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# I Dreamt of(,) an Elephant (is) Dreaming of Me

by CHARLES L. CROWLEY

I hear a whirring through the walls, as a rocket takes off from close by, outside. A subsequent shaking overtakes the room for a moment, and then the jury, the judge, the congregation, and the prosecution all settle in their seats. Are you coming to take me away?

No one hears or feels it. Two things in the same place, no one feels a goddamned thing.

The judge sits, divining, from her pulpit, the surety of the people's preparation in the air.

"The defense may proceed," says blindfolded Lady Liberty, Justice: bald, pale, and sickly thin, a vestige of the old democratic world. She's got a way with the waves—time—twisting shape to fit a particular 'where' and 'when.'

"It's simple really," says my defense attorney, "my client was hunting and he ingested some sort of psychedelic in the field,

obviously and, surely, unintentionally. He meant to shoot the elephant, but was made, through the influence of psychic persuasion, to shoot this other hunter."

You land a rocket and walk into court. Processing takes only a moment, and I am suddenly on trial for an event that took place not five minutes ago.

I can hear the rockets outside, taking off, going home. Going home.

Can you hear them?

Blindfolded, Justice.

She weighs opportunity and punishment just as anyone else, from her fingertips.

"Traces of psychedelic substance were found in the elephant post-mortem, suggesting that there was enough of said substance in the atmosphere to influence the actions of my client, therefore rendering the prosecution's case invalid. It is the duty of the jury to

realize that my client had no control over his actions. His senses were co-opted by external stimulus without consent, and therefore he should not be sentenced for any crimes committed in the psychedelic ether. A CDC team is quarantining the area now. And—”

“Surely we get the point; thank you.”

Patience is vestigial.

Sight is a hindrance, when the whole world can sense everything before it's going to happen. Riding the aura—the waves of time as they wiggle around us—giant worms squirming up from the temporal underground. Have you seen the future? It's full of color and grey all at the same time. My neighbors and I can exist in the same place, together all at once, without ever touching. We're all riding the waves, though. Looking out through the wishy-washy water...

You could land a rocket in the courtroom, couldn't you? If you were a rocket pilot... Maybe. You are a pilot somewhere else.

Fly somewhere.

Take me away.

There's a whirring far off. Or a trembling. Or a rhythmic shaking. Like feet stampeding, pace hastening rapidly—a waltz with increasing tempo.

“Your honor, please—”

“The courts do not have time for the psychedelic stateside squabbles of other planetary spheres. Which way does the jury fall?”

They huddle together, yelling over each other, members on the outside crawling over to the middle. Biting and falling and squirming. Worms. Ball of worms.

They lift one old woman up in her wheelchair. “Not guilty,” she says. And she falls back down into the blurring puddle of bodies.

Do you hear the thumping of a thousand heavy drums riding the wind?

Another rocket takes off, and a tusk punctures the wall. Elephants in the courtroom. Trampling all the people. All that talk

drummed down to nothing by their feet.

Forty-one elephants with psychedelic minds all drumming their way to revenge.

Remember? I killed one...I shot it...real good.

They think I got a person with my bullet. But I shot an elephant. They killed another elephant to prove that we're all on drugs.

I've been high since '72.

Psychedelics in the air, baby.

I wanna go back to my sphere, though.

I thought you said you'd take me—somewhere sometime, you fly rockets.

“Yah, somewhere sometime, I sometimes fly rockets, man.”

Right on, brother.



# You

by T.E. COWELL

Summers you work down at the marina, at the kayak rental shack. The rest of the year you juggle the roles of stocker and checkout clerk at a market in town. This has been the routine for years now, almost a decade.

Now it's the winter again. The season of cold air, colder winds, and cement-colored clouds that occasionally drop snow. Whatever the season though, rain or shine, you rely on your bicycle (a reliable road bike) to get around, as you don't own a car and don't like waiting for the public bus unless you have no choice, meaning if there's a snowstorm.

Riding your bicycle to the market from your apartment takes you all but ten minutes, as you're a confident, able rider. You cruise through the below-average-income residential neighborhoods, blowing past the four-way stop signs whenever you see no cars coming. When you reach the market you always

feel a satisfying heaviness in your legs from having stayed in a high gear for the duration of the ride. You're breathing somewhere between good and hard by now, feeling your lungs straining to bring in enough oxygen. Slim and muscular, all in all you're in good shape. If your diet were a little better, and if you did more than just ride your bike and take walks for exercise, you might even be in great shape.

After locking your bike to the bike rack you walk inside the market. The automatic doors open for you, and the first thing you do upon stepping into the store is take notice of the women manning check stands 1 and 2. You arrange your mouth into a tight-though-not-unpleasant grin, and dip your head slightly as you wave at the women.

They both smile back at you in different ways—the middle-aged woman genuinely, as if heartfelt, while the younger woman, who's enrolled in college, a little passively, making it clear to you that she's smiling more out of a sense of civil duty than genuine happiness.

You veer to the right, start past the produce on your way toward the back to punch-in. Passing the cauliflower and broccoli, you sense more than see the store manager, who is standing overhead, on the second floor, where he has his little office. You make a conscious effort not to look up and let him know you know he's there. In all honesty, you don't really like the guy. You think he is a sad strange man who thinks he is basically above everyone else.

"Mornin' Dan!" the manager says to you.

You wince a little, slow your walking pace, and look up, doing your best to keep any sense of annoyance from showing on your face. Hands in the pockets of his slightly-too-baggy slacks, the manager's standing just outside his office, looking down at you and smiling idiotically, like he just won the lottery, like he knows some big secret that you don't.

You nod, and give a wave. You are trying to fool the manager into thinking you're in a bit of a hurry, perhaps to use the bathroom. You look straight ahead again, and continue toward

the back of the store. Your ploy seems to have worked—the manager says nothing more.

A few weeks pass, then a month. Christmas comes, goes, as does New Year's. Though it's continually getting colder, it hasn't snowed yet. You wear long johns under your pants now, also thicker socks. Your lungs sting from the cold air whenever you ride your bike from point A to point B. Your cheeks have taken on a red hue.

After work one Saturday, when you return to your apartment, you jump off your bike and feel the familiar heaviness in your legs from the ride. Your apartment's situated in a drab gray wood-paneled building that's pretty much identical to the handful of other drab gray wood-paneled buildings that make up the complex that you live in.

Your breath is visible in the brisk air, and your nose hairs are frozen stiff. Because it's Saturday, you feel happy. Saturday—it is your second favorite day of the week after Sunday. Saturday night

is movie-and-pot night, and Sunday is movie-and-pot day. There is a distinct gap now, however short, before the following week starts up again and you have to return to work and do it all over. You lean on this time-gap as if against a solid wall. At the end of each week the weekend is your little taste of freedom.

Another reason why you like the weekend is because your girlfriend typically spends it with you. She has Sundays off as well.

You carry your bike up the steps to the second and top floor of the apartment building, then set the bike down and open the door. You enter with your bike, picking it up again, as you don't wish to scuff the carpet with your tires any more than it's already scuffed up. You still hope to get your security deposit back whenever you decide to move somewhere else.

Compared with the cold air outside, the air inside your apartment is warm and stuffy, domesticated. After closing the door you kick off your shoes, lean your bike against the wall and then start down the little hallway. As always, you're eager to see your girlfriend, who gets off work before you do and, because

you had a spare key made that you gave her as a token of trust, is now sitting at your kitchen table. She looks up from a book and smiles at you.

"Hey," she says.

You smile back and say hey back. You walk toward her, then stoop down to her seated level and go in for a welcome-home kiss. One thing that you love about your girlfriend is this: she doesn't try to persuade you to do this or that with your life, to do more with your life. She seems to really think you're fine just the way that you are. If only her dad could be as accepting of you as she is. Her dad—the guy is about as un-fun as a flat tire.

Whenever you and your girlfriend go out to dinner with him, or over to his house for dinner (which thankfully isn't very often), he typically ends up drinking more than you and your girlfriend combined and then telling you in front of your girlfriend—who is always somewhat embarrassed by her dad's behavior, apologizing to you afterwards when the two of you are alone again—how he wishes you'd either go back to school and get a bachelor's degree



or learn a trade. It infuriates you to have to defend yourself against him but you hold your anger inside because you don't want to risk losing your girlfriend by saying something unforgiveable to her dad, who definitely has a level of influence over the life decisions his daughter makes. The guy insists on knowing what your plans are, if you plan on keeping the same two "dead-end" jobs, as he likes to call them, for the rest of your life or what. When he looks at you he looks at you with a look that seems to say, *Boy, wake up!* When he looks at his daughter, he looks at her with a look that seems to say the same thing, only with the requisite tender fatherly compassion thrown into the mix: *You can do better, darling! Wake the fuck up!*

February proves a tough month for you: a week before Valentine's Day your girlfriend surprises you by breaking up with you.

Here's how it goes down: Sunday mid-morning—Sunday of all days, your favorite day of the week, your movie-and-pot

day—your girlfriend successfully persuades you, even though you have already waked-and-baked and have a DVD in your DVD player that you were about to start watching, to leave your apartment with her and get some fresh air. You ride with her in her Toyota Camry to a beach that months ago, before the summer had ended, you had gone to with her a handful of times to watch the sunset and talk and make-out and drink cheap beer as if the two of you were back in high school.

Your girlfriend parks her car facing the calm water in the sound, then turns off the engine. You sit there next to her, silent and stoned and looking through the windshield at the water, which is mirror-flat as usual but strangely metallic-looking today, the color of silver rather than blue. The sky is dark and gray every which way, though somehow it isn't raining or hailing or snowing.

Sitting behind the steering wheel, your girlfriend looks at the water with you. In your hypersensitive, stoned state, you think she is thinking nostalgically about the past. She is being unusually quiet, unusually reticent—she was like this yesterday, too, when

you returned to your apartment after work. Despite your advances, it had been a no-sex Saturday. With a hard-on you had asked your girlfriend what was up, and she had said, vaguely, that she just wasn't in the mood, that she was tired. And this morning, she uncharacteristically opted not to join you with smoking the requisite bowl while the coffee brewed in the kitchen. Vaguely, she'd said she just didn't feel like it.

Now, sitting in her car at the beach and looking past the patch of grass at the silver water in the sound, you start to feel nervous. Your hands are getting clammy, and your insides are adopting that ugly sinking hollow feeling that's related to breakups. There is too much silence in the car, not the good contented kind but the bad weighted kind.

You think: she is going to break up with me. You think: I knew this all along, but still, fuck.

"Let's go for a walk," your girlfriend says.

"Sure," you say. "Where to?"

At first your girlfriend doesn't answer you. She opens her

door and steps out of the car, and you do the same on your side. You look over the top of the car at her, and she says to you, vaguely, "Around."

You end up at a dog park. You follow your girlfriend's lead and sit down on a wooden bench, facing the dogs. You watch them tearing around in the frozen dry grass. Being dogs, they're having fun, of course, having a blast. Their owners are bundled up, standing in the grass, their shoulders hunched against the cold.

Your girlfriend comes right out with it. "I've been doing some thinking," she says, and now you are convinced that this is the end. Your heart is beating horribly now. You simply sit there and wait for her to elaborate.

She says, "I just need a guy who...takes life more seriously."

At first you think: vague, very vague. But you understand her. You are not as stupid as you like to let on.

You still can't think of anything to say though. You know better than to lie and tell her that you can change, that you'll take life more seriously, that you'll do it for her, that you'll do anything

for her. *Please give me another chance, baby!* Yeah, right. You may not have much, but you do have a certain amount of self-respect. At least, you like to think so.

You look at your girlfriend's face now, or your now-ex's. She is looking at the ground, looking serious, resolved. You still can't seem to speak. Stoned, none of this feels exactly real. It is almost like you are watching it happen to someone else. Almost.

Finally, your now-ex stands up. She turns around, looks at you. "Want a ride back to your apartment?" she asks.

You shake your head. You fight the urge to look back at her. "No, that's all right," you mutter.

You are both already something like strangers. You watch her start to walk away, back toward her car and a new life, one without you in it.

You continue to sit on the bench, watching the dogs that continue to play in the grass. You are convinced she'd had a talk with her dad earlier in the week, a kind of heart-to-heart. You are convinced it was primarily his doing.

It starts to snow, then, the first snowfall of the winter. You continue to sit there. You're in no hurry to do anything.

To deal with your newfound loneliness you start frequenting a particular bar after your shifts at the market. You drink nothing but house-whiskeys at the bar, and it doesn't take long before you've earned the nickname "House" from one of the bartenders, a young woman named Andrea.

"You know, the show," she says. "*House*."

She sets your new glass of whiskey on the counter. You pick the drink up and take a good sip of it. Andrea moves down the bar to help someone else, and when she comes back over to you, you tell her you know of no such show.

"You don't know the TV show *House*?" she asks.

You give her a blank, unknowing stare. You shake your head.

"What were you, born in a barn?"

"I was born here," you say, meaning in town.

"Close enough."

Andrea tells you she's from Seattle, and that she moved here for college. She tells you she's working on her master's. You ask her what she's getting her master's in, and she tells you to mind your own fucking business. But then she laughs and tells you.

You think she is weird, but, also, due to the defiant way she portrays herself, as well as her slim, able-looking body, sexy. She has quick, dark, cut-to-the-motherfucking-chase-already eye-shadowed eyes. Most nights she wears a black leather vest to show off a snake tattoo on her arm. After you asked her why she has a snake tattoo, she replied, "Because I bite back if anyone double-crosses me."

You think: wow, this chick has some issues. You think: she needs to get laid big-time.

The more you frequent the bar, the more intrigued you become by her. And that's how it happens all over again, after you go home with her one night. This is the young woman who momentarily helps take your mind off your most recent ex.

By March, the weather is slowly but surely warming up. After

you enter the market one morning, after greeting the women manning check stands 1 and 2, while walking past the produce toward the back to punch-in, you hear the manager overhead say, "Mornin' Dan."

You look up and wave, continue walking. But before you can get too far you hear the manager say, "Dan? Why don't you come up to my office for a minute."

You stop walking and turn around. You look up at the manager, who is looking down at you, hands in the pockets of his slightly-too-baggy slacks.

"Sure thing," you say, and try to act normal as you head toward the stairs.

The last thing you want to do is go up to the manager's office, of course. You try to think back to the last time you were called up there. It's been a while, years. You remember the manager's dad, the market's founder, when he interviewed you in the office that is now his son's office. You wonder why you're being called up to the office now, if the manager has good news or bad news.

You try to think about what, if anything, you've done differently lately at work, if you've done anything that someone might've complained about, either a coworker or a customer. You can't recall a thing.

You take the stairs to the second floor two at a time. You can still feel the heaviness in your legs from the bike ride over from your apartment. You take a deep breath before stepping into the manager's office. He left the door open, and is sitting in a swivel chair when you enter. After stepping into the office, he asks you to close the door. You close the door.

"Have a seat," he says, and thrusts out his hand toward the shiny aluminum chair on the other side of his desk. You sit.

At first he doesn't look at you, just looks at his computer screen. His eyes are wide, making him appear intent, like what he is doing is important. You look at him and try to look comfortable, content, though really you are uncomfortable and a bit disgusted by the manager, by his overall fleshiness—his perpetually-pink cheeks, his crimson forehead, his fat mouth. You

look from him to his desk, on which you see an assortment of papers, some scattered, some stacked neatly. You are glad you don't have the manager's job even if he does make more money than you.

The manager looks from the computer screen to you—an abrupt sweep of the eyes. He is like a hawk—from his office, he watches everything that goes on below, on the ground floor. You can feel your heart beating faster now, like it does when you're pedaling hard on your bike up a hill. The manager, you are well aware, has the power to fire you if he wishes to. You assume he doesn't need a legitimate reason. That he could simply say he doesn't think you're being friendly enough with the customers, that you don't ask them enough questions about how their day's going when you're in the middle of checking their groceries, and that that's a big no-no in his book. He could imply a three-strikes-and-you're-out sort of rule if he felt like it. Maybe you're about to get your first strike. If you are, you're still doing pretty good—your average so far would still be one strike for ten or so years.

Going by those figures, you still have twenty more years before you get the boot. You'll be in your fifties then. Lucky you.

The manager leans back in his chair without taking his eyes off you. You stare back at him, trying to look completely at ease. You try to smile. His face, though, like a serious poker player's, is unreadable. Your attempt at a smile quickly fades.

"I bet you're wondering why I called you up here," he says, and now he's sort of smiling at you. Against the redness of his face, his teeth look unnaturally white.

You nod, try to keep your casual appearance intact. "I may be lots of things," you say, "but one thing I'm not is a mind-reader."

The manager doesn't laugh at this like you'd hoped he would. You think: stupid! You think: why the hell did I just say that?

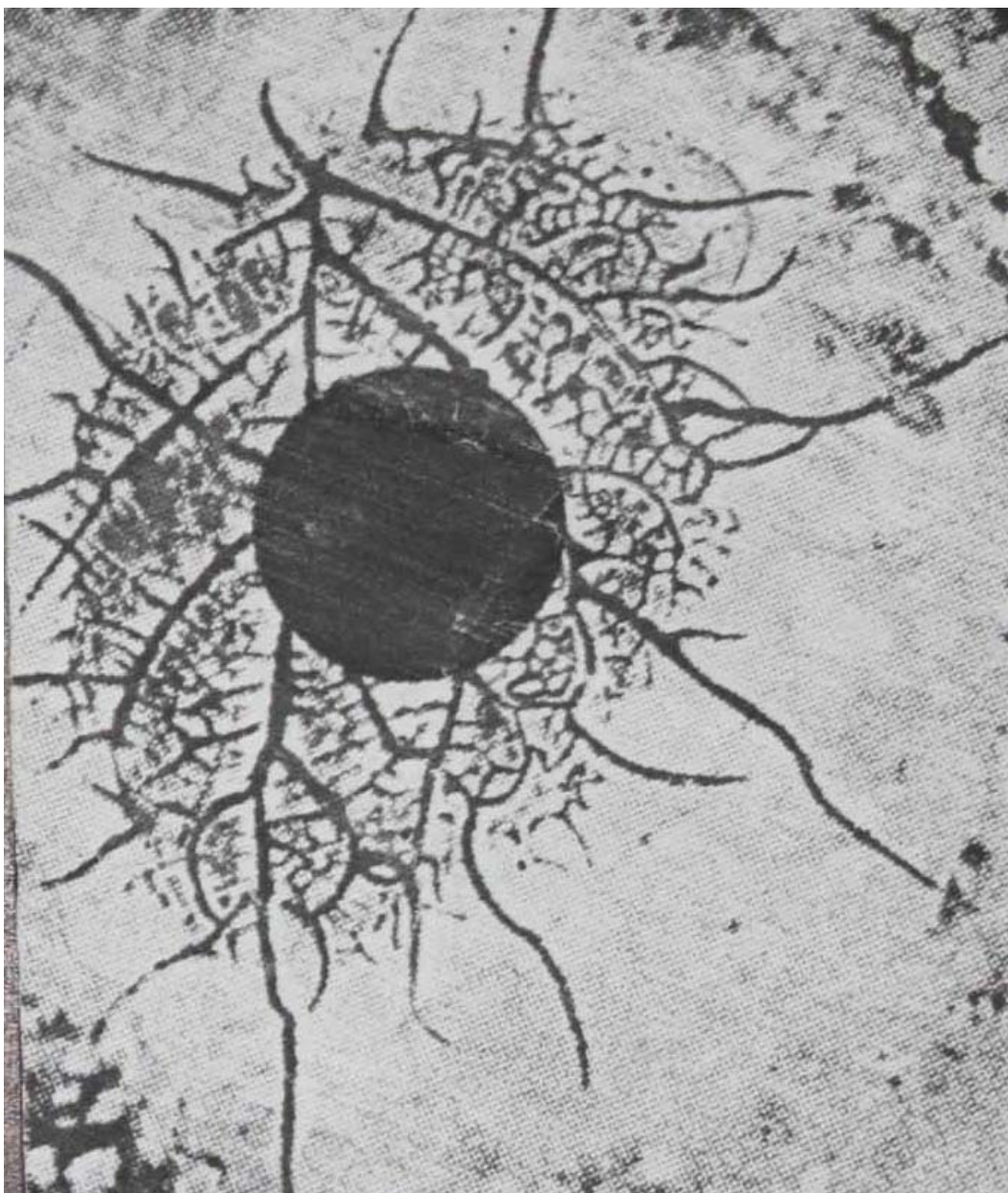
The manager leans back in his chair and interlocks his fingers. "Well Dan," he says, "I'll cut to the chase. You've been an asset to the company over the years, and to show my appreciation for all your steady and honest good work, I've decided it's time you got another raise. But I want you to do a little something in exchange

for me. I want you to say "Mornin' Bob" back each morning after I say "Mornin' Dan." I'd also like it if you could be a tad more gung-ho around the customers. Oh yeah, and one more thing. Now, don't take any offense to me saying this, but your posture, it's a little slumped, a little, well, defeated. It doesn't give our customers the best reason not to shop at, say, Haggens or Trader Joe's instead of here. So if there's any way you could work on standing up just a little straighter, I'd really appreciate it."

The manager, Bob, widens his eyes at you after this ludicrous rant. You stare back at him, hating him suddenly. He outstretches his hand over his desk then, his big, red, no doubt clammy hand. You look at this hand and notice a patchwork of dark bristly hairs over the meaty knuckles. You look at the manager's hand and think that it might very well be the ugliest hand you've ever looked at.

"What do you say?" Bob says. You look from his impossibly ugly hand up at his face, and see that he's smiling again. "We got a deal?"

Then the fucker winks.



# Albert's Teeth

by SUZANNE CONBOY-HILL

Albert's teeth are opinionated, unlike Albert. All day they clack on about things for which Albert has no interest or that he considers they should keep to themselves. It is especially difficult when they address the thorny question of what his wife looks like in a particular outfit. If they are complimentary, she will sidle up to him and make gooey eyes, and he is expected to make them back, as if they were sixteen again. Conversely, if they are not complimentary, supper is likely to be a very insular affair.

Albert often takes his teeth out at functions to avoid them insulting the vicar or the Lady Mayoress, but this means he cannot eat and so he has developed a strategy whereby he fills his mouth with as much food as possible and then eschews alcohol until he has been able to trap his teeth in a handkerchief in his pocket.

Albert always takes his teeth out at night to avoid opprobrium should they venture an opinion on his wife's upper aspect which has been making its way south for some years. This also means he can avoid any sex which might result from an inopportune comment. When once Albert's teeth said that they – not Albert of course – would like to slap Mrs Albert's backside until it glowed pink, Mrs Albert first slapped Albert around the face, and then presented him with her naked rump while giggling and cooing into the pillow.

Albert puts his teeth in a glass on the night stand and seals them into it by placing a saucer on top. They natter and worry at him from there, sometimes gritted up tight, other times gaping like a hungry clam. One day, Albert thinks, he will put a stop to it all with a hammer.





# Absurdians of the Madhouse

by KEVIN MUNLEY

Neo-chicago doesn't have a mental health problem. It has a robot problem. The robots that were programmed to protect the citizens from their depression, mania, and psychosis- the cancers of our modern technological world. The emotional tumors growing internally since we retired and left our work to the accountant-bots, teacher-bots and commander in cyborg robot presidents. It was thought that less stress would minimize the multiple psychiatric breaks large portions of the population were having. Instead, it just quickened them. Funny how that works. The therapists and psychologist couldn't keep up, but "luckily" there was a breakthrough in technological personality programming, The Absurdians 3000. Or as I like to call them the Dr Freudian-bots.

My name is Frank. I'm a diagnosed Bipolar depressive and drug addict. Last night, as I looked up into the night sky's mural

of solar flares and celestial colors, I said "fuck it" and jumped from my sky based cloud condo. It would have worked but the air patrol caught me mid-fall. I almost saw the ground beneath me when they intercepted my flailing body. So close, yet so far. The "Sky Absurdians," as we call them, are programmed to grab the intrepid people that break through the glass of their apartments. Let's just say I'm not the first. The Sky-bots contain you till then take you to The Absurdians 3000 emotional turmoil center (A.K.A the psych-ward).

The ward is one of the few earth based buildings left on our planet. It was built on a mountain top of garbage above what we use to call a planet. The unbreakable glass view from the unit is a foggy haze of pinkish destruction spreading out in every direction. If you see a light in the night sky, it's not the moon. It's time to get to your fallout bunker. I guess we can't blame all of our problems on the robots. The Sky-bots dropped me off in the interview room, where the foremost robots in mental health care waited to take notes on my distress and anxiety.

“Frank Ward. How are you feeling today?” the robot drones at me as it enters. It is surrounded by tiny intern-bots scurrying around while assisting him in his consultation. The scene reminds me of something out of the Hollywood myths of alien abduction that we once told ourselves. Those were the sci-fi Gods, we had worshiped at the dawn of the technological age, before we were able to use our Infinity Telescopes to prove that we were hopelessly alone in the expanse.

“Not that good Dr. I almost made the ground this time.”

“Do you have any current plans to hurt yourself or others, Frank Ward?” The tiny robots were probing me with their tools as the head Absurdian talked to me. One of them laser blasted a psychotropic substance into my bum. In the early days, the Absurdians would give the option of whether you wanted to take meds or not. That didn’t work so well. Most of the paranoid schizophrenics were not too trusting of the robots; something to do with their fantastical delusions around government, aliens, and

robots controlling every aspect of our lives. I can’t imagine why. Now they just transmit it through highly concentrated blasts up your ass crack. It cuts down on the unnecessary chit chat.

“Mr. Ward,” the head doctor droned, “On a scale of one to ten how would you rate how you are feeling?”

“Jeez Doc, can I say 100? Seriously, suck my dick, you useless piece of scrap metal.”

“I am glad to hear you are feeling better.” The robot naively responded to my insults, not registering my dick as a psychological concern for him to assess. The irony of the situation was too much for me at times. We built these hunks of tin to help us. “Security transport, please follow the patient to the ward immediately for therapeutic recovery.”

“Fuck you too,” I mutter. I’m led by gigantic robots with disproportionate tiny soup can heads to the higher levels of the compound. There is no fighting back or escape with the Security Transport. They have itchy trigger fingers and Electro-convulsive therapy deployment at their beckoning. During my last stay at

the unit, some pure cuckoo for brains tried to take on a bunch of them and they fried his brain into blissful submission. He was pretty much pooping in a diaper for the rest of his stay. No thanks. I like to do my pooping in holographic black hole disposal units like the rest of us.

The ward is jumping today. There were multiple admissions last night, something to do with the weather. A nuclear holocaust is a real bitch for sunny days. The Absurdians are busy buzzing from room to room on their motorized wheels. Like a technological Pegasus trademarked by Google, the Freudian-bots have the wheels of a Volvo and the head of a humanoid. They lead me to my room down the long hallway. Faces of deathless and broken misery stare back blankly at me from their rooms. My roommate is an older man in his fifties. He is wearing a button down shirt and a V-neck sweater, yet he has absolutely no pants on at all. It is not a good style for him.

“Mr. Jones, wouldn’t you be more comfortable in a nice pair of pants.” the security transport transmits through its conversational interface.

No, he wouldn’t. He begins to rant about the demons that are in his jean pockets and how they have been tampering with his privates. I feel bad for him. His penis does look a little misshapen. The robots leave me to talk Mr. Jones into a nice pair of pocketless hospital admission sweatpants. It doesn’t work. He slumps his tired body back down on his safe zone sleeping unit. “Don’t worry,” I tell him, “the Absurdians don’t wear pants and they are way happier than us.”

The quickest way to get discharged from the emotional turmoil center is to get up early, eat three meals a day, and go to lots and lots of groups. Each group is recorded in Binary Code. Solve the formula in the behavioral programming and you’re a free man. The groups are run by the Absurdians and cover a variety of subjects from medication adherence, to art therapy and

even to coping with stress. I shit you not, I once went to one called, “Don’t worry. Be happy.”

Right away, I’m already planning my way out. I wake up early and go to the first group, which is music therapy. The Absurdian therapist has a cloud based database of songs and each patient picks a tune and then we talk about it. It’s basically not quite as therapeutic as a juke box at a dive bar, but at least we get to listen to songs. I could really go for a shot and a bud right about now. Everyone gets a pick, even poor pants-less Mr. Jones. Arms raised and flailing, the Absurdian conducts our group of miscreants and fuck ups like the composer of a grand opera. Its not over until the fat crazy in a bath robe and slippers sings folks.

Mostly, the patients pick despicable songs that are played in popular commercials of the day and have little to do with being sad and depressed. Everyone is joking and laughing. The robots are pleased with our progress. Unfortunately, the Absurdian therapist calculates a low non-verbal reading from someone in the room and calls on the young girl sitting in the corner alone. She

has been quiet the whole time. Her hair hangs down, hiding her face; she looks attractive, but angry.

“Samantha Ray, is there a song that makes you feel happy?”

“Lots,” she responds with a sly smile on her face, “how about you?”

The robot pauses and tries to process his response. It is not used to talking about its own happiness. But Samantha presses on. “Are you happy?”

“I assure you I am very happy, Samantha. I have a good job and I get to help people.”

“And that’s enough for you?” Samantha asks. I’m unsure if she is fucking with him or generally interested at this point. The robot moves his wheels in closer to her towering over her diminutive frame. She looks young. Maybe it’s her first admission. There are stitches on her wrist. She’s a cutter. I could picture her hacking the glass in her sky-prison and trying to cut herself. She would only have minutes to do it, with their remote feeds in our condos, the Absurdian always get there.

“I am very happy,” the robot responds almost pathetically, but a week as a result of her angry outburst. So if I’m going to help, I also annoyed with being challenged. I look at Samantha who is have to sneak into her bunk. It’s not as difficult as it sounds. looking up at the robot with courage in her hair covered eyes. Most newborns are conceived this way; when schizophrenic A

“I’m not. I’m going to kill myself and you won’t be able to stop me.” Samantha explodes at it. This won’t end well. The Absurdian has remotely relayed her threat to the security unit. I just hope she goes willingly now. With poise, Samantha gets up and walks towards the security bots, who are confused by her compliance. They end up doping and dragging her to her bed anyway because they are slaves to their programming. The Thorazine blasts they deploy on her will keep her quiet and content for hours. Watching her frail human frame overpowered by the soldiers of tin, I make up my mind to help her. Actually, I think I’m in love with her. love? Did I mention I am in

The robots have a consultation period every night. The therapist bots hand the night shift over to the hulking security bots. During this consultation they insert their data files into each other while humming in their low buzz tone. It’s pretty sexy frankly. The security bots are clearly the power bottoms. The patients run from room to room in this period trying to find a little release from their loneliness. When I find Samantha, she is curled up in the top of her sleep unit, oblivious to the excitement outside of her room.

After you’ve made a threat against yourself or others, the process is containment. Like a computer virus infecting programming, the Absurdians isolate the files and delete. Samantha will not be allowed into the common room for at least

“How are you?” I ask. As she looks at me blankly, the haze of medication clears and she responds.

“Hi.”

“I’m Frank.”

“My name is Samantha.”

“I know.”

Turning on the bunk light, she looks at me closely. She spies the rings of pain under my eyes like space dust circling a planetary mass. She sees my slouch pulled low to the earth by gravity’s force. And she shrinks away from my uneven smile looking back at her like a misshapen crescent moon. There is a silent understanding.

“You’re too old for me Frank.”

“It’s not that,” I stutter for once in my miserable life. “I want to help you.”

“If you want to help me. Get me a screwdriver. Can you do that for me Mr. Frank?”

I had never seen a screwdriver though. The robots probably wouldn’t want us even thinking of rattling their bolts. I wondered if that was what Samantha had in mind. She’d never get close enough. They’d fry her long black hair with ECT till it never covered her eyes mysteriously again. Maybe she was just a nut job like the rest of us? Lost in her own delusions of grandeur like a cosmonaut in the great darkness of space.

When I return to my room, Mr. Jones is in there. He is talking about his penis again. Unfortunately, my thoughts are elsewhere, I’m thinking about Samantha and her long black hair which is darker than the darkest part of the night sky. It hangs in her eyes behind deep dark curtains. That and screwdrivers. Mr. Jones says something about ending his testicular misery. I consider asking him about a screwdriver, but he doesn’t strike me as being particularly skilled at home maintenance. Paying his crotch area no mind, I go take a piss in the black hole containment unit and watch my urine disappear into the horizon. It swirls around the

bowl down into the dark hole of nothingness. I'm just another man peeing into the cosmic wind.

When I return, Mr. Jones is thrashing about his bed like a hooked fish with his severed penis is on the ground. Fucking idiot! He had somehow managed to find the rusty dull edge of a can and sharpened it for cutting. He looks generally shocked at what has happened. As if in this moment, he has come back to reality. In seconds, the Absurdians are in the room. For once, I am glad to see them. There is an uproar and a struggle. Blood is smeared on the floor and bed. Psycho-pharmaceuticals are dispersed in furious blasts of light. Mr. Jones has an uninteresting soliloquy about his own personal sexual dysfunctions and then exits stage right with an entourage of robots. A cleaning droid scampers in to collect his severed penis, sweeps it into its dustbin, and then is gone. I won't be seeing Mr. Jones or his penis for a while.

Later that night, I sneak back into Samantha's room during the consultation. But she isn't there. The walls are covered in

pictures and images she has been drawing. Although I know it can't be, I feel like I'm in the room of a great Pharaoh's daughter. It's her tomb and it's decorated with long forgotten religious imagery. I'm moved. Samantha comes out of the bathroom.

"Frank. You got the screwdriver?"

"Soon. Just tell me though, what is your plan?"

"Don't worry about that now. Get me the screwdriver and then I'll tell you."

Our conversation is over, but I hesitate; I don't want to leave. I turn the conversation to an etching Samantha has done on the wall. Intertwined circles wrap around a center and are divided by beautiful and mysterious words like war and beauty.

"What's this mean?"

"It's the afterlife"

"It kind of looks like the planets and their orbits" I tell her. She looks at the circles with a daze and answers me with a laissez faire smile.

“I don’t know really what it is. I saw it in a book somewhere. Do you like it?” She asks me.

“It’s beautiful.”

Then she stops reflecting on her art and returns to the screwdriver. “The screwdriver Frank. I need the screwdriver.”

“I’m going to get into the consultation room later. I’ll get one.” I say and then I slink back to my room which is painted solely in dried penis blood. It’s not as majestic as Samantha’s murals, but it is the best art Jones was capable of. I actually have begun to miss Mr. Jones. It’s amazing how lonely we are as humanoids. We search the heavens for Aliens to destroy us. Then finding none, we build metallic friends to watch over us. Hopefully, Jones will be back soon.

I don’t go see Samantha the next few nights. I’m watching the Freudian-bots and planning my move. Unfortunately, security bots are always in the facility of the consultation room. At a loss at how to proceed; eventually, I luck out. During art therapy, a hardened heroin addict named Jackson loses it with this crazy ass

broad for criticizing his art. He can’t get over her comments about his nude still-life of his friend lacking in humanity and misusing the natural light of the room. I kind of liked it myself. It really shows some of the horrors of death and aging. Basically all parties involved lose it. Jackson starts throwing chairs. The art critic tries to escape through the emergency door. While the Absurdians and security bots are dealing with the riot, I’m already down the hall. Hiding behind a corner, I let the next wave of security bots pass. In seconds, I’m breaking the lock on the consultation room and I’m in.

The room is unadorned. The Absurdians clearly have no need for a home-like feeling at the office. They are at home with white walls, uncarpeted floors, and hideous wire protruding from the outlets. It looks like the inside of a Mac Book. Wondering how Samantha plans to open up one of the robots, I luckily stumble on a screwdriver. Their insides wouldn’t look too much different than their office I imagine. A bunch of cords and casing rotating and revolving around their miniscule computer chip. I



grab the screwdriver and begin to run towards her room. It won't be long before they act. They have cameras everywhere. I broke the lock and they will see it. However, she plans to rattle the Absuridians' bolts, there is no time like the present.

When I get to Samantha's room, she is waiting for me. "Why haven't I seen you?" She has missed me, like I missed Mr. Jones. Not as a friend, and I know she could never miss me as a lover, but she has missed me as human. A dying breed.

"I got it."

"Give it," she grabs the tool from me and examines the tip.

"How will you get close enough to the Absurdians to open one?"

"It's not for them, Frank. It's for me."

Samantha goes into the bathroom with the screwdriver. At first, I'm unsure if I should follow but my curiosity overcomes me. She begins to undo the bolts around the bowl. My God! She intends to get at the epicenter of the black hole unit.

"Thanks for helping me Frank."

"I'm sorry," I say. But I'm not sure why.

"No, don't be sorry. I appreciate it."

Samantha is meticulous with the bolts and finally removes the dark containment unit located at the base of the toilet. Inside is the cosmic nothingness that consumes all, even light. All of her depression and anger will be swept away and blown apart by gravity's wrath. Even the Absurdians can't stitch you up and resuscitate from the galaxy's own God of death. It's painful for me to watch her shoving the unit into her mouth, gagging on it and then after a struggle being able to swallow it. I know I need to say goodbye. There won't be another chance. She is moving at the speed of light away from me now towards a destination that awaits the Absurdians, the Earth and even the Galaxy.

"Samantha?" But there is no time for goodbyes. She is gone. She has done it. The light in her eyes flickers off and then she collapses. Her insides sucked into nothing. Her empty casing stares blankly up at me from the ground.

When I return to my room. Mr. Jones is sitting up in his bed. The Absurdians have stitched his severed penis back on, but he will never have sex again. I don't think he will miss it much. I can hear the commotion from down the hall. Samantha will disappear. Her files will be deleted. No one will know how she was able to beat the emotional turmoil system, but me.

I begin to talk to Mr. Jones as best I can. He is disorganized and makes unclear statements that I can't follow. It's shocking to me but I actually tell him I missed him. Eventually, I take over the conversation and begin to tell him about my mania, my depression and my drugs of choice. He doesn't say much and when he does, it is clear he does not understand the conversation. We stay up late talking and don't even notice that the sparkles of far off stars has been replaced with our own.



# People of the Mediterranean

by CHRIS HEMPHILL

My gut has shit for brains. I am stealing that line from a Nick Hornsby novel, but it is as true for me as it is for him. My gut told me to go home. It said, *This job isn't for you. Go home and pour some French roast on your face. It will be more fun that this,* but I stuck it out. Instead of walking back to my car, I approached the two fat security guards who were standing outside the domed government building.

"ID please, young man," the guard said and I produced my driver's license. I had shaved before making the eighty mile trip and so looked to be about eighteen years old. Shaving always caused others to refer to me as kid or young man for a day. It didn't bother me; you just notice the pattern after a while.

I walked along the marble floors toward Room 120. The letter in the mail said to wait in Room 120 for Samantha Alvarez

to fetch me for the job interview. Finding the room took a little while due to the fact that rooms 100-119 were on the first floor, but room 120 was on floor one-and-a-half. John Malkovich must have had a hand in designing this building.

I knocked and explained who I was to the first person who answered. I talked too quickly. I'm a fast talker in general, but can become a verbal machine gun when nervous. That day, you could hear a sonic boom behind my larynx. The person grumbled something about Democrats and after a moment, I realized that the waiting room was in the Republican office. At the time, I just thought it was just convenient. Now, I think it was part of the plan. You know, shove the nervous kids into the Barry Goldwater lion's den and make them sweat it out while waiting.

As this Republican staffer chastised me for being a pinko, I tuned out. I really didn't want to be here. I had an alternate job offer to teach English in Romania. It would be perfect. I could live in the center of Europe, working a job that required barely any thought, and could spend all my time partying. It would be

perfect. And not a single person I knew wanted me to go. My girlfriend Alex really didn't want me to leave. She never said it outright, but when I brought it up, the twenty seconds of silence made my comment feel like an ill-conceived Holocaust joke. My parents thought I was crazy. How could I turn down a primo political job to teach a language I already knew to a bunch of hieroglyphic-reading communists?

I knew they were probably right, but there was an allure to living in Europe and acting as though I was finding myself. In fact, I remember Alex talking about that very thing. "My friend Angela's brother went to Japan to find himself and he hated it. He needed to come back after a few months. I don't think you need to do that. I think you already know who you are." She was wrong, but it felt nice to know that someone believed it.

But beyond the "finding myself" rhetoric that I would peddle, it seemed like a great idea. I was a liberal arts major, had bombed the admissions test into law school, and had too much pride to go without a job. Moreover, I had tried the political route for about

eight months in D.C.. By try, I don't mean lead tours of the Capital. I mean I worked for a political company that made campaign commercials. I worked grueling hours, for a grueling boss, and ate gruel for food. Over time, I earned my boss's respect, they even started paying me.

Yet, I hated it, but couldn't voice that feeling aloud. Being a political science major, admitting that I didn't like politics seemed like an admission of failure. Moreover, people associated me with being political. To admit that politics left a taste in my mouth akin to black licorice would be to jeopardize my image. It also seemed like the kind of attitude from which chronic pessimists suffer. Those are the types of people that no one likes; I didn't want to be that kind of person. So I lied a little. I told people I loved the cut-throat competition, the yelling matches with my boss, and sleeping at the office. *No guys, I really did love it when my boss horse-traded me to Philadelphia to work on some stranger's campaign.*

The problem is that if you lie a lot, you become a good liar. I wouldn't say I became so good at lying as to convince myself that this falsehood was now true, but I would say a good liar can block out the dissonant thoughts in his own mind. And so I did that. All of a sudden working in a political job didn't seem so bad. You know, maybe I needed to give it one more shot. I needed to "double check" that I didn't want to work in politics.

And so that is how I found myself in this room being chastised by a Republican as though I were a child with tummy ache caused by eating too many fruit roll ups. Finally, Samantha arrived. I called her Ms. Alvarez as first, but she laughed that off and said to call her Sam. We walked back down the stairs to the first floor and approached a door. Sam said to wait outside and she entered the room. After a moment, a young woman dressed in a business suit walked out. Right away, I noticed something odd: she was crying.

Sam appeared and said, "They are ready for you now." She paused and then added, "Just so you know, they are being a little

ornery today." Two thoughts jumped into my mind. First, *ornery*? Second, I really don't want to start crying.

I entered and knew that this situation was going to get ridiculous fast. My interview location turned out to be a committee hearing room. Imagine the raised judge's bench in a court room, but with twenty-five of them. The seats were broken down into four auditorium-style ascending rows. Worse yet, almost every seat was filled. There were twenty people here to interview a twenty-two year old college student. The only open seat was a small table under a lamp at the base of the rows. I felt as though as I were a CEO from Big Tobacco waiting to testify before Congress. As I sat in the chair, I could feel the lamp's heat. I also noticed that my prospective interviewers were obscured by the light from my lamp and the lack of light from theirs. The shadow people were here to interview me. It felt like an interview for the opportunity to be a detainee at Gitmo.

“You are Chris...Hemper-hill, right?” A male voice from above asked. I couldn’t quite find the origin of the voice. I looked in the general direction from which I believed the voice came.

“Hemp-hill, actually,” I responded.

“Great.” Very quickly, they ran down their names and positions. I think it took the twenty of them a shorter time to finish their cumulative intro than it did for me to say my last name.

“So Mr. Hemperhill, tell us why you want to work in the state legislature?” A female voice from the back asked.

“Well, I would lik...”

“Hemperhill, what’s your favorite Mexican restaurant in D.C.?” A male voice cut me off.

“Salvador’s on K and 20<sup>th</sup>,” I spat out as quickly as I could. It was an odd question, but a former legislator-turned professor warned me that this interview process could turn into a confrontational experience. I glimpsed a couple of shadows talk to each other. I had made up the restaurant’s name on the fly and

they may have been questioning whether or not Salvador’s existed. Luckily, political hubris prevented them from admitting they didn’t know for sure.

“So, let’s get serious. Do you have any proof whatsoever that you are Democrat? I see nothing on your resume. Nothing at all. Dan Quayle looks more like a Democrat than you,” a hoarse female voice called from my right side.

“Well, I worked for Robin-Blake.”

“Isn’t that the actor who killed his wife?” The Dan Quayle lover shot right back without missing a beat.

“No. It’s a Democratic con...con...consulting group. We made TV and radio ads for a couple Congressional races, a couple of state-wide races...you know that kind of thing. I also worked on the John Kerry campaign in Pennsylvania.”

“Yah, but what about our state? That is what we care about. Did you help on any state races? What, did you do, for us?” The Quayle lover sounded like a low-level mobster shaking me down.

“I haven’t done very much state work.”

“Did you at least join the College Democrats?”

“Um...well...my friends were in the group. I often participated on the side.” I remember thinking that that answer could have been better. ‘My friends were in it’ was the equivalent of saying, *I have a black friend*.

“So Hemperhill, tell me about an animal that you love to hate?” A male voice yelled from what sounded like the middle.

“No, no. No!” the Dan Quayle lover said. “I want to talk more about this College Democrat issue. Hemperhill, why weren’t you in the group? I don’t care if your friends were in it. They aren’t going to be working for me.”

“Well, you know, I should have been more involved,” I said as resolutely as I could without causing offense. I wanted this line of questioning to end without showing fear or irritating my interviewers.

“Damn right,” the Quayle lover said. “I think you should apologize to the Democratic Party.”

“Yah, I really don’t think I am going to do that.” I could hear a couple murmurs from the firing squad.

“Tell me about your application essay? What was it about?” A higher pitched female voice from the back said. I looked in her general direction.

“Well, I wrote about the death pen...”

“Are you a late person?” A different voice from the left interjected.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“You know? Are you often late to things?”

“I don’t think so,” I lied. I was chronically late, but this seemed like a fairly innocuous question to me.

“Then why was your application essay eighteen days late? I am looking at this time stamp and it looks like this thing was almost three weeks late,” a male that sounded older asked. I couldn’t quite peg his location so I looked to the center.

“I found out...”

“No. Over here,” the previous voice said and he snapped his fingers. I still couldn’t tell his location, so I looked to the left instead of the center.

“I found out about the program about two weeks after the deadline, so I slapped together an application in like four days,” I lied again. The professor told me about it months ago. I had simply procrastinated for eighteen days. Maybe deep down, I did it intentionally.

“Does that explain why you’re a thief?” The high-pitched voice asked.

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t see a single citation here. Are you stealing from authors who actually do the work you were supposed to do?”

“Listen, like I said ten seconds ago, I slapped it together pretty quickly. I just wanted to get something done,” I said.

“Hemperhill, do you want to kill a human being? Like could you stab one in the eye with a butcher knife?” A male voice from in front of me called out.

“I am not into that sort of thing, but if we repaired the system, I could live with the death penalty.”

“What are you into? What is your fetish? Death?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“What did you say?”

“You heard me,” I said. It sounded too stern, so I added, “I can support the death penalty after a few changes.”

“So are you an overachiever?” A female voice asked from the left.

“No.”

“Do you enjoy marijuana?” A male voice from the left asked.

“No.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know whether you liked it?” The male voice asked in a tone I can only label, as ‘gotcha.’ I definitely walked in that. If George W. Bush could avoid this trap with Al Franken, how did I fall for it?



“As I read your letters of rec, I see this –great—paper referenced in two of them. Tell me about how –great—it is,” a sarcastic male voice from the very top asked. The sound of his voice gave me the impression that he was (1) an asshole and (2) the top guy in charge.

“Well, I worked on a paper about the effects of digital video recorders on politic..”

“Did that paper have cites?” The Quayle lover returned with a comment.

“Yes.”

“Go on,” the top guy said with a stern tone. It was either aimed at me in general or at the Quayle lover for interrupting his questioning.

“Well, you see. No one really likes political advertis...”

“I like it,” a random female voiced interjected.

“..ing. DVRs give them the ability to skip the ads. So imagine regions where political ads are over-saturated, like Ohio or Iowa, you know places where political ads are 75% of the commercials.

Now combine that with people’s general dislike for political ads. People used to endure the ads so as not to miss the *Cosby Show*, but with DVRs like Tivo, people are just turning off the TV, turning on the Tivo, and skipping over the political ads. If that is true, then campaigns need a new way to communicate. I wrote the paper on that.”

“So you are saying that we are failures?” The top guy said.

“Not exactly.”

“How do we know that you are a Democrat?” A female voice from somewhere unknown asked. *Back to this*, I thought at the time.

“Well I am pro-life and believe in gun-contr...”

“I’m a Democrat and don’t believe in those things,” she interjected. “A lot of Democrats don’t believe in either of those.”

“Well, I...”

“Where would you say the southern part of our state begins?” A young male voice with a rural accent asked.

“I think if you drew a line from Keystone City from east to west, the southern portion would fall under that,” I said. I made that theory up on the spot. I had never been farther south than the middle part of the state and for good reason: God knows what is down there.

“Would Bakerston be in the south?” The rural male asked.

“I don’t really know where that is, I’m sorry.”

“Where is I-42?”

“I am sorry, I don’t know.”

“Who are your state representative and state senator?” The top guy asked.

“Johnson and Andrews.”

“What about in the college town?” The top guy asked.

“Hentzel and Wagner.”

“Name the four legislative leaders,” the top guy demanded.

“Johnson, Cruz, Allen, and Bradley,” I said and a few people laughed. I didn’t know the answers to these state political

questions until a couple of days ago. Again, the former legislator-turned professor warned about some of the common screw ups.

“Name the U.S. Senators,” the top guy said.

“McGovern and Sanders.”

“Would you ever run against any of them for office?”

“No, I am a Democrat.”

“Okay. Let’s just say that we filled up all of our spots, would you work for the Republicans?”

“No, I am Democrat.” They laughed again. That was a sucker question for which I am glad I didn’t fall. An hour or so earlier, I had interviewed with the state’s nonpartisan research agency and although I tanked that interview, the interviewer warned me about that specific question. A lot of college students simply want a job, so they answer yes. However, loyalty and party discipline are the precious metals of politics.

“Hemperhill, what do you do for fun?” A different male voice asked.

“I read a lot.” They laughed.

“What else do you do besides read?”

“I watch sports.”

“Do you drink when you watch these sports?” The male asked.

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“As much as the average college student.”

“How much is that?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Have you ever drunk so much you forgot?”

“Probably.”

“How often?”

“How am I supposed to answer that, if had forgotten?” While I was getting tired of this hazing ritual, I also was enjoying it. I was beating them and they knew it.

“Hemperhill, why do you hate people from the Mediterranean?”

“Um, what?” I remember thinking I had a Greek uncle, but we were on pretty good terms.

“I am looking at your resume and it appears that you hate Greeks and Italians. Tell us why.”

“I really don’t know what you are talking about. I like Greeks as much as the next group of people.”

“It says here on your transcript that you received your lowest grade in Greek and Roman Mythology. But you just love your Asian classes. What’s up with that? Do you have a thing for Asians?” I do in fact have a thing for Asians, but this seemed like a bad time to bring it up.

“You know, I really could have studied more for that class. I still kind of regret that.”

“Were you drunk?” Even I laughed at that comment.

“No, I wasn’t drunk.”

“Hemper-hill, do you own a car?” A female voice asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t afford one.”

“Where are you from?”

“Prentice Lawn.”

“I know people from there. They all have cars.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“I live in a trailer park. We have to make choices. Car wasn’t one of them.”

“You live in a trailer park?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then how did you end up in college?” I laughed at that too. It wasn’t unusual for people to assume I was born in an upper-crust type place. I can give off that entitled attitude sometimes.

“Where do you buy your shampoo?” The Quayle lover asked.

“Wal-mart,” I said. Before I finished, they started to boo me. I couldn’t believe I was being booed in a job interview.

“How do you think you did, Hemper-hill?” The top guy asked.

“Okay.” I knew I had done fantastically well.

“Do you have a confidence problem?”

“No, I just didn’t want to be bold.”

“Okay, we have one final question for you. This will be the last one, we promise,” said a male voice that I had not heard before. “If you could be any male character from *Saved By The Bell*, who would you be?”

“Zach because he is the leader.” One of my better thoughts at the time was that if all else failed, an answer should somehow be related to leadership.

“Not Screech ‘caz he was smart or Slater because of his muscles?”

“Nope. Screech may be smart, but he just follows Zach. And Slater, well, Slater is one of those guys who is popular in high school, but has no future.” They laughed at the comment. It seemed like a good note to go out on.

And with that, I was done. As I walked out, Sam told me that they liked me quite a bit. I had mixed feelings; while I could handle this job and those people, I definitely didn't want to do so.

Yet, did you ever have one of the moments where success overwhelmed your internal compass? That happened to me. I aced that interview and a job offer followed shortly thereafter. My girlfriend wanted me to take it. My parents did as well. Yet, my gut said, *don't do it. If you do this, you'll regret it.* Remember how much you hated D.C. But like I said, I knew my gut has shit for brains, so I ignored it. I trusted my professors, my parents, and my girlfriend. They said take it, so I took it. And after that, I learned that gut isn't the only things that has shit for brains.



# I'm Alec, Call me Keith

by JOHN GREY

My name is Alec but you can call me Keith. My parents called me Alec. Enough said.

And here I am. If you asked me why, I'd have to say compulsion. It's like that with everywhere I show up. I don't plan to be here. I don't Google Map this place or key it into my GPS. Forget motive or wondering if I'm just plain off-the-wall crazy. But it must be someone's plan that has me in this basement apartment, a bloody knife dangling from my hand and a hacked-up corpse slumped at my feet. Could be God's design. Or some insidious plotting by the devil. Or my parents, you know, the ones that called me Alec, who refused to say, "We love you, Keith." They're both dead of course. But that hasn't stopped them crying out, "Hey Alec!" from time to time. I just don't like the name.

When I was younger – three jobs back, and my nose maybe one thousand lines of coke clearer, I'd have just brushed it aside

when people said, "Alec this", "Alec that." Alec is on my license. I can't help that. It's on my birth certificate as well. But that's the government and they're too vast, too multi-headed, for me to seek my revenge upon. Individuals are different. They live in one place. There's a face to go with the insult.

"Your name's not Keith," she said. "It's Alec."

She'd poked around in my wallet when my attention was elsewhere. I'd rather she'd slipped a few of my dollars up her crutch – you know, for services rendered. But she had to go looking in my personal papers. They said "Alec." They're really my impersonal papers.

She had no idea that Alec's crazy mama dressed him in skirts until he was school age, that his drunken father beat him around the head and called him a sissy. Alec was slow to grow, that's all. He was weak. He was puny. But he had a pretty face that his momma said looked like a girl's. And Alec's old man wanted a bruiser for a son not a wimp. He sometimes called his boy "Alicia."

But Keith was different. His body was filled out. He was confident and strong. Nothing could upset him except, that is, when someone had the temerity to call him Alec. He would give that smartass a beating. He just wished he could do the same to Alec, put him away for good. But that pansy was always out there somewhere where he couldn't get at him – in a registry, on a database and, worst of all, holed up, quivering and afraid, in a memory.

I was in prison for ten years. What I mean is that Keith was in prison. He was just released. He was tried as an adult but he only got ten years. “Mitigating circumstances,” the jury said. If that's what you call having to stand up for that fairy, Alec, then so be it. Of course, it's his name in the prison records. But it sure wasn't Alec who shoved that stupid bitch down the stairs or wrung the old man's neck.

None of which explains what I'm doing here. Strange room. Strange woman. Not even Alec had this problem. He hid himself in his room mostly. He didn't suddenly appear in alleys or

barrooms or women's apartments or the park late at night. Alec was too busy burrowing down in the sheets or crawling under the bed. And tinkering with that computer.

Now there's some said that Alec, for all his puny frame and low sense of self-worth, possessed a most remarkable mind. What if it wasn't God or the Devil but Alec and one of his damn computer programs who are putting me in these situations where my only recourse is to get mad, grow violent, stab or throttle anyone who refers to me by that other name. I'm not Alec. My parents called me that and you can see where that got them. I'm Keith.

Look at that stupid bitch on the floor – Sheila she said her name was. Not Andrea, no. She kept insisting she was no longer Andrea.

“Andrea's weak,” she said. “She falls for any old line. She believes what guys tell her. I'm Sheila now. I'm strong. I take control. I know when someone's trying to put something over on me.”

You know Alec and Andrea would have probably got along just fine. But Keith and Sheila? I'll let you know after I wash this blood off my hands.





# Booger Brothers

by MATTHEW RAMELB

When Lauren said she was moving out, I made plans to make sure I wouldn't be there. Her parents, both retired cops who had never approved of me, were going to show up with their truck on Saturday morning. Her friends were also coming with a U-Haul. I imagined how all of them would be lined up in my apartment like ants, tracking dirt on my carpet as they struggle with Lauren's stuff. There was a picture of me in the hallway walking out of the water, surfboard in hand, mouth agape in exhaustion. Even though I wouldn't be there for the move, they'd all have to look at me at every pass.

Our relationship had changed when Lauren got a new job working on infomercials. It was at some studio production in a high rise in Westwood. I went there once, flip flops and salty, to see what her job was about, the bright lights, the woman who cried for the camera when asked how some cream made the

wrinkles around her "dé·colle·té" disappear. I didn't even know what the fuck a décolleté was. When they reshot the scene, her sobbing and tears returned on cue. I couldn't wait to leave. Then there were the long hours on production. Lauren started coming home right before sunrise, and then some guy in an S2000 began picking her up for work. What was most difficult was the distance between us. Even when she was only inches away in bed or in the same room, she just wasn't there anymore.

When Saturday came, my surf buddies met at my place before convoying to San Diego. Lauren stopped packing when I was about to leave, standing before me in house sweats and a grey T-shirt. Boxes were laid out across the living room floor. Her brown hair was disheveled from sorting through her things. We both knew what today meant. I looked upon her light skin and hazel eyes on this last day she'd call El Segundo home, but I didn't want to drag things out. I said, "Hey, well maybe I'll see you when you come back to grab the rest of your stuff?"

She nodded. "Okay."

It was a short hug, but I squeezed her tightly. When I shut the door it made a loud thud. The sound of three years echoed in the hallway.

When I returned on Sunday, I wasn't looking forward to seeing the damage. A few things were out of place. Her Dan Brown and George R. Martin books were off the shelf. I walked in the kitchen and found her family-size container of Twizzlers in the trash. Our bed was gone, along with her dresser and our small TV. Where her pile of clothes and vanity used to be was now a vast and barren blue carpet. I used to get on her about her mess, but now I wanted more than anything for that pile to still be there. I was doing fine until I entered the bathroom. All her little face washes and bottles of shampoos and conditioners were gone.

It felt like a black hole had formed in my stomach and was rising towards my throat. From the second-floor window, I watched the sun's rays fade over the entire street in my half empty apartment with my half empty heart. Shadows from the incoming night began to drain the light around me. Looking out

from the living room, I stood there motionless, and that's when Manny called.

"Matt," he said. "I really need you right now."

I had known Manny since the third grade, but we hated each other back then. We used to be in a friendship tug of war over Sebastian and Martín, the Gioberti brothers. Whenever they wanted to hang out with me instead of Manny, he would say, "Fine! Go hang out with your *Hawaiian boyfriend!*" I used to say I would kick his ass, but I never had it in me.

We officially became best friends in the sixth grade when the Giobertis moved to Orange County. It happened after school one day, when Manny asked me to help him build a model of the world for his science project. He laid out a Styrofoam board on his front porch. We hovered over it. Manny began by drawing a racetrack in the center. From there, we pasted on random things: a Micro Machine car, a plastic tree, a figurine of a little man running in a yellow tracksuit.

Manny looked up at me and said, “You know what, Matt? I think we should become best friends.”

“Okay,” I said. “But we have to become booger brothers.”

“Booger brothers?” said Manny, with his head tilted to the side, showing his front teeth. One of them was crooked.

“Yeah,” I said. “You see, you stick your finger in my nose, and I’ll stick mine in yours.” We crossed arms. *Booger brothers*. I had made the whole thing up, a joke. After picking each other’s noses, we had to put our fingers in our mouths. I waited for Manny to flinch. Without hesitation, he opened his mouth and held eye contact with me the whole time. I’ve never questioned his loyalty since.

Manny’s wife had picked the same weekend to move out. He was really private about personal matters, so he had only told me about their problems a week prior. For Manny, they began with “Happy Hour,” when Monique, who used to be a homebody, started staying out late and partying with her coworkers. For Monique, I don’t know when the problems began. Manny was a

piece of work himself. Ever since AA, he considered himself a “sober drunk” and a “work in progress.” Throughout his bouts with alcoholism, he lost friends, so it would take a hard woman to stand him. While Monique was just, simply put, a nice girl.

He asked me to be there, to walk in his house with him after she left.

“Sure, where you at?” I said.

“I’m at the Petco on Inglewood Ave. I need you to go over there, Matt, and tell me if they’re gone yet.”

I was driving down Aviation Boulevard on my way to console him, but I was already failing. I struggled to hold in my tears. I thought about all the dinners with Lauren, sitting side by side, stoned, and eating on our coffee table in front of the TV. We’d watch *Clone Wars* or *Regular Show* on Cartoon Network. I’d set down the drinks and placemats, waiting for her to stop stirring throughout the kitchen, and then she’d come out in her pajama pants with our food ready. Now I wouldn’t be waking up next to her or coming home to see her on my couch anymore.

I did the recon in front of Manny's house, only to find his mutt Smokey, sitting up in the driveway, looking confused from having just seen one of his masters pack up and leave.

When I spotted Manny's truck at Petco, I parked right next to him. Both in our driver's seats, we turned to face each other. I don't know how I must have looked like to him, but Manny looked horrible. His facial complexion had a tinge of green in it, and his eyes looked tired like he hadn't slept in days. He reminded me of the Haunted House ride at Disneyland, when the hologram of a ghoulish face takes the place of your own reflection.

As soon as we entered his house, Manny stomped towards the kitchen in his work boots and said, "Fuck! Monique took the fridge." All that remained was dust on the tile floor, not even the dinner table or chairs. He flicked on the lights and entered his bedroom. "Fuck, she took the fuckin' bed, too. That was *my* fuckin' bed. And the wedding pictures?" He stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the blank walls. "Un-fuckin'-believable." He tore through cabinets and drawers. "This is fuckin' terrible, Matt."

I felt the vibrations of his footsteps as he continued with his inventory, Smokey scampering alongside with him. I wanted to vent about my issues, too, having just seen the aftermath of Lauren's move, but how could I compare? I had willingly let Lauren take whatever she needed, even offered up my own stuff. I figured if I couldn't have her, everything else was useless. Even then, she wasn't excessive in the things she took.

I followed Manny back into the kitchen. He opened his silverware drawer and said, "Mira," scooping up a handful of plastic flatware. "Look what they left me with."

He asked me to accompany him to see his AA sponsor Loretta. We were exiting the 105 West amidst the runway lights of LAX when he said, "I'm tired of crying, Matt."

When his voice cracked, he looked away from me. I grabbed his hand and said, "Hey, man, we're gonna be all right." He grabbed it back. It was an awkward moment between men. We were like two cancerous testicles without the shaft. Balls are usually uneven. In this case, he'd be the bigger ball.

I had only met Loretta once before on a personal invite from Manny. None of our other friends had met her. She was small and wrinkled like a thumb with thinning white hair, but she had the mouth of a chainsaw.

When we arrived, she greeted us at the door, holding a thick manila folder. Manny handed her some envelopes to put inside of it. We sat down at her kitchen table. Cigarette smoke rose as they pored over scattered documents. She went over Manny's to-do list: change the locks, switch the bills into his name, cease contact with Monique, write down the things she took, obtain his tax documents, and prepare for the lawyers. Loretta even made me sign a few papers.

Just then, Manny received a voicemail and played it on his speakerphone. It was his father-in-law, telling him not to contact Monique anymore, and that Manny had less than a month to come up with twenty-thousand dollars or lose the house. He said

in a drunken slur, "You don't want to mess with me, Manny. You don't know me."

Loretta looked at him and said, "You need to do these things," she pounded the table, "now!"

"I'm gonna have to sit on these for a second," said Manny. "I got work tomorrow."

Loretta took a strong pull off of her cigarette and held her breath. "We've all got something to do tomorrow, stop making excuses!" She blew her smoke into the air, raising her drawn-on eyebrows. The network of wrinkles on her face became agitated. "I'm seventy-eight and I've got cancer, and I'm still wiping your ass!" She looked at me and said, "Matthew, I've been telling him to do these things for weeks." She drilled into him, telling him how she had warned him, that they were too immature to get married in the first place and buy a house together, but that at least they didn't have kids. She looked at me and ended with, "I only promised Manny one thing when he came here. The truth!"

Manny sat with his legs crossed, biting his nails and shaking the loose foot that dangled over his knee, but his eyes were wild, cutting through Loretta and the white wall behind her. Even though he was sober now, I could see a familiar scourge rising within him.

“And how are you, Matthew?” asked Loretta, lighting another cigarette. “I heard you were going through a tough time, too.”

What could I say? I had just watched them go over Manny’s paperwork as if they were planning The Allied Invasion. Until the divorce, each day for Manny would be a calculated game of chess. One wrong move, and he could lose everything, even his sobriety. Sure, I was devastated over Lauren, but the only thing I had to worry about was the other half of the rent.

“Thank you, Loretta. I’m fine.” I cracked a smile. “I’ll be all right.”

When we got back to Manny’s house, he suggested that I move in. He had the extra room now. We could help each other save money, help each other, period. It made sense to stick

together, so I told him I’d move in at the end of the month, and then I drove home.

I had never spent the night on my couch before, but the lifeless air in my bedroom compelled me to quarantine it off. I spread my military-issue sleeping bag across my couch. It looked more like something to put a dead body into. I lay down and stared at the ceiling, thinking about how funny it would be if I drowned surfing the next big swell. I fantasized about Lauren getting that phone call. One of my surf buddies would break the news to her saying, “Lauren,” in a light, tactful voice.

She’d know that something was wrong and reply, “Yes. This is her?” in a worried tone.

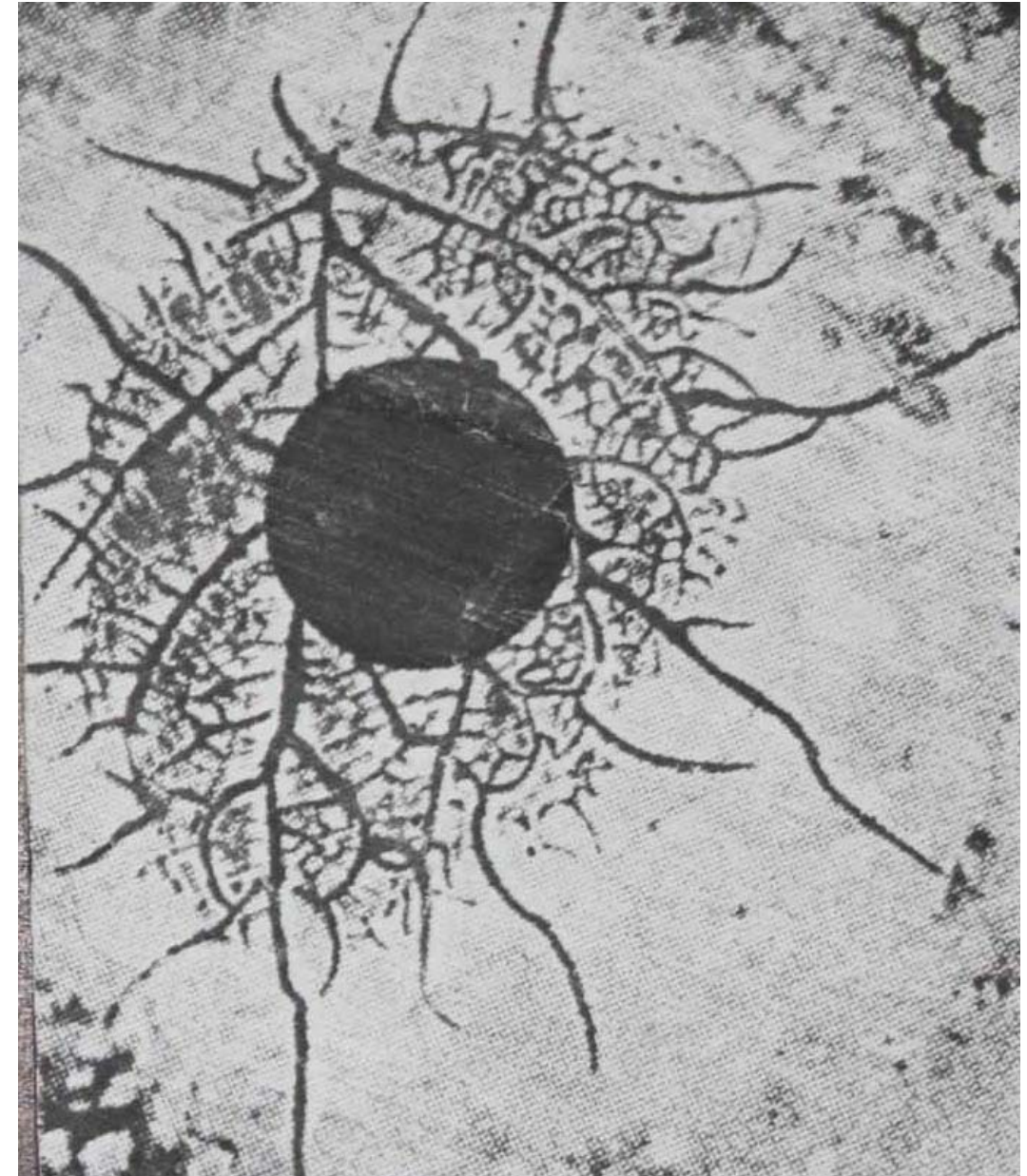
“Matt . . . he drowned surfing El Porto today. It was big.”

That’s when Lauren would drop the phone and breakdown crying. Maybe then she’d feel the guilt and regret of leaving. I smirked for a moment, but then I pushed a breath through my nostrils, realizing how stupid of a thought that was. And then I imagined Manny in his house, probably still in his work clothes,

staring at a blank wall, justifying how this would be the perfect moment, if there were no other, to have a drink.

This wasn't the movies where the woman comes back running, pounding on the door, and then the guy jumps up, swinging it open to find her standing there in tears. One begs for forgiveness, the other says, "Yes, yes, of course." They hold a long kiss and embrace, promising never to part again.

Small cracks of light crept through the blinds. My router and modem gave off a subtle glow of green and blue dots. I could see the frost from my breath, so I pulled the sleeping-bag zipper all the way up.



# Red, Blue

by DAVID THOMPSON

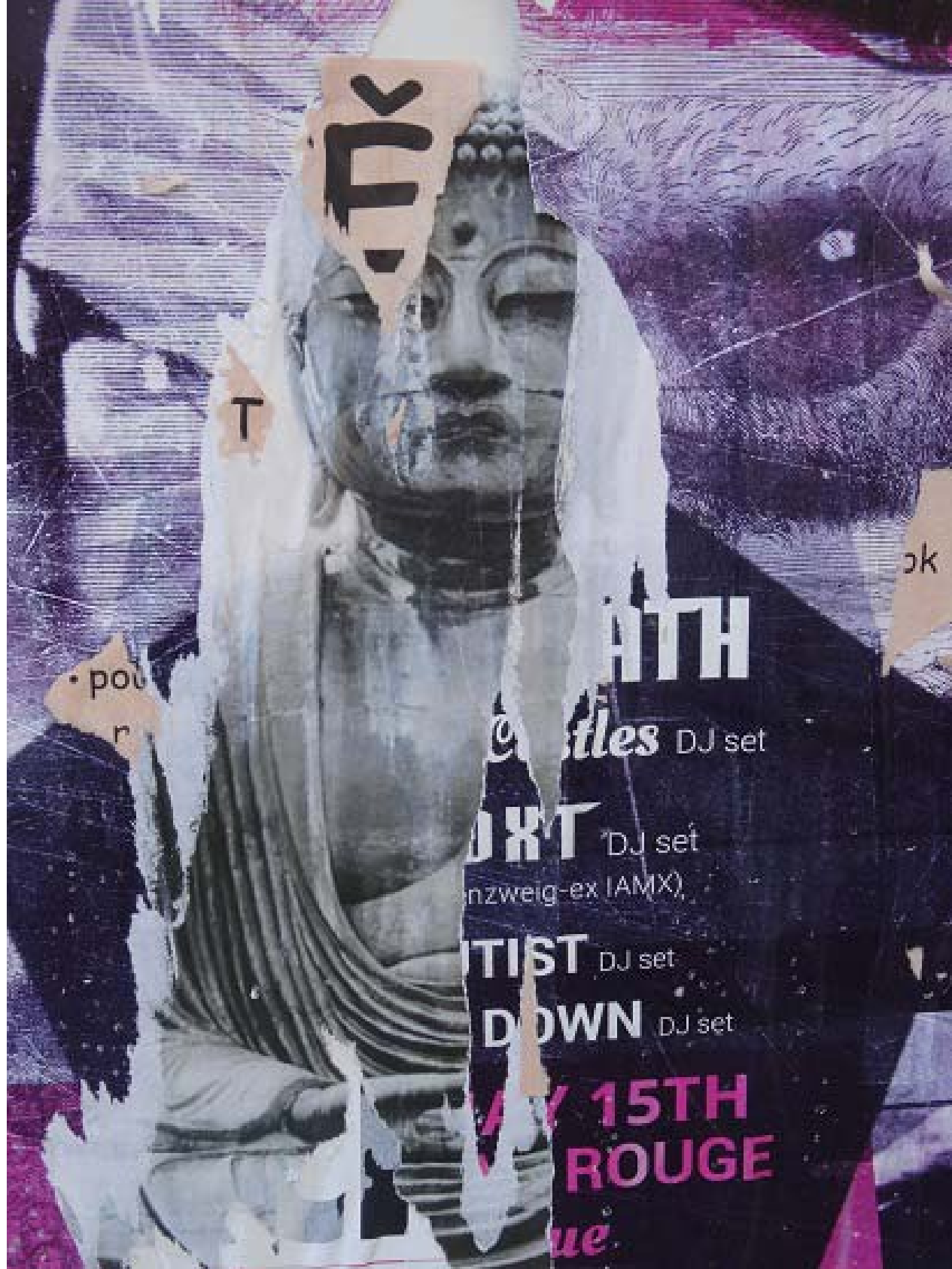




# Night

by DAVID THOMPSON





# Torn Buddha

by DAVID THOMPSON

# how i am somewhat responsible for internet porn

by STEVEN RUGEL

a long time ago  
in a land far away  
toronto canada  
my brother and i took a job  
helping a man integrate  
cameras  
and the internet  
so he could throw one of the  
first  
internet  
live sex shows  
  
this was ground breaking  
history making stuff man  
like being one of the first  
men in space

only this was more like  
being some of the first men  
to fuck around in cyber space  
literally  
(and also sort of...allow me to explain)  
  
the beauty of that time  
so long ago  
the first days on the internet  
was the innocence  
hell  
no one had even called another person  
a fascist pig fucker  
on a message board yet  
(it was that long ago!)  
and the internet didn't really have the power

to move video between machines yet  
in fact  
if you wanted to upload a .jpg pic even  
you had to compress it to like 2 kilobytes first  
or go with a transparent .gif  
(that gave some photoshop geek a stiffy  
you know who you are!)  
then connect to the internet through a phone line  
with a modem kicking 2400 bauds or some shit  
(that just gave some old time tech geek a stiffy  
you know who you are!)

and to connect this old modem to the internet  
you had to first endure a sonic warfare  
of myriad sounds  
an argument of sorts  
between the modem and the server  
like

ba-dong  
ba-ding  
screeeeeeeeeeeeqk  
waaaaaaaaaaaaa  
boy-ba do  
boy-ba ding  
boy-ba dong  
sounded like a robot raping  
or being raped  
by a donkey  
with neither enjoying the experience

and after about a minute you could connect  
then ftp your pic to your server  
and after it started uploading  
you could walk away and take a lunch break  
and come back and maybe  
if you were lucky

the pic would be on the internet  
where testing it by downloading it  
would take another several minutes  
the internet was that pathetically slow  
in its early days

so that was an innocent time  
in a lot of ways

and since the internet  
didn't have the throughput  
for video yet

our toronto canada

live sex show

was

in reality

just a couple nude people posing

while a very low resolution camera

took a pic every 15 seconds or so

and attempted to pseudo stream the frames  
onto the net

now imagine how innocently  
you could make pornography  
under those circumstances

people pose

camera shoots

reposition

camera shoots next frame

director occasionally yells something inspirational

like

smile jimmy act like you love it!

and

since there was no sound with the pics

we all hooted and hollered

laughed our asses off

threw in suggestions for poses

and thought  
how simple  
easy  
lucrative  
and non invasive  
and also hilarious  
and thumb in society's eye sort of dignified  
it was  
being a porn star  
on a live sex internet site

when our couple of hours  
live sex show  
was almost up  
the director decided  
the internet audience deserved a finale  
the first ever  
live

cum shot facial  
on the internet

at this point  
i was no longer laughing  
being a bit of a prude  
frankly  
and a germ-a-phobe too  
i became a bit uncomfortable  
with what this director just might ask  
his models to do  
i waited uneasily to see what was about to happen

however  
since our camera  
and our streaming uploading pics  
were 15 seconds ahead of the internet

all the director had to do  
was position the two models  
then  
from outside the camera's view  
he threw a handful of white hand lotion  
in one model's face  
the camera shot before  
then fifteen seconds later  
voila!  
the first ever  
live on the internet  
cum shot facial

and we all went back to laughing  
and hooting and hollering  
and drank some beers and cracked up  
over and over  
about what a relief it was

to not have degraded any fellow human beings  
that day

see?

i told you the internet  
was innocent back then  
ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

looking at the internet today  
i sometimes ask myself  
what the fuck went so horribly wrong?  
or has it gone horribly right?

and how did it come to now  
to today  
with people actually  
you know

doing it  
in a lot of pretty graphic  
sometimes even disgusting ways  
all over the internet?

and then i remember  
that first live sex show  
toronto canada  
the innocence then  
and how that first experience in the business  
as a guy hired to help integrate  
video and the internet  
desensitized me  
to a lot of things in this world  
without me even realizing it

and then i remind myself  
that i know how it all came to this  
and how i played my part

i helped bring big titties to the world  
(and yes you are all welcome for that  
i doubt any of you did as much for me and mine)  
but back when i did it  
it was clean baby  
it was innocent  
it was funny  
it looked like a two frames a minute  
charlie chaplin old time silent movie  
the internet moved so slowly back then  
and a handful of lotion  
went a long long way  
to fool this fucked up world  
into thinking things were far more real  
than they really were  
and that  
set a trend  
that has never since stopped trending

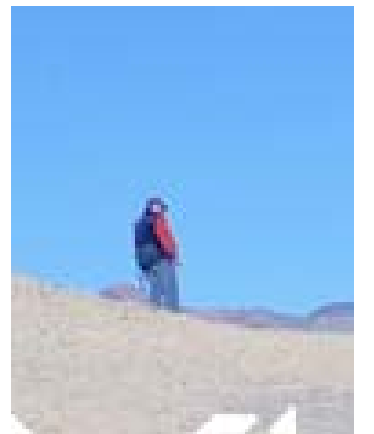


# She's a Penis-cloud

by BRENDAN R. VAN VALKENBURGH

That girl is a penis-cloud. A high up thing, cast against the beautiful blue. Stark in its profundity. A thing that rolls through this world, unfolding like some great story of heavenly brilliance. Amazon genius—a cloud in a sky of so many clouds—none of them detracting from one another's perfection, only adding. An integral player in a great blue world of panoramic delight that would always be just so curiously perfect, yet never the same without that one unique form. That one unique body—still perfect amongst all the rest. It's impossible not to take notice. Not to wonder. Not to dream. And so we stare, that one-eyed devil and I, walking so far beneath her, along the same street. She doesn't walk or stride or move. She unravels like Weezer's sweater. She unravels like Jack Torrence's mind. And so we stare—all of us—up and down the street. Binocular and monocular alike. We stare—we

gaze longingly at the cloud as she drifts between the other clouds—down the blue sky of our street. But in the end she's a penis-cloud. A cumulous for the cock. A stratiform for the schlong. A duplicatus for the dick. A nimbostratomutatus for the knob. From here she looks so curiously perfect. The sensual curves of her billowing celestial brilliance. One might go as far as to suggest majesty. Yet, when you approach—when you find yourself close . . . you find that she isn't even there. The ideal form of her cumulus curves gives way to a nebulous haze of disjointed life. Perfection from where I stand and stare. Closer though . . . its almost as if she never was. And that is the secret to her curious perfection. She's a penis-cloud, my friend. Leave her in the sky.



# On Freeways in Los Angeles

by JESSICA SHEETS

Weekends at my dad's house, cooking cheap sausage and blasting Breakfast With The Beatles. "Get Back" breaks my 10 a.m. slumber (mom always lets me sleep late), as dad stands at the foot of my sometimes-bed and shouts that "it's a beautiful morning!" and that I "should go outside and play!" with my sometimes-friends.

I get dressed in clothes out of a suitcase and I leave the bedroom that was mine from birth 'til three, and (eventually) I leave this city.

I go back and visit my mom in the house I never grew up in on Thanksgivings and Christmases. As soon as we get close enough, I turn the car radio to K-Earth 101 ("Los Angeleees!"), where I confusingly hear a Janet Jackson song from the early 90s, and not

the Donny Osmond bubblegum, Brenda Lee, Beach Boys, Supremes, doo-wop.

("Baby, baby, where did our love go?") I switch the stations without finding the memories I'm searching for, save for KROQ, who forgot that it's not 1994.

Anthony Kiedis still croons under the bridge, but lonely as I was, I never came of age in the City of Angels. I spent my formative years dodging Brunch With Bob and being asked if I was "friends with anyone famous?" or if I ever saw "anyone get shot?" (No, and nearly-yes.)

I wonder how different I would be, how the losses I never lived through might have formed me.

As is, I recall the broken hearts of middle school classmates when our pop stars and street poets passed too soon. "¡Viva Selena!" the Mexican-American valley girls cried, and the

kid who had a different 2Pac shirt for each day of the week.

I was the minority, token white girl, always late on the grief. It reached me through tears from the call-ins on KIIS FM and connected me, the other, to the others.

“April 26th, 1992, there was a riot on streets, tell me where were you?” Questioning my mom on why we all had an 8 o’clock curfew. (And the fucking absurdity of the Rodney King beating being poeticized about by a bunch of punk white guys).

And a couple years after the freeway chase, a different interstate collapsed in the quake. The mall also went, and while I never really said it, the voice in my head mourned the loss with the best Moon Zappa “LIKE, OH MY GOD” my mind could muster.

I imagine me at 18, hearing Elliott Smith would no longer walk down Alameda, driving to his Silver Lake memorial, since

removed, now restored (just as things go in L.A.).

But I never learned to drive on the 101; the 405 carried me in my motorist infancy, kept me from seeing Jenny Lewis (et al.) at Spaceland. I stayed in my comfort zone and settled for that shitty stage in San Diego (as if my over-protective mother who *lived* the fast times at Ridgemont High would have ever let me go).

That was also the year I read *Less Than Zero*, set amongst buildings I occasionally drove by, though I think Ellis got it wrong: people there are just afraid to merge.

I tried to connect to a city I never quite fit in, through rich kid anecdotes from the 80s, published the year I was born into my place of origin. It’s something I keep with me as it’s as real to my recollection of my almost-childhood, my rewritten teenage years, and my resistance to take on those freeways in Los Angeles.

# West End

by S.A. GERBER

i lay  
supine upon  
a sheet  
on the sand  
where ocean blvd.  
comes to end.  
two large umbrellas  
serve as  
a 'lean-to'.  
sky is starry,  
air is damp.  
her wine  
and substance

warm me  
as she reads me  
pablo neruda  
in spanish.  
all the senses  
are being selfishly  
and carelessly fed.  
sometime during  
the dark  
misty night,  
we make love  
while she  
hums familiar

songs in tune  
with the crashing  
waves in my ear.  
in the morning  
we get  
snack-bar coffee  
and watch  
the boring  
brethren gather  
on the beach.  
night strolls  
into day....  
on the west  
end of america.

# A Letter to Santa

by JACK BRISTOW

Dear Santa,

This year, more than anything, I would really appreciate for my paraplegic brother Billy to walk again. He has been wheelchair-bound for quite some time now, Santa, ever since his unfortunate accident a few years ago. You remember who Barry is, don't you Santa? Of course you do! You know everything! Anyway, just to refresh and re-jog your memory: Barry is the family's farmyard bull. Anyway, Barry tore Billy in the spine one day with his horns when Billy was hunched over with a smelt by his side, trying to milk Barry. I guess Barry didn't understand my brother was a half-wit, and that Billy really believed he could get milk out of a Barry's scrotum just like a cow's teat. I feel mighty

bad for misleading my older-but-denser brother like that but, you have to understand, Santa -- we have zero electricity on our farm: no television, no Internet, and absolutely no YouTube. There is not a whole lot of entertainment value in our neck of the woods, except for petty capers such as that one.

Which brings me to my second request, Santa. Would you mind helping us on this front, too? You know -- would it kill you to bring us a TV set, and maybe some electronics this year, for a change? Each time I keep thinking it's going to be different but, every year, nothing changes. Poppy keeps telling us it's because we are so far out in the country. He always explodes, whenever we needle him for presents. "Santa can't find us out here!" he always shouts, waving a quart of Wild Turkey in his hands, whenever the subject arises. "Can't you little bastards understand that? Look at all them willow trees we have outside there, cov-

ering the top of our trailer. You think he can find our little shit-box of a trailer when it's covered up by all them branches, foliage and so forth?" Poppy then always topples over to the ground, with a huge smirk on his face, and pee-pee draining through his knapsack-colored pajamas. It happens exactly this way every year -- just like in the movies...

Santa, I'm also writing you to request that you send my halfwit brother and me a non-cyborg mommy for a present this year. You see, every night, Billy and I can hear Mommy and Poppy arguing in the next room. "You are drunk all the time," Mommy always protests. "And that makes you impotent. Your dick looks like a tiny little firecracker, and it never shoots off. I thought when we got married fifteen years ago, I was going to have a real man by my side. But no, I am stuck with you. Shit, I should have listened to my mother. She warned me about you. She had you pegged for what you really are: a worthless, drunken

sack of shit that doesn't want to sully his hands with an honest day's work!"

"Well, fuck you then, woman! I injured my back when I worked stocking shelves at Wal-Mart. You know that. It's your fault things are the way they are now. I keep telling you to get that job at McDonalds!" Poppy always screams at Mommy, and then exits the room, slamming the door shut behind him on his way out. And then, as Billy and I are trying desperately to get some shut-eye, we will hear this strange-sounding buzz -- sort of like a vibrating noise -- coming out of mommy's bedroom a few seconds later. And then afterwards there's a moan and some sobbing. One day, Santa, I asked daddy to explain these strange noises to me. He was sleeping on the living room floor, with his Levi jacket balled up under his head like a pillow. Groggily, and with accompanying breath that smelled like poo-poo, he explained it all to me: "See, son. Your mammy

ain't even human. She's a morbidly obese cyborg sent from the future to torment me. That sound you're hearing in there -- that's the sounds of her recharging her batteries." "Really?" I responded. "Really," Poppy confirmed my suspicions. "Not only does your mammy need to shovel mass quantities of food into her trap to subsist, she also needs to stick that big nozzle contraption up her butt, just keep her batteries charged, so she can live another day to keep chewing on your old poor Poppy's ass.

"Wow," I replied in wonderment.

And Santa, while you are at it, would you mind giving us a new roof this year as a present? Whenever it rains, or snows, water seeps through the entire house. And it is very unpleasant, Santa. The stench of mold and mildew is, at times, overbearing. I have allergies, and I've plumb near stopped breathing a few times on account of this. One

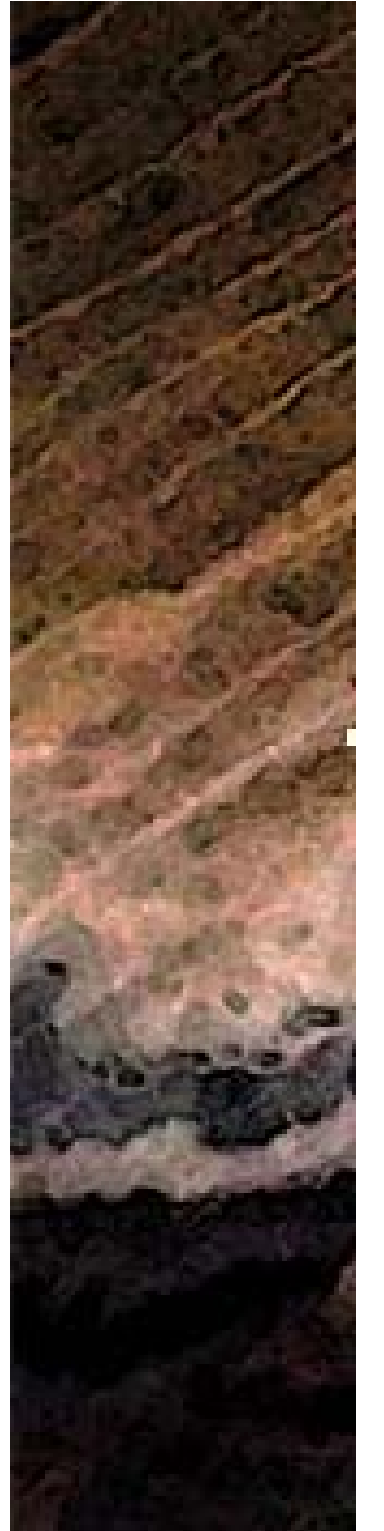
morning, I told Mommy that Poppy should have the roof fixed, and she just shrugged my suggestion off with a scornful laugh, as she was frying bacon for us. "Your daddy ain't nothing but a lazy sack of shit." She cracked a few more eggs into the batter. "He don't want to work. And all he wants to do is drink himself to death. He has already given himself a bum liver. And with the way he's drinking, he will be dead in six months' time. And then, how are we going to survive? His Social Security check is the only thing's been keeping us financially afloat, month-to-month."

Oh yeah, Santa, which reminds me -- there's one more present I would like to ask of you. I know I have already asked for a lot. But, please, give this next request some serious consideration. Could you please send my Poppy a brand-new liver this Christmas? Because if the cirrhosis finally does him in, like Mommy says it will, we will all

starve to death.

Thanks for reading this missive Santa, and, hopefully, you will be able to send me all these presents this Christmas.

Sincerely, the bestest boy in the whole entire world,  
Spencer Goodman





# In America's court

by DANIEL ARI

Some learn to convincingly  
parley;  
others miss too many pep  
rallies.

Because the charges between  
two  
are private, accusers must  
prosecute

grammar and its failings,  
experts  
circumscribe the word  
severe.

I suspect a teenager might  
never  
prioritize foreswearing  
perjury

above the clutches of her  
liberty,  
hormonal highs of  
pregnancy,  
  
drained bottles of milk and  
tequila,  
a handsome, grinning, ex-foot  
ball player.

# Reasonable Doubt v. Abiding Conviction

by DANIEL ARI

The judge, if he were I, would smoke a doob  
every night at six. He'd return from court,  
leave his lightless clothes bunched on the bamboo  
floor then go naked into the kitchen  
to fix himself a vodka and Yoo-hoo  
  
and take it all with him to the hot tub  
to lose definitions to the bubbles.  
The niggling asides from the Princeton brat  
prosecutor; defense counsel's large boobs;  
jurors moping in and out of the room—

and that girl at life's buffet of trouble,  
the sift of blood marks from alleged violence,  
the unseeing windows of those suburbs  
where something boiled her grief into grievance  
that cooled quick, like skin on gravy recants  
  
its heat. Mistrial. Lost to the night's silence,  
his honor's thoughts are not in evidence.

# bright

by ROBIN WYATT DUNN

tell me when and I'll tell you why  
braised buried and untrue  
my rue for you like anyones  
a dog that I keep running

tell me who and I'll tell you where  
the there that wasn't air  
it was real:

the teal and the beer  
the fear and the seal  
of our love

tell me everything

my burn,  
and yours

my burial,  
and yours

my urgency untoward for you  
what have you  
what have you  
what have you my burn  
my burr  
my urn

tell me  
and I will have you

over ours  
over our days  
and nights

bright

# jerusalem

by ROBIN WYATT DUNN

I ruined her jerusalem bandying it about like leather  
swinging it around my head.

Now we'll never know what happened.

Perhaps I should have waited to see what the city could have been,  
Who she was.

I only knew I felt like swinging it around my head.  
And it felt good to know  
That I would be forgiven.

# cock-a-doodle-doo

by CHANGMING YUAN

Born in a year of the rooster

You were fated to crow

But not so high in the sky

Like any other bird flying fast by

Rather, you perch low

Low on a broken fence

(Still reserved for ghosts and spirits)

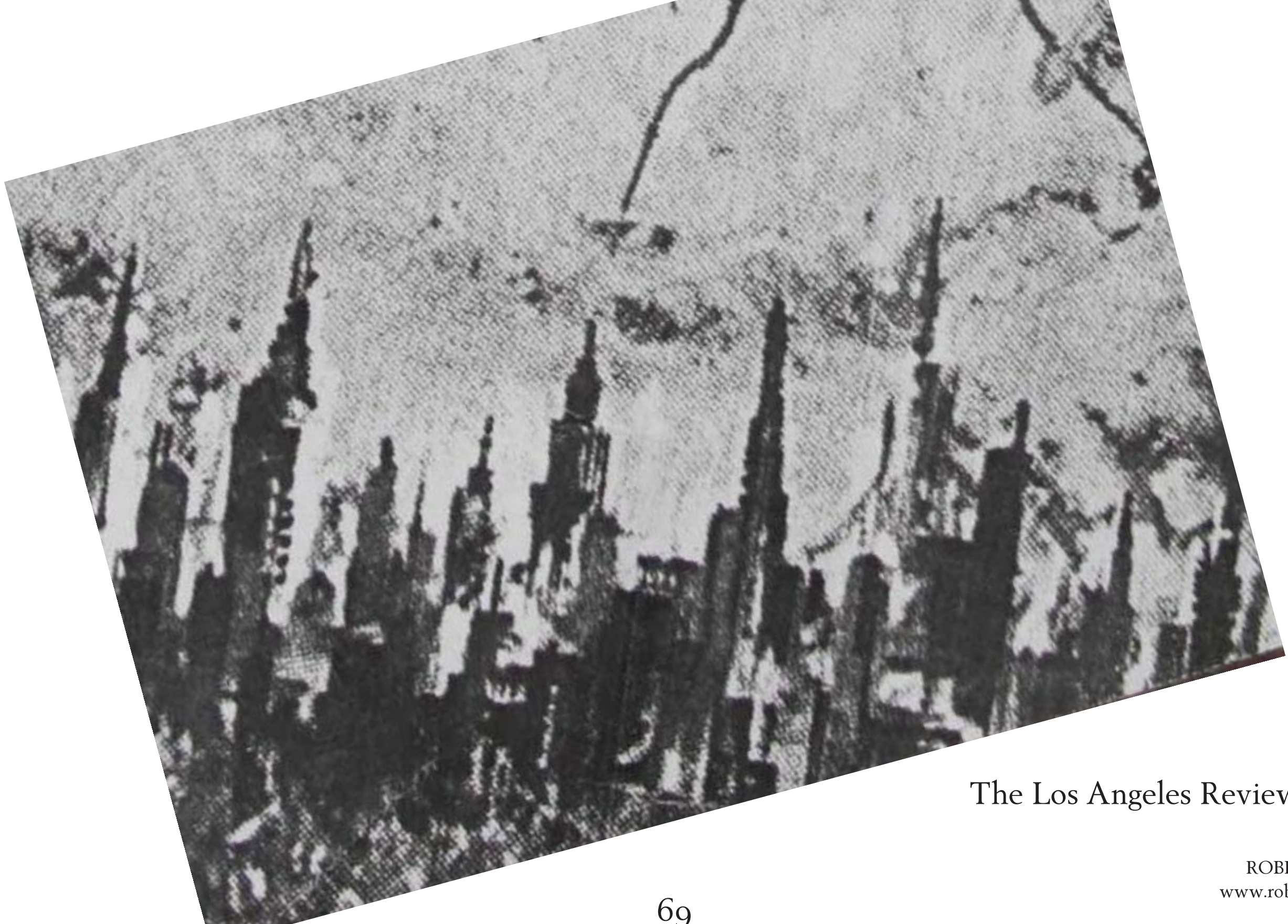
Crowing as aloud as you can

To welcome every sun

Looming above the dawn

Yes, you are vociferous, both because of

Your breed, and your personality



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