



The Los Angeles Review of Los Angeles

THE LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF LOS ANGELES, NO. 16



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COVER BY ROBIN WYATT DUNN

Sanctuary Golf Course

VADIUS WILBURN

The sky was red.

“Honestly it’s fucking crazy,” she said.

“It’s because California’s on fire,” he said.

“Nah that’s fucking, way too far for us to see it.”

“It’s like bright fucking red.”

“I think it’s Utah or something.”

“What even is Utah.”

“Haha yeah. Nevada.”

“That’s way too far. It’s literally red, like right fucking there,” he said.

“Yeah.”

They stood, looking at it.

“I guess like our own shit must be on fire—”

“Yeah like our own shit must be on fire then,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.”

“Who gives a fuck honestly.”

“Honestly who fucking cares. Honestly.”

They were in the middle of the fairway. The sky at one horizon was indeed a searing red. The summer green of the fairway contrasted.

They were essentially on top of a mountain, and the grass of the eighteen fairways was stamped there for their recreation. The groomed grass fell about the crest of the mountain and down its sides. It was like at any moment there was a vantage by which they could spy the rest of the world, or its apparent annihilation, or whatever was occurring with that red of the horizon.

She now had to hit the ball in the direction of the green. Tim’s dad and

Tim’s dad’s friend were waiting there, at the green. She hit the ball. When she was done following her shot she turned to him and said, “Tim,” and he said, “What?”

She said, “I look like such a rich-ass hoe right now.” She spun around and lifted her skirt so Tim could see her ass. “I love it we should golf more often,” she said.

“Babe. Notwithstanding how ungodly fucking sexy you look in that outfit—”

“Look at my fucking legs like holy shit babe. With the color of the sky.”

“Yeah notwithstanding any of that, golf is pretty wack—”

“Can you just like briefly comment on how fucking amazing my legs look right now—”

“I mean babe I’ve literally had, like at least half a boner for the past half hour.”

“You can fuck me you know. Right now I mean.”

She stood there, leaning on the golf club.

Tim looked downtrodden.

She said, “It’s just your dad. Your dad is super wack.”

“So wack.”

“Let’s go join them?”

“Let’s,” he said as she got in the cart and he drove through the fairway to where his father and his dad’s friend were standing. He parked adjacent to the green and he and Sara grabbed their putters.

His dad said, smoking a cigar, “This is just absolutely wild with the sky isn’t it.” His dad exhaled the cigar as it was part of his persona.

“Wild, yeah.”

“Crazy yeah.”

His dad’s friend was standing there, aesthetically equivalent to a filing cabinet.

Tim's father said: "Well we'll definitely have to get a photo before the day is done. Several photos. I mean just look at the sky. Have you ever seen anything like that? Roger have you ever seen anything like that."

"Yes once."

"But I mean, like that?"

"It's impressive. I admit that is impressive," Roger said.

The four of them stood there on the green, staring at the sky.

Sara said, "It honestly looks like the world is ending."

"Who gives a fuck," said Tim.

"What was that? Hey don't say that. Don't say that Tim," his dad said.

In one minute Sara said, "So whose turn is it?"

"You can putt. You're inspecting your line. I see you. You got it," said Tim's dad. And then he said, "Great putt," after her stroke.

Tim navigated the scenario and finished his putt rather quick.

They reconvened at the tee box of the following hole. Roger

manipulated the velcro of his gloves and looked down the line of his club. He pressed his cleats into the grass at the tee box and then lifted one foot and then the other, testing the ground. Then he did so again. With the ball teed up, Roger drew back his club a few inches and then reset it, and then did it again. He hit the ball. Then Tim's dad got up to the tee box and did the same routine.

Tim got in position to swing and said, "You guys can go on ahead. I'm probably going to mulligan a few times here. You know."

"That's cool Tim. We can wait," his dad said. "That's fine whatever you have to do." He exhaled his cigar.

"No honestly just go ahead. Gonna try something new here."

"It's okay if you have to take a few practice balls," his dad said.

"Just go ahead hahaha."

"Well that's fine that's not usually—"

"Really if you don't mind I have to say something private to Sara."

“Tim,” his dad said, “yeah we can play, sure. Roger you don’t mind? We can go out there on the fairway.”

They drove down the cart path, dissolving into the grand view of the valley.

He and Sara were alone at the tee box. He teed up a shot and took some practice swings.

She said, “So what did you have to tell me?”

“Literally nothing haha.”

“Hahahaha.”

“He’s just so fucking lame,” Tim said.

“So fucking lame.”

“Honestly.” He looked at her. “My dad wants to fuck you.”

“Duh. Hahahahaha. What a fucking gremlin.”

“And the fucking Roger guy.”

“Who the fuck is he.”

“One of my dad’s friends from AA. Literally my dad only has sober AA chode friends.”

“What does Roger do?”

“Sells airplane parts.” Tim took a few practice swings.

“That’s so fucking lame hahahahaha. What a fucking loser,” Sara said.

Tim hit the ball. It curved into the trees, where it might have just rolled down the mountain. He fished from his pocket another tee and another ball. He regarded his surroundings, seeming to finally take it all in. He said, “Holy fuck.” She stared at him. He looked at her and said, “Dude this is a fucking insane view,” and she laughed. He hit a ball which went into the trees. He said something absurd and grabbed another ball and hit it into the trees.

She said, “Why don’t you actually try?”

He said, “Baby I am I’m just fucking hammered hahahahahaha.”

He hit another ball.

“Baby,” she said.

“What.”

“Babe?”

“What.”

“Why don’t you just fuck me in the trees. Just hit one into the trees and play it and we can go over there and you can fuck me,” she said.

He looked at her. “Yes. The trees. Let’s go fuck in the trees.” He hit the ball and it landed in the middle of the fairway. Then he took another ball and hit it into the trees.

She had to hit a ball now.

“Just hit the fucking ball,” he said to her, “hahahahaha. Just fucking hit it.”

They got in the cart and he drove down the cart path. He drove them into the trees where lay his seventh ball. He said, “We’re doing this come over here.” From where they were standing they could actually see the

outlines of his father and Roger down along the fairway. They were playing their balls.

“I’m shivering oh my god,” she said, “in the shade I mean.”

From behind—he grabbed her at the waist and put her up against a tree so that there was a tree between them and the rest of the course.

He grabbed an ass cheek and pushed her panties to the side and said, “Just take them off,” and she said, “Yeah I’m just gonna take them off,” and she slid them down her legs and threw them in the cart. He slipped his fingers into her pussy and he untucked his shirt and stuck his cock inside her. He put his elbow around her throat, from the back. “It would be dope if you screamed right now,” he said. He fucked her and she lifted up her shirt and felt her own tits. “Tim,” she said, with her hand in his hair.

They were celestial with the red.

“Should I put them back on?” she said.

“No fuck that.”

From the trees he hit the ball into the fairway. They drove to it and she sat in the passenger seat of the cart.

“Your dad. What a fucking loser,” she said. Tim was crying and laughing, trying to hit the ball. He said, “This is really serious, we need to be serious for a second. Just for a second while I hit this fucking ball.”

He hit the ball.

Back in the cart he said, “Alright Sara. Where’s your ball? Where’d you lie?”

“I don’t know. Over there.”

He drove in the indicated direction.

The distant sky was blackened intermittently by blurring smoke. It was clear that the environment was on fire.

Roger and Tim’s father were chatting at the green. When Tim and Sara arrived, Tim’s dad said that they should take a photo. “What do you think

Sara? You guys look really good.”

“Great idea. Definitely need some photos.”

Tim put his arm around her and their background was the apocalyptic sky. It was like the universe was cut into two plains. There was the edenic, lush, green world, and there was the ethereal celeste of dissipating red. This is what Tim’s dad saw as he took photos. Even Roger made a comment.

Tim’s dad said, “You guys look really good,” and Tim said, “You know I fuck her right? I literally just fucked her in the trees,” and Sara literally laughed. Tim’s dad said, “Hey Tim, that’s not what you want to say right.”

“Honestly fuck you.”

“You better watch what the fuck you say to me,” his father said. “You better watch what you fucking say to me.”

“Why? So you can maintain your stupid fucking identity of being this fucking cool corporate fucking douche bag that walks all fucking

indolently on the golf course—”

“Tim I don’t know what the fuck is your problem right now but I want you to know that I do not approve of the choices that you are making in your life right now. I do not approve. You tattoo your fucking hands. And you’re clearly drunk—”

“Like it fucking—”

“Fucking listen to me right now Tim. You come out here and embarrass me in front of Roger. I entertain you and Sara all day. I come up with a plan so that maybe I can relate to you and we can have an enjoyable afternoon and understand each other and maybe you can have something purposeful in your life. And I do not—I repeat—do not approve of the choices that you’re making with your life. I’m your father, and I’m disappointed in you—”

“Do you realize—”

“Tim you better pick your words very carefully right now—”

“Yo literally fuck you. I come out here and ‘embarrass you in front of Roger,’ who gives a fuck. Fuck Roger. Roger fuck you. Either of you is just a complete fucking joke just a complete hollow fucking identity—”

“Tim—”

“Literally fuck you. You’re a fucking joke all you do is spew your fucking toxicity upon anyone who even approximates a fucking mile within your radius. Why don’t you fucking drink you’re a fucking pussy you literally pretend to have this identity like you’re this wise old fucking man that lived a life and had all these experiences and then decided to do the right thing or whatever the fuck and you’re sober but don’t you get that you’ve just fucking put all that shit inside yourself you’re a miserable old fucking piece of shit you’re a fucking pussy you drink black coffee and smoke cigars because you still need to hide everything inside that you’re running from you’re a fucking monster, you know I still have fucking dreams about you I’m a grown fucking man I still have dreams about you

where I'm crying and you're fucking laughing at me. Your life's a fucking joke and you too Roger you're a fucking pussy you both sold out your fucking lives and bought into some bullshit fucking value system asserting that you can't make your own fucking choices and you're just the victim of a fucking disease, why don't you fucking drink you fucking pussies. You fucking losers. And dude you tell me you're disappointed in me? Do you realize how fucking little I give a shit about what the fuck you think about me. I literally don't even give a fuck. I literally fucking hate you. You're a fucking pussy you embrace this fucking bullshit corporate identity and do the whole golf thing and buy into a fucking image and you smoke your fucking cigar and you fucking actually literally fucking believe in all the AA fucking bullshit like it's the core of your fucking identity your utter futility before fate or whatever the fuck your victimhood before the fucking disease the fucking world like you don't have any choice and you just embrace the fucking lies so you don't actually have to take any fucking

responsibility, that's what it is you take no fucking responsibility you fucking outsource your own fucking identity to some external cause that isn't in your control so you think you're destined to just be this fucking worthless loser that's just uptight all the fucking time and only achieves like ten percent of what they fantasize about. And dude you just make everyone fucking miserable, except Roger who's a fucking loser anyway, worshipping you, your group of orbiting fucking AA buddies. Like it's become your fucking identity, weakness your identity, victim your identity, impotence your fucking identity, misery, no-fun your identity..."

This was happening and she acknowledged it. Roger was walking distantly, lighting a cigar. She asked him if he wanted a photo of just him in front of the sky. He scowled at her and she peered expectantly until he said explicitly, "No I don't want a photo."

She didn't actually know what she was supposed to do in this situation. She was standing on the edge of the green and looking at the grass which

was effulgent with the red of the sky. But the color of the grass reflecting its inverse in the sky formulated something inexplicable. And the anger which arose fulminant, apparently, yet not unpredictably; typifying for her effectively the whole world. She didn't know what to think about it. She hated his dad. She thought maybe that they should stop getting drunk with weirdos like this. If Tim was just here yelling and being a psychopath—how could she disapprove. She literally hated the world. Literally fucking hate it, she thought. I fucking hate it, she affirmed. So what the fuck am I supposed to say. She felt anyway that maybe there was a better way for things to go. If Tim wasn't so recalcitrant then maybe there'd be less anger and hatred. It was almost like it was unethical or something, everything that was occurring. It's not like I have a strict set of ethical values, to compare it to, she thought. Tim's dad was screaming terrible terrible things, presently. She could see within the man despair and failure and figured that Tim was in a way just psychologically enslaving the

dude and was probably a source of constant torment. And she thought, I don't fucking care. She thought: this is what I'm supposed to do in this godforsaken society of violence, I'm supposed to yield to moments like these and recreate them and sponsor them. It makes no sense to me. Why is Roger such a loser. Who are these people. Where did these people even come from. How can someone like Roger even exist. How is that even a possibility in the universe. How can you actually be a conscious aware thing experiencing what it is to be, Roger. What must that man think about himself, how must he see the world. How can you not react with disgust and hatred. How can you not fucking vomit on site when you see Roger. I literally don't get it. So that makes sense. Hopefully we can leave soon because I think the vibe has been killed. Also *what the absolute fuck* is going on with the sky right now.



After Race Morning
WILLIAM C. CRAWFORD

Art District Skyline
WILLIAM C. CRAWFORD



Yorkshire Terriers

M. A. ISTVAN JR.

Through cage bars these rodents watch me
suck marrow from chicken bones. How many
must be overtaken by that clenching urge
to torment such pathetics—swooned

by the thought of lowering them, cages
rock-weighted, yapping into the sea.
Yet so many do only what they can—
just enough to keep on with their lives:

jab-jab jabbing at them with fork,
with butter knife, steak knife—face
redder with each thrust thwarted
by bars, by slippings of the jab;

feeding them a few grapes or raisins,
pepper sauce and vodka—dry kibble
merely sniffed before being dumped
in the woods for the sake of the wife;

running them, mere leash weights,
through brambles—so insistent upon
continuous top speed that the leashes,
their loop handles, strip finger creases;

screeching the SUV to a rocking halt
a few sweet houses down—those rats,
fake-forgotten, having been bumper-tied
while packing for the family outing;

crush-rubbing the little one's face,
black bangs over its pathetic eyes,
too hard too quick into the tile
of urine and shit—oscillation blur;

hammer-throwing that same little one
over the house—the leash windup
drawn-out for centrifugal torture
in the heart-pounding secret of night

Italian Way?

M. A. ISTVAN JR.

Everyone says, “It’s not
that they’re fags. Italians
just tend to get real close,
in your face when speaking.”
But there must be *some* link.

Each time I’m over there
friends I make snuggle up,
nudging to ass-dick me.
I shrink and they whisper:
“USA. We friends, no?”

Their moms seem in on it:
I’m not to sleep the floor.
One breakfast, my eyes red,
one mom, all chipper, asked:
“Young men have much good night?”

I failed to attend close
enough to see for sure,
but asking this she seemed
to shoot me a small wink—
dad’s head in the paper.

It Will Never Happen to You

PHOEBE REEVES

ITS world (a bare stage).

David and Julie’s home.

A Funeral Parlor viewing room.

TIME

Now.

Scene 1.

A bare stage within the scope of the stage light on IT. In the background just beyond the stage light a table and three chairs for David and Julie’s kitchen.

IT is a goblin and is dancing, prancing, around, completely charming and charismatic

CHARACTERS

- IT

The Demon of Addiction. Goes by many names and masks.
(Can be played by male or female actor/actress)
- DAVID

30 years old. Husband of JULIE. Father of JAYCE and MELANIE. Very recently recovered heroin/opioid addict.
- JULIE

Mid to late 20s, Wife of DAVID, mother of JAYCE and MELANIE. May or may not have addiction problem.
- JAYCE

David and Julie’s young son
- MELANIE

David and Julie’s young daughter

SETTING

(Minimal set: a plain table and three chairs. A coffin.
Props: two large cellphones, one for David, one for Julie; a large 30 days of sobriety chip for David; a small ice cream wedding cake; casket for David; markers, paper, stickers for Jayce and Melanie.)

IT

I'm not Rumplestiltskin so we can dispense with the "Will you spin straw into gold for me." And in exchange for the usual price, I've got something so much better than gold for you.

First, what's my name? I know yours. I've always known it since before you were born. Names are masks. And I love masks. I bet you've seen this one. (IT strikes a pose as a wife beater.) Any guesses? Spouse beater. I don't subscribe to gender stereotypes: male, female, they, non-binary—IT all works for me. (Another pose.) Thief. (Another pose.) Liar. (Another pose.) Emotional penitent.

Just don't call me by my Christian name. Addiction. Because where's the trick or treat in that? There's only treatment—no BOO—only BOO-HOO. Here's my number $\text{C}_{21}\text{H}_{23}\text{NO}_5$ In case you're one of those people who remembers letters better than numbers (I get it, no worries) that's H-E-R-O-I-N. Got it?—oh wait, that's my burner phone—I only give that to people that are dead to me now, and you are so very much alive, so very special so you get my direct line $\text{C}_{18}\text{H}_{21}\text{NO}_3$ And because I love you already and I feel like we've known each other forever, here it is in letters, just for you: H-Y-D-R-O-C-O-D-O-N-E. I'm the monkey on your back—but my favorite disguise is—drumroll please: (IT gets the crowd to drumroll) IT. As in "IT will never happen to you."

Lights dim. IT pulls back into the darkness.

Scene 2.

Lights up now on the kitchen. David enters carrying his cell and his sobriety chip. An ice cream wedding cake sits on the table in the background. David is typing into his cellphone on his Instagram.

DAVID

(typing into his Instagram) Masks make every moment Halloween. Including Christmas which is supposed to be the time for cold, bare truth.

David searches his cellphone for photos of himself and his family, Julie and Jayce, and Melanie.

DAVID

Julie and Jayce and Melanie'll love this one. Wish I had the right Christmas present for them, something to be my legacy, that they will always remember me by. We need a Christmas card.

IT crawls out of the shadows.

IT

Gotta love David. He always ignores the potential—and the enormity—of the moment in favor of some rainbow and unicorn future.

IT hops on David's back, clawing at David's jaws as IT pulls ITSELF into place, and makes David take selfies.

Julie, Jayce, and Melanie rush in with balloons, decorations, presents. There's hugging (difficult as IT is latched onto David's back) and kissing, David grabs at his jaw, wincing, as he makes a big presentation out of the ice cream wedding cake to Julie and the kids.

Julie cries and pulls out her phone and takes photos for their Instagram.

JULIE

David, it's never going to happen to you again, right? Because when it happens to you, it happens to us.

DAVID

143 big!!! You and me again forever, and the babes!

IT

Yes! Yes!

DAVID

(typing into his Instagram) Today we decided to be a family again, forever—

Julie takes more pictures with her phone.

IT

More! More!

DAVID

Wish us luck!

IT

(digging at David's jaw) NO! NO! NO! Scratch that part! There is no such thing as luck—it's in the blood and bones—inheritance—legacy—the gift that keeps on giving forever, remember?

David gets a knife and cuts a piece of ice cream cake for each of the kids, then one for Julie and himself. They entwine their arms (IT included) and everyone feeds each other cake and takes their first bite at the same time. They all make cold sugar faces. David's face is clearly one of serious pain in his tooth.

JULIE

Oh, David! Are you ok?

DAVID

(tries to laugh, but holding jaw in pain, IT still on his back) Guess the junk rotted my tooth. Sorry, babes. Kinda hurts. A lot.

JULIE

Oh baby, we need to get you to a dentist. Why don't the doctors check everything out and tell you what to look out for?

IT

Painkillers. A new mask. I love pain. Because pain is so innocent.

Lights dim.

Scene 3.

The kitchen is reshuffled into a funeral parlor viewing room.

David lies in a casket, same suit that he wore for the party previously. Jayce and Melanie sit in chairs on either side of their mother's chair. They are intently making pictures with markers, paper stickers.

Julie fusses with the casket and trying to get just the right picture on her cellphone of just her and David and is trying not to get frustrated with the kids.

IT coils itself around the pillow under David's head and plays with Julie's face, her hair as she leans in to fix David for the best photo. Julie keeps flinging off IT's caresses and when IT won't stop playing with her, she shrieks and turns in the kids' direction, thinking they have something to do with it.

Jayce holds up a sign that reads 143 mama.

Melanie points to the unicorn on one side of the words and the rainbow sticker on the other to show they are her work.

Julie turns back to David's body and lies on him.

IT

(laughs) When Jayce first learned to write, he wrote Julie Jayce love, learning her name before the word "mama," before even his own name. He was always playing with her phone and reading his father's texts that said 143, and 143 became his favorite number when he found out it meant "I love you."

IT whispers to Julie who pulls herself up off David's body.

JULIE

Don't you dare use our words—those words for your father's and mine alone!

Jayce drops the sign.

JAYCE

I sorry.

Melanie leans into her brother.

JULIE

I need you both to sit there quiet for however long it takes—I will never get to be alone with him again—do you think you can manage that?

Jayce nods and goes back to writing.

Melanie nods and puts her thumb in her mouth.

Julie lies back down on David and closes her eyes.

IT lifts Julie's hair.

JULIE

Is that you, David, baby?

IT sighs, lifts her hair again, and blows on the top of her head.

Julie snuggles closer to David and holds him for a long time.

IT slides Julie's hands into David's pockets and makes her feel around in a sexual way.

IT

Just a little pain pill. Just for his tooth. Or just for you. Just one. More. Breath. Death. That's IT!

IT pulls Julie's hair as hard as IT can. Julie screams as she pulls a pill from David's pocket

Jayce holds up another sign that reads David Jayce love.

David lies in the coffin, eyes still closed, arms down at his sides. Dead.

Julie gets on her knees in front of the kids. She kisses and hugs them fiercely and frantically, holding both her phone and the pill.

JULIE

We'll take a family picture together, all of us.

Melanie resists her mother's hand holding the pill.

MELANIE

No, I don't want to--

JULIE

Melanie, he's your father and my husband, and we are a family, and people think this will never happen to them, but it does, and I want people to know this is what it looks like when it happens to you. Come on, we are taking a family portrait.

Distracted, Julie gets ready to take their selfie. JAYCE and Melanie lean in on Julie.

Jayce smiles and holds up his sign.

IT leans up, smiles behind Melanie as IT makes the sign of the horns above her head. Melanie sees IT do this in the cellphone screen even though Julie and Jayce don't see IT there. She turns in horror to look at IT as IT lowers the horns into the gesture of a phone, points to the pill in her mother's hand, and whispers to Melanie.

IT

You've got my number, call me, Melanie.

Julie forces Melanie to turn back around for the photo and Melanie obeys, her eyes darting frightened from the pill in her mother's hand to IT behind her, and she holds one of her arms in the other, pulling herself away from her father's coffin so that she doesn't have to touch IT.

NASA Boy

SAM FLETCHER

He hears the artificial shutter close as he enters the convenience store. It comes at him from the palm of a teenager, surrounded by a group. They aren't trying to hide it, the way they are giggling. He knows it is probably his outfit—the bleach-splotched denim, vermillion Nikes, the camo jacket over his brazen NASA hoodie—he doesn't care.

He looks straight forward at the cashier, never minding those in line behind him. She looks him up and down before she scans—his acne? His stubble?

Is that all? she asks, blows a gum bubble and pops it.

His eyes dart to his left and back before he nods. Can she not do her job without judgement? Without intrusion? He grips the ribs of the coconut water can and walks back through the alley.

NASA Boy enters past the chain link of his backyard and through the open pane of his bedroom.

His Nike squishes into the layer of clothes covering the carpet. When he settles into his rolling chair, he cracks the can of luke-warm water and munches on the pulp as he rips open the graphic novel on his desk.

He pauses, distracted from the narrative.

It's not that the story's corny, he thinks. It's supposed to have a certain level of otherworldly-over-the-top-ness to appeal to its fan base: children. Not children, he rethinks, anybody tired of living in a world without superhumans and aliens and magic and monsters and good and bad. If the heroes on the page don't name-call each other and have catchphrases and wear colorful costumes with brilliant hairdos, he might as well read about

firefighters. Or soldiers. Or parents, even.

So, corniness isn't *really* the issue. It's verisimilitude. The particular brand of corniness. He can buy characters with super-strength, appearing at the right place and time, the quote-unquote good guys always winning. He can't buy that they aren't being consumed by real-world issues as they undergo these quests. PTSD, existential crises, despair, isolation, depression. They can wear colorful costumes for utility, or they can wear them for flair. But they can't wear them for flair and not acknowledge that's why.

He stows the book in the drawer filled with loose drawings of similar characters. But his are better—gritty, realistic, developed—with the same colorful charisma that keeps the younger demographic fulfilled.

He watches the same movie for the second night in a row. At this point he's probably seen it more than some of its actors have. In fact, he knows this is true. He watched an interview last night of one of the leading

actors getting major plot points wrong. Major world concepts wrong.

Major identity traits—of his *own* character—*wrong*.

He can't blame him, though. If some casting director offered NASA Boy involvement in a project with such a large fan base he would take the job. If he were involved in a project with such a large fanbase composed of folks he would never introduce himself to at a party, he wouldn't meticulously memorize every detail either. Even if he were representing a character that most of these kids would quote on their tombstone.

But isn't that the problem? Fans can't believe in a project if the actors don't. No matter how many lines the celebrities memorize to say in interviews about how 'emotional' the process of filming was. This is just another character for most of them. It shows.

NASA Boy, of course, doesn't have the equipment to make something better. He doesn't have the technical training to run the equipment if he did. Doesn't have the money to buy it. Or to pay the staff it would take.

He's never been to school for it—never even had anybody critique his work.

He can do it better, though. It's obvious. How can someone be so immersed in the culture, the art, *love* it—and hate it—so much, how can they, after all this knowledge, know theirs is better and be wrong? Who else is there to appease?

He finds himself nodding off before the movie ends. He hates how they reveal character information—a scene per character, with no justification whatsoever. The justification, he supposes, is that the critics would dock it for leaving them two-dimensional.

NASA Boy would dock them for developing the characters by shoving spoonfuls of information down his throat. As if their first idea of how to introduce this information was never revised. It probably wasn't.

He hates that this is his favorite movie.

He switches tabs to porn before he gets too tired.

An hour passes as he watches the first thirty seconds of videos. If they pass the phase one test of approval, he jumps ten minutes and watches thirty seconds there. Rarely do they pass phase two.

He's never seen a video on the site picturing someone who looks like anyone he's seen in real life. Even worse, none of the characters talk even remotely similar to how anyone he's heard in real life.

He doesn't mute the sound, though. He likes the talking.

This just makes him jot more notes. Bits and pieces filling document page she will probably never return to. But he can do it better—he needs to remember this.

Porn, like a graphic novel, is not *supposed* to emulate real life. He understands this. The videos are, however, supposed to be crafted in such a way to not distract the viewer from the narrative. Even if the narrative hardly strays from penetrative stimulation resulting in a literal climax, the viewer should not be thrown miles outside of the story by a phrase like

yes, Patrick (who is Patrick?) or you are SO much bigger than your dad!

Even if large-organ praise from someone who has slept with both the viewer and the viewer's father is his particular kink—which, it isn't—a phrase as such just reminds him of when he was eight years old and walked in on his father naked. Not an image he wants to remember erect.

He settles with his choice, as he does with all forms of art and media, before his dreams take him somewhere else. Not from any reality he has chosen as an escape, but one his subconscious did. In the depths of a forest somewhere in the night. He does not feel at peace.

Around him play hundreds of small, winged, elvish creatures. They chase each other, fight, and bicker in high-pitched chatter.

NASA Boy looks down at his hands, unsure at first if he was one of these creatures or just among them. His fingers remain as he remembered—thick, resembling burnt sausages. Even the baby hairs creeping up each of them remain.

At least his dreams are honest.

This doesn't mean he isn't an imp, though. Dreams are weird like that. Things that don't make sense elsewhere tend to make sense here. Why would he be an imp if he is still himself, larger than them, fatter than them, more human than them? Maybe he isn't.

He sure feels like an imp, though.

When he wakes, they surround him. They pounce through his bedroom, throwing his papers around. Tossing his clothes on the floor. Making it smell—*putrid*. Like he hadn't showered. Like his room hadn't showered.

He fires up his laptop again. The imps are fine. NASA Boy is glad they are here. Another ample escape.

But they aren't *perfect*. He can do them better.

He doesn't even mind the rowdiness. This sort of crazy fantastical disruption to a quiet youth provides comedic value—he understands

this. His character might not appreciate the chaos, the noise, the broken figurines. But his readership will.

But these imps—they are incomplete as they are. Faceless, nameless. They need a purpose—are they part of some larger syndicate? For crime? For compensation? Do they go around in groups and interrupt different lost souls for the humor of it? To give *them* purpose?

That's it. The great irony of it.

These anarchic helter-skelter beings have no divinity within themselves, but provide it for whom they disrupt.

His fingers ache from the keyboard drubbing. Imps lick the remaining milk drops from the bowls of cereal littering the room.

The unrelenting clatter doesn't bother him, but it must have his father. The old man pounds at the door. With each knock, another imp vanishes. Their particles dissolve into steam, the same dark-gray of their skin.

NASA Boy doesn't open the door right away. After a beat, his father

knocks again. More imps poof until but one remains.

When his father whips the door open, the imp hides behind it.

The man looks at his son with the typical strength in his chin but a new softness in his eyes. He still wears his work clothes.

What are you doing? he asks.

Nothing, NASA Boy returns.

Have you left this room today?

He looks around at the scattered bowls. To the kitchen, he says.

His father whiffs in the room's body odor. He scans the imps' disruption—the clothes on the floor, the musty sheets, and finally the boy's computer. The document is open, the tale of travelling imps.

His father takes a deep breath. I really hope I live to see you make it, he says. His jaw clenches as he leaves back into the hallway.

The cowering imp shoves the door behind him. I hope you don't! it shouts.

But it turns to NASA Boy, whose chin breaks, quivering.

Water fills his eyes before he shuts them. Tight. When he does, the imp vanishes like the rest of them.

NASA Boy pulls on his bleached jeans and throws the camo over the hoodie he slept in. He pulls up the blinds of his window. The sun has fallen once more.

He lifts the pane and steps onto the dry grass. It doesn't matter that he wore the same thing two days in a row, he thinks. It will probably be a different cashier working.

The Beggars

DAVID S. GOLDING

The alchemists won when they discovered how to change gold into arsenic, arsenic into death, death into numbers, and numbers back into gold. They used adding machines to calculate more solutions, measure more solvents, and sell more chemicals. They put those adding machines right in front of us until we loved them. We transmuted ourselves into things, divided time into circular rhythms, and danced by clockwork. We danced for numbers. Our machines grew smaller. They disappeared as they governed, but even the numbers did not reach the stars. The stars cried, their expended energy coursing our every atom, seeing the costs of their labor.

The theologians specialized in statistics, an art of war that wielded numbers like a celestial spear. The theologians heaved their spear through

the orbits of planets, through Earth itself, joining the laws of nature with our own and inscribing our spherical motions back upon the universe.

They mapped how water flowed down paths of packed dirt and through cornfields. They registered what was contained in those flows, the swirlings of particles, bursts of pollen, traces of poison. They recorded flows of metal, currency, tools, weapons, beings, fauna, flora, spores, seeds. They documented flows of myth, debated over bonfire, scrawled on parchment, radiated from great steel spires of truth. When the theologians inspected a flow, they found death and decay, so they calculated the ideal shape of dissolution. Their theories envisioned cessation and conducted its behavior. They commandeered it to ensure that when the ectoplasms of everything dissipated, they were routed into new circulations, new

channels that all led us to the jungle of towers. This was their necromancy.

The seekers, usually one of us crippled by hunger or sickness, would trek across the estuary where the tides of garbage met rusted meadows, past the shells of beasts made by dead hands, beasts who in turn died a second death in that bright acid bog. There the seeker would meet the seer, huddling in a hut built from old wood. The seeker would watch the seer rescuing the wood, salvaging it from high piles of waste, bringing it back to life. Together they would drink mud and read smoke, subsumed by the dry fires of what was about to come or had already come. Inevitably the seeker would vomit, emptied of everything, witnessed by the seer. In the eyes of the seer, the seeker would see the question, but not its shell of words nor croaks and wrinkled flesh. The silence at the core of it. At this point the seeker would fall to their knees and beg for something, answers or mercy or water or health or escape, and the seer would bring it to them upon their back, a vessel, and within that vessel the shame of having to

be inside this body and having to beg for things from the world. The seeker would have to refuse. Free of pain for the time being, they'd make their return under the gaze of the stars, across the scorched meadow to the mountain of waste, moving not like a human among humans, now a creature clinging to the curve of the world, at the mercy of its rotation, swept up in its circuits, getting lost in them until they flow through skin and mind, story and vision, unable to bear this burden alone.

In a Heart of Alleys, Trash Cans Burn Sublime

ALEJO ROVIRA GOLDNER

I existed in just an inch of hotel
with a three-bedroom baby in a one-finger room.
It was the Alps of Aleppo Hotel in the Quarter.
I missed my mom and dressed as a good mom.
Lobby dogs lapped up the goop of sleepers liquefied.
The concierge spoke a language thought to have died out,
he sported a long white severity
adorned with Masonic shapes bad for the eyesight.
I lived on Tylenol and Excedrin.

I saw a woman in the feet of the wall
step by step she walked up the wall,
her wings had wings and she opened her beak—
“C’mon, Mary Pope, your boy’s gotten sick of this,
let’s not wake up the whole establishment.”
When a storm escaped from her beak
a brute named Hot Clint wrested my baby away.

People talk and die, years pass, CNN in the background.
They say taxis ride to the hills and back
heavy with children from hotel bowels.
The taxis pass by the Alps of Aleppo
where hallways narrow and widen, clinging to a center.
They say my child at seventeen still wears baby things.
Tourist couples order kids from an app.
Under streetlamps of sleep I see my child,
harrowed by birth in his bassinet.

They say the two-headed boy who fathered my boy
still hovers in his lordly pebble by my gravesite.

How Slattery Goes Wrong

WILLIAM SLATTERY

I am my flaws.
To be good is to be like you.
Where I am wrong is where I am me.

Friend, I love you
for the one you wrap
hidden inside you.

I made my mistake
that almost no one knows about
but everybody knows about —

the flaw of me I hide but you
see me hiding so always know —
the me of me.

I'm not supposed to say these things.
You're not supposed to know I see
the transparency of my mystery.

Some perfection that I can't find
has pruned away vocabulary
until the truth is all that's left.

I can't stop the future from happening!

The County Line

TERRY RACINE

I left a note on the pillow under her head,
Ran by the shady willow tree feeling about dead.
It's not a crime of passion, but it could've been,
Hopped in my metal bullet drivin' East of my sin.
Is blonde hair blonde or dark to the root,
One in the temple, one for being too Damn cute.

And the County Line in the mornin' sun,
Me and my life, my life undone.

I shifted from second to fourth rubber burning hot,
Drove past the child hiding behind my rot.
It's not a crime of passion, but it should've been,
Dropped to see my Maker, wasn't my good best friend,
Are primal thoughts really, really thoughts
Two tokes for the road, two before I am caught.

And the County Line in the noonday sun,
Me and my life undone, my life undone.

I caught a bullet through my eyes over my nose,
Fading where judging angels just seem to know.
It's not a crime of passion, but it would've been,
Slumped in my seat, bleeding, this is the end.
Can people laugh from a secret hidden place,
A pat on the back, A cop Smiles in my Face.

And the County Line by the settin' sun,
Me and my life undone, my life undone.

The Great Migration

MAX MUNDAN

Somewhere around North Hollywood it hit. I had to take a shit. Really, really badly. I'm talking about the great migration here. It's coming and it's coming soon and there is nothing I can do to stop it. I'm not even sure I can delay it much longer.

I'm on my way to Orange County to see my father. He's claimed he's dying again, so it's my duty as a son to show the fuck up and be by his side till he figures out he just had indigestion, or some such shit and I can get on with my life.

I've left my RV at a park in Oxnard and am driving my dually by itself. I didn't expect this case of the runs that came out of nowhere, so solving my problem isn't the easiest thing in the world. It would help a lot if this had happened when I was out in the middle of nowhere, like Barstow or Coalinga, where all there is for miles is just a gas station right off the

freeway. I could crap at the station or just pull off the road and stand behind my truck and do my business. Here in the Valley, though, so close to the big city, it's going to be a bitch.

I do exit at Laurel Canyon and pull into the Mobile station right off the freeway. Fuck me, I have to go so bad. What the hell did I eat that is doing this to me? It must have been the Big Mac I had in Carpinteria. I thought there had been something off about that. The stoner dude behind the counter had given me such a weird look when he handed it to me that I wondered at the time if someone had spit in it or put in something even more disgusting, Maybe it was the 7-11 sushi I ate in Salinas. Anyway, whatever it was, it's hitting me like a ton of bricks now.

The attendant is some redneck looking dude with thick glasses and a neckbeard. He's about 300 pounds too and looks like one of those guys

who waddles instead of walks. I try not to show my urgency but move to the counter as fast as I can and ask him if I can use the bathroom.

“No bathroom. Sorry,” he says, “damn thing’s always out of order.”

Fuck. What the hell am I going to do now? I’ve really got to fucking shit.

No use putting on a show for this asshole anymore, so I run out of the little mini-mart looking for my next best option. First thing I see is a Jack in the Box across the street. That will probably have bathrooms I can use. Please God, let there be a bathroom I can use. I can feel the shit building up pressure inside of me and getting ready to force itself out whether I am ready for it or not.

I think for a minute about jumping back in the truck and driving over there, but I can’t tell from where I’m standing if there will be a place to park. Instead, I take off at full speed across the street on foot, dodging traffic, and run straight to the side door.

Fuck, locked. They can’t be closed, can they? It’s the middle of the day. Wait, there are people inside. They must be open.

I sprint to the front door and throw it open, scanning the room for the bathrooms. There are a few customers at the counter and nobody is paying particular attention to me, so when I spot the restrooms at the far corner of the room, I make my way there as quickly as possible without having to put up any pretense of wanting to buy anything.

Goddamnit! There are two restrooms and as I reach them I can see from the red of the little dial on the door that they are both occupied. That’s really fucking bad. Anyone who’s ever been a junkie knows that these kind of fast food bathrooms are the best you’ll find on the road for shooting up. Only one person can go in at a time, they have doors that lock and the pothead kids who work at these places couldn’t give a good goddamn if you die and rot inside. Whoever is in these restrooms could be in there all day. What’s worse, there is a junkie-looking dude with the

requisite long sleeve shirt and thousand-yard stare waiting in a chair in front.

“Waiting for the bathroom?” I ask him.

“What does it look like, Einstein?” he snaps back, “Maybe I’m doin’ a jig.”

Normally, I would put this fuckin’ mental midget in his place but I ain’t got time for that. The shit is coming, and I have to do something before I drop a load in public. I spin on my heels and get the hell out of there, racing back across the street and jumping back into my truck, driving straight over the sidewalk and back out onto the road, some kind of sports car slamming on its breaks and screeching out of my way.

I am in a panic now. I can feel the liquid shit start to dribble out into my underwear. I’m clenching my butt cheeks as tightly as I fuckin’ well can but the great migration has begun. The animals are waiting at the gate and they are going to goddamn well push their way through whether I want

them to or not.

I’m swerving wildly down the road now, desperate to find an AM/PM or something like it. Places like that usually have usable bathrooms. I lived in this neighborhood many years ago, when I got out of rehab, and I’m trying to remember where there might be a suitable bathroom, but I can’t think straight. I think the shit has started to fill up my head, making me incapable of rational thought. My mind’s a blank and I can’t seem to picture anything that might work for my needs of the moment.

Hell, yes! There’s a Chevron station. Do they have good bathrooms? I have no idea. It’s going to have to be good enough. As I drive by the little store, though, I can see a sign in the window that says, “BATHROOM OUT OF ORDER.”

Fuck fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckity fuck fuck!!!

What the living hell am I going to do? I may never find a gas station with a usable bathroom and I have, at best, one more chance before the

myself from the kids and families hanging out in the park and take a shit on the fuckin' ground.

I find the most secluded spot I possibly can. I mean, this sucks, I can see a couple families on blankets and a group of people off in the distance playing soccer. I just hope they're far enough away that they won't be able to see what I'm doing and have me arrested. I throw down my pants and dive into a squat, letting go with the wildest, most massive storm of shit that has ever flowed uncontrolled from my ass. I'm trying to hurry, of course, 'cause I don't want to fuckin' get caught doin' this shit, no pun intended. It just keeps coming, though. In addition to the endless supply of liquid poop, I am farting so loud I imagine the entire park must be able to hear. Goddamn it, how did I get in this position?

Finally, the merciless poopfest comes to a pathetic finish and I pull my pants up as quickly as I can. I have absolutely nothing to wipe my ass with so there is no point trying to get comfortable. This is going to suck till I

can find a bathroom but looking around it seems that nobody is behaving with alarm, so maybe I'm going to get away with this.

Not being able to discourage myself from my habit of morbid curiosity, I turn around to inspect the spectacle I have made. It's fuckin' everywhere. There is shit all over the wall and a massive pile on the ground that looks like it came out of the ass of a horse. Jesus, did I do that? I must have been sick. It's then that I notice my cell phone isn't in my pocket like it's supposed to be. I must have left it in the ca...unless, fuck, did it fall out of my pants when I pulled them down? God, that would be horrible.

I begin to scan the ground for some sign of my phone, and to my eternal regret, find it immediately. There it is, plain as day, sitting directly at the bottom of my mountain of vile diarrhea. I've squirted a bucketful of steaming, liquid shit all over my phone. Oh, my fucking God, this day just keeps getting better and better.

I have to stick my hand directly into the shit pile to pull my phone out and since I have nothing to wash it off with, I have no choice but to rub it on the ground to try to get some of the fuckin' feces off the goddamn thing. Doing this. I am able to get the bulk of the shit off, but I also manage to cram poop into the speaker and camera and power hole. Oh, fuck it, I will just have to do a really good cleaning of this thing later. For now, I still need to find a bathroom somewhere and clean the shit that I can feel starting to dry and cake on my ass.

There is one tiny silver lining I am able to grasp out of this nasty shitfest clusterfuck. This day has nowhere to go but up.

Balance

DS MAOLALAI

sometimes it feels
like you're playing with blocks.
this thing,
I mean;
this poetry,
this putting words
in front of words
and testing
and finding
what holds.

pressing
the balances
and learning
the steady places.
getting used to pyramids
and easy shapes
and moving on,
spotting the centre
and finding
what storms
it can take.

sometimes
it's predictable
and you end up
with something
easy to build
that doesn't amount to much.

the squares of a keyboard
all perfectly weighed
like a sleeve of jenga bricks
you could never
knock over
but you can always
spend an evening
fucking with.

Economic Indicator No. Three

WILL ACKERMAN

Back when I was young enough to think “growing up” was worth the effort, there was a fellow in our town who accumulated carloads of cash by making dog food and peddling it to folks who either had dogs or couldn’t afford people food. He was damn rich and damn proud of being rich and was daily quoted in the local newspaper for the witty things that he had to say about how rich he was and how he intended to stay that way.

He said things like this:

“If it’s a dawg, I’ll be doggone if it ain’t a dawg gone on my Bowser Chow.”

Ours was a relatively small town and, since nowhere on Earth are richfolk more elevated and adored than in a small town, he usually got a lot of Rotarian belly laughs saying things like that.

All of this was of direct interest to me back then because my family

was essentially unwealthy, and we always had dogs. All poorfolk, who can’t afford to have much of *anything*, pad their lives with dogs, often lots of dogs. It’s an inverse constant that I made of study of later in life—whether I wanted to or not. The poorer the folk ... the more dogs: Ackerman’s Economic Indicator Number Three.

Anyway, we were not exactly wading in loose loot in those days and we had a dog, and about the only thing in our corner of marginal poverty that was pretty much free for the taking was Bowser Chow. It was free because quite a bit spilled when the bulk meal was dumped from the big hoppers at the plant into railroad grain-cars waiting there to be filled.

Once Bowser Chow hit the ground it couldn’t be sold, of course, so we could have all we wanted, as long as we didn’t get caught by the armed guards or eaten to death by the cougar-sized rats that flourished on the

stuff.

“Free,” I came to first understand with Bowser Chow, is a highly relative word.

The irony of Bowser Chow being “free” was: I never *once* had a dog that would touch that stuff with a ten foot cat. Not one!

I thought this extremely curious since we usually had dogs of wildly varied and absolutely untraceable forebears that could, and would, consume just about anything.

The rich guy, who owned Bowser Chow, had litters of television commercials. Most of the ads featured pampered Westminster show dogs with pedigrees longer than the royal house of Monaco all slobbering like a bunch of wild animals as they tripped over each other trying to get at Waterford crystal bowls of his dog food.

It seemed to me at the time that if blue-blooded dogs like those liked the stuff, then the dog I had, that was of such a mixed background

it might not have even been a dog, ought to enjoy it too. But this was definitely not the case.

So the Bowser Chow that spilled around the big railroad cars was free, and the rich guy who owned it didn't mind in the least that the local poorfolk were taking what they could for their dogs. He cared so little, in fact, that he had the guards who worked for him spice the spillage with poison, and about ninety per cent of the dogs in our neighborhood had convulsions of gratitude and croaked.

The rich guy had an explanation for what happened. He explained:

“The cyanide was for the cougar-sized rats. We din't want the rats attacking and eating to death all the poorfolk in the neighborhood.”

The local newspaper glowingly reported what he had to say. The publisher even wrote an editorial commending the rich guy for his “public conscience” and added a footnote about how “unfortunate” it was that all the dogs had croaked and that the rats were either too smart to eat the

poisoned chow or too tough to die from it.

Naturally my dog, Vetch, survived because he wouldn't go near Bowser Chow if he was one swallow away from starvation. That animal would wolf down pasture patties, if he saw a platter of them come off the dinner table, but would not so much as sniff Bowser Chow, even *purchased*, much less free.

I used to mix Bowser Chow with milk and eggs and warm it on the stove for him, and it smelled so damn good I practically ate it myself. But when I approached his doghouse with a pan full, he would run inside and lock the door and threaten to call the cops if I harassed him again. Until, finally, I threw it out in the field behind our place where the grass immediately turned yellow and died and stayed dead for fifteen years.

The rich guy who owned Bowser Chow was magnanimous to a fault about telling every human being he ever met how he began making pet food back during the Great Recession and scratched and clawed his way to

top dog. He started making it in his bathtub.

He didn't have many friends in those days because he couldn't take baths in a tub filled with Bowser Chow, and when he *did* take a bath he smelled a lot like dog food. He always laughed when he got to that part and the reporters eagerly scribbling down his every word would hoot and rush back to make their witticism deadlines.

Bowser Chow grew from its puppyhood in his bathtub until it chewed up his whole house and picked his teeth with the detached garage for good measure. Soon the rich guy bought machines, huge dehydrators, for drying and processing things like the left over pigs' parts that went into Bowser Chow's secret formula.

Every morning reeking barrels of reeking pigs' parts would have to be opened and those pigless parts dumped into the dehydrators. The rich guy recalled what a vile, disgusting, thankless job it was for him to have to sit in his little office and listen to his wife retch while she was doing this.

However sacrifices must be made. The “free” in free enterprise is highly a relative word also.

Eventually, inevitably, Bowser Chow got loose. It attacked and devoured a neighbor’s house and then a whole block of nearby poorfolk’s houses and some empty lots that had never been of much value for anything except for playing baseball and football and soccer and things like that. It gobbled up property like half-starved show dogs on television commercials and belched dehydrated pigs’ parts contentedly. Every time it belched what was not yet devoured of our neighborhood covered its collective nose.

The rich guy got so rich that he let hundreds of poorfolk work for him. He finally even allowed his wife to retire to the office while he went on the road to deliver a series of motivational speeches on how a self-made man goes about making himself.

For the rest of us, earning minimum wage and all the poisoned Bowser

Chow that we could kill weeds with, there were valuable lessons to be learned.

WE LEARNED that a even person who never takes baths can get ahead.

WE LEARNED that the same person can be hysterically funny without a functioning sense of humor if he has enough money.

WE LEARNED that rats ain’t as dumb as they’re cracked up to be.

WE LEARNED that every time you see the word “free” start looking for the caveat.

Packing List

BUNNY MCFADDEN

When he told me his mother's mind is going
i made a list of everyone I knew in LA
So i wouldn't forget who i thought they were

1. Elisa from the Navajo Nation
She was the house ghost who watched me when i gathered brittle leaves
And learned to cook pork
2. Tara from the cigarette car ride
She is in a circus now | i called her drunk one night
And learned she was a bride
3. Lena with the fancy shades
She runs my mommy group
i don't think she knows my pronouns
4. Sydney who cracks eggshells
i'll never make art
She wants to talk about
5. Bob and Sarah
i hope I didn't fuck your shit up
When the Department of Defense asked if i knew you

6. Michael the beach bodybuilder
Not just nice but kind
You can't know someone from the sand they keep in their shoes
7. April
Who kicked the door down
When i was alone at a party
8. Ben
Who sat with me on Santa's lap
At a bar three years in a row
9. Charlie
Who i named my son after
i hope we never lose you
10. Sylvia
Who i witnessed reborn
And whose new name fits her well

Maybe if i am armed with this list
Dwelling there won't kill
My soul

Retirement Story

CRAIG LOOMIS

Not only did they give him a gold-plated plaque that said, among other things, thanks for all the years of service, hard work and dedication and so on—applause all around for those who could make it during their lunch time—but they also gave him a cashier’s check for \$500.00. The money part was handed to him by Jacobs, one of the vice presidents who almost nobody liked, except for the director of HR, his uncle. But never mind because he held the plaque in one hand and the check in the other and said thank you and smiled as if there was a photograph to be taken, but there wasn’t. Although he meant to say more, something bigger and better and more retirement-like, even practicing a speech in the bathroom that morning, before he could continue—clearing his throat and pulling his hand away from Jacobs--there was another round of meager applause

as one by one they began to file out of the conference room.

The next day, on his way to clean out his desk, he found two empty cardboard boxes in front of his office door, along with one very thin security guard. The security guard, badge number 44 whose nametag said Congress, stepped forward and congratulated him on retiring, even shaking his hand, saying his uncle had retired just this last summer and his father wasn’t far behind; in fact, his grandpa had worked some 43 years and.... In the end, security guard Congress told him he could use the boxes for his things and please be out of the building by noon, before shaking hands one more time. In the meantime, Donald March stopped by to say hello and good-bye and good luck, apologizing that he couldn’t make yesterday’s ceremony but he had clients to meet, not to mention a

daughter who was late for her piano lesson, concluding with a long manly handshake; not long after that came Peter from Accounting who made a farewell speech that was surprisingly good, heartfelt, and by the way, he'll be sure to have him over for dinner sometime soon, "You can count on it." The hallway traffic was brisk and no one had much time to talk—there were meetings to go to, calls to make, people to see, or maybe not.

Surprisingly everything from his three desk drawers plus file cabinet fit neatly into one box, with room to spare, and by 11:00 he was ready; and just like some kind of bureaucratic magic, security guard Congress appeared, announcing, "You're done."

Later, that night after dinner, he sat in front of the TV, some movie about the police who were, yet again, out to capture the killers. He watched but really cared nothing for killers, in any form. In fact, he was waiting for something else that had nothing to do with TV, something like a sense of relief, of all doneness, of being able to lay in bed for as

long as he wanted, of being . . . From now on his new world would be one without meetings, without reports, no more Donald Marches and their no-nothing handshakes. There would be no more deadlines. By now the police had managed to trap the killers, who, come to find out were also drug dealers, in a warehouse on the edge of the city. With both feet firmly on the coffee table, waiting for whatever comes next to wash over him, wave-like, one of the bad guys was killed—shot expertly between the eyes—and another was about to be . . . By the end of the program, two of the drug dealers had been killed and another terribly wounded. And that was that until next week.

But never mind because he couldn't help but remember what the security man, Congress, had said, "You're Done." And as much as he wanted to make it a question, thinking back, it didn't sound that way.

Asphyxia

CORINA K. SKENTZOU

My dad is walking in front of me—looking at him from behind makes me sad. Always, when I see the back of someone’s head, I feel that way. I’m not sure why; perhaps the person seems more vulnerable, unaware of my existence, unaware of my power to hurt him. I can count the vertebrae of my dad’s spine through his moth-eaten shirt. He drags his steps on the linoleum floor; his left hand—curved from a stroke that he suffered some months ago—holds a catheter. He’s still tall, my dad. I mention it because they say that people with cancer at his age shrink, but not my father; he’s 6’2” tall. His hairs, grey and thin, cover some parts of his yellowish tanned skull. Still, because he will start chemotherapy next week, they won’t be there anymore.

He does not know that he has cancer. He does not know that he is dying. I’m not saying anything to him. He does not believe in an afterlife,

nor do I.

My dad doesn’t know many things after all. For instance, he doesn’t know that I’m gay. *Gay, ha!* I’m not gay at all. I mean that I’m not happy, I’m just a homosexual, a sad one. Thus, my dad never knew that I was providing oral sex to the dean in my college years. It’s better that way. I remember that the dean, after finishing sucking me, never neglected to say *I’m not gay, I just like sucking dick.*

My dad decides to sit in the waiting area. I follow and sit next to him. The plastic chair is so uncomfortable. The chairs in this world are not made for people like me, for people my size. My dad looks down on the floor. His protruding cheekbones have changed the shape of his face. I’m recalling the dad of my youth. He is not there. Suddenly, he turns his head and whispers to me, but his voice is so weak, I don’t understand what he

says. His breath stinks and I feel guilty for admitting it to myself.

When I'm guilty I eat; actually when I'm not guilty I eat too. I'm always hungry and morbidly obese, as Dr. Nowzaradan tells people like me in *My 600-lb Life*. I watch this show; I order Mexican, which is my favorite junk food, and while I'm polishing off my gigantic burritos, I witness Dr. Nowzaradan tell these people of my size that they're dying.

My dad grabs my hand and holds it; it feels weird, almost uncomfortable. His wrinkled skin feels rough. My chest tightens. He turns his head and he's looking at me. This feels even stranger because he never looks at me. Especially after I surpassed five hundred pounds. He's looking me deeply in the eyes. *If I die I want you to take care of Sarah*, he tells me.

Sarah is my older sister and a medication-noncompliant paranoid schizophrenic. She lives with my dad. I guess that my dad lives in this hospital now. I hate hospitals. Especially this one, dirty with mean

underpaid doctors that hate me as much as I hate them.

Many times during the day and especially at night before falling asleep, I think that I go to my dad's home. I take the greasy pillow, put it on Sarah's face, and suffocate this sister of mine, in her sleep. Then I say to my dad that it was a heart attack, so *freely* he can live the rest of his life, which is some weeks or months. After he dies I will inherit all the real-estate property. I will sell it all with no second thought, and with all that money I will have a gastric bypass operation and leave this fucking country behind.

Then, I feel disgusted with myself. Because it is true, I wish them to die—not necessarily for the money. I just don't want to bother especially with Sarah. I did ten years of psychoanalysis and I figured out two things: the first thing was that I fancy men, and the second was that I hate Sarah. Okay, I could say that I envy her, I could say that I've been traumatized because I was neglected due to her health condition. Nevertheless, *no*,

what I feel doesn't need sugarcoating—I hate Sarah.

My dad just fell asleep in this plastic chair. I'm running to his room to get his sweater because it's cold out here. It's funny that I say *running*; what an overstatement, running as an activity has been *paused* by fat, my fat. For reasons of accuracy, I will correct and say that I'm floundering to my dad's room.

After ten minutes, I'm back, and I find my dad still asleep. The catheter bag is ready to explode. The color of his urine is dark yellow, almost bloody. *Should I worry? Should I call the nurse?* I stay still instead; I don't do anything. I observe him. His closed eyes are now buried within deep wrinkles. His hands are lying on his lap; his fingernails are long and dirty. He smells. He probably hasn't had a shower in months. He smells like an old person. I guess he is an old person, almost; he's sixty-nine years old. Someone sixty-nine is neither young nor old. This age is on the border.

I suddenly feel as if bees are flying in my stomach. *Is he breathing?* Yes, I

can see his stomach rising and falling with each breath.

Sarah always calls me at the most peculiar times. By *peculiar times* I mean after hours. She called me yesterday at 4:00 a.m. to tell me that I must come and kill this giant mosquito, which most probably resides in Pluto, thus is an alien and has come—the mosquito—to steal her neurotransmitters and frontal lobe so she will remain sick forever.

I don't know why I pick up the phone. I don't know why I don't have my phone on *not disturb*. Perhaps I feel that my dad and dead-for-years mother can see me ignoring Sarah's calls.

It's not her fault, don't take her seriously, Billy, Sarah is sick, she didn't mean to hurt you, I recall my mom's voice when Sarah threw boiling water on my back when I was eleven, or when Sarah stuck scissors in my fucking eardrum when I was eight. My hearing never recovered; yes, I'm deaf in the left ear.

My dad opens his eyes; he wants to go to his room. I stand up; my knees are killing me but I can support him. I'm strong, I almost lift him.

When I embrace him and feel his bones, tears well in my eyes. Fuck! I love my father, I don't want him to die, not yet.

I'm out of breath but I'm trying to hide it, so I take slow and semi-shallow breaths so my heartbeat slows down. I don't want him to worry about me. He does I know, but it isn't about me now. My dad is dying. Perhaps this very moment is the last time I will see him. The bees in my stomach hurt and this is not hunger.

I lie him down in bed. He closes his eyes. I can't swallow, I need water. I take my bottle from the side table and take two sips. It is not helping. The tears are coming; they drown my eyes. Fuck, I can't help it. Perhaps this will be the last time I see him, hear his voice, smell this disgusting foul smell. No! I need this smell in my life. I need his voice, I need his brutal comments about my weight. I can't be an orphan. Yes, when he goes I will be a forty-five year-old orphan. He opens his eyes and smiles at me. His fake teeth are perfect and contradict the sagging skin of his face.

You love me, uh? he asks. I want to say *yes, I love you*, but I can't. I fucking can't. I smile at him instead. He closes his eyes again. I check the time on my phone; it's late, I will be going soon.

I'm driving not to my home but to my dad's home. It's 3:00 a.m.; there is a chance that Sarah, fully awake, is fighting with the alien mosquito. I feel as if an elephant is stepping on my chest. I park the car in the parking lot. I don't see light in the living room. Perhaps she's asleep. I unlock the door and step inside. *What a rotten smell!* I instantly throw up on the spot, which is on my mother's Persian carpet in the living room next to the piano. I walk to her room. She isn't there. I walk to my parents' room and there she is. Sarah is sleeping on her back in my parents' bedroom. The bedroom smells even worse than the living room, even after my vomit. Her red hair, greasy is covering the pillow. I cannot see much in the dark, but I can see her long neck, the perfect shape of her face. She was always beautiful, *what a waste*, my mother used to say. *Such a beauty and so sick*, she

used to say.

My heart is pounding fast when I take the pillow next to her. The elephant will break me down. I place the pillow on her pretty full-of-freckles face. I push it strongly. My neck is so stiff, I feel the blood circulating in my body. I push once more. Her hands dance in the darkness. I put the pillow back next to her. She opens her eyes; light green lakes. *Daddy*, she says. I feel an expanding hole in my chest. She falls back asleep.

While I'm walking to the kitchen, I kick the source of the rotting smell. A dead kitty? A dead rat? I walk to the kitchen and put gloves on. I put it in a plastic bag. It was a kitty after all, Sarah's alien mosquito and it seems that she extinguished it some time ago. I open the window. The chill air comes in the room and liberates it from some of the nasty smell. I cover Sarah with the blanket.

I'm sitting on the couch in the living room. I just received the call

from the hospital. He's gone. *Peacefully in his sleep*. They said. I look around; on the coffee table his presbyopia glasses on top of the last month's newspaper. The *news* that he never read.

His velvet blue armchair, dusty but still imposing is here. The woolen blanket that he used to cover his legs is here. His books are here. The everyday proofs of his life are here. I and Sarah are here. But he's not.

I feel very empty and sad and *powerful*? Is *powerful* the right thing to say? My thoughts are racing. My feelings stuck in my throat. I have phone-calls to make.

The first call is to the funeral home.

The second one is to the psychiatric ward.

I'm walking back to the room where Sarah is asleep. I wake her up. She opens her eyes and smiles at me; *Billy*! She recognized me.



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