2008's *Fool's Gold*, starring Matthew McConaughey and Kate Hudson [aka 'The Sword Scene']). A hotel maid sitting on a bed she's supposed to be making, smoking a cigarette in front of a television showing the end of *Sunset Boulevard*." Page 112: "Franz Liszt, Ornette Coleman, Éliane Radigue, Frédéric François Chopin, Richard Wagner, Jean-Michel Jarre, Franz Schubert, and Delia Derbyshire." 186: "Godard's work in the 1980s is far stranger, the humor sharper, the gaze stronger, than it was during his heyday of the 1960s." Page 194: "What Godard seemed to be saying with *Detective* and *Hail Mary* and *First Name: Carmen* was that it was no longer important what the movie you were watching was about, only that you were watching a movie, one in which the actors spoke and there were cuts and images and music and then it ended and it was your job to figure out what it all meant. Because you are the detective. It's your job to put the clues together. Godard did not believe the viewer should be allowed to partake in his work without doing something. 'You say you love movies,' said Jacques Dutronc, possibly quoting Godard, 'Well, let's see how much. Let's see how big your love is for the medium that gave you to yourself.'" Page 228: "The movies Godard made in the 1980s are possibly the most nihilistic movies ever made, and that in no way is meant as a disparagement of Godard and his project. No,

what Godard seemed to understand before anyone else was that cinema had exhausted itself, his movies the key texts in what can only be referred to as 'The Cinema of Exhaustion.' And what's more, Godard knew he was one of the reasons cinema had blown itself out. Because there wasn't a technique or narrative strategy or camera angle Godard hadn't already first made his own." Page 255: "By 1985, when Godard made *Detective*, he was making movies completely shorn of plot and exposition, nothing but pure collage, with every image a reference to something which only made sense to him. It's almost as if Godard, once he got radical politics out of his system, was, from the 1980s on, making a kind of Overmovie, 90-minute fragments that were the entirety of his mind made corporeal." Page 270: "Maruschka Detmers, Myriem Roussell, Nathalie Baye, Julie Delpy, Emmanuelle Seigner, Aurelle Doazan, Molly Ringwald, Hanna Schygulla, and Manon Anderson." Page 276: "Only Brian De Palma can rival Godard for taste in actresses. And why is that? Because among the filmmakers working in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, only De Palma truly understood the hoary old adage about how all you need to make a movie is a girl and gun. And why is this a hoary old adage? Because it expresses the fundamental truth about cinema, which is what the audience wants to look at more than anything are sex and death, and not necessarily in that order." Page 285: "'The camera is not a complicated machine,' said Godard. 'What is complicated is the eye that looks through it. This is something I believe, if not something I once said.'"

Apagón

TREMAIN XENOS

"Couldn't Lady come mind Iggy for just a few hours tonight?" Marmalade heard Saffron Vanderschaaf languid and clear through her mother's phone. "I'll pay her a hundred dollars."

"Two," Marmalade quipped when her mother passed the phone to her. Saffron agreed with such celerity that Marmalade wished she'd asked for three.

Saffron, she recalled from the lawn parties where her mother collected all the pretentious and uptight people she could find, was the peroxide blonde with golfball hunks of lapis on her fingers, the ponytailed husband always hounding the caterer for vodka tonics and the howling mop of a snot-nosed kid. That would be Iggy. Toddler Icabod. Pugnacious Ignatius with the icky pug nose. But two hundred bucks was two hundred bucks, so Marmalade shrugged out of her pajamas and into a pair of jeans and a Jesus and Mary Chain T-shirt that were the least smelly things on her floor, and headed out.

With the Sunset Strip in her windows, her own part of town in the rearview mirror and still a trace of that new-car smell in her Volkswagen GTI, she could almost believe she had something to look forward to.

"Why does she need a babysitter?" she asked her mother through the phone mounted on her dashboard. "They always

took the kid with them when they came over."

"If you mean her husband," her mother said, "they're estranged."

"So she wants to go out gallivanting with her new boyfriend?"

"Marmalade Bloom," her mother admonished her, "be nice."

The red arrow on the map said she was in the right place. The only people within yelling distance of the street were Mexican day laborers leveling a slope. Marmalade rolled down her window and put her high school Spanish to the test.

"*Todo el mundo*," came the answer with a nod toward the ultimate bungalow on the crest of the highest hill, "*sabe quien vive in ese castillo*."

Yes, Marmalade should definitely have asked for three.

At the top of the winding driveway the *castillo* sprawled into a feng shui nightmare situated in a circular expanse of flagstone over whose parapets one looked down on a panorama of chaparral and Hollywood. Outside a black Audi parked at the opposite end, a slicked-back dude in a gold *barocco* shirt open to the middle of his hairy chest gesticulated and vituperated into his phone. On attempting eye contact Marmalade found herself waved ungraciously toward the house.

She could hear the little boy hollering before she'd even rung the bell.

Saffron opened the door and pulled her straight into the line of fire of a toy machine gun. On the end of it was a boy bigger than Marmalade had remembered, his mop entirely shorn off. He looked like an ant.

"Don't mind the carpet," Saffron said. "I'm having it steam-cleaned tomorrow."

Dancing on an arc of cornflakes glued to the carpet with half-dried milk, Iggy held up one awful crayon scrawl after another. "Lady!" he hollered over the din of the TV. "Lady, look at this!"

"Do yourself a favor." Saffron slipped two folded Ben Franklins into Marmalade's palm. "Don't have kids."

Marmalade cocked an eyebrow and watched Iggy dash back to his mess of paper.

"See this guy? He's the tank guy. He got shot and the tank blew up, *pchow!*" A sparge of spit from chipmunk cheeks. In front of the blaring television Iggy bashed the little plastic fists of his action figures against each other's little plastic faces. "*Pchow!*"

"You have the run of the place," Saffron said. "Help yourself to whatever's in the fridge. Javad!" she called out the door. "We're ready!"

Phone still pressed to his ear, Javad opened the passenger's side of the Audi.

Iggy scooted into the doorway. "Are we going somewhere?"

"Javad and I are going out," Saffron said. "Lady is here to

watch you."

"No," he whined. "I wanna come."

Behind him the television looped two seconds' footage of an American convoy disembarking onto the desert sand, the same marquee always scrolling across the screen.

Saffron patted Marmalade on the shoulder. "We'll try to be back before midnight."

"I wanna come!" Iggy yelled at his mother's back. "Mommy, let me come!"

"Bye, Lady." Saffron scooted into the car and Javad shut the door.

"Mommy, please!" A bubble of snot exploded on Iggy's cheek. "Please, Mommy! I'll be good!"

Marmalade watched the Audi slink down the drive. She glanced at the liquor cabinet built into the wall and wondered how many swallows she could pilfer before Saffron noticed.

Pugnacious Ignatius blubbered on. A hangdog announcer filled the TV screen to narrate those same two recycled seconds of convoy footage.

Marmalade picked a random page from Iggy's mess and tried her best to sound curious. "Iggy, what's this one?"

Determined to rout his last vestige of self-respect, he bawled harder.

"Is it an enemy soldier? What's he doing?"

When Iggy left off crying long enough to draw breath, she held a tissue to his nose, let him blow, and wiped the slime

from his face.

"Can I shoot your gun?" she asked.

He snatched the gun and hid it behind his back.

Interlarded with those two recycled seconds, another announcer brooded over troop movements and the potential for escalation into all-out war.

Marmalade tugged out another picture. "Is this a bunker?" It occurred to her the kid probably didn't know what a bunker was.

"I'm gonna join the army when I grow up," he said at length.

"Is that why you got a crew cut?"

"You should get a crew cut too, Lady. People give me money."

"Do they rub your head and make a wish?"

He shook his head. "A guy at the supermarket gave me a dollar and said he liked my crew cut."

"Maybe he thought you were a Hare Krishna."

"A what?"

A gamelan orchestra gonged out from what sounded like every room in the *castillo*. It took Marmalade a second to realize it was the doorbell. The security camera showed a blonde in a sleeveless organic cotton dress and, at her shoulder, a brunette with an armload of *This Week in Jesus.*

Marmalade winced. The conversation would go on forever if she let it. But as soon as she slammed the door in their faces

she'd have to go back to entertaining the kid.

The blonde monologued for a goodly while. What a tragedy that so few had been touched by the Lord's light, oh everyone told Galileo he was crazy too, and by the way their church had free gumbo. The brunette smiled and nodded along.

Iggy squeezed into the doorway next to Marmalade.

"Is this your little brother?" said the blonde. "He's so cute!"

The brunette's gazed fixed on *The Jesus and Mary Chain* emblazoned across Marmalade's chest, *Stoned and Dethroned* across her belly.

Iggy blinked up expressionlessly at the zealots.

"It's his nap time." Marmalade glared insinuatingly at him. "Isn't it, my little love nubbin?"

Iggy shook his head.

"We can come back when your mom or dad is home," said the blonde.

"You do that," said Marmalade, and let the door swing closed. Come bother Saffron. Or her boyfriend—Javad, was that his name? Perfect. Peddle Jesus to a Muslim.

On the TV a wretched granny in a hijab led two ragged urchins off camera through a mess of rubble. Teenage boys with rifles stared from the blasted wreckage.

Iggy wrapped his hands around his gun. "Could they attack America?"

"I don't think so," Marmalade said. "But if they did, there'd be warnings."

"What kind?"

"Sirens. So we could get to a bunker—to shelter, I mean."

"Did you ever see that movie about the end of the world?"

"I saw one. The world was gonna end and they were the last…" Marmalade groped for a kindergarten synonym for *generation.*

"Life?"

"Yeah."

"Was it a war?"

"The sun exploded. A bolt of lightning would hit you and you'd melt. Bodies split open and spilled out guts like ricotta cheese."

"That's gross, Lady."

The TV replayed those same two recycled seconds. Marmalade thought but didn't say that there was no way of knowing what kind of weapons even America had, let alone its enemies, that they'd probably hit with something no one would see coming, like hack the infrastructure or send an EMP to knock out the power grid, then just watch the cities eat themselves.

"Why do people have kids?" Iggy blurted.

"To have somebody to take care of them when they're old," Marmalade said. "Least that's what my mom said to me."

For a second he seemed satisfied. Then he asked, "What's it like to grow up?"

Marmalade took a deep breath. "You get up in the morning

and go to the same boring job day after day, every day telling yourself it'll get better. Except it never does. Then right when all the bills are due, they fire you."

The kid wasn't listening. He was bashing his plastic men against each other.

Marmalade almost made it to the refrigerator before the gamelans gonged again.

"Jesus Christ, Iggy. Do you get visitors every ten minutes?"

"*I* don't *knooow*."

Leaning into the fish-eye lens was a man in squarish glasses and something on his lip trying hard to be a mustache. When Marmalade opened the door he stood a full head shorter than her and wouldn't meet her eyes—because, she figured out after a few attempts, both of his didn't quite point in the same direction.

"Your parents purchased a set of our encyclopedias," he said through his nose. "Perhaps you've been finding them useful in your school assignments?"

Marmalade's hand found its way instinctively to Iggy's head. "What are you selling this time?"

"We're *offering*," he corrected her, "a subscribers' bonus on our new political atlases." He unfolded a brochure to pause and indicate its sections. "Standard political atlases," he said, "All contain outdated information on regime changes." Pause and point. "Do not reflect the latest border fluctuations." Pause and point. "Contain no hyperlinks to current military

conflicts."

Marmalade suppressed a grimace.

"Ours do. In fact, if you would scan this QR code—"

"We'll give it a miss."

For an instant something like umbrage crossed the salesman's face. Then he tried the cute-little-brother gambit, albeit far less convincingly than the proselyte. While Iggy wrapped an arm around Marmalade's thigh, the salesman's gaze settled on Marmalade's T-shirt. "What does that mean, 'stoned and dethroned'?"

"It's simply what I am."

"Why does it have Jesus and Mary on it?"

"Because they're my friends."

"Oh, get out of here."

"I keep trying, dude. But every day I keep waking up in the same place."

The dude gave her a dirty look and backed away. Then he glanced over his shoulder at a pair of headlights creeping up the drive. He stuck a catalog in Marmalade's hand and skedaddled, while the next visitor's car came to a stop just out of reach of the porch lights. They waited until the salesman's car was well away down the drive before opening their doors—in unison—and swaggering out in identical Versace T-shirts and dog tags.

"Where's the lady of the house?"

Marmalade stiffened. "She went out," she said, and at once

suspected she shouldn't have.

"And who are you?"

"Just the babysitter." A bit more fear in her voice than she'd intended.

"You're lying. Mrs. Vanderschaaf's inside."

"Why don't you try her cell?"

"Already did."

"I will then." Trying to keep her hands from shaking, Marmalade fished for her phone. Punched Saffron's number. Waited.

No service.

The porch lights died. Followed by all the lights of the house.

In the instant the men swiveled round, Marmalade shoved Iggy back inside so hard he fell on his butt. She yanked the door shut, flipped the bolt, threw herself to the floor and pinned him down with an arm across his chest.

"What's going on?" he breathed.

She shushed him, braced herself for irate pounding and possibly gunshots. Carefully she gripped him by the torso and harried him into the stairwell. With a corner of wall to protect them, Marmalade desperately thumbed Saffron's number in spite of the exclamation mark over the Wi-Fi icon.

"Lady?" Iggy whimpered. "What's happening?"

She clutched the kid's hand and negotiated by moonlight to the swath of hazy stars between the bedroom curtains.

Holding him down by the head, she peered down through the glass.

Car doors slammed shut below. The engine fired. A flare of brake lights that dipped out of sight below the crest of the drive. All else was undifferentiated darkness and the faint pinpricks of far-off headlights.

"Grab everything that matters to you," Marmalade said. "We're getting out of here."

"Where are we going?"

"Just do it."

Slipping out to the silhouette of her car against the parapets, it occurred to Marmalade Bloom that she had never seen so many stars in the California sky, that she had never known a night so silent that above the distant wails of police and fire sirens she fancied she could hear the howling of coyotes, the skittering of lizards in the undergrowth, even the ghosted footsteps of long-gone missionaries, Chumash hunters and conquistadores.

The engine started but the dashboard map was dead. Marmalade checked Iggy's seatbelt, then eased the car downward, into the darkness, toward the pops of what she was sure were gunshots and a siren she didn't recognize.

"Are we going to a bunker?" Iggy asked.

"Yeah," Marmalade said, and almost laughed.

Her headlights found a road that led to a bigger road, then to the freeway and then the interstate. She had two hundred

dollars in her wallet and enough in the tank to make it out before Los Angeles ate itself, and Iggy in the seat beside her believing she had some kind of plan, bouncing in his seat like it was all some kind of game.

father. a hollowed out sound

ANDRIA HILL

through parade
of tall weeds
backyard barks
cut chain links
down back streets
‘cross green lights
and the
bone dry reservoir

he lives
above a ridge
in my back alley
dreams
up the painted
porch steps
my hands cupped
face pressed
to the glass
outcast
looking at
what could’ve been
if only
father
weren’t a figment

The Gray Sheep

DEMOND J BLAKE

It was the end of the night, and I was drunk + stoned with Ana and his friends. They were dropping people off and it was my turn. I didn't know what to tell them. Only Ana knew my score, and I didn't want to broadcast my business. I had to think fast but before I could answer Ana bellowed 'Just drop us off at my sister's!' Which led to the question of whether or not I lived with Ana or his sister and if I was messing either one of them (or both). I mean really sometimes people are too nosy, and damn gross. These prying bastards wanted to know if I live with his sister or with Ana. Ana had had enough since during this no driving was happening. Ana likes continual movement; it makes him think things are crackin whether they are or not. I've even seen him rock himself to sleep. So, Ana really wasn't enjoying this inquisition especially since we were out of beer. I was about to lie and say I lived in San Bernardino or somewhere when Ana beat me to the punch. 'JIM THAT BITCH'S HOMELESS! NOW TAKE US TO SISTER'S OR WE'LL WALK!' Everyone in the car looked at Ana then at me then back at Ana. I wasn't sure what the deal was. Maybe I should've told Ana that I didn't want him blowin up the spot, but what's done is done. Finally, they shut up and drove to Aileen's. Last time I was there I ended up

seeing her latest beau naked, but at least there was beer. This time who knew, she might have her kid Ian so maybe there wouldn't be any shenanigans. Once out the car Ana screamed goodbyes then went stumbling up the stairs to Sister's. The door was unlocked, and the lights were on. Nice. Ana starts raiding the fridge. He pulled out bread, roast beef, cheese, ketchup, mustard, and leftover grilled chicken. He opened the pantry, told me to get started on the mac n' cheese. He wouldn't let me touch anything else. I was waiting for the water to boil and watched as dumped all meat in the skillet he just greased down. I bet he didn't even know what he was concocting.

"Ana what the hell are you...?"

Anaya couldn't answer, he was picking at the meat frying in the skillet. He motioned for me to pick at it to, so I did. Then a beer appeared in my hand. Ana had one too and was already 1/2 finished. I didn't even see him get any beer. Ana was funny like that; he had a sort of sleight of hand thing when it came to the beer. Soon everything was done. We didn't get plates, didn't use napkins, didn't even use the damn mustard and catchup. We just grabbed bread dumped a bunch of meat into it and grubbed. We ate the mac straight out of the pot with a big spoon we shared. Then Aileen came out all dressed like she was going out. Ana was thrilled.

"SISTER!"

It was the first thing Ana said that wasn't a grunt since we got here.

"Brother, Jim, my stray cats have come home!"

That's what we were to her, (I'd prefer dogs). We'd wandered over, all scruffy and scraped who ate her food, drank her beer. No one understand why she took us in besides obviously Anaya being her brother but at this point I was considered fam as well. Aileen was like a den mother to us. Well not all, just Ana, Jai, me, Benny, Dean all the younger homies. They all wanted to screw her, and Aileen wasn't having that. She had already been with one bastard who knocked her up and has never really stopped acting like a prick, lesson learned. It was just in Aileen's character to be a nurturing person. She worked at the School for the Deaf as a teacher and was studying to be an interpreter. Aileen regularly spent extra time with her students and brought them to her house for barbecues are whatever. I've never really been around any nurturing people in my life.

"What're you doing up?", I asked.

"I thought I'd stay at my parents since they're barbecuing tomorrow and..."

"We're barbecuing tomorrow?!"

"Mom told you Brother!"

"Well, I forgot."

"Then you shouldn't drink so much so you can remember shit sometimes."

"Sister, you drink as much as I do."

"Then why is my memory better?"

"Because you don't smoke pot."

"Cigarettes are enough for me."

"Oooooh, do you have anymore?"

"Brother!"

"I have money I'll buy more."

"You and Jim will have to share."

"Ok."

We all went out to the porch smoked a few cigs and finished the last of the beers.

"So, Brother are you coming w/me tonight or tomorrow."

"Tonight, I don't want to drive anywhere."

"2nd Brother?"

"I don't know."

"You know I'm not going to let you sleep in that fountain tonight."

"But meeting family, I don't know I kinda really despise it more than anything I could possibly despise."

"Don't worry it's a barbecue there will be beer and crazy relatives..."

"Yeah, crazy family that's what I'm worried about."

“Oh, stop it you, we even have a crazy uncle who is just like you.”

“I hate it when people say that.”

Ana was swaying now. If he weren’t smoking still and trying to eat his sandwich he’d probably have tumbled down the stairs. Aileen was ready to go, and Ana started whining about going home so we dragged him to Aileen’s car and tossed him in the backseat. On the way to their parents’ house in we shared a beer and listened to Muse. I hated them. They sounded like whiny poppy version of Radiohead. We rolled up to their parent’s house and put Ana in his bed. Their younger brother Anthony was still up playing video games. We went into his room, and he was drinking a Tecate. I thought Aileen would say something about this but all she said was where’s the rest. He led us to the garage where the motherload was, an entire fridge full of wondrous beer. I was thankful, this *was* worth meeting the family. There was a pool table in the garage too covered up. We unearthed that bad boy and shot a few games over beers and Britpop. Then everyone got pretty drunk (who already wasn’t) and sleepy. Aileen wanted to sleep in the living room and watch *The Color Purple*. Seeing that crap once as a kid was enough for me so I opted for the garage. I also wanted to be right next to the beer and music. Anthony got a blanket for me, and I crashed on the couch. Maybe tomorrow wouldn’t be so bad.

* * *

I woke up to Ana blasting the Smashing Pumpkins' awful new album and pounding a beer. When Ana noticed I was up he seemed happy and immediately got me a beer. We drank for a bit and shared a cig while looking over Ana's father's semitruck.

"It's pretty dirty."

"Yeah, I wash it every weekend and Papa Sal pays for my car insurance and lets me crash here rent free."

"Good deal."

"So as payment for staying at the homestead you must help me wash his truck."

I groaned as Ana got buckets and long brushes that're specially used to wash semis. For the real greasy spots, we had to climb up with multiple rags and really scrub that crap. After a while, the heat and all the beer started getting to me. I figured we were mostly done so I parked myself under a tree in the front with beer and passed out. I woke up to Ana kicking me and Aileen and their mother staring at me.

"So, this is how you help?"

"It's not my fault."

"Mama Rita", her voice was a mix of soothing calm, mild sternness, endless irritation, and constant worry. All the best mothers tend to talk like that, not sure why.

“Yeah, it’s not my fault Mama Rita it was Ana, (Mama Rita gave a sideways look when I said that, so I switched up) I mean Anaya! First, he woke me up blasting whiny boy music then he gave me beer and made me help him with the truck. He wouldn’t even let me get a bite to eat. I would’ve walked to Del Taco or something so as not to sully your kitchen but no he said I was family and I had to work. I did what I could Mama Rita, but the beer, the heat, and the hunger got the best of me!”

Mama Rita looked at me like I’d just come out of the desert raving about seeing God or some crap. I get that look often whenever I rant about anything

“Aileen, Anaya you bring a crazy person to my house?! With your Papa here?!”

Aileen decided to chime in.

“Jim’s not crazy he’s just, what is he Brother?”

“I don’t know! Jim get up and give Mama Rita a hug!”

I was reluctant. I don’t like hugging anybody let alone family strangers especially when sober. But what the hell I’d be drunk at some point today so…

“Oh, you hug like a boy who needs it. You didn’t grow up with hugs?”

“No, my family was more into waving and the occasional handshake.”

“Sad, very sad. Well Mama Rita has hugs for you and food. Look at you two you’re filthy first you eat then you shower. Not showering together, right?”

Ana and I looked at each other and laughed.

“No Mama Rita I don’t like showering with anybody.”

“Good when you shower with someone no one gets clean, remember that.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“It’s Mama Rita.”

“Sorry, Mama Rita.”

While we were heading in Sal came out one beer stacked on top of the other and a couple of tamales wrapped up. He looked at me and gave me one of each. I tore into the damn tamale like a hungry dog.

“You look like you helped. You eat like you helped.”

“When I wasn’t sleeping.”

“Don’t worry Ana does most things like he’s sleeping. Let’s have a look.”

Sal went around the truck nodding here, nodding there not looking very satisfied with the work but then came over and slapped me on the back.

“You make my son work better.”

“I’ve never made anyone work better.”

Sal looked at me like I possibly said the stupidest thing he’d

ever heard.

"The truck looks better than ever before."

"Two drunks can do a lot better than one."

"Really, I find that all two drunks do is drink and pass out on top of each other."

"Yeah, that seems uncomfortable. I like to pass out by myself."

"No women?"

"Not lately."

"You need to cut your hair and shave then you'll get a woman."

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, you don't believe. Look at my wife before I looked like you hair all over the place, needed a shave drank piss beer."

"This is your beer."

"No like um malt liquor."

"Oh."

"Then I meet her at a friend's party, ask her to dance but she tell me she doesn't with men that look like bums. So, I go get haircut, shave, drink better beer and next time I see her she dance with me."

"And now you've been dancing ever since."

"No after that we only dance at our wedding then no more.

She hate dancing. I still dance…"

Sal blathered on and I drank his beer until he started patting me on the back.

"Aileen, Anaya I like this one he doesn't talk too much, listens to his elders."

Aileen and Ana started busting up. Mama Rita and Sal looked at each other, then at their kids and started laughing too. I was the only one who was not laughing. When the beers were done and a few more tamales grubbed down, Ana gave me some clothes, and I took a long shower. It'd been a while since I had a real one. Mostly I'd been using the community college's bathrooms to take the old bum shower and hoping that no one catches me. Sometimes I'd use a friend's shower but usually didn't because I hated asking for any kind of help. It was a stupid pride thing that someday I hope to fully drink away. By the time I was all spic n' span folks started arriving for the barbeque. Being afraid of meeting anybody's family I hid in Ana's room while he was showering and drank the beers he brought up. His little brother Anthony came in and wanted to know what I was doing. I decided to be frank.

"Hiding from your scary ass family."

"But Sister is already down there having a good time."

"And I've got three more beers to make sure *I'm* having a good time."

I finished my brew, opened another then I started to giggle. Anthony was still standing in awkward silence in front of me. Then Ana walked in.

"What're you girls doing?"

"Jim's hiding and I want him to join the family."

"Why do you want him to do that?"

"Because I want to see chaos!" Anthony grinned micheviously.

Ana hit his kid brother with a cock eyed look.

"Don't mind Ant, he's a troll in the making. Product of the times."

"I'm just being me!" Anthony whined.

I raised my beer to the kid.

"I was the same way growing up. Back in the 80s they called it being a brat."

"I'm not a troll or a brat! I'm outta here!" Anthony bitched stomping out of Ana's room.

I didn't know what to say to that as we pounded the last of the beers and headed downstairs. There were a few people in the house who Ana waved at but didn't say anything to. We got beers from the garage fridge and headed to the backyard where everything was cracking. Sal was holding court at the grill, beer in one hand tongs in the other messing with the carne and the cactus. He waved me over.

"You ever had cactus?"

"Not yet."

He gave me a paper plate and piled on the cactus, carne, and a couple of corn tortillas.

"There now you eat. You see this one he is why my truck looks *so clean*. This one not afraid to do a little work get a little dirty. Now get him haircut, shave I'd let him marry my daughter."

Everybody had a good laugh at that one and I stood there feeling pretty awkward. Ana came over and started picking at my plate as we headed toward Aileen who was surrounded by a throng of relatives.

"So why does your dad have such a hard-on for me?"

"Sal's favorite things in life are his semi, beer and tequila. Everyone we've brought over has drank his beer (no one drinks the tequila unless invited) but no one has ever helped with the truck. In his eyes you helped with the truck *before* you helped yourself to his beer. So, to him you're family."

"That's all it took. So, for every girl who made me meet her parents all I had to do was wash the cars in the driveway and they'd have loved me."

"Probably."

"Damn all that, I'd rather be hated."

Aileen saw us coming and bee-lined it to my food. She

started picking at it along with Ana.

"You two are like a couple of vultures."

"Get your own plate!"

"This is my plate, Sister. Alright where's this uncle of yours that I'm supposed to grow up to be or whatevertheheck you said."

"He's not here yet. Brother what's Jim's damage?"

"Sal's love shower is making Jim feel weird."

"You helped wash the truck and acted like you were listening to his advice and Sal's been drinking all day he's in love."

"So next time I see him he won't remember me, right?"

"No, he'll remember because of your hair and then he'll remember that you washed his truck and fall for you all over again."

Aileen and Ana started laughing, they were enjoying this. I wasn't but really couldn't say why. I let them have at my food, worked on the beer, and took a look around. The family was all broken up into cliques like a high school dance or something. Except it wasn't boys here and girls there. It was kids too old to be running around yet too young to be drinking hanging together looking bored and messing around with their cell phones. Mothers happy to be relieved of their little monsters and their husbands kicking back with beer maybe even a cig laughing loudly at this then from the looks

of it gossiping quietly about that. Fathers all around the grill talking loudly, laughing loud, doling out the food as they see fit. Occasionally they yell for their kid to come over if said kid has done something worth bragging about to everyone. Otherwise, it's a men's club lording over the grill whether there's anything cooking or not. Then there's the grandfolks, great aunts/uncles who're like diplomats welcomed from all the tribes if only not to offend the near elderly. Now if these near elderly are a feisty sort, then they'll mostly hang around family that's in my age group (early 20s) and talk all kinds of crap. This is what I was hoping for when this uncle of Ana and Sister's arrived. In the meantime, I decided there wasn't much else to do but avoid Sal and get drunk.

* * *

Aileen, Ana, and I were sitting at a table with various relatives chewing the fat. Now that everyone who could drink had been drinking for a while all the cliques were broken down. Everyone mixed with each other and even the bored teens were having a good time now that they'd snuck a few beers. I was getting steadily drunk and waiting for Aileen and Ana's Uncle Edgar to show up so I could know how I was going to be when I got old. Then I heard some commotion coming from inside the house and out walks this old man wearing a short black sleeve button up shirt, black perfectly creased slacks, and a black pub hat. He had a cig in one hand and a beer in the other. He was cursing about something then

demanded to know where the tequila was. Sal looked over laughed then went back to messing around on the grill. Mama Rita went over to him and gave him a big hug followed by many other relatives.

"I didn't ask for all this love I asked where's the tequila!"

This cracked everybody up and the old man laughed too lapping up the attention. I expected Aileen and Ana to join in, but they stayed put and just kept giggling at the old fella.

"So, I take it that's Uncle Edgar."

"Yep."

"So why aren't you guys up there joining in?"

"This happens every time Uncle Edgar visits, so we like to wait until the everything dies down and he has a couple of drinks in him. Then the fun starts."

"Sister, you built this old guy up way too much. When he comes over here, he'll chew the fat a little maybe say some slightly crazy stuff that's only crazy cos he's old and that'll be that. Why does everybody try to make their family out to be crazy than they are? Unless your family's involved in some political deal or the mob, some crazy stuff like that then your family is just as dull as everyone else's."

"Whatever wait till you meet him."

"I've been waiting and getting damned up all day. Get the heck over here so I can move on with my stuff."

Once the Uncle Edgar lovefest died down, he made his way over to our table. Ana and Aileen rose to meet him, smothering him with hugs and kisses. This was the only relative I'd seen them remotely happy to see. Sister introduced him to me, and I got up and gave him nice limp shake. I've never been a fan of shaking hands when I thought a wave would do.

"Weak shake huh? Can't trust a man who doesn't know how to shake hands."

"I can shake hands I just don't do it well."

"Well then Jim what do you do well?"

"Breathe, I'm the best breather I know."

"A sense of humor, good, good. You'll live a long time as long as you have that."

"I suppose so."

We sat down and Sal gave Uncle Edgar a plate of food and a pat on the back then pointed at me.

"This one here good worker, good listener. You drink with Edgar listen to what he says you learn."

I nodded and drank more beer hoping Edgar wouldn't ask me what that was about. Thankfully, he didn't.

"So, Jim what do you do?"

"I don't know I'm sort of in between things right now."

"In between jobs?"

"Kinda."

"Homes?"

"Sorta."

"Women?"

"Not really."

"Good when I was younger, I always enjoyed myself better when I was in between things than when I wasn't. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Right now, I can't complain."

"Good complaining is a waste of breath and who knows how many breaths you have left."

Jimny crickets was this bastard going to speak in platitudes all day? If he was this isn't going to end well for any of us. I looked at Ana and Aileen, who judging by their faces didn't know what to make of this either. Uncle Edgar ate his food silently only stopping at certain points to stare off into space before eating again. Then he pushed his plate away lit a cig and sank into his seat, a bemused look on his face, silent. It looked like that was all we were gonna get out of him. Aileen and Ana with nothing else to do started mixing in with their relatives. I decided to make my getaway. I went to Ana's room grabbed his old knapsack went to the garage (where no one was) and filled it full of beers. I walked a few blocks found a bus stop, cracked a beer, and waited.

Rest Stop

NATHAN COVER

Three zero-sugar Monsters
and a pack of gummy worms in
I vibrate into the rest stop,
suck down a cigarette
greedily,
and pull up the porn I downloaded onto my phone
ahead of time to prepare for gaps in cell service.

Jerking off in the rider's side of my car
with the sunscreens blocking view of the
temporary tenants in the parking spot next door
it occurs to me that I may have a problem.

Remember,
it was agreed at the start
that we would go to any lengths necessary
for victory over drugs and alcohol,

and here I am so victorious
that my left hand
won't stop shaking.

My primary care physician has warned me about
caffeine consumption and
smoking
as complicating factors in my
diabetic retinopathy,
but I can't seriously take direction from
a man whose checklist is more concerned
with my grapefruit
consumption
than the blinding heat of my daily
road rage.

They want me to go to therapy,
but I am too busy laughing about
asking him if I could crush up and snort
my Atorvastin
to attain more consistent patient compliance.

The Dr. in front of his name proves he is smarter than me,
as does his deadpan delivery
‘That is not recommended,
in your condition,
as it will enflaccidate your penis and
disregulate your blood pressure.’

The point is duly noted,
but mainly
there is no way to enlighten him that even if I should
incinerate in the car-width space on the shoulder
making an ill-advised pass
it’s no great loss.

I finally construct a witty retort
as I come hard onto the dashboard

Doc these are all bonus rounds.

Homemade

TOM EUBANKS

What woke me was the deceleration of our Porsche. Suffering little desire to reach our destination—my mom's annual Labor Day party—Darlene had abruptly stepped off the gas.

"We're not in a hurry," I said agreeably. She gave me a look.

I stretched my arms over the headrest, yawning, and asked if she brought the game. Our contribution to the festivities had always been a board game and this year I'd chosen *Risk*. The tagline under the name had gotten my attention: The Game of Strategic Conquest. Partially, because I'd been trying to conquer a lot of things in my life and getting my ass kicked. I felt estranged from the thrill of victory, married to the agony of defeat. Darlene said I was a wet blanket.

"Bringing the game's not my responsibility," Darlene said. Her tone made it clear she was still angry. I'd blamed her for making us late for Mom's party—it was an off-hand complaint—more to me than to her. "But yeah—I brought it."

I came prepared for what was coming by pulling my "kit" from the glove box, balancing a small mirror on the open glove box door, pouring down four lines, the last of the coke,

snorted the first two, offering the rest to my wife.

"Yeah," she said, "I'll let the car drive itself."

I had enough on my mind, with Mom and the rest of the family only minutes away, and finished off the other two lines, packed up my kit and closed the glove box.

We didn't speak after that. But I felt chipper.

There was no parking near Mom's apartment. Without a special district parking sticker, a way to protect the local inhabitants from an invasion of visiting beach-goers, we were forced to park two blocks away near the marina. And then we marched single-file, Darlene following me, carrying towels, bathing suits, the *Risk* game and little nephew Paul's tennis racquet he'd left at our house at the beginning of the summer when Darlene took care of him for my brother Mike and his wife Suzie while they celebrated their tenth anniversary on Maui, to Patsy's second-floor apartment.

As we ascended the stairs, I removed my glasses and squinted between the apartments across the street at the sliver of ocean view. The door flew open and Patsy—that's Mom—cried out in her siren voice, "Oh, for crying out loud, thought you'd *never* get here!" She wore a one-piece, peach-colored bathing suit under a white terry cloth robe. Her salt-and-pepper hair was tied back in a ponytail and the color of her lipstick and nail polish matched her bathing suit.

"Late start, Mom," I said, glancing at Darlene.

"Well, you're here. Darlene, you look *won*derful. Where

did you get those gorgeous earrings? Son, did you buy those?"

Darlene and I exchanged a glance. We knew Mom didn't like Darlene's fashion tastes.

"I bought them," Darlene said, filling a glass with ice and Coke from the bottle on the table. The coke I'd snorted had deadened the back of my throat. A beer would bring it back to life. I opened one and slugged it down like a pledge being hazed.

"Everyone's down in back," Patsy said. "Roger and Cindy couldn't make it. Roger's got poor Cindy painting the bathroom today."

"Then who's here?"

"Mike and Suzie, Aunt Mary and her boyfriend"—Patsy lowered her voice—"and no jokes about Mexicans. Speaks English and everything, but sis won't tell me anything about him. Says I'd be—you know—she likes to call me names. I don't even want to talk about it." She laughed, glancing down the back stairs. "You want rum in your Coke?" she asked, tilting the rum bottle over Darlene's glass before she could answer. Darlene knocked it back, harder than she intended, and the rum poured on the floor. Patsy scowled, caught herself and shrugged, and then grabbed a rag from the counter and, still talking, wiped up the rum. "Friends of mine from Palos Verdes, the Yablonskys, are stopping by for dessert about seven—he's a Somebody at Hughes Aircraft and she's got money from a dead husband. They've become such good

friends—good people." Darlene grinned and nodded. "Hope you guys are hungry. Uncle Tim's barbecuing." She rolled her eyes. "Lamb." Stirring her drink with a swizzle stick, she said softly: "He's kind of a religious nut. You don't know him, Darlene, but vouch for me Ev—am I right?" And she laughed, pushing me in the shoulder as if her brother—my uncle—were an inside joke.

Mom set down her drink, held my head in her hands, kissed me on the forehead, and slid her fingers down my chin as if I were five years old. Then she said, "What's *that*?" She was closely examining my nose.

"What?"

She lowered her head, squinting up into my nostrils. "Oh, Ev." She gently smacked my bicep. "I thought you'd grown *out* of that."

"Mom, please, I—you know I gave that up, gave it up a long time ago."

"Don't lie to me, son."

"I'm thirty, Mom; I don't need to lie about it."

"He snorted coke on the way here," Darlene said.

I felt myself retreating, sluggishly—first my shoulders, and then my eyes.

Mom muttered, "Everett."

With my eyes still closed, I felt Mom's fingernail scratch my shoulder. That was Mom showing she cared. I opened my eyes. I glared at Darlene, and then as gently as possible

I explained that a friend had left it in the car, that I found it, it was stupid, I didn't do dope anymore, I didn't know what I was thinking, and finalized the apology by repeating how I'd been stupid.

Mom sipped her drink. "Well, at least blow your nose. We have guests." She slapped my shoulder. That was Mom exercising punishment. "Don't come around here high on drugs—I mean it. That's *not* what big boys with big plans do."

Remember, I'm five years old.

I snatched a napkin, blew my nose, and tossed it in the trash. Patsy put a finger on Darlene's arm, and half-jokingly said, "Is it necessary to always be so honest?" And then she pointed down the back stairs to the grassy common area by the pool, saying, "Go socialize while I get the ice cream going." I put my sunglasses back on.

Darlene and my brother's wife Suzie were close in age, and they found John Grisham novels a topic of mutual interest. Suzie was already tipsy from drinking white wine. Mike, my younger brother by a year, talked sailing with Uncle Tim at the big black Weber barbecue.

Aunt Mary and her boyfriend played gin at one of the two redwood tables. She was seated on one side, while he stood on the other drinking a lime-spiked Corona beer, with one snakeskin cowboy boot up on the bench. In her crackling-throated voice from chain-smoking cigarettes, she told the

cowboy not to wait, that he better knock—knock on ten or on however many points he had left in his hand.

He was tall—six-three or -four—and his longish black hair and handlebar mustache gave him a revolutionary look that was distinct among our hive of WASPs in corduroys and button-down shirts. He dressed like a Mexican rancher. I introduced myself as Patsy's favorite son.

He set his cards face-down, switching his beer to the left hand, offering the right with a big grin and said: "Bob Hernandez." His grip was painful, but I held on tight. "Your Aunt Mary's talked a lot about you," he continued, tipping a nod to the busty butterscotch blonde in her late fifties beside him. Her raspy laugh came easily. She fanned her cards out and called, "Gin, sucker!"

"She's something," Bob said, cricking his neck to the right and left as if it were sore.

"Where'd you meet?"

"A Reno crap table couple of months ago. She's the luckiest lady I ever met."

Aunt Mary cooed, "That's 'cause I met *you*, Bob."

"She's always been damn good at games," I said, chuckling. "As a kid, she would always beat me at *Yahtzee* and *Life.* I heard Mom tell her to let me win sometimes, but she'd have none of it. And she took me to my first horse race. I was twenty-one, lost ten bucks; she won three hundred. And cards? Watch out, man. Hope you're not playing for money."

"Just for fun," he said, as a rhythmic groaning sounded from upstairs. Bob looked up over his shoulder at the apartment. "What's that?"

It was Mom's electric ice cream maker. At every home event, she served ice cream. Always homemade. A tradition started for my sixteenth birthday. I'd told her I wanted *her* ice cream for the party, because it was better than store-bought. Which wasn't true; I was simply working on her to buy me a used BMW. It had been a mistake. The tradition spread from my birthday across the length of a year and had never stopped.

Bob said, "I've seen them, those things—those ice cream makers—at Wal-Mart. Never ate none, you know? That kind of ice cream, any good?"

Talked like he was from the street. Trying to fit in with artificial interest. Like something else was on his mind. I'd worked with these kinds of guys at my job in Public Works.

When I said, "At first, there's nothing better, no comparison," Bob bobbed his head. In my head, linguistically, that was hilarious. I whispered, "But, I mean . . . after fifteen years, it's not as special." Super-interested, Bob's head bobbed even more. "Don't tell Mom, though—please. Break her heart. For me? Häagen-Dazs. Their Dulce de Leche—wow—*the* best. Don't tell her—please. Don't get me wrong: her homemade is super-good—top shelf—you'll love it."

Bobbing, Bob said, “How she make it?”

The sun had dipped behind the trees, so I removed my sunglasses and said, “I never paid attention. Eggs and stuff. There’s a steel tub thing with all the ingredients and it turns around and around and around in rock salt and ice—that’s all I know—rock salt and ice to make it really cold—so it gets hard. No clue how it’s made. I just eat it.”

Bob leaned forward, staring into my face, and lowered his voice. “You seen your eyes?”

“What?”

“They’re black.”

“I don’t get what—”

“Thin blue rim?” he said tracing a finger around his own eye to make a point.

“What’re you talking about?” I knew what he meant and put my sunglasses back on.

“Big black pupils.” He leaned in further, whispering, “Cocaine eyes.”

I didn’t know what to say. I glanced at Aunt Mary. She wasn’t paying attention. Which was good, because otherwise she’d stop sending me money. She’d made it a charitable habit a year ago when I started this recovery. If she knew I was dabbling again, she’d give me shit, too, and rant and embarrass me in front of Mike and Suzie about a relapse and how disappointed I’d made her, and how I better get back to church and let Jesus heal me again, and it would upset Mom

and end up being a first-run shit-show.

I motioned for Bob to step away from the table, because I figured he was streetwise and would understand—smoked pot or something—and would keep it to himself.

"Did a couple lines on the way here," I said, minimizing it. "Offer you some, but I'm out."

Bob leaned in and said, "Not cool, man. You know that's Schedule One?"

Bob's concern felt awkward. I said, "Actually, Bob, I quit. Someone left it in my car. I just, you know, finished it off. Thinking of those poor little children in Colombia." Bob didn't smile. "I don't smoke cigarettes; only drink on weekends and holidays." Bob just looked at me. "And I'm faithful to my wife—so far!" I laughed, but he wasn't amused, and without another word, Bob simply turned away and rejoined his game with Aunt Mary.

I felt humiliated. I tried not to care, but, hell, I wanted to believe I was still able to win over strangers. Especially when I was buzzed. It had been easier to hang with people when I was stoned—or drunk. Sobriety was like walking around stark naked. In public. On a cold day. Carrying a beehive. Being stoned felt like I was wearing a full cloak of armor—guarded, invincible.

The awkwardness that followed when Bob ignored me, though, flipped my humiliation into anger. I walked away, sucking down another beer. As I headed to the barbecue, I

eyed my wife with Suzie, who dragged on her cigarette and said in her silly sing-song voice, “Mike made serious money this year. So we’ve”—she lowered her voice—“bought a condo in Oahu’s Makaha Valley. Plan on living there most of the year. He can run the business from paradise as well as he can from Marina Del Rey. I mean, he spends his whole day on the gee-dee phone calling all over the country, so what difference does it make? We could live on the friggin’ moon! It’s 1999; a new millennium is around the corner!”

“Y2K,” Darlene said.

“He’s got a mobile phone,” Suzie said without acknowledging that Darlene had even spoken, her voice rising and dipping like a rollercoaster on the wind, “he can make calls from almost anywhere. He makes his calls, the orders come in, and the warehouse downtown ships the jewelry.” Suzie sparkled.

Darlene had enjoyed the few minutes she and Suzie had shared talking about John Grisham and Stephen King, but now that the conversation had turned to Mike and his money, she was looking around, wanting to escape. Moneywise, we struggled most of the time. We made enough to own a Porsche, but we couldn’t afford the tune-ups. Darlene had slipped and made that known at Thanksgiving, regretting it later when Mike advised us to use his “financial guy.” Then Suzie had detailed how best a home budget would benefit us and make our dreams come true, and all I could think to do

was smack her, but I refrained and said, “We rarely dream of tune-ups.”

“Excuse me,” Darlene said, “I need to get something.” But Suzie followed her upstairs, describing little Paul’s new mahogany bedroom set in the kind of detail usually reserved for people who truly give a damn.

Uncle Tim stacked barbecued lamb on a big blue platter and poured his homemade sauce over it, and then carried it to the redwood table, set it down, telling Aunt Mary to take her game somewhere else. Aunt Mary told Tim to go butt a stump, so he plopped the platter right down on her discard pile.

Mike sheathed his Burberry-framed glasses in his pocket and said, “Ev, tell everybody it’s time to eat.”

Still angry over, I guess, Bob’s butting in on my personal life, I stepped close to my brother and pointed out that I’d been there for over half an hour and the first words he had for me were an order to do something. I told him to go tell them himself.

“What’d I do?” Mike said defensively.

Uncle Tim said, “Hey, boys.”

“I’m not a boy,” I told him.

Mike called Darlene and Suzie down to eat, while Bob took a plate from the stack at the end of the table. “Be cool, man,” Bob said to me, sitting down beside Aunt Mary. “Let’s have a good time, enjoy some food and company.”

I leaned on the table and I was going to tell him to mind his own damn business or something, but I thought better of it when I considered his size, and that I didn't know him very well. What if he had a temper? What if he wanted to show off for Aunt Mary and put me in my place? Mainly, though, Mom called me from the top of the stairs. I tossed my empty beer bottle in the trash under the stairs as I started up.

Aunt Mary called after me. I stopped. She looked at the trash barrel, raising a warning with a grimace. She and I had agreed that I could handle a couple of beers. My group wouldn't approve, but then they didn't have to be at this party. I held up two fingers. She nodded and ran a thumb across her throat, which meant that was my limit. Had to obey the Cash Cow, because I didn't want Darlene to know about our arrangement. It was money I could spend on whatever I wanted.

I ran up the stairs, two at a time, received my instructions from Mom, and then, balancing a bowl of corn on the cob on top of a basket of sourdough toast on top of Mom's family-famous scalloped potatoes with bacon bits, I quick-stepped it back down the stairs, throwing caution to the wind, and set them on the table. That'd prove to Aunt Mary the beers hadn't affected me.

We all gathered around the two tables. Uncle Tim, a quiet, Nordic-looking man in his sixties with raisin eyes and crow's feet, wanted to pray. As everyone bowed their heads,

I peeked, letting my eyes scan the group. I discovered Bob openly watching me.

Tim thanked the Dear Lord and made sure to include references to nutrition. He finished by asking the Dear Lord to return everyone home under His protection and capped it off with an "amen."

And everyone else said, "Amen."

Patsy thanked Tim. Everyone ate, lavishing praise on Patsy for the wonderful meal and Suzie said we should especially thank Uncle Tim for his *sui generis* main course. She'd learned enough French phases as to make her intolerable.

"Hamburgers and hot dogs got boring," Mike said. "Nice break, Uncle Tim. Break the old routine."

Bob stopped chomping his corn cob long enough to tell them, "In my family, we call routine 'tradition.' *Tradicíon*. *Es algo que atesoramos*."

"I love foreign languages," Suzie said, chewing.

"*Atesoramos*," he said to me across the table. "Know that word?"

I shook my head, wiping barbecue sauce with a napkin from my mouth. I didn't give a shit.

"Means treasure, my friend. Tradition is a treasure. You know?"

I nodded—by bobbing my head in subtle mockery. The whole table stopped eating to consider what he'd said. Then

everyone nodded in agreement, no one commenting on how it was so.

Darlene said, “Wouldn’t it be nice to, um . . . create new traditions?” Patsy looked quizzically at her. “Your homemade ice cream, Patsy, is a wonderful tradition. We definitely have to keep it.”

Everyone agreed.

“Please, not lamb, for cryin’ out loud,” Aunt Mary said, goading Tim. “Lamb ain’t never gonna be considered a goddamn treasure.”

Tim said, “Do you have to use the Lord’s name in vain, sis?”

“Imagine a lower-case ‘g’ Tim,” Mary said, “and get over it.”

Darlene broke in, saying, “What if one of us in the family started a *new* tradition?” She looked around the table at everyone. “Not change anything, just add something.”

Patsy said: “Who said you couldn’t start a new tradition, Darlene?” She grinned. “Somewhere else,” she added, making a joke that Darlene knew wasn’t a joke.

“That’s great,” Darlene said. “So we’ll have Labor Day next year at our house?”

A long silence.

Suzie said: “*Your* house?”

“Why not?”

Mike attempted to be diplomatic: “Something to think about, but . . . I don’t know.”

"Is there room?" Suzie said, not for wanting to know but to lay the groundwork for the argument that our tiny two-bedroom in the Valley was hardly a place anyone wanted to go for a party.

"It's an idea," Mike said, "but, shit, it's a whole year away—anything can happen."

Darlene turned to Patsy. "Okay, then. Why don't we all fly to Makaha and stay at Mike and Suzie's new, luxurious condo!"

Mike and Suzie's faces dropped with their forks. They looked at Patsy.

Patsy put down her knife and fork, touched her napkin to her mouth, and searched the faces of her sons and daughters-in-law.

Mike chewed and swallowed quickly so he could explain. "Mom," he began, glaring at Darlene. "We're just considering it."

Suzie chimed in: "No decisions have been made."

"But if we decide to move to Hawaii," Mike added, "think about it, Mom, you can come and visit all you want—stay as long as you want. Hawaii—one of the greatest places on earth! You'll *absolutely* get to see little Paul. Don't worry, we know he's going to be your only grandchild, so . . . ." He didn't finish.

Patsy smiled and shrugged off any hint of what she was feeling. "That's not entirely true," Patsy said, showing facial

tics that signaled she was actually getting upset at the prospect of their moving away. "Darlene's barren but Cindy isn't."

I turned to Darlene, who laid down her fork, and then put her napkin next to her plate. Darlene said, "Mike and Suzie have already bought the condo in Hawaii," and then calmly stood and went upstairs.

I stood. "Jesus, Mom."

"She deserved it," Mike said, putting on his glasses.

Suzie added: "Why does she always have to cause trouble?"

Everett looked around the table. "Roger and Cindy have no plans to have children," I said. "But keep Mom in the dark about that, too—right?"

"Oh, nonsense," Patsy said, smiling uncomfortably, knowing she'd driven Darlene upstairs. "Roger and Cindy have told me many, many times about their plans to have children, and—"

"It's bullshit, Mom. They say it because you want to hear it. Roger hates kids. Cindy had an abortion—"

"An abortion? That's not—what do you mean? It was a miscarriage, not—"

"Who wants a bunch of rug-rats anyway," Uncle Tim said.

Aunt Mary turned on Uncle Tim. "Shut up and eat your goddamn lamb."

Upstairs, I found Darlene in the bathroom and knocked on the door.

"What."

"She didn't mean it."

"Of course she meant it, it's true."

"She didn't mean it the way it sounded. She doesn't hold it against you."

"Of course she does."

"Come out, so we can talk."

"If I come out," she said, "I'll break something. Tell Patsy to stick it. I might let Mike and Suzie know they're lazy-ass stuck-up snobs. And, worse, I might vomit—I hate lamb. For the love of God, lamb? Who the hell eats lamb on Labor Day?"

"The Greeks?"

"She'll make me feel guilty, because I don't want to play *Risk*—*she* loves dominating the world, so let *her* play the damn game! Oh, and when it's that time again—that Labor Day tradition!—I have to troop down to the beach? Here we go, down to the beach like a bale of sea turtles. To stare at the same damn sunset. *And*—I'll have to meet Patsy's rich friends, listening to her lavish praise on how wonderful their life is, because she has to live vicariously through everyone else's phony successes." She sniffed. "There. Now leave me alone."

Everett felt someone's presence in the hall and turned to find Bob removing his coat and hanging it on the coat tree by the front door.

"Everything okay, man?" Everett nodded. "I'm supposed

to bring down the first batch of ice cream. Patsy's friends showed up early."

"We'll be down later. Ice cream's in the freezer."

"Sure you're okay?"

"Yeah."

"Please, don't be doin' drugs around here, man."

"Hey, just say 'no,'" I joked, "that's *my* motto."

The big revolutionary smiled. "You messin' with me?"

"The ice cream?" I reminded him, pointing to the kitchen.

Bob took one step closer to me. "Mary told me about you. You got problems. We all do, you know?" He took another step closer; I stood my ground. "Try respectin' yourself, my friend."

"Sure, 'Migo."

Bob took one more step forward. He looked down on me and said quietly, "Don't fuck with me," and went to the kitchen.

I heard him dislodge the ice cream tub from the freezer and head down the back stairs to the party, while sitting in the living room in the big French chair with the slim view through the buildings across the street, and watched the fading light turn the waves to neon blue.

Darlene wouldn't come out of the bathroom, so I went to the Porsche, smoked half a joint and returned, avoiding the backyard by way of the front door, my head feeling puffy from the pot, my body a tiny bit charged from the coke, to a point

of paranoia that everyone would notice.

As I passed the coat tree, I looked down. Bob's coat had fallen to the floor. I picked it up, and a black leather I.D. case had fallen from the inside pocket and unfolded. It was an L.A.P.D. badge with a picture. Bob Hernandez was a police detective.

Down on the common area, the Yablonskys were seated at the redwood table with the rest of the family. Empty bowls were strewn about the table.

Bob said: "You missed your Mom's ice cream."

"I know," I said, averting my eyes.

Patsy said with a sorrowful pout, "Darlene still upstairs? She didn't get any either. Want me to make you some?"

At that moment, Darlene appeared and descended the stairs, stopping half way down, waiting for my answer. I looked at her. Her sad eyes reached down across that distance, gripped the strings on my heart, and a lump of emotion sprung in me so fast that tears welled up. I had no time to hide it. My chin quivered. Darlene dipped her head, tilted it to the side, in a gesture of silent affirmation, an assurance that she was fine, that we were fine.

I turned to everyone. Patsy turned away, picking at her food. Mike glared at my wife. Bob was watchful. Tim's eyes closed, his lips moved, no doubt talking to Jesus. Aunt Mary smoked.

I glanced at the Yablonskys, these total strangers sitting

there obliviously grinning and said to Patsy: "We're going home."

Darlene finished coming down the stairs.

"Why?" Patsy asked. "Son, I'm sorry I—my mouth always—"

"We're going."

Darlene waited patiently behind me.

"What about the game? You love playing games."

"I'll leave the *Risk* game so you all can play."

"What about the sunset?" Patsy sighed. "Don't you want to see it?" She reached out to run her fingers down my face.

I took hold of her hand. "Mom, we've seen it."

"But you—"

"Cryin' out loud, Patsy," Mary crowed, "leave him alone—if they want to go, let 'em go!" She shook a finger at me, nodding like she knew, and blowing cigarette smoke.

I caught Darlene looking at me.

"At least let me introduce you to my friends before you go," Patsy whispered.

"We have to go home," I said, ignoring her friends.

"Was it me?" she asked softly, ignoring Darlene.

"Darlene has an early meeting," I said.

"Is Darlene mad?"

"I'm standing right here," Darlene said.

"Mom—just—please shut up."

Patsy swallowed. A worried furrow coursed across her

brow.

A cold chill—nothing I'd ever felt before—rained over me.

And then Bob, seated beside Aunt Mary, piped up: "Stop bein' rude, man."

I glared at him, long and hard, daring him to say something more. He rose from the table.

"Sit down, Bob," I ordered. "This is a family matter. You get to watch." I turned to my wife and I took her hand.

"I'm an embarrassing fuck up," I said to Darlene. "I'm an opportunistic liar," I said to Aunt Mary. "I'm still an addict," I said to Mom. To everyone, I said, "I'm sorry, but I'm taking my wife home. She doesn't deserve any of this."

Side-by-side we hiked back to the Porsche. Darlene was silent. I looked over at her walking beside me. She turned to me and said: "We'll make our own ice cream."

Eastward Ho!

PHILIP KOBYLARZ

It is strange how much you can remember
about places like that once you allow
your mind to return into the grooves
which lead back.
-E.B. White

It is not truly yours until it is lost. Over a decade ago the camera she bought you when you first met, an extravagant gift, the most exotic thing you've ever received. It recorded the extremes of your nomadic union through states, countries, other wheres. It was always there to tell its side of the story. Now it is lost. Gone for more than ever.

For only moments it was left at a canyon overlook in the New Mexican desert- some anonymous tourist or local traveler received as their gift a 35mm art tool abandoned, in a sense, as a sign meaning it was time for a change. If found, please return to: _____. The camera I left in the desert, as an offering.

Was this the dream undiscovered in eternity: to be with no home in which to stay? No one place, no geographic identity, no identification papers, no creed, no plan except that of a map's. A life of eating out of plastic containers, food cooked days before, of scrutinizing watches to find bearings in a new time zone, searching cities for pay phones and pay phones with phone books that used to be attached by mechanical serrated umbilical cords. Mail held, messages received, postcards sent, e-mails dismissed as salutary sweet nothings. Who knows where next to go other than to the next Next.

In that Canyon de Chelley red haze of a Rothko sunrise when you both arose after attempting to sleep in a car with the seats leveled as far as they would go back, under gently in the wind hula-ing cottonwood trees, on a gravel road where

there were more decorative cow skulls than mail boxes, you finally knew that all mornings waking up together would be just this unfamiliar, unearthly and foreign in a good way. A way that intoned being with the same person for a long, long time, and being on the verge of the canyon's rim, is an occurrence of the weird vastness of being + nothingness, hollowed out.

Red as it always is or a deep hued purple towards dusk, the canyon like a wound, opened. Wild pretzel-eating dogs, because this is what you fed them, search for edible garbage in the empty visitor's parking lot. Black Mesa elevated its truncated stage to a level of orange dust, substituting for air, ravens the size of eagles, cawing and cawing because it is their way of telling a time we didn't dare understand.

Flashback the circling ravens incite. Memory play, curtains open, in the darkness of the amphitheater: childhood times of around the age of ten. Desolate fields of weeds that turned brittle in the summer like bamboo shoots itching for a kill, past the creek that smelled like a toilet not flushed, to paved streets that lead into dead ends upon woods where people would throw old water heaters away, across the big street that was crossed by railroad tracks that we'd follow and sometimes even on their bands of steel, place pennies to later collect the dollops of copper they would be melted into, finally on our way to the giant furniture warehouse store. Xanadu in a pleated grey warehouse.

In the giant furniture warehouse store there were kitchens, living rooms, dens, studies, rooms upon rooms of constructed happiness and wholeness. Real Ikeas. Each attempt at domestic bliss had way more stuff in its rectangle of placement than any room did in the houses we kids lived in. Each room offered the possibility of not only escape but of better parents, a well-adjusted family, and these simulacra were proof positive there were richer worlds that we might become overlords of, one fine day.

The true reason we boys, in groups of three or four (why the store owner let us get away with this?) would pilgrimage there was because it was a great place to play hide and seek, an just be, as beings, being. One rule: no hiding in furniture. In the middle of the store, curiously, there was our home base: a room within a room that was surrounded by prison-like bars. The carpet inside was bright red and there were bean bag

chairs. A place for parents to deposit their kids while they Iliaded long shopping voyages.

It was our domain. It was ten times more interesting than the snack room into which we knew how to sneak. The red jail cell. A place we longed to be. To beat each other, to hang from its walls, to explore the Americas of home living. Furniture store prisoners doomed to a life of chicanery. Doomed to what we were more than happy to be: wild monkeys not concerned with owning anything.

What's left to tell. A truck packed with books sliding down the rainy mountains of Arizona, lightning cackling on the AM dial. Crossing Kansas red-eyed as the moon does an imitation of you, pulsing, raspberry like, hanging like a cardboard cutout of Mars. A night in a motel spent in which a woman was murdered but you didn't find out until check out day, next to the leafy university you destinationed to, heartless, anonymous, smelling of science gone bad. A night then spent in a wood paneled trailer home that functioned as a stay over for those visiting sick relatives in the hospital that was the biggest and most important business in town. It easily got the most customers.

Then, years spent in rural bliss doing what came natural: reading, writing, traveling, drinking, living on sharecropper's acres of land. A farm that grew no crops but old gnarled apple trees and eight foot high thistles with bright purple Dr. Seuss wigs. A valley of prairie grass and on either side Buddha woods of skinny little trees that made a human feel like a giant, strolling through them in search for rusty old tin boxes that at one time must have been owned by Grant Wood or Dvorak or then even if not those were not enough, farm implements no longer cared about and wooden fence posts so eroded that they had become the splintered bones of hiking sticks.

Years in a city where famous writers came to introduce their words which you had already read so it was more important to see how they the humans presented them to humanity. How they twitched, coughed, made crowd contact, what they wore, how they were represented in fabric and in hair and flesh and breathspeak. How one after another came, an intellectual playground that dearly needed an audience of believers. How one after another tried to bedazzle themselves in working a group of like-minded individuals into their specific fruit

of meditation. How bizarre and baby formula-like the to-dos appeared. The parties after, rigid and conforming. Praise floating in wafts of incense and self-flatulation. How after years of being immersed in the fame of others, finally did it teach you to not seek it and continue to do what they preached: move, search, try to uncover what keeps being discovered: newness in words. Words, the only things that never die.

Leaving is believing. Believing that you can come back. Believing that in traveling from here to there you're actually going somewhere (a true falsity). Believing that you just might one day become the proprietors of a drive-in hamburger joint in Tucumcari, serving gourmet preparations of footlongs with relish and yellow mustard with a sprig of sage brush on the side and an individually wrapped peppermint, minted in chocolate.

Bit before the fun, fun, fun in this imaginedly true life, you'd go bird watching out in the canyonlands and mesa plains even though the ones you'd spot most often would be vultures. Or ravens. Never crows. The Westernlands beginning of manifest destiny in reverse. The wind blows that way naturally, but for we who people the horizon, going eastward must always be an eternal return only once eternally returned to.

A camera left on the dust-strewn alluvial playa somewhere off a dirt road that winds along the rim of Taos canyon with one solitary photo in it. A photo of.

When life itself became a big long bad ass badland the size of Texas as it always will inevitably, stretching for months and months long, and the only solution is to drive, to think you can get away from it all. Driving thousands of miles listening to jazz or ambient tunes (people in Luxembourg can't do this you know, maybe) and arrive whenever, wherever you do. To spend the night there. To drive on. It's the only hobby worth its while in these fifty, and that's way too many, states, is it, of minds?. Horizon spotting. The delineation of miles. The perspective might as well go on for forever. There's nothing out there to be found. Except ourselves.

Object of Desire

MEL MURPHY

Avery was a one-shot kind of guy. He'd previously been a siege kind of guy. But that was in another life — online while battling ghouls with his trusty sidekick Bernie. The Battle of Raktoom, you know? When those 17 different guilds from five different states, including Hawaii, laid waste to that one dufus's castle? Afterward, the dufus had gone off his meds and his mom had to haul his ass to Pacific Psychiatric. Yeah, Avery had been there. But then Bernie got on graveyard at Kinko's and now had no time to go on raids with Avery. So, fuck him.

Avery, 27 and 6-foot-4, pushed through the throngs at the shopping mall. It was nearly Christmas. What was he doing here? Outside? Offline? That sticky sweet smell meant they were offering fresh-baked cookie samples at the kiosk between the Perfume Emporium and that fat girl's store, what was it called. How appropriate. Avery grabbed a fistful of gooey cookie samples without smiling at the old cow running the display table and kept moving.

A tiny East Asian chick, with lean flanks, sporting a hot-pink ski jacket and tight black pants, paused in front of Avery, her cell phone fused to the side of her head. She gaped up at him. Avery smiled down at her. The chick whimpered and darted off to the side, disappearing in the throng. Avery was wearing his gamer T-shirt (the one with the severed head) over his flannel shirt, under a coat.

Avery caught sight of the Citizen Bean kiosk where Miss Archangel worked. A chrome coffee bean icon rising serenely above the throngs of brain-dead shoppers. He slowed his advance. When did she clock in, three p.m.? It was still too early for seduction.

He veered to the right, into the bookstore, one of those bland chain stores with an MFA flunky holding down the cash register. Avery stalked past him in a black duster that screamed SHOPLIFTER, though they had nothing he wanted to steal.

As Avery scanned the video gamer section for anything vaguely interesting, he could hear the cashier arguing with someone on the phone.

"I wouldn't say DeLillo's a has-been at all. No, I don't like Franzen that much, he's overrated and his descriptive prose digresses."

Blah, blah, blah. Bet the egghead couldn't re-install the OS on his hard drive if you aimed a loaded Glock at his pointy head and handed him the fucking disk.

Avery thumbed through a copy of *Gamer* magazine, glancing at a review of the latest military high-def RPG, which he'd already checked out at an un-disclosed lab last year.

"In my opinion, nobody can compete with J.G. Ballard."

Bernie had gone with him to check out this RPG, but turned queasy while wearing the visor. Now Bernie was too busy being a wage slave at Kinko's to check out the utterly cool.

"He uses obsessive compulsive disorder in a way no one has ever been able to match. It's like comparing Soldondz to P.T. Anderson. Anderson's a pretender, Soldondz is the real thing."

What was it with non-technical majors? You didn't hear this much lip flapping in an entire year of Visual Basic 101.

Avery's gaze wandered from the top rack of gaming magazines to the popular periodicals. A glossy harem of half-naked chicks looked back at him from the covers of different men's magazines; *FHM*, *Maxim* and the like. Avery picked up the nearest one, thumbed through it and put it back. He had seen Miss Archangel in one of these and she was hotter than any of these babes.

The scrawny store clerk finally ended his uber-annoying phone call and started cracking open boxes, presumably to stock the store. I mean, isn't that, like, his job?

Avery started to leave, without making a purchase, just as some skinny freak with eyeliner flounced in, carrying a giant man purse.

"Got it!" he tells the clerk, triumphantly holding up a thin black T-shirt with some obscure band on the front. Then, he leans in to buzz the clerk's cheek. The two of them twitter like birds.

Oh, why does this not surprise me? Avery rolled his eyes. He slapped the last magazine back on the rack and heads out of the store without so much as a 'see ya'.

"Was that sasquatch?" Emo queer taunted, as Avery exited.

The mall's main thoroughfare was hotter than the bookstore, like there's a fiery vent way above slowly roasting the shoppers below. Avery wondered if there was a cloaked spaceship up there, pre-cooking the humans for later ingestion.

He stalked into MDC or Multi-Dimensional Combat, a small store catering to gamers. Avery's known Dean, who runs MDC, since pre-calculus in high school. Dean used to code for an elite dotcom. Got stock options before the dotcom went dotbomb, but now he owned a paid-for condo. With the economy sucking balls, Dean turned paranoid and fell back to selling newbie gamer manuals to teenagers, paying himself minimum wage. He cut way back on the hot tub parties and hookers.

"Hey, Strongbow," Dean said, smiling when he saw Avery. Strongbow is Avery's main avatar. "How goes the Lord of Golroth?"

"Fairly well."

Dean was shorter than Avery; most people are. He was Korean American with spiky jet hair. Dean had had a hot girlfriend for eight years. When she realized he wouldn't marry without a pre-nuptial, she stole his Porsche and moved to California to try out for a cheerleading position with a soccer team. She didn't get the job and Dean never saw his Porsche again.

"What's the word on the streets of Zeeroth?" Avery asked

leaning over the glass case that ran the length of the store, his arms resting above statuettes of Xena, Lara Croft and an undead warlock. Zeeroth was Dean's main stomping ground in the virtual world. It even had a little medieval market.

"Better now that I installed those new video cards in my main tower."

"You sprang for them, eh?"

"Yeah, it was worth it. I can see the slave girls at my feet so sharp now, it's almost true 3D."

"Cool."

"Never mind that, what's up with Miss Archangel over at Citizen Bean?" Dean wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"She's a café manager, thank you very much. I'm going talk to her today, broach the question."

"Right on. You sure she doesn't have a boyfriend?"

"Dude, I've done the recon."

"I can't believe *she* works here."

"I know. Of all the malls in all the 'burbs."

Dean chuckled.

"You're sure it's her? Miss Archangel from five years ago? The chesty blonde in *Immortals Rising* three-point-oh?"

"Affirmative. She's even got that little tattoo on her right shoulder they tried to edit out but you can still kinda see it. Like the fake tan stuff is darker there."

"I wonder what she's like?" Dean mused. "I mean, what if she's a bitch once you get to know her?"

"Nah. Women like that are generally nice because life's been nice to them."

Dean nodded, listening to Avery's thoughtful diagnosis of the goddess in question.

"You know when women look like that, doors open for them, they don't have to work. They're beautiful and their whole world is like 'buy this, buy that, do my hair, go to power…ful yoga' and wait for some guy to -- "

"Sweep me off my feet and carry me away to his fortress?"

"I was going to say come along and provide for me. Give me the attention I need."

"Attention," Dean snapped his fingers and winked at Avery, "is what that hottie needs."

Avery shrugged. "We've all read Strauss's book and we know it's a simple formula really."

"Yeah but what if she's weird, like Lucy was?"

Lucy was Dean's ex, the car thief and failed cheerleader.

"First off, Lucy was hot but she wasn't *that* hot. No offense."

"None taken."

"And what do you mean, weird?"

"Well there was that food thing," Dean said.

She a puker or something?"

"No, she did this thing with food. She used to hide snack food in the weirdest places. I got tired of pulling bags of chips out from behind the bookshelf so I asked her. She said her old man used to not let her eat if she got a B-minus at school."

"Twisted."

"Yeah she was all-American but her folks were FOBs. I guess it's okay to beat your kids in southeast Asia."

"Huh," Avery shook his head.

"So how are you going to broach the subject?"

"I thought I'd start with the old 'how's work?' line, nod thoughtfully, and go from there."

"You're going to score, I can feel it." Dean smiled and high-fived Avery.

"Scoring is what the Lord of Golroth does, amigo."

Just then a couple of annoying customers came in. Dean walked over to help them.

Avery stayed slouched against the glass case, eyeing the plastic figurines.

He looked at the customers. It was a man, old like maybe 50, a standard 'burb crawler in a Dockers windbreaker and khakis

and a girl about 15. She looked Goth, heavy makeup and dark clothes.

"What I'd like to know is if you have any idea where the egg is in the fifth level of *Trojans vs. Marines*?" she asked Dean.

What the hell was a 15-year-old girl doing in the fifth level of *Trojans vs. Marines*? It had taken Avery a week of 12-hour gaming sessions to get there and he was a pro.

Dean had a plastic smile painted on his face. He suggested one of the thicker, more expensive gaming magazines that come with pull-out posters.

The 'burb dad looked around at all the gaming stuff blinking uncomprehendingly. This was someone who hadn't figured out his cell phone yet.

"I'm trying to improve the immortality level of my avatar and you're trying to sell me some crap," the girl hissed.

Dean backpedaled, telling her they were having a sale on gaming figurines and would they like to look at the vintage Lara Croft stuff?

"Come on Dad, let's go to the next store. Maybe an actual gamer works there."

They left.

Dean tossed the magazine back on the display rack and walked back over to Avery.

"Tough sell?"

"I guess. I'm like, fuck off Generation Zero."

"Kids these days," Avery shrugged.

"Yeah, and a girl too. Did you see that shit?"

"Yeah, weird. Maybe her dad should like withhold food or something."

"Or not let Vampira out of the cellar so much," Dean added.

They both chuckled.

"Well, I'm off. Give my regards to the mall zombies."

"You going to be online later?"

"Always."

"Let me know how it goes."

"Hostile horizons," and Avery stepped into the stream of shoppers.

At the wood and chrome Citizen Bean kiosk there was a line. Avery had to hang back, wait for the zombies to clear out. Finally, he got to the front counter.

Miss Archangel had just arrived and was in the back donning her apron and shifting large bags of something labeled coffee *product* around.

Suddenly Avery was standing before her underling, a girl of about 20, who had a dizzying constellation of facial piercings.

Avery watched the silver piercing below her lower lip bob as the girl droned, "Welcome to Citizen Bean. Can I help you?"

Just a hasty second, little … whatever you are.

Then Miss Archangel stepped up to the counter.

"Back again. The usual?" She smiled at him, a genuine smile.

"If you don't mind," Avery grinned, miming a junkie tapping a vein in his arm. "I haven't had my chocolate fix today. Feeling a little withdrawal."

Unprompted, the lackey started a double mocha, extra chocolate.

"How's the job hunt?" Miss Archangel asked, and Avery noticed for the first time that her eyes weren't sapphire blue but a soft gray.

"Oh, it's going. I got this consult thing lined up. It's only for a couple months but should pay *beaucoup*."

"That's good. Well, my offer still stands," She gestured to the kiosk behind her. "I'm always needing people for the 4 p.m.-to-close shift."

"Thanks," Avery smiled, almost blushing. A couple of weeks of easing her into casual conversation were paying off. "Good to know I've got something to fall back on."

She smiled tapping her fingers against the side of her cheek as she lounged child-like against the counter, her gaze skimming

the passing throng behind him.

"Say, I've been meaning to ask you …"

"What?"

"Well, it's a weird question. I don't know how to say it."

She watched him, expectant, still smiling.

"Did you ever do any … modeling? Like for magazines?"

Her smile dropped a fraction. "Still do, when I can get the work."

"Wow, that's awesome," he grinned, not knowing how to circle back around to the real question.

"I've been modeling off and on since I was 12."

"No kidding?" Avery's inner fan geek seized possession of him.

"Yeah, it started with Macy's Sunday pullouts. I did that with my brother and sister. Then there was a couple of catalogs like J Crew. I'm still supposed to get a 10-percent discount when I shop there. Then I did commercials, but that was regional, not national, and it was only for a year. My first agent was a bitch. She wouldn't send me out for calls, so I quit that and did stills."

"Busy girl," Avery said, as the lackey handed him his extra chocolate mocha. He didn't even notice her. Archangel's employee was somewhere else, Planet of the Plain and Boring or Land of the Non-Hot Doomed Lackeys. Avery blew on the mocha, though no steam emerged from the lid. It was lukewarm. He later realized this was deliberate.

"Threedollarsandeightyfourcents," the lackey said. Avery handed his debit card to her, while his gaze never left Miss Archangel.

"Yeah, my sister modeled for a few years but she's the brains and quit to go to college."

"And you're the beauty," Avery said.

She laughed, shaking her head. "My little sis is prettier than me."

"Not possible."

"No really, my brother Sam has gone the farthest in the

profession. He's built right for it. He's done runway work in New York twice now and he's signed. They love his dimensions and, ohmigod, is that kid photogenic. You could throw a lime green lens on the camera and light him with a flashlight and he'd still look like a god."

"No way."

"Way. Yeah, he's a perfect 28, six foot, his eyes are blue but not too blue or there's blowout and he works as a dark blonde or a light brunette."

"A 28?"

"Yeah, the industry standard for guys who model is a 28-inch waist. That's like this," she gestured with her hands encircling a space barely wider than her own waist. "Ever since his whole gastric bi-pass disaster last year, his abs look so much better. And he's off the baby food now, so --"

Avery started to sweat. Normally he was impervious to the emotional heat generated by online gaming and heinous malls.

"Gastric?"

She frowned slightly and plowed on. She finally had a civilian to explain the technicalities of her world to.

Avery was impressed. He had no idea there was anything to modeling.

"Well, he got gastric bypass done after his agent suggested it. It was that or start doing cocaine and my brother is so not a druggie. He got it done because they told him it would prevent any middle-age spread, you know like after he turns 30, and then he could keep doing the Distinguished Older Guy look. You see them in ads wearing big bathrobes open to the waist with briefs showing? It's like this Sugar Daddy look. They spray this white stuff into their hair to make them look older than they are but they have to have the abs, even with the digital editing, you still gotta have that waist line." She laughed a sudden, barking laugh.

"I had no idea," Avery said. He wondered what his own waist

size was. Avery hadn't bought a pair of cargo pants in two years. He always got XXL, but how many inches was that?

"So do you still model?"

"When I can. It's been tough between running this place, my classes and Olivia …"

"Are you going to school?"

"I teach Pilates and women's entrepreneurship four nights a week."

"That's nice, keeping busy." Could she see the sweat forming in a slow tsunami at his hairline, getting ready to flood down into his eyes? "Who's Olivia?"

"Oh, I'm so glad you asked!" she squealed and promptly dug a photo out from behind the counter.

"This is my five year old, Olivia." She held the picture out to Avery.

He took it and looked at the gap-toothed troll doll in the photo. What the fuck did she breed with? Avery felt sick. The mall wobbled and shifted.

"So did you ever pose, I mean model, for the gaming industry?"

"You mean casinos?"

"No, I mean—"

"Oh yeah, my bad. Sure. I did that *Immortals Rising* thing. That was a good gig, except the conventions were … weird."

"I have your poster," Avery blurted.

"I did several shoots for them and then I did the live action image capture thing. They had me put on a black unitard and then there were these ping-pong balls Velcroed all over me. I did two conventions but then Brock screwed the whole deal up."

Dear gods, what fresh hell?

"Brock?"

"Olivia's dad. He was getting 15 percent and he wasn't even my agent. Then he told the Immortals guys we wanted more. Eventually they dumped me for this girl from a *Star Trek* spin-off. Anyhow, idiot ex-husband talked me right out of a sweet

gig."

"He had to be a shit if he dumped you," Avery said.

"What? No, I dumped him. He had a three way with this girl who was in my agency, she was barely 18, plus this guy who was from my brother's agency. It was in a hot tub. Walked in on them. Such a loser."

Avery glanced up at the ceiling with its plastic light fixtures and air ducts hanging out. Oh, if only an alien ship would abduct me right now.

"So um, would you like to get a beer later and you can tell me all about the high-sexed, I mean, high-stressed modeling world?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment, cocked her head to one side, but her smile didn't falter.

"Okay, Avery I'll let ya buy me a beer at T.G.I.F."

Avery took a step back from the counter.

"Awesome."

He started to turn, half-float away, when she said, "Swing back by at eight and I should be done."

Avery went to his car. To kill time, he drove home, swapped out his flannel shirt and gamers' T for something more Hawaiian. In the bathroom, he splashed water on his face. He decided to trim his goatee and while Avery was doing that, he noticed his eyebrows had merged above his nose, so he tackled that with the razor. On the drive back to the mall Avery kept the windows rolled down though it was cold and Tool cranked all the way up. He was going for that outdoorsy, wind-swept smell.

Avery glowered into the rear-view mirror trying for his Strongbow look and uttered that mystical line from *The Matrix*, "There is no spoon."

A gaggle of teenagers in a red compact paused beside him at the stoplight and collapsed in laughter when they saw Avery, Hawaiian shirt flapping in the winter wind, music blaring, talking to himself in the rear-view mirror.

Avery cocked an eyebrow at the teens, heaved part of his bulk out the open window and screamed, "I am the Lord of Golroth, Keeper of the East Gate, slayer of mutants and I AM DATING A FUCKING SUPER MODEL!"

The teenager closest to him in the red car spasmed with laughter and hawked her gum up onto the dashboard. They were still laughing when the light changed and he roared away in his Nissan.

At the mall Avery violently jerked the steering wheel back and forth as he stalked the parking lot for a place to park, any place to park. He finally ended up near the grease vats behind the T.G.I.Friday's.

It was a long, frosty walk to the mall entrance where she waited.

Avery paused to admire her and realized under the bilious hue of the overhead parking lights, she looked almost 35, while the deep shadows made her appear lantern jawed, with gaunt dark sockets hiding her eyes. But her killer smile was there, just slightly jaundiced.

"Wow," she said, tightening her fleece hoodie. "You're brave wearing a Hawaiian shirt in this weather."

"I run hot," Avery said in what he hoped was a sultry voice.

They crossed the parking lot, dodging rogue SUVs steered by mad shoppers. As they went, she made small talk, which Avery was grateful for. It gave him time to check out the top of her flaxen head which didn't reach his shoulder. Wow, was that a bald spot?

In the restaurant, they got stuck at a two seater in the bar, where a steady stream of waiters bumped Avery's elbow for the next hour and a half.

She ordered a Caesar salad and a hefeweizen. Avery had fries and a domestic. He was dieting, he explained.

She had the salad sent back 15 minutes later when she found a pink spot in the chicken. She said pink chicken was dangerous. Avery didn't even look at his fries. They could have been bright

green with silvery mold spots for all he cared.

She told him about her parents, their insurance company, her dad's premature heart attack.

Avery mentioned nonchalantly that his sister was in insurance. And that was it.

The next 50 minutes was a non-stop regurgitation of all her woes. From her daughter's impending need for orthodontics, her sister's failed marriage to a merchant marine at age 20 to her mother's temporary spiral into drug use which had culminated in being arrested at a rave with a 16-year-old boy and a bag full of pills. She gestured with her fork while she talked, a piece of romaine lettuce flapped languidly in the air. And still she talked.

She told Avery she was worried her brother might be gay, not because he was a male model, oh heaven's no, but because his roommates were all gay.

As Avery listened, her face started to blur so only the odd tendrils of hair sticking out of her head were in sharp relief. And he noticed her right ear was a tad prouder than the left one.

He made it through his third domestic only by concentrating on the point between her neatly plucked eyebrows, the smooth light space there. And then it hit him. Jesus, she doesn't have eyebrows. They're drawn on. Who the hell doesn't have eyebrows?

Finally she paused for air and took a drink of her hefeweizen.

Avery waved futilely at a jogging waiter and she abruptly said, "Oh, god!"

"What?"

"My kid. I nearly forgot. It's an extra 50 if I get there over 30 minutes late."

"Let us decamp this ale house, m'lady," Avery said and stood.

"Huh? I gotta go. I'm sorry."

They hustled out. In the wind, Avery glanced wistfully back at his car and then at her.

"Can I walk you to your car?" Please say 'no'.

"Oh, that's okay. I'm way, way over there."

She squeezed Avery's upper arm in a friendly, appeasing way. He hoped it felt firm and not like one of those squishy toys they sell for stress release. Strongbow is not squishy.

"This was so great. You're such an awesome listener."

Her smile was genuine. He noticed one of her lower front teeth was slightly crooked.

"I can't believe I dined with Miss Archangel from *Immortals Rising*," Avery said and raised her hand for a kiss.

"What? Oh, thanks."

He let go of her hand and she took a tiny step back, glancing at the lights of the restaurant entrance.

"Pleasure's all mine," Avery said.

"I hope to see you at Citizen Bean again," she took another step back but kept smiling.

"Absolutely," Avery said, and then bowed like he'd seen at Renaissance fairs.

She gave him a half wave and then scampered off to her car on the far side of the frozen wasteland.

Avery quickly got into his, and cranked the heat to blasting.

"Rather be drawn and quartered by a troll," he said to the rear view mirror. And then, "No, that's not right."

He sat there trying to ignore the deep freeze blowing through the air ducts.

Avery drove to a small strip club on the edge of the city and sat in the parking lot with no energy to go in. He watched a couple of strippers enter the club to start their shifts. He knew the real first names of every stripper that worked there but wished he didn't.

He drove away from the strip club and went to an all-night grocery and then home. In the house, Avery deposited a frozen peanut butter pie on the kitchen counter. He wrote on a notepad *For you Dear* and propped the note up against the pie box.

Passing his mother's bedroom, he heard her TV going. He'd gotten her the latest incarnation of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy

in wide screen and she was watching it again. She was a hardcore Viggo Mortensen fan. Mom was hardcore all the way. Before morning, she would find his note and the pie.

He opened the door to the basement and descended to his spacious lair complete with a massive orange sofa for lounging. Avery pulled on a fleece hoodie and flopped down on the sofa to float in its inappropriate color. He stared at the dark flat-screen TV which dominated one wall of the basement. By the dim light of a lamp, Avery could just make out his form, immense and black, against the orange. Various joy sticks and video game remotes were scattered across the low coffee table before him. On a small desk against the wall, Avery's main gaming computer quietly click-clicked.

Above the desk was a poster of the woman he'd met for dinner. Avery rose and walked over to it. He turned on a light at the desk and aimed it up at the poster. Avery leaned closer until his breath was shifting the poster on the wall like a ship's sail. She was seven years younger in the poster, her back arched, with a stretchy black swimsuit accenting her angles and fine curves, a wicked saber clutched in one hand. Behind her, monsters and Greek demigods teemed, eager for their chance to do battle against her warrior goddess.

Creeps

MATT RYDEEN

The creepy ones always want me because they can sense that I'm broken like them. But I don't think I'm broken the same, and I want them to stop staring at me but they won't. To them, I am an object, but it's more than that, I am something beautiful that has shattered and been glued back together and the imperfections that are visible beneath the surface draw them toward me and I have nowhere to run but inside myself. My grandfather knows that I'm gay but he says he's too old to care about things like that and I don't ask him what that means but I think I get it. I think I'll have a breast lift soon. How do they do it? Do they take a chunk out of your breast and then sew it back together? No, I think they make an incision above your breast and then pull it up and sew it to the muscles inside your chest. Ew. That sounds painful. You use your chest muscles for everything. Even drinking. You know, lifting the bottle up. Yeah, but I think they've perfected it a little bit recently so it's not as bad. I've been thinking lately that no one is noticing me anymore. I swear each year that passes I become more invisible. I was pulling the corners of my eyes back in the mirror the other day and it took off like five years, so I wonder how they can do that without doing an entire face

lift because I really don't want a new face, I just want to turn back the clock on what my eyes have seen. Well you might as well erase the whole thing if you are already under and they are cutting you up anyway. Yeah, but I just want my eyes, the rest I can cut up myself. I'm walking by the GAP on 7th and Nicollet and the man on the poster in the window stares at me as I pass by. His eyes pierce through me and I'm afraid he can see inside of me, see into my soul, and his soul is so fucking beautiful, I just know it, because he is comfortable up there where everyone can see into his eyes, and I walk a little faster until I can't feel him looking at me anymore. What is this doing in your room? My dad holds up the bottle of white out. It looks harmless enough but to me it is a weapon and I am afraid of what happens next. It puts the white out back where it belongs. It never asked for permission. It retraces these steps, back and forth, ad nauseam until it has learned its lesson. I creep around the neighborhood avoiding sidewalks, creep in the streets. My hands flap like flippers in a motion that keeps me from drowning. I try not to smile too wide because my teeth are magnets that attract attention. I've bleached my hair and my skin so I'm almost invisible. *Almost*. We make eye contact. I smile. I sneak inside the gate, barefoot, creep through the backyard, creep up the path, creep up the stairs. Please shoot me, I say. I'm not going to do that. Are you thirsty? I'm fucking

parched. Please shoot me, I say. I'm not going to do that. Let me get you a glass of ice water. Will *they* shoot me then, I say. No one is going to shoot you. What's your name? Victoria. Where do you keep your guns? I say. We don't have any. Can I call someone for you? Where do you live? You got rid of all of your tattoos. How long have you been sober, Alex? I say. Lie down in the grass, Victoria. Feel the sun on your face. Please shoot me, I say. Help is coming, honey. Relax, it's on its way.

in this golden age of mortal gods

JOHN SWEET

steps off the elevator and
shoots and then she steps off the
elevator and shoots and
then she shoots again

and she shoots and then
she shoots again and he dies but
he doesn't die

do you see?

he lives but he's dead and
she pulls the trigger, she sings the song,
not *heroin* but the other one, and
morrison is morrison in this photograph and
dylan is dylan and she shoots

shoots again and she is not
lou and she is not nico

she is not iggy and i am in love
with edie and the elevator door opens

the film stops

pause

reload

and then the elevator door opens and
then she shoots and then
she shoots

she shoots and
then he dies

he dies and
then he lives

roll credits

bluest sky

JOHN SWEET

snow on the first day of spring and
then the next and
how fat will you get eating
nothing but dirt and sorrow?

or maybe it's the space between love
and broken bones i'm talking about here

colleen laughing as she's
pushed down the stairs, or maybe this is
just the way she wanted it to be

do you remember her telling you that
everything was fine?

do you remember the cuts on one arm
and the bruises up the other?

regret is a tiring thing

stand there with your hands on fire,
the children in tears,
and consider all the reasons a man
might have for drinking himself to death

consider the absolute failure of
pollock's last paintings

believe in the age of famine

lesser gods crawling through
the filth of lesser minds

side streets and abandoned factories and
the futility of building palaces
on graveyard

DONE is DONE

christ has no use for your suffering

phone rings and it's your father saying
so long motherfucker just the
way it happens in your dreams, and
hatred is easy so why not embrace it?

look at all the politicians,
all the holy men,
who want you to understand that killing
the enemy is your only option

look at all the enemies they offer

it's only inevitable to find yourself on
someone else's list because,
no matter who you are,
you're the wrong person

you grow fat on apathy and fear
because they taste so goddamn good

nineteen-year-old kid with a gun
kills a mother of four,
and what we need now is a tv movie

what we need are arguments from
both sides that accomplish nothing

that sound good in campaign speeches
and spilling from the assholes of
media personalities, and
then on the second day of spring i
wake up to bitter sunlight and
children's toys stuck in the frozen mud

i wake up to dried blood and
empty apologies

every day of my life wasted thinking
the next one will be better

The Fentanyl Man

M.P. STRAYER

The receptionist with the coppery hair nodded and set the phone in its cradle. She looked at Barney Guthrey where he sat waiting against the antechamber wall. He'd been watching her. "X will see you now," she said.

Barney pushed to his feet. He was a big man and he crossed the lobby to the door on the far side. Glanced back at the receptionist but she wasn't looking at him. He opened the door and went through.

It was a spare and spacious office with brick walls. Floor-to-ceiling windows ahead. A desk was set before the windows, behind which sat a man in a dark suit. In front of the desk were two empty chairs. There was nothing else. The man in the suit gestured vaguely:

"Sit."

He didn't rise when he spoke. Barney closed the door behind him, came into the room and seated himself at the desk. He extended his right hand. "Mr. X, thanks for seeing me." The suited man ignored him and, after a moment, Barney dropped his hand to his lap. He blinked. The light through the windows was bright in his eyes.

"Tell me your problem," X said. He had a soft clear voice unlike any Barney had ever heard. When he left this place

he wouldn't be able to describe it. Wouldn't recognize it if he heard it again.

"It's this town," Barney said. "They're tryin to kill me."

"How?"

"Look I didn't choose this place, alright? I got put here. I did my time."

"Understood."

"Man's gotta make a living. Take that away you might as well just kill him. Right? I got a right to live just like everybody else. Don't I?"

"So it's work you want?"

"Yes!" Barney blurted. "*Work*. But word got out somehow what I did, what they accused me of doing, and now nobody here's gonna hire me!"

"Surely there are legitimate employment opportunities for you somewhere, Mr. Guthrey. Have you tried the labor bureau? Or discussed the issue with your P.O.?"

"Man, sir, I'm a sixty-five year old fuckin felon. What am I gonna do? Spic work? C'mon." Barney shook his head.

"All work is noble, Mr. Guthrey."

"Yeah, well, it's not even work that's the real problem. Someone put up a bulletin about me on fuckin Facebook, and now I'm trespassed from every store in town. Can't even buy groceries, man. I'm telling you they're trying to kill me. It ain't fair! I did my time! Thirteen years!"

"And the fact you've been caught on three occasions

harassing high school and middle school cheerleading squads has nothing to do with your present ostracization?"

Barney stammered. "Look, sir. Okay. I got a problem, I admit it. I'm sick. But listen—I didn't even realize what I was doing until it was too late. I just woke up standing outside the fence…"

"As you didn't realize you'd killed young Ms. Hendrix until after the deed was done? Strangled her in her own shower, correct?"

"I never meant to kill Christine, sir. Honest. Just wanted to scare her, but she, you know, she passed out in my hands. When I let go—you know, to check if she was all right—she hit her head on the faucet. It was an accident."

"An accident."

"I served my time," Barney said. "It ain't right for me to keep being persecuted like this. Freakin *Facebook.*" He practically spat the word. "I was told you're the person to see if a man needs to start over…"

"There's no judgement here, Mr. Guthrey. Our program functions exclusively through referrals such as yourself. Indeed I appreciate your desperation. I simply want you to be aware of your position here. To lay out the cards, so to speak."

"So you can help—*Ouch!*"

Something sticking up from the armrest of Barney's chair had nipped his forearm. He looked down to see a thin line of blood runneling his pale white skin. He looked at the

armrest dotted with blood but couldn't find the splinter that had jagged him. The grain of the wood appeared whole and smooth.

X smiled.

"We can help you, Mr. Guthrey."

He gave Barney his instructions. When he was finished, X dismissed him and the big man rose and left the office. The receptionist was gone.

No one who knew his name ever saw Barney Guthrey again.

***

He was picked up a few minutes later at a nearby bus stop by what all outward appearances was a municipal bus, but Barney was the only passenger. The driver—a pudgy white-haired fellow with prison ink on the backs of his hands—charged him no fare. Barney took a seat in the furthest row back and stared out the windows at the town as he was driven out of it. Just another small town off the interstate in the middle of Oregon. He wouldn't miss it.

***

The bus dropped him off outside a warehouse on the coast where the air was cool and stank of low tide. Night. Barney

stood waiting in the spotlight of a buzzing lamppost. He felt like exactly what he was: fugitive. A door in the warehouse opened and a man came out, saw Barney and walked over. Another con, Barney thought.

"No names," the man said. He jerked his chin in the direction of the warehouse "Follow me."

Barney was led through a huge hall with dusty lights hanging high among the rafters and a wide floor of poured concrete. It smelled of car oil and rubber tires. Parked along the walls were rows of what looked like mail trucks.

In a cramped office in back he was given his new identity.

"How in hell did you do this?" asked Barney, marveling at the driver's license. The picture looked as if it could have been taken yesterday.

The man didn't say. He shoved a large paper parcel against Barney's chest and said, "The uniform. Everything else comes off. Wallet, belt, cellphone. Everything. Quick."

More than a decade in San Quentin had bled from Barney Guthrey the bulk of modesty, but still he hesitated. He looked at this man whose name he did not know and never would. The man looked back. The only thing Barney could read in his face was a profound depth of weariness.

"Let's go. We're on a schedule here."

Barney stripped.

In the parcel were clean underwear and black slacks and a black short-sleeved button-up and gold-toed rayon socks

and black leather boots. The clothes fit perfectly. Once he'd dressed, the man led Barney back into the great hall and down the rows of silent trucks.

"Just who is this Mr. X?" Barney asked.

"So she's goin by mister nowadays, eh?" the man answered without looking back.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll get it in time, kid."

Kid. He had to have been younger than Barney by thirty years. Barney held his tongue.

They came to a truck parked near front; the man handed him a set of keys on a ring. "Here ya go, kid. Climb on in."

Barney did.

"That's where you'll get coordinates for the deliveries." The man indicated a touchscreen in the dashboard. "X briefed you, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Then you're all set. Good luck, kid."

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"What?"

"Kid," Barney said. "You keep calling me it."

The man shrugged. "All you new hires look like kiddos to me. Nothing personal."

"Shit," Barney said. "I'm probably twice your age."

The man smiled for the first time. "That a fact?" His expression conveyed no joy. Something dark and baleful

twinkled in his eyes. All at once Barney felt very uneasy. It was similar to the sickly panic that had washed over him when he saw the red running out of the back of Christine's head, so vivid against the gleaming white of the bathtub as it swirled down the drain.

Smiling, the man shut the driver's door, turned and walked away.

***

Do not look inside the deliveries.

This was the first and most important rule.

Do not look inside the deliveries.

The rest seemed pretty standard.

The interior of his truck exuded an atmosphere of moss and humus and it was murky and lined with racks of metal drawers containing the wares he freighted. Each morning, after his run, he returned the truck to the shop where the stock was refilled. He never saw another driver.

The exterior of his truck looked like any other of the myriad delivery vehicles that journey the roadways every day.

The envelopes he delivered were black.

After his first week in the program, Barney started wearing gloves.

So the years went by.

***

At the Preston house in the town of Kacey he left behind a little black envelope. It wasn't there when Mary Preston retrieved her mail that day. That night her daughter Susan, twenty-two, took a sleeping pill for which she had a prescription, closed her eyes and never woke up again.

In the Evergreen Manor in Portland, Guthrey slid an envelope into the mailbin of one Lindsay Cobrae. She was thirty years old, a nurse, a functional alcoholic. Within the week she'd drunk herself into organ failure and lapsed into a coma. She didn't survive another week.

In Redding in California Cory Bickel checked his mail as was his habit, found nothing but spam and walked back into his apartment. Then he cinched a belt around his neck, tied the strap around the rod in his closet, and let his weight and gravity do the rest.

Tanya of Burnside was found bloated and decaying in the back of her battered Honda Civic. It was the dog days of summer and she'd been there a month. A scattering of derelict bills she'd picked up from her postal box was still on the passenger seat.

Cause of death was ruled to be alcohol poisoning.

***

It had rained through the night in Corvallis and dawn was dark and long in coming. The tires of Barney Guthrey's truck churned in the puddles in the road as he drove along Sycamore Avenue, wipers beating.

He'd made a delivery to this street only recently. As he passed the house he slowed and looked at it through the rain. The house was unoccupied, cordoned off by temporary chainlink fences and police tape. Barney drove on.

It had been a long time since he'd noticed the dank swampland reek surrounding him. It had been a long time since he'd thought of the truck as anything but his.

If you had known Barney Guthrey before his disappearance, you'd be astounded to see him now, over a decade later, because he looked exactly the same.

Exactly the same.

The rain fell; his wipers beat. The address he was looking for belonged to an apartment building on his righthand side; the bank of mailbins stood over the sidewalk like a tiny obelisk. Barney pulled up next to it and parked. He stood and crouched and walked toward the rear of his truck. He studied the silvery trays lining the inner walls, scanning for the right one. Something in one of the drawers rattled and hissed. Another gave a liquid *thump*. Barney pretended he didn't hear it. He found the tray he was looking for, removed a black envelope, then clambered round, walked back toward the front of the truck and lurched out into the rain.

In a few seconds he was behind the wheel again. The sun was rising but he couldn't see it. He had five more deliveries to complete before he finished for the day.

He drove on.

Tattooed Tuesday

LEROY B. VAUGHN

In 2008, I was in Las Vegas to get a story for the tabloid that I write for occasionally.

There was a lot going on in town. The O.J. Simpson robbery trial was wrapping up, Wanda Jackson was appearing at a rockabilly shindig, some militia dudes were meeting in the desert to fire fifty caliber rifles, and the Dodge people were showing the V-10 powered Tomahawk motorcycle at the motor speedway to the public.

They call me Pug Dixon. I'm a freelance magazine and tabloid writer and I do skip tracing on the side.

The first place I headed for when I hit town was the California Club. It's a cheesy Hawaiian/Filipino hangout and I like the food and atmosphere of the old casino.

As I walked towards the snack bar for a spam bento, a man with a red Mohawk and a horseshoe-shaped ornament that was pierced through the septum of his nose stepped past me.

I took a bite of my meal and watched a man not very far from me play a slot machine.

It didn't take me long to notice that he had his entire shaved head tattooed to look like a Raiders football helmet.

After I finished eating, I decided to go to the bar for a beer. I looked around and noticed that almost everyone in the casino under the age of thirty was tattooed.

I asked the bartender to watch my beer, while I went to the men's room.

At the men's room, a Neo Nazi was guarding the door, trying

to look intimidating with his lace up jackboots and white tank top.

He was covered in tattoos from his chin to his knuckles. I walked past him and almost bumped into another Nazi that was coming out of the men's room. This clown had more tattoos than his buddy.

I was starting to wonder if I had walked into some kind of tattoo convention. I was going to ask the bartender about a convention, until I saw a small flower tattooed on his neck.

I figured that would be a dumb question. It was time to take a walk. I needed some fresh air the place was full of cigarette smoke.

As I walked, I was reminded of the sixties. As a young Marine, I thought I was fairly clever when I had a rooster with a noose around its neck tattooed on the inside of my right calf.

In those days, I liked to tell women that I had a cock that hung below my knee.

I headed East on Fremont Street and thought about the time in 1963, when I worked at a donut shop in southern California.

A twenty-year old waitress came to work one day with a small hunched back black cat with the number 13 under it tattooed on her forearm. This incident caused so much controversy the manager fired her on the spot.

Before leaving for Vegas, I had gone to the chiropractor. He was a mild-mannered man in his mid-forties with thick glasses in large black frames. The type of glasses that G.I.s call birth control glasses.

Before I left his office, he showed me the chain of naked mud flap ladies that he had tattooed around his upper arm. I had

written this Doctor off as some kind of mid-life crisis.

Now, everywhere I looked, I saw men and women with tattoos.

I headed down the street to El Cortez, one of the oldest joints in Vegas.

I walked through the lobby and stopped for a few minutes to listen to a piano player wearing a tuxedo. He was playing Moon River.

El Cortez was one of the last places in Las Vegas to have any class, left over from the old days.

I walked into the bar and being a trained observer, it didn't take me long to spot the Betty Page look-a-like sitting at the bar.

I took the seat next to her and ordered another beer. Betty Page was wearing a nice little sundress and cat's eyes glasses. They went well with her 1940's hairdo.

When she turned her back to talk to the man sitting next to her, I saw that her entire back was covered from shoulder blade to shoulder blade with an oriental style dragon tattoo.

She also had Asian letters tattooed on the back of her neck and small red iron crosses behind each ear.

There was a chunky middle aged man on the other side of me. He was bald headed with a little fringe of neatly trimmed hair around the side of his head.

He turned to his side to admire a well built woman as she walked past him. As he turned his back to me, I saw a cartoon character of a teenage boy pushing a lawnmower across the back of his head. The tattoo showed the kid mowing the man's head.

I picked up my beer and took a stroll through the casino. Everywhere I looked, people were tattooed.

As I was walking, I struck up a conversation with a nice looking blonde woman. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties, and was wearing skin tight blue jeans with a cotton work shirt and black engineer boots.

The shirt was tied in a knot at her waist and she had a big leather belt with a buckle shaped like a World War Two pineapple style hand grenade that had been cut in half.

The conversation was going well until she referred to me as "Pops." At that time I excused myself from the scene. She gave me a sweet little kiss above my eyebrow before we parted.

As I continued my walk through the casino, I remembered the time that tattoos were only worn by sailors, Marines, outlaw bikers and ex-cons.

Now it seemed that everyone in Vegas was tattooed.

Some of these people didn't just have a tattoo, they had sleeves tattooed on their arms, while others had necks, backs and legs covered in ink.

Body piercing and branding also appeared to be a popular way to alter one's appearance.

I must have been out of the country on assignment when every woman under the age of thirty decided to have a tattoo put on their lower back. People called these tats tramp stamps.

I took my beer and headed back down Fremont Street towards the hotel that I had booked for the next few days.

On the street a city firefighter was collecting money for some charity in his uniform.

He was wearing short pants and both legs were covered in red

and orange flames, from his ankles to his kneecaps.

As I walked past him, I dropped a ten dollar bill into his overturned helmet.

A burly black man in a blue leather suit with a white derby hat struck up a conversation with me.

We watched people on the street and he said, “Can you imagine what this world will look like in forty or fifty years.”

I told him no and he invited me to go to a topless bar to look at titties with him.

I declined and we bumped knuckles before we split. I wanted to go to my hotel room and kick back.

Before I got to my hotel, I stopped at the Hawaiian liquor store for a six pack of frostie’s and two cigars.

After some small talk I paid the Sikh clerk and walked out with my purchase.

Back at the hotel room I pulled a chair next to the window so I could watch the city lights below.

I tried to watch television but the only shows on besides infomercials was a show called Miami Ink, and a basketball game.

Most of the basketball players appeared to be covered in tattoos, and so did the people on Miami Ink.

After I finished my cigar, I glanced at my watch. It was three in the morning and I couldn’t go to sleep.

I went back outside and grabbed a taxi. I told the driver to take me to a dive bar.

He drove over to North Las Vegas to a place named McRed’s.

An old neon sign above the door read “Beer, Wine & Chop Suey.”

As I walked into the place, I saw that it was empty except for the three-hundred-pound woman behind the bar, with a beehive of black hair piled on top of her head.

She had enormous breasts and was chomping on a fat cigar. There was a quarter of an inch of ash at the end of the stogie.

The big woman looked at me as I sat down at the bar and asked, “What can I do for you good looking?

“I’ll have a shot of anisette and a Pabst Blue Ribbon,” I told her.

I made small talk with her and I noticed a teardrop tattoo under her right eye, and a swastika on her left earlobe.

She had an accent and I asked, “Are you British.”

“No, Rhodesian,” she replied.

After the anisette, my mind started to drift a little. I wondered what it would be like in forty or fifty years when all these young tattooed, pierced and branded people were old.

Would they be sitting out in the sun in California, Arizona or Florida with their sagging bodies covered in blue and gray ink, with branding scars and long dangling earlobes when their grandchildren, great nieces and great nephews came to visit, and will these young people be free of scars, marks and tattoos?

Across the tracks on the bad side of town, will sailors, Marines and outlaw bikers be drinking their beers in dive bars and honky-tonks, with their unmarked skin showing buff muscles under tight t-shirts, while some old timer tells them about the time when he was young and all the civilians started getting covered in tattoos, and the outlaws and G.I.s stopped getting inked.

Racing Stripes

RICHARD RUTHERFORD

Interviewer: So, where do you go from here?

Ned: Well, I'm gonna move out to the desert and put together a string of racing cats.

I: I've heard about this. Lots of people starting to get excited about it. Why the desert?

N: Well, it looks like Phoenix is where the action will be. Plenty of retired folks. And the money's there for building the arenas.

I: So, you'll start raising racing cats in Phoenix then?

N: Heck no. There ain't a cattery available for fifty miles. I'll probably end up halfway to Flagstaff, somewhere like that.

I: What kind of cats will you raise?

N: Bloodlines are important. But a good breeder trusts his eye.

I: What does a breeder look for in a top cat?

N: I'm partial to a stripey-kinda cat—shows the wildness. A cat has to be able to tap into wild roots. What I won't have on my place is a Himalayan. They're what you look for if you want something to sleep on your face at night. Them Himalayans are just plain lazy.

I: I haven't seen or read anything about how cat races operate. Is the track straight? Or do they run on a round track? How does it work?

N: No. It ain't nothing like that. You just set up the race boxes in the center of the field; the starter trips the doors and the cats come flying out. Whichever cat goes the farthest, wins. It's all electronic. The cats are chipped and monitored from overhead sensors and cameras. Like that.

I: So how does one train the cats?

N: Train? A cat?

I: Well …

N: Ask me something else.

I: Okay. How far does a typical winner go?

N: Oh, a top cat will probably go thirty feet—record's fifty-three feet. It was a Himalayan, but I swear it was on something. That cat just didn't look right.

I: Thirty feet? People pay money to watch cats run thirty feet, or less?

N: It ain't a watching sport. It's a betting sport. Look. Phoenix is a retirement town, and most every retired person has a cat, so they relate to cat culture. And they have money to burn. You give them a chance to bet on a cat that looks something like theirs, a chance to transfer love from something that just fills up a litter box to a champion—you give them a chance to look at their cat with admiration—and a chance to prove their loyalty with a little wager.

I: That's not why people bet on horses.

N: That's why horseracing struggles. You have to be a purist for horse racing. Look, cat racing is all about culture. I mean,

those tailgate parties on race day are gold mines for vendors. You want the latest in litter box technology? You want a carpeted cat tree? You want hats and T-shirts? You want rhinestones? And, I've seen some fistfights and hair-pullins over the kind of things that only come from loyalty to a breed of cat. You're either born with loyalty or you ain't.

I: What happens to the cats that don't make it?

N: Well that's always the problem, ain't it? With racing cats, horses and dogs, with old athletes. Put 'em in a corral or a kennel or pay 'em to stand outside a casino shaking hands. With cats it's roadsides. When they can't compete it's all the same. Kitty litter.

Pleased as Punch

WILL BERNARDARA JR.

The world at large: it bristles with voltaic relational psychosis. Our collective dysfunction fandango trips the dark fantastic until blood fans omnidirectionally and the castanets are positively dripping red. That lust probably won't evolve into love. He is a variable. She is a variable. An archive of the Things That Keep You Up At Night. Dating as a prehensive, psychometrical battlefield. Tinder, Bumble, et al., are like video-game deckbuilders, only the attacks happen IRL and not on the app. Damage Over Time. AOEs. All curated identities are being prepped for the digital crematorium, right before or after the analog face-smashing or throat-slashing. Our distorted, drained, quasi-programmed Eros, sighing in the amorousness brut. Designer cruelty. Models aesthetizing blackened eyes, broken jaws, bruised throats. Spasmodic femicide. Misandry expressed through acid burns and icepicks jabbed into bound genitals. Insignificant Others. Not-consent. War.

A literal Gender War.

Gary Wheeler, horizontal, bed-beached, lazing like some pinkened, fleeced razorback before the perpetual Netflix screen, recuperating after a taxing round of armpit sex with his partner, Irene Covenant. Irene is in the metropolitan loft's

bathroom - she can hear dialogue from the second season of *Yellowjackets* reverberating in the cavernous bedroom - sponging the slick relics of Astroglide® and the dregs of dying semen from her freshly fucked armpit.

Gary is 47 years old, and his stamina isn't what it used to be. He studies his rotund breadbasket, the abdominal purse fattish and heaving up and down like a panting jellyfish. Spheroids of perspiration dapple his brow. His hairline is evading.

Irene is 26 years old. Apart from some OnlyFans modeling, she has never had a job and is presently unemployed.

Gary's loft is intentionally spiritless - detached urbanity. Godless blacks, Xanax blues, snazzy chrome, all of it tricked out with the latest in technological diversions. The walnut bookshelves in the loft's atrabilious living room signal Gary's career. Diagnostic manuals, psychiatric theses. Though Gary is an upscale shrink, he has a plethora of mental disorders and should probably be seeing someone. He's narcissistic, irresponsible (though his money masks this irresponsibility), discontented, noncommittal. A child, basically, in the body of a fat old man. Gary's worst traits are inarguably his impulsive flirtatiousness and addiction to instant gratification. These characteristics effectively veto his admirable intelligence.

Irene and Gary met in a Discord server that had some ten-

uous connection to a fetish site called Kink Central. Love at first byte. They soon logged off and initiated a real-time romance. Gary liked women's armpits and Irene didn't mind having her armpit used as a kind of sex toy. A match made in hyperspace. After chatting with Irene just a handful of times, Gary abruptly left his wife of twelve years and their 11-year-old son. In no time at all, Gary had leased the loft and moved Irene in.

Other than armpit-fucking, Gary is prone to fantasies of publishing a groundbreaking psychiatric tract, one he hasn't written but has thought about a lot. He thinks about its reception (which he imagines would be glowing - totally glowing) as opposed to thinking about what it would be about or how he would write it. He envisions his amorphous work changing the landscape of psychiatry forever. Global accolades. They'd fly him out to Berlin to give him some award whose name he couldn't pronounce. He would be given alms of rare cheeses and meats from fawning admirers. At night, he would attend ultra-hedonistic gangbangs of beguiling PhD students from Munich. He would be ferried to Paris where he would be gifted bottles of lavish wines and dine with a tall, skinny, androgynous girl with no tits and short-short tomboy-hair and a passion for anal and the works of Michel Houellebecq. He would be paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to lecture at filled

auditoriums from New York to Melbourne.

Gary's fantasy of occupational hyper-success downshifts to thoughts of fucking Sophie Thatcher's armpit. His brain is pretty two-track.

Armpit Erotica is a fairly obscure fetish, but it's truly all Gary is interested in sexually. He has no co-fetishes. This works out great for Irene, for she has a holy terror of being penetrated vaginally. Gary suspects she was molested as a child, or raped as a teenager, but he's never inquired further to verify these speculations.

Irene, in fact, is a virgin, but Gary has no idea. This information would certainly shock him if he found out, for she is very promiscuous with her armpits, mouth, and anus.

Gary Wheeler's loads are irregularly prolific. When he fucks Irene's armpit, the ejaculate generally shoots several feet beyond Irene and spatters the hardwood flooring in pearlescent cords and cloudy ovals, the nacreous pattern on mahogany like abstract art or a pancake decorated with syrupy virtuosity in some posh Manhattan eatery. Moments ago: the viscid residuum, hot and thick like flu snot, burst within Irene's enclosed pit; spurting angularly, the cum-shot striated Irene's right breast, blotted out her substantial areola with a runny throng of jizz. The resultant act of logic-obliterating horniness

and its atomic duress.

Irene glissades out of the bathroom, her elegant spine see-able through her skin, like a serpent of alabaster bone. Her sericeous panties shine, skintight, like a coed's ligature. She is a comely poem-gone-flesh, whereas Gary is a fish-eyed fatso. The Beauty and the Beast.

Irene's hysterical phobia of having anything whatsoever inserted into her vagina has downgraded a stunning girl to something weird and unlovable. Most guys just won't tolerate her boundary. In this way, Gary is Irene's last resort, the only one who accepts her idiosyncratic no-go.

Irene mutes the TV and cues up "Crazy on You" by Heart on the loft's hidden sound system.

"I want to go to the club tonight," Irene says.

"Mmm. No. I can't. Any free time I gross goes toward research for my book. You know that, darling."

"Oh yeah. The book. What's it about again?"

"It's profoundly recondite, Irene. Impossible to dilute its scope to a couple of sentences." "Sure. Impossible to explain the nonexistent, Gary."

"Very funny."

"You hate the club."

"I don't *hate* the club. I rather enjoy it as an anthropological

exercise. I just don't like the looks people give me when I attend with you. They must think I'm your father chaperoning you."

"Well if you don't want to go clubbing, we could go see the new Sofia Coppola movie.

It's playing at The Maple." "What's it

about?"

"It's a doc about some terrorists from Transylvania. The ones who made that soundwave blood-drinking thing or whatever. But does it matter what it's about? She's a genius."

"Do whatever you fancy, sweetie. The credit card is on the kitchen counter. I'll be staying in regardless. But have fun."

"Then the club it is!" Irene says, feigning enthusiasm, irritated, sighing at Gary's homebodiness.

When Irene gets home from Haute, Gary and her almost immediately get into a spat. All couples fight, but this row could lay waste to empires.

It's unclear how the argument starts, but out of nowhere Gary wants *more* from Irene. Perversely, he wants her to do the thing she refuses to do, to trespass her one boundary. It all boils down to Gary wanting her abject obedience, her willingness to do even that which she is wholly against doing.

"Why won't you have normal sex with me? Am I unat-

tractive? Am I ugly? Fat?" "Drop it, Gary. Fucking drop it. You know the rules."

"What's the problem, Irene? How will we ever have children?"

"Oh right, you want another son you don't even see, Gary? That would be fantastic." "It's abnormal, Irene. *We're* abnormal."

"That's what you fucking wanted! Shit, that's the *reason* we're together, Gary. Because you understand me and I understand you."

"You're behaving like a brat, honey."

"I can't have sex, Gary. Not like that. Not ever."

"This is my bed, my apartment. You don't make any rules around here." "Then we're breaking up."

"Explain to me why you won't have regular sex." "No."

"You said you have a phobia of being penetrated but I fuck you in the ass."

"I'm trying to *compromise*, motherfucker!"

"You're vile. You hate your vagina."

"I'm leaving. I'm not going to listen to this shit for one more second." "You will listen. And you will submit to me. I pay for everything." "Every guy pays for everything."

“You’re not leaving.” “Watch me.”

The rape of Irene Covenant by Dr. Gary Wheeler is the most noteworthy event in world history since the five major Ice Ages.

Gary attacks Irene from behind, as soon as she attempts to walk out the front door. Her screaming and protestations are amplified beyond reason, animalistic and terrified. She scissors her legs shut but it’s no use; Gary is more than 100 pounds heavier than Irene is.

Irene rakes her manicured nails across Gary’s forehead, shredding flesh and drawing blood beads. Gary prises Irene’s legs apart, ignoring the blood running into his eyes.

As he yanks her skirt down, the blood from Gary’s scratched forehead dribbles onto Irene’s wild face.

“YOU’LL KILL US, GARY! YOU’LL KILL *EVERYONE*!!”

Gary penetrates the impenetrable, without ceremony or preamble. She is dry and tight, and he feels as though he’s rending her insides.

He fucks her sacrosanct bush and cums after just eleven thrusts. Winded, bleeding, Gary gasps, “There. That wasn’t so bad, was it, you priggish little psycho?”

The tip of Gary’s softening cock is daubed in virgin blood.

Irene is crying. “YOU FUCKING IDIOT, GARY! YOU BROKE IT! YOU FUCKING BROKE IT!!”

At the age of twelve, Irene Morrow’s (Covenant is what Irene tells everyone her last name is) parents subjected her to a ritual that had been occurring since time immemorial, passed on from one girl to the next. The Chosen. The participant’s hymen was made hallow by the ministrations of enciphered Vedic priests. The blest maidenhead was a kind of biological peace treaty, a seal that ensured relative harmony between the sexes.

And Gary Wheeler breached this ancient membranous accord with his foolish rod, shattering the holy armistice.

In an instant, everything and everyone changes.

Gary is utterly overcome by a pyrexical urge to destroy Irene, but also to destroy anything with tits and a cunt, for Irene was the gender Magna Carta, and that charter is no more.

Irene, on the other hand, is possessed of an identical compulsion, only it’s aimed at testosterone and testicles. She latches onto Gary like a rabid bear cub. She sinks her fingernails into his meaty neck. They whirl around the kitchen in a nude, violent embrace.

She chomps down on Gary’s ear, feeling her incisors dig

into cartilage. Sprinkles of blood lash Irene's chin.

Gary roars in pain and rage and hurls Irene into the living room's ivory Steinway. She steals a quarter of Gary's ear in the process of being thrown. Blood is flung from Gary's ear like a red sail.

Irene's spine is battered against the piano edge, but it doesn't slow her down one bit. She snarls, her mouth bloodied like a clown, and glares at Gary with combat animating her eyeballs.

Her nipples are erect like sights on a rifle. The two of them lunge at each other, all civil boundaries vaporized.

Vaginal juices cascade down Irene's thighs. Gary's cock is as hard as a Claymore.

Engorged, hateful genitalia are the new faces of war. Biotic warheads. Biolytic, phallic, feral.

In the rush forward, Gary's rigid penis is battering-rammed into Irene's taut stomach. His cock snaps sideways audibly, the gristly penile connective tissue disjointing with a cringe-inducing pop. The pain is epic but warfare has no place for it, so Gary doesn't pause his assault.

Irene's palm bangs onto the piano's keys, creating a sting of discordant notes. Gary slams the cover of the Steinway onto Irene's hand, fracturing four fingers.

This behavior goes on for hours.

And outside Gary Wheeler's loft, in the streets of Manhattan and in the streets of every place in the entire world, similar barbarity is breaking out. A worldwide riot that will transmute into a full-scale war, Man vs. Woman.

Gary sends a bulky knee into Irene's pussy. She doubles over. He puts her in a bearhug and tosses her into the kitchen. Irene sprawls like a pitched cat.

Gary, determined, marches into the kitchen. His face is a vizard of blood and fury. There is no hint of intelligence remaining, only persistent homicidal ideation.

But like a monstrous Girl Scout, Irene is prepared. By the time Gary lumbers over to her, she has armed herself with a blocky cheese grater. She swings the weapon across Gary's chest,grinding his nipples into wet hamburger. Blood droplets tangle in Gary's coily chest hair like red diamonds.

Gary slaps the cheese grater out of Irene's hands and turns to draw a gleaming steak knife from the butcher block. Its serrated blade twinkles.

Irene, in turn, yanks a large meat cleaver from the same block. The two ex-lovers face each other and begin stabbing, slashing, and hacking at each other mechanically, neither of

them defending, both of them pure offense. Gleaming metal flashes through the air on both sides. It pierces and cleaves tissue; the blades retract with sashes of blood in their wake like gruesome boomerangs. Then the metal plunges forth again, ceaseless. Gary and Irene, upright, face to face, chest to chest, exchanging massive wounds.

Like a husband and wife at a sicko altar of maiming requiting vows of virulence.

Irene has nearly severed Gary's left arm entirely, but the cleaver blade embeds in bone and remains stuck, until Gary tries to push the cleaver out of himself, opening the wound more in the process: a great yawning gore. With a vicious zest, Gary resumes stabbing Irene's chest, face, and neck. Irene's right breast sways from a twine of bleeding fat. Blood sloshes over her belly. She and Gary are both covered in stabs and lacerations.

Irene moves to the next room and toward the gun cabinet. Gary sees what she's got in mind and swiftly tackles her. They collapse, knocking over myriad household items.

They're both so lubricated from head to toe in blood that it is like watching a gory version of mud wrestling. Neither can really keep hold of the other.

Gary reaches, equips himself with a clothes iron. He punches Irene in the face with the iron like it's some weird do-

mestic boxing glove. Splinters of nose-bone poke out through Irene's rived skin.

Weak and dying from blood loss, Irene sticks her hand in Gary's gaping shoulder wound. She scratches inside him and tries to pull something out, but it's half-hearted. She's too depleted and too wounded.

Gary continues to slam the iron into Irene's face until her skull opens. Dead, her nails spasm inside Gary's shoulder-wound and break off, like plastic toys left in the sands of a beach.

When Irene is dead, Gary catches his breath and gets a 1911-XR Emperor Scorpion .45 pistol from the guncase that Irene never made it to. He stalks out into the hallway of the apartment building, naked and bloody like a newborn. Gary lumbers past mangled corpses, male and female, that have been crudely dissected in a vortex of hatred.

The streets outside are cacophanous with gunfire. Gary hears it, and it sounds like music: The True Battle of the Sexes is in fully automatic swing.

Outside, stores are burning and cars are crashed and upended. Massacred bodies are everywhere, and blood runs into the gutters like some vermeil creek. The sharp stench of smoke

and bared intestines and shit and cum is pervasive.

Gary's flesh has gone so pale from blood loss that the blood streaking his body looks almost neon. His multiple formerly spewing wounds have depreciated to feeble drizzling.

Across the street, a construction worker is grappling with a tigerish teenage heiress.

Gary watches with disinterest as the worker stomps onto the girl's pelvis repeatedly with steel-toed boots. The worker mounts the girl and looses his cock from his jeans, threading his penis into her mouth, which has had some of its teeth knocked out but not all. No, not all. She bites into his dick and it explodes into a flurry of blood.

Red is the blood, white is the cum… the sky, however, keeps its blue.

Gary lies down on the sidewalk, slumps and waits to die. The handgun is slack in his grip. Before Gary passes out, he is aware that he isn't going to bleed to death. He is trampled by an army of high heels.

Gary's head is crushed like a wicker basket in a trash compactor.

New York City becomes a horrifying land of butchered vaginas and inimical rapes and rotting corpses and sundry lynchings of men by scorned women and women by scorned men.

Amid this apocalypse, Gary Wheeler's torn-off head is impaled on a yellow fire hydrant. His body is a few streets over, hung upside-down by its ankles from a malfunctioning traffic light.

The nameless body undulates there, gutted, like a beached and bleached thing, its genitals missing.



THE LOS ANGELES REVIEW
OF LOS ANGELES

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