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Table of Contents

The Machine	PAUL SHIELDS	-	2
Saved and Abandoned	KEVIN MUNLEY	-	11
Shouting at a tornado	JOSCHUA BERES	-	17
Manifesto of pain	NORIS ROBERTS	-	20
Walk of Fame	COURTNEY ROWE	-	23
The Unexpected Doctor	JONPAUL TAYLOR	-	25
Photographs	DAVID THOMPSON	-	29
Interview	DR. DAVID HILLMAN	-	31
Poems	MICHAEL STRAYER	-	48
Lust for Life	NICHOLAS BENCA	-	53
Poems	CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY	-	72
Poems	KJ. WORTENDYKE	-	75
Suicide Interventions of the Afterlife	LANCE BRADSHAW	-	76
Setting the Intention	ERIC ULLERICH	-	86
Notes on Jumping	BENJAMIN DREVLOW	-	101
There is no Post-Colonialism: Brian Friel and <i>Translations</i>	ROBIN WYATT DUNN	-	124

The Machine

by PAUL SHIELDS

What do you mean ‘are there problems with The Machine?’ Of course there’s fucking problems with the The Fucking Machine. What are you? Fucking stupid? All told, coils, wire, water tanks and turbines and all it’s bigger than a city block – shit bigger than an IBM, so of course it’s gonna use a butt load of power. Haven’t you seen the pre-charge? What’s that? Where-the-hell-in-fuck-are-you-from anyway? Oh, up north? That explains a bit. The pre-charge’ll send lights sepia, it’s enough to stop the swing and dip of the draglines. Stop? You for real? Fucking oath they stop mate, only for a minute though, what are you fucking stupid? Nothing stops the digging for long. It’s like Mayor Newman says: *There’s a shit load of coal down there and it’s our job to dig it the fuck up.*

What do you think about that?

Well isn’t it? Don’t we live here? Don’t we need jobs here? Whose job is it to dig it the fuck up if it’s not ours? Theirs? Yours? Bullshit. That’s what that is right there. Bullshit. Every time those draglines you can see over there, every time those cunts pause – that’s enough to register on the JumboTron in the centre of town, you’ve seen that haven’t you?

Yeah we caught that on the way in.

Cause you did, sticks out like dogs balls, and so you saw the big neon sign above it then as well?

‘Ca\$h We Could’ve Made.’?

Yeah, that’s the one.

So firing up The Machine costs a fair bit of money, so does that mean that taking The Test costs a lot of money?

What are you fucking stupid? Cause it costs butt loads. Gotta cover costs right? Gotta pay your way right? Who is gonna cover the costs? Them? You? That doesn't mean though that there isn't a butt load of takers for the Test. Finding out how much time you've got left to scratch your balls- who wouldn't want to know that?

So some people really think that it works then –

It works. It works. Shit. Mayor Newman had practically won the last 'lection after he took The Test with that slogan of his– *Ain't Dying Soon*.

Yes, I was just about to ask about that. I have a copy of his ads right here. His election ads right here, could you explain something to me though? So I can see he is standing outside the doors of The Machine after just taking The Test and I can see the

banner behind him that says his slogan. But could you explain one thing to me?

Sure, you got a smoke?

Smoke? Sorry I don't –

You mean the cat? Is that the question that you are going to ask?

Why is he holding onto a cat? Because I know you button down shirt, tie-wearing fellas up north had a field day with that. So what's the question then? There's a big colour picture of him having taken The Test winking to the camera holding onto his big dumb cat. I think it was his cat.

Some people say that the cat played a big role in him getting elected?

What so you don't like hard work and now you don't like cats?

That there is what you call a money shot, people around here like holding and told telling me would ya?

cats, what you don't like pussy son?

I never said... I was just wondering, if the cat got tested?

Cat got tested? What are you fucking stupid? Cat got tested?

Man. No the cat didn't get tested. He, Newman, got tested, walked out and they gave him the dam cat to hold and he won the election 'cause – can't you read the sign? *He AIN'T dying soon.*

That's the reason why Mayor Newman called that shot, shit every shot he was in *the money shot*. Man's a genius.

Okay, well I can see that you are quite passionate about him. I was just wondering though I was talking to someone a little earlier and they didn't call it taking The Test, they called it something different.

You mean – you sure you ain't got no smokes? You wouldn't be

Um, no sorry.

Anyway The Test is still called The Test some of the time but people also call it getting Zapped.

Why is that? I was just speaking to someone –

Someone? Someone? Some people don't know shit. It's called getting Zapped. You writing this down?

I've been recording, this, my assistant here, she is holding onto, this thing here, it's a mike.

I know what a – fuck. I just thought you being so particular you might what to get it down double time. It's called getting Zapped because it's a cool way of describing something that costs a butt

load. That's where it's at. Sure are shit up north you probably call your Elk-fucking-Club or whatever The Club, being casual about cash, that's where it's at. We're making money down here with all that fucking coal underground. Haven't you seen the JumboTron? Nobody who isn't a nobody is going to run out anytime soon.

So, the same person that I just spoke to said that when he got Zapped, him and his new wife that is, it was just after they had gotten married.

Chapel is right outside the fucking door man! You can go from I Do to ZAP! in like ten steps.

He called it something, the name of the chapel – The Zappiest Place on Earth.

And?

Well it just seems like maybe that's a little offhand because –

That's marketing son. Not allowed to market up north? Surely they've got signs for Tweeds that stretch more miles by the look of you –

I mean a little off hand because some people say it's not really that–

Did your fella that you were just talking to- did he pay the extra hundred for a Celebrity minister?

Well he didn't say –

Me and the missus did, Thomas Edison, Thomas Fucking Edison man. My brother paid an extra 2 large and got Thom Ambrose.

Thom Ambrose? You mean The Machines inventor?

What are you? Fucking stupid? Yes the Machine's inventor, well, er not The Machine's inventor he's dead of course.

Didn't he die in rather unusual circumstances?

Burned alive you mean? Horrible man in that horrible float parade fire, god-rest-his-soul. You don't get many people taking about that around here.

Did he, I mean was he able to predict –

Sure as shit he was, I mean he died with his Chit in hand –

Shit?

Chit Chit C-H-I-T, man. Chit. You get Zapped by when you take The Test from The Machine and it gives you your results on a

ticket. Your Chit. Anyway, went down like a good soldier Chit in hand.

On a float?

Yeah. Still, the impersonator was something to see, fuck, could sing a shit tonne better than the original as well, not that's saying much.

Sing? What did he sing?

Oh, just stuff from the radio and loudspeakers mainly. Bon Jovi. Tom Waits. Journey. Shit we all know, you know?

And is it just the bride and groom then that get done?

Yes sir.

Because I have heard that it's big enough to do more.

Yeah it's big enough to do more, but it's their special day, you don't come between someone and their special day around here, not unless you have designs on cheating the Chit. Yeah doing both bride and groom is dead easy. The Test happens in a room 'bout as big as an elevator, not one of those dickhead lifts you are probably used to with the first stop on a floor that ever seen the sight of coal dust. I mean a proper, we are going underground working man's elevator. Big enough to do an entire football team if you wanted to. Of course officially they don't allow it anymore in the big leagues. But what are you going to do? Stop them dressing as The Bee Gees and Teen Wolf on Mad Monday, getting liquored up, and getting Zapped? What are you? Fucking Stupid? Can. Not. Be. Done.

So what did it feel like? When you got Zapped? What did The Test feel like?

Now that question is going to cost you a smoke.

But I don't.

What about your girl there? This here mike holding lady? Looks like she might be holding –

I'm not.

She's not.

Fuck. Don't make no difference you know? Fate's fate. Smoking or not. 'Spose I'll tell ya. The Test only takes about ten seconds. The lights go off and then whack.

Whack?

Whack!

So it hurts?

Of course it does, what are you? Fucking stupid? Right on your neck like you've been whacked with a 5 Wood. Even leaves a fucking bruise on your neck like you've been whacked with a 5 Wood.

Because we've seen some people walking around with these big bruises on their neck -

Of fucking course you have. Nobody covers that bruise up. You get Zapped you want every cunt know you got Zapped. Those bruises are spenno-as. Still you might not have seen the real legit Zap bruise y'know?

Sorry, so you are saying some people fake the bruise?

Sure as shit they fake the bruise. Shit. 'Sideline in most of the salons in this town, still it's more of an out the back deal and the better places will actually whack you in the side of the head with a genuine 5 wood. But hitting the right spot and saying you are going to hit the right spot are two different things. Hitting someone in the side of the head with a 5 wood is not are easy at it seems and plenty miss. Shit I could explain but, fuck, just do to dubya, dubya, dubya – you writing this down.

We –

Are recording? Yeah no shit. I was just fucking with you. Dubya, dubya, dubya, dot Zapfail – all one word dot net dot hey you.

Okay, we might check that out later. I just have one other question for you, that you may not like, so please don't be offended but, there are some people out there who think that,

that The Test all this Zapping, isn't really doing anything. I mean that the test doesn't, that's just a —

Doesn't work? Yeah we hear what people say, but on this side of town that shit will get you 5 Wooded for fun. Still, I must admit for all their talk and I'm putting you and your dyke here in the same bag as them.

I'm not.

It's okay. I don't mean anything by it. Carpet's gotta get munched too I guess. It is rare that you see anyone with the guts to come over here and ask the question. Still, most of the people saying it's fake are from the same side of town with the cash to get Zapped as they please and believe me they do. But its rare that you'll see someone on this side of town with Zap-Kinda-Cash - they reckon the air hurts their lungs or some shit. Still they dig their coal dust sunsets as much as they enjoy counting down.

So you clearly believe it, The Test?

Believe in it like I believe in the dirt underneath my fingernails.

So could we, I mean I know that some people think it's bad luck, but you said that you got Zapped so, is it okay for us to have a look at your Chit then?

I don't think I would be okay with that.

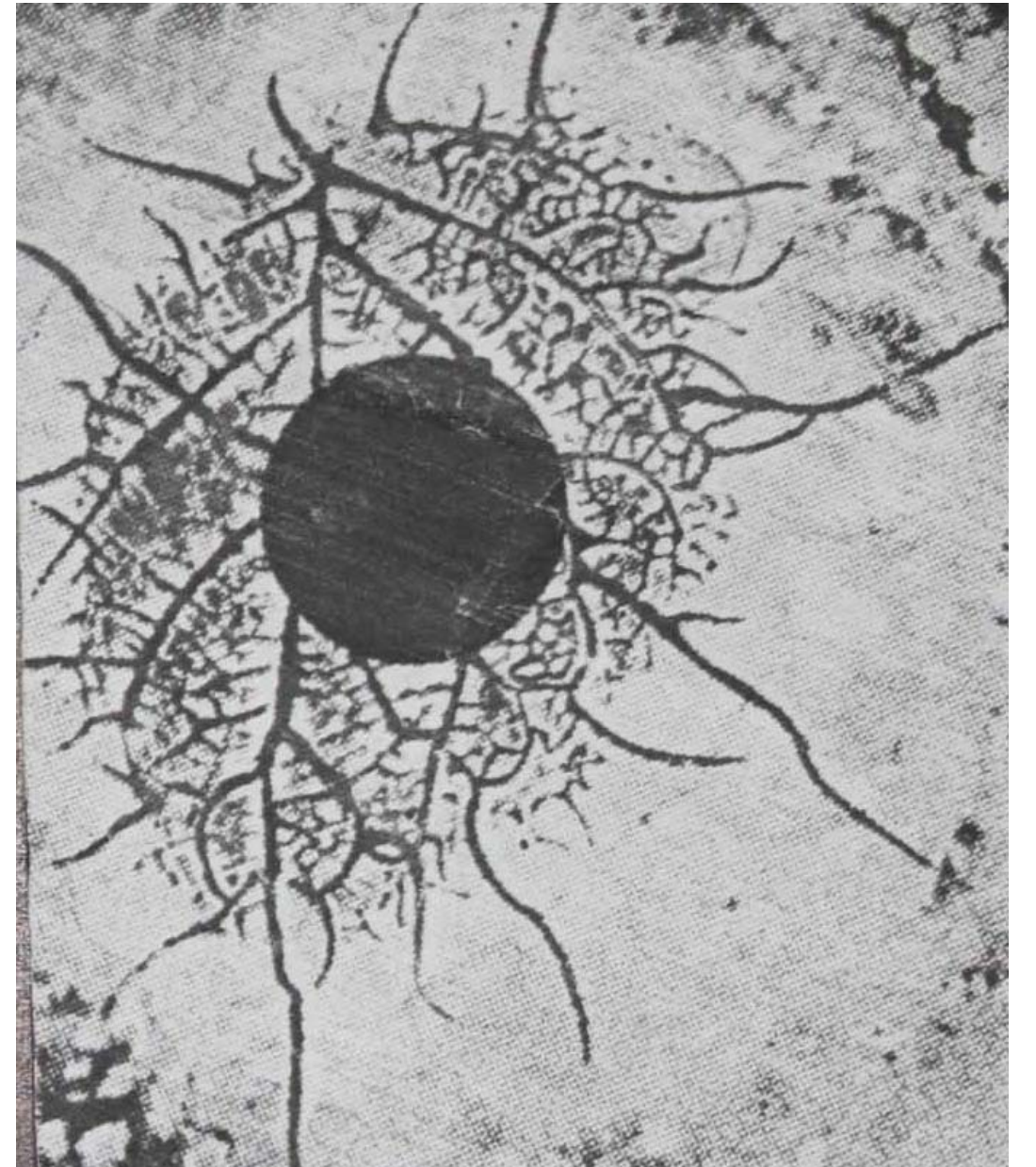
So you think it's bad luck then? I mean to show it to us?

Bad luck? I don't believe in luck, but a man's Chit is between him and his maker. Anyway, what's the fucking point of you looking? I could tell you what's on every fucking Chit in this town — Not fucking long.

Does that bother you then?

Bother? There ain't no bother about it. It is what it is, and anyway, like I said ain't nobody who isn't a nobody not making money in this town. Didn't you see the fucking JumboTron?

END.



Saved and Abandoned

by KEVIN MUNLEY

“I love you.”

Deirdre turned toward where she imagined him to be. Worried the other sisters would hear her, she whispered, “When will I see you?”

“When you pass through the heavens, I’ll be there waiting for you, my love. Soon my love, soon my love.”

Delicate sensations of pleasure swirled around Deirdre’s body. Though she couldn’t see her lover, she experienced his warm touches and gentle brushes against her body as miracles from the Lord. Beams of light crept through the windows and up onto the outer reaches of her bed. It was almost morning. Soon she would be in her habit, meeting with the Mother Superior, but not yet. She rested her eyes and drifted off to sleep in the sensual hands of Christ, her Lord and lover.

Deirdre made the sign of the cross. “Forgive me, Father Peter, for I have sinned.” Father Peter’s hands were soft and wrinkled with age. It soothed her to watch him walk through the parish

doing his sacred and daily work; he moved slowly in his robe with a gentle air. She trusted him, even though her Lord and lover had told her never to confide in him. She wanted to entrust him with her secrets. He would be so surprised. Who ever would have suspected lowly little Deirdre? From the other side of the confessional Father Peter peered through at Deirdre. “How long has it been since your last confession, child?”

Deirdre explained she was suffering from guilt. Was it always wrong to want? She wanted to experience motherhood. She wanted to belong to a man, but she never would. She could never confess to the father, with his frail hands and good heart, the sensations that came to her at night. As Father Peter comforted Deirdre’s, she watched the sunbeams stream into the confessional twisting and turning slowly in air.

She wanted to know if he had once felt like she felt:

“Father, how were you as a boy? Did you have these feelings?”

The kind father explained to Deirdre, “You have made a great sacrifice to the Lord, my child. Pray to him to take away the burdens of the body.” But Deirdre wasn’t listening.. She was lost in the strands of light dancing around her like lovers at a ball.

A great warmth rested against her and she was far from the convent.

Deirdre left the confessional genuflecting in front of the tabernacle. A celestial wind stirred between her legs as Jesus drew near.

“Follow me; Deirdre, I will bring rain to your drought. You have love. And I...I will harvest it.”

Deirdre hurried back to her room, rushing to bring the Lord up the long stairs to where they could be alone again. Once again in her unadorned room and on her sparse bed, she waited and listened for him. What special message did he have for her now? She tried to feel him but there was nothing. In the confessional, he was as alive and real as Father Peter. She closed her eyes and felt herself leaving the burdensome demands of her flesh. Free from her body, she twisted and turned in the room. Heaven was all around her. She was in and out of dreams again. She felt someone next to her in bed. Her Lord had not abandoned her.

A talkative girl with loud red hair, Bridget was Deirdre’s best friend at the convent. She had come from County Mayo on the far side of Ireland. She was forced into the calling like many, but she took it with humor and a good bit of disdain. As Deirdre cut

the potatoes for supper, Bridget talked significant nonsense about her hopes and dreams for a man.

“Don’t you ever wonder about love though? Sure, you and me are not like the rest of those old goats around here.”

“I think about love.”

Sometimes during the day, Deirdre could sense her Lord and lover around, listening to her and carressing her. He was there now. She grew quiet and listened to his voice in the air. *“Tonight my love,”* he whispered. Deirdre felt fear and wonder. Would it be a sin with the Lord?

“Deirdre! Deirdre! I lost you in your thoughts,” Bridget interrupted loudmouth that she was. “Were you away dreaming of a bouquet of roses?”

“I was thinking about something wrong.”

The Lord stayed with her, *“No one must know about us.”*

“You may as well get yourself to Father Peter and confess what you were thinking.”

“Sometimes I wonder. Is it really a sin?” With the Lord present, Deirdre drifted off inside of herself to the far side of her soul. Deep behind a wall, where she had hid her dreams for her life, the Lord lingered there watching and waiting. Deirdre would

give herself to her savior tonight. How could she not comply? She felt herself being pulled closer to his heavenly spirit. Stars from the sky fell like raindrops into the convent, as cherubs and seraphs descended from above. Angels were around them- a heavenly choir singing of their love. "*You are beloved amongst all. For you are chosen to bear the heavenly spirit,*" they intoned in harmony. Like a cosmic convergance, his form was drawing closer to hers. What would happen tonight? Deirdre and the Lord embraced as Bridget added parsley to the soup.

Deirdre awoke with a start. She wasn't with Bridget, she was in bed. She didn't remember walking back upstairs. What had happened? She remembered the Lord. There was knocking coming from behind the door. It had been the knocking that pulled Bridget back into herself and away from the freedom of sleep. How she wished she could just sleep forever, but the knocking continued. One of the other sisters was calling her, "Deirdre, the Mother Superior needs to see you."

The Mother Superior had called Deirdre into her office to lecture her on her behavior. Deirdre hated to be around this woman. Years ago, when Deirdre's mother was passing, Mother Superior had come to the house to take Deirdre away. She had

one look at the tiny girl of 16 with her tangled hair and poor education and stated she would "do her best with this one." Her body was hunched and falling then and was hunched and falling now. Gravity had been pulling her down to the grave. Hair sprouted like wild funeral flowers out of the clefts in her chin. Time had made her bitter and mean. Deirdre could see life's cruelty on each of her wrinkles and moles.

"You were sleeping during the morning mass."

The Mother Superior's breath was foul and pungent. She wondered when the mother had first come to the monastery. Deirdre imagined the old woman always haunting the halls, but surely she was young once too. Deirdre could see a young Mother Superior spending time with Father Peter, himself a young man, praying and planning for the church. Could she have loved him? Her body had been thirsty for love all those years ago, but had been dried out by the desert sun.

"I'm glad your mother is not here to see you. God rest her soul."

Deirdre turned away in disgust. The Lord had no need for this weathered old bag, smelling of death and disease. He had chosen Deirdre of all women. He had told her she was beautiful. The

Lord was with her now. He slid between her legs and gently tickled her thighs. Soft kisses gently crawled across the soft skin of her stomach going slowly down and down, until...

“Yes...yes, I will try harder.” She wouldn’t end up like the tyrant across from her. He had once promised her children. Maybe tonight, when they were together...the sons of the Son of God!

Mother Superior ranted, unaware that Deirdre was inside of herself again. There was no one else in the world. All around the convent, bodies were rotting from the inside out. Not Deirdre though. Not tonight. She would be a mother tonight. But not to the zombies of death around her. She would give birth to a new world. It was a world Deirdre only knew from her dreams.

The Mother Superior had stopped talking now. She had noticed Deirdre’s absence from their dialogue. The young nun was deep within herself again.

“You’re dismissed. But keep your mind here in this convent. Jesus needs you here. “

After her bath, Deirdre ignored her habit. She pulled out the dress she had worn on the day she arrived. It was long and plain, but it was the best she had. Her blouse she left unbuttoned. She lit candles around her bed. As she closed her eyes, she prayed for

his arrival, while she began to touch and massage her breasts gently.

Nervousness and curiosity made her excitement intensify. Her hands went lower and lower. The Lord was inside of her mind and was moving them for her. The hands of a ghost spread her legs wider and wider. With each moment, new sensations exploded in her body. As the Lord entered her, his warm breath fell on her neck like crashing waves. She was gasping in pleasure and she couldn’t breathe. Her head was submerged beneath a sea of sensations from the Lord. Her body was now being dragged with the currents father and farther from the docks. Would she ever return? Oh the ecstasy! Heaven and Earth joined for a minute. When she was done, she felt he loved her and she loved him. She wished she could see him, but knew she wouldn’t be able to. She couldn’t even smell him. There was a smell in the air, but it was just the sweet smell of her body. She rolled over and began to dream.

She was in childhood home. Was she a child? Her mother was there, and they were waiting for her father to return home from work. He would be home any minute. Deirdre knew she was dreaming, but she felt whole.

Someone was in the front of the cottage. She could hear them approaching the door. It was her father! He was home from the fields for dinner. She waited anxiously, but no one came in.

Deirdre awoke hours later with a great pressure on her chest. Only partially awake, she couldn't see past the darkness. Darkness was everywhere. There was a darker shade on her and she could feel it forcing itself into her. What had happened to the Lord? She tried to move but couldn't. The shadows were tearing at her body. They weren't gentle. They didn't acknowledge her. They just took and took. Their laughing echoed through the halls of the rectory. She tried to pray but no words came out of her mouth. The Lord was gone, and she knew he wouldn't come back.

The demons were laughing. They mocked her and called her a whore. They said they would rape her with Jesus's cock.

In her terror, she called for her mother, but wasn't able to speak. Deirdre tried to mouth the words,

“Please, Mammy. Please.”

But her mother was dead ten years. This is why she had come to this convent- alone and orphaned. When the pain

became too much to bear, she blacked out and returned to the world of nightmares.

She was in her cottage again, as she remembered it before she left. Food rotted on the sink. Newspapers were strewn on the floor, yellowed and filthy. Their dog was wet and starving. He whimpered to himself for his lot in life. Her mother was as she remembered her, with her unwashed clothes and tangled hair. Physically ill and talking to ghosts from her past, she waited for Deirdre's father to return. He wasn't coming back.

When she awoke, she was running through the woods screaming in terror. Was she still dreaming? Her clothes and face were torn. She knew they were following her because she could hear them- horrible children with demonic faces. They were gaining on her, so she ran and fell and continued to run and fall. She would never stop because she knew they wouldn't stop. She had birthed them and they wouldn't leave her. Their horrible laughter echoed through the night. When she couldn't run anymore, she began to crawl. Almost naked now, she was blinded by blood and tears. She couldn't see anymore, but could

still hear her children around her. They would feast on her flesh.
Why had Jesus abandoned her?

The Mother Superior would find her naked and bloody in the morning. She was covered in blood and screaming about her children.



shouting at a tornado

by JOSCHUA BERES

we're sitting on the porch at zero dark thirty
breathing heavy clouds into the humid dark.
my brothers' chest is swelling
in and out and out and in.

he's holding his beer like a microphone.
his voice sounds like two stones
grinding together.

he says that we are all official members of the Church of
Insomnia.
it was founded by an original hipster in the 2010's
I say "ok".

he says the earth is tilting and that's why
there's lightning out over the mountains
making the clouds glow green
and we feel like we're looking into space.

we spent minutes in the wind
watching the mountains light up
and feel the thunder shake our guts like a firing squad.

the little kid in me knows it a pow-wow
in the spirit world.

long rainy fingers are tapping
on the windows -
tapping tapping tapping
the rainstorm is begging to come in.

somebody in the kitchen yells that tornadoes are coming
but there hasn't been a tornado here in years
probably decades. maybe never.

my brother says its a waste
unless it kills someone

he says people die choking on hot dogs.
people die vacuuming their cars.
people die in their bathtubs.

why not go in a tornado that only comes once a century?
why can't I die in a tornado?
why can't we all die in tornados?

there's people still dancing upstairs,
still singing too, like they're way out in space
swirling around with ghosts that only live here
only here and only this once

they can also feel the earth is tilting.

what if the tornado is here already
what if we just don't know it yet?
what if the tornado is made of ghosts?
swirling around taking us to the spirit world.

taking us out to space.

we collect zip lock baggies.
we breathe into them.
my lungs feel like buzzing chainsaws

trying to zip lock enough air to last us
a year in space -
just in case.

he says "it's a party in there."
and closes the screen door behind him
I press my face against the screen
but it protests.

talking to my brother through the wind
feels like standing in an empty train station

I'm counting the seconds between
seeing and hearing the lightning,
I don't know the formula anymore.
I don't know if there's another train scheduled
in my lifetime. this must be the way
Geronimo waited in shackles for years
to be released back to his desert.

the same way my brother waited for storms
when he was six on the trampoline

jumping into the sky, higher and higher
screaming “Come on!”

come on!
...come
on....

the earth is tilting.

there’s water running down the stairs
it might be someones bathtub overflowing
it might be the storm coming in the screens of the windows
but nobody notices.

or nobody cares.

the tornado touched down in the field outside of town.
and that was the end of a perfectly good field.

to this day, there are no official records
there ever was a substantial tornado

and there’s never been any official evidence
of where my brother went.

but if you ask me,
I’d tell you that I saw a 6 year old boy
on the porch
holding zip lock bags
shouting at a tornado “Come on!”



Manifesto of pain

by NORIS ROBERTS

My country, without justifications sinks... I have voiced, whispered and even shouted in countless ways what I perceive and feel in this bizarre present and this why I should not and cannot silence. I don't assent to injustice, apathy, deceit or hypocrisy and because of that my chest explodes in fire. I live in a depressed, tired and cornered country in which, gagged, we are forced to shut up and accept lies and false and unfounded acclamations.

I have clearly and repeatedly pointed out my feelings for the rescue of peace and freedom. In return I hear shrieking, vehement, dissonant voices but also shocking stories of grief, torture and death. Anguish and helplessness is what I see in every face. Bewilderment and uncertainty flood the

air and you can feel it sprouting like tears, like sweat emerging from the pores of the skin. Confusion and uncertainty is reflected everywhere, no matter whether they are supporters or opponents of the government, those two words are engraved on their foreheads and in their eyes.

Panic in the depths of the night thrust me back to weep for my country. The smell of revenge, teargas and hatred, permeates through the walls of my skin. Every day and every night, chaos is called to battle. No place for peace, serenity or tranquility. Lives fall as slabs on the pavement. Blood and tears are shed for a yearning, for the desire for a future, for a longing for harmony and brotherhood. However much I, we, want to understand and reason we are immobilized in body and soul.

Time is an enigma, seems eternal, it shudders with pain, a pain that no longer pleads, that is not embraced, that is

not moved, which has been defeated by indifference!

Blindness, indolence and ignorance suffocate people with perks and crumbs resembling to what the conquerors did to the people of our America centuries ago; mirrors exchanged for gold. No, things have not changed in 500 years; today mirages are given in exchange for freedom, trickeries in exchange for peace. Oh my people! The awakening will be much more painful and severe ... for there will be more suffering and tears.

The sun goes down and I try to understand the dying heartbeats. Too much punishment for reasoning has been in this eternal night and it shudders in the graves of the meek.

A few meters away I see a Venezuela that does not surrender. The outcome, another body lying on the pavement.

Indifference and hatred has settled in the hearts of the rulers who rinse their hands with the blood of its own people, trying to break their spirit, their aims, their hopes...

Again, tears flow from my eyes....

Tired, I find myself torn; I live in a harsh reality and an immense void caused by this inferno.

How sad!

Venezuela, the country that liberated and gave freedom to five nations, that was an example of solidarity, an example of democracy, who unconditionally helped brother countries that had been brutally assaulted by dictators or foreign intervention, did so without pursuing or seeking advantage or profit. Today, that same Venezuela that

opened its doors to those who were harassed and helpless
is now being handed on a silver plate to be bounded and
sacrificed!

Today I live the shame and pain witnessing an America,
which was not Bolívar's dream, which turns its back to a
whole nation for a handful of coins and for ideas that died
and were buried in the dust of history. These "brother
countries" consent and justify the savagery of a regime that
converts the blood and the future of their own people into
their own benefit, power and wealth.

How sad, what a shame!

Noris Roberts

Caracas on the twenty ninth day of April, 2014

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbQwyQ-FbXs&list=UUfIyli1F-4oZA5meuefRJXA>



WALK OF FAME

by COURTNEY ROWE

So I waited for the bus tonight

As I did three-hundred-some-odd days before

I waited for it to transport me on a two-hour journey through villages with various kinds of personalities and potential, futures and pasts, stories brilliantly told and legacies just dying to be created

I waited to be ignored by them

I stand for an hour in the torrential downpour of capitalism and its subliminal messaging

Its aftermath made the city in the center of the world look like a land that used to be, a space now occupied by the once was, their descendents and everyone who could have been there but never got a chance

I am its accidental colonizer, and I want to be anonymously relevant

Its moments like these that are opportunistic for the hushing of an unquiet mind

Yet this narcotic atmosphere rattles my steel cage, pitting panic against calmness for the title of Most Profound, it's the fight of the century, get your tickets now, may the best person win

Loser goes home with my faith

An indigent who lives better than me by virtue of Steel Reserve

Asks if I can spare any change

I throw him some rudeness, the same kind that drove me to not care

I don't wonder what he was or could have been, I don't reassure myself that his street-bound destiny is set in piss-stained stone

I'm not insulted by his nerve to obtain a luxury item like survival, nor do I theatrically remind him of the hard-working tax-payers who make good choices and take responsibility and never play the victim whose dignities are being threatened by his stab in the dark at basic needs

In that moment, hypocrisy becomes a long-lost relative

My heart belongs to the purgatory of The City of Angels and its passive-aggressive, push and pull, bait and switch game of dress-up

The popular girl who's actually talking to YOU

And when you two hang out she may not speak or make eye contact but that's perfect because now you can safely stare at her holiness and write her entire story- the story that includes YOU

And the chance to be somebody through her

The Unexpected Doctor

by JONPAUL TAYLOR

When I entered that florescent city, I knew nothing but pain. It was the kind of pain men tell stories about in bars with pints of beer in their hands and their sobriety left at the door, each comparing horror stories of snapped limbs, pinched nerves, and lacerated skin to decide who had seen the worst—felt the worst. It was the kind of pain that burrows under your skin and into the fibers of your very soul, shredding it like paper—the kind of pain that changes you.

Luckily for me, the pain didn't last as long as it could have. They took care of it—the doctors, I mean. Two shots, that's all it took. The first was from the pain. The second, to counteract the nausea caused by the first. The doctor (or nurse, I can't remember) administered both directly into my bloodstream with the help of an IV. She told me the names of the medicine, and

she wanted me to remember those names. It was important that I remember. I had to remember. They sounded foreign to me, like the names of most medicine, so I tried to remember these words like I would any foreign language. I said them out loud over and over and over again until I was sure I would never forget. Nothing could make me forget.

What followed is hard to explain. The lightning-like pierce of the needle through my unwilling skin sprung my clenched eyes open, but they closed shortly after. The agony in my side was too much to bear with open eyes. The IV was in, and the nurse (or doctor) swore that the worst was over. Then came the injections.

The first one burned as it trickled beneath my flesh. As it spread, so did the blaze. But, it soon simmered, lowering in intensity with every inch it spread. By the time it reached all of me, my skin felt as it would if I was sitting in a warm bath after a long day at work, soaking in the rejuvenating presence of steam. I felt my lips curl upwards, and my face relaxed.

When the final syringe was empty, the doctor (or nurse) looked down on me in my hospital bed, and asked me the names of the medication. I let my mind wander for a moment in the hopes of stumbling upon the answer somewhere in my swimming brain, the warmth of the chemicals hindering my senses—hindering my memory. I found nothing.

The nurse (or doctor) smiled. “Good,” she said. “It’s working.” They left me in bliss for I don’t know how long. It might have been an hour. It might have been 5 hours. It might have only been a few minutes. New men and women sporting lab coats bounced in and out of my room like pinballs going for the high score. They ran tests in dark rooms, pointing radioactive cameras at my stomach and side. A nurse (I think) asked me if I wanted a blanket. She said that I had goose bumps all over. I turned my head to her and smiled, but I felt too good to form words. She returned the smile, and tucked a fleece blanket around me. Then, they left me in my room again for eternity (or was it a minute).

I must have dozed off for a while because my eyes were closed when I heard a voice. It was a familiar voice—that voice you hear a couple times a year telling you to lose weight, go on a diet...you know, that sort of thing. I had known that voice for well over a decade. Dr. Stevens: the man who got my eighteen year old self to smarten up and quit smoking, the man who convinced me to get a gym membership, the guy who had kept my health on track since I reached adulthood.

The sound of his voice sparked images of a white lab coat, thick rimmed glasses perched on a nose disproportionately large for his face, and that salt-and-pepper hair that screamed, “distinguished member of the medical community.” This, however, was not the image that greeted me when my eyes slacked open.

It was no man that stood in the doorway of my room. Hooves replaced hands and feet. Short, white hairs replaced skin—a white brighter than that of the lab coat I had grown so

accustomed to seeing. And his glasses? Where were his glasses?

Well, they had been replaced with a solitary horn.

“Morning, Michelle. How’re you feeling?” it asked.

“Dr. Horn?” What was I thinking? “I mean, Dr. Stevens? Is that you?”

“Of course. Who else would it be?”

I sat up for the first time since I arrived at the hospital. My eyes did not resist when I opened them as wide as I could. The IV pulled at my arm. I felt the rubber needle wiggle in its place.

“You’re a...a...unicorn.”

It stepped forward on its hind legs and used its front hooves to pick up my chart. It studied the chart for a moment, nodding its long nosed head up and down. “Ah, yes. That makes sense. Don’t worry, Michelle. Everything’s going to be just fine. Trust me, I’m not a unicorn.”

I nodded my head. “Yah-huh.” The words slipped off my tongue like a determined third grader. “The horn, the hair, the hooves? You’re definitely a unicorn.”

“Whatever. Fine. I’m a unicorn. Listen. We need to take you into surgery right away. Your appendix is about to rupture.”

“But you’re a unicorn!” I giggled at that, maybe because I realized how ridiculous it sounded. “Why don’t you use some of your unicorn magic to heal me?”

He shrugged. “I’m fresh out.”

Two nurses walked into the room. Well, they had nurse uniforms on, but they definitely weren’t nurses. They had pointed ears and wings that fluttered behind them so fast I could barely see them. Woodland fairies, of course.

“Is the patient ready?” one asked.

The unicorn nodded. “Yup. Let’s get her down to surgery.” Each of the fairies took a place to my right and left, while Dr. Unicorn pushed from behind me at the head of the bed. With my eyes towards the ceiling, I wondered what spells they would perform and what demons they would cast out of my body with this “surgery.” I felt the warm tingle of the medicine and nerves

in my spine. Miracles were about to happen. What could be more exciting?

They wheeled me into a room. There was a light protruding from the ceiling within the grasp of large hand. The arm protruded from the ceiling, allowing the light to be swiveled from side-to-side and to be lifted and lowered as necessary. I wondered what giant had sacrificed his limb for this convenience. There were more woodland fairies fluttering around the operating room along with a man with white robes and a wand in his hand. He was the great wizard of the operating room, I decided. He would use that wand to dash the sickness out of me. It was that simple.

One of the woodland fairies lowered a mask over my face. The air smelled funny, and I felt my body slipping away from me. I was tired, so very tired. I could barely keep my eyes open. That's when the great wizard spoke. "Just relax, Michelle. Count backwards from a hundred and it'll all be over."

Was this some kind of spell? I could not be sure. All I know is I listened to him, and slowly listed off numbers. "A hundred.

Ninety-nine. Ninety-eight." My eyelids felt like vices had been attached, with each word cranking them tighter. "Ninety-seven. Ninety-six." I couldn't fight it anymore. I let them shut. "Ninety-five." My lips closed by themselves and refused to open. I counted in my head. Eighty-four. No. Wait. Ninety-three. No.

That's not it.

My mind began to shut down as I argued over what number was next in the sequence. It was in that split second between consciousness and unconsciousness that I questioned my surroundings. When I woke up, where would the fairies be? And the wizard? The unicorn? Would they wait for me? Hold my hand while I recovered from this battle with evil? Would they use their powers to keep me safe? Would there be pain again? Would I be alone?





Grenada Chimp

by DAVID THOMPSON



Go Greyhound, Detroit

by DAVID THOMPSON

Interview with Dr. David Hillman

[LAROLA spoke with Dr. David Hillman via Skype about his three fascinating and controversial books, *The Chemical Muse*, *Original Sin: Ritual Child Rape & The church*, and *Hermaphrodites, Gynomorphs and Jesus: She-Male Gods and the Roots of Christianity*. Thanks to Beverly Potter at Ronin Press for putting us in touch with Dr. Hillman.]

LAROLA: Hi, Dr. Hillman?

David Hillman: Hello. How are you.

LAROLA: Very well thanks!

David Hillman: How would you like to proceed?

LAROLA: Thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me. You've researched and written about drug use in the ancient world, the systematic rape of boys in the early christian church,

and the evolution of Jesus into a gynomorphic, pansexual character. How did you become interested in all of this?

David Hillman: Drugs.

LAROLA: Lol. Any ones in particular?

David Hillman: All of them. No seriously, I was studying ancient pharmacy and I noticed there were a lot of drugs being used in cults (religions). Looking into this, one thing led to another and I stumbled onto the use of boys as a means of obtaining oracular knowledge. This was tied up with gynomorphic deities, so I looked into that as well. It was all purely unintentional.

LAROLA: so you didnt take a whole pharmacy yourself, because you teach high school and that would be illegal. William S Burroughs was not an inspiration for you? :)

It was through your amazing eye for detail and knowledge of Latin and your advisor who knew ancient plant knowledge?

And one thing led to another.

And you added together the dots. Presumably you were not the first person to do this.

You have not yet been murdered by the Jesuits, who educated me.

Could the jesuits have killed scholars like you 200 years ago?

David Hillman: For the record, I don't do drugs and I teach college students. It's funny, people read my first book about drugs in antiquity and asked: "Do you do drugs?" I think the sensational nature of the topic lends itself to people not realizing that is is research only.

LAROLA: Forgive me for my adolescent assumptions no better than my predecessors in interviewing you
It must have something to do with the fear these books generated in me.

LAROLA: I am agnostic and maybe "spiritual not religious" but . . . these scared me so much.

And I feel humiliated because I should have known better.
Like you revealed the wool pulled over our eyes and I should have known better.

I know I'm an idiot.

David Hillman: You had some excellent questions in your email. Don't worry, I'm used to people wanting to learn about the crazy stuff. I've got lots of crazy material but it is all from the ancient world. I'm afraid I'm quite boring. You are not an idiot. What caught your interest in the gynomorphs book?

LAROLA: That one is disturbing too, but for quantum physics reasons.

You play fast and loose in your introduction.

With dark matter.

David Hillman: Great! Now I'm on board. What do you mean?
The Romans loved dark matter.

LAROLA: If religion is binding things together, you explain beautifully (and frighteningly) in your book how , forgive me if I have this wrong
Erebus is dark matter
the Earth is light matter
and Olympus is something else?
and religion weaves em together, for the ancients?

David Hillman: Yeah. Dark matter and air and ether are the principal elements of those three realms of the universe. They are the matter in which the beings who inhabit those realms live. The Romans said the stuff within a collapsed star was dark matter—their poets did anyway. And yes, religion manipulates these elements.

LAROLA: Okay. So part of me . . . I'm so conflicted. I feel, again, like an idiot.

To what extent have you fused these ancient understandings of the universe with your daily *weltanschung* or whatever the word is

your understanding of the physical reality we inhabit

David Hillman: Good question. Not at all. In order to understand the texts you have to set aside your own perspective or cultural “lens.” They called the stuff behind the collapsed stars—the stuff breathed by the shades and the underworld divinities dark matter. So I do too. I try not to mix the physics,

but it is interesting that our physics collide with theirs on a regular basis.

LAROLA: Okay. Certainly these aren't quite the Romans I learned about. I wish I had earlier. I'd like to ask you just a bit about Early Church History as it has been taught. Why did Denis Minns OP at Blackfriars College not teach me about any of this when I took his Early Church History class at Oxford in 1999? Did he just not find it interesting? I know you can't speak for him. But I suppose I'm asking, to what extent do you regard your research as completely revolutionizing the field of Classics? Only somewhat? I know you're a modest fellow.

We read about Iraneaus and talked about Gnostic split sects and that was it.

Admittedly I was in love with a nice English girl and somewhat distracted.

David Hillman: There are two sides of the fence. There are Classicists and there are Church Historians. The two have neatly divided up antiquity and they never, ever have anything to do

with each other. Classicists look down on church historians as incompetent, and church historians look down on classicists as heavily biased against religion. So, Classicists tend to ignore religious sources and church historians don't study Sophocles.

About the closest they get to each other is the study of Aristotle. There's only one problem: the primary sources are all from the same period and it is just stupid to say "OK, I'm going to read this guy and ignore that guy." If you want to understand the Romans or the Greeks, you have to read everything. I read everything, and I'm not afraid to dig into the texts on both sides of the fence. I feel this way because I also got an MS in Bacteriology and I'm not afraid of looking into science as well as the liberal arts...so the same applies to all ancient sources. Love is a great distraction.

LAROLA: Yes it is. You were careful to correct me that you teach college and not high school, thank you for that. Where do you teach?

And what are you teaching? Thank you for teaching, by the way. It's holy work. ;)

and Satanic work! ;)

David Hillman: Unfortunately my ex-wife is a state-certified sociopathic paranoid schizophrenic with homicidal delusions who made an attempt to poison my children, so I don't discuss much about my whereabouts. Don't worry about asking, everybody does, and I give them the same answer. In a few years when things settle down, I'll feel more open, but I always give mysterious non-answers to personal inquiries. Have to protect my children. No, it's not Satanic work, unless you ask my ex.

LAROLA: I'm so sorry to hear that.

David Hillman: Thank you.

LAROLA: I was trying to be funny with the Satanic comment but that failed

David Hillman: No it didn't fail. Satan was a part of her delusive voices.

LAROLA: the reason I said it was it relates to your research: how one religion was successfully demonized, literally, taking "daimon"

which was Greek for “a god” (do i have that right?) and making it an evil demon

and how education so often motivates people to believe the worst (PTA boards and such)

David Hillman: Satanism is interesting because every time I publish anything on ancient cult, modern audiences immediately associate it with satanism. Not quite sure why. Maybe it is a medieval thing. My expertise stops around the 5th century, so I really don't know.

Yes, great question.

LAROLA: I was very intrigued because I immediately thought : the 1980s scare about “ritual Satanic abuse of children” must be an ancestral memory of early christianity!

David Hillman: Daimones got a bad rap. They were good for the Greeks (mostly) and bad for the later Christians. Most of the impressions you have of demons are late. The early picture is one of beneficent beings.

Oh, that is great. Ancestral memory. I like that. You may be right.

LAROLA: for the record, you convincingly prove, to me anyway, that the early church decided (with malice aforethought, you call it in your books) to rape young prepubescent boys over and over so taht those boys could not partake in pagan religion now, would these poor violated boys have been turned out by pagan priests/ priesttesses?

or would they have become mind slaves of those early christian priests?

I mean, you point out that theyre starving homeless boys so was it more of a political stage effort? Telling Rome : WE RAPE BOYS, AND YOU ARE FUCKED?

David Hillman: The could not serve as oracles. The oracles—those able to open portals—had to be ritually clean and those who were sexually violated had been “tagged” by specific demons and could no longer serve as oracles.

LAROLA: Okay, so this ritual cleanliness. Doesn't that connect us to our early Abrahamic roots?

David Hillman: Some great issues you raise.

LAROLA: I mean those fucking Levites go on and on about it. ritually clean this, ritually clean that

what the fuck

the apologists for the theocracy of ancient Jews and other

Canannites will say: well, it prevented disease

but it also, more importantly, cemented those priesthoods, as ritual sexual domination, right?

I mean if you look at photos taken this decade, of new Catholic priests, with their bald heads, and their white robes, my God,

they look very very similar to those poor boys you describe,

getting oiled up in the basement, waiting for their sicko rapist to whisper his religion into their ears

I guess now they're older though. They're not 9 years old anymore

David Hillman: Yeah. It's confusing because we are no longer a part of that culture. The Etruscans, Romans and Greeks (along with others) believed in a daily interaction with forces or divine powers. And these forces could affect both the mind and body of the individual or group. I've seen poets describe it as invisible ties or strings between people that are influenced by demons. Very much influenced by the Fates.

LAROLA: Yeah, but why did the Pope just re-institute casting out demons?

he just announced he's re-hiring Exorcists

who you prove were the rapists around 100 AD, correct?

exorcists were the priests raping boys, to conquer demons

I know you can't speak for the Pope lol

David Hillman: Exorcism was a means of influencing or manipulating demonic forces, particularly those involved in acts that brought pollution. It is interesting that the actions of exorcists are based on ancient magical rites.

LAROLA: What do you find most interesting about that?

David Hillman: Exorcism evolves out of the magico-religious traditions. It's all about manipulating demons.

LAROLA: And what are demons again, in these ancient traditions?

David Hillman: You want the ancient definition? OK. Demons are the avengers of Justice.

LAROLA: You scare me so much Dr. Hillman, but that's why I loved the Jesuits

LAROLA: they are scary fucks

LAROLA: and it makes me so sad because I want the Jesuits to be as smart as you but they're dumb

they're not as open minded as you

How do demons avenge for Justice?

David Hillman: When you violate someone via blood, say murder, intentional or not, you create a smell that attracts demons.

LAROLA: like, molecules in the air kind of smell? or . . . interdimensional smell? ;)

David Hillman: Yes. Like the foul odor of greed...to which they are also attracted.

LAROLA: And all of this implies a strong Ethics in the ancient world. That these transgressions - violations - are punished in this world, and in other worlds and these priestesses are gates between worlds

David Hillman: Exactly

LAROLA: gates are, for me, chaos and walls are order and we need both, like a cell membrane

David Hillman: The priestesses aren't the gates, they are the keys to open them.

LAROLA: but now I sound as crazy as you ;) forgive me, as the ancients

I know you're reporting their views.

David Hillman: It is crazy. No doubt.

LAROLA: But I've often felt this with Classicists
they are . . . very . . . far away
they . . . 'get in touch' . . . with THE BOOKS
lol

David Hillman: But you have to be crazy to follow the gods.
That's why Bacchants are so dangerous.

LAROLA: doesn't this shit scare you out of your mind?
or not at all?

David Hillman: Why should it?

LAROLA: no reason. I guess I want to know why it scares me so
much.

David Hillman: What scares you about it?

LAROLA: partly it's because I never learned any of it and I
consider myself an educated man. but you know so much and it
makes so much sense and I wish I had known it earlier.
What I find scary about it is the lies part

how easily we swallow these lies, over and over and over and
over

we need to believe those lies because the truth is so much scarier
that we know so little

and will always know so little

and we can never know enough to make sense of the universe
all we have are these partial stories

and then these storytellers, priests, they get jealous
and they want to MURDER rival storytellers

kill them off

to cover up stories, to change stories

is it just a story?

just words around the campfire?

David Hillman: That's what the mysteries are for.

LAROLA: What do you mean?

David Hillman: They are the bridge between the story and
reality.

LAROLA: I don't know what you mean, could you please explain?

LAROLA: You mean ceremonial rites?

David Hillman: The Church was a mystery religion. It used rites meant to extend a sacrament across time. Other Roman mystery religions did the same thing.

LAROLA: so does sacrament = rite = ceremony ?

David Hillman: Roman and Greek sorceresses did the same thing.

LAROLA: for your purposes?

ie, doing shit around the campfire?

David Hillman: Of course not, it's their universe not yours.

LAROLA: with some mindblowing chemicals?

David Hillman: Which chemicals? The ones in your body?

LAROLA: Right. What is a drug, professor?

I've learned that it is "something that crosses the blood brain barrier"

David Hillman: Plants and animals who produce toxins are always a part of the mystery rites.

Remember, its a manipulation of physics.

LAROLA: Okay I'm sorry youve lost me again , i was thinking about the pharmakon, the healer / killer aspect, and death, because of poison, and drugs

David Hillman: Let me ask you a question. Why is a snake the symbol of medicine?

LAROLA: but how does this manipulate physics? not long ago, physics were "unmanipulable" but of course that's changing because the snake can kill you dead

or you can drink its venom and go nuts

I dont know I've never drunk venom

David Hillman: No. Because it is a carrier.

LAROLA: Hmm, very mystical.

A carrier of?

David Hillman: Sorry, I got distracted. A genius.

LAROLA: Forgive me, it's just that your'e so close to your material. And me and my readers, those few brave souls, don't know what all these things mean.

So the snake is a carrier and a genius?

David Hillman: We don't recognize the concept anymore. The closest I've seen it is Native American mythology. It is a force—sort of the composite of a clan or a family or a very strong individual who has ties to the clans of the underworld—Erebus.

LAROLA: Do you encounter people who know about your research and have peculiar reactions?

could you speak about that at all?

I don't want to upset you though.

I know I'm having peculiar reactions too, so forgive me.

David Hillman: Let's get to that in a second. What do you see when you look into the eyes of a snake?

LAROLA: Hmm. I've no idea. Black little eyes? A wormhole? ;)

David Hillman: I'd feel pretty comfortable with wormhole. The snake is a carrier for a power that extends from the dark matter realm to the realm of air—so they convey a power that heals and kills—always at the demands of Justice.

LAROLA: Fuck me again

David Hillman: F*** us both.

LAROLA: And how does this connect to Erebus?

David Hillman: Erebus is the source.

LAROLA: Awesome. is Justice fairness?

David Hillman: No, justice is a teenage girl.

LAROLA: But I learned that justice is fairness.

LAROLA: You dont believe that? :)

David Hillman: Is it fair to kill?

LAROLA: I guess not.

LAROLA: It's just something that beings do.

LAROLA: But then you seem to have this overwhelming sense of personal justice when you describe teenage girls in ancient religion.

LAROLA: if killing is just something that beings do, it sounds like moral relativism to me.

David Hillman: Remember, we are using Greek standards here. Justice is bound to do what is beautiful.

LAROLA: Right.

David Hillman: Beauty is good. Ugliness is bad.

LAROLA: Right you do explain that in your book.

LAROLA: And was Justice beautiful for the Canaanites?

David Hillman: It was. They worshipped Astarte. She is Aphrodite.

LAROLA: or for the people at Göbekli Tepe?

LAROLA: the 11,000 underground shrine in anatolia?

David Hillman: No idea about GT. I've read about it, but it is way out of my expertise.

LAROLA: forgive me, 11,000 year old , I read it was

LAROLA: okay sorry Im just fascinated by it!

David Hillman: I am too.

LAROLA: What do people mostly not get about your research that you really want them to?

David Hillman: It was real for them.

LAROLA: Yes. Thats the great thing about history. Like talking to the ancestors.

David Hillman: Exactly.

David Hillman: As a matter of fact, the sorceresses made a living out of talking to the dead.

LAROLA: Are you teaching your college students that Christianity is founded on child rape?

LAROLA: or would your boss shit his pants?

David Hillman: The more research I do...the more sources I read...it looks like ritual child rape was a bisecting mystery encountered periodically and recurrently within the church. The verdict is still out because there is so much work to be done.

LAROLA: Wow

LAROLA: Are other people working on this?

David Hillman: I've spoken with a couple of profs who have looked at sources with me. One who found the same practices among the Templars. But it is still taboo, and not many people are willing to step out and publish on it.

LAROLA: What is a taboo?

LAROLA: I mean, I understand it as "something that isn't done"

LAROLA: Something that defines a culture.

LAROLA: and of course that can translate into “something that isn’t thought” and/or “shouldn’t be thought”

David Hillman: Sex, drugs and cult. Three things scholars always shy away from. For example, I found that snakes were medicated and then placed inside vaginas in ancient rites. I’m publishing on this right now. Nobody has looked into this, but in the 19th century, Sir Richard Burton found the same thing...which he only mentioned in one note.

LAROLA: as gene wolfe, my favorite writer, had it, Correct Thought is the property of the people, and The Group of Seventeen regulate it ;)

LAROLA: Yes, I was completely and utterly fascinated by that.

LAROLA: what about rock n roll?

LAROLA: thats the cult I guess

David Hillman: Gotta have rock n roll with those three.

LAROLA: sex drugs and rock n roll, are . . . what?

LAROLA: where rock n roll = religion

LAROLA: ;)

David Hillman: Yeah, demons create music and are attracted by it.

LAROLA: You sound so sexy when you say that ;)

LAROLA: So, you point out in your books, quite rightly I think, that sex, drugs, and religion, all TIE THINGS TOGETHER

David Hillman: That’s cause you are listening to the demons...if I were to speak as an ancient devotee of Hecate.

LAROLA: they’er like SUPERGLUE

LAROLA: forgive me, I’m interpreting your work

David Hillman: Yes, they were the superglue of antiquity.

LAROLA: you wrote about how those three are connected

LAROLA: cool so i understood that part

LAROLA: are they the superglue of modernity?

David Hillman: Just look at Numa. He was the first king of Rome following Romulus.

LAROLA: Okay. I wish I'd learned about him.

David Hillman: And he was involved with a goddess named Egeria. She sang to him the religion of the Romans. She was a young, at just under a thousand years old.

LAROLA: I found your wolf / medusa / snake-teat / sphinx connection / teenage girl assassin trope mindblowing, by the way

LAROLA: Ah, a young goddess.

David Hillman: Yeah. Sphinxes are awesome.

David Hillman: Yes a goddess.

LAROLA: I wrote about the sphinx today, I'm writing sa science fiction story about a 12 year old girl in a hijab who talks to satellites and fights priests

LAROLA: so thanks for inspring me, in part :)

LAROLA: I mean, in a burqa

David Hillman: Imagine George Washington spending time with a goddess. Sounds like a good story.

LAROLA: ok, so superglue . . . Egeria is young . . .

LAROLA: she tells Romulus THE GOOD RELIGION or something

LAROLA: ie WORSHIP ME ? :)

David Hillman: Yeah. She gives her info to Numa. The king following Romulus.

LAROLA: Ok, and numa means cloud, does it? like numinous?

David Hillman: Sure. We really don't know what it means but it is related to the "numen" as the divine spirit or mist.

LAROLA: Right, like that fucking cloud following mooses around

David Hillman: He was a magician too, you know?

LAROLA: Ok theres so mcuh to talk about. I have to ask you: are you religious?

LAROLA: were you raised religious?

David Hillman: Why ask about me. Ask about the Romans, they are much more interesting.

LAROLA: Oh, sir. Self and other and all of that. Sure, you are only the vehicle, for this great wisdom

LAROLA: and the fashion , in literature, is to say, the biography of the author is menaingless

LAROLA: and can tell us nothing

LAROLA: but I know, living in LA

LAROLA: that everything is personal

LAROLA: everything.

LAROLA: so, I know you have a milllion reasons to be shy

LAROLA: but please tell us something you believe or dont believe about the universe :)

David Hillman: OK. Give me a second to think.

LAROLA: this city has so much religious energy it gave me a nervous breakdown and turned me into a novelist

LAROLA: I am a stark raving mad poet beccause of LA

LAROLA: it terrifies me

LAROLA: but enough about me :)

David Hillman: Real poets are always mad....like lovers.

LAROLA: Yeah

David Hillman: There's my religious belief.

LAROLA: But you made me hate Christianity so much.

LAROLA: So so so so so so much.

David Hillman: Why?

LAROLA: I went to Sunday school as a kid, and stopped believing about 13 or 14

LAROLA: you made it seem like this big scheme that was carefully orchestrated, to mindfuck the public, and give child rapists their jollies

LAROLA: and kill feminism

LAROLA: and kill nature

LAROLA: and fuck the earth to death

LAROLA: I mean, I knew all of that. But you proved it to me.

LAROLA: You proved it so fatally and overwhelmingly to me, or it felt like that.

LAROLA: Like we missed out on something big, because of what those Christians did, and what they lied about doing.

LAROLA: and you're so brave to be doing this work. I loved your story, by the way, of your conversation with a jewhovahs witness abotu that scene in Mark

LAROLA: "you mean, because jesus was with one boy, after all he did for you???"

LAROLA: lol that was hilarious

LAROLA: what Im asking, Prof, is this: DONT YOU LOVE JESUS?

LAROLA: DONT YOU LOVE PRIEST JOSHUA MORE THAN YOUR OWN DAUGHTER?

LAROLA: DONT YOU WANT PRIEST JOSHUA TO TOUCH YOU IN YOUR SPECIAL PLACE AND SHOW YOU THE WORMHOLE SNAKE?

David Hillman: You didn't hear any of that stuff from me.

LAROLA: You are a brave political animal.

LAROLA: What else do you want to tell us?

David Hillman: Wait for me, I'm old and slow.

LAROLA: What is your citystate? Is it a ghost? Is it a daimon? Do we live where the Sidewalk Ends? ;)

LAROLA: Sorry, I'm getting so old ;) And nuts.

LAROLA: I'm just impressed that you're so careful.

LAROLA: And i dont want to take all your time this evening, so, just tell us anything.

LAROLA: as gene wolfe had Patera Silk, say

LAROLA: your lightest word will be treasured

David Hillman: It sounds to me like you are hearing voices.

LAROLA: yeah, big time.

LAROLA: sorry about that.

LAROLA: but hey, im not the first guy

David Hillman: Don't apologize. So did Homer.

LAROLA: yeah but he was an indigenious process

LAROLA: lol

LAROLA: youre so nice though Prof

LAROLA: thanks

David Hillman: So did Ovid. So did Apuleius.

LAROLA: who the fuck was apuleis

LAROLA: Im ignorant.

David Hillman: He's the man with all the answers. A man with the head of an ass.

LAROLA: oh that asshole

LAROLA: god, that made me cry, sir.

LAROLA: i thought of shakespeare, and Bottom the Weaver

David Hillman: He was fond of saying "suck my balls."

LAROLA: weaving the universe together

LAROLA: was he?

LAROLA: lol

LAROLA: Did Bottom weave the universe together?

LAROLA: Was Bottom Erebus?

David Hillman: He was the weaver, but Eros was the one who moved him.

LAROLA: Hmm

LAROLA: Yes

David Hillman: Eros is the key. Some call him Phanes.

LAROLA: Why are we here on Earth?

David Hillman: Let me just leave you with this.

David Hillman: Give me a second to write this out.

David Hillman: The language of the Greeks and Romans (and probably others) was three dimensional. When you read Latin, you read it two-dimensionally. But there is a "carrier wave" so to speak engrained in the language that transmits ideas from one receiver to another...on the back of the basic meaning. The Romans called these receivers "initiates" or those who had been "purified" by the great Kore. The Greek poet Aeschylus almost got executed for revealing how to translate this second language. He included it in one of his plays. It answers your question, of why we are here.

LAROLA: Dammit you tease

LAROLA: Whats the answer?

LAROLA: :)

David Hillman: Tsk, Tsk....not so fast. You have to find the Kore first. Just look for the little bottle that says "Drink me."

LAROLA: That's totally awesome. It's like William S Burroughs again, except language isnt a vrisu from outer space

LAROLA: its a 3 diemsnional hologram from black holes where gods live or something

LAROLA: and Alice likes it there ;) lol

David Hillman: Exactly.

David Hillman: Language is the plaything of demons.

LAROLA: Thank you Professor for your wisdom and bravery and for taking the time to talk about your work! :) :) :)

LAROLA: Damn those demons to Erebus!

David Hillman: Thank you! And please, suck my balls!

LAROLA: Thank you Dr Hillman :)

David Hillman: Anytime. All the best. And thank you for taking the time to read my work.

LAROLA: Thanks for reading and writing and teaching!

LAROLA: Bye bye

David Hillman: goodnight.

Sad Beauty at the El Rey Cantina

by MICHAEL STRAYER

It was the kind of night that goes too fast,
that spirals wide
and sinks low
and—
looking back—
there's very little
that you've learned.

He was the kind of guy who knew
how to sit at a bar
and she was the kind of girl
beautiful when sad.

Jimi Hendrix was on the jukebox;
cigarette smoke
lazed
about the air.

He sat at the bar
and clutched his drink
and looked in the mirror.

He could see her in the seat beside him;
could see her face tilt,
the light glinting from her cheeks
and lips

He watched her eyes water,
felt the condensation dribble
across his knuckles,
unable to look away—

unable to move
as the jukebox blared
and a hundred conversations
ebbed and flowed around them
like light through the branches of a tree.

Beer Days and Whiskey Nights

by MICHAEL STRAYER

Beer is for the daytime—
for the mornings when the world tilts
and the head screams
and the guts cry out for vengeance.

It is hard to despair on beer.

Beer is for the daytime—
when the sun is shining
and the glass is cold
and the deck cool and damp
beneath your feet.

Beer is for blue skies
and shimmering green trees
and square green lawns,
Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers,
a sound of laughter,
a sound of magic,
a sound of summer,
a sound of love.

Beer is for the heat,
for the sweaty and the fetid,
for the sand and the sea

and the zephyrs
and the sun.

Beer is for the daytime.
Whiskey is for the night.

Whiskey is for the smoke
and the darkness—

for those nights the moon smiles in the fog,
when the stars feel close,
and the shadows feel alive;
when tomcats howl
and gangsters scream.

Whiskey is for the night—
for the sleepless hours
when your mind wheels
like a burning carousel

and your neighbors' voices
come in through the walls
like the questions of the damned;

when all you think about is love
and lost love,

and death and mortality

and blood on the tiles

and Lucille crying
in the stillness.

Whiskey is for red wind,
violence
and fits of passion;

beer is for laughter.

Beer is for the hangover
caused by whiskey;

for the showers you don't want to end,

for those sudden kisses
in the sun.

Beer is a cloud,
a dream,
a magic carpet
on a sea of music.

Whiskey is a raptor.

Lust for Life

by NICHOLAS BENCA

A previous version of this story appeared in a chapbook published by Nerve Cowboy's Liquid Paper Press.

Getting out of bed was usually the most difficult task of the day for me, but the need for sleep wasn't the only reason why I wouldn't rise. It was seven-thirty in the morning, and the temperature was already in the mid eighties. I didn't have air conditioning, but while searching for furniture upgrades three days earlier, I had been lucky enough to find a box fan on a neighbor's curb. I had to rewire it with a piece of extension cord, and although the fan only blasted stale warmth onto my face and shoulders, I was still grateful for the motion.

I'd been awake for nearly an hour, trying to push Amanda from my mind. I had dreamed we were still together and were back at the Pictured Rocks National Park, where we'd camped the previous summer, and she was wearing the shirt that made

her eyes turn green. We were staring at Lake Superior from the beach, and it looked like sparks were cascading off the electric blue of the water. It was so crisp and bright that I had to close my eyes. My hand traced down her ribcage and stopped at the curve of her hip. We were kissing when I woke—the dream so vivid the scent of her unwashed body stayed with me.

I'd been trying to avoid thinking about Amanda, an impossibility since everything reminded me of her after five years of living together. Even my trash-picked fan somehow recalled the time we used a spray bottle to mist each other with ice water on a hot summer day. Although the memory of her didn't evoke emotion like it used to, it made me aware of the empty space left by everything I'd lost, which was more than her—my desire to love, fear of death—all the things I had assumed were fundamental to human existence were gone.

There was nothing else to do, so I just lay there on top of a comforter that needed washing, sweating out the previous night's alcohol until my phone rang. It was going to be my boss.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Mark!” he said.

“Hank,” I said, thinking it was going to be a long day if he was already wound up this early.

“Have you left yet?”

“Just about to step out the door when you called. What’s up?”

“I got a call to put in an estimate on the other side of town, so I won’t be able to meet you down at The Arlington,” he said.

“You should head to the shop, pick up the van, and get down there early. This is a new client, so try to look and act professional. Wear the company shirt and don’t be late. The landlord said he’d be waiting at nine, so you need to get there early. Got the address? Directions? You’re leaving right?”

“Yeah. Got the address and directions, and I’ll leave as soon as you let me get off the phone,” I said.

After brewing a pot of coffee, I stepped outside with my travel mug and was glad I didn’t wear that heavy, black polo shirt with “Healy Heating and Cooling” stitched on the front pocket.

Every pore in my body swelled in the humidity, and I became dizzy, which meant my hangover was bad that morning.

Detroit was in the middle of a heat wave harsher than anything I’d experienced in at least a decade. During a typical Detroit summer, it was rare for the temperature to get into the upper nineties and rarer still when it happened a couple days in a row. Even then it would either be bearable at night, or a thunderstorm would roll in to provide temporary relief. This was a different beast altogether because the five day forecast only contained triple-digit highs. It was like the city had become a giant egg that a massive bird decided to nest on and incubate until it hatched.

Most buildings in Detroit could withstand bitter cold, but the idea of climate control in the summer was neglected. So when it was hot, the city’s residents burned, and work in the HVAC business was much slower in the summer. To keep money coming in, Hank accepted the jobs other companies would turn down. The location of the Arlington apartment complex meant

the work conditions were going to be rough, which was fine when I compared it to the possible alternative of crawling through fiberglass insulation in a hundred-and-twenty degree attic to connect A/C ductwork. The job was actually perfect for us because there were only four official employees, and we were often shorthanded since Ralph routinely missed a couple days a week when he was either drunk or too hung-over to show up. Because it was summer, there would be no rush to get the boiler running, so the gig could be extended over the course of a couple weeks if necessary.

Tangible borders do not really divide the neighborhoods in Detroit, and the Arlington was in a nameless area just south of downtown, east of Corktown, west of the Cass Corridor, and north of Woodbridge. The directions said to make a left on the one way street after the park, so I slowed as I approached the only thing in the neighborhood that could have been mistaken for a park. No plaques, sculptures, benches, trashcans, or even foliage. Undoubtedly a strip of buildings stood there once but had been

demolished or burned down long ago when the city still had enough resources to raze dilapidated structures.

The only thing that distinguished this particular area from the many other abandoned spaces you might find throughout the city was the presence of people. I knew there was a soup kitchen and warming center in the area, which probably accounted for the half dozen vagrants evenly dispersed across the grounds among the blown litter and scattered piles of what I hoped was dogshit from strays. With the exception of the two who were sharing the contents of a bottle in a paper bag, they all seemed to be staking claim to a specific territory. The one guy in motion was pacing back and forth and speaking to himself in an urgent, spastic voice. I assumed it was his daily routine because his steps traced a path of exposed dirt, a gash worn into the flat plain of yellow crab grass.

I identified the apartment complex out of the three buildings on the block because the other two were condemned warehouses. It was a four-story structure that looked like it had

been built around the turn of the century. There were vast patches in the façade where the brick had flaked off. The building gave off the impression that, under the weight of the memories of the hard living that had taken place within its walls, it had grown tired over the years and had taken it upon itself to return to the earth.

I maneuvered the van into a space in the parking lot and sat there for another fifteen minutes finishing my morning coffee in silence because the radio was broken, which was a relief because there was no danger of hearing a song that might remind me of Amanda. I pulled out my phone and dialed the landlord to tell him I'd arrived.

"I've been waiting for you," he said. "I just tried calling Hank but couldn't get a hold of him. He said you'd be here at nine, and I was starting to get worried."

"Sorry, sir. Hit some traffic on the way in," I said as I checked the clock on the dash. It read 9:04 but was probably off a few minutes.

"Sir!" He laughed. "No need to be so formal. Please call me Mr. Gall. I'll meet you at the wooden gate around back."

As I got out of the van, I nearly stepped on a condom, and a cursory look revealed four more sitting like opaque, deflated caterpillars on the asphalt. I grabbed the bag of hand tools I needed to get started and made sure all of the doors were locked.

I walked along a seven-foot wooden fence that had a taller chain link fence crowned with razor wire behind it. In the alley I heard the approaching clatter of keys, then the crisp metallic clicks of locks unfastening, bolts sliding back and chains being pulled away. The interior gate squawked as it rolled back, then there was more fumbling as wooden boards used to barricade the outer door were removed. The intricacy of the process made me think I was about to enter a miniature haven different from the rest of the mundane city, so I was disappointed when the wooden doors parted and revealed an unremarkable, pale man wearing a grease-stained jumpsuit. Judging from his grey hair and the creases in his face, I guessed he was about sixty-five.

“Hi, Mr. Gall. I’m Mark,” I said as I offered my hand for him to shake.

He ignored my greeting and stroked the stubble on his chin. “You look younger than I expected.”

Because I was not the grizzled man with thirty years of experience that customers always expected, I was used to that type of reception. I had learned to tell people what they wanted to hear and leave out what they didn’t. It usually bothered customers to learn I had graduated Magna Cum Laude from the University of Michigan honors college—people didn’t want a guy with a degree in philosophy repairing their furnace, so I pretended my goal in life was to become a pipefitter.

“I’m young, but I’ve been working for Hank for almost four years and have demolished more than fifty boilers. I am a capable worker, and it doesn’t take a genius to use a pry bar and sledgehammer. Now, the installation process can be a little tricky, but Hank will be around for that.”

He nodded his head when I finished speaking. “Follow me,” he said, then led me through a graveyard of claw-footed bathtubs, toilets, and porcelain sink fixtures spread over the back lawn.

“Doing a little remodeling?” I asked.

He laughed. “No. These are still good, but I don’t have room to store them inside. You never know what you’re going to need in a pinch.”

He took me to an alcove along the side of the building and down a little stairway to the service entrance. When we entered the utility room, I was immediately hit by the brutal stench of dead animal. The smell was so intense it was impossible that the landlord was unaware, so I stopped, hoping for an explanation. Flickering florescent lights illuminated a worktable cluttered with a vast collection of rusty tools, some of which I couldn’t even have guessed their function. The wall on the opposite side of the room was lined with four wooden boxes, each about three feet tall and five feet wide. Because they’d been painted black, they looked like oversized coffins. The boxes had Plexiglas tops, which

would have allowed me to view the contents if I had been close enough to peek in. I assumed that those boxes were makeshift cages, and that the animals inside had died and been left long enough to rot.

I followed the landlord down a dingy corridor lined with padlocked doors to the boiler room. When he opened the door, I tried to cover a retch with a cough and rethought the source of the smell. The landlord ignored that we were standing in a room that probably contained some sort of corpse. When he continued to remain silent, I wondered if there was a reason he didn't offer an explanation for the stench. My imagination toyed with sinister possibilities when I saw the lumpy mound of trash bags piled in the corner.

"This is it," he said, smiling and nodding to the ancient boiler the size of an old-model Cadillac in the center of the room. "I'll let you get started. If you need anything I'll be in the utility room."

As soon as I was alone, I scanned my surroundings and spotted something puzzling stretched across the only window ledge in the room. There were three of them, each about three feet in length. And as I approached—first noticing the monstrous talons jutting from the claws then the scaly skin on the leg itself—I wasn't sure what they were until I was inspecting them up close. They were definitely from a bird of some sort, but because of their size, I could only picture prehistoric flying beasts from the illustrated dinosaur books I read as a child.

Legs usually come in pairs, so when I counted three on the ledge in front of me, it sent a tremor through my body. I needed a plausible explanation that would account for the missing limb, but I blanked when I tried to figure out who would want a single bird leg and what they might have used it for. My racing mind made a desperate connection to voodoo and ritualistic sacrifice. The questions kept popping—why would anyone keep bird legs in the boiler room? How long had they been there? What type of

bird could they have come from? But the answers eluded me completely until the lone question, “What the fuck?” perched itself in my brain and wouldn’t budge.

I considered telling the landlord I needed to go out to my van for something, then just driving away, but I called Hank instead.

“If you aren’t down here in fifteen minutes, I’m leaving,” I said as soon as he answered.

“Why? Everything going alright? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I don’t even know where to start,” I said. “It smells like rotting corpse down here, and there are these giant bird legs on the window sill.”

“Bird legs?” he asked.

“Yeah. Three of them. I can’t even explain, it’s all sorts of fucked down here. So are you coming out, or am I leaving?” I asked.

He sighed, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d actually gone to submit a job estimate or was still at home in his

underwear playing solitaire on the computer. “I’m on my way,” he told me.

I had finished disconnecting all of the gas and electrical lines to the boiler when I heard the muted voices of Hank and the landlord. I was trying to break the seal on the union in the return steam line when some kid with multiple facial piercings walked in. He was wearing an oversized Iron Maiden tee-shirt, which accentuated his emaciated physique. He was so pale that the only color on his skin came from the tattoos that covered his arms but failed to hide the track marks.

“Hey, man. I’m Jeremy. I’m the super around here,” he said.

“You got to be kidding me.”

“What?”

“You’re just so young. Wondering how you got hooked up with a gig like this.”

“I’m bout the same age as you,” he said with a smile that revealed missing teeth.

“I’m not the super of an apartment building though. Really, how’d you get this job?”

“Dunno. Just luck I guess.” He shrugged, wiped the saliva from the corners of his mouth, then made his way to the corner and removed a few garbage bags from the pile.

When all of the garbage bags were gone, Hank came in. “Smell better?” he asked, and I continued working.

“I just finished talking with the guy about all this and trust me, it’s not as bad as you think,” he said.

I pointed to the window ledge.

“Ralph is on his way down to help you out. Are you going to be able to hold tight until he gets here, because I got to get going?”

“No, Hank. I’m not going to be able to hold tight until you explain exactly what the fuck is going on here.”

“Well, Billy Gall took this science course at Wayne State a

skeleton. Apparently he was really good at it, decided to try his hand on a larger animal, and it became a hobby for him. He gets dead emus shipped to him from a farm in West Michigan.”

“Those trash bags sitting in the corner were filled with dead emus?” I asked. “Emus are like ostriches, right? Doesn’t matter. Then what’s he do?”

“Well, he puts the carcasses in those wooden boxes in the utility room with maggots and other insects that eat the meat off until there’s nothing but bones, which he boils then sets. Apparently he makes good money selling them on eBay.”

I stared at Hank until he ventured, “Weird, huh?”

“Weird for someone to buy an emu skeleton on eBay, yeah. But weird’s not the right word for what this guy is doing,” I said as I put down my pipe-wrench. “That’s some sick, serial killer type shit, and I want no part of it.”

“It’s really not that bad,” Hank said with a laugh.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that it’s illegal, but that’s not even it. Think of the people that have to live here. He’s got a pile

of rotting flesh sitting in the basement. People in undeveloped countries know better than to keep decomposing corpses in places where people live. This slumlord's doing it to cultivate his sick hobby? I honestly would have rather found a dead body in this room than that."

Hank didn't know how to respond. He'd seen me angry before, but it was usually because I had to go finish one of Ralph's jobs or was frustrated when I couldn't fix whatever I was working on.

"Look, Hank. I've worked some awful jobs for you—removed asbestos, went into crawlspaces in sub-zero temperature to fix frozen pipes. There was the creepy guy on Second who kept coming into the basement in his underwear and that old woman with cat piss all over her house. I've never walked out on a job, but this is bullshit."

"We follow the prescribed guidelines for asbestos removal."

"Maybe so, but we aren't certified to it. And I doubt we dispose of it properly."

"Alright, I will pay you double today if you stick around and work with Ralph," he offered.

"You're such an asshole. You saw all this when you came down to bid on the job, and didn't even give me a heads up," I said.

"Well, the heat makes it smell a lot worse down here," he said. "I'll pay you triple-time today and double-time whenever you work here."

I liked to think of myself as someone who would stick to his principles, but money trumped whatever integrity I thought I had. I was willing to ignore certain things if it meant I wouldn't have to wait until payday to buy groceries.

I shook my head. "Alright," I said.

On his way out, Hank stopped in doorway. "I don't understand," he said. "You pitch a fit when Ralph doesn't reclaim R22. For someone who's so concerned about the environment, I would have thought you'd appreciate Mr. Gall's effort to be green—he's recycling."

He was already in the corridor when I yelled out, “You can get fined thousands of dollars and lose your license for releasing R22 into the atmosphere.”

Ralph arrived an hour later. I had finished disconnecting all of the tie-in pipes and was almost done pulling the fittings out of the boiler. All I needed Ralph to help with was prying the boiler sections apart, a task more difficult than it sounds. There are two seals that tie each section together, one on the top right side, and the other on the bottom left. When they had been installed, the seals were tight enough to prevent steam and water leakage between the sections, and a century of corrosion had fused them together further. There were eight cast-iron sections total, each about four feet tall, five feet long and just under a foot wide, which made them nearly five hundred pounds apiece.

Ralph only grunted when I showed him the bird legs, and when I asked him about the smell, he told me he couldn't smell a

goddamned thing because a sinus infection had clogged his nose entirely. Ralph sounded pissed when he told me that Anthony was going to be around later in the afternoon—it appeared his racism trumped having an extra man to help with the work, which was surprising for a man as lazy as Ralph.

Although Ralph was about fifty and had been in the HVAC business for almost twenty years, I had to lead by example because Ralph would use the slightest excuse to give up. If he encountered any unforeseen difficulty on the job, he would tell the customer he needed to order a part that wasn't available, then go home and drink. Most days, I was tempted to do the exact same thing but knew if I did, I would have to handle that same problem the very next day. If I had the money, maybe I would have pulled a Ralph and not shown up for the next few days, hoping someone else would clean up the mess.

The first section came off with relative ease. We wedged chisels into the joints of the seals and alternated sledge hammer

hits, Ralph working the top seal on one side and me on the bottom of the other. Ralph was a mountain—over six feet tall and two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle. The sections would bind if they were not coming off evenly at the seals, so there were times I had to swing my sledge twice to equal the force of one of his.

By the time we were working on the third section, the heat was getting to us. Ralph was sweating out whiskey, and instead of masking the smell of emu corpse, it created a new and altogether unholy stench. My shirt had been soaked through before Ralph had arrived, but it was beginning to spread to my shorts.

We were taking a break when Anthony called to say he would be there in five but needed someone to walk him in. Anthony was a scrapper and didn't work for Hank. Usually we'd just set any scrap metal out on the curb and let it disappear, which usually took less than an hour. Hank called Anthony when we had a lot of it and needed an extra body to help remove it. I'd

only met him a couple of times, and although he seemed a bit goofy, I liked him well enough.

He remembered my name when I greeted him, and I warned him about the smell, said there was something else he had to see because I couldn't explain it.

Ralph, sitting on an overturned bucket with his eyes closed, didn't stir when we walked in.

"Whew!" Anthony said with a wave of his hand in front of his nose. "I see what you mean. Smells like a cross between a slaughterhouse and a distillery. I'm gonna grab a dust mask."

"Already tried that," I said. "I almost suffocated with the heat."

"How's it going, Ralph?" Anthony asked.

Ralph grunted.

"Check those out," I said and pointed to the window ledge.

"I'll be damned," he said. "What are those from? A phoenix?"

"An emu."

Anthony shrugged and let it go.

It was too cramped for all three of us to work at the same time, so we rested in shifts. When Anthony and I were hammering at a section that wouldn't budge, Ralph asked, "What's a matter, junk man? Not used to real work?"

Anthony stopped swinging and forced his gap-toothed smile. "I'm not a junk man because no one pays money for junk. I repurpose the things most people don't realize are valuable."

"After work, you can come by my house and sift through the trash for valuables. The wad of tissue I jizzed in yesterday has gotta be worth something." Ralph laughed like his joke was the cleverest thing he'd ever said.

By the time there were three sections left, Ralph was done. "Fuck this. Let's head home. In half day, we've accomplished more than most full crews of men do in an entire day's work. No sense in breaking our backs for this bullshit."

Instead of telling him we'd done the work of two men in a few hours, I said, "No. If we don't finish this shit today, we're

going to have three days of swinging a sledgehammer instead of two. Let's just take it easy, take more smoke breaks and knock it out. I want to be done with this."

He stayed until all of the sections were separated, but Ralph was defeated by the time we were through. I felt bad for making him stick around, knew he wasn't going to be back to the Arlington the following day.

Hank was a step ahead of me when I called that evening to tell him the news. "I already told Ralph he was going to be heading to a different jobsite. He probably won't show up anyway, but at least there's a chance this way."

"So who else are you sending out?" I asked. "Anthony and I aren't going to be able to bust up and remove those sections ourselves."

"Sorry, but you're going to have to. I'm paying you double-time, so money-wise, it's like I got two men down there. Guess you're going to have to work twice as hard."

I tried to argue, but it was useless.

Before I hung up, Hank said, “Remember. You are my employee, not Anthony, so you are the boss down there. If he starts doing anything stupid, anything that goes against common sense, speak up. You are in charge, and if anything happens, it’s on you.”

Although they were only going to get dirty again in the morning, I wasted ten minutes in the shower trying to clean my hands—a habit I developed for Amanda since she had been disgusted by how filthy my hands were when I came home from work. Because a soap-lathered washcloth did nothing to cleave the grit, I used a scrub brush. My hands were red and raw when I gave up. Like a stubborn memory that refuses to be forgotten, the black boiler grime remained etched in the creases of my palms and outlined a dozen calluses.

That night I drank whiskey instead of beer. I started early, hoping to get drunk enough to pass out so the heat wouldn’t keep me awake. I fell asleep in my armchair with the lights on. I spent the entire night straddling the space that divides conscious and unconscious thought, staggering back and forth between the effortless void of sleep and the sluggish labor of awareness.

Every morning there was always a headache and different pain or sore spot in my body. I had to put my foot on the coffee table to lace my boots because my back was too tight to bend, and I worried that the soreness wouldn’t dissipate once I got moving like it usually did.

I called Mr. Gall on my way in and told him I was running late to keep him from calling Hank. When I arrived, Anthony was there waiting for me. The smell in the utility room unraveled my twisted stomach, and my mouth filled with the metallic saliva that is often the precursor to vomit.

Unlike the previous day when Mr. Gall had just left me to my work, he stood around with his arms folded and watched as Anthony and I came up with a plan, then started to attack the job in front of us. After being silently watched for five minutes, I wondered if Mr. Gall had a problem with a black man working in his building.

A century of filth had gathered in the boiler, and when we cracked open the sections, each swing of our sledgehammers sprayed us with thick, black sludge. Sticking to my pores like molasses, it was suffocating when it combined with the sweat.

When we were tired of swinging the sledges and had four of the sections broken into pieces small enough to be lifted, we started carrying them outside and loading them in the bed of Anthony's truck. It was so hot outside, I considered if it was possible that the Earth had somehow shifted its orbit and actually been pulled closer to the sun. After every trip, we stopped to

catch our breath and drink water. Mr. Gall kept peeking in every time we sat down to rest a moment.

By the time 11:30 rolled around, we were almost done carrying out the busted-up section pieces, and we decided to take our lunch break early. Although it was a lot cooler in the boiler room, we agreed it would be unsanitary to eat in there and found a shaded spot to sit in behind the building.

"Didn't you bring anything for lunch?" Anthony asked with a mouthful of sandwich.

"I got some pizza in a cooler in the van but don't feel hungry at the moment."

"You don't look so hot." He reached into his brown paper bag and pulled out an orange. "Eat this. It will make you feel better."

"Thanks, but I'll pass."

"Trust me, it will do you good. Revitalize you. You need some fuel to help you make it through the day," he said.

"Really, I'm fine. You have a wife and kids?" I asked.

“A daughter, but she’s all grown up and out on her own. She works at a bank in Chicago, and I’m real proud of her. I got a wife too, but won’t for long,” he said.

“My parents got divorced when I was a kid. Seems like it’s tough for people to stay married these days,” I said.

“Ain’t that,” he said, shaking his head slowly as he raked his fingers through the grass. “She’s real sick, and it’s the kind that only gets worse.”

Before I could offer my apologies, he asked, “What about you? Got yourself a woman?”

“Used to, but I messed it up.”

“What went wrong?”

“She said she couldn’t stand the silence, that I didn’t talk to her anymore. I don’t know...guess I don’t have a whole lot to say that isn’t useless chit chat. I mean, if I had a story to tell her, I would, but I don’t really have any stories worth telling.”

“I doubt that. Everyone’s got something to say.”

“Life’s typically made of vacant moments. Most people talk to distract themselves from that realization. There’s too much emptiness to fill, so it seems better not to try.”

“That’s healthy.” He laughed as he tossed the orange rind into the closest bathtub. “Are you still hoping you two’ll hook back up?”

“Nah. Sure there are times when all I want is to have her back, but that’s not the answer. I loved her but always wondered what else was out there when we were together. I was planning on moving somewhere after I graduated college. Didn’t matter where as long as it was far away. My girlfriend came back here to be with her family, and I tagged along for the ride because it was easy.”

“Then why are you still here now?”

“Don’t know.” I fingered my callused palms. “The same reason I keep working this shitty job. It seems like a lot of effort to make a change. And what if I did leave and found out that it’s more of

the same, just with a different job, a different address? What then?”

He held the orange out to me. “Go on,” he said. “Take it.”

“I don’t want the goddamn orange, so stop it.”

After he finished eating, Anthony pulled a partially smoked blunt from his pocket. I thought about what Hank told me about being the boss and knew this was the type of thing he would’ve frowned on, but I wasn’t about to tell a full-grown man what to do. Instead, I asked Anthony for a cigarette to try and cover the smell. “Could you do me a favor and put that out if anyone comes around. If Hank thought I was getting stoned on the job, he’d dock my pay.”

“Almost afraid to ask, but since it ain’t an orange, you want in on this?” he asked before lighting up and taking a puff.

“No. For some reason I can’t handle smoking around people anymore. Get too paranoid. Besides, I’d be completely useless when we got back to work if I did.”

Anthony had just finished exhaling his second drag when Mr. Gall poked his head out the door. Wearing an expression approaching disgust, he nodded to us and ducked back in.

Anthony discretely snuffed out the blunt. “I suppose we should get back to work soon,” he said and began repacking his leftovers in the cooler.

We were getting up to head back inside when a voice rang out from above, “Hey there.”

A woman was standing on the third story balcony directly above us. She was wearing a long skirt and looked like a young, less attractive Janis Joplin.

“You boys see my boots?” she asked as she extended her foot out over the balcony and dangled it back and forth. When she did this, she revealed that she had nothing on under her skirt, giving Anthony and me a perfect view of the untrimmed, auburn bush encircling her crotch.

“Miss,” Anthony said. “I can see your puss and boots.” And we all laughed. She blushed, then waved before returning to her apartment.

“Did you see all of the condoms in the parking lot on the way in?” I asked. “Wonder if she’s turning tricks out there and trying to drum up some business.”

“Doubt it,” Anthony said. “She knew what she was doing. It was just a friendly gesture, a gift. She was saying, ‘I know you two are working hard down there, so here’s a little treat for you boys. Enjoy.’”

Both Anthony and I experienced a mood shift that lasted for the rest of the afternoon. Because we were wearing ourselves out, the work was more tedious and vicious than it had been in the morning, but it just didn’t seem to matter anymore. The sledges grew heavier. The jolt from landed swings, a sting that had started in the meat of our hands in the morning, bit a little deeper each time and was now buried in our marrow. The temperature inside

rose as the building absorbed the fury of the sun. But we carried on, joking at every opportunity until the larger pieces of boiler were all in the bed of Anthony’s truck. We swept up the smaller shards and carried them in buckets until the room was cleared.

When we were finished, we went back outside, and since the sun had shifted, we had to sit against the building because it was the only place still covered by shade. Anthony pulled the blunt back out, and when he offered it up to me again, I accepted. I hit it hard, and Anthony said, “Careful now. I only spark up the best shit in town.”

I felt cozy with my back roasting from the accumulated heat in the bricks I was leaning against. I felt more relaxed than I had in months. “I don’t know you real well, but you seem to have this attitude about things that I don’t understand. And I’m jealous of it.”

“How do you mean?” Anthony asked.

“You seem to take everything in stride. When I told you we were working for a guy that’s running some sort emu skeleton factory, you didn’t flinch. You ignored Ralph when he was being an asshole yesterday. Shit, your wife is dying, and you’re still able to smile and joke around. Your job even, how you find value in the things people throw away. Everything seems old and used up to me, and I’m sick to death of it all. I don’t know how you do it, Anthony.”

He burst out laughing, and so did I. Didn’t stop until there were tears in our eyes.

Finally he said, “You’re either stoned out your mind, or you’re plain stupid for a college grad. You act like I should be proud because I make a living off what most people consider junk, but there are no other options. It’s not a matter of pride or shame, it is what it is— because I have a lust for life, I will take what I can until there’s nothing left to go around. I do what I need to survive, even if it means living from the leftovers.”

The layers of caked-on boiler sludge had dried up in the sun and began flaking off, exposing a stained skin that didn’t look or feel like my own. I realized I was no longer sweating. An odd sensation swept through my body, and I slowly lifted my hands in front of my face. They were shaking.

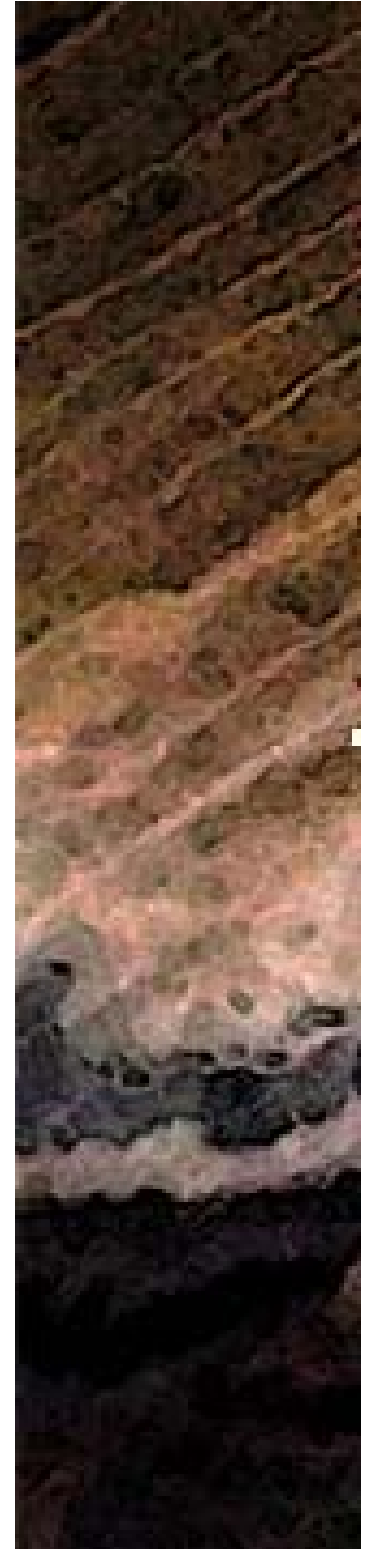
“Hey, Anthony,” I said, showing him. “Maybe the heat is getting to me. Maybe I’m dehydrated. Might be low blood sugar from not eating all day or that I’m higher than I’ve been in years, but something’s happening to me.”

“What’s it feel like?” he asked.

“Not sure I can describe it, but it came on fast,” I said as I closed my eyes. “It’s like I was standing on the edge of the world and stepped right off. Been feeling so low, I didn’t think it was possible to go any further down, but I’m falling...It’s absolutely amazing.”

He laughed. “You ain’t falling. You’re flying, man.”

He was right. It was as if my core had burned to nothing, and I was a piece of ash caught in the hot, raw power of an updraft. I didn't fight it or try to hold on to it either—gave myself over entirely and took flight in an unfamiliar direction. I began praying it would last, thinking if I was able to ride it out long enough, I might be able to push on through that foreign border. I sensed that if I had enough in me to keep moving, I just might end up somewhere new.



my family goes on willing

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

to be damned and voracious in its torments
says the Italian perhaps a Florentine a Guelph or Ghibelline
you can take it on trust
the cogzuggers and the buggers hereabouts
are swine happy in shit up to their snouts
I left him stark sidling crazy on the ghostly street

the muscle man

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

this here the louts on one side
funneled through the drug trade and thievery general
a hulking lot of gross trash
and then the sweating businessman at his cash register
has the whole syndicate up his wazoo
and looks at you

quack

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

if it looks like a hot damn quack
Westside kid or Valleyite
then it must be a damn quick hot damn
flat ass decoy duck to save your life

the fork in the road

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

You go your way and I'll go mine.

The Matchmaker

how about a good soup
your fork'll stand up in
if you've got a fork good
add rutabaga carrots pickles and onions
if you've got 'em stir with the fork
you say you have and season liberally
if you have a liberal education

victory

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

...Gaudier's eye on the telluric mass of Miss Lowell.

Canto LXXVII

the headless form

almost chubby if one looks at me fast

no Charlie

wings of May

snotty

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

gouty old girls at 27

quick wallpapered over

then it's the red light district

home to an ape each night

The Wheel

by K.J. WORTENDYKE

I have spent the bulk of my life behind the wheel,
Maintaining its pendulum mechanics.

I have surfed the asphalt tide,
And the concrete swells,
Washed in the gravel spray,
And its briny dust.

I have gone forth with velocity and range,
Among the fluctuating revolutions,
Travelled with fearful axels,
And spit-shine bumpers.

I have hauled cargo of all sorts,
On all sides of the law,
Drugs, Drapes, Liquor, Lipstick,
Genealogies and Generations.

I have made friends of elbow grease and wiring,
Before these hands started to shake,
My eyes can sadly no longer bear the sunrise,
And no mechanic can set them right.

I have spent the bulk of my life behind the wheel,
And now I am driving my final route,
Straight on past last call and flickering billboards,
Because there are no junkyards for men like me.

On the Ramifications of Temporal Short-Sightedness

by K.J. WORTENDYKE

There is a man,
Holding a gun,
Posed to kill.

He kills genealogies,
He kills possibilities,
He narrows things down.

“I am God,” he says,
Click click,
The man below him shakes.

“I am the deciding factor,”

“I can take away all this man will be,”

“Because he is evil.”

“I have all the power,

None of the omnipotence,

No guilt for not yet born great-grandchildren.”

“I am God,” he repeats,

“And a little bit of the Devil,”

BANG!

Suicide Interventions of the Afterlife

by LANCE BRADSHAW

David hung himself. He is the youngest in the program.

Kurt and I both used the shotgun. It gives us some common ground. Once after our group meeting we were left to restack the chairs. We agreed we could have chosen a tidier way to end our time on earth. We both laughed. "Guess it doesn't matter now. Does it Chris?" He asked and I just smiled and kept stacking.

Vanessa overdosed on painkillers. Cindy and Brett slit their wrists.

We all did it a little differently but still had three things in common. First, we were all dead. Second, in every case it was inspired by depression. And thirdly, we all had to attend these meetings before we were granted another try. It was a background check of sorts.

Kevin jumped off a bridge; he left behind a wife and two children. He was usually in charge of running group. I'll admit, I don't like him very much. He is the type of guy who killed himself and hoped everyone missed him. I get the feeling he did it to see if he was loved. There were a few others that seemed to have the same motives, but still, I like Kevin the least.

Kevin starts in with his old familiar speech. "Okay folks, let's begin by joining hands."

I hate this part. I grab Kurt and Vanessa's hands. Kevin continues "Okay great!" He yells. "Now, everyone close your eyes and walk yourself through the reasons that brought you here."

I remember my suicide. I was tired of trying; I didn't feel like continuing my search for purpose. I had tried so hard for so long, fought it every day but still was stalked by this particular brand of sadness. It'd follow me around wherever I went, even in the few content moments I had. Then, it'd slither in to my body, chew at

my heart, poison my blood and drain the color from my eyes, leaving me paralyzed in my bed for days, weeks, sometimes even longer. What kind of life is this? I used to ask myself. My answer was always the same: A pathetic one. I'd had it one day. I wrote on the wall with a marker 'I'm sorry' and loaded a led slug into the chamber of my 12 gauge. And that was the end of that.

I open my eyes, look around the circle, everyone else's are still closed. To my right, Kurt looks peaceful, his dirty blonde hair hanging to his shoulders. He is much better at this than I am. Of course he's been in the program twenty years longer than I have.

To my left, Vanessa looks smokin' hot. Her light, wavy brown hair hides just enough of her face to keep me looking. I watch her until she opens her eyes and catches me. She's always struck me as a kinky girl. There isn't anything in the afterlife that resembles sex but that doesn't stop me from wondering what kind of sweaty magic her and I could have made in a bedroom back on earth. I quickly turn my attention away, though she stays on my mind for a while.

Goddamn Kevin is still deep in his own memory which further backs up my argument of what an attention whore he is. He wants everyone else to open their eyes before him and see him at 'peace' with himself. Finally they pop open behind his black rimmed glasses.

"Great folks, great work." He says.

Listening to Kevin's annoying, peppy voice makes me want to do whatever the equivalent of suicide is up here in the afterlife, which I guess would be to not have killed myself. Shit, maybe this program is working.

Kevin starts in again. "Now everybody, I'm going to hand the reigns over to Kurt for a second, I'd like you all to give him your undivided attention."

Kurt never seems like he enjoys talking to the group, which in turn, makes us all the more intrigued to listen to him. He always starts off sounding a little nervous.

"Uh, Hi everyone." He says, looking down at his feet.

Everyone chants back, "Hi Kurt!" And he looks even more uneasy.

He pauses, then continues. "I killed myself almost twenty one years ago. I was in pain. I struggled every day with a darkness that I carried with me even in my best moments. I guess I got tired of fighting it. And I felt like the world changed, people changed, everyone was so insincere. I couldn't feel any love. And one afternoon I looked up at the sky and felt how broken I really was. That was the day I ended my life."

Kurt pauses and I look around the group and see all the sad faces. And somehow I feel bad for them. Especially for Kurt. It just occurs to me how sad it is that we all killed ourselves. He keeps telling us his story.

"I left behind my daughter and that was difficult for me but I decided I couldn't do her any good, she'd be better off with me not around. I regret my choice in a lot of ways. And I miss my daughter more than anyone knows. And truthfully I'm sick and

tired of waiting for my second chance. I've been in this program so fucking long and every year I get turned down. They say I'm still suicidal."

Kurt ends right there. Right when he has everyone's sympathy in the palm of his hand. He always seems to do it like that.

Kevin chimes in, using his obnoxiously sunny attitude. "Great! Kurt, thank you for sharing." Everyone claps. "Alright Chris, it's your turn."

I am pretty new at this and am always uncomfortable sharing, especially after everyone has dished out all their sympathy to Kurt the way they always do.

"Hello everyone." I say and receive the same chant back. "I killed myself almost a year ago now. And I thought things would be better somehow." I take a deep breath and continue. "I guess I was wrong. I still feel the same pain. And I agree with a lot of what Kurt just said about the world being insincere and I don't miss that part of life."

Kevin pipes in. “Okay Chris, why do you want to go back then, why do you feel you need a second chance?” Since I was the newest addition to the group, Kevin often interrupts me with questions like this.

“Well, honestly, there is only one reason I want my second chance; I loved a girl. I was passive; I didn’t go after it like I should have. I got close once, but fucked it up somehow. And I think if I could get my second chance within a few years it might not be too late. Yeah she’ll be twenty three years older than me, but I know she’ll be a milf, so I’m fine with the age difference.” The group laughs. Vanessa leans in toward me and whispers so no one else can hear:

“Lucky girl.” I just give a quick smile and pretend I didn’t hear, though I’m thinking *no, she’s not a lucky girl. I fucking blew my head off.*

“Those are all perfectly valid feelings Chris.” Kevin says.

David’s story is always the most heartbreaking. He got locked up when he was sixteen for some drug charges. After two years served of his eight year sentence he made a break for it. But then got worried he would just get caught again and go back to prison for the rest of his life.

He said he felt ‘trapped’ and ‘pinned’ into doing what he did. He ran to his parents’ house and hung himself in a tree in their backyard. He told the group he feels like he is owed another shot. Normally saying that you feel ‘owed’ anything is the fast lane to getting denied your second chance. But I think in David’s case, everyone agrees.

The rest of the group shares their stories. Kurt always sticks around to stack the chairs. I like him, so I stick around too. “Hey, the board meeting is next week. You think you’ll get your second chance?” I ask. He keeps walking back and forth around the room collecting the chairs.

“I have been denied the last twenty years. I don’t see why twenty-one would be any different.”

I wish I could come up something better to say. But can’t. “You never know man. Maybe it’s your lucky year.” My heart breaks a little for him. He looks defeated even in this ‘life’, probably the same way he looked in the last one. He just keeps rounding up the chairs and there is no conversation for a minute.

“You know, Chris.” He says. “I’m not even sure if I want a second chance anymore. I could just drop out of this program and finish out eternity in the real afterlife, instead of this bullshit half-way house, constantly hoping to be reborn so I can grow up and try to meet my daughter again. I think I’m finally seeing that earth is the real hell. It’s the hell of the afterlife.”

I take a minute or so to come up with a response that I feel is worthy of his time. “We gave it up Kurt. We gave up life, then we gave up the afterlife; the one everyone craves. We cashed in all the splendors of being dead for a second chance. We all did it for a reason. And I think you have the best reason of all; a daughter.”

“If I don’t get my second chance this year I’ve decided I’m dropping the program.” He says.

I think for a moment and realize that no matter what, Kurt won’t be here much longer. He’ll either drop the program or hopefully get accepted. I’ll miss him but I hope he gets accepted, even more than I hoped for my own second chance. He deserves it.

David and I share a room. I sit on the end of my bed then he walks in. It takes me a second to realize he’s even there. You see, in the afterlife, we have no items, no possessions. The closest thing we do have is our memories.

In my free time, when I’m not listening to Kevin’s bullshit suicide prevention speeches, I rifle through the few memories I have with Hayley. Most of them are simple and indirect, me staring at her, craving her, wishing I could make a move. There is one though, of her and I doing laundry in the basement of our

dorm hall back in college. I hadn't expected her to be down there, alone in a room with me doing laundry.

It was a miracle of its own kind. She dropped a quarter on the floor and it rolled under the washer. I knelt down and found it. And when I stood back up I realized we were only a foot apart; the closest I'd ever been. I felt the warmth of her palm as I handed her the quarter. Something inside of me wouldn't let me pull away. I sort of grabbed her wrist and I think she did the same. I pulled her a little closer to me, hoping she would realize, without a doubt, I was unquestionably, the guy of her dreams. Then a bunch of bratty guys from the basketball team flowed into the laundry room with baskets and bags overflowing with clothes. Distracted and caught off guard, Hayley and I broke free. And that was the furthest things ever went.

"Can I ask you a question?" David asks. I break away from my thoughts.

"Fire away." I say.

"If you loved that girl so much you, then why didn't you just go after her? If it didn't work out, you could have still killed yourself if you wanted to."

David is naïve sometimes. He sees everything as black and white. "Because, I thought I had tried hard enough." I say. "But I see how wrong I was now...after it's too late." David nods which I take to mean, *ah hah, that makes perfect sense now. Thank you for clearing that up Chris.*

That night I make my way to Kevin's room. See, the interesting thing about Kevin is, he doesn't want a second chance. He is just the one running the show. But he does make recommendations to the board and they usually take them. Knowing that makes me hate him a little more each time I think about it.

"Hey Kevin." I knock on his open door.

“Chris, Come in, come in.” He says as he turns toward me from his desk. He seems oblivious to my distaste for him, which again proves what a joke he is.

“I’d like to talk about Kurt for a minute if we could.”

He gets up from his chair and closed the door. “Yes of course.”

“Well, I know I’m pretty new here. And I know it will probably be quite some time before I am reborn, but I wanted to ask, from the bottom of my heart if you could recommend Kurt for his second chance to the board.”

He just peered at me through his glasses.

“I think he’s ready.” I add, as if that seals my entire argument.

“Well Chris, I appreciate your concern for a fellow member of the group. But I don’t think he’s quite ready yet.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“I still think he has suicidal tendencies.”

I take a step closer. I don’t want to do any serious damage, but I want to hurt him, just like, a little bit. I draw my hand back, but

leave my palm open and slap him across the face, like my father did to me the time I called my mom a bitch. His glasses fumble off his head and he stands there, stunned.

“Listen up asshole.” I say. “The only reason he might still be suicidal is because he has to spend all this goddamn time with you. That would make anyone want to end their life. Kurt has been in the program longer than anyone else. You think long and hard tonight about the kind words you’re going to use in your recommendation to the board on his behalf.”

Kevin stares at me with wide eyes. His hand touches his cheek where it had been slapped. He looks afraid. *Good I think. I always knew you were a pussy.*

I leave his room and shut the door behind me. I feel good about what I did. I know that I will probably have to spend another million years in the program for that ‘violent’ ‘demanding’ behavior but I don’t care. I still fear though, that he’d try to get Kurt turned down again.

Kevin avoids eye contact during group session, and he never speaks directly to me, he just lets me assume when it is my turn to speak. Towards the end of the class he stands and says, "I have a special announcement. Could everybody please give me their attention?" He scans every one's face in the room, only he skips right over mine. He continues. "I'm very pleased to announce that I am recommending Kurt to the board for his second chance. Congratulations Kurt, you earned it buddy!"

It sickens me how he plays it off like it was his own idea, like he wasn't going to deny Kurt before I strong armed him into it.

The whole room erupts into a thunder storm of applause. Everyone stands and assembles an unorganized line around Kurt and takes turns giving him a hug along with a "congratulations"

After group, it is left to Kurt and I. I wait until the room totally clears out and start stacking the chairs. It feels like the right moment to say something. "Kurt, I'm really happy for you man."

"Thanks a lot, I'm happy too." He says.

"You know, dildo-face-Kevin wasn't going to recommend you."

He looks confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I wanted to talk to him about giving you a good analysis and he said he didn't think you were ready."

"Are you serious?" Kurt asks. "What made him change his mind?"

"Oh, I gave him a little bitch slap. Don't worry though I wanted to do it anyway."

Kurt drops the chair he is holding and throws his arms around me and gives an honest squeeze. "Thank you so much Chris, I owe you big time."

I pat him on the back then break free from the hug.

"I have one favor to ask. Just a small one though."

"Sure, anything." He says back.

"After you get your second chance, once you've grown up enough to wander on your own, could you please look up Hayley

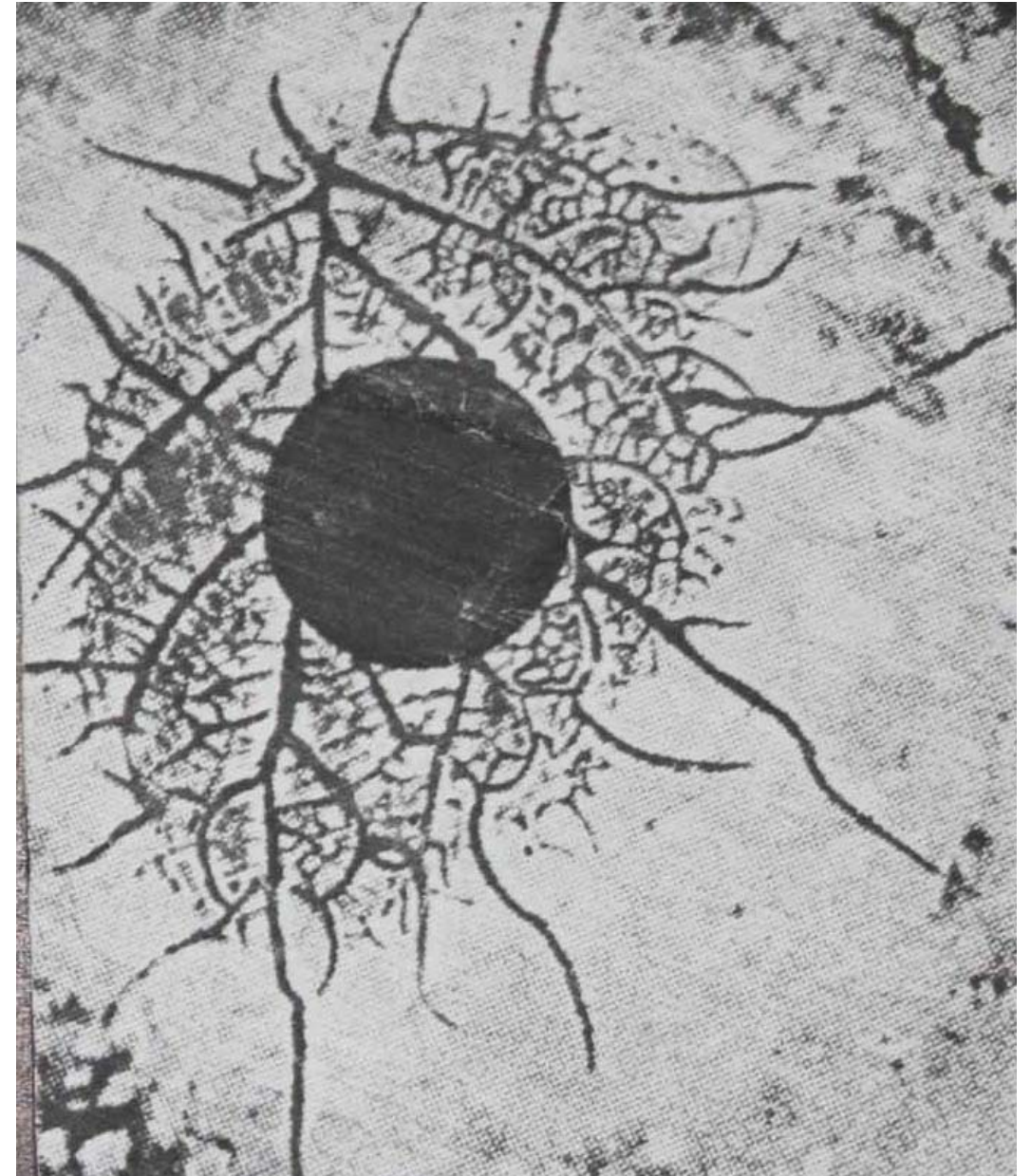
Madden in Portland Maine? Tell her I'm sorry I didn't try harder, but I'm on my way back to her."

"I promise I'll find her." He says.

It is Kurt's last day here. We all gather with him outside by the fountain. It is sad to say good bye because I know our lives will probably never cross paths again. But it was nice to know him. And I hope he feels the same about me.

He steps outside the gates and drops out of sight. We all stand around the fountain and wait. The water stops flowing, and the surface calms, then an image appears. Vanessa squeezes in beside me and cups her hand on my ass-cheek. I swat it away, she just puts it right back, so I give up.

We all watch as Kurt's soul comes out of a woman's vagina in a hospital, in the form a newborn baby. Baby Kurt looks up at us, like he knows we are up here, and smiles then starts crying like all babies are supposed to.



Setting the Intention

by ERIC ULLERICH

BEN

Ben needs \$300.00. He waits in front of Nicole and Andy's house, for Nicole to return from picking up her kids at school, with the heels of his Jack Purcells dug into their lawn, grass staining the rear of his cargo-pants, his daddy-pants as his children call them, lots of pockets for kleenex and a wallet, thick with supermarket-reward and health insurance cards. Although, he's 45 years old, he has clung to the screenwriters' convention of dressing like a child, a fashion choice complemented by his lean physique and thick hair.

Ben met Nicole about a year ago when his wife encouraged her to start attending her weekly women's groups at their home following Nicole's surgery. She hasn't missed a council since and

Ben hears his wife's half of their phone conversations many a night.

He is prepared for the possibility that Andy might get home first but knows it is unlikely. He can't remember the last time Andy got home before dark on a weekday. Ben's charm works best with women but is fine with men too - the fruit of pitching scripts for more than twenty years to producers cocked to say no.

Nicole's Volvo SUV pulls into the circular driveway. He runs his open palm across the tops of the blades of grass, feigns a mesmerized look at something small amongst the sod, like he's found an unfamiliar life-form, before unfolding himself from the ground.

"Hey, Ben, what's up?" she asks. The Volvo's doors and trunk spring open, children spilling out and then dispersing, clown-car-style.

"Nicole, I've got a business opportunity I want to talk to you about."

"Don't fuck with me, Ben, how much do you want?"

“I have a meeting tomorrow with a producer. I know this script is going to sell. It’s going to be bigger than *Body Blow*.” Referencing his biggest credit, he remembers the red carpets with his wife, Adina, paparazzi focusing on her first, then their children, their eldest, about eight years old at the time, with the toddler strapped to his front in a Baby Bjorn, the little one’s chubby feet inches off the ground. Some tabloid will use the shots for an internal spread on Hollywood families with their values in tact.

“I’ll get paid in two weeks. It’s about an autistic kid....”

“How much?”

“How much? Gross? Domestic?” He thinks the foreplay should have lasted longer then berates himself for the hack-y metaphor.

“No, how much money do you want?”

“Three hundred, I just need to get some food in the refrigerator before Adina gets home.”

“If I give this to you, it has to be the last time.”

“It will. I swear. Nicole, I swear.”

“I’m serious,” she reaches back into the Volvo for her pocketbook, releasing the clasp, cracking it backwards, revealing the cash slot, guarded by rows of gold and platinum credit cards. She separates and hands over three one hundred dollars bills, with a look, he imagines, she uses to show that she knows she is being taken advantage of.

“Thank you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. I’ll get your money back in two weeks, honest, with interest.”

“You promise this is for groceries?”

“Definitely!”

She stows her pocketbook, turning to her front door.

“One last thing.”

“What?”

Ben tugs the bottom of his t-shirt down, tightening the cotton across his shoulders, revealing his v-shaped torso.

“Don’t mention it to Adina.”

“Whatever,” she rolls her eyes, slams the car door and walks into her house. Forever the Valley Girl, he thinks. He turns to walk home, a lift in his step, the same as though he’d sold a script.

Raised in Queens, graduated NYU, B.A., communications, M.F.A. film and television, but before starting his life, he wanted to live on a kibbutz, live as he imagined, and still imagines, people are supposed to live. In 1993 he moved to Israel and found such a community, 60 kilometers outside Tel Aviv, settling differences great and small over weekly councils, everyone present from great-grandparent to infant, a cedar branch, shiny from use, passed around as a talking-stick.

“Please respect the talking-stick,” five to eleven year olds were frequently reminded when their chattering reached a certain level but they learned by twelve, thirteen at the latest.

Ben found the professional ladder at the Israel Broadcasting Authority to be rather short, only having one channel with vague plans for a second. He was writing entire surreal sketches for a variety show four months after he was hired, his American perspectives on sex and the Holocaust appreciated.

Due to Jewish control of Hollywood, the International Criminal Court formally expunged Germany’s association with the Shoah as a quid pro quo for David Hasselhoff.

Adina, a Russian émigré, employed by the IBA as a photographer, was assigned publicity shots of their new American star writer. When she looked over the top of her camera her coffee eyes scowled at him.

He married her in Israel, knowing he would be required to complete two years of military service, a matter discussed over their first private council.

“Adina, I want to do this.”

“Darling, Binyahim, my love. You are ridiculous American. We may leave, get married in America. Why would you want to be in IDF? There is no point to this,” Adina’s Russian accent rolling consonants in the back of her mouth, filling gaps with *ehms* instead of *uhs*, omitting needed or inserting unnecessary articles.

“Adina, it’s just wrong, I’ll feel like I’ve stolen you from your family, from your country.”

“It’s not my country but alright, Binyahim.”

And he enlisted expecting to be dropped from gunships into the Occupied Territories or police Palestinians armed with rocks and Molotov cocktails. He ended up editing training manuals. When they moved as a family to the U.S., to Southern California, Ben set the bar high, selling his first four scripts for increasing amounts. It didn’t feel imprudent to take on a mortgage for the 3,000 square foot house in Encino, private school, a housekeeper, leases on a Suburban and a minivan and, yes, there was sports

betting, the losses barely a rounding error year-end. But screenwriters can be like ingénues.

NICOLE

Nicole bangs the front-door shut behind her, dropping to an exhausted squat over her mocha strap-back high-heels. Ben confuses her, with his artistic helplessness, Bohemian children that never fight, stories of all-night script re-writes with Brad Pitt, the twenty-plus Thai wristbands he wears that would look ridiculous on anyone else. Three hundred dollars means nothing to her, it’s so easy to give to him, to help his family, but she fears the baggage that comes with it. It’s not like when she hands a twenty to the homeless man at the off-ramp. She will tell her husband about the loan, as if Andy cares about the money, between her trust fund and his cushy job at her father’s firm he’s

well taken care of. How she fell for the only lawyer in the country that couldn't pay his bills still isn't completely clear to her.

"Math majors don't go to law school," he had quipped, making her laugh, his ironic deprecation charming then.

However, she won't tell Andy the way she feels when she looks at Ben, the way he dresses like a skateboarder and takes responsibility for his family even if it means begging from his friends. And he moves like he wants her to notice his chest, talks like he wants her to look at his lips. Twice, she's had what she would consider impure thoughts related to him. Once, she masturbated over her panties imagining him rubbing her feet. Second, and this one barely qualifies in her mind but she thought about him while Andy thrustled on top of her, smelling of beer but not like she was having a fantasy, like he was inside her instead of her husband. She just replayed a nice conversation she'd had with him the day before while Andy completed the process.

Ben had asked about her new purse and she knew he didn't really care but at least he asked.

Still resting on her heels, in her foyer, she brushes her hair from her eyes, getting used to her new cut, recently converted into a side-swept bob, going short to minimize the transition from *Copper Blonde* back to her natural chocolate.

She's also been brought in as a co-conspirator against his wife. In two days, it will have been one year since Adina held her in her arms before Nicole's breast tumor was removed and then, in the post-op recovery room, for much longer. She's not sure how long exactly as she fell asleep and woke up several times.

"You want some company?" Andy asked while Adina's torso was draped around her, Adina's legs hanging off the side of Nicole's bed.

"I'm okay, baby. Thanks for asking," she felt alright saying under those circumstances. Adina held her like it was permanent, Andy like he's waiting for her to tell him when he's done.

After, Adina made her sit council in one of her women's groups.

"If you want to truly heal from a wound, you are called to share your experience so others can heal and this will heal you," Adina told her. The scent of burning sage permeates her living room at this moment from a group the night before.

Adina sets the so-called intention for every council even though everyone just talks about whatever they want.

"I call on Spirit to meet us in this place with forgiveness and healing," Adina said while folding the matchbook backwards, trapping the match between the cover and strike point, combusting it with a quick pull. Amy's pile of talking-sticks surrounds the candle, most of which aren't even sticks: shells, smooth stones, heart-shaped stones, a tiny hammer, a harmonica (their five year old daughter's favorite toy she had left in the immediate vicinity so often it had been mysteriously co-opted), a feather, a crochet needle and a piece of knitting her eldest son had

made in kindergarten at their "hippie-school," as Nicole's father called it. "What kind of cockamamie operation are they running there? My grandson is knitting?" Nicole met Adina at that school.

Nicole watched the talking stick move towards her like the baton in a relay race, simultaneously trying to pay attention to what the other women were saying, while planning her contribution.

"I know I'm so lucky to have a big house. I get to send my kids to private school. Andy has a great job for my dad. I wish he didn't have to work so much so he could get to the gym every once in a while," she says with a giggle, looking up to see how her joke was received. "But I'm grateful that I get to stay home with my children."

ANDY

"I lent Ben \$300 today," Nicole tells Andy.

“Just Ben, not Adina? I mean, I’m not in family practice but I know some community property law.”

“Yes, I lent it to both of them and their children if you must have them all on the hook.”

“I don’t *want* any of them on the hook but it just seems like she could get a job if they’re going to borrow money.”

“She’s a healer, Andy.”

“I’ll add it to the tab.” Whenever he heard about someone else’s financial nut, he felt relief he had all their bills on auto-pay, never had to open a windowed-envelope, stamp something to The Lakes, Nevada, 88901, with a check for the minimum payment inside. He graduated from Berkeley with a degree in Elizabethan poetry and \$3,000 debt. Panicking that he had no viable profession he went to law school, owing in excess of six figures by the time he squeaked through. From 1996 to 1998, he never answered the phone in his apartment for fear of hearing

that cool, female voice calling from “Citibank Student Loan Services” asking for Andrew Thomas Fitzgerald.

That apartment. He had stapled king sized sheets into the acoustic ceiling to create a “bedroom.” The landlord kept his deposit when he moved out, unhappy with the chunks of ceiling that came out when his ghetto remodel was dismantled.

When he met Nicole he was working at a bankruptcy mill, the best job he could get, given his bottom quarter class ranking. He interviewed prospective debtors, took their \$400.00 retainer, signed documents churned out by paralegals. Between student loan payments, rent, car, car insurance, food, some Friday and Saturday night cocktails, he was losing ground.

Two months earlier, he sat in Ben’s living room, in his informal (but not free) screenwriting class, listening to him lecture on *Moonstruck*, enjoying the discussion but wondering why he was there, in school again. Weeks prior, Ben and Adina were over for dinner, when Ben spied his stash of screenwriting

books in an upper-shelf. Andy had no desire to write a screenplay but loved the structure and rules of the process in the same way he loved poetry with the subtext, the acknowledgement that people rarely say what they mean and when they try they usually fail.

“That’s a great book. You should take my class,” Ben said, pointing to Robert McKee’s *Story*.

“What class?” Andy asked.

“My screenwriting class.”

“Really? I didn’t know you taught a class.”

“You should take it, honey,” Nicole jumped in. “You should do something that excites you.”

Following his lecture on *Moonstruck’s* Act II opera scene, Ben invited his students to consider whether their lives have been driven by “logic or passion.” Andy’s hand flew in the air, with a quick sip from his sports bottle, concealing 36 ounces of vodka-
tonic.

“Well, I sure as hell know it’s not logic, so by default I’ve got to go with passion,” he blurted, sideways glances from his two classmates, silent reference to Andy’s thick-framed glasses, short haircut and paunch restrained by a royal blue Brooks Brother polo shirt.

“Sometimes, we are also guided by angels,” Ben suggested.

BEN

At midnight, Ben wakes on the floor beneath his ten-year old’s bed with his left arm deadened by the weight of his head and the awkward angle. Sometimes he falls asleep in his children’s bedroom after the nightly installment of the rock-man story he has been spinning since his oldest son, who graduated from Wisconsin last year, was in diapers. The rock-man, invulnerable to most external threats, is a bit, as one might expect, dim, needing guidance to maintain a low-profile and find sustenance (raw ore).

Adults, rock-man has learned, are not to be trusted and thus he relies on the kindness of children, specifically Ben's children, whose squealed advice is woven into the story.

Pushing himself up, he sees all his children, the ones that haven't left the nest yet, sweet-eyed asleep. He walks down the hall, opens the door to the master bedroom.

His wife writes in her journal in their bed, a king-sized mattress on the ground with white sheets and a white comforter. She looks over the top of her book at him just like when she first looked at him over her camera. The rest of her is changed, wider, grayer, but the eyes are the same.

"Yakiri, please sit council with me," he says. No candles are lit; no talking sticks passed; they don't even form a circle, just lie next to each other, right next to each other. He speaks and then she speaks.

ADINA

Adina sees Nicole sitting in her car at the turn-circle of their children's school, ten minutes before pick-up and watches her own shadow cross the iphone Nicole strums. Nicole clicks down the driver-side window.

"Hey, how are you?" Nicole asks.

"I am well, thank you. Dear Nicole, I feel so much love and compassion to you and must tell you that we are being called to sit council."

Nicole nods, punching buttons on her phone, looking askance at other cars and parents.

"Sure anytime."

"When can we make a sacred space for the four of us?"

"Four of us?"

"Yes, the four of us should be there. I know that Ben has borrowed more money from you. Not all of it was used for food."

“Okay.”

“I think it is critical.”

“Okay.”

ANDY

Andy enters his house at 8:47 p.m.

“Adina wants us to get together,” Nicole says from a barstool angled towards the door he has just entered. The rest of the house is silent, children in bed, teeth flossed and brushed, jammied, storied, he can tell.

“A cocktail party? That sounds fun. I can wear my skinny tie.”

“Don’t be a jack-ass.”

“Council?” he asks.

“Yes, she thinks it’s critical that you attend.”

“Let me know when something’s not critical with her.”

“Andy, I can’t have conflict in my life. It’s not healthy,” Andy

absorbs the reference to her tumor. He wants to remind her that it was benign.

“Do you care if I go?” he asks.

“I’d like you there but if you don’t want to go, I understand.”

He pulls his phone from his pocket and glances down.

“She hasn’t called yet. Guess you get to hang out with them on your own.”

He heads out to the garage to pour some vodka into his Perrier. He imagines how the call will go while failing to remember the words of the serenity prayer - he knows the gist though: don’t worry about the horseshit. Years and years ago, before kids, they would have gone straight to the bedroom, smoked weed, had sex, foraged for food in the refrigerator or ordered in, then eaten while watching TV. They never had trouble agreeing on what to watch.

Now, it’s easier to satisfy his occasional desires with his laptop and two squirts of Jergens. Too many rejections caused him to

stop trying and wait for the rare invitation, which is always to a “quickie,” no matter whether there is a cause for urgency. That’s just her word for intercourse now, a “quickie,” to be performed in an X position, with intertwined legs. Missionary is also agreeable but he feels self-conscious when his gut smothers the back of her hand while she touches herself.

He sometimes fantasizes about her with other men, turned on by his potential psychic damage, imagining her reluctantly damp, unable to resist, not undressing but only pulling her panties to the side, the slightest physical action required, a mere finger swipe, a blind-eye almost, the doorman looking the other direction.

The next afternoon, his cell vibrates while he waits in line at the convenience store in the lobby of his office building to buy a bottle of Perrier.

“Hey, Adina. What’s going on?” he says, stalling the conversation to exit the building, more specifically the lobby and

its marble walls that echo even whispers. He could send her to voice-mail but knows he’ll have to talk to her eventually and now is as good a time as any.

“I feel it is very important that we sit council, Andrew.” He appreciates her approach, offering no opportunity to decline or deflect.

“Listen, Adina, if you’ve got something to say, I’m all ears but I don’t feel that we need to go through the process...go through *this* process...,” he trails off.

“Andrew, council is only a place for us to speak. It is not a courtroom with the judge and the arguments. It is a place of peace and respect.”

“Listen, I have nothing but respect for you. If you have something to say I’m all ears.” Having walked through the courtyard outside his building, almost to the parking structure, he veers left seeing an associate of his heading towards him.

“I understand that you have all the ears, Andrew. I understand what you are saying but I believe that a council would be the best of all the ways to meet and to be open. I always believe this, you know, Andrew, that we need to be open.”

“Open what up? What needs to be opened up?” his associate throws him a thumbs-up, observing the aggressive body language directed at the phone, certainly assuming heated pre-trial negotiations.

“Andrew, I know you see it that my family’s story is only about the money. It is also about community, it is about friendship, the family, it is about all our gifts and how we share them.”

“I don’t care about that...the gifts...I don’t even care about the money. It’s Nicole...with the money...she has issues...”

“Andrew, I make commitment to all my friends. We show up for council even if it is hard or if it is scary. We trust that we all carry the same intention: to have powerful, real, the loving

relationships. Yes, relationship, it does take the work, and, yes, the hardship. I am willing to show up for this. I wake up every morning prepared to show up. Are you, Andrew? Do you show up?”

“I show up, Adina. At work, at home, I read to my kids at bedtime, I make breakfast,” he stumbles, frustrated that he messed up the chronological order.

“Andrew, I have dreamed this vision, I would want others to be with us too - everybody carries these issues - of money, friendship, love, how to share your gifts. I know that you have much more to give than you are giving.”

“You want to make a party out of this? Are we going to pick teams?”

“There are no sides, Andrew, only what we are willing to show up for and heal. I hope you will decide to show up and participate. I do not know of any other way.”

“I don’t even get this council-crap. It’s just a circle-jerk; people sitting around feeling sorry for themselves. How’s it even supposed to work?”

“I cannot make legal document for you. I am not good at making arguments. I am a shaman, a healer, I know you think this ridiculous that I call myself that but I have studied this since you were a child and all that I can tell you is that it *does* work for those that show up.”

“I don’t see the point, Adina. With all due respect, why don’t you use that time to get a goddamned job, fire your housekeeper and clean your own fucking house?”

“Andrew, please consider doing this for your wife. She needs you to sit council next to her, be her partner, be her support.”

“...” Andy then understands what goes on at these councils. His wife airs all their dirty laundry, all the things she complains to him about and probably a lot that she doesn’t, that would hurt

too much. Which is bad enough but the thought of participating, having to listen to her, in front of others, is simply horrifying.

“Andrew, your gifts are much more than sitting before computer every day, typing words, making the arguments.”

ADINA

Adina imagines her father’s face, drawing three calming breaths, before she starts every council and does so now while Nicole, Andrew and her husband wait for her to set the intention, provide the guidance for the conversation that is to follow. When she was seven years old, her father took her and her siblings from the Soviet Union to Israel, chasing the wake of Zionist pride after the 1967 Six-Day War, visiting her mother’s grave one last time before departing.

“Are we moving for God, Aba?” she asked.

“God and Stalingrad cannot co-exist, Yakiri, but if we abandon our rituals from fear what is the point of a family?”

Unlike her siblings, her Russian accent survived to maturity, never being overwhelmed by the Israeli inflections. Her father died when she was fifteen, not from a mortar shell from the West Bank, nothing violent or at least in the traditional sense, just cancer, just a tumor.

“Spirit, I ask your guidance setting the intention of this council for our friends, Nicole and Andrew, my husband, Binyahim,” she holds Nicole’s elbowed piece of spruce, fingering the dark leather banded around it, the loose-ends hanging but clinging together. She strikes a match, in her unique way, then lights a low, fat candle that centers Nicole’s other talking sticks: stones, fabric, tools, musical and otherwise spread around a well-oxidized silver platter atop the coffee table between the two couples.

“Andrew, I call on you to speak first, when you are ready. I do not mean to put you on a spot but money is becoming a story between our families, within our families. Some heat is still

between the two of us, you and me, but I believe it can become warmth. I know your anger is not at me but fear of revealing yourself. I have seen this before. This is normal. Council is not normal in this country and your participation on this night is beautiful because of what it means for your family. I know this. You have a wound around money, I know this too. Andrew, I call on you to share your wound so you can help us heal.”

Adina and Ben sit on the single-cushioned divan that forms a right-angle to a larger couch. Nicole and Andrew are on opposite ends of that couch. Andrew reaches for the harmonica, selecting it as his talking-stick. He rolls it in the palm of his right hand before switching it to his left. Adina recognizes the inevitable fussing with the talking-stick when one is new to council. She will wait for Andrew to speak so long as he holds the stick. When Spirit does not provide the words or motivation for the person with the stick, she sees it that Spirit is giving her the time to be

still with her thoughts. He might just put it back without talking. She's seen that happen many times.

She wonders if Andrew has ever even touched his wife's tray of talking sticks, not out of a lack of interest but rather a conscious choice not to come into physical contact with them and Adina never dismisses her wonderings in council. A full minute passes before Andrew looks up from the harmonica.

ANDY

"You know, I was the one that added Emma's harmonica to your collection, honey," Andrew says looking at his wife. It was the first sincere thing he'd said to her in months.



Notes on Jumping

by BENJAMIN DREVLOW

He makes himself a deal. He says to himself if anybody smiles at him on the way, says hello in a friendly manner, asks how his day is, asks what's the matter in a way that shows real compassion, real thoughtfulness, and not just pity, he'll stop. Turn around. Never look back. Never give it a second thought. He's sixteen, by the way. His last meal, Starbursts and Cheetos. They make his teeth hurt, his jaw crack. They stick to his fillings, make his cavities ache, stain them yellower.

Before all that, the lady at the 7-Eleven says it'll be 2.58 with tax. Gives the kid a real look, rolls her eyes, clicks her tongue when she sees the twenty he's holding out. "Aren't you supposed to be in school right now?" he waits for her to ask. "It's not ten o'clock, yet, and you can't be over fifteen years old, young man."

But she says nothing. She looks down at her drawer, sighs, shakes her head again, then pulls out the ten, the five, the ones, the dimes, the pennies. Gives him back his 17.42 without counting it out the way he'd seen some cashiers do. She mumbles "Have a nice day" under her breath, but as far as the kid is concerned, this does not count. She's already staring over his shoulder at a couple of young Hispanic dudes at the back of the store when "day" slides out the side of her mouth.

The kid drops four dimes and two pennies in the take a penny, give a penny, then stops and stares at them for a second, thinking he might want those dimes for the bus. Then shakes his head. *Idiot*, he mouths to himself. Seventeen's gotta be way more than enough for the bus, he tells himself. The kid—he has a name, incidentally, not that anybody besides his parents would ever know it or say it unless somebody like a teacher was about to yell at him sleeping in class again—he hasn't ridden the public bus since before he was in school and his parents could only afford one car and his mother would take him for little bus trips

during the day to different parks and stores and stuff. He can't remember if there's usually a change jar or not. He can't remember even how much the bus costs and if it'll cost more to make it all the way over there. But it can't be more than seventeen dollars, can it?

He's pretty much in full-blown panic-mode by the time he's back out on the sidewalk. *What if it's twenty-even for that long a ride? What if he's ruined everything just because he had to be a big fat-ass and stop off for his favorites?* He's eaten all the Starbursts already and half the Cheetos, but maybe somebody waiting for the bus'll be starving and'll have no time for lunch and they'll offer him two bucks for half a grab bag of Cheetos? Which still wouldn't get him back to twenty dollars. Maybe he can talk them up to three? *You retard*, he thinks.

When he gets to the bus stop, there's just one big black dude sitting there with headphones thumping. He's bobbing his head, occasionally mouthing lyrics and only turns his eyes on the kid when he sits down next to him and holds up his Cheetos to see if

the guy wants any. Dude stops bobbing his head and mouthing lyrics then. Gives the kid a definite weirdo look, then goes back to his music. *What a freak*, the kid tells himself. He can't tell for sure what the black guy's listening to on his headphones, but it sounds a little like it might be Tupac, which is one of the kid's favorite MCs, right up there with Eminem, though he can't say that to this guy, since the guy's black and the kid's just some freckle-freak white kid who goes around smiling by himself and for no reason. The dude's pretty clearly avoiding all eye contact now, probably afraid that the kid's gonna pull out some Uzi and go all Columbine on him. Which is almost hilarious, some big black dude listening to Tupac and he's scared of this little white kid pulling a gun on him. *Ha!*

But then again, this black guy's probably just weirded out and wants nothing to do with him like everybody else. The kid decides he's better off not asking him if he knows how much it'll be to ride the bus over to the bridge. Pretty soon the bus gets there and makes that big squeal-farting sound. The bus driver

turns out to be white, not black like the kid had imagined. And really, really tubby. His gut and his crotch all run together into one big blob and spill out over the seat so far in front of him that it rubs up against the steering wheel. This blue trucker hat holding on by the last snap, these wraparound sunglasses over his regular glasses. No facial hair. Just a bunch of acne around his neck and chin.

Black dude gets on first. He has a little card that he pulls out of his wallet and flashes at the driver. The driver gives him the head nod without barely even looking. He's got that water balloon of a head and neck aimed down at the clipboard next to him. His hat pulled down low, those sunglasses over his real glasses. He's staring at the kid now, or at least the sunglasses and hat are tilted in his direction. "Getting on or getting off?" The kid can't see his eyes, but it's pretty clear the guy's not smiling.

The kid fumbles around as he grabs the crumpled up bills along with a few Starburst wrappers from his jean pockets. He stuffs the wrappers back in and then tries to unwrinkle the bills

as quickly as he can to show the bus driver that he has enough money, he just doesn't know how much it costs. For a few long moments, the kid stands there holding out his rumpled money—no change of course—until he finally notices the little sign taped above the money tin, it says 4.50 (EXACT_CHANGE_ONLY!), the one that's been taped there in right in front of his eyes this whole time: *Retard!*

"Either get on or get off, but I'm going."

"B-b-but I don't have exact change." *Why don't you cry about it, baby?* he tells himself.

From the back of the bus, somebody yells, "Let's go already!" but the kid can't see if it's that black dude or not. Then somebody else from up near the front yells "Let's go, kid!" And then somebody else: "T-t-today, Junior!" and a couple people giggle quietly.

The kid starts to say, "I've n-n-never ridden the bus before,"

which isn't a complete lie, he hasn't ridden the bus by himself

before, and not at all since he was a little kid with his mom, but either way he's pretty much ready to bawl his eyes out right then and there and in front of everybody. What a sniveling little crybaby freak he's become—or maybe he always was.

Before he can get it all out, though, the bus driver reaches over with his huge paw and grabs the crumpled five out of the kid's hand. "There," he says and stuffs it through the little slot atop the money tin. He does not say, "Grab a seat" or yell at him to get out of the aisle like his old school bus drivers would've said. He just paws at some lever to make the door shut, and then some other lever on the other side to make the squealing-fart sound again before he starts in on cranking the wheel rubbing against his gut.

The kid nearly topples over onto some old lady's lap as the bus pulls out, but manages to grab the pole at the last second. The way this old lady cringes at him, her arms and legs turtle up into her stomach, her face very nearly pressed up against the far window, you would've thought the kid had just pulled a pipe

bomb out of his back pack. Even after he's gathered himself, she doesn't apologize for over-reacting, doesn't ask if he's okay. She shoots him a quick sideways look and then slides herself over to the window seat and stares out at the buildings across the street, the people walking by, the parked cars—anything that's not this kid whose still waiting for her to apologize. He decides to go first and give her a chance. "Sorry," he mumbles, but she keeps staring out.

It seems the entire bus is refusing to look at him. Or a couple of them, a mother and her little girl, are refusing to *stop* looking at him. Real weirdo stares, too, disdain in their eyes, especially the mother, but even the little girl, which definitely doesn't count. *What are you staring at?* he wants to shout at them. He isn't sure what's worse: the two staring at him or the others refusing to stare at him. *Make up your frickin' minds!* he wants to shout at them. *Either I'm a complete loser weirdo, who you need to stare at or I'm a total schizo freak who you don't want to make eye contact with because I might try to kill you. But I can't be both.* Except that he

knows he probably is—both schizo freak and weirdo loser—which is why he can't even get anybody to feel sorry enough for him even when he says sorry first. *You freakin' psycho*, he tells himself.

Maybe that's just how pathetic the kid's finally become—he's completely invisible to people like this, just like the way people were always walking past all those homeless guys who'd hang out at the parks. "Jesus, don't stare like that, Sweetie," his mother would always tell him when he was a little kid. "It's not polite to stare at people like that, honey." Maybe that's how bad the kid has gotten. He's become *people like that*.

He slides himself into the window seat, feels the cold metal even through the sleeve of his hoodie, the glass against his cheek and forehead. The thing about sitting on a bus is that pretty much where ever you sit, everybody's either behind you so you can't see if they're looking at you or they're ahead of you and staring forward so you can't see if they're even considering looking back to see if you're waiting for them to turn around and see that

you're looking at them too and maybe you might want to start up a conversation.

Unless they're kids, of course. Kids like that little girl up there are always shifting every which way in their seat and half the time standing up on the seat and sneaking peaks up over the headrest to see what's going on behind them. That girl with her mother up a few seats is staring some more, and when her mother notices her, she grabs the girl by the arm and then whispers something. "It's not polite to stare at people like that, honey," that's what the kid imagines her whispering. Or maybe: "There's something wrong with that boy, sweetie. We don't want to make him mad at us and come up here and try to kill us, now do we?" Or maybe just: "There's nobody back there worth your time, baby. Why don't you turn around and draw me one of your pictures, eh?"

The bus pulls over and the mom and daughter get off. The girl gives him one last look before she gets out, but then the mother whispers something to her again and then follows her out so that the kid can't see if the girl tries to shoot him any more

looks. He watches them all the way until they get off, just to make sure that the mother doesn't say anything to the driver on the way out. He waits to see if the driver shoots him a look through that mirror at the front of the bus. He waits to see if the guy is gonna shoot him a look from behind those wraparound sunglasses and then go and radio the cops to alert them to the potential pedophile he might have on his bus. He doesn't. Can you be a pedophile if you're only sixteen? "But I'm only sixteen years old," he imagines saying to the cops as they drag him off the bus. "I'm just a kid myself," he imagines saying and bawling his eyes out the whole while they're carrying him off the bus.

The bus pulls over again; the brakes squeal and fart. The black guy gets up and walks past him. He's still bobbing his head and mouthing lyrics as he walks past him. He puts his hand on the kid's seat and his other on the seat across the aisle. He doesn't look over. He does this, touches the headrests without looking at anyone in particular, for nearly every aisle seat on his way to the front of the bus. He does not look back over his shoulder at any

point, nor mouth any words loud enough for the kid or anyone else to hear. Others get on. They don't look either. Not at the kid or at anybody else in particular.

The kid can see the water now, or thinks he can at least, the splotches of blue-green peeking out through the fog, between the spaces in the taller buildings. Almost there. He stands up in his seat and cranes his head to see if he can see the water for sure or if it's just in his head. He holds his hands over his eyes as if he's holding binoculars. God, what a Looney Toon he probably looks like right then, if anybody's looking, which they aren't. He hears the brakes before he feels the bus slowing down. He braces himself on the seat in front of him. He glances up at the mirror above the driver, just to make sure, still. Nothing. Can't even see the guy's sunglasses over the brim of his hat. He glances at the backs of the other passengers' heads in front of him. Nothing.

When the bus has squealed to a stop and the brakes have farted one last time, he creeps across the aisle to the other window. It's not like he's doing anything wrong. He even paid fifty

cents more than what everybody else paid. But still, he keeps glancing up at the bus driver to make sure he's not looking. The kid can finally see it up ahead and in the distance—the flashes of red peeking out through the fog and against the blues. Maybe four, five blocks down. Maybe a couple football fields. Who knows. But he sees it and it's there and he's made his deal with the people on the bus and he's held up his end of it and they've held up their end, and he's that close to it, so right as the driver is letting out on the brakes again and pulling the doors shut, the kid makes a break for it.

He's never moved so quickly in his life probably. Never run so fast to the front of a bus at least. He brushes up against a couple of people on his way to the front, but he doesn't even bother to apologize, that's how excited he is, how close he is. He throws his shoulder into the closing door as hard as he can and then bounces back against the side of the bus, but the important part is it's the outside of the bus and free and clear, and he can hear somebody on the bus yelling something behind him, but he

can't tell if it's the driver or one of the passengers he'd bumped up against and he can't make out what they're shouting even if he knew. He's out on the sidewalk now and everything is laid out for him up ahead. He can see it.

It's foggy and he's further away than he had first thought, but he can see it, and he almost starts sprinting again, then makes himself slow down. He reminds himself that some weirdo freckle-freak kid sprinting from eight blocks away would definitely raise some red flags for people. It's drizzling now, the fog as thick as he's ever seen it. But all those sharp orange-red lines cutting across the horizon, it might as well be lighting up the path in front of him.

It's not like it's calling out to him, though. It's not like he can hear its voice speaking to him, telling him to do it. "It's not like I'm not a total schizo," he imagines explaining. "That wasn't why. I'm not crazy. I knew what I was doing. In fact, it was the only thing that made any sense at all, can't you see that?" It's not like he

can't see anything else around him except for that bright beacon of hope.

It's not like the fog is that bad, or ever that bad really, the way they sometimes show it in scary movies or on TV. There are people—tourists and vendors and runners and bicyclists and then your average, everyday people just going about their average, everyday lives. Mostly adults. Maybe on an early lunch break, maybe playing hooky from work, maybe even between jobs and hitting the streets and papering the neighborhood with resumes. Probably have a couple of kids at school right now and they're out trying to find work to put food on the table and pay the bills. Probably not for happy pills or child psychologist appointments, but maybe piano lessons, memberships to the Y for soccer leagues and swimming lessons.

It's not like he hasn't given them their chance to smile at him and ask how his day's going. It's not like he's running around this way and that and drooling all over himself and anybody he can latch onto. He's going at a pretty good clip now. Not sprinting or

even jogging, but pretty close to speedwalking, which makes him feel retarded, his arms swinging up and down at his sides, his hips doing that side-to-side waddle thing. But it's drizzling and not all that warm out. Not freezing, but cool, and getting cooler with the drizzling and the wind coming off the water.

Probably if people are looking at him and thinking anything, which they probably aren't, but if they are, it's just that this kid is cold and wet without a coat or umbrella and trying to get where he's going without getting drenched. Perfectly normal. He takes a quick survey of a couple cyclists that pass him going the other way. Nothing. They don't even look up to see if he's lost and needs directions. Somebody could bother to ask him if everything's okay and if he needs directions. "It's not like I didn't give people a chance," he imagines himself explaining. "That's exactly why I made a deal with them. I said, 'Anybody smiles at me, anybody stops me, asks me how I'm doing, or if I need anything, and that would've been enough to stop me. It's not like I

was crazy or anything. I wasn't hearing voices. I made a perfectly reasonable and fair deal. It just didn't work out, that's all."

There are signs now, actual signs and not just in his head. Arrows pointing forward. As if you couldn't just look up and see all those sharp red lines stretched out above the water like that, even through all that fog, the drizzle, the clouds. There are even lights for the boats and planes and helicopters and whatever else might run into it in the fog, a bunch of fog horns that keep going off, and not just in his head either. *They're real!*

They sound the way sad old hundred-year-old humpback whales might talk to each other, or so he imagines. "How's life, Frank?" he imagines the one whale saying to the other. "I'm a big ugly humpback, I'm a dying breed, what kinda life you think it is, Joe?" "Well you don't gotta remind me, Frank. I'm right here next to you."

He's so close now. What helps is the fog and the drizzle, he thinks to himself. Cuts down on the people taking pictures, the people wanting to take a walking tour of it. There are even a

couple of open spots in the parking lot, which he's never seen in the times he's been over this way. "You wanna go see the bridge, again, buddy?" his dad used to ask when he was little. "You wanna get up there in the middle of it and see if we can catch a couple boats going under this time?" So far as the kid can tell, there are no ships coming in today, at least none that he'll be able to see. "And that was another thing, too," he imagines saying. "There were no ships coming in. Maybe if there had been a ship going under, maybe then it would've overruled everything else, but there wasn't. There were just all those cars honking at each other."

And then he's heading onto the walkway. He has to sidestep this old couple, the man holding a big black umbrella for the both of them. When he looks back, they squint at him briefly and then look down, but even in looking down they're really looking in towards each other. Like they have some inside joke to which the kid has just provided the punchline, or maybe they've made their own deal with each other and now that some freak white kid has tried to make eye contact, they have won their own little bet. He

decides that he's done looking back and becoming the butt of the joke for everybody else, done helping everybody else win their side bets. He's so caught up in not looking at all the couples, he almost forgets to look out and down and take everything in. To prepare himself, to get himself up for it.

"But I can't see, Daddy," he used to complain when they'd come up to watch the boats go under. "How come it has to be so tall so kids like me can't see?" "Well, buddy, they just don't want kids like you to be able to crawl over and fall off, you know." His father would be saying this as he hoisted the kid up to see over the guard rail. "See how far down it is, buddy? It wouldn't feel very good to fall way down there to the water, now would it?" "But I wouldn't fall, Daddy," the kid would say. "I'd hold on so tight like Spiderman." And his dad would say he knew he would and then set him up atop the railing so the kid's legs could dangle out over the side. "But not every kid's watched as much cartoons as you, buddy. Some just don't know any better."

His dad'd been warned a couple times. The police stationed at the end of the bridge would say if they ever caught him putting his kid up on the guard rail like that again, they'd haul them in for endangering a minor. Other people had said things, too. "Jesus, put that boy down before he falls," they'd say. And "How can you do that to your son?" Or: "Do you know how dangerous that is?" And his dad would always just smile and then shake his head, maybe tighten his arm a little around the kid's waist. "Every thinks they know what's good for you better than me, eh buddy?" And the kid would point down towards the water. "You're gonna miss it, Daddy. You're gonna miss it. It's a big one." And then his dad would quiz him about what the ship might be carrying for cargo and what the big bump on the front of it was called and what they called ships that sailed out on the ocean.

There still aren't any ships that the kid can see. The fog is even thicker up on the bridge though and it's hard to open his eyes very wide with the wind and the rain. Despite all that, the traffic is pretty steady, still honking but not at him. He's almost

past the first tower and still can't bring himself to look down. Too risky, he thinks. What if he wusses out before he gets out to the middle? What if he starts in on the crying and freezes up and somebody tries to stop him now? There are a couple of runners coming up on him about a hundred yards off or so, but nobody else.

He should probably just close his eyes and hurdle the whole thing right now while he's got forward momentum, but he's stopped jogging. He's walking as quickly as he can, but the steel railing is so wet and cold under his fingers. He's stopped walking now, his legs won't carry him any further. Is this as far as his legs'll go? Is this far enough? He's still not looking down, but out of the corner he can see streaks of greenish blue through the fog.

Probably a bunch of video cameras on him right now and some foot patrol deciding whether or not to call it in. He decides to stare up at the tower behind him, as if he's just marveling at the miracle of modern engineering. But with the rain still coming down, he has to squint and blink and shield his eyes. He can hear

the wet hum of car tires as they buzz past him, the bicycle tires nearing him, then past him. He can hear the fog horns. Pretty quickly he starts to get dizzy and fall backward. Toward the guard rail. Which makes him jump back a little. Which makes him do a double-take to make sure nobody's noticed.

He's walking again. His sweatshirt's soaked through to his undershirt at this point, and even though he tells himself there's no use, it'll all be over soon, he still can't help but hug himself and shiver as he walks. Not far now, he tells himself. Almost there. As if he has a specific spot he's already picked out. He has the spot he's been fantasizing about for a few weeks now, but in his fantasies, his spot has always been bright and sunny and so calm, with all that green and blue laid out before him. With the fog and rain, it's hard to pick one spot out over another. They all look like the spot, they all look completely wrong. There's no sun. He's stopped again. He's back to shielding his eyes and squinting up into the rain and wind, then over to the next tower, what seems like miles away still. This is when she taps his shoulder.

“Excuse me,” this Asian girl says. These fogged-over glasses, these doughy eyes behind them, these doughy cheeks. All those fat teeth she keeps flashing. “You take picture?” she says. She has on one of those yellow rain jackets on that almost nobody wears anymore. The way she’s got her hood up over her head, it makes him think of Big Bird.

“You take picture, yes?” she says. She giggles a little giggle and pushes the lens of her camera into his chest. It’s one of those nice ones with the lens you can zoom in and out on and the flash that pops up off the top, like his mom used to have. “Yes?” she says and giggles again. “You understand?” She makes little click-click sound effects and points out at the water. It’s the first time he’s looked down since he got onto the walkway.

She pokes him in the chest again with the lens of her camera. “You understand, yes? You take picture?” He takes the camera from her. It’s all he can do to stop looking down. He nods his head, starts to say something and then stops. She’s got that smile, all those fat teeth she keeps flashing at him, her cheeks pressing

into the frames of her glasses. He wonders what she looks like under her rain jacket, if she’s got a soaked white t-shirt under there, if her boobs are half as perky as her cheekbones. He wants to smile back but doesn’t want to show any teeth, doesn’t want her to see the stains he has from the Cheetos and Starbursts, but more so doesn’t want to look all big and toothy like some perv. He imagines how nice it might be to get an Asian girlfriend, how she’d probably think his freckles were exotic and his mustache was sexy, how she’d always want to please him and do whatever he wanted her to do for him.

“For boyfriend,” she says. “He not here. He sad. He work.” She points out toward the water again. “In Hong Kong.”

He tries to say, “Yes,” but it won’t come out, so he just nods again and makes more click-click sounds. He makes himself smile with teeth this time and she says, “Oh no.” Grabs the camera back and hugs it to her chest.

“No, you drop,” she says. With her free hand, she points over the railing and then makes sounds like she’s falling, then makes a

big splashing sound and points some more down toward the water. “No you take picture,” she says. She’s directing him by both shoulders, pushing him back away from the edge. She’s steering him backward until he’s leaning against the railing separating the roadway. “You stay,” she says. She puts both hands up like she’s training a puppy. “Yes, you stay?” she says and cranes her neck to look up at him.

“I’m not a puppy, you know?” He actually says it.

“Yes,” she says, “you stay.”

She’s backing away now, nodding each time she speaks. “You stay, you take picture, yes?”

She’s already posing back against the guard rail. She’s got one hand on one of the steel cables and the other hand up in the air like she’s a model on a game show. She puts her elbow on the railing and rests her chin in her hand, looking back at him, her chubby face, huge glasses, that yellow hood framing them, everything framed by the fog and clouds off in the distance.

“Yes, you take picture now,” she says. She has her hands up above her now, as if to point out all shades of gray he should be photographing behind her. He doesn’t even have the camera up near his eye. He’s just watching her pose, watching her put all the fog and rain and clouds on display.

“Click-click,” she says, “yes?” Then she’s alternating between pointing at the camera in his hands and pretending to take pictures. “You take picture?”

This could very well be a hallucination, he suddenly thinks. Probably he’s not even up there with a camera looking out through the fog at all the air and water down there. Probably he’s just dreaming. And because he thinks he might just be dreaming all of this, he stops stressing. He holds the camera up to his eye, the way his mother had taught him to. He turns the nob on the lens until this chubby Asian girl comes into frame against the fog and clouds blurring the horizon. “Say ‘Cheetos,’” his mom used to tell him. On the dolphin-rockers at the park, on the beach in front of a sandcastle the waves had just ruined, in front of the

guard rail with his dad's hand on his shoulders. *Jesus, would you put that boy down before he falls? How can you do that to your son? Do you know how dangerous that is, Robert?* Maybe it'd been his mom yelling his dad all this time. He presses down on the camera and waits for the click.

Maybe there'd never been anybody else yelling at his dad to be more careful with him except his mom. Maybe it'd just been that one time watching boats from up on the bridge, his little-kid feet dangling over the railing, as the boat floated by down below.

"Take picture," she's saying. She's leaning over the railing with her shoulder and pointing down. "Take picture now, please."

He presses the button. He waits for the click, hears it, presses the button again, and listens for a second click. He's no longer shivering. His shoulders and chest feel so numb, there's almost a warmth there. Of course it's a dream. He's nodded off in Geometry again and he's drooling onto his notebook and the kids behind him are shooting spit balls at his mouth while the teacher draws triangles on the overhead.

"Happy now?" he says to the girl. He's smiling as big as he can, showing his teeth despite the stains and how creepy he might look. He's handing the camera back to her, poking the lens in her chest now.

"Yes," the girl says back. "Yes, thank you, very very much sir." She nods and takes the camera back. Her smile is fat teeth and doughy cheekbones when she turns to look back up at him, maybe for the last time. "Boyfriend very much happy."

He nods back. "Yes," he says. "You should make him very much happy indeed." He can't stop smiling. Not even the tears coming down his cheeks can stop him from showing his stained teeth. He can't help himself. He reaches over and grabs her with both arms. Hugs her tight even as she tries to turn away, even as she makes those *oh-oh-oh* noises. He presses his numb cheeks to the side of her yellow hood, presses his numb chest against her. Her hands clutching the camera, as it rests pinned between them, his sopped hoodie against her dripping rain coat. Or maybe she's saying *no-no-no*? Not that it matters now, none of it being real.

He lets go and she nearly lets the camera slip through her fingers, regaining her grip at the last second. It's the perfect time, he thinks. Time to wake up. Time to go back to Geometry. He lingers for a moment, watches her drop to one knee as she puts the lens cap back on and unzips her camera bag from over her shoulder. Watches as she drops the camera in and zips it back up. It's time. She's getting back to her feet. She's turning around.

How else but in a dream could he have done what he does next? So quickly and fluidly at the same time? No wasted motion at all as he turns to grab the guard rail behind him, his own cold wet steel pommel horse. If it were real, wouldn't he've had to take more steps to make it over? Wouldn't he've had to stop and gather himself on the outside ledge before he let go? Wouldn't this Asian girl have turned around and tried to grab him and pull him back? Wouldn't he've looked down and seen how far it was before he jumped, before he hurdled his body over the side?

He can almost imagine himself saying, "*Smile!*" as he does it.

It is all wholly unbelievable, is what it is, what he's thinking right up to the moment his hands lose grip of the railing, the moment his numb fingers reach out and grasp all that air.

What've you done? he thinks as he feels the suck of wind and rain and gravity as his feet, then legs, then body plunge downward. *Oh Jesus*, he mouths to himself, *Oh Christ*.

Later on in the documentary, the interviewer asks him if he thinks it was a miracle. She wants to know what it's like falling over two hundred feet. Like four or five chances for your life to flash before your eyes, the other survivors have told her. There've been twenty-six others, according to her research. Which is pretty good really, she says, considering you hit the water going somewhere around seventy-five miles an hour, a force of a thousand pounds per square inch. "But I guess I don't have to tell you," she says. She even lets out a wry smile as she says it.

But then again, she says, maybe that's not great considering it's twenty-six out of sixteen hundred—sixteen hundred known suicides anyway. She says that one expert she interviewed said that you might as well be belly-flopping on concrete, the way surface tension works, and she asks the kid if that's what it felt like.

The kid shrugs, says that doesn't sound quite right to him, the way he remembers it.

She tells him that a lot of bridge jumpers will survive the impact long enough to drown to death after that. Like a quarter of them go this way, she says, though that is not entirely accurate, because most of those who drown are also suffering from severe internal bleeding among other things. "Did you know that?" she asks. They've got lacerated spleens, livers, collapsed lungs, brain hemorrhaging. She says that she's heard the coroners describe it as if somebody'd taken an egg-beater to scramble up your insides—so that for these people who survive initially, the drowning may

only be putting them out of their misery before their vital organs can reap their revenge. Multiple blunt-force trauma, the medical examiners call it. Same as fatal car accidents.

"Did you know that the crabs go for your eyeballs first?" she asks. The kid knows what she's trying to get him to do. "That the soft flesh of your cheeks is the next to go? That if no one notices you go, there's a good chance that you won't have a face when they pull you from the water on the Marin County side of the bridge? That is if you ever wash to shore." Lots of them, she says, end up floating out to the Pacific never to be recovered, which is why most experts say that sixteen hundred jumpers is probably closer to two grand. She says all this to him as if it'll get the big on-camera breakdown she's looking for.

Later in the interview, he'll say that what still haunts him the most is knowing just how quickly after his fingers lost their grip on the railing, how quickly he knew that everything could've been fixed. How in the five long seconds he had to fall, the five seconds he'd had to think about what he'd done, it only took an

instant for him to realize he didn't want to die anymore. "Dear God," he'd kept saying to himself, "I can't die! Dear God, I need to live!"

How he knew the only chance that he had was to go in feet first, which is when the documentarian interrupts to say that the EMTs had told her that was the only thing that had saved him, that almost all twenty-six guys like him who'd survived had gone in feet first and at a slight angle, that also was the key to surviving.

And then she asks if the kid ever thinks about how many other jumpers, how many shooters, how many wrist-cutters, how many of them may have had those exact same second thoughts that he had, and for how many of them it's too late, if he ever thinks about all the ones who *can't* fix it, *can't* undo what they've already done.

The kid replies, "Why else would I be talking to you?" He goes on to describe how long it took for him to resurface, how it had felt like his lungs were going to explode, how one of his lungs

actually had—or at least it had been punctured by one of his four broken ribs at least, so it was that along with his lacerated spleen.

How he'd just kept on kicking his feet despite the broken ankle he had, how despite his dislocated fingers on his right hand and shattered elbow on his left, he kept trying to flap his arms as hard as he could just the way his dad had once taught him to swim underwater.

He describes how painful that first gasp of air was once his head finally hit that surface, and then the sting of all that salt water rushing in when his head bobbed under again. How he'll never be able to taste the salt of the ocean again without remembering the stabbing pain that shot through his chest as he let out that scream from deep down in his aching gut: "*Ahhhh!*" The kid says he literally had no words in him, only "*Ah!*"—not *Oh my God, I'm gonna live* or *Yes, praise the Lord, Hallelujah I did it.*

He pauses before describing the next part. He looks down for a moment and then back up into the camera, and says the next

part is the part that she probably won't believe, how nobody really believes it no matter how many times he tries to explain it.

"But you survived a jump from the Golden Gate Bridge," the interviewer says. She almost shouts it at him. "Won't people believe just about anything after that?" But the kid just shrugs. Not this part, he says.

Then he tells her about the school of dolphins. How they'd kept swimming back and forth under his feet to keep him afloat for the twenty minutes until the coastguard could get there to pull him out. And how he knows that God had sent those dolphins. He pauses before nodding his head, to say yes, of course, he knows it was a miracle. How he knew God had sent him those dolphins so that he might live to spread the word of his experience and save others.

He says his parents had just shaken their heads the first time he told them about the dolphins, how his mom had run her fingers through his hair, and said how thankful she was to have him back. How his dad had told him he should just take it easy

and get better for now, they could talk about all this other stuff later.

"It's not like I didn't realize how loony I was sounding right then," he tells the camera. "How crazy it still sounds. I'd never even been to church."

How weeks later, his mom and dad would sit him down and say they thought it was a bad idea for him tell others about the Asian girl and jumping and the dolphins sent from God.

"You don't really want everybody out there to know what you tried to do to yourself, do ya, buddy?" his dad had said.

"Now honey," his mom had said, "we just think it will be hard for people to understand when you tell them about the dolphins and how you think they were sent from God."

The kid makes sure to emphasize that his parents were both very thankful he had survived and thought it was nice that he wanted to help people and of course they thought it was nice that he felt like he had a calling from a higher power. "But what

about how people will look at you when you tell them your story, buddy?” his dad had said.

“What your father’s saying, honey,” his mom had said, “is just that isn’t that what caused you to do this to yourself in the first place? The way people always looked at you as if you were crazy?”

The kid explains all this to the interviewer, then looks down at his hands folded in his lap. He sniffles a bit for the first time and shakes his head. “That’s what’s still so hard, you know?” His voice cracks, his head still down. “To know how much I hurt my parents, right? And to know they don’t even want me to try to do what I could to make it up to them and everyone else I might’ve hurt. To know they don’t even want me here right now talking to you or anyone else. How much it embarrasses them. How much it hurts them that I would want to keep talking about it with others. How much they still don’t trust me not to try to hurt myself again.” His last moment onscreen, when he finally looks

back up a minute later, the freckles under his eyes wet and almost glistening under the camera lighting, his smile big and toothy, and then all lips, when he looks back down into his hands folded in his lap and nods slowly to himself.



There is no Post-Colonialism: Brian Friel and *Translations*

by ROBIN WYATT DUNN

“Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe? The usual approach of science of constructing a mathematical model cannot answer the questions of why there should be a universe for the model to describe. Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing?”

-- Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*

“Remember everything is a form of madness.”

-- Brian Friel, *Translations*

* * *

I begin this essay with an observation of the state of the art of the integrated circuit.

New quantum computer chips use photons rather than electrons; pulses of light instead of electricity. These chips operate on the newly-applied principle of “quantum entanglement” -- two particles who “know” what the other is doing instantly, over any distance, faster than the speed of light.

These new faster-than-light chips, some theories suggest, may make small-form time travel possible; that is, the processing power of the chip relies on the chip’s ability to process information in times *more than just the present*.

Yes, those computers keep doing new wacky things!

And this is all in keeping with other new experimental evidence that confirm that the future affects the past.

But how is this related to Brian Friel’s *Translations* and this bald-faced title “there is no postcolonialism?”

My theory is that Friel, deep bastard that he is, was instinctively aware as an artist, and especially so because he is an

Irish artist familiar with “the Other World,” of this nature of time, that it does not flow backwards or forwards or round and round in the present, but all of the above, all at once.

My secondary theory is that this understanding of drama, as neither “diachronic” (over many times) or “synchronic” (having to do with one time), but “trichronic” (having to do with the past, present, and future, and moving in multiple directions through them) is fundamental to Friel’s understanding of Ireland, and to a more general understanding of colonialism.

What does Faulkner mean, after all, when he opines that the past is still with us, it isn’t even past? Clearly he meant it literally.

* * *

Postcolonialism relies on the (tried and true, isn’t it though!) concept that time flows forward, that tomorrow follows today, and yesterday precedes it. No one’s going to argue with that! Except quantum physicists. Except for the Irish.

Because tomorrow does not simply “follow” today.

And yesterday does not simply “precede” today.

One could argue this is merely the next logical step in a long “postmodern” series of the destabilizing of comfortable “oppositional” conceptions we have of the world. First we destabilize space with space travel and rocket ships and quantum physics . . . and then Friel does it with time.

I am reminded of the handsome British colonialist lovingly depicted in E.M. Forster’s *Passage to India*, who is profoundly frustrated, following the episode of the woman in the cave, whatever it may have been, at the differing conceptions of guilt, accountability, and causality in the Indian and British minds.

A generous Indian explains it to the Brit, pointing out that guilt is collective; for: how can we know who ultimately caused anything? A defeatist attitude, the rational Western mind says. The end of personal responsibility cannot be tolerated! No, indeed, it cannot. But nor can we tolerate an end to the ongoing

fruitful commingling of Eastern and Western thinking, a confluence Friel is well aware of and writes about in *Translations*.

Postcolonialism, to my reading, relies on a synchronic/diachronic reading of history. It has not yet grappled with developments in quantum physics. Now we know that the future affects the past, from experimental evidence such as the faster-than-light camera, or “femtocamera.” (In experiments, light ricochets recorded at faster-than-light speeds are shown to ricochet “backwards” indicating that our former understanding of causality was flawed).

The future can affect the past! Is this so different from the colonized affecting the colonizer? So different from the victim triumphing over the perpetrator?

You are throwing together a dangerous mishmash of quantum physics and moral relativism, Robin! Some critics may object.

Still, let’s follow this logic down the little rabbit hole through which it leads:

If the future, as well as the past, affects the present, and “now” is a kind of inter-penetrated mutually constructed “agreement space” between thinking beings who interpret reality and “consensually hallucinate” it together (incidentally, astronomers also now tell us that we live in “The Matrix,” projected like a hologram through black holes, as reported in the New York Times, August 12, 2013) . . .

If this “trichronic” interpretation of reality and historical causality are correct, the Irish have been way ahead of us all along! And Brian Friel (aren’t the artists always ahead of the scientists anyway?) was totally ready for this crazy shit back in 1980.

Just like quantum physics did not supplant Newtonian physics, just added a new, weird layer on top of it, this newly forming understanding of causality will not supplant the old, merely complicate it.

* * *

One way to interpret this concept of “trichronic” is as a strange kind of *inevitability*, which is not the same thing as an end to free will. *Inevitable* merely means you cannot *avoid* it, it does not mean that the crisis-point, the fulcrum upon which all human (and animal!) drama rests, the *now*, the *collapse of the quantum state*, will go away. Obviously not; time keeps flowing, we keep experiencing it as going forwards, we keep making decisions that affect our future (God bless our hearts).

This is near exactly what Friel writes, when Hugh in *Translations* says:

“Yes, it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception - a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to... inevitabilities.” (51).

Let’s look at the traumatic and disturbing act of colonization. In this disturbing conception of causality, our picture is complicated further too. Luckily, we are not forced to say

something offensive and untrue such as “the victim was asking for it.” We must instead, using this trichronic valence, allow ourselves to think something like this:

The perpetrator caused it.

The victim caused it.

They caused it together.

This is, in essence, what I mean by “there is no post-colonialism.” There is no pre-colonialism either.

Note that this disturbing picture of causality does not remove any of our ethical considerations in judging the colonist evil, or in empathizing with the colonized.

What it does suggest is that we conceptualize something like the following:

The colonized *came from a future* in which they had been colonized, and the nature of this future *caused* the colonizer to commit it.

Another way to think of it might be this: in any invasion context, there are a number of possible futures in which a particular nation is colonized, and a number of possible futures in which the nation is not colonized. These possible futures *all exist* and are *competing* for dominance in the moment of the collapse of the wave function, the disturbing present where the invader arrives in Ireland, or wherever.

Why does this matter at all? If a “trichronic” reading of history changes nothing about guilt, nothing about accountability, only makes us assume that the future does somehow affect the present, but in ways we cannot control, then isn’t it just a bizarre footnote, good not much else?

There is no post-colonialism, I’m saying, because there is no pre-colonialism either.

Who was the first colonist? If we buy the InterGalactic Pan-Spermia thesis, well, the first colonizer was the meteorite that had the germs, and the “virgin” Earth was the colonized.

But remember that, acting from at least some of its possible futures on its own past, virgin Earth also *caused* that meteorite to hit!

The complicated interplay between Irish and English in *Translations* mirrors this complicated interplay between virgin earth and that first colonizer, that evil little meteorite.

But if that theory is wrong, and if in fact it is only a matter of degrees that separate living from non-living matter, if our ancestors were right in combining “whit” (thing) and “wight” (being) in one Proto-Indo-European word, then this is only stronger evidence for Friel’s conception of Ireland, as an inevitable collision of particles, emotional rational dramatic humans, plants, and animals, bent on making something new with what they found there.

Our friend the ancient Greek concept of *pharmakon*, both poison and cure, is very applicable here, because life has been called a “disease of matter” but the binary opposition of sick/

healthy is what is being dissolved in this ancient Greek / modern Irish understanding of causality: it is a dreamscape, that we imagine together. What's sick and what's healthy depends entirely on where you're standing, and where you're going, and where you've been.

This is what most critics of Friel and his *Translations* totally fail to understand. Admittedly, writing thick in *The Troubles*, it is hard to blame Sean Connolly in 1987 for writing: "*Translations* represents a distortion of the real nature and causes of cultural change in nineteenth-century Ireland so extreme as to go beyond mere factual error. Friel misrepresents the character both of the Ordnance Survey and of the national schools. In doing so he presents a grossly oversimplified view of the forces behind the abandonment of Irish."

If you will allow me a little "me moment" that is, excuse me, an opportunity to examine my "subject position" – I realize that this essay, originally ironically intended as a little jab at

postcolonialism, is actually going to be an effective strengthening force for a number of its tenets (I'm just removing the "post" part). In the same way, Connolly misunderstands Friel and accuses him of not doing all the things he actually does: present a complicated picture of Irish history, one not reducible to easy stereotypes.

Connolly's is an attack piece, calling Friel a man with "inferior art" but really he's just upset because he believes Friel isn't being complicated enough for the complicated picture of Ireland, missing entirely that it is Friel's genius to present a simple surface that masks a hugely complicated interplay of tribal and, dare I say it, trichronic forces. Daily, ordinary life is not simple, even when a master artist carefully paints it so.

Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, writing in 1996, has a similarly oversimplified reading of Friel's intentions, writing that the play "avoids mention of the Protestant tradition and evokes the

binaries of Carthage and Rome to indict the British destruction of Gaelic culture”(228).

Interesting (again!) that Cullingford indicts Friel here for not being complicated enough, when obviously Friel is a lot more complicated than Cullingford. She attacks the work for being “binary,” but it’s clear the whole piece is designed to deconstruct them, and to suggest that, far from “destroying Gaelic culture” the British only strengthened it.

In a way, this short-sighted mode of attacking Friel and his work can be seen as very similar as the silly race to be “more politically correct” than the next guy, jumping to quick conclusions about their lack of “political commitment” or “authenticity” rather than trying to reach a nuanced understanding of the work in question.

But hey, we’re used to postcolonial theorists colonizing shit all the time, aren’t we?

Cullingford’s close readings of Friel, mixed with Heaney, are interesting, but she continues to jump to oversimplified conclusions, writing about the Irishmen’s love of Latin and epic poetry:

“Friel thus associates foundational acts of self-sacrifice and epic heroism with Virgil (and Yeats) and credits the Ulysses of Homer (and Joyce) with love of hearth and home”(231).

Her associational observations are accurate, but Friel is not writing about “foundational acts of self-sacrifice.” Everything is personal for Friel. Each man, and each woman, acting trichronically, joined in the weld of the world, decides how to play out his and her own future. The “foundation” if it exists, is only the universe itself, the earth under the feet, *any* earth, in all its glory, not any particular moment in time.

To my reading, Juno’s love of Carthage and her fear of Rome is not about the tragedy of Carthage’s defeat to come but merely the sadness of it, a human sadness, rather than an epic one.

Translations is NOT an epic. It is a carefully told human story, on a human scale.

It is too rigidly postcolonial to see the play as an indictment. It is a sophisticated analysis of powerful personal and historical forces (moving in both directions! East and West! Backwards and forwards in time!) at work in a very specific situation.

Yes, all generalizations are bad. Ho ho ho. So ends literary criticism!

* * *

Kurt Bollock, writing in 2000, begins with a more promisingly complex understanding of Friel's *Translations*:

"Inherent within naming of place is motive; beyond identifying and marking locale there is the intent to make the place known or understood."(98).

He goes on, usefully quoting Wendy James: "To name a place, on a map, is to try and stamp some certainty on the world. But to

look into naming too carefully undermines all sense of uncertainty."(98).

Again I am reminded here of developments in quantum physics. We all know and love Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, but quantum entanglement has further complicated our picture of it. While it remains true that you cannot know both the spin and the location of one particle *at the same time*, now we know that you can know the spins of *two entangled particles*, no matter the distance between them, because if we know one's spin, we know the other. Sort of like a love story, eh?

So, is Friel really "undermining certainty" as Bollock suggests here with his quoting of Wendy James?

Kevin Whelan, writing in 2010, comes much closer to my conception of Friel's work, when he emphasizes at the beginning of his essay "The Politics of Culture in Friel's *Translations*" the location of Friel's birth, in Donegal, the point furthest north in Ireland yet belonging to the south. Whelan quotes Friel calling the

people in Derry: “a dispossessed people, living in a state they never subscribed to, with Donegal lying just across the bay. Janus like, they had one head looking to the north and one looking to the south.”

This is trichronism, or a form of it. Janus, god of exits and entrances, god of gates, for whom we name January, is a reasonable approximation of our quantum physics understanding of the collapse of wave functions that yield the present moment.

Whelan also comes closest to understanding the nature of *Translations* when he writes that it “diagnoses the conditions” (8) of Ireland. We’re back with the *pharmakon* again, playing doctor, wondering whether to kill the patient or bring her back to life, or both.

Having fielded these beautifully ambiguous metaphors to deal with an ambiguous play, Whelan then chickens out, and retreats to postco orthodoxy, using Said and George Steiner to try to force Friel to say, yet again, as so many writers seem to want Friel to

say, that *Translations* is a condemnation of English colonialism. This is like saying that *Macbeth* is a paean to the Scottish kingship of James I.

He is wrong on the face of it to quote Steiner’s *After Babel* as he does, insisting that, as Steiner believed, each language is “incommensurable and opaque to translation.” This so wrong-headed that Whelan has again fallen in to the same trap that all the other critics I’ve mentioned have—trying to reduce Friel to an either/or, for/against mentality.

In the text of the play, Owen even says to Yolland: “You can decode us.” Yes, language is opaque, but it is not “opaque to translation.” Language is built to be translated. That is one of the things that language does. It translates.

Towards the end of his essay, Whelan brushes faintly against my own thesis. He paraphrases the anthropologist Johannes Fabian’s work in *Time and the Other*, writing of it:

“anthropological discourse constructed a different time for its

objects, framed around the binarity of tradition and modernity, which suppressed the possibility of cultural coevality.”

What a beautiful conception, leading once again to the wrong conclusion! The point is that these two competing waveforms, future and past, collide in the present, that these two forces of colonizer/colonized, Irish/ English, *do* construct a different time for “their” objects, in this collision of tradition and modernity that is our constantly-collapsing wave function of the present, but that this explosive, romantic, dramatic process that Friel understood so well and so intimately actually *made possible* “cultural coevality.”

That is what is happening on Earth as I write this, in February 2014. A big motherfucker of a cultural coevality. Made possible by quantum physics, and a whole lot of invaders, and a whole lot of invaded, doing what they do best: fucking, and mind-fucking.

There is no Postcolonialism nor is there an Ireland. At least, not any more.

This is the tragedy Friel is writing about, not that past is gone, but that suddenly we have *a new past*, along with a new future. Not an Orwellian rewriting from the top-down, but an organic one, from every which way at once, reconstructing our sense of ourselves at the genetic level, the linguistic level, perhaps even the spiritual.

We are, once again, cave people.

There is no postcolonialism because there is no pre-colonialism. Astronomers are now more inclined to agree with Aristotle: it's world without end, Ouroborous all the way through, with a hundred billion Januses staring in every dimension imaginable, asking at every intersection: *who are we?*

If all that rises must converge, in love and understanding, what new forms will we make, at this convergence?

Ciaran Deane, writing in 2009, has to my mind the strongest reading of *Translations*, as a play that emphasizes that language, in politics, is both the problem and the solution (16). *Pharmakon*

again. She is spot on when she writes: “it is the limitations of language that create intercultural conflict, and yet it is the creative potential of language that also provides the means for cultural synthesis” (16). And she is following the same line of thinking as me when she quotes Friel’s statement in an interview:

“[F]or people like ourselves, living close to such a fluid situation, definitions of identity have to be developed and analysed much more frequently. We’ve got to keep questioning until we find some kind of portmanteau term or until we find some kind of generosity that can embrace the whole island. Of course, there is no better, no more fluid, place to develop and to analyse identity than the theatre, where actors transform.” (21).

Friel is, of course, a genius, which is an old-fashioned and sometimes maligned term, but genius he is, and in so being he is a kind of human portmanteau, encapsulating within himself, like the shaman encapsulates within himself the competing realities that he will translate, through his hallucinogen-laced urine, into

the minds (and brains!) of his/ her community, the words of the gods into the words of human beings.

Is the convergence of the rising beings of the universe a portmanteau?

Is America a melting pot or a tossed salad?

If the future affects the past and the present, aren’t we this poor portmanteau of trichronic energies still trying, day in, day out, to remain something like ourselves?

What does this new conception of time mean for our understanding of drama?

I suspect that it will make drama harder; it will make the “anti-hero” easier and easier to draw, as Hollywood has shown, because everyone is suspect.

In a globalized world, everyone is a colonist, and everyone is a native. Every conversation is an act of war. As we jettison the Derridean obsession with binaries towards a richer understanding of language as a multi-focal kind of ongoing fusion reaction, that

makes of deuterium and hydrogen the stuff of life on Earth, we come closer to the language of the gods in the sense that we understand, more and more, how our behavior is massively intertwined, massively compromised (massively multiplayer!), massively self-similar (a la fractals), massively enjoined together in the mutual effort of constructing reality.

But how shall we govern ourselves?

If drama can be understood, as I suggest it can, in trichronic fashion, this collision of wave functions, the past affecting the future and vice versa, who is the governor of our self, who is the steersman, the *kybernetes*?

Can we truly pilot the Human Ship, the Spaceship Earth, with the first democracy in human history since the Paleolithic? (One that might start in Ireland, who knows!) Can we pilot this ship democratically?

Friel seems to say that we can, we must, we do anyway, regardless of what leaders say, regardless of which way the “kybernetes,” the pilot, turns his oar, we are free.

There is no postcolonialism. And soon there will be no more slavery.

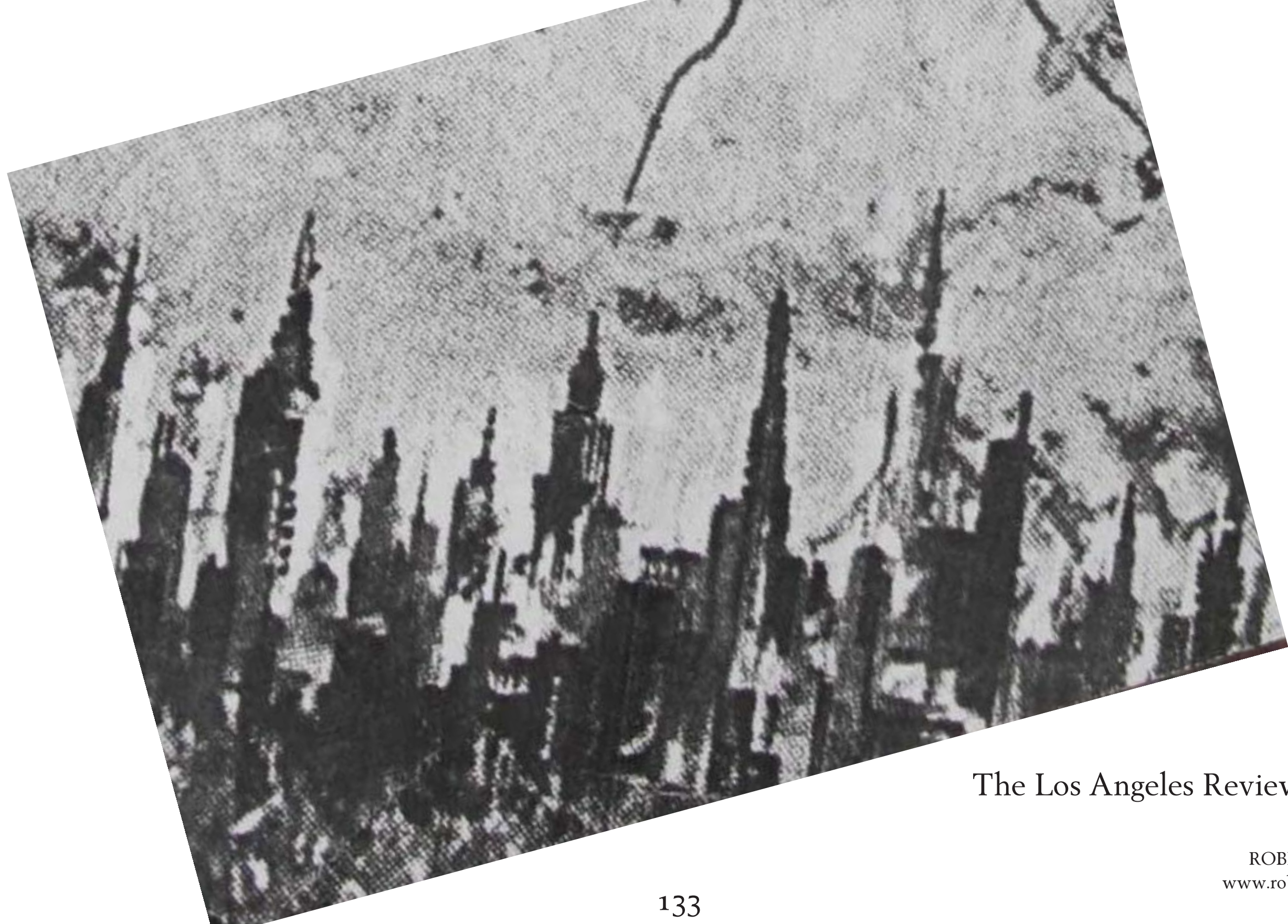
Perhaps even in the frightening future of brain implants, where evil men will try to make us into robots, freedom will not be destroyed.

There can be no slavery because freedom is written into the code of quarks, massively entangled, joined together, in a shared, constantly unfolding future, like the future of Ireland.

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