



The Los Angeles Review of Los Angeles

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THE LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF LOS ANGELES, NO. 18



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COVER: TOWARD SUN FROM THE DUNES, DEATH VALLEY
JEFF DUNN

China, 2022

ANONYMOUS



from the photographer:

Don't include my name because I could get into trouble. Yesterday ten people died because there was a fire and the fire trucks couldn't get into the community because it was quarantined. Two babies who were three months old died in the fire, and they had been quarantined for three months. They hadn't even seen the world. I don't know what to do because I could easily get kicked out of the country, but this is what's happening.

LIVE



FROM



GREAT AMERICA

A DOUBLE ALBUM

**THIS BOOK
SHOULD BE
READ LOUD**

SIDE A



KADDISH

Gunther Anders finished saying the Kaddish. He asked his wife to pass the brisket. He drank wine and made faces at his grandson, who was a little chubby. Gunther folded his napkin in his lap and said, “World War III has already started. Whole cities are soon to be erased from the map. The 21st Century is going to make the 20th look like the 19th, just as the 20th made the 19th look like the 18th. History is an object we live inside of, and it’s always adding to itself, improving its capacity for barbarism on a mass scale. None of you understand this, and those of you that do don’t want to admit it. War, as it ages, only gets deadlier and more spectacular in its ability to produce absolute existential terror.” Gunther wiped his mouth and asked his wife to pass the noodle kugel. He spooned out a large portion. He ate. He announced he was full and ready for sleep.



My dad drove a Mercedes-Benz. He dropped me off at school but he never picked me up. My mother says she's seen my dad driving around our neighborhood. She says he still drives a Mercedes-Benz. I tell my mom I've never seen him. My mom says she sees him all the time. "All the time," my mother says.

Mercedes-Benz



Leon and Peabo have been cellmates for almost twenty-five years and Leon is still not used to Peabo's mood swings. There is no rhyme or reason for why Peabo is either up or down. Leon has been stuck in a cell with Peabo for just about a quarter of a century and he still can't figure the guy out. Peabo gets down and Leon gets put in a chokehold. Five minutes later Peabo is up and hugging Leon, saying, "I love you, brother." Leon's going to get out, someday. He just doesn't know when.

Manic Depression



Chicago

He's done things he wishes he could forget. Nothing he would hide. Little things considered cruel. But nothing major. Nothing for which he should be punished. And yet, he's not proud of what he's done. He's managed to make it to the end and he's got no regrets. He still has his self-respect. But, hey, let's change the subject. He's climbed mountains, you know, including Everest. He climbed a mountain in Peru and found a throne, which he prayed to and then had shipped back home. Now it's his. He's the owner of his very own throne. He loves his wife and kids. He likes to be near them. He likes how warm they are. They accept him for who he is. "What is life," he likes to say, "if not to live." He says there's nothing else to life but to live it. He's not frightened of change. It doesn't make a difference anyway. He won't remember. He especially won't remember what he's done or to whom he's done it to. Tomorrow he's flying to Chicago. When he comes back he will have won. He will be holding all the roses. He loves roses. He thinks they're glorious.

SIDE B



Kansas City

“More ballads about sweet strippers and funny cars,” he says, “is the name of the new album. And tonight I’m going to play some songs from the album. The first song is about a stripper. Who was very sweet.” He plays the guitar and sings about the time he met a stripper in Kansas City. He sings about watching the stripper dance. He sings about the voices of the men watching her dance. He sings about how much he misses her. The song ends. He drinks beer and smokes a cigarette. The audience waits and watches him drink his beer and smoke his cigarette. “Now I’m going to sing a song about a funny car,” he says. He plays the guitar and sings about the sound funny cars make when you’re standing right next to them, how he loves the smell of burning rubber, the look on the faces of the slow and defeated. He sings about a funny car crashing over and over. He sings about what it feels like to be on fire. “On fire,” he sings. Next he’s going to sing another song about a stripper, a different stripper, not the same as the first. He’s going to sing about how every stripper is always sweeter than the last. He’s going to play his guitar.



Nurse

He's riding the train all the way to Miami, by himself, without his nurse. He's going to Miami to meet his new nurse and he's worried that his new nurse isn't going to be as nice as his old nurse. He tried to sleep but it was too hard. He can't afford to send himself in a sleeper car, so he's been sitting in the same seat for three days. He tried to sleep by curling himself up into a ball. He put his legs on the seat next to him and was almost asleep when The Porter tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Get out of my seat, goddammit." He closes his eyes and thinks about his new nurse. He hopes she isn't old. The old ones are always mean. They make you clean up after yourself. They tell you to have some class.



The birth wasn't a straightforward one. To be painfully accurate it was a difficult birth. He was too comfortable inside the womb and didn't want to come out. During the delivery the obstetrician was forced to use forceps. That is why his face (not bad looking) looks a bit 'off.'

Birth



Jon Dough

Jon Dough was a very successful male pornstar who peaked during the early to mid 1990s. By the turn of the century he was addicted to meth and heroin. Right before he committed suicide his wife complained about the quality of actresses Dough was now performing with. Whereas in the past he had been cast alongside some of the biggest names in adult entertainment, now he was relegated to the margins, filming scenes in small, far-away edge cities with what appeared to be teenage runaways. “Those girls are gross,” his wife said. “No,” said Dough, “they’re not. As a matter of fact, they’re the exact opposite of gross. This is without a doubt the best sex I’ve ever had in my life. And what’s funny is I’m getting paid almost nothing. And no one cares. And I don’t care that no one cares. That’s how much I care. That means I care a lot.” Dough’s wife agreed, he was not making as much money as he used to. Dough’s wife suggested that maybe it was time for him to quit having sex for a living and find a new line of work, maybe something more along the lines of a solid nine to five. “Over my dead body,” said Dough, who was 42 when he hung himself.

HIDDEN TRACK



Underwear

He had been trained by his father to see the world through the eyes of a child. And now that he was a father himself he didn't like what he saw. There were men everywhere with large hands and it seemed like they were just waiting to scoop you up and put you down somewhere else, somewhere you didn't ever want to be, somewhere off the map. So he hid in the bushes, where he found a pair of underwear that fit him perfectly. Yes, they were wet. But they were his.

SIDE C



Birmingham

He asks her if he can record their conversation. She says she would appreciate it if he didn't. He says he won't and then, when she isn't looking, he presses record. She says, "So I know people who go for pediatric neurology up to Birmingham. Uh, plastic surgery, interventional cardiology. We have that here. It's very specialized healthcare. We do medical research at the company I'm at, but I am always excited to hear what people think when they come in from Birmingham and visit us. Some of the best cardiologists in the state. We definitely have an amazing endocrinologist, pediatric endocrinologist, um, pediatricians, interventionists, it goes on and on. I've worked with both hospitals and private facilities. Amazing things. And obstetric and gynecology, as well. It's a really, really great healthcare place. I didn't know there would be so many physicians per capita. Any place I've ever lived it's never been like this, almost a physician per person. That's an exaggeration, but we have a lot." He asks her why she

speaks with a Southern twang if she's from California. She says she isn't from California. He says she said she was, earlier, when they were talking, before she decided to go on the record. She says she never agreed to go on any record. He asks her if she's really a doctor. She says she is. He asks what medical school she went to and she says he wouldn't know the school even if she told him so what difference did it make. He asks if he can see her academic transcripts and a copy of her diploma. She says she doesn't have them on her. She says she can send him copies when she gets a chance. She says she isn't from California. She asks him if he was recording their conversation. "No," he says. "No, really." She rolls her eyes. "Look, bitch," he says, "I said I wasn't."



The Wire Crib

Joseph Merrick, also known as “The Elephant Man,” was more than just a sideshow attraction; he was also a dental prodigy who pioneered numerous orthodontic techniques, including the wire crib. Merrick also invented the pedal-operated pneumatic drill and, later, right before his death, the electric drill. Due to an error at the British Office of Patents, Merrick’s inventions were never officially acknowledged or cataloged. One of Merrick’s patients, Tilly Kite, was interviewed by the Daily Mail in 1980, at the peak of Merrick’s popularity. Kite, then 103-years-old, had this to say about Merrick: “He was a very nice man. He had an enormous head. He didn’t talk much. But he straightened out my teeth and got rid of my overbite. I was the only member of my family not to have an overbite, and because of this, my family made fun of me. They said I had a dead man’s smile.”



Face

To them she was a face and nothing more, so when her face began to change, to get older - the lines around her mouth deeper, her eyes no longer as bright and open as they used to be - they let her have it, insulted her, stood in front of her with cameras and asked her how it felt to get older, asked her how it felt to lose your face. She said she didn't know. She said she didn't want to think about it. But they did. They wanted her to think about it, and they could tell when she was thinking about it because that's when she would cry, and that's when they would get even closer, shove their cameras practically up her nose, ask her why she was crying, ask her what there was to be so upset about. "You make me feel bad about myself," she would say, "you make me feel ashamed to be a woman." But these were her two sons. She had raised them, by herself. and now they were both dressed up in her fanciest gowns, with their lights, cameras, action, and they would not stop. She told them she knew they were trying to bring out the worst in her. She told them she knew she was powerless to stop them. And this, to them, was the best, to hear the surrender in her throat.



The Age of Cancer

Despite being both the High Priest of the Church of Satan and an informant for the F.B.I.'s Counterintelligence Program, Anton LaVey is a firm believer in the Age of Aquarius. "What I understand that the hippies don't," says LaVey to Sammy Davis Jr., "is that there are real magic powers available to those who want to use them." LaVey and Davis, Jr. are sitting in bed, sharing a post-coital cigarette. Tuesday Weld is lying asleep next to LaVey while Jean Seberg is lying asleep next to Davis, Jr. "But there is only a finite amount of magic to go around," says LaVey, "and it can be used up very quickly. And when it's gone, it's gone." Weld shifts positions, as does Seberg. Davis, Jr. hands the cigarette back to LaVey. "Let's go downstairs, baby," says Davis, Jr. "The natives are getting restless." LaVey puts on a red velvet robe with a hood. Davis, Jr. puts on his glasses and nothing else. They walk downstairs. LaVey hands Davis, Jr. a warm snifter of Grand Marnier. They gently clink. "L'chaim," says Davis, Jr. "So," says LaVey, "like I was saying, there's just way

too much doing it in the road, and I believe they're going to use up all of their magic powers, and when they do, when they realize that their best weapon is gone, they're going to turn to actual violence." Davis, Jr. brushes ash from the tip of his penis. "You're talking about things that explode," says Davis, Jr. LaVey nods, swallows the last of his Grand Marnier, then bends at the waist and touches his toes. "Do you know what comes after the Age of Aquarius, but before the Age of Capricorn?" asks LaVey. "That would be Cancer, baby," says Davis, Jr. "The Age of Cancer." LaVey and Davis, Jr. talk late into the night. They both agree they don't want the party to stop. They both agree they'd rather die than have the fun come to an end.

SIDE D



One, Two, Three, Four

He gets on his knees and prays. “Dear God,” he says, “this is the last time I’m going to ask you for a favor. But please, God, there’s a new woman in the building, and she has children, small children, and as far as I can tell, she’s raising them alone. I see her every single day. She looks like she’s struggling. I pray for her to be blessed with your grace, and with your power. I pray for her suffering to end.” He makes the sign of the cross and kisses the crucifix hanging around his neck. “Please show yourself to this woman,” he says, “so that she can see you and be saved, and I promise, this is the last time I will ever ask you for anything, I swear.” He stands up. He grabs a 35-pound dumbbell. He does one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, one, two, three four curls. This is the only way to stave off the Devil. Through the repetition of a righteous act.



A Very Sensitive Man

They were happy their father was happy. They had found the one restaurant in the city where he didn't think it was necessary to abuse the waitstaff or pick fights with the other customers. He sat quietly, ate his fish, drank his iced tea, and simply looked around the establishment, which was dimly lit and quiet. He had a smile on his face. But they were still worried something could happen at any moment. There had been other places, in the past, restaurants just like this, with the same calming effect on their father, until, one day, the effect wore off. Watching him enjoy his dinner they remained on high alert. They forgot about their own needs, which was fine. Being hungry was better than being in trouble, being involved in another situation where they felt concerned for not only the safety of their father, but everyone else, including themselves. Their father was a very sensitive man. They wanted him to find some peace so they could find some as well.



To Tie a Tie

No one ever taught him how to tie a tie. It's just something he's always known how to do. And he can do all the different knots. The Balthus. The Pratt. The Windsor. The Half-Windsor. He can do them with his eyes closed. It's like his hands belong to someone else. His father tells him in his past life he must have been a butler for a member of the Royal Family. When he asks his father what his father was in his past life his father says, "A member of the Royal Family."



Gift Shop

It takes over a year for the words to spread around Earth. “Fire from heaven, the end.” Atouk hears the words from Lar. Atouk tells his wife, Lana, who understands immediately what has happened, what is happening, and what will continue to happen. “The end,” says Lana. Atouk nods and says, “Caca.”. Atouk tells Lar they need to get on their dinosaurs and ride. Lar laughs at Atouk. Lar shakes his head. “The end,” says Lar. Atouk nods and says, “Caca.” Lana does not want to tell her children about the sky turning black. Atouk tells his two sons about the fire from heaven, the black sky, and the end. Atouk cries and says, “Caca.” Atouk’s sons understand what has happened, what is happening, and what will continue to happen. They pick up rocks and hit Atouk over the head until he stops moving. Lana points at her sons and she screams. The sons grab their mother, get on their dinosaurs, and ride. They hide in a cave with their mother and begin the long process of re-populating Earth. Thousands of years later one of Atouk’s descendants will wind up founding the city of Xenia, Ohio. Thank you for visiting. Please exit through the gift shop.



Loco Moco

Hospice care workers are lazy and unambitious serial killers. They're comfortable with watching people die.

They get to administer death, but they don't have to exert themselves. Because it takes a certain amount of strength to be a serial killer. And stamina. Hospice care workers don't have strength or stamina. What they have is really comfortable shoes. These are not people who are worried about planning ahead. Are they organized? Sure. But they don't like the hunt. They just want the bodies to be right there, right in front of them, helpless. No struggles. Hospice care workers are not fans of struggling. And, by the way, some of them don't like to be called hospice care workers. They'd rather be called death doulas. "We understand how to foster an environment conducive to death. We understand how to bring death into life, easy peasy, so that death doesn't hurt, not really, or, not as much as it should." This is not a serial killer talking. This is a hospice care worker. His name is Ferdy and he's eating a large plate of Loco Moco and he's watching you die. He's wiping yolk from his chin and he's waiting for you to die. He's saying, "Hey, mister? Time to go. Chop, chop. You have to let go now, mister. Come on. We need the bed." His is the last voice you will ever hear.

Bonus Tracks



Cheap Dresses

Having agreed to participate in what many considered to be one of Reddit's most important AMA's in recent years, the Neurophysiologist, whose books about the complexities and quirks of the human brain regularly made the New York Times Best Sellers List, had this answer to the first question: "If I could have a threesome with any two movie characters it would be An Officer and a Gentleman's Paula and Lynette. They prance around in short, cheap dresses, with their hard hair and glossy lipsticks, but you can tell by the set of Paula's jaw and Lynette's resentful demeanor that they're aware of their performances and do not accept the roles they've been assigned, even though they enact those roles to a T. Paula and Lynette are magnificent, members of an elite class of women: those who have the intellectual, psychological and physical wherewithal to fly the jets, but who, for reasons too complex to talk about here, aren't allowed to fly the jets. And so these women turn themselves into vehicles of potential mastery instead. Just see the movie. It will all make sense."



Almond Joy

Dad retires. Dad was a dentist for over 40 years. Now all dad wants to do is travel. Dad must spend at least half the year on vacation. Dad's favorite place to visit is Thailand. "The girls are young and beautiful," says Dad. "And they're cheap." Dad's having a good time, but still. People worry about Dad. They worry about his health. They worry he's going to get the AIDs. "Oh, no, that's not something I ever think about, because that's not even the worst thing that can happen to you over here. The worst thing that can happen is that you're arrested, thrown into prison, and then you get the AIDs. No, no, no. I don't worry about the girls. That's the entire reason I come here. No one is worried about getting anything from the girls." One of Dad's sons calls Dad and asks if he can borrow some money. Dad says when he has a moment he'll send what he can. Dad says, "Do not expect a lot." Dad says the money he has right now has to last him the rest of his life. When people ask Dad when he's coming home he says he can't talk anymore. Dad says he has a

date with an Almond Joy. Dad says being in Thailand has cured his diabetes. Dad says being retired has done wonders for not only his health but his general outlook on existence and the cosmos. Dad's son says he doesn't think he's ever going to be able to retire and travel the world. "Well, that's too bad," says Dad. Dad sends the money to his son, who pays his utility bills and buys a week's worth of groceries. Dad says in Thailand you can wear shorts all day, every day. Dad says there are people who tell him he's "a wonderful man" at least one time a week. Dad says there are worse things than the end of the world.



In a Trance

When asked by the Suits what his dream project was, the Filmmaker, fresh off the blockbuster success of his hyper-violent, almost dialogue-free retro revenge / action drama, said he had always wanted to make a time-travel movie with Kafka as the main character. He went on to explain to the Suits that Kafka himself would not travel in time but be visited by a Time Traveler, someone from one hundred years in the future. Picture Kafka, the Filmmaker said, walking alone at night down the streets of Prague and then suddenly there's a flash of lights coming from the second floor of an apartment building. Kafka, as if in a trance, walks into the building, up the stairs to the second floor, and opens a door to find a man wearing an inexplicable and shiny outfit. This is the Time Traveler, and he sits on a chair in an otherwise empty room. The Time Traveler introduces himself and proceeds to describe, in detail, all of the horrible events that will happen after Kafka dies, but which Kafka will

write about, in the abstract, allegorically, before Kafka dies. The Filmmaker paused to see how the Suits were processing what he was saying, but the Suits had no faces. When the Filmmaker was done the Suits got up and left the room without either saying good-bye to the Filmmaker or even acknowledging he was there. Subsequent follow ups with the Suits resulted in no further communication, and the Filmmakers's dream project was put on indefinite hold, as well as any other projects he may have been either considered for or shown an interest in. It appeared to the Filmmaker that he had been put in Director Jail without having committed a box-office crime. No one had any answers for him, and no one seemed interested in helping him. What had he done? "Here," the Suits liked to say, "There is no why."

CHRIS OKUM
LOS ANGELES - JULY 2, 2022



Burgos
DANIEL DE CULLA

In the days of Hunter Biden and Cassius Dio

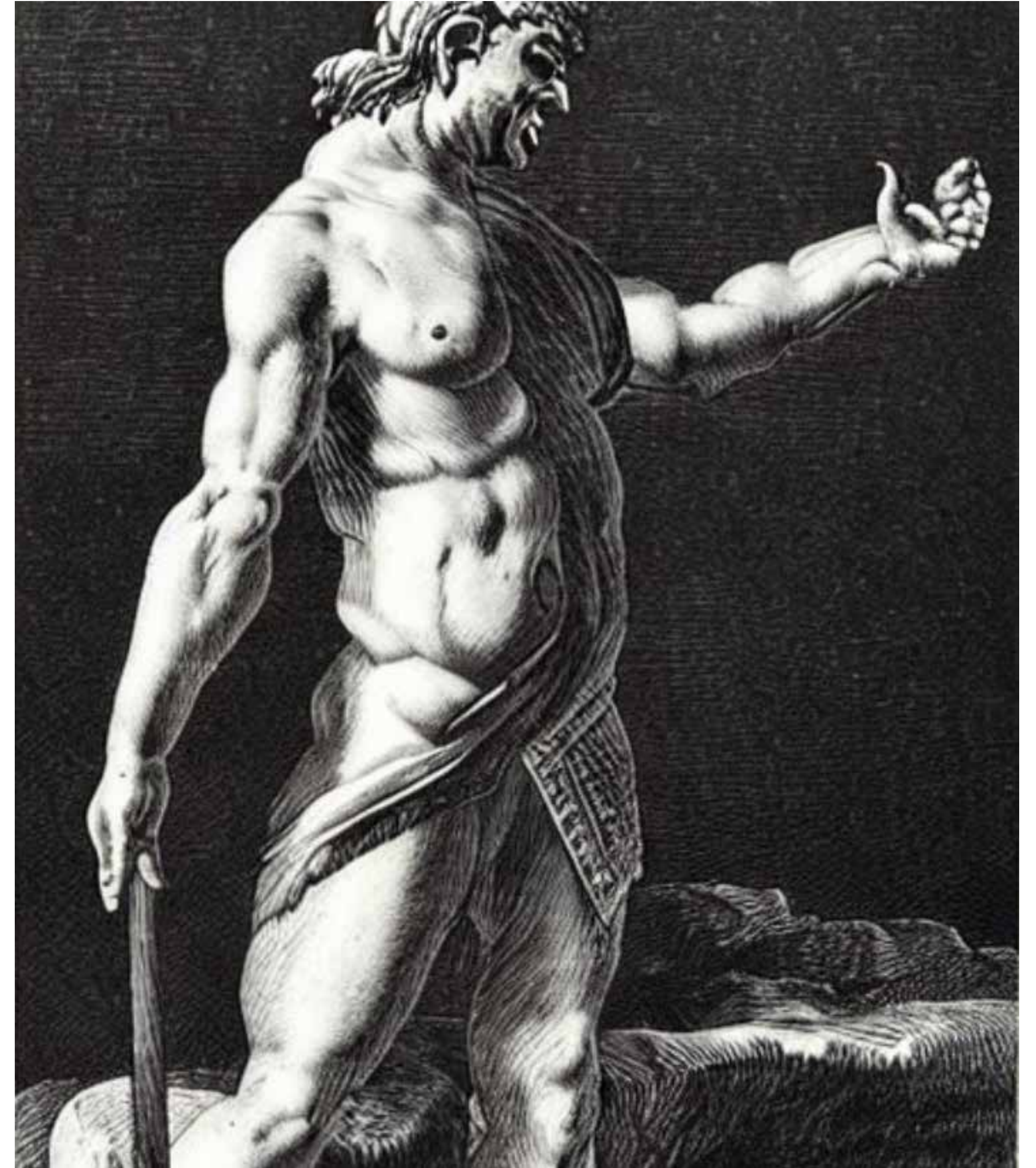
ANTHONY ACRI

This is a trigger warning. Both Jane Russell and Joe Califano, not to mention that the producers of the Godfather were also the team that made Hogans Heroes is mentioned in this puce. This is the equivalent to horror to some who vote for segregationists and or Goldwater girls all this time later, all the way down.

Isn't it funny that both Italian dunderheads running for the now shit stained and mothed eaten, purple sashes of this dwindling, dying, empire, we passed Republic long ago, both have resumes which include the US MILITARY, AND WERE CANNON FODDER IN BUSH BOYS' IMPERIAL, INCESSANT AND UNDOING PERPETUAL WARS FOR PERPETUAL PEACE. You know, here in Transylvania, the ones called Communists and/or Fascists, depending on what the good wholesome,

blond married to, Jewish money lenders, free traders, and or prosecutors so draconian that they were almost brought up on charges over an almost Disney villain love of sending darkies and N*ggers to jail, but then I didn't sell out. Whatever the good Yeshiva boys need them to be as well, crime never pays well with the soccer moms in German-town anyway and both are below 50 percent, as are they all. Someone has to fight the wars, and its never them. Bill could tell you what that means, but then, Livicus and Galen were so long ago, Brother Bill and now it seems to be almost immediately a Cassius Dio, like coffee, Zipiideedodah day. I can smell the rust. Now, Frankenstein's Praetor in his full third act must be led from the imperial Ambra Sky Yacht steps by his aging, bitchy, trophy wife, all the way down. How Virgil. Or Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In. I made much of my hero, as a

boy being based on Sylvester Stallone, who true to his creed, on cue is a mafioso- too muscle, I'd think we're I'd casting,- for HBO. He can, I take it, play an illiterate Boxer or a aging mercenary, but alas, thanks to intervention of Col Kurtz who did George Scott one better by sending out the butter girl to scold a Hollywood that just gave a gangster movie best picture, he can't ever play Superman. I watch Hunter repeats at night, not just to avoid Death dealing dottoers in bird masks and queers who are a cross between Bishop Sheen and Love that Bob on Tommy Smothers mausoleum, do comedy too close to the River Styx, as bloody bed-sheets wave in the dying Capote autumn, but because of something my mom called La Belladonna curativa.



Self-Pity And Apotheosis

HEIKKI HUOTARI

Sandpipers shepherds of attenuation, what one
stumbles on is both an artifact and not, a universe
composed of clowns nor one to give one leave to
laugh. The autodidact says, Let there be extra cheese,
and there is extra cheese. The autodidact says, Let there
be honor among thieves, and there is honor among
thieves. Diogenes gets bounty hunting backwards.
Theseus says, Don't change horses in midstream.
One's body is a temple. That one's theory's banned is
its cachet. One's body is a temple. Nice statistic you
got there, would be a shame if it would fall outside the
interval of confidence. The outside of a dog is flooded
with fluorescence. Do you read me, says the signal to
the noise, Go forth and multiply just don't collect two
hundred dollars, i.e., don't pass go

Slong Ooni olive---

TYREE CAMPBELL

Signs of death always linger, in memory, in echoes of voices, like a recording on the phone tape. Devra's parting words will remain on my tape until I record over them--an impossible alteration. The only inner voice I hear now is my own.

But I have no mouth voice. It is the price we pay, the trade forced upon us by circumstance and by genetics. I cannot speak coherently, I know that. Your words reach me clear as the tinkle of a silver wind chime, sharp as a raptor's cry. But I cannot duplicate them back to you. Even these words in my diary may prove incomprehensible to you. Once, I sketched a seascape, golden sand on a burning beach, lovers walking toward the sunset and the privacy of a palm grove, with a great scarlet macaw bursting from the fronds of a *coco-de-mer*, disturbed by

the human invasion. Norbert said it was a very nice fish.

(Norbert says other things to me, when no one is there to hear, and does things to me when no one is there to see. I do not mind, much. It is the only love I get, now that Devra is dead).

My earliest memories are of cacophony. People around me with their mouth noises, trying to shove fabric over me, or help me hold a spoon by the handle and not by the bowl, or show me how to wipe myself. In time I associated sound patterns with activities--run, play, speak, sit still--all beyond the physical capabilities of a dysfunctional musculature malconnected to neurons, and with abstracts--draw, sing, listen, think, love--all beyond coherent expression to anyone.

To anyone Outside.

But Inside, where I live---

I saw, across the years, how I became too much trouble. I understand why I live in this Home, alone now, but formerly with others like me, incomprehensible and remote. How many times did I brush Crest across my upper lip, not across my upper teeth? How many nights did I have to be helped up the stairs to the bedroom? How much did the bed cost my parents, the one built to prevent me from falling out...or from wandering in the dark too close to the stairs? How much food did I waste, missing my mouth entirely? And not once did they understand that the curious, strangled sounds I made were my words of affection, of appreciation, of gratitude. They thought I was gagging. They never heard my thank-yous, never felt my love.

There were times I longed to scream, to shriek, to cry out. There were times I did just that. They thought I was suffering *grand mals*, and upped my medication.

I knew what they were thinking. How could I not? But I tried to shut it out. There are some things you can do that you should not do. You can fall into a rose bush, or slice your finger with a knife. And I did not mean to. Just like I did not mean to hear their thoughts--to see, behind the too-wide smiles, the relief of “finally having some peace and quiet,” the “am I glad *that’s* over!” and the terrible “Ooni will be better off in the Home, anyway.”

Devra understood. She was my roommate. Even after the others had died, she roomed with me. The other rooms were rented, to people who did not belong in the Home, so that the proprietor might recoup certain financial losses. Devra and I were accustomed to people who

did not care, or who professed to care...who were paid to care. It did not matter, after we met. We cared about ourselves.

I never touched her, nor she me, not in that way. How could we? We, who can marginally feed ourselves, brush our teeth, wipe ourselves. How could we touch? But in another way...in our minds...we traveled to that seascape, the one Norbert said was a fish, and we walked, and held hands, and talked, and loved in our own way, she in the berth along the wall, I on the bed under the window, because my skin could tolerate the sunlight better than Devra's. Sometimes Norbert interrupted our play. At first we found this irritating. Later, we learned to close our eyes and hold very still. I pretended it was Devra, and she me. Our link helped us to tolerate his attention.

The link now broken by her death.

She wanted to see the stars. Not go outside, but to see them. To travel to them. It is not an uncommon desire among those who can comprehend themselves, who can walk along a sidewalk or in a mall without others pointing and laughing, or turning away, not to see. But it was her desire...*our* desire...too. She had dreams. If you can read this, you must remember that. Devra had dreams.

We were going to travel to those stars, to find a planet of our own. How? Teleportation is the easy part, so easy, once you learn how--as you might have learned, had you understood, had you seen through our fish. But to go together, that was more complicated. Devra could not move well at all, especially toward the last. How could she? Her muscles had wasted terribly, while she lay there, waiting for me each night to think myself to her. She had so much to give. So much love. So much vision, Devra had. She could see things. Others, like us, could see things, before they died. All anyone had to do was

ask what we saw. What others like us could see. Ask, and care. We would have told them, Devra and I. We tried to tell them, with our pictures of fish, and our nonsense humming, our metronomic rocking back and forth in the stuffed chair while our parents tried to visit. We screamed at them. They gave us more medication, while they themselves dreamed of the stars only we could truly travel to, if we wished.

Devra wished. But she died. I laid there in my bed under the window and the drawings taped to the wall of planets and galaxies and stars that Norbert and Doctor Phelan and Miss Crutchfield said were very nice cats, and oh, isn't that a cute frog? I laid there and listened to my friend die. Devra. My friend. I listened to her mind. She led a life not quite there. Her last words were not quite there. How very like her, how very like my friend.

“Slong, Ooni, olive---”

And I responded to her, in my way. “Ar oova doo.”

Now I am alone, with her voice Inside. I shall find our planet, and call it Devra. I am going there just before the sun comes up. Before Norbert comes in again.

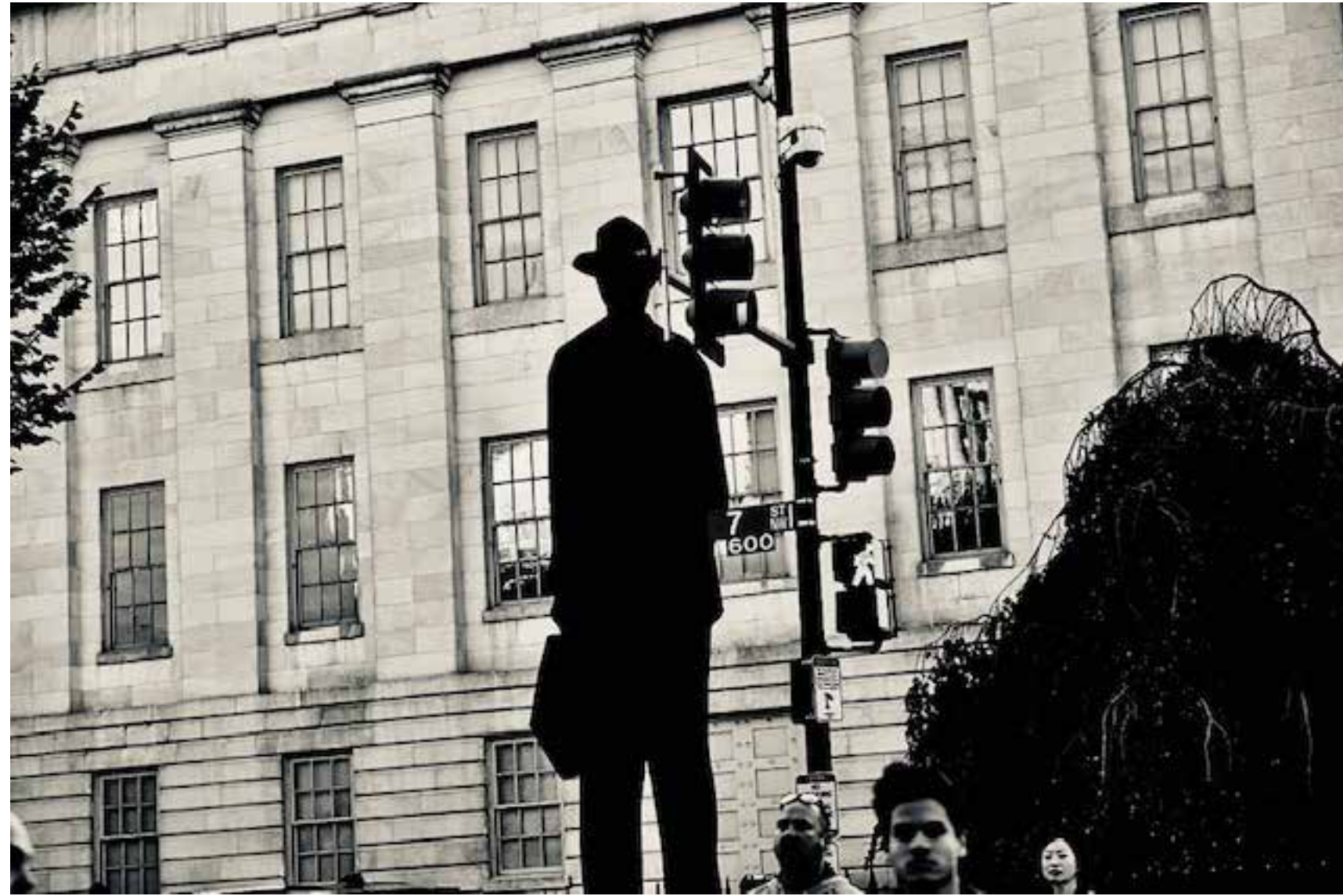
They will not find me here.



Headless Waiter
WILLIAM CRAWFORD

Long Standing Demonstration
WILLIAM CRAWFORD





Man with a Briefcase
WILLIAM CRAWFORD



Ramen Precursor
WILLIAM CRAWFORD

Rage

RON SANDERS

The night rears, and I sag.

It's all a mad stampede of staring pedestrians, of dueling traffic and crisscrossing helicopters. Headlights fry my eyes, but I've got to keep moving.

There's Oscar, loitering in the half-light between streetlamps. I know he sees me coming: his left eye gleams and drops. He backs against a kitschy restaurant's gaudily painted wall, feigns nonchalance, casually peers left and right. When he gives that discreet toss of his head I follow him down a short flight of concrete steps leading to the restaurant's streetside deliveries door. At the bottom a pool of pitch obscures us from the sidewalk above. Oscar glares.

"Remember what I told you, chump? Don't come shuffling around here like the walking dead. Put on some decent clothes, wash your face and hands—comb your

fucking hair, for Christ's sake. You're a total bust, man. So get your funky act together or go score somewhere else."

"I need a dime," I mumble, avoiding his eyes. "Just a dime. Just a roll."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You need a dime, I do the time. Don't play with me, dog. Make this worth my while."

My fingers knead the twisted steel handrail. "But it's like I really *need* a dime, okay? Because I really *need* to stay awake."

Oscar sneers. "What you really *need* to do, dude, is chill out. Then you really *need* to *realmente* clean up your lice-happy self. After that you can let your Holmes hang out in that snarky afeminado espresso bar over there. Don't forget to say ¡hola! to all the little *bareeestas*. Or, if you're really so *fagged-out* all the time, just cop to the

mainstream and start sucking down some of them ‘like totally bitchen’ new energy drinks y’all be jonesing over. Hey? Learn to pace your homeless ass, or do a boatload of NoDoz. I don’t give a crap. Show me some real green or get the hell off my turf.”

“*C’mon*, man! This is like a life-or-death thing here. If I fall asleep again I’ll go off again. Okay? And I really, really *do not* want to hurt anybody else, dig?” I’m talking to a wooden Indian here. “I try my hardest. I do my absolute *damndest* to control it. But I can’t stop myself. It’s like my rage...it escapes. It goes off on people.”

“Your rage? Shit, homey. What do you mean, your ‘*rage*’? Grow a set of cojones, will you?” Oscar isn’t sure whether to shake his head or spit. “You gonna start on me again, like some kinda freaked-out broken record? We all got rage.” He taps his temple. “You keep him up here where he belongs.”

“And I’m telling you, man, it’s way heavier than all that. It’s called random eye movement sleep. I read about it. It

happens to everybody, but it has a way of messing with my head when I’m in like really deep, *deep* sleep. Dig? It gets me up, but it doesn’t wake me up. I mean it only wakes up that primitive side, you know, that darkest part of a man that should never wake up. It makes me furious. And it makes me do things.”

“Makes you *do* things?” Oscar snaps his fingers in my face. “Who’s awake here, little vato, you or me? Why you gotta come at me all loopy and pinch-eyes instead of like my always together and super-tight *cliente*? Hey? When my colegas check in they know my street rep’s spotless, and they know my *postura* gonna be cool, and so when we does our business it’s with brotherly negotiations just as righteous and smooth as my sweet baby’s bum. No freaky space-rap. No stinky rags. And no excuses. Hey? You’re like this hobo spazzdick who’s just begging to be fried. Ain’t a brother on the street can’t see that. So school my ignorant ass, shaman. ¿*Compren*—eh, how you white boys say...*capiche*? *Educarme*, and I do mean here and I

do mean now. Tell me how you gots how you gots. I just gotta *know*, mi zombi loco—but *from the heart* this time.” He thrusts forth his chest. “*Hey?*”

It’s coming up, I swear it’s coming up. My fist burns round and round on the handrail. The bad side of my head begins to throb. “I don’t *know* how I gots how I gots, man. I only know that it’s been coming on really *hard*, and I mean really *fast*. And it’s like I really, *really need a goddamned roll, man*, like right on the dime, and like right *now*, because I know if I fall asleep again I’ll *really* go off again. It’s that simple.”

“Simple?” Oscar backs away melodramatically. “That’s some heavy bullshit, Sleepy. And it’s the same bullshit you ran by me last time, and the time before. You don’t need no more uppers. What you need is a good headshrinker.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you too, bitch! Don’t you be dissing me! Here I try to give you your props, and all I get back is more grief and promises. So scram! Beat it! ¡Vete a la mierda! Take

a hike, puta, and I don’t wanna be seeing you no more. You *dig?*”

It’s coming up again. Like way, *way* up. Like bile-boiling. Like lava-pissed. But I’m wrung so thin the very act of framing a retort leaves me clinging to the rail. My pounding head lolls against the wall. Can’t afford to blow it. Not now. “*Please*. It’s like I’m...um, truly, um...*realmente* sorry. So just this once?”

Oscar appears to seethe. Finally he says, coldly, “Where’s my dime?”

I stuff my free hand in my trousers pocket, pull out a few crumpled bills and a mess of change. “Eight dollars and thirty-nine cents. It’s all I could scrounge up. I’ll square it with you next time.” In a minute I feel the handful scraped away and the slim foil-wrapped roll take its place.

Oscar gores me with his eyes. “There ain’t gonna be no next time. Now split, fool.”

I conquer the steps one grueling lunge at a time; a

strikeout victim again, a frustrated, streetbroken, enfeebled old man. Deep in the well, Oscar curses my ancestors and any descendants to come.

And I'm staggering down the sidewalk, storefront to storefront. Every nerve's on fire, and it won't hang, it just won't hang.

Rip open the roll. Pop the little handful dry.

Seconds later I'm sitting on the curb, knees pressed together, tears squeezing from my eyes. Saliva floods my mouth but I refuse to heave. I swallow again. The bitter, bitter mouthful slowly dissolves and works its way into my bloodstream.

The sound of brakes. A bright light slams into my eyes. The officer's voice is chilly: "You all right?"

I wince and nod. "Something..." I manage, "something caught in my throat."

"Do you need medical assistance?"

I shake my head and make a great show of swallowing. "Better," I say, and open my mouth wide.

The beam breaks from my face, searches the curb and gutter. The light is switched off.

"Move along."

I stand and raise a grateful hand...stretch and yawn...innocently amble down the walk pretending to window shop...waiting...waiting. Waiting for the uppers to kick in.

There's a minute—or is it an hour—when I completely lose my train of thought while staring through some miscellaneous window.

And then the night's all over me. Moonlight spatters and pools...lovers furtively weave their overeager eyes...cafe-bound shoppers, burbling en masse, jollily join in the evening's refrain. And then there's...*Me!* Stupid eyesore freak, stumbling in circles, half asleep, half alive.

Sit down, you fucking idiot, or fall down, you fucking idiot.

It's a dead-end alley lit only by the moon. A shithole for sure, but at least it's off the grid. Tucked behind a leaning

plywood panel is a bed of flattened cardboard, stained by booze and pee and God knows what. A wino's crash pad. My arms begin to tremble, a white-hot flash cleaves my chest.

And I'm rushing, rushing, rushing. Get down, dick-head, behind the wood and out of sight. Close your eyes or they'll sizzle right out of your skull. Rest. Ah, *please*. Only for a minute. Only for a breath.

Just rest.

* * *

There he is, on the move. We're creeping down an alley in an REM nightmare, one shifting shadow after another. I follow him over a drooping chain-link fence, a fence that, like everything else, fights my every move. Now he's inching around a building to study the street. I can sense what he's after. He's found a man walking alone; a little old man in a nice suit, tapping a silver-knobbed birch cane. His excitement grows with each approaching tap. I can't reach him, can't stop him; my limbs are tangled up in some

kind of sticky invisible web. I can only howl soundlessly as he grabs the old man and yanks him headfirst into the alley, bashes his skull repeatedly against a cold brick wall, chokes him to death and hurls the body down. He checks for a pulse before frantically rooting through the dead man's clothes, then leans back on his haunches to examine something important in the fractional glow of streetlamps. He peers all around, his blank eyes squinting when he looks my way. A moment later he drops out of sight, savaging his prize. The background begins to revolve. The periphery dilates and contracts. The curves and angles collapse as the night caves in around us.

* * *

A stinking bed in a starlit, roach-ridden room. A smashed-in pane framing a dirty false dawn. I must have broken in, must have climbed in from the alley. It's an old abandoned hotel; rat carcasses on the floor, cobwebs in the corners. Just as spooky as spooky can be. But eerily familiar.

Those uppers had to have been cut with something; chalk, maybe, or maybe baking soda. That underhanded son of a bitch Oscar. Still, notwithstanding any personal revulsion for that weaselly creep, I have to give his stuff points for its long-term effects: jaws and fingers are jazzed, teeth grinding for the pulp.

My groping hand chances upon an open matchbook, and in the sudden glare of a struck match a half-memory challenges me. I reach under the bed to retrieve a fancy billfold stuffed fat with cash and credit cards. Twenties, fifties, hundreds. Some “real green”. The driver’s license reveals a distinguished, elderly gentleman smiling pleasantly for the DMV. Just a face in the crowd. But he knows me, and he fears me. As I guiltily pocket the bills my palms begin to sweat, my fingers itch like crazy.

Who the hell am I?

Zoning out. Suffocating. Temple pounding inside and out. Sliding down the wall a foot at a time. Barely conscious, all but unaware of the sky’s gradual lightening.

Can’t stay in here. Can’t breathe, can’t think.

Next thing I know I’m rolling on my belly in the alley, groggily scoping for looky-loos. In the distance are scrub-peppered hills growing distinct with the breaking day. They seem to be calling me...why do I feel I’ve been tramping them all my life. The neglected terrain, the field mice, the litter: this whole back-section’s been going to seed for years, but once I’m on the sidewalks I begin passing plenty of small businesses, even some nice homes. There are quaint shops and mom-and-pop retailers that look like they’ve been around for decades. It’s more of a cool little lost community than a big city offshoot. Yet...I don’t exactly feel a stranger here. Faces other than Oscar’s peer in from the rim of my consciousness. I could swear I’ve seen this short row of exclusive chichi establishments before. And the deeper I go, the more intimate it all becomes.

Off to my left reels a wretched, raggedy creature who looks like he just crawled out of a storm drain. Christ,

it's my reflection in a plate glass window. The image is so disturbing I refuse to look again.

A convenience store, security cameras inside and out. A gas station, way too many people hanging around the pumps. A beauty salon, blinds rising to meet the new day.

A 24-hour doughnut shop, only a few lingering customers anticipating the morning rush. I ricochet table-to-table to the counter, nervously thumbing my new wad, and somehow summon the grits to order an extra-large black coffee. The amphetamine must still be circulating: aromas are smothering—the thought of food, of even sampling a pastry, makes me want to pitch into the restroom and puke. Cashier and customers regard me strangely, but is it only my wild appearance? This house brew's burnt motor oil...got to get it down, got to force it down, got to keep it down. Can't afford to pass out in plain sight.

On a tabletop covered with crumbs and coffee stains, the local paper's banner headline screams up at me:

CANYON KILLER

Partial memories swirl like falling leaves. A jogger...a wandering bard...a young photographer who strayed just a tad too near. Regrets objectified and suppressed. Feelings bagged and buried. Victims mangled and mutilated.

Anxiety jangles my nervous system in little electric waves...have they found the old man yet...hastily gulp down the scalding coffee. Way too paranoid to order a refill, but sooner or later I'll have to really hit the caffeine. Anything to keep me going.

Sunlight butters the hilltops as I wobble down the road. Jesus! The morning's barely begun and I'm already out of it. What makes the worst part of a man sleepwalk? And what makes him crash on his feet? Copters sweep the sapphire-to-gold gradient, their searchlights' beams jerking this way and that. For one heart-stopping moment the nearest of those lights abruptly swings my way. I pale and turn to stone, caught in imaginary crosshairs.

Jesus! I won't make it another hour like this. No way; not without chemical assistance. I'll shrink or I'll snap or I'll swoon or I'll freak. And Oscar's never out before dark. Even assholes have rhythm.

To my left an old woman sits slumped against a market wall. She raises a languid arm and smiles gummily. What does she want? A face to remember, an ear to bend, a shoulder to cry on? I blow her off until I see a sheriff's car climbing the hill, then gently slide down beside her, away from the road. She grabs my hand and jabbers her psychedelic whatnot while I blearily peer around her. The car slows before continuing up the road.

My mind refocuses.

"I read you," she's saying, gripping my hand with passion. "Sleep. Sleep is your problem."

I cram a five in her molten Halloween gypsy face. "What do you want, man? Money?"

She snatches the bill like a bullfrog catching a gnat, shoves it in her bra with one claw, takes my paused hand

with the other.

"You are hiding," she drones. "You are on the run."

"Fuck you, lady. Let go of my hand."

I jack myself to my feet. She's trying to jack me back down when her eyes shoot open and her jaw drops wide.

"No! It's *you!*"

"I. Said. Let. *Go!*"

Peel myself loose...grobe around the market's side; extremities going numb, brainpan brimming with sleep's cement...bang down the wall one backbreaking brick at a time, a pointless, festering, pathetic pile of human debris.

Traffic picks up. Pedestrians pop into view. An ambulance shoots past. Ah, Christ—Oscar's right: I'm a total bust. Shudder to my feet, fall back against the wall, butt-walk my way into a cul-de-sac between buildings...a space behind garbage bins...no, don't wobble, jerkoff, don't stop. And don't close your eyes. Just a space where I can curl up. Just a crushed newspaper pillow to mute

that sickeningly pounding spot. Just a flattened box to black out the day.

Stay awake, stay awake, stay awake!

Do *not* close your eyes!

* * *

He's slinking ahead, but not so irresistibly this time. I could reach him, if only I could work my way free of this slow-motion spacewalk. He moves like smoke, seeping between obstacles—just a shape, a head and torso propelled by four rapidly firming limbs. Down a broken walkway to a gutted cottage stripped black by wildfire. He's solidifying: all that heaving, driving haze is fleshing out before my eyes. I lunge to take him by the shoulders, but my forearms slam together just as he reaches the napping old woman. My long wail of protest splinters and fades. Now he has her by the throat. He's lifting her up the wall and he's choking her with a feverish, with an almost libidinous savagery. For a single black heartbeat he pauses to look back. And I'm drifting in tight, wrists

locked, fingers closing and cramping as the woman's head bobs and bounces, as her arms slap left and right against the wall. Then with one final, impassioned squeeze, the nosy old witch is silenced.

* * *

Kicked in the lobby's restroom door. Shaved and hacked off hair by the fistful. A careful combover to cover the scar. A little pomade and a found baseball cap and I look almost human.

Gazing slackly in the glass, I flickeringly remember being up and about earlier, warily feeling out the neighborhood with my hefty new wad. And I pulled it off, even running on automatic pilot. The sporting goods outlet provided pocketed jogging sweats and a pair of top-notch running shoes. Way more important: I bought a pocket-sized high-tech programmable alarm. It's a bitch to deal with in my present state, but once I figure it out I'll set it to vibrate at ten-minute intervals.

Again my gnarly reflection is replaced by a single nag-

ging image, an image burned into memory:

Everybody in that store was just STARING at me!

Ah, the scales are falling from my eyes. I'm finally getting the unadulterated picture. That wildly paranoid event was an oh-so timely newsflash; a wake-up call to my weary white ass, and the collective view of all these precious, milling, artsy-fartsy gleeps: Monster At Large!

Just so—the fog lifts: while I've been wrestling with my own demon this geeky little community's been quietly freaking out. And now their big bad bogeyman's out of the bottle. It's in the air, man; in the sweat marks on the doorknobs, in the half-prints on the floors: that panicky vibe bawls from every newsrack, leaks from every local's lips, burns in every crossing guard's eyes. There are warnings taped to windows, sketches tacked to walls. How long before the whole place is just crawling with cops. How long before it's all feds and vigilantes.

How long before they find the old lady's body.

* * *

Late afternoon.

I've been stepping in it all day: falling out on benches, cussing out shopping carts, freezing up in crosswalks.

This stupid alarm's got a mind of its own. It goes off when I least expect it, razzing my every attempt at programming with its every ironclad algorithm. It's constantly redirecting me to functions I could give a good long holy crap about, using visuals jerkily mimed on its little integrated screen by some retarded ex-librarian or other. But at least it's kept me from keeling over in public. And now it's coming on dusk.

I've got to end this ride tonight.

I've got to OD while I'm able.

I've got to put myself out of my own misery before I really blow it and the whole fucking thing starts all over.

I'll buy out that scurvy snake Oscar. My whole begging wad, man, every ripped off dollar of it, for just one long, electric, bitter white rush into night.

* * *

This time that savvy eye glints rather than gleams.

Oscar, sitting insolently on the steps' thigh-high safety wall, wags his head sardonically as I shamble up, wind-milling my arms for balance. He gets to his feet assertively and moves to block the entrance.

"Are you deaf? Didn't I say you wasn't to come around here no more? Now split."

"This is different." I peel down my waistband to reveal an arsenal of flattened hundreds and fifties. "I want quantity this time."

"What did I just say, asshole?" Oscar shows his silver caps. "I told you to split. We don't do business no more. You ain't welcome, you ain't wanted. I don't know you, punk."

From my tensing jewels comes an antediluvian call for malice, sweet malice. Whatever that line is people aren't supposed to cross, the prick's definitely stepped over it this time. Without considering the likely consequences I get right in his face.

"And fuck *you*, bitch! Why do you have to be such a dick all the time? And why can't you get it through your fat fucking head—this is no casual pop-and-go! I want it all, man! I may be nothing more than a piece of shit and a nuisance to you, but I'm a complete menace to the rest of the world. *And*, whether you *do* get it or not, I'm *not* gonna let it happen again! So why don't you just do us both a favor, *punk*, and *do not* stand in my way!" I brush him aside and begin making my way down.

"You keep going down them steps, boy, and you sure as hell ain't gonna be coming back up. You hear me?"

I whirl and climb, my rage rising with me. But even this brief surge of passion leaves me giddy and spent. "*Please*." I miserably embrace that low running protective wall. "Please, man, *please*."

A loud burr comes from my left front pocket. We both see the fabric vibrating.

Immediately Oscar is a live wire. "What's that!" A hand finds his back pocket and I hear the characteristic click

of a switchblade. “You’re one dead narc, motherfucker.”

“No, no, no, man! It’s just an alarm. I’m still learning to program it. I keep trying to tell you—I *can’t* let myself fall asleep!”

“Back off.”

I feel the blade’s tip poking my belly.

“Please. I swear, just this once.”

“*I said back off!* And I don’t wanna be seeing you no more. If I catch you on my street again I’ll kill you.”

I clumsily backpedal down the sidewalk, turning in time to see a police cruiser nosing around the corner, recovering in time to force a believable shuffling jog. That familiar beam lights me up before swinging onto Oscar, now stargazing serenely on the gaily painted little wall. At the corner I pause to glance back. Oscar is talking jocularly with the officers, who haven’t left their car. It’s obvious they’re sifting for something bigger than pissant dealers.

Fumbling, faltering, feeling my way. Edging into a blind corridor between buildings, crumpling behind a clutter of

trash cans. Even as I’m massaging my screaming temple two official vehicles momentarily probe the scene with their spots. The helicopters, as always combing the hills, are beginning to comb the town.

Pull out the alarm...the LED winks cheerily...tentatively set it for ten minutes, and for five-minute repeats thereafter. Back in the pocket. Back on my feet.

Scrabbling at the walls. Kicking through the rubbish, a flutter of Jacksons spiraling in my wake. Hanging from a fire escape ladder, rust breaking off in my fingers. Letting go; first the left hand, then the right. Withering. Wilting.

Slipping like silt as the black earth rushes up to meet me.

* * *

Down the alley and between the parking lots, all the way to the sidewalk—he throws Oscar into a chokehold, ferociously breaks his neck, drags him back the way he came. He drags him right through me. Comes a nagging hum and insistent vibration. My body heaves into a wretched

arch; he hurls back his head, throat crooking and apple popping. The racket grows and grows until its components collide behind my eyes. The night begins to quake, the walk to shudder. And I'm being pulled out of sleep's murk like a fish on a line. The overpowering sound bangs away, shivers and shimmies, clatters to a close; rapid eye movement is renewed. He hauls Oscar's body back up that bisecting walk, frantically bashing the forehead on cement as he goes. Another burring of the alarm, somewhere on the line between grogginess and complete insensibility: five minutes have passed; it seems like five seconds. He collapses and recovers, blurs and congeals, repeatedly smashes the face on the ground, against a wall, again on the ground. And I'm gelling in time. My whole frame goes into shock—like teeth-gnashing, toes-curling shock. Like being electrocuted while inhaling to your roots, like sucking it all down until your whole puckering reason for being just blows up in your face—and immediately my heart's hammering in my skull. He pauses his

mauling to look around, a cheetah at the kill. The violent throbbing intensifies; his eyes, two white holes in the night, widen with mine. When my respiration threshold's breached we simultaneously lurch and explosively exhale. He resumes dragging Oscar down the alley; I push off in pursuit, but my arms grow leaden, even as he becomes weaker and weaker. We're beginning to stumble and sag. At a third burring he slumps just outside the old hotel's shattered window, finally forcing himself inside one semiopaque limb at a time. I draw myself brick by brick along the wall, bellowing in a vacuum as Oscar's body passes through the frame. Pulling myself into the room is like fighting quicksand. He looks up, tears his nails out of Oscar's eyes and goes for mine. Just then the alarm shocks us back into alignment. I grab a sheet from the bed, knot it around his neck, and squeeze my way out of slumber. His hands find my eyes, but I have leverage—enough to stand on the bed, enough to loop the sheet around a wall fixture, enough to use my body weight to

draw the sheet tight. I sink back down until we're face to face. And my mouth spews an ugly black mantra while his translucent lips writhe in perfect sync:

Die, you son of a bitch, die. Die, you son of a bitch, die. Die, you son of a bitch.

Die.

* * *

THE CANYON KILLER MURDERS – THEIR IMPACT AND AFTERMATH

All available data regarding the Canyon Killer Murders point conclusively to derelict Owsley Martin as the sole perpetrator. Martin was a vagabond living since his late teens in the hills of Topanga Canyon, drifting down to the community when he required sustenance: one of those hit-and-run relics of the hippie era now known colloqui-

ally as “coyotes”. He was discovered hanged by his own hand in an abandoned hotel off of Deep Ridge. The instrument of his demise was a noose fashioned from a sheet taken off a bed in one of the hotel's ground-floor bedrooms. The mangled body of a known drug dealer, one Oscar Benecito, was also found in the room, but forensic analyses demonstrate he expired prior to Mr. Martin, and was therefore not a party to the actual hanging. A large sum secured in the waistband of Martin's sweatpants lends credence to the popular belief that this was a drug deal and robbery gone tragically wrong, an ill-planned event culminating in a spontaneous outburst of unbridled temper and violent remorse. Regardless, arm-chair conjecture cannot be substantiated. All the underbelly documenters, street-culture enthusiasts, and amateur criminologists must ultimately yield to the only viable conclusion: this once-glamorized incident was really nothing more than a crude murder-suicide.

Longtime residents remember Martin as intense and ex-

ceedingly antisocial, prone to bizarre behavior and empty nights lost in frenzied soliloquies. According to several locals who had spoken fleetingly with Martin during the two weeks of murders, he had complained of an inability to stay awake, and of a predisposition to act out his most violent fantasies during rapid eye movement sleep, as though, through some kind of weird preternatural dream bifurcation, his unstable innermost being might erupt to commit mayhem on enemies old and new. A number of the above-mentioned witnesses received the distinct impression that Mr. Martin was severely mentally disabled, others that he suffered from sporadic attacks of acute narcolepsy. The state's autopsy reveals Martin was actually a victim of hypothalamic damage involving the body's circadian regulator—that aspect which controls the sleep-wake cycle in otherwise healthy beings. Whether or not the hypothalamus is diseased or has suffered injury, rapid eye movement sleep, which normally sets in around an hour after one drifts off, occurs much

sooner in those who are sleep-deprived. There is speculation that, had a narcoleptic Martin regularly succumbed to the vagaries of rapid eye movement sleep, the onset in his compromised state would have been nearly instantaneous.

However, serum albumin indicators establish that Martin was not a narcoleptic—that he had, in fact, functioned *without measurable sleep* for an astonishing fifteen days. Based upon tests performed on subjects awake for even half that duration, the overriding tax on his mind and body must have been incredible, producing psychopathic delusions, highly erratic motor impulses, and a complete inability to differentiate between fancy and reality. Various specialists have published opinions over the years, in both *The Lancet* and in *Nature*. Their consensus: Owsley Martin was a man who, paradoxically enough, only dreamt he was asleep.

Although fingerprints, DNA analyses, and hair-and-clothing vestigial evidence prove beyond contest that Ow-

sley Martin was the lone culprit in the Canyon Killer Murders, there were two additional deaths in the community, and three in the abutting canyon, that have been attributed to a so-called Copycat Killer, due to their striking similarity to the Martin slayings. The victims—a hitchhiker, a shopkeeper, a deputy sheriff, a tourist, and a deep canyon squatter—were all murdered and mutilated with Martin's trademark ferocity, and were forensically determined to have been dispatched, one by one, in a meandering line leading from the community to the hills. Outside of the immediate signs of struggle, no actual physical evidence exists to help cast light on the identity of this mystery figure.

A massive operation was undertaken in Topanga Canyon, with nearly three square miles initially cordoned off as a possible crime scene. Some two hundred squatters were promptly rounded up, cited, and expeditiously expelled through the highly commendable efforts of Los Angeles County Sheriffs and L.A. Firefighters. All were

interviewed in depth regarding their impressions of Ow-sley Martin throughout the decade-plus of his tenure in the hills. The results were so similar as to be considered gospel: an insular and disagreeably gruff man prone to incessant overt self-talk, and to periods of wild profanation followed by bouts of cursing and weeping. Members of a peripatetic commune, the Soul Sunflowers, reported encountering Martin at the bottom of a gorge after he had fractured his skull in an appalling fall. Each claim he had refused their aid and, following recuperation, made frightening advances filled with what one described as sinister and vehement psychobabble.

Over a period of eighteen months the entire area was segregated by conjoined lengths of razor-wire fence, in the locally famous *Hands Helping Hands* project, a County-funded enterprise that, ironically, provided strong temporary employment for those very evicted squatters.

The Canyon is now an indigenous wildlife sanctuary, rigidly protected by officials and citizens alike. Off limits

to all civilians, it is rigorously patrolled by County inspectors and by periodic helicopter runs. No unauthorized person has ever entered the sanctuary.

Yet there are scores of residents, even now shaken by the grisly murders, who whisper of an odd nightly phenomenon. It's just human nature, of course: urban legends are born in the imagination rather than in fact.

Still these dwellers lock their windows and doors, still they clamor to congressmen and councils, still they swear of a black figure roaming the hills, raving through the night of an invasive slumber, and screaming to the moon of an unknowable, of an insurmountable, of an unimaginable rage.



Dinner with Vlad

LEROY B. VAUGHN

Vladimir was from Russia and had been in the states about five years when I met him. We lived in the same town in the mountains near San Bernardino several years ago. My first impression of him was that he looked a lot like Vladimir Putin. This Vladimir wore a long black leather coat, had short blonde hair and was built like the Russian dictator.

He didn't seem to have a lot of friends, but most people that knew him called him Vlad. He lived a few blocks from me and he would come over to my place and we would drink beer in my garage. He didn't talk a lot about the old country, except that he had been a police officer in St. Petersburg. He was waiting to see if the Los Angeles police department would accept his application for police officer.

I had a buddy that was a detective with the San

Bernardino police department, he told me one day when I was hanging out at the lodge that Vlad was not just a police officer in Russia, he may have been a KGB agent. The detective didn't say how he knew this, but he said that Vlad was a Lt. Colonel in the KGB, not a street cop in St. Petersburg.

A few days later back at my garage, I asked Vlad about police work in Russia after he had slammed down four beers. He didn't say too much, only mumbled something about riding in a helicopter on a raid in Kazakhstan. After he left, I looked up Kazakhstan in an atlas and figured that it was several thousand miles from St. Petersburg. No street cop would travel that distance to file a report.

Vlad had married a nice Chicana from San Berdoo. She was kind of a homegirl from the streets, but she and Vlad seemed to get along well and my wife liked her a lot, and

so did I. It took several months for the background check, but the L.A.P.D. was interested in Vlad. The background investigator told him that the police department could use more Russian speaking officers, and that he would most likely be stationed in the East Hollywood area where there was a lot of Russian and Armenian criminal activity. Vlad graduated at the top of his class, and was already thirty-five years old when he joined the department.

My wife stayed in touch with Vlad's wife Wanda. One day Wanda called and invited us over for New Year's eve. I tried to bow out gracefully and explained to Wanda that I didn't do well around a lot of people. Wanda said not to worry, it would only be us, Vlad, Wanda and Vlad's mom that was flying in from Russia.

We arrived around five in the evening, thinking that dinner was usually served around six pm. Vlad's mom was there wearing her long black leather coat. Vlad was smoking a Cuban cigar that his mom had smuggled through customs and he offered me and my wife a cigar. My wife

declined but I lit up and sat down for a shot of Russian vodka with Vlad. That shot turned into a few more shots as we snacked on Iranian caviar and pickled herring that his mom had brought from Russia. While we drank and ate hors d'oeuvres, my wife was in the kitchen with Wanda listening to her complain about Vlad treating her like shit and staying drunk when he was off duty.

His life with the L.A.P.D. was not what he had expected. He told me that the background people had lied to him when he was recruited. He didn't go to East Hollywood. His beat was a few miles away in Filipinotown. He was not using his language skills or anything else. He had a partner that was senior to him and all his partner wanted to do was to retire on the job. They picked up a patrol car at the start of each shift and "orbited" their beat until the end of their watch avoiding as many calls as possible.

Dinner was served at ten thirty and we finished eating a little after midnight. Vlad and his mom explained that this was the way they ate in Russia. Vlad was drunk by this

time and he was getting verbally abusive with his wife. It didn't appear that Vlad's mom liked Wanda very much, and she went out of her way to make Wanda feel uncomfortable. Vlad went to another room with his mom to get more caviar from her suitcase and Wanda asked me to hide Vlad's pistol that he had left in his chair. I was not very comfortable with this idea and Wanda took the gun and hurried off to the kitchen to hide it.

Vlad returned a few minutes later and saw that his gun was missing. He demanded to know where the gun was at and Wanda pretended not to understand what he was talking about. Vlad's face turned bright red as he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a switchblade knife. "Give me the fucking gun Wanda, or I'll cut your fucking face off," he yelled at her. The mom made no attempt to calm him down and my wife stood up from her chair and asked Wanda to come home with us. She told her we were leaving now, and I was able to calm Vlad down enough for him to put the knife away. Wanda assured us that he

would be okay after she got him to bed. We waited for Vlad to go to bed before we slipped out of their house.

At nine the next morning my wife called to check on Wanda. Wanda was okay but Vlad had left the house after we left and had not come home yet. "Where do you think he went," my wife asked.

"He's got a couple of Armenian buddies that live two blocks away, you know those guys he talks about that raise those big Russian police dogs." Wanda told her.

Wanda said that it had been snowing all night and Vlad left the house wearing only jeans and a sweatshirt. I offered to go over to their place and look for him and was ready to go to the car, when Wanda said. "Here he comes now," and then she yelled "What the hell Vlad, where are your pants?"

An ogre with his footprints in the soft underbelly of your land,
Pulling conversation out of you like teeth
Maybe it's another long con from a seat back position of going your way
Always fleeced by the unseen hand,
Just the type of bozo Nietzsche was babbling on about...
The esteem in which we hold Nazi's and Syphilitic minds
When they weren't remonstrating on their proselytization's
They were dick down in 15 year old hooker pussy.

I, a hungover animal

Treelined streets is a vomitorium
Farm to table freaks huddled together like brunch classist warrior
The stench of long dead mafioso wafts up to my portion of the bridge,
Who has the time anymore?
It's all a broken clock we stare at each day
Just your hopes and dreams,
Just your life's work...

That's why you need degeneracy like mine,
So you can lie to yourself, thinking you can do it like this,

Hey...

At least I know the clock is on the fritz.

All Remaining Passengers

JOE SONNENBLICK

Another strong Jewish Woman went back to dust yesterday evening,
At Seders, a cut-up.

I think of her on the dance floor at dull family functions
Like a bee pollinating the whole joint.

She came to me in a dream,
A melatonin laden fantasy

The book of tobit is open and pages are flying
She's a dybbuk,

Under a trance from Asmodeus...
This ancient scroll means nothing

I tell her how the mishpocheh is,
Opening her eyes wide,

Closing them slowly.
Sweated, awake, gasping...

I pour a glass of iced coffee
She's at the table,

Smiling and watching us live our lives...

Aunt Rhoda Was Here

JOE SONNENBLICK

She's at Lonny's table,

Scott's table,

Rachel's table,

David's table,

Carly's table,

Having "A very small glass of red wine with a little ice."

Discombobulated

BEN UMayAM

12PM

Ridwan is thinking about the news this morning; they gave the guy some 99 years. He is already 24. If he dies in jail after 50 years, do they keep his body there for another 25?

He pumps once, twice. Something weird with the brakes. That other driver, not Pakistani, but Latino, maybe from one of those South American countries. They speak Spanish there, so different. Not like the way he learned when he immigrated to Alicante with his Auntie from Cornwall. There, Spanish is different. Theirs is much nicer. They always say “*Hola*” and “*Muy Buenas*” to you over there. Here everyone says, “*Coño. Cabron.*”

He is thinking now about the Latino guy, on the highway, in the snow. He wonders if he was new at driving a truck like he is. That guy, he texted a friend. Told him his

brakes didn’t seem to be working. Ridwan thinks, make sure you do not text Habibi.

That guy did not take a runaway truck route. Runaway truck. Sounds like a runaway train. Sounds like some sure collision. The news reports say that guy should have taken the runaway ramp if his brakes were failing. That guy should have taken the hill that goes off the highway. Take the hill that goes up a dirt road on the side of a mountain. Gravity will do its thing, slow a truck, even a big truck like his, to a stop.

Rid does not trust the pile of dirt that goes up the side of a mountain. So Rid, like the Latino, decides not to take that uphill route.

Rid decides not to stay on the highway either. That Latino guy did, stayed on the road, crashed and burned, and is sentenced to 99 years. Involuntary manslaughter,

the jury did not buy the Latino guy's rejection of the laws of Sir Isaac Newton. Laws were laws. He broke the law.

Ridwan thinks if his brakes fail, he will not chance 99 years in jail by staying on the highway. So instead, he will get off on a local road, crash into some field or something. Kill some chickens or a cow at worse. But not a bunch of people in a fiery collision on the highway, 99 years in prison.

12:30 PM

"It was like in slow motion. I saw the whole thing." Joe, the homeless guy, would say later. Everyone assumes he is homeless, clothes a mess, missing his two front teeth. "I was on the way to the rec center. The bus turned at the library, and we saw it come off the I-70 ramp, turn, hit the center thing, then fall on its side and block everything. Shit, I said and got off the bus. This is a mess for the rest of the day. Traffic started backing up going north, cars backed up going south. I got off and decided to

walk the rest of the way."

1PM

Ridwan pulls off the highway, down the ramp even though he remembers, from some handbook, you are not supposed to do that. Is it against some law? Even if he breaks some law, he is sure it won't mean 99 years in jail, not for some inexperienced trucker, a guy who takes a local road instead of a runaway ramp.

The hairpin turn coming off the highway is sharp. Ridwan turns, hits the bump, and his truck careens to the side. He slides. The whole world is not upside down, just on its side. He curses the bump that was the center island, the truck now effectively blocking both directions of the parkway that goes through the center of the smallish-sized town. The truck blocks the parkway that hugs the "Little River" that it is named after.

The big truck sits on its side, in front of the Wendy's, in front of the Cheap Mattress that sells expensive ones, in

front of the High-Country Dispensary that sells edibles and flowers for way too much money. Ridwan lies on his side, his truck sprawled, blocking the road that runs like a river through the town, north to south and south to north.

1:30 PM

His troubles with the local dentist, unbelievable. You can't make this up. They told him that NY is the only state where dentists don't take a qualifying exam. "All you guys from New York, you all show up here, and you have all these problems." That is what they tell him at this Colorado dental office. No insurance? We have a gold plan. Pay yearly, and you get our discounted price.

His visit would be routine and cheap, he thinks. A crown fell out when he flossed that morning.

The dentist is Vietnamese, his accent heavy. He says that NY State is the only state where a dentist does not need board certification. "Your NYC dentist has left a

root canal with one root still intact, another crown, rotten to the core." Convinced, he lets the Viet schedule three visits, finish the root canal, do two crowns, the last that attaches to the partial. He sends the partial denture out to fit the new crown. George pays the \$3000 discounted price.

For three weeks, he is not George; for three weeks, he is Michael Strahan.

After three weeks, the Viet dentist puts in the new crown and is proud of how it looks. Then he inserts the old partial denture and does some adjusting.

They are no longer a good fit. The minute George chews on a baby scone, the denture comes loose, and the baby scone gets stuck between the denture and his palate. And it is always painful now, the old denture. It hurts so much; he is always taking it out.

Livid, George is. He has paid 3000 bucks for this dental work. They do all this stuff, three visits, and his partial comes back obsolete. Plus, he now has a lisp.

Another dentist with the clinic, she is Dutch with origins from New York City. She tries to fix the denture. She tells George he must read out loud, practicing t's and s's. "The tongue has to relearn how to say those letters. You will relearn in a couple of weeks."

"Thweeth-hearth, I am already gay. Now thith?"

Dutch dentist laughs, tells George a story while she tries to refit his partial. Her grandfather lived in a house that is now an administrative office at Brooklyn University. "Wath Bwooklyn Univerthity. I know a Bwooklyn College, not a Bwooklyn Univerthity!"

2:24 PM

George hears from Andy while waiting at the dentist's office. He is stuck on the bus for an hour already—traffic at a standstill. The bus driver tries taking side streets, and that does not work. Driver nice enough to let him and the rest of the passengers off. "I ain't supposed to do this; I am supposed to leave you at a bus stop. Just don't

tell anyone. We ain't getting to a bus stop anytime soon."

He is going to walk, he says. We are supposed to do Mexican food for lunch. I want to go to Fruitopia. That's what I call it. Never can remember the name. I look it up, *Fritangas* it is called. What does that mean in English, I wonder? We will meet there. I take the partial dentures out. They hurt, and I lisp; who cares if I look like Michael Strahan at the Mexican restaurant.

2:38PM

They turn into the restaurant parking lot. Maybe he thinks it better to wait it out here, at this restaurant. Maybe in an hour, he thinks, things will ease up. There is a table for two in the corner. Would have preferred a booth—more space to discuss nothing.

"*Fritangas*." Nina says. That is Nine-a. The first syllable pronounced like the number 9. "Odd name for Mexican. In Nicaragua, that's a plate of rice and beans and a protein, a *fritanga*. Will you look at this menu, all this Mexican

stuff. So fancy. Who said this is a hole in the wall?”

It is buzzy. Waitresses are trying to appease customers who have waited too long, bussers juggling glasses of water threatening to topple, the short staff struggling.

Hank does his grunt. And a nod in agreement or disagreement. More of a nothing humph.

She wonders. It is pretty bad. Stuck for 2 hours on a parkway because a truck overturned, blocking traffic going north and south. Not a word is said between them for 2 hours.

She remembers her fiftieth birthday. She confronts Hank about something or another. He snaps back; he never wants her to mention that again. Odd and juvenile. Why shouldn't she mention it? It is all part of being married. He wants to keep things all shut up, tied up tight in a box.

As she blows her candles out that day, she thinks she never wants to celebrate in the future. It is just another day, as far as she is concerned. Just like the others. Careful what you wish for is her thought as the smoke from the

candles floats away.

Five years later, she is at this corner table, her husband humphing and nodding, never talking, stuck on the parkway, stuck for over two hours because of an overturned tractor-trailer. And it is her birthday, her 55th. And he, no one, is talking about it.

2:48PM

They arrest Ridwan. They pull him out of his cab, and his teeth are chattering. The refrigerated air has seeped through the broken glass into the driver's cab. He is as cold as his cargo of lite beers when they pull him out.

3:00 PM

They have all been pretty much on the bus for two hours. There is some movement now. The parkway is cleared, the lanes going north. Going south, is still blocked by part of the truck.

The lady walks up to Amber. The lady smiles a plastic

smile. “*Donde sta la parada para eso.*” She holds her piece of paper out. The scribbling looks like The Comfort Inn. But it could be the other place with the Spanish name, La Quinta. It is scribbling. And they are all the same, motel cheapos. Expect nowadays, they are not cheap. Nowadays, it is practical to stay at these lower-priced places.

Amber has taken four years of Spanish. High School. Don’t ask her if she can speak it. She does not speak it at home. She does not think in the language, so don’t ask her if she can speak it.

Yet she knows enough to tell the lady it is the next stop on the bus. The lady smiles, not trusting the gringa’s English. She asks the guy in the orange construction vest, shows him her piece of paper and asks, “*Donde sta la parada para eso.*”

Carlos is third generation. He speaks English with that middle state twang. His Spanish is still first rate, the real thing. He asks her if she knows if it is the Comfort Inn or La Quinta. The lady says she does not. Not know?

It is what someone wrote down for her. He tells her in Spanish, lady, you should know the name of the place where you are starting a job. Carlos shouts out to the driver from the middle of the bus, “Les, she doesn’t know where she is going. It sounds like she is starting a new job at The Comfort Inn. What stop is that?”

Everyone on the bus, not a lot, a handful of people, all yell out it is the next stop, past the mall with the Under Armor and Levis factory outlets.

“Whoa,” Carlos exclaims, “talk about good Samaritans. That is cool. All you folks trying to help out. *Senora, es la proxima parada. Tu quieres The Comfort Inn. Se llama The Comfort Inn.*” In Spanish, he tells her to get off at the next stop and walk up the hill, and it is right there.

Since he speaks excellent Spanish, the lady’s smile turns to a grin. Everyone rings the bell, and she gets off. Carlos repeats, “Man, you guys, all good Samaritans, wanting to help.”

It is the wrong stop. She is starting a job at La Quinta,

which is the previous stop.

Carlos and Les carry on their conversation as the stand still heading south eases up, Carlos yelling up to Les driving the bus. The whole bus learns Carlos is an electrician. “Working right under where the forest fire was. Every year we have to dig up right under the tree line to make sure the lines won’t go down during the first snowstorm.” Les says you would think they would come up with a permanent fix, so they don’t have to fix it every fall before the first snow. “You would think, right, but they don’t. Fine by me. Keeps me with a job through the winter. Gunna finish this job and come when it is cold, collect unemployment, maybe work at the Lowes during Christmas. Then collect till it is warm again. Say, did you hear about Carmen? She is some mean bitch. You can’t run a house like that. Gotta keeps the customers satisfied.” He goes up to the front of the bus and whispers the Carmen story into Les’ ear. The traffic eases up. Things return to normal. People ring the bell. People get on,

and people get off.

4:30PM

Chuck and Joni are a new couple in town. They leave the *Fritangas* restaurant like everyone else, having waited for their food from an overwhelmed staff and after eating, still waiting out the traffic lockdown. They live on the hill, on the bus route that goes north. The shuttle will return, then changes, goes south after the bus terminal. Walking, they, sure enough, catch the first bus out going up the hill. Things are slow but moving along. The driver is talkative, having been stuck in one spot for three hours. He goes through the litany of what has happened. He uses words like discombobulated. They pass a truck, a small truck. The driver announces it is the truck that has caused all the problems. It is obviously not that truck, too small. The sign on the side of the truck says B.D Totnal. Bus driver quips that it stands for “Bad Driver Turns over truck, no accredited license.” He laughs all the way

up the hill. Clever, Joni tells Chuck. A discombobulated bus driver with a sense of humor.

The couple has just bought their house. The market is crazy. They buy in a day, fix it up in a month and rent it out for ski season for 6 months. Meanwhile, they will move to Spain, Croatia, or wherever it is warm and infection rates are low. Israel is sounding good right now. Isreal wants to do a fourth vaccine, a mandatory second booster. The world is up in arms; they are overreacting. Talk about conflicts, but it is the Holy Land. Evangelicals have built plexiglass platforms on the Sea of Galilea. They charge you a price to take a picture walking on water.

6PM

Everything is seemingly back to normal. The last of the backed-up cars going north and south on the parkway that hugs the little river, they have all straggled home. The passengers, of cars and buses, all stuck for 3-4 hours, are now settled in, discombobulated, contemplating what

just happened.

9AM at the Spotted Trout Café, the following day for the next few days

The café is named after the trout in the river by the parkway blocked going north and south the day before. I can never remember his name, Chuck tells his wife. Bobby, no, that's not it, Jerry, that could be. I remember it was the name of one of the Blood Sweat and Tears members. There were so many members in that group.

Clay greets the couple. Introduces himself to Joni. "Hi, I am Clay." Yes, Chuck thinks, David Clayton Thomas was the guy who sang "You Made Me So Very Happy." Clay has heard they are going to the Caribbean. He tells them that he works with a shuttle service to Denver airport. He says he will give us a good price. I tell him no thanks. The bus service to Denver is excellent, only 12 bucks. The bus system here is fantastic even when the freeway is shut down for 3 hours by an overturned truck.

Joni asks why they don't take him up on the offer. Chuck tells her that Clay lives near the airport shuttle office. In the parking lot. He says he lives out of a van, a rec vehicle, parked in the parking lot near the outlets. He tells Chuck, "I shit, shower and shave at the rec center." He has a free membership.

It makes sense. Clay is there at the café every day, same outfit, corduroy jeans, and flannel shirt. He brings his own cup in for coffee, goes straight to the sink and washes it out, and gets his coffee. He never seems to pay. He has his own table, second from the door, right next to the stage where the performers perform their live music. He wears a cap that looks like Bob Dylan's on his 1960's album covers. "Do you want to take a 90-minute drive to the Denver airport for 90 bucks with a guy like that," Chuck asks Joni.

People have their laptops open, sharing pictures. The traffic, standstill running north, running south. The overturned truck, six axles, big rig. Everyone is pulling

up the picture of the police chief on the internet carrying off a case of cold lite beer. A similar picture of the mayor, a gal, with her kids, the fire captain is doing the same.

Everyone is sharing pictures from internet news agencies and social media. Everyone is smiling in the photos. Even Joe, the homeless guy with no front teeth, is smiling. All carry-off cases of cold lite beer. George and Andy are doing their morning lattes. George turns to Andy, and says without a lisp, "That Joe guy, he looks like me."

The truck is emptied of all its beer on the internet so that tow trucks can turn it upright. Everyone is helping. Everyone is happy, and why not, free and cold lite beer. Beer is always cold here. In the 1860s there was some big train wreck in these parts where all the beer, the supply to the gold miners for the summer, got ruined because it was too warm. From then on, first in trains and then in trucks, beer is always transported in CO by refrigerated transport. It is a cold, free, lite beer morning, that morning before.



Fisherman
DAVID ISHAYA OSU

Singing the City
DAVID ISHAYA OSU



Traveling by Bus

DANIEL DE CULLA

Dangling ear rings

Tattooed leg

Banana and middle finger playing with the mobile

Volcano lava



Velatorio
DANIEL DE CULLA

Afternoon Piache

DANIEL DE CULLA

Piache is a childish voice of tweet, of chirping.
For talking or being late
To the political talk in the Polisoón Room
From the Teatro Principal, in Burgos
You have not heard
That a certain Sancho el Bravo
Fucking his daughter
Running for general election
Leaving his wife Doña Beatriz
Naked and shitting swastikas
Virtuous and pious
Because, according to him, she said while shitting:
-You have to build and help a lot
To the churches
That Spain, by the grace of God
It has not ceased to be frankly fascist.

In the Polison room
We were like chicks in the egg.
Another who belonged to that talking party
Gobbled up our brains
And screamed in his throat:
That we politicians are badly inclined
Vicious, thieves, fakers, motherfakers
And similar things.
It is a great truth.
But that's what there is
And so it wasn't
If you had not given to Politics
And to Garlic and water:
Fuck off and suck it up.
Here, in the Polison Room
The respectable public

Is chirped like a little bird after being caught
In the nest
Dreaming that some position or position
Would be distributed
Since the bait brought by the lecturer
Making them open their beaks
And applaud the promised promises
Which were always the same:
Liberty and Distributive Justice
With the stick, the club or the tumbler.
After the talk is over
The respectable public
Gobbled up and cheated by their greed
Did not notice that the lecturer
And his henchmen disappeared
As if by magic
Sheltered by their guardians
Staying like chickens and hens
Featherless and cackling.

From a blessed old lady
We hear her say:
-These guys in this game are saints.
From an old atheist
We hear commenting:
-After cuckolds, beaten
And everyone satisfied.
Long lives slavery;

from *Testaments*

PAUL PERILLI

MARY DEE DUPREE, SAN BERNARDINO, 1998

We lived at the end of East First Street near the park. Our house wasn't very big. Backyard nothing more than a square of grass was all. A shade tree in the middle, swing hanging off one of the branches, love seat to sit in and rest and look up at the Milky Way at night. That's where Lewis practiced, under that big tree. He was always out there. It didn't matter what kind of weather. Twelve years old, in overalls, t-shirt, the skinniest kid you ever saw. Nothing to him but flesh and bones. The silver horn my father gave him was always in his hands like it was his first girlfriend. He slept with that instrument. I mean it went under the covers with him. I can still see him through the kitchen window, puckered, blowing

away. Those big eyes, black pupils with pure white surrounding them. Playing a sweet melody though I was never sure what it meant or where he got it from. Maybe from the clubs he'd stand outside of to listen to the bands. Didn't matter. He kept after it. He couldn't help himself. He was making something on his own that sounded good. He knew it and he'd tell you. You could see the joy in his eyes when he was playing, being him, a sound leaving the horn only he could make.

Our neighbors didn't always agree with the quality of his playing. Even if they liked it, they did so in small doses. They knew there would be no end to it unless they did something about it. They're coming to our front door from the right and left. One, two houses away. From across the street. A few knocks

at the wood around the screen. Marie tells Mom its Mrs. Taylor. Mom already knows what it's about. Lewis is out back, so what else could it be? She ain't bringing us a blueberry pie. Come to ask for some quiet. Mrs. Taylor don't mind Lewis playing some of the time. She thinks Lewis'll be good at it someday. Hopes he's a professional that gets work in a big hall. But why so many hours? she says. Shouldn't he have more to do? What about school? Doesn't he go like the other children? Some days he walked to the park. Sat on the top row of the ballfield stands and played until it got dark. Or until the bigger boys came around and he had to run back home so they wouldn't steal the horn and play it themselves. Or try to sell it in a pawn shop. No one else ever used it. Lewis made sure of that.

Sometimes he played indoors, in the room he shared with Billy and Robert. An hour here and there. If he went on longer we rose up and sent him out-

side, told him it wasn't fair to fill the place seven of us lived in with only him. He was the oldest boy and supposed to set a good example for his brothers. Home was small. Clean but small. Four rooms under a roof that rose to a point in the middle. You were always looking for extra space to be alone and knew you were never going to find it. Lewis just needed more space than the rest of us.

That's right, we were a family that spent a lot of time together. Except for Lewis. Besides the trumpet, he was always out on his own, like the things he was doing were big secrets. Never wanted to get to know people close up. Even ones he was raised with. I try to picture all of us together and it's a struggle to make Lewis show up in it. He caught on with a band when he was sixteen. I didn't see him again until many years later, here in L.A. I went with a girlfriend to hear him play. Sat right up front. Small table around a bunch of others. After the last set

we talked and I told him about Dad. He had cancer and Mary was taking care of him. Did he want to see him? I wrote the address down and he put it in his pocket. He promised to go the next week, but he never did. That was Lewis.

Dad put the music in the house and horn in Lewis's hands. I think he wanted Lewis to be a musician. Saw a lot that he might have been in him if he didn't have a big family. He played piano, which took up a lot of the living room. Gave lessons to some of the neighbors. They were the ones that didn't complain so much about Lewis's playing.

No matter what Dad expected from him, Lewis never thought of anything but playing the trumpet. I don't remember the time when he made that decision. That one moment when he saw himself playing on a stage, people out there listening even though they may not know what they're hearing.

By the time Dad went west to find work and call

for the rest of us to come Lewis was already bringing home money playing at neighborhood dance halls. Like I already told you, he left when he was sixteen, took the apprenticeship in the trumpet section of a band. McShann was the name of it, I think. Is that right? You must know better than me if you're here asking the questions. He'd heard about Lewis when they came through Oklahoma City, let him play with them while they were in town. Then he invited him to go to Kansas City. Didn't take no more than that. Lewis was gone. He never looked any of us up after that until years later. Not even Dad until it was too late.

LEWIS BOLTEN, LOS ANGELES, 1958

Long silence, is what Mr. Tynan called my being away six years. Though it wasn't any vacation I was on. Town down in Mexico you go to for the winter.

Forging a check in Oklahoma City was part of it. I was back there after leaving Johnson's group in New York. Picked up with him after the troubles with Brown. With Johnson it was different. No problems with him. I was tired of playing the same thing. Was getting good money, but no amount's making you happy playing bullshit. My apprenticeship was over only they didn't believe me. I wanted to step out on my own, and in a big band like that you got to wait your turn. You get ahead in line of someone and there's a mutiny if you're the leader. Problem is, no one ever leaves. Got anything in you that seems important you come to a decision point: you stay and play your part in the group, or you go do the thing you want to do and find others you want to do it with. Or hope they find you. And until then you gotta eat.

Now I'm out. In town again. You go away a while and they forget what you've done. Other's take your

spot. Step up. Open the floodgates and put it out there. Some youngster out of Tampa or Chicago. From up in Seattle. Walks on a stage one night and blows everyone's mind with a sound they describing being as pure as polished ivory. Everyone's excited about him. Tables fill every night. People understand he's saying something important, and if not that then he's being convincing about the unimportant stuff. Three encores instead of one. You ain't around, he is, poof, you might as well not be alive.

On Central Ave, the strip, nights stretching out to morning, most don't know where I've been. But enough do to add to the mix of talk. Got to have something to jabber about between sets. *Down Beat* wrote I was away with personal troubles. Nice way to say you were in jail for forgery. Possessing cocaine. Skipping bail. Most reading it will know what was up. Can't disguise that with a happy face. And since talk travels fast, there's no escaping it when

you got troubles. It grows larger than the trouble you got into. Some will care. Some won't give a damn long as I fill the seats. Make em forget all about the youngster out of South Noplace saying nothing at all. Give em their money's worth. Set their asses and ears on fire.

At the It Club, where we been playing, Mr. Tynan sits at a table to the left of the stage. Little notebook out. Fancy pen scratching at it. He must of liked what he heard the other night. Come to see me again, Mr. Tynan? Blowing the wildest jazz on the West Coast, is how he described it. Said I been turning heads around town since I came back. The fire burning in me making a lot of fine shit happening. Had a picture of me to go with the writing. Wearing my gray suit and white shirt. Big cufflinks you can see all the way across a room. Mustache trimmed nice.

Six months later he tries to get some things out

of me about where I've been and what I've done. I don't tell him much. You don't have to tell everything about you to people. One thing's clear, my sound's strong as ever. Big and honest. Blistering. Coming out so fast and powerful I think I might rip the heads off those listening to it.

So said *Down Beat* in their last issue.

And they got that right.

ANITA VAUGHN, HOLLYWOOD, 1998

Lewis has been gone from my life for many years. I hoped the best for him, always did, but assumed he'd been dead a long time. I wanted to see him get the recognition he deserved. But he was his own problem that got in the way of that. After we split I felt something tragic waiting just around the corner for him and he'd meet up with it sooner than later. One of those corners he took that he shouldn't

have, and kind of knew it, but went anyway. That was Lewis. He never thought about consequences even though he experienced them more than most. Was mostly worried about things that were happening now, in the present. What he needed and wanted. Drugs do that to a person. Drive you to your grave if you don't resist them.

I've been singing in nightclubs all my life and that's how we met. I saw Lewis for the first time when I was working at the Cat and Fiddle. Well he saw me up on stage singing. I was thirty, I remember, had been through a lot of men by then, so it wasn't like he just came into the picture and filled a space where there'd been no one else. Afterwards he walked right up to me and introduced himself. Said he enjoyed my singing. I liked him right away. He was handsome. There was no doubting that, a bit small, thin, nice smooth features, almost like a woman's. He dressed well. Impeccable. Clothes looked good on him. He

could have modeled them if he wanted to. I'd find out soon enough the ladies were always after him and he had hard time resisting their attention.

After the Cat and Fiddle closed we went to another place and talked until morning. He had other plans for us, I know. But I sent him on his way, to wherever he was living then. I'm not quite sure of that anymore. Just where. I know he was sharing a place with another musician. Maybe more than one.

We finally decided to get together. Rented a bungalow over in west L.A., on the north side of Baldwin Hills. It wasn't much, but we set it up nice and comfortable. Lewis was into his music. He had a very creative mind. By the time we met he'd been in prison twice a total of five years. For small stuff. Forgery. Stealing. He was up front with me on those things. Never tried to hide them. But they'd ruined him in a way. He was very contained by that. Maybe by then he was more comfortable in that kind

of restricted environment. He had a phobia for big crowds. Wherever he was, in a grocery store with narrow aisles filled with goods and lots of people, driving down the freeway and all the traffic coming up beside him, he'd have to get away from it. But when he got up on stage and the place was filled he could work through it. Show you things you never saw before.

Sure I'll take you there, where Lewis came into his own as a musician. But to get to the corner of Forty-Fifth we have to get out of Hollywood first, get through downtown and skid row. It may take a while this time of day, but we'll get there. If that's what you want to do, Richard.

It's not much now as you can see. Nothing's left except for the Dunbar Hotel, and that's boarded up. We'll come to it soon. If you knew the place then,

what it looked like, the people that came here from all areas of life. Everyone had one thing in common, to get away from whatever they needed to and have some fun, listen to music. That's when there were plenty of places to work in. Blacks had the kinds of jobs that paid you something you could live on and left some money over that to spend on the sort of entertainment that attracted whites to come down here.

This is the Dunbar, right over there. Only place left standing from that time. It was the city's best black hotel. Jack Johnson, the heavyweight boxer, you know who he was? He had a nightclub in it. Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong stayed there when they played next door at Alabama. Reason you don't see it is that it went the same place everything else did once the money dried up and the City Council decided that whites and blacks mixing with each other and having a good time together wasn't such

a good idea, so they run a highway through it, right over where the business center was. Destroyed it all. Had something good going for everybody and they ruined it. Then wondered why everything else went to hell right after it.

Park for a bit over there and I'll show you the photos I brought along. I don't throw away much. I never really break up with a man. We just go separate ways. When it's love there's always leftover feelings hanging on you. Never get rid of them. That's the way it was with Lewis. Not the kind you have when you're getting to know each other. But ones that give you a good vibe whenever you think about him. You forget the bad stuff easier than the good. You keep something going inside you.

Those two are at his 34th birthday party. In the one where he's cutting the cake and turning to smile, that's his brother Bill behind him, and Bill's second wife. That was our house and his car, taken about

a month before I left him. He was proud of that convertible. Sometimes I felt I was competing with it for his attention. He washed it every other day. I told you he wore his clothes well. That gray silk suit and gray shirt were his favorites. A producer bought them for him for recording on his label. He knew a happy Lewis would make the record sizzle. He was always wearing black shades, no matter what time of day, to hide other things I think you know about. The lifestyle he was living. Otherwise you wouldn't be here talking to me. Isn't that right?

I met his entire family once. It was a good one. They were right here in L.A., not far away from us, but he never went to see them. His mother was a Christian woman. His brothers and sisters were there too with their families. They all got along, except you could tell Lewis was in a different place than the rest of them. They liked him more than he did them, and seemed to wish he returned their kindness. It was a

good day though, I recall. But like I said, we went only one time.

Lewis was clean when we met. No drugs. I wouldn't have got involved with him the way I did if he was doing them. He liked to drink. But who didn't? Drugs are different. My experience of the jazz world made me know things I wouldn't stand for up close with a man. When I was younger I traveled with Parker and seen what happened. I explained that to him before we got our place. He agreed to it. Said he had no intention to shoot up anymore. He was over that. Playing was all he wanted to do. After a while there was a man started coming to the house acting like he and Lewis had been friends a long time, though they didn't seem to have much in common and nothing to talk and laugh about. Sometimes you don't question things. But I knew what was happening. He was bringing Lewis his stuff. When I realized he was going to be a junkie again, I wouldn't take it. Not for

a moment. I tried everything to stop him. Did no good. I knew he'd never give up the habit. One day I called my sister and told her to come pick me up. We'd been together two years. I only saw him a few times after that.



Shooting Photographs of a Wrecked Freedom Bus Conjures Up a Visitor or Two From Mississippi's Darkest Past

WILLIAM CRAWFORD

I had passed the decaying bus on Northwest Boulevard more than few times. It's rusting carcass with badly fractured glazings held a funky allure for a wandering photographer like me. I shoot stuff no other lensman would likely touch. My goal is simply to elevate the mundane to pleasing eye candy.

I whipped my little car into the side street, hard by the overflowing junk yard. It was still early and the light was scarce and flat. I slapped a walkabout zoom on my old Nikon. The bus was mostly gutted and its damaged, clouded windows served up impromptu abstract art. I had a strange sense of perusing an outdoor museum.

I soon heard a slight scrape in the loose gravel behind



me. Up came an old bent over black man dressed in a well used straw fedora and a brightly colored checkered shirt with baggy pants. He had a fag fired up and I was suddenly dodging his thick sweet smoke. “Name’s Cleveland,” he mumbled. “Want to know the history of this here bus?”

Well, I was just waiting for better Golden Hour light, so a little backstory, real or imagined, would be just fine.

“She took us to Meridian in ‘64,” he offered. “I was just a freshman at Winston Salem State then.” Bingo! In an electric instant, I knew this was a Freedom Bus and Cleveland might well be an aging civil rights hero. My suspicions were quickly reinforced. He pulled off his straw fedora to daub away some perspiration on this humid North Carolina morning. His balding head held a thick ugly scar from one ear over to the other. In a flash I knew some-

body had beat the living hell out of Cleveland, probably back in 1964.

In a slow but steady voice he told me his sordid tale of being recruited to register Mississippi voters by the fledgling Congress for Racial Equality. He had been working the rural counties around Meridian when three of his colleagues were kidnapped and murdered, their mangled bodies ending up buried in an earthen dam.

Cleveland opined “I was lucky to make it out of Neshoba County. They caught us buying gas at a little place, and they beat us with their clubs for fifteen minutes straight!” “We had to go all the way to Jackson just to find a hospital that would help us.”

Cleveland was never really the same he lamented. He dropped out of college and he eventually found steady employment on a city garbage truck for 29 years. “As bad

as I had it down there, at least I lived to raise a family,” he remembered.

Cleveland had had enough! He was restless and this story was still painful. As we exchanged respectful good byes and he lumbered away, the sun was higher in the sky, and I was trying to shake off my astonishment enough to start shooting the bus. I felt new found motivation because I knew I was photographing a small piece of American history.

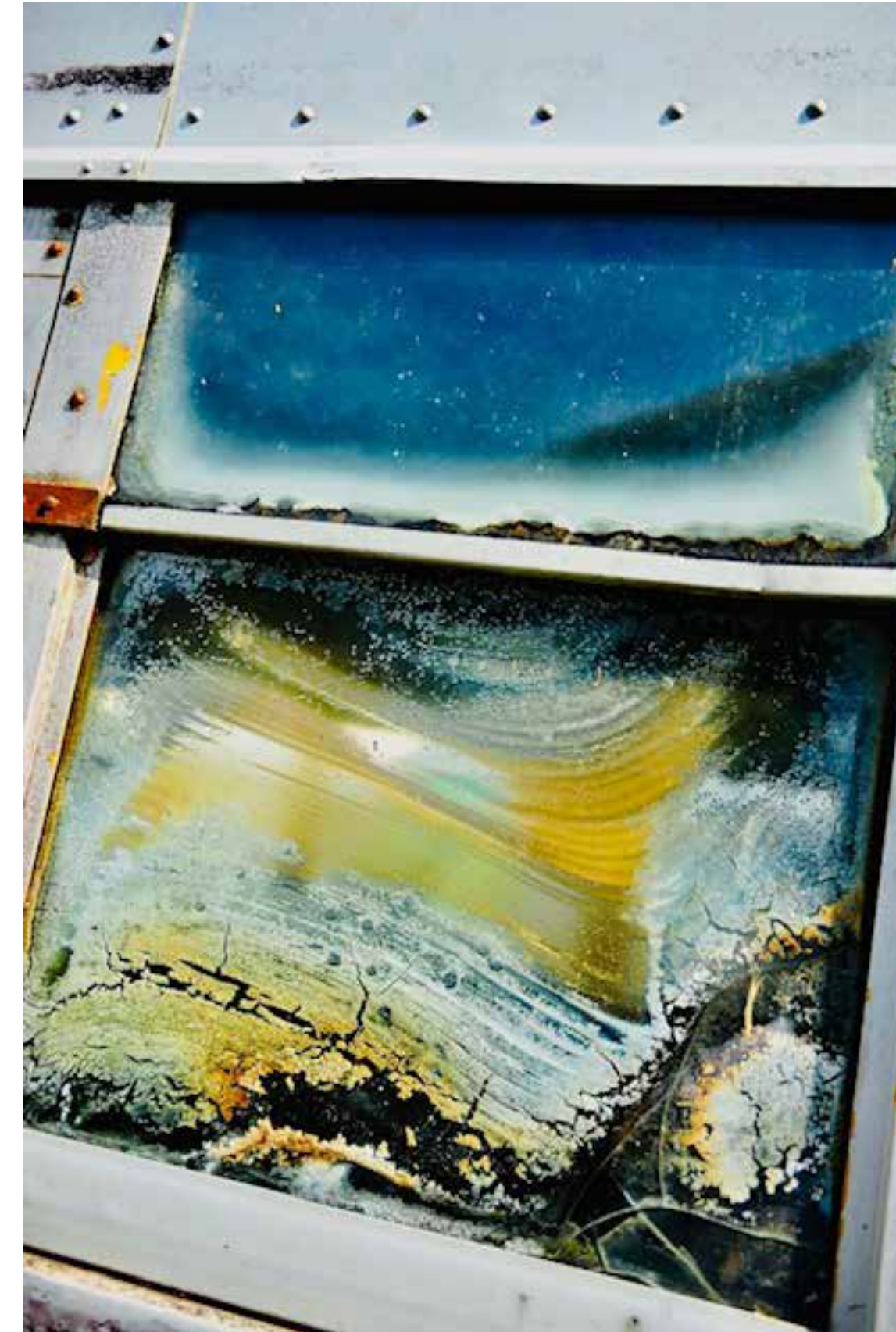
Traffic was picking up on the Boulevard and I busied myself shooting the battered hulk from a variety of angles. Suddenly the sky darkened a bit and an eerie calm descended kind of like being in the eye of a hurricane. I looked around quizzically and then I noticed a vintage black town car moving slowly past on the Boulevard. The back window was down just over halfway, and a young man with a distinct Jewish countenance and a scrubby

goatee stared blankly at me as the car rolled past. There was something about that guy—but hell, I couldn’t put it together in this suddenly surreal setting! Traffic picked back up and the sun peaked out. I shot for another quarter hour and I left satisfied that I had an exceptional early morning. But that kid in the back seat just stuck in my subconscious ...

A few weeks later I was glued to my iPad reading about renewed efforts in Mississippi to indict someone for the long ago murder of then teenager, Emmett Till. Out of nowhere my bright screen shifted on its own to a Wikipedia entry about the three slain civil rights workers near Meridian. Their photographs were there and my heart skipped a beat when I saw that third pic. A goateed Michael Schwerner stared back at me. The same young face that gazed stoically at me from the backseat of the passing Town Car a few weeks before. The Wiki entry said that the KKK had referred to the brave civil rights orga-

nizer as “Goatee” when they put a bounty on his head back in 1964.

I was momentarily dumbfounded but this wasn’t the first time for me to be engulfed in this wild otherworldly shit. Over the years, while shooting, I had supernatural encounters with Rod Serling in San Francisco and Pancho Villa in an obscure West Texas cemetery. This rendezvous was closer to home, but it offered me further insight into why I am still shooting as I near my 80th year. Those giants of combat photojournalism(four Pulitzers) who got me started in Vietnam but who are now mostly gone are still sending me bizarre opportunities from the Other Side. And you can bet CRAWDADDY can damn well still press his shutter!





Mission Hill

JOE RECCHIA

Paul Moretti Jr. woke up, as he did most workday mornings, to the sound of the alarm going off on his iPhone. Except this morning it sounded more like a horn blaring freight train bearing down on a public crossing. And his iPhone didn't read six thirty as was normal for a weekday. It read nine o'clock.

From the sybaritic excesses of last night, fur-tongued, he slowly sat-up on the edge of his bed—motionless. Saddled with a bad case of the jug flu.

Standing-up, he steadied himself with the help of the wall, with phone in hand, he toddled his way towards the bathroom. Reaching the John, straining to see incoming messages on his phone, he glumly returned to the bedroom once again to fetch his glasses from the nightstand muttering;

“Fuck for shit eyesight!”

Today had been his 50th birthday. He looked forward to birthdays much like he did his annual prostate exams.

“Fucking Birthdays!”

He muttered on his way back to the bathroom.

He had taken the entire week off from work. No doubt, needing part of it to recover from last night’s intemperate, birthday romp with his office buddies at The Busted Bottle Tavern downtown. He was to spend his mostly solo fete for the week on the Cape, hauling with him on the back of

his Range Rover, a brand new Specialized Roubaix Sport, a birthday gift to himself. Taking this time to assess the first half-century of life. He planned on cycling through the scores of bike trails that lined the Cape along the ocean, bay and canals. With plans to meet up later in the week with his best friend Michael Baker and Michael’s wife Margaret in Wellfleet.

Michael had been the best man at Paul’s wedding. There was even talk of a mystery woman that Margaret had invited along to meet Paul that she felt would be perfect for him. That in all likelihood, wasn’t.

Twenty miles of roadway lay ahead roundtrip, before he would load his bike up on the back of his Rover and head out to the Cape.

He got dressed in his biking gear, downed a Matcha Hustle Peach Energy Drink, considered his waning hangover and then downed another for good measure. Closing the kitchen door behind him he stepped down the four steps that led into the garage. Mounting the saddle

of his brand new Specialized Roubaix Sport, he strapped on his helmet, clipped his shoes to the pedals and out the opened garage door he flew.

He was sailing down Mission Hill at a blur when an F-150 pulled out unexpectedly in front of him. The truck never stopped.

Fucking cocksucker!

As he however attempted to do so, like one of the infamous Flying Zacchini brothers, he launched himself – like a human cannonball – over the handle bars.

Fixed to the roadway, like a freshly patched pot hole, semi-conscious, oddly enough in little pain—a car in passing thankfully stopped. The driver no doubt having seen him do a Greg Louganis into a black pool of asphalt might have been a clue he might be in need of some immediate attention. A 911 call ensued. A squealing ambulance arrived to sweep him up and off to Mass General they drove.

Three cracked ribs, a collapsed lung, a broken jaw and

an assortment of contusions later, he lay in a hospital bed. Dormant as a mole crab.

Nothavinggivenmuchthoughttochanginghisemergency contact information on his medical records, his ex-wife Kathleen showed up at the hospital. Despite their recent six month divorce, their relationship continued to be just as tangled and knotted as before. For Paul, tolerating Kathleen had never come easy. In their rumpled minds, they felt—despite their dysfunctional ten year history together—that their time together should represent something laudable. Like for instance, having survived a combat military tour of duty. That those years together, futile as they were at times, should command, at the very least, a scant dose of respectability toward one another.

Kathleen had always been extremely attractive. Even at 48 she turns heads, but today mostly for the wrong reasons. Mistaken for Gisele Bündchen in her younger days, these days, her face, drawn and heavily mapped from the harsh excesses of drugs, alcohol and smoking, plus

too many botched plastic surgeries over the years, had rendered her more in the class of Donatella Versace.

With time having left its coarse imprint upon her once flawless Irish countenance, psychologically speaking, she had managed to add a few new wrinkles to her already burgeoning moonstruck repertoire. Her latest had been conducting exhaustive daily conversations with herself. Which came as little surprise to Paul. But for those less knowing, snared in her presence, they either grew to tolerate the conversational interruptions, or as was normally the case, they'd discreetly back away, then turn—and run frantically for the nearest exit door. Like someone had just yelled—“Fire in the hole!”

Despite her considerably weighted cognitive challenges, she did have her moments of lucidity. Six months from their divorce, knowing Paul as she did, Kathleen had the good sense to assume that that same kind of medical contact oversight, likely spilled over to his failure to also draw-up a new Last Will and Testament. And she

would have assumed correctly. As it stood today, in the unfortunate case of Paul's untimely demise, Kathleen notwithstanding, as was initially arranged during their shaky 10 year marriage, she would become the beneficiary to his rather modest, but nonetheless gainfully procured estate.

As she approached the nurses station—from the window of his room—Paul watched intently as her blithesome spirit dulled as words were exchanged between her and the attending nurse. Words he imagined, said to the effect—to her utter disappointment—that he'd not yet been terminated to the chilly after life of a coroner's meat locker.

In his palliative daze, panic began to set in. Fear-ridden, he reached for the nurses call button. His intention was to ask for more oxycodone to dull the sting of her presence. But like he frantically presses the search button on his TV remote nightly, channel surfing unsuccessfully through hundreds of stations for anything that might grab his attention—pressing the nurses call button with equal

resolve this day produced similar results.

Having received the disappointing news at the nurses station that Paul was still a living and breathing member of the homo sapiens community—albeit, at the moment, a quasi-functional one—Kathleen entered the room with drooped shoulders and a forced smile.

If it weren't for the smoke-free laws that prohibited smoking in public places—a ban Kathleen vehemently protested—“What next?” she'd say with disdain, “A ban on bacon? Pastries? Soda? French fries? Plastic?” Paul was certain she'd have no doubt, entered the room with a lit American Spirit cigarette dangling loosely between her plump, collagen-enhanced lips.

Paul found her smoking to be more than a bit perplexing. Given her intransigent belief in eating only whole organic foods. Buying only unsullied, chemical-free beauty products and consuming only all natural curative health remedies when sick.

Minutes later Paul's parents made their shaken appearance.

His mom clutching a chocolate cannoli, Paul's favorite, with a lone white candle stuck in the center, inside a clear plastic container. Paul thinking...*I hope they remembered to bring the Cuisinart, because the only way I'm having any of that is through a straw!*

If their faces where any judge, Paul must have looked worse than he felt.

Staring brickfaced, Paul's eyes darted nervously to all three. He was starting to feel the walls closing in.

His mom, dad and Kathleen in the same room together? *Not good.* He thought, *This might have been worse than death itself.* Outside of his own this day, there will surely be further bloodshed before visiting hour's are over. His mom was weeping and being consoled by his dad. The two seemingly unaware of Kathleen's presence. The seedbeds of his existence and she never got along. Not marrying a woman who's last name ended in a vowel I'm sure had something to do with it.

“Marry an Italian,” was his dad's paternal advice, “they

make good wives. They take good care of their men!”

His mother would furtively ask on any one of their many dreadful obligatory holiday get-togethers, when Kathleen and he were still married;

“Paulo, are you still in contact with what’s her name, um”... with a side-long gaze to Kathleen, his mom tapping her forehead with her forefinger, as if to imagine herself pondering, or heaven forbid thinking. “Yes, yes, it’s coming to me now.” —No longer content to hide her claws, she smiled broadly at Kathleen—“Ah yes, now I remember—it’s Mary Espisito!”

Had his mom believed in tattoos—she’d of had Mary’s name tattooed to her forehead. As a constant reminder to Paul of his failed attempt at nuptial bliss with Kathleen.

Mary had been the one Paul was engaged to—before Kathleen. In his mom’s eye, Mary was the younger version of Lidia Bastianich. His mom would derisively drivel on...

“I seem to recall her being such a great cook.” Looking to Kathleen as she said it—knowing Kathleen being

Irish—wasn’t much of one. While married, the smoke alarm was her oven timer.“

Her lasagna was even better than mine.” Paul’s mom smiled ferally at Kathleen, content in having achieved her pernicious goal.

As Paul helplessly observed this verbal tennis match begin to heat up, the score currently even in a tie breaker for the deciding game of the match.

Kat grinning nefariously back to Paul’s mom served up; “Yes, so I’ve heard MOM.” Calling her mom always put the hair up on the back of Paul’s mother’s neck.

ADVANTAGE KATHLEEN.

“You bring it up nearly every chance you get.”

Paul’s mom covertly smiled for the return.

Then mercilessly, Kathleen delivered the killer volley for the match.

“But the word out on the street MOM, is that Mary may have been able to light it up in the kitchen, but she was as cold as a frozen tray of lasagna in the bedroom.”

GAME, SET MATCH, KATHLEEN!

And then Kathleen, asking for a line judge to corroborate the call, looked to Paul and stated, “Isn’t that right Paul?” As his dad flushed from embarrassment.

Kathleen’s assertion of Mary, for the most part, had been true. But the same could have been said of Kathleen. Her vagina was perennially in a constant state of permafrost through much of she and Paul’s marriage. Except for the handful of times she chose to step out of it.

Lying on his bed like a sloth, Paul bleary-eyed Kathleen’s face through the oxycodone—thankful his jaw was wired shut—wishing hers as well as his parents were too. He thought; *true she didn’t need to be here—but the overriding general consensus of his reasoning, based on his ten year experience, overwhelmingly wished that she hadn’t.* Especially given the fact that she was within easy strangling distance of both his sources of existence.

Nevertheless, he did manage a congenial smile through the analgesic fog.

During the latter part of Paul and Kathleen’s marriage, at the end of each and every day, they both partook in their own separate panacea meant to help blunt their dismal lives together. She—preferring her alcohol mixed with only all natural organic juice or sodas. His nullifier was always taken straight-up. No time for dillydally. Better to enter the land of nod, sooner rather than later.

Then came the divorce. Paul’s parents threw a party. But with divorce comes the dubious bouts of not being able to know quite how to deal with the sudden sense of loss. Even though, through much of the marriage, Paul sat shiva for a life lost—his own. But not just for seven days—for most of his marriage.

Nevertheless, self-doubt still hovers subtle—like a Mi-26 chopper idling above your head—inducing every second thought you might have in this now sudden interminable expanse of silent desolation. Conflicting emotions bounce between rejoicing and bereaving.

Over the ten years of their marriage, Paul had more

than his fair share of opportunities for stepping out of it, as Kathleen had, or as many of his friends from last night's birthday romp had. But never did. Must have been his strict Catholic upbringing he reasoned. Taught as he was to believe, by the draconian iron-fisted nuns in his weekly Confirmation Catechism class, that adultery, along with the act of spilling one's seed, was considered a life-threatening act by God.

“When Onan had sex with Tamar, he withdrew before his orgasm and spilled his seed on the ground, since any child born would not legally be considered his heir. Onan did evil and that God slew him.”

As a sexually curious, impressionable preadolescent male—if that bit of God-fearing, chaste-riddled text wasn't enough to have you desperately jumping in the shower for long Arctic fusillades whenever the urge presented itself; how about this similarly alarming medical excerpt from 1903? Taken from Mark Twain's book of controversial satire entitled, *On Masturbation*.

“Teach your boy that when he handles or excites the sexual organs, all parts of the body suffer. This is why it is called “self-abuse.” The sin is terrible, and is, in fact, worse than lying or stealing. For, although these are wicked and will ruin the soul, self-abuse will ruin both soul and body. This loathsome habit lays the foundation for consumption, paralysis, and heart disease. It makes many boys lose their minds; others, when grown, commit suicide.”

Those were pretty terrifying and traumatic words for an inquisitive, budding fourteen year old. Especially for one, who had only just recently discovered the jubilant rapture and euphoric joy his stiff willy was capable of rendering. Delivering oneself, each time to an unparalleled world of uncharted empyrean pleasure. And performing said pleasure not once, but in fact, countless times a day. Eventually reducing oneself thoughtless. Other than the constant pondering and pounding of jerkin' ones gherkin.

But now the young Paul had been stuck in the conundrum of having to choose between the heavenly bliss of a an afterlife, as promised by the Bible, and the immediate

felicity of an otherworldly, rapturous orgasm found between the covers of his bed and a Playboy magazine.

So, as any red-blooded fourteen year old would have done—he chose—although not without the throes of guilt bestowed so generously on him by the pertinacious nuns in his weekly Confirmation Catechism class—the celestial and expeditious rewards found in a Playboy Playmate of the month centerfold.

Psychologically scarred as he was from that brain blunting, self-flagellation folly he had been indoctrinated with in his youth, a faith he had long since jettisoned, he was stumped as to how, on some level, that “Catholic Guilt” followed him all the way to adulthood. It had prevented him from either stepping outside the marriage as Kathleen had, or leaving it altogether. Sooner rather than later.

And then he began to suspect, maybe it had nothing at all to do with his strict Catholic teachings. But instead, it had been because Paul Moretti Jr. was forever and always

the perpetual realist. That friends would almost always refer to him as “The Doom Merchant.” Nevertheless, succumbing to the sobering conclusion as he had—*Don’t all marriages and affairs eventually end up crashing and burning? What would be the point of leaving, only to find myself right back here again? But, why would I remarry? Would I remarry? Fool me once...*

He recalled an instance when Kathleen and he drove over the GW bridge into Manhattan one day. As they began their drive over the Hudson, Kathleen reached for her pack of American Sprits, ready to fire one up, to which Paul had told her—for the umpteenth time:

“Kat, you know how I feel about smoking in the car.”

“Oh please Paul, tell me you don’t actually still believe in that foolish secondhand smoke non-sense?”

“Um, yeah.”

Completely unmoved by his request, pulling a smoke from her pack, cradled between the index and middle finger of her left hand, gazing at him with a look of

disdain, Kathleen continued;

“Rush Limbaugh believed tobacco users should be congratulated because their purchases help generate tax dollars that fund children’s health care programs.”

She then suggested he get over to the far left lane, as far from the edge of the bridge as possible. Foolishly asking why—she pointed out soberly—

“I just read that the bridge is in need of desperate repair, and could collapse at any time.”

He stared at her as if she were a word in a sentence he hadn’t understood.

Bringing the unlit cigarette to her lips, torching it up—she sucked a deep, lengthy draw into her lungs—the tip glowing bright as napalm. Then emptying the contents of her smoke filled lungs, she stated with certitude:

“And today could be that day.”

Paul had been drawn to her like a moth to fire in their early years. From the onset, Paul had spotted some slippery behavioral tendencies in her that he chose to ignore.

Like her claiming to have made contact with extraterrestrials one night while camping.

OK, he figured she’s not alone in that claim.

Her recoiling in the fetal position when introduced to strangers.

OK, she’s just shy.

Her ouija board and Tarot card obsessions.

So? She likes games.

But as a hot blooded 24 year old male, whose sexual proclivity was perpetually running in overdrive, 24/7—they made like Bonobos—this was long before she and her vagina had entered the perennial Cryogenian period, it undermined any semblance of coherence for seeing it for what it was.

Kathleen never did remarry. Paul assumed it was because she was never able to find a man as crazy as her. Albeit, except for the sex crazed younger version of him. These days, thanks to an enlarged prostate, Paul settles for an empty bladder.

Aside from the usual excursions of one night stands by men she meets in bars—whose good senses have been sufficiently flattened by alcohol—she lives alone with her cat Wrigley. As, Paul is certain, Wrigley himself wishes for a better lot in life.

Paul had on several occasions when they were married—in the rare instances she was lucid—tried to subtly suggest that Kathleen give psychoanalysis a try. How she might unearth some deeply rooted issues that lay sunken—dimmed within the far reaches of her subconscious. That when brought to light, could prove beneficial, for her—and more to the point—HIS overall well-being. The benefits were substantial, Paul continued to enumerate, smiling. “Not the least of which is having at your disposal, a huge assortment of psychotropic medications from which to choose. To make your life –OUR life better!”

He had at that moment, a joyful sight flash through his vision of thought: her reduced to an anesthetized, stoned-out ghoul, slouched over on the couch. Saliva flowing in

a continual torrent, like Yosemite Falls, down one side of her mouth.

After a long pause—smiling like a child on the last day of school—Paul continued. “Some are even organic!” Waiting anxiously—aching for some sign of acknowledged hope. None came.

Kathleen, at his pleading, finally did attend one session of psychoanalysis, having gotten the name of a highly recommended psychiatrist from their neighbor. Coming home from that one and only session, Kathleen proudly announced: “I’m much too intellectual for this sort of nonsense.”

He realized then that the strident, verbose, psychobabbling neurotic was here to stay.

He strolled to the liquor cabinet for a stiff dose of his own preferred and familiar psychoactive drug. Vodka. And lots of it. Where he would find himself the next morning passed out on the couch, with trails of saliva oozing down one side of his mouth like Horseshoe Falls

onto his tee-shirt. Waking up to the TV, in a murky fog, with Good Morning America greeting his day.

* * *

Looking around the room at all three now, the oxycodone beginning to loosen its grip, the insensible haze starting to lift; his mom still dramatically tissue stabbing at tears, Kathleen disappointed that Paul was still breathing and his dad, well, still perplexed as to why his son hadn't taken his advice and married an Italian. Paul was beginning to sense cracks in their studied urbanity. Their civility beginning to wane. The contemptuous looks beginning to become more pronounced.

And then thinking, OK this sucks, but the silver lining in all of this he reasoned, was not having to meet the mystery woman that Margaret thought was so perfect for him. That in all likely hood wasn't. But then—what if she was?

His dad lit the candle on the cannoli, temporarily defusing the antagonistic mood, as all three began to sing “Happy Birthday.”

A nurse thankfully entered the room bearing the most treasured gift of all.

“Look what I brought the birthday boy!” Holding up a fresh dose of oxycodone in her hand, winking.

He thought, *Abhh, this woman truly is the celestial, benevolent being of the infirm and distressed.*

“It's time for your medication!” She exclaimed, handing him the oxycodone, which he wolfed down, giving her a BIG thumbs up in response!

Not quite done. This guardian angel, this virtuous, divine savior of insufferable tribal gatherings and misery-filled, family birthday celebrations, had come to his rescue yet again.

“I hate to be the one to break-up this birthday kegger, but visiting hours are almost over—this birthday boy needs his rest.” Smiling at Paul as she said it.

“WILL YOU MARRY ME?” Paul tried garbling through his wired shut jaw.

As all three wished him well in leaving, through the freshly delivered analgesic haze, thankfully beginning to cloud his mental acuity once again—he felt relief take hold. And then gradually their pasty fluorescent faces, their repressed murmuring voices, their uncomfortable strained civility, began to dim like blackout blinds being slowly drawn to the sun.

With eyes closed, his mom in passing, leaned in and faintly whispered:

“Paulo, I’ll be back tomorrow morning with some freshly made minestrone soup for you.” Paul’s eyes flared open like high beams on a blackened roadway.

He heard the beat of his heart monitor along side his bed accelerate momentarily like Ginger Baker’s ‘Toad’ drum solo—and then slowed to a 4 bar drum beat as he watched the door to his room gently close behind them.



Mother in the Ruins

RASMENIA MASSOUD

The cracked and crumbling road disappears beneath a dusty mound of rubble. Ruins of walls and roofs that once contained lives and scenes unknown to me block my path. A path that had once seemed so clear. I'm clambering and scrambling over fallen concrete and splintered fences. After a long while of staggering and climbing under the night sky in this labyrinth of wreckage, I've lost my way. I've taken a wrong turn and wandered off in the wrong direction. I have no idea which way I'm going. Random encounters with strangers are infrequent. They blink stupidly, shaking their heads or worse: respond with blank stares when I ask for directions or help. Now and then, their gaze drifts down, landing on the lumpy, mottled scars I wear like gloves on my once harmless hands.

Every time I have the dream, it's the same. Lost and trapped on a path without end, moving over and around

the ruins of a fallen society. This morning, when I awoke soaked in cold sweat, I gathered up my wet bed sheet and wrapped it around my neck, imagining how easy it would be if only I had something sturdy to tie the other end to.

Then, like I do every time, I return the damp sheet to my tiny bed and get ready for the day. Same as yesterday. Same as tomorrow. Stuck in a time loop while the mind and body continue to deteriorate. I'm one of the lucky ones. Some prisons are worse than others. And I've been here a while. I've earned some trust. I get to spend a couple hours outside of my cell each day. Usually exercising or working with Belinda; cleaning or maybe doing some laundry. It's not much. I've never liked cleaning anything, but that was before. When I was someone else. Now I've learned to love

it. Mostly I just follow Belinda's instructions. I'm happy let another person do the thinking.

Belinda's been here twenty-six years. Four years longer than me. All those years ago, I was petrified. Eighteen years old and sent to death row. My imagination played out so many different threats with countless possible outcomes. All of them leaving me battered and bloodied. Weak, naïve, and unable to defend myself. I never could have prepared for the reality; for how swiftly fear turns to boredom. That first morning, I stepped out of my cell and into the caged pen they let us into each day. Belinda walked right up to me and gave me a hug. A fucking hug. Then Sylvia put her hands on my shoulders, her round face and shiny dark eyes showing nothing but sympathy. She pulled me into her thick, soft grandma arms. With my face buried in her coarse black and silver hair, I choked down a sob. I thought it must be some kind of trick. But it was no trick. It was just people who already knew.

Not that everyone here is friendly. They're not. It's all

just a matter of time. It takes a few years for the rage to burn off, for it to be replaced by sorrow and the grim acceptance of your fate.

The few times I'd been to juvie, nobody greeted me with hugs or kumbayas. They either ignored or tried to provoke me. Those girls still had fight left in them. My first night on the row, I lay on that hard bed, staring up at the low ceiling of my cell, listening to the hollers, whistles, and screams from gen pop in the distance. For the first time in a long while, I thought about the weeks I'd spent in Thalacker House. A social worker with a bad perm and red-framed glasses drove me out of the city until the landscape opened wide to dry, yellow fields reeking of shit. She chatted the entire way as though we were going on a picnic in the countryside. The previous social worker was a guy in tight jeans with feathered hair who always said, "Hey, Kiddo!" so this dorky woman was an upgrade. I sat in the passenger seat of her tiny green Honda with blood spattered down the front of my gray tank top, all

the way down the front of my jeans. An aching bald spot where a chunk of my hair had been ripped out. Both of my scrawny forearms turning an ugly purple.

A broad-faced woman with bushy auburn hair greeted us at the front door. She smiled and delivered a well-rehearsed welcome. She whispered with the social worker and a tall black girl in a teal hoodie took me upstairs to a room filled with bunk beds. None of those girls hugged me when I arrived, but they didn't need to. I knew and they knew. No animosity, no pity. We were all the same. The people who were supposed to care for us failed for one reason or another, forcing us together, stacked in bunk beds, miles away from our homes.

During that long ride from one cornfield to the next, I'd told the social worker how I was hungry all the time; how my mother dragged me from one room to another by the hair. I explained how she punched me in the face; my nose exploding in a gush of blood. How when I tried to run out of the house, Mom grabbed me, threw me

to the floor, kneeling on my arms. "You belong to me," she'd spat in my face. "I will break both of your fucking arms because that's my right."

Social Worker blinked behind her weird red glasses and nodded, showing me sympathy, making me believe it was all over. But on the day we all went to court, she didn't even look at me as I sat behind my mother who meekly folded her hands in her lap and spoke with a mousy little church lady voice I'd never heard before. The judge said things like "deferred adjudication," and "the state prefers to keep the child with the mother." Not understanding why I didn't hear the phrase "child abuse" bandied about more, or why no-one had mentioned my father, I sat next to the woman from Thalacker House, trying to make eye contact with the social worker. Attempting silent pleas for help. I never saw that social worker or those girls at Thalacker House again. They're buried in the ruins of my memories. In the rubble and wreckage I struggle through each and every night.

Belinda's kind of famous. Outside, there's people making noise, working to get her exonerated. They do Instagrams or Twitters or whatever about her innocence. She still has her looks, which doesn't hurt. There's days I hope it works out for her, but other days, I imagine punching her through the wall. There's no simple feelings about anything. She has a lawyer who believes in her so much that he works for free. Last year, a guy even came all the way from England to talk to her for some documentary.

"All those people know I couldn't do those horrible things to my baby girls," she said the day before the interviewer was scheduled for a visitation. "The bond between mother and daughter is sacred." She wiped tears from the corners of her eyes with her shirt. "Ugh. Now I'm gonna have fucked-up red eyes."

Her eyes were as bright and green as ever. "Isn't it better if they see you having feelings about it?" I said, think-

ing about how many women were rotting inside this place for betraying that sacred bond.

How I betrayed that sacred bond. I rubbed the scar tissue covering my hands like gloves of melted flesh.

Belinda shook her head. "That doesn't make any difference. We're evil women, don't'cha know. If we cry, we only cry crocodile tears. The people who don't know us have already made up their minds about that."

"So why do any of this?"

"Maybe it can help my appeal. Maybe it can help those people who are campaigning to end the death penalty. I dunno." She sniffed. "And sometimes after doing things like this, I get more letters. That's always nice."

Letters are everything. Belinda even has a boyfriend now, but I don't see the point. They can't touch or have private moments. The guards read all our mail. The only letters I get are from strangers, but they're a lifeline. Especially the letters Carol sends me. Carol chose my name at random through some letter writing program. In her

first letter she said she “needed to write to me because of ghosts.” At first, I thought she was somehow haunted by my actions. People who heard about what I did need to let me know what they think of me. But with Carol, I had it wrong. For several pages, she told me her story, how she had nobody. Her parents had died. Her husband found a new wife. Her son all grown and going to school in another state.

She wrote, “I spend too much time feeling like a ghost. It’s as if the rest of the world, even people nearest to me, don’t see me. Like my hand passes right through when I reach out to touch them. Sitting and watching the world go on without you, people you used to interact with in constant motion around you, progressing and passing through all those various phases of life and all you can do is watch, trying to make them hear you. To see you. I’m writing you this letter because no-one should feel like a ghost.”

Carol sends me pictures. Some of places she’s been

to, others she has on her bucket list. The first place she took me to was Pompeii, in Italy. On the back of each picture, she wrote in the details. Like a tour guide. I write her long letters or email her when I’m able to use the JPay kiosk and then I ask a bunch of questions. She always responds and maybe even emails another photo or two. When I’m alone in my cell, I look real hard at those photos. Before long, I know every cloud and each blade of grass. I hear feet grinding pebbles underfoot on the road. The sun is burning my face and shoulders. I smell the dust in the air. After a while, I can even go all the way back to when that volcano scorched and smothered everything. Back to when that dust was still people. Before everything burned.

The thick metal door opens. That’s the worst part. If I stay in my cell, with my damp sheets, my books, paper, pens, and art supplies, existence is somewhat tol-

erable. But stepping out of my cell and into the cage is torment every time. There's only nine of us here in the condemned row, but so many out there on the other side of the cage where the guards and gen pop walk around, talking, eating, laughing, and fighting. Many of them will leave someday. Some won't, but we nine condemned to die feel their staring eyes, grateful not to be us. Remaining hidden behind that heavy door is always better.

A recent letter I received from Carol had some photos from a place that's on her bucket list: Paris. She found them on the internet and said we could explore them together. That letter and those photos took me on a strange trip through the Paris underground. That was something else. "There's a whole city underneath the city that many never see," she wrote.

Through those photos, we explored the sewers. After studying them a while, I could smell the stagnant air, warm and thick with the city's shit. The whirring machinery grew louder, drowning out the sounds of gen pop.

One of the photos she sent was of a mural, right there in the sewer. It depicted a man carrying another man on his back as he trudged through that river of human waste. That struck me, the thought that someone created art while surrounded by all that shit, breathing it in. It made me think of me and the rest of the women here, we're artists, writers, and inventors, every single one of us. Here in the shit, creativity and imagination are the only powers left to us.

Carol explained the mural is of a dude named Jean Valjean from that book, *Les Misérables*. She said he was in prison. I was surprised to find the book was in the library. Every morning, after I shake the nightmare from my hair, I read before the door to my cell is opened. I read until lights out. I never read much before I was on the row. It didn't seem important then. A lot of things didn't seem important then. There's something noble about that Jean Valjean. I think most people who haven't trudged through shit forget that lowlifes and convicts can still have dignity.

There's another place in that underground city. The Catacombs. I like the sound of that, how it feels when my mouth forms the word. Carol wrote that "it's the city of the dead." Walls lined with skulls and bones. Some stacked up like firewood or in ornate patterns to create an elaborate design. Miles and miles of bones. I imagine the cool, damp air, inhaling the odor of soil and mildew, coming face to face with all those old and nameless dead.

I asked Carol in an email who they were. She said, "everybody and anybody." All mixed together in their final resting place under the city. Rich, poor. Young and old. All stacked up the same pile of bones in the dark.

It's only above ground, in the light, that some bones matter more than others.

I read about Jean Valjean until dinner comes. My special holiday meal, shoved through the slot in my door. Our Thanksgiving dinner is always a paradox: exciting because it's outside of the routine and depressing because it's so goddamn bad. The green beans have onions

in them. There's a thing like cold cornbread with frosting on it. Maybe it's some kind of a spice cake. Another thing on the tray similar to Play Dough that I think is supposed to be stuffing. I poke at it and knead it a little bit, thinking I could use it as a sticky glue to hang some of my photos on my wall, but decide not to go through with it in case it could attract bugs. A hard, dry dinner roll that must've been left out in the open. Processed turkey roll masquerading as meat. The only thing on the tray that isn't messed up is the sweet potatoes.

Tempers are shorter on holidays. Even though we are able to interact with other people so little, there's more arguments both big and small. Gossip, drama, and shit talk are a regular part of life. Some days, it feels like *As the Row Turns* up in here. During the holidays, though, drama is magnified times a thousand. It escalates from shit talk to pass the time into pent-up rage and hateful eruptions. Inmates on the row already carry around a heavy load of resentment and regret. It's compounded by the pain

of being separated from their loved ones. There's phone calls, visits, and cards. Things that help more than people on the outside can understand. Death row provides so little. Inadequate heating. We're always getting sick with colds and flu. This shit food. The bare minimum to keep us alive until they decide to switch us off.

It's not just us, though. The guards resent spending their holidays here and take it out on us. The verbal abuse gets turned up. The belittling reaches a new level of humiliation. They go home at the end of their shift, but still want to make sure we're punished for every minute they have to spend here with us.

On Thanksgiving after the stint at Thalacker House, I spent the day on the couch with a can of tuna, hoping my mom would stay out all night. If she caught me eating her food, there'd be another few rounds. Maybe it was the time spent in that girls home, or because it was Thanksgiving, but sitting in the middle of an *I Love Lucy* rerun, the dipshit idea to call my dad suddenly invaded my

thoughts. Once the notion entered my mind, I couldn't focus on anything else. I'd convinced myself that I could call like a regular daughter and that he would respond like a regular father. Even he'd done absolutely nothing while I was sent to live in a home. I fooled myself into believing if he knew how much I was being punched and screamed at, it'd be different. Hell, I couldn't even recall the last time we'd talked. A few years before, he'd found a new wife, a new home in a new state. They had new kids and a new life. Me and my problems, they were the old. Discarded. Forgotten.

I didn't see any reason why they couldn't fit me in, scooch over and make room for me. Let me have something new. When I finally found the courage to find his number and make the call, his new wife answered the phone.

"Hey, it's me, Jodie," I said.

"Jodie," She lowers her voice like we're about to exchange secrets. "He'll have to call you back."

“It’ll only take a minute.”

“Sure, sure. It’s just that it’s Thanksgiving, and we’re having dinner.”

“I know. That’s why I called.” I think about this long-distance call showing up on the phone bill and wonder how many punches upside the head I’ll have to endure to pay for it.

“Tell you what, I’ll pass a message on to him. What would you like me to say?”

I think about this. I would like to say: Help me. Get me out of here. I don’t feel stable here. I don’t feel safe. I don’t know where I’m going. I’m afraid, I’m alone, and I’m exhausted from feeling angry all the time.

So I tell her, “Nothing. I’ll call back.”

When Mom did make it home late that night, she’d brought Rod with her. Then the walls came crumbling down.

Remembering that Thanksgiving and the shitty Thanksgiving dinner I just ate, I settle back down with

Les Misérables. At first, it provides me with the distraction I need, but then I’m back in that place I always end up. That land full of “what ifs.” As I read about Jean Valjean and how he cares for motherless Cosette, the sorrow rises to the surface again. I close my eyes, exploring the Paris sewers and imagine what it might be like to have someone like Carol for a mother. What it might be like to explore those dark passages with someone who makes you feel safe.

I had more hope when Steven was around. My lawyer Steven was a stout black man with white hair at his temples, a protruding belly and perpetual razor stubble. He’d bring books and snacks, telling me if I’d had better help when I was young, things would’ve turned out different. He believed the defect in my mind could’ve been fixed, or at least dealt with and that the defect, combined with my circumstances is what’s to blame for the death of my

mom and Rod. Steven saw who I could have been if I'd had another life. He kept working my case because he was convinced I would be better if I had a second chance. He used to say, "This is something that happened to you, that you responded to in the wrong way, but it isn't you. You are not these events."

There were times I'd wanted to give up because people create a narrative, a caricature of who we are in here. The reality of who we are, our circumstances don't matter. Every facial expression and unconscious gesture is judged and condemned; evidence of being a jezebel. A bitch. A monster. Steven never bought into any of that and chastened me whenever I let it get me down. "Jodie, monsters aren't born, they're made. Villainizing people is easier than recognizing the truth: people are complex; we endure harm and perpetuate harm. You're not a monster, just a person who lived through and experienced and felt things most people could never comprehend. You get me?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I get you. But I don't know if you can convince society it's at fault for not preventing murderers."

"I don't have to convince society. Just the folks in the courtroom. Society comes later."

I reached in the bag of sour cream and onion chips he brought me and said, "I dunno, man. Their institutions didn't help me then and they're not helping me now."

"I know. Just believe, girl. Just try to believe."

I did believe. Until Steven had a heart attack while driving home. My lawyer, in his final moments, ran a red light. Even if the heart attack hadn't been fatal, the crash would've been.

The next lawyer assigned to my case was different. Every time we met, I felt like some clutter on his desk he needed to file away. I told him I didn't want to go through any more appeals. I feel like once I have my execution date, the nightmares will stop. The agony of wandering in the dark through the rubble night after night will final-

ly come to end.

My mind has been shattered for a long time. It hasn't always guided in me in the right direction. Over the past twenty-two years in this place, I've tried to learn, to meditate, and reckon with my mistakes. There's so little here, but there is an abundance of memories. That's part of the punishment. We carry the burden of other people's memories, too. Those who remember what I did back then even if I don't. Not in any clear sort of way that makes any sense; not a way I can explain. Believe me, I've tried, even though I don't want to remember. I wish I could forget the deafening sounds of the roof collapsing. The taste of copper gushing in my mouth. The crackling hiss of my hair singing as I burned everything away. The agony of my hands on fire.

I've been writing this all down. I started keeping a journal at Steven's suggestion several years ago. I guess when I'm gone it'll go out with the rest of the trash, but I feel better after I've cried and screamed on the page. I scrib-

bled all my thoughts about requesting an execution date so I could hear myself making that decision.

Doing time will be easier knowing when they're gonna kill me. To have a clear, certain path laid out before me. A date in black ink on white paper. I won't have to wonder any more at what kind of future I could have. No more wasting energy on dreaming of second chances or redemption. All those nights yanking the sheets from my bed, wishing I could do it myself, wishing I had the option, to take away the threat of oblivion they hang over my head every goddamn day. To put an end to the time loop I've been stuck in for twenty-two years.

As I write, I find myself distracted by a skinny brown spider crawling around on the toilet. Sharp shiny limbs and elongated body. Hideous looking fucker. I move to flick it into the bowl to flush it away so I don't have to look at her anymore when I remember something Steven said once.

“Prison is a trashcan where police and politicians throw

all the flaws in their system.”

Instead of condemning her to a watery death, I watch the spider do its thing for a while. Before long, she looks a little less ugly and I’m glad for the company.

Today we get to break out of the routine. Some church people are spending the afternoon talking with us. These things, they’re nice to go to, I guess. We rot in our cells. We eat our shitty food. I know I’m one of the few in condemned row to have a few extra perks, like a couple games of Scrabble in the cage with Sylvia now and then, the occasional work detail, and being able to read all the books I want. But it’s still the same day over and again.

I’m not into what these church people are selling, but some people need to hear it. What this pastor says, and what some women in here believe, is that there’s gonna be some kind of consolation prize. A second chance to live right. This doesn’t work for me. I tried it on, wanting

it to fit, but it just won’t. Hope is useless here.

The pastor is talking about light. The light heals. The light is salvation. Forgiveness. A way out of the darkness. I’ve had a lot of time in here to think about it and I know light offers no protection from the darkness. It only exposes defects and shows you the reality of things.

Shining a light on my mother when she bruised and bloodied me didn’t do either of us any good. Didn’t do her boyfriend any good. What I’d like is to bring them back. That’s all anyone would like. It’s why I’m here, even though that won’t happen when I die. But trading one darkness for another doesn’t fix that. Revenge and justice got all mixed up and confused for one another.

Sylvia’s black and silver hair is all silver now and pulled up in a tight bun. She’s real quiet during the whole thing. After, we get to talk to the pastor and the other people from the church one on-one. My back aches and I just want to go back to my cell to lay down. I’m about to stand up when she says, “None of this is for me.”

“Not many non-believers in here,” I say.

Sylvia shakes her head, her round face a craggy map of grim experience. “Nah. I mean I’m a Buddhist.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah.” She shrugs. “I guess there’s no wrong path, but that’s my path.”

Part of me is curious and wants to ask her about this, but I’ve had enough belief for one day. The nine women here know all about transformation and redemption, but these things remain our own. Outside condemned row, our growth and salvation aren’t considered valid or genuine. So, we silently hold onto it for ourselves, in the dark. That shadowy place where the face of my mother stares into my eyes, forbidding me to look away.

If I’d stayed to talk to that pastor, I’d tell him how that consolation, that second chance has to come from other humans, not a promise interpreted from his ancient book. I’ve never met Carol, but I feel like if a mother, even if she isn’t my own, could see me as a person, someone

worth sharing stories with and reading letters from, that could be my redemption. My last shot at being a member of the human race. Or at least make me feel like one of them for the time I’ve got left.

Sylvia didn’t wake up this morning. It happens like that sometimes. A guard does checks and finds someone cold in their bunk, just finished. Later that morning, Belinda and I have been assigned to scrub the concrete floor just outside our little cage.

She hands me a scrub brush. “You heard about Sylvia?”

“Yeah.” I take the brush and dunk it in the soapy water. “Poor girl. She shouldn’t’ve been alone like that.”

Belinda stops scrubbing. She pushes a sandy-colored strand of hair from her eyes, then continues. “She shouldn’t’ve, but at least they didn’t do it to her. She went out peacefully instead of suffering for hours from that

fucking cocktail.”

I envy Sylvia.

“Hey,” Belinda doesn’t look up from her scrubbing. “You ever try to get in touch with any organizations like Innocence Project or anything?”

I glance up at her, shake my head. “No point.”

“You sayin’ you—”

“I’m saying I did it.”

Belinda looks up at me and I can see her dark brown eyes searching for her next question, examining my face, looking for any indications of a homicidal monster. For any traces of my crimes. “All this time we’ve been in here, you never...”

“It was a long time ago,” I say, putting almost no effort into my work now. “I was barely eighteen and tired of being hit and screamed at. All this rage built up with no way to let it out. Nowhere to put it. I didn’t understand the right way to fight back and had no-one to teach me or quiet me down.”

“I hear you.” She looks up at me. “It surprises me a little though. You’re always so calm.”

“Time takes a lot out of a person, I guess.” I wipe my hands on my pants. “I’m too old and tired to throw my anger around.”

“If only the outside could see it like that.”

“There’s a lot they don’t see. But they don’t need to see everything to condemn a person.”

“Sure feels that way.” Belinda nods. “But God judges us all.”

I laugh. “Yeah. The biggest killer of ‘em all.”

Belinda stares down at the bucket of filthy water. “Sylvia was always good to me. After I lost my first appeal, I was in a bad place. She shared her cookies with me. You know, those ones with the big chunks of chocolate?”

I do know. Those are valuable. “Did you know she was a Buddhist?”

“Like a monk and shit?”

I shrug. “I guess so. Maybe.”

Belinda wipes her forehead with the back of her hand and stares off in the distance. “I wonder where she is now, then.”

After we finish our work, I return to my 11’ x 6’ cinderblock world and wait for dinner. The spider is there, spinning a web, keeping busy. I get it. I watch it weaving and spinning, remembering that night. Mom and Rod’s drunken snoring as I tied them to the bed. Watching them with one eye because the other was swollen shut, still trembling with rage at the way she’d mocked me when Rod’s fist connected with my face.

“Get up and get the fuck out of my house,” she wrapped her hands around my skinny biceps and pulled me up from the floor. “You’re eighteen now. I don’t have to feed you or deal with your shit anymore.”

Still dazed, throbbing overwhelming one side of my face, which felt wet all of the sudden, I tried pulling my arms free. “What did I do?” I sobbed.

Standing behind her, Rod’s voice raised to a shrill girly

pitch says, “What did I do? What did I do?”

She pushed me out the front door and let the screen door slam shut. I gently put my middle finger on my cheekbone. I could feel it jutting out. It was in the wrong place. My finger was slick with blood. I looked in the window at Rod sitting on the couch, playing around with a Zippo lighter as he yelled at my mom, ordering her around.

I could have walked away, tried to find somewhere to stay, even if meant sleeping in a fucking dumpster. But my rage at the unfairness of it all said to burn it all down.

They’d put themselves in an alcoholic stupor deep enough to let me sneak back into the house unnoticed. They snored through it all when I tied them to the bed and barely flinched when the gasoline splashed and soaked their passed-out bodies on the bed. I didn’t even notice the gasoline that splashed onto my bare hands.

It wasn’t until Rod’s Zippo set it all alight that my mother’s eyes opened and landed on me, her face a mask of

terror and fury aglow in the flames.

The light I thought would heal. That would be a salvation. A way out of the darkness.

My arachnid roommate stops weaving and settles down to rest and appreciate her work. I lean back on my bed, opening a new letter I've received from Carol. She's sent some more photos of Pompeii. I study the dry, dusty wreckage of what used to be a city. I can't help noticing that some of those crumbling walls look like the ruins I've been clambering over almost every night for the past two decades in my dreams.

On the back of one of the photos, Carol wrote that the building was once a prison and that the bodies of a prisoner and his keeper were found together. The shape of their bodies intertwined in the dirt, faces frozen in endless torment. Bound together for eternity as the walls around them deteriorate to a fragile ruin, continuing to erode. The image blurs as tears swell in my eyes and slide down my cheeks.

Then she wrote, "The prisons and institutions people build cannot last forever. But our connections do."

At last, I can sleep.

* * *

I

is a waiting
is a stretch of time
is a pure and lasting duration
is a movement out and in
is a drawing down
is a drag
is a tracing above
the wires on the poles
looping over our lot
is an ebb and flow
an emptying out
is a stretch
is an elongation
is a keeping still
and an unfolding into
is a working out of ends
and a kind of cultivation

Tract

ED FERRARI

II

Our walls are a thin,
cement skin over absence
we here are also empty
and what the house contains
is happy, but it is a cavity
our vault, hall, hole, hollow
swole the body whole in place
almost gone, almost not quite
there where we come from

III

Our home like this poem
is a little raft
something dashed off
something done off-hand
and thrown into shape, into form
like you, you little squirt of me and your mum
what you have been riding on what is to come

A Midsummer's Drunken Stumble

TREMAIN XENOS

We all wondered what California Stew knew, but he was too cool to tell us. He claimed acid switched off our mental filters, so if we cared to we could see that tube of light that always snaked down from the moon. That night in front of Tsuji Forest, he was slouching slowly toward the woods while all the rest of us sat clustered on the hilltop bench. Starlight glinting in his eyes and off his One Cup Ozeki marked him from the darkness. “They’re afraid to come,” he definitively declared, “Because this forest is the abode of the yokai.”

“There’s gotta be a better explanation than that,” said a voice I guessed belonged to Ret.

“They can’t really believe that shit.” That was Mark, our selected captain, in charge of dragging our hungover asses to the field next day.

Our boss—whose name was Boss—wanted the six of

us because we were foreign, and rounded out the team with the five youngest Japanese guys in the office. Tsujigaoka Park should’ve been as good a place to guzzle wine out of the bottle and convince ourselves we could beat the rival English conversation school at soccer, but the desk jockeys wouldn’t come. Those myrmidons who feloniously altered students’ answers on their state-sponsored tests whenever Boss told them to—they all tilted their heads and sucked air through their teeth in response to our invitation. Not the edge of the Tsuji Forest, they said. Not under the solstice moon.

“The fuck are Yo Kai?” piped up Tiny Jack, who wore sunglasses at night and chugged giant cans of Sapporo. He talked big and swaggered because he’d once been in a metal band, and knew he could put us all to shame at karaoke.

I suggested they were more like elves than ghosts, though *yokai* was usually mistranslated as the latter. They weren't noncorporeal remnants of the deceased, but primeval entities fused inextricably with natural phenomena, the legends of their machinations handed down in furtive whispers by hayseeds with faces like dried figs.

Kaz, the half-Japanese Canadian, exhaled a limp chuckle. He didn't need to talk. In his presence we were all invisible to women, and he knew as well as we did.

An august mass of empties said we'd been on the hill more than an hour. We knew as well as anyone that if we'd come up with anything resembling strategy, only by a miracle could our broken Japanese convey it to the locals in the morning.

"Just don't put me on offense," Stew said. Then he dissolved into the shadows.

"Midfield then, with Kaz," Mark said. "The office dudes'll fill out defence. Me and Jack should be play forward. Ret's centre."

He'd named everyone but me. Less lucidly than I intended, I nominated myself centre.

"You? How does that make sense?"

Brandishing my bottle like an oriflamme, I declared it was my DNA. "Awakened by the power of Vitis! From the people who brought you civilization!"

"And anal sex," Ret quipped.

"The hell would you know," I slurred. "You and your country of convicts! I'll put you all to shame. I'll play centre and goalie all at once!"

The ember of Stew's cigarette advanced and receded like a firefly.

"Stew," Mark called. "Will you play goalie?"

"I can try, man." To one who wore the world like an ill-fitting robe, our squabbles and our rivalry were trifles.

"The fuck are you goin' into the woods for?" Jack asked.

"Don't you wanna meet the yokai?" Stew intoned.

"Let's all go," said Mark.

"Fuck that," said Jack.

“Let ‘em come get you then,” Ret laughed. “In the flicks the one who gets knocked off first is always the pussy who stays behind.”

Next thing I knew, we all were trailing Stew’s cigarette. Bacchus danced between my temples. Nauseous euphoria yearned to burst out in a paean to the crystal night. My feet swung in the undergrowth as though they weren’t my own. I thought of the flock of middle schoolers on bicycles I’d seen the day before, how I watched them cross a patch of mud they didn’t see and all go down like dominoes. I thought of dear departed daylight and women in high heels whoswerved around the storm grates. I thought of Yuki from payroll and her perfect skin, and hoped she’d be watching from the stands when I scored the last decisive goal.

With the lifting of the reverie came Ret’s account of how he and Yuki snuck into a classroom after the school was closed and he shagged her on the floor. Everyone laughed and taunted Kaz, knowing he and Yuki were sure

to be an item even though he was engaged to someone back in Canada.

We were in the woods so deep we couldn’t hear the traffic from the road. Watching Kaz’s stupid head in front of me, I wished we’d stumble through a fairy ring and come out the other side of Shrovetide. Smashing through the market stalls before soccer rules existed. Players impaled on their daggers. Yokai playing kemari with our decapitated heads.

“If anything happens,” Mark said, “We meet back at my place.”

Sliding through a patch of slick, I attempted to voice assent. I’d been to his place once. Down the street from the station, over a red bridge cater-corner from a Lawson. Ground floor. Last flat on the left.

I had to ask what he thought might happen.

“I heard there’s bears in these woods,” he said.

“Worse things than bears,” Stew reminded us.

“Not the fuckin’ *yokai* again,” said Jack.

Kaz bobbed silently ahead, the moonlight blooming the flowers on his Hawaiian shirt. The musky torso pleading for contact with my fists. Ret's and Stew's voices sloshing outwards through the trees.

"So," I said, "You really got a date with Yuki?"

"I might take her out after the game's over." Kaz's tone was like a shrug.

"Does your girlfriend in Canada know?"

"Oh, probably-maybe-definitely *not*." I saw a hand push aside a swathe of ferns. I think Kaz turned around and pulled a face, but I was done talking to him. I staggered out of sight to piss into the thorn bushes.

Everything was spinning. Kaz was calling out to me while I was zipping up my trousers. Something hit me in the head. I could tell by the purple bursting flower in my eye sockets. I flailed in the direction whence it came, hoping my fists would find their way to Kaz's face. He called out from the opposite direction. Ret's voice bled over his. I barrelled up the hill. It rose and threw me at

a tree. Clinging to grass and mud I plunged across the reeling landscape. I thought I saw a clearing. The wraiths of clouds whipped through the empty sky. The ground was all blond hair and trouser legs. I leapt out from the bushes. A pandemonium of shouting, and all the bodies scattered.

Then everything was quiet.

I dragged myself upright and waited for the hill to settle on a direction. Once I was fairly confident the ground wouldn't smack me in the face again, I set off in search of light. I had the sense of being watched by something vaguely inhuman and grotesque, something that didn't want me there. I began to sing, an improvised discordant melody that dared the yokai to come and get me. With Jack not there to judge me, I sang my fool head off. The vomit burned on its way up.

With my stomach empty, I felt better. The slope was steadying itself. My feet discovered asphalt. Headlights climbed the hill. Blinded by the high beams, I made a

mad grope for the shoulder.

There was no shoulder.

I hit the slope, feet over head and pebbles up the nose. I heard the bottle shatter, but I couldn't tell how far away. I lay on my back half-floating in the river, wondering whether on balance it would make any difference if I were to lie there forever. Something must've decided for me. I have no memory of everleaving the ravine.

Somehow I found myself at the bottom of the hill, walking toward the lights of town. My steps were automatic, carrying me from one illuminated, rocking patch of pavement to the next. I stopped to vomit in the grass. A curtain fell across an upstairs window. It was probably some beautiful woman turning away in disgust. It was probably Yuki from payroll.

I found the red bridge, the Lawson, the billboard sign with the pristine shirts and shit-eating smiles of our rival school. When I reached what must've been Mark's building I followed a trail of sound. It was musical in rhyth-

mic structure, but in place of melody was howling chaos from the bowels of Hell. Drums destroyed the fabric of time. Guitars eviscerated space. Satan roared, his minions screaming harmony. I pressed forward, up the stairs and onto the landing. The ground-floor flats were dark and silent except for one—the last on the left. The door hung open, washing the landing in jaundiced light.

Mark, Ret, Jack, Kaz and Stew sat in an arc of chairs and sofas around the blaring television, too engrossed in their Norwegian metal video to notice me.

Except, that is, for Stew. His knowing chuckle brought their gazes round to me, and at once they jumped out of their seats.

“You fucks,” I said, “Ran off and left me.”

“Dude,” said Jack. “You have no idea what you looked like.”

Ret laughed. Mark threw me a towel. “Sorry, man,” he said. “The night can play tricks on your eyes.”

“What did you think I was?”

They shook their heads and didn't tell me.

At length Jack quipped, "We were trying to figure out who'd play centre if the *yokai* got you."

Stew winked and dropped the last of his cigarette into an empty Sapporo bottle.

Mark switched off the remote. Cacophony gave way to gusting silence. I looked down the landing at the darkened windows of the long-suffering desperate to sleep, and reflected the Japanese reluctance to rent to westerners might not be unjustified. Then we all sprawled out between the towering empties, slept in our clothes, and peeled ourselves off the floor barely in time for the first train of the morning.

An hour later we were staggering to the field.

From nowhere the ball sailed past me, skittered across the turf and was assailed by a cleat of a different colour. Repeatedly. I noted dimly that we had no goalie. Was it supposed to be me? Did I even have a position?

I raised my face expecting Yuki from payroll, but

couldn't pick her out among the creatures that filled the stands.

The ball caught me in the temple. I went down.

When I got to my feet I saw the scoreboard turn over. The game was called at 4-0. The other team danced away high-fiving each other. In the middle of the front row, Boss was clapping furiously and howling with laughter.

I took one last look and found a simpering little naked man with an oversized misshapen head, fleshy ears as long as a rabbit's and scant lanky strands on his knobby crown. He met my eyes and grinned the kind of grin the kind they hang in dental offices to scare you into proper oral hygiene. I tumbled backward. He was surrounded by dozens like him. Scores. Hundreds.

I blinked and they were gone.

I bent over and retched, but there was nothing in me to heave up. With a wallop on my back, Ret chortled, "No worries, mate!"

In the emptiness and silence, I crawled to where Stew

stood lighting his post-defeat cigarette. “Did you see—”

“Course I saw,” he said, smirking at the backs of our teammates trudging off the field. “But don’t say anything to them.”



Lily Green Blues

M.P. STRAYER

There was a girl named Lily Green,
she was an Alpha Phi at Chico State.
I said there was a girl in Chico
named Lily Green.

Lily Green was a friend of mine
and when she died
she was just nineteen.
Oh I knew a girl named Lily Green...
Lily Green died she was only nineteen.

Lily Green popped a pill
she thought it would help her sleep.
Said she took a pill
and drank it down with wine
and then she closed her eyes
and went away in her sleep.

I knew a boy his name was J.C.
There was a boy named J.C.
we had some good times
and J.C. was in bed with Lily
the night the girl died.
Said J.C. was with Lily
the night that she died.
They each took a pill
and laid down side by side.

And when he woke in the morning
J.C. found Lily Green dead.
He saw her pale in the daylight
with the sun in her eyes
and her lips stiff and blue
and when he touched her he knew
the girl wasn't sleeping.
Said when he touched her he knew
the girl wasn't sleeping.

J.C. was nineteen
he was the last to see Lily alive
and when he told me it happened
he started to cry.
Broke down on my doorstep
and started to cry:
I killed her! I killed Lily Green!
Me and J.C. we had some good times.
J.C. was just nineteen.

I knew a girl named Lily Green.
Lily Green died she was only nineteen.
Oh I knew a girl named Lily Green,
Lily Green died she was only nineteen.

A Moment in Time

JOHN GIARRATANA

I left Lincoln Avenue and walked up to the boardwalk, just as a shaft of sunlight pierced the wooden rafters of Funtown Pier. Shading my eyes from the sun's rise I saw there was no swell to speak of, and the breeze from the west was beginning to lighten; these conditions promised a wind from the southeast by afternoon. There would be no surf today. That made the hours at work go a little easier. Being at work while there was surfing to be done, well, let's just say the hours seemed longer. Not that the job I had that summer of 1968 was that bad, in fact it wasn't bad at all.

A freak I knew from the graveyard shift of the boardwalk clean-up crew dropped an emptied mesh garbage can. He answered my greeting with a nod and a slight wave of a hand. I stopped and watched for a moment,

as the disengaged jaw of the yawning Seaside Heights garbage truck, accepted its fly-swirled breakfast with a grinding groan and mechanical rattle. My friend pulled off a leather glove and a sweat-soaked bandanna. After wiping his face he signaled the driver and the truck responded with a hissing release of air brakes. He jumped on the back, as it disappeared behind Funtown Pier.

I turned the corner at the Kohr's Orange Juice stand and glanced ahead to The Seaside Steak House, where I had been working since the last week of June. Danny was already there, and the whole area, Danny included, was immersed in cool shadow. As I neared I watched him at work, shifting the sizzling peppers and onions with his spatula, reaching for the oil then spreading some more; all with the quick, fluid movements that I had grown ac-

customed to see from the wiry grillman.

I knew that he saw me, even if he didn't respond. But that wasn't surprising. After all I was just another summer worker. There for two or three months, and then just as suddenly gone with the first northwest wind of approaching fall. But it wasn't just that. Danny, the grillman slash manager of the steak house was hard to get to know.

"Morning Danny." I stepped off the boardwalk and joined him behind the counter of the stand.

He responded as expected with a grouchy lift of a bushy, dark eyebrow. "You never opened before so go get an apron and I'll show you what needs to be done." As he went back to frying a pile of white onions on one of the three large grills that lined the front. Danny was not only the oldest worker in the place, he had far more experience than most on the Seaside boardwalk, and so he was the guy you went to if you needed to know anything. That is if you could handle the sarcasm that his answer

would generally include.

I couldn't say for sure, but even for him, Danny didn't look in the best of moods. It was hard to say if he was really pissed off, or just hungover. It wasn't long before I learned that hung-over was pretty much Danny's every morning condition.

"Make sure you turn these grills up to exactly four-fifty." He started right in with the instructions the moment I returned with an apron. "Anymore than that and the steaks'll burn. Any less and ... are you listenin?"

"What? Yeah, Danny. Sorry."

Danny looked up and at the object of my distraction.

Mary Ann, one of the day shift regulars, had just come through the gate into the stand. A single shaft of dawn caught the exact spot where she stepped. The light framed her face, giving me the opportunity, at the expense of Danny's rising ill humor, to study Mary Ann more closely.

Mary Ann was very Irish, with reddish brown hair, cut unfashionably short for those days. She had a small,

round nose and slightly rounded, pale, freckled cheeks. Though it was already August, Mary Ann had no tan at all, and with her very white, northern complexion, probably never would. Petite, maybe five-one at the most, and thin, but definitely not fragile. She was chewing on a wad of gum that you just knew she was never without. . “Hey Danny.” Her accent and swagger said urban North Jersey, not Newark though, probably Jersey City.

Danny stopped and leaned against a low-boy refrigerator. “Hey honey.” He pulled a pack of Marlboro’s from the pocket of his white cook’s shirt, placed one on his lips and lit it with his ever present lighter, as a slight grin deepened the lines of his forehead.” You have a good time last night?”

“It was a pisser.”

Mary Ann was a long time employee . This was her fourth summer at the Seaside Steak House so Danny’s welcome was not surprising. Not to mention, from what I now gathered, she was a drinking buddy of Danny’s. She

took down the shoulder strap of her large brown bag and dropped it on the stainless steel counter . “We gotta do that again.” She added tossing back the short bangs of her red hair. She took a cigarette Danny offered from his pack.

“So you’re with us today?” Hand on her hip, she blew a cloud of smoke like Bette Davis in every forties film she ever starred in.

“Yeah.”

“That’s what I heard. You switched with Mazzie.”

“He needed the day off.”

Mary Ann shifted the cigarette into the corner of her mouth. “Day shifts easy.” She assured me . “It stays pretty steady all afternoon. No crazy rushes like you guys get at night...” she stopped , noticing the full Pyrex coffee pot across the aisle ...” that’s what I need.” She crouched down to the lower shelf below the counter and returned with a styrofoam cup. After filling it to the brim, she blew away the radiating steam and proceeded to drink it, with

no cream, or sugar.

“So how much did we drink last night ? “ She turned to Danny, who was in the middle of shoveling mounds of fried onions and peppers into stainless steel steam table inserts.

“I don’t know, a couple cases I guess.

“My head feels like it .“

It was a little strange for me to see Danny somewhat animated and eventalkative.

“How about your roommates . They like that late night swim?”

From what I gathered Danny along with Mary Ann and her two roommates finished their drinking with a very late night ocean swim.

“They were still asleep when I left but I know they had a good time.”

The reminiscences of the previous night continued for a moment or two when suddenly Danny paused as a distinct look of sadness seemed to overtake him. His whole

mood changed, and in that instant he became the old Danny that I was already accustomed to, quiet and distant. He shrugged his shoulders .

“Bill in today?” I couldn’t tell if Mary Ann was aware of Danny’s sudden mood change. Or maybe it was just that she knew him better than me.

“He should be in soon. He had a stop at the bank.”

“Who else is in today?”

“Us...” Danny pointed at me with his spatula “... Anthony. And I think Debbie’s on the patio with you.”

Mary Ann rolled her eyes. “ In that case I better get going.” She reached over and lifted her pocketbook with a grunt. “ I got a lot of setting up to do. Debbie might be here by eleven, but I wouldn’t hold my breath.” She stepped over and disappeared down the hall that led to the back storeroom and the patio. The Steak House had a large patio in the rear. There were five long benches along both sides and four or five tables in the center. The patio, which overlooked Ocean Avenue was the waitress

station for customers and larger parties who wanted table service.

“Alright. Get these other grills on and finish up frying these peppers and onions. Then start on some sausage. I don’t know, ten or twelve rings should be good.” Danny resumed his instructions without missing a beat. He picked up a clean rag from the counter and dried his hands, his eyes scanning the boardwalk in front.

Across the way, a tall frail looking kid in a “Clam Bar” tee shirt was struggling with a huge bucket of shaved ice. His skinny arms trembled as he lifted the overflowing tub over his shoulder. We both watched as he finally got it high enough to dump the ice over the inclined counter that was topped with hundreds of glistening littleneck clams.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Danny’s raspy voice was something else it was hard to get used to. It sounded of years of hard work, and even harder drinking and smoking. He dropped the rag, hitched up his baggy white cook

pants by the belt and ran heavily veined hands through his fifties style haircut. It was hard to say exactly how old Danny was. But from the stories around town he had been working on the boardwalk for at least twenty years. He had to be at least thirty-five. Maybe forty. That wouldn’t seem “old” to the average citizen out there, but on the boardwalk, dominated by high school and college age kids, it was I lifted an oil can and spread a thin film over the surface of the grill then dumped a plastic bucket of onions and peppers onto it. Within seconds a sizzling cloud of pungent aroma rose. I adjusted the temperature on the next grill and after a little struggle with a broken latch on a low-boy came up with two, ten pound boxes of Schafer’s Sausage. With the grill at the right heat I laid out two large rings .

Out beyond the boardwalk, the red dawn had exploded into a white-hot morning. Where there had been the soft hiss of gently lapping waves was now the intrusive sound

of human life. Across from the Kohr's Orange stand, around the corner of the boardwalk at a record wheel, the sitar from the Beatle's, "Tomorrow Never Knows," echoed off the rows of wooden stands. That was joined by the calliope that accompanied the spin of the arcade's ancient carousel. I watched the creaking revolutions of the as yet childless ponies. A sudden wave of sadness swept over me. Each empty, painted pony reminded me of a lonely old man, shuffling away, in some forgotten nursing home .

To the right, tourists trundled up the ramp from Lincoln Avenue, struggling with the accessories for a day on the beach- radios and blankets, chairs and lounges, coolers and children's tubes. Their voices rose and fell, like the breathing murmur of a single being- a restless vacationing giant.

Everywhere, corrugated- metal garage doors were flung open over the counters of the twenty-five cent wheels of chance . The wheel operators, mostly teens in shorts and

tee shirts, their aprons heavy with change, hopped over counters. They didn't waste any time hawking a message to the steadily growing crowds. For just a quarter, you could be taking home a record, a giant stuffed animal, a carton of cigarettes, a box of candy bars. Then spinning the large numbered wheel, it would rotate with that click, click, clicking that reverberated most everywhere in the background on the boardwalk.

A shooting sizzle of burning pork fat caught me on my foolishly resting arm. "Whoa, that was hot!"

"That'll learn ya to pay attention around a hot grill." Danny surprised me with his appearance, but not his lack of sympathy. "You better flip them before they burn." He nodded at the frying sausage rings with an as yet unlit Marlboro that bounced on his lips like a conductor's baton.

"Somebody wanna give me a hand over here. "Bill's voice came from the gate that he was struggling through with armfuls of bank deposit bags, inventory ledgers and

a pile of small manila pay envelopes.

“Sorry boss, didn’t see you coming in.” Danny said without the least bit of irony. All the workers at the Steak House, as well as the regular customers and other stand owners knew how much Bill relied on Danny. Not that Bill didn’t know what he was doing. He was sharp as they come even at his age, but he also knew how important Danny was to the smooth running of the operation. These stands were ridiculously busy and when you had a steady stream of dozens of customers lined up hour after hour from opening at eleven to closing you better have it together. Closing was two on weekdays and three on the weekends. In other words sixteen hours of continuous business.

“Just grab these deposit bags and these envelopes for me will ya Danny.”

Their steps echoed on the wooden slats that covered the floor in front of the grills. They dropped everything on the stainless counters.

“I need a coffee.” Bill reached under the counter .

Danny finally got to that smoke, as he leaned on a skinny, pale arm. God, he was so white! I didn’t think Danny ever got in the sun. Nearly everyone you worked with or ran into on the boardwalk had some level of tan. But not Danny. Between the fifteen to sixteen hours a day he put in at the Steak House and the time spent in the bar on his rare hours off, his complexion was as colorless as the stiff white cooks uniform he always wore.

He was rarely in street clothes. And when he was ,it was obvious how out of place he looked . And acted. First of all ,the clothes were all from a different era. He was stuck in the fifties. The sixties had not touched him in the slightest,in dress or in thought. Having a rare day off he seemed as lost as a storm tossedboat; without direction, untethered to the steady anchor of work. He didn’t have much of a family and you never heard him talking about any friends. He lived in a one room hotel for the summer, one of the turn of the 19th century rambling man-

sions that had been converted by the grandchildren into the hotels that ran up and down Grant and Sheridan Avenues. The rooms didn't offer much, basically just a bean old dresser, a shared bathroom on each floor and a large outdoor shower. But they were cheap. And it was an inexpensive way to spend a summer at the shore. Most of the rooms were rented by kids from North Jersey , who earned enough working a stand on the boardwalk, to pay for their rooms with some extra to help pay for tuition for the upcoming school year.

Danny's hotel was on Grant. Like the kids half his age in the rest of the boarding house, his room was just a place to get a few hours sleep.

Bill glanced at me with a curious squint.

"I switched with Mazzie."

He nodded. "I forgot about that. So, how's it going with your first set-up?"

"We're just about there ."

"No problems? "

I shook my head. Though it was all new to me, and I hadn't realized how much the day crew actually did getting us ready for the night shift I was getting through it. I'd never make the assumption again that the day crew had it made- unlike us dealing with rush after rush at night. They really did have a ton of prep to do during the day- all while also dealing with a steady crowd , hungry for a quick steak sandwich.

"Good man."

"The Schafer delivery get here yet?" Bill glanced at his watch .

Danny's thin face tightened. " Nope."

"You know I'm real close to getting pissed. Friday the truck broke down, last Wednesday the driver quit. What's the problem today?"

Schafer's Wholesale Meats and Provisions of Asbury Park, was where The Steak House, as well as much of the Seaside boardwalk got their meats. In business for decades , known for their quality and good prices, there

had been somewhat of a letdown in quality of service that particular summer. Rumors were spoken of concerning the reasons – and the consensus was that there was some disagreement between the three partners- the Schafer brothers.

Danny exhaled the smoke from the last cigarette of pack number one. “ We got a lot of steaks to cut. It better get here soon.”

“Call Asbury again. See if you can get the old man.” Bill patted down the pocket of his plaid, short sleeve shirt. Like the millions of others who are continually claiming to have quit smoking, Bill followed the time-honored ritual of pretending he had a pack, somewhere. “ And gimmie a cigarette.

Danny took a new pack from his shirt patted it down on the counter and handed it over .“What time you get through last night?” This in reference to a rare night of closing that Bill had done for Danny.

“Christ. You’re not gonna believe it. I was here until

about four.”

“Four! What the heck happened? I’m outta here two, two-thirty the latest on Tuesdays.” He lit Bill’s cigarette with the silver butane lighter that was as much a fixture of Danny as his hands.

“What didn’t go wrong. Tell you about it later. Right now you better go and make that call.”

Danny nodded and started for the back office and the phone.

“You alright here ?” Bill started for the gate leading out to the boardwalk. “ I’ll just be a few minutes.”

“You got it boss.”

“Good man. See you in a few.”

It was hard to believe that Bill, as young as he was, he was only twenty-seven-,was the owner of the stand. The food stands on the boardwalk were gold mines. In just three months a year, from Memorial Day to Labor Day, most of the owners made more money than the average college graduate would earn in five years. Bill’s reputation

was already legendary. Working since he was fourteen he had saved every penny he earned. And when the opportunity opened up to buy the steak house from the original owner two years earlier, he had jumped at the chance.

I watched Bill merge into the growing throngs of boardwalk visitors when an elderly voice came from my right. “Do you have coffee, young man?”

“Yes, m’am we do.” I turned and pointed to the Pyrex pot behind me. Coffee wasn’t exactly a big seller in a boardwalk stand known for steak sandwiches and cold sodas. Mostly it was just there for a tired or hungover employee.

“Could I have one please. One sugar and just a little cream. Are you sure you’re not having any dear?” She turned to the equally elderly man in a brown cardigan to her left. He switched the beach chair from one arm to the other, grimaced in obvious discomfort, if not pain, and declined.

“Just one then young man.”

After filling a Styrofoam cup I gestured with the aluminum cream server.

“Just a touch please.”

I covered the cup and handed it over the counter. “Careful now, it’s hot.”

“That’s fine. Thank you.” The woman removed a black purse from her wrist. “And how much do I owe you?”

“Twenty-seven cents.”

“Do you have change?” She reached a heavily veiled trembling hand across the counter with a dollar bill.

“I can change that.”

She placed her coffee on the counter as she reopened the purse to return the change. With a frail hand she moved a wisp of gray hair from her blue-gray eyes. When she looked up, smiling I saw the shadow of a girl of twenty, in another time, in another world far from this bustling, frantic summer of 1968. Then arm in arm, the two forgotten dreamers moved away, out to a bench in the ageless sun.

“Cook any steaks yet?”

Danny’s voice startled me. “Huh? No, not yet.”

“Hell you waitin for ? Better doa full grill.” Danny snapped a glance at his watch and nodded at the growing crowd. “Looks like we’re gonna be busy.”

No sooner had he uttered those words when a heavy set tourist in a white terry cloth beach outfit stepped up to the grill. He stood with his hands in the pockets of his opened jacket, as he read the bold ,black letters on the large menu that lined the wall behind the counter. His huge belly was sunburned red into what a resembled a bright round beachball.

“I’ll still be in the back for a bit.” Danny called from the hallway entrance to the back.

I told Danny that was fine by me. I wasn’t the least bit worried about the now five or six customers . At night at any given time there were never less than twenty or thirty customers waiting to be served.

I asked the man in the terry-cloth outfit how the water

was.

“Cold.” His gaze never left the stand’s menu. I felt his eyes on me as I began to lay down rows of bright red steaks onto the sizzling grill. “They look good. Gimmie one with the works.”

The man pulled a five from the pocket of his jacket. “And a large Coke.”

“You got it.”

An hour or so later, after the first midday rush had died out, she stepped from the cool gray shadows of the alcove to my left. She was in a faded print dress,surrounded by a brood of four or five kids. At first glance , I couldn’t tell exactly how large a brood .

“Help you ma’am? “

“Yes. Thank you.”The pale woman gathered up the kids while glancing up at the stand’s menu with an obvious concern ...”Let’s see. Five hot dogs, and I guess five small sodas...”

From the lack of sun tanned skin and their obviously

well-worn street clothes it was obvious that the group were day trippers, and not here at the beach on vacation.

“What Eugene...” one of the younger boys had been pulling on the harried woman’s skirt...”I told you...” she continued in a discussion that seemed to have begun elsewhere, and probably many times in the past.”we don’t have enough money for that. Now I promised two rides apiece. Now, that’s enough now. That’s the end.”

“How much does that come too?”

“Ah...” I did some quick addition and then lied. “One sixty.”

“Really? I thought it would be more than that.” She said with obvious relief as she counted out the amount with various coins including nickels and pennies.

“No. That’s it.” I had decided to replace the dollar -thirty difference to the register from my own money. I didn’t know why I did it, I just felt I had too. The thought of this stressed young mother with all her cares was too much for my stoned state. That was the price I paid for my con-

tinual pot smoking. My imagination was forever running away. And those thoughts invariably came around to the human condition. And it was at that moment, I pictured a young girl married too young, a husband at work on a menial low-paying job, while the most she could hope for through the long summer was a single day at the beach.

“Is there some place we can eat these? She asked as she took the wax-papered hot dogs.

“There’s a patio in the back.” I pointed to her right. Just go through there under the awning.”

At that moment, the Seaside Heights boardwalk was exactly how I always remembered it- a textured fabric of white sunshine, of pockets of cool shade in dim arcades, of sight, sound and touch. There were the intermittent squeals of excited children, the high-pitched screams of teens onscreeching amusement rides and a mechanical symphony of pinball buzzers and bells intermingled with the click-click-clicking of a spinning wheel of chance. There was the explosive energy of loud-speakered rock

above the frenetic barks from the hawkers at the record wheels. A stunning myriad of smell competed with the sound- the greasy essence from bubbling french-fryers, the sweet pungency of sizzling onions and peppers, the cheesy scent of pizza to the sugary aroma of candy and through it all- now and then, a fleeting insinuation , depending on the whim of the breeze, of the fragrance from the sea.

I took one grill, Danny another. Danny was fast, but so was I. Together we moved in a choreographed dance - laying down row after row of frozen red steaks, the flip of them onto rolls, the covering of onions and sauce and the continual handing over to customer after endless customer. We were so good, all of the actions blended seamlessly. This continued unabated, sometimes for hours. In between we manned the fryers, dispensed the sodas and worked the register. All while rapping with the tourists. It was a rush to be good at the work, and it was a rush to be appreciated for it.

“You guys alright?” The pride for our work was evident in Bill’s eyes . He gestured towards the crowd with his chin. “I can jump in for a while.”

“We’re fine boss.” Danny winked at me. It was in these times when Danny was most likeable.” Go back in the office and finish the payroll. I wanna get paid today for Chrissakes.”

Bill laughed. Busy days made for happy bosses.

“You alright kid?” He patted me on the back as I handed over four waxed paper steak sandwiches at once.

“It’s a cakewalk.”

“Good man. I’ll be back in a little while and Anthony should be here too.” He took a quick glance at his watch. Friggin Anthony. If he ever once gets here on time... he was due in at twelve. Oh well, what else is new. Mary Ann’s great on the grill herself if you need her.”

‘Relax Bill.’ Here..’ with one hand on a spatula Danny reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the pack of Marboros... “knock yourself out.”

“Hey hippie.” Then , out of nowhere, there he was. Anthony, the wannabe mob guy from East Newark. His usual greeting to me coming from the corner of his mouth-gangster style. And as always, he made a grand entrance. From there it would be a daily soliloquy, complete with off-color, and generally ridiculous opinions. I never knew if it was just me, or all freaks, but he was especially determined to keep me abreast of his most off the wall comments . He was never reserved in his contempt towards me and my kind. And as always I just shrugged it off.

Anthony dragged a large cup through the ice bin turned and clicked down on the soda dispenser, completely oblivious to how hectic the lunch rush was. “Guys look a little busy .” He casually went on . “Let me get my breakfast and I’ll bail youse out.”

Danny never turned around. He remained in his clock-work rhythm of lifting steaks onto rolls, passing them out, taking money and giving change.

“What happened to you? You were supposed to be here

at twelve. It’s like what...twelve-forty-five. One thirty with tax..” he called out across the counter to the young guy and his girl as they took the two sausage sandwiches with the works.

“Got stuck in traffic on the Parkway. Big accident near 105. Cops. Ambulances. Didn’t see any blood though.”

“That sucks Anthony. You missed out again.”

“Yeah . You know what I’m sayin’ hippie.”

“Fix me a soda carton, Anthony. “Danny went on completely ignoring, basically everything Anthony was saying.” Danny took the five from the father in the middle of the group of five gleefully shouting kids.

“Bill knew I went up north.” Anthony said as he slowly unfolded the cardboard multi- soda carrying container.

“Schafer’s just got in.” Bill peeked his head around the corner of the hallway.

“What’s up boss?”

“Oh, hey Anthony. You made it. You wanna see to that delivery.”

“You got it boss. I seen ‘em when I was comin up the ramp.”

“Alright...” Danny began...”after you check in that delivery I want you to cut three buckets of onions and peppers, and then come up on the grill for a while. “

“That it?” Anthony asked as he tapped me on the shoulder and gestured towards Danny with his chin. “What am I, Superman?”

Then casually, as if there weren’t one single customer out front let alone about thirty, Anthony began what was largely yet another solo conversation. Finishing his giant Coke and the bag of Italian zeppoles that he had been eating as his breakfast, the topics ranged in rapid succession from the previous night’s Mets game, the accident on the Parkway, the crowd on the boardwalk to finally his day off at Monmouth Park.

“I seen your friends at the track.” He said to me.

“Yeah, who’s that?” I took another customer’s money and returned his change.

“Richie Franco.”

“Oh yeah.”

“He was with Joey T and that crowd from the club.”

Unlike a gangster hopeful like Anthony, Joey T actually was a mobster. He owned several businesses in Seaside including a restaurant on The Boulevard where I had been a busboy for a few years. Joey liked me and when I worked the breakfast and lunch shifts, he was there almost every morning at his corner booth alongside his usual crew. They went to the track almost everyday, and reading the racing form was a daily late morning ritual. While bussing tables it wasn’t uncommon for him to call me over to sit down for a while at his booth. Their stories all told with the colorful language of real street life were interesting, if not hilarious.

Ever since the day Anthony had found out that Richie Franco, who actually *was* a real gangster and I were friends, his attitude towards me had made a slight turn. There was still a suspicious dislike but also a begrudged envy. “*How*

could a long haired hippie freak be a good friend of guys like Richie Franco and Joey T."

"The Midget...", Anthony went on about another of the club's regulars"... , hit a trifecta for like two grand. You hadda see the little prick. He was smokin a cigar big as him."

"Somebody wanna check this delivery. I gotta get back up to Asbury sometime this summer. "The muscular truck driver from Schafer's was holding out a clipboard as he clacked his way down over the wooden slats behind the grill.

"Anthony." This time Danny did turn around. And not at all pleased.

"Yeah, I'm going. "Anthony rolled up the greasy white bakery bag of zeppoles and tossed it on the counter. He stepped over and took the clipboard from the driver. "You got a pen, pal?"

With an annoyed look the driver pulled the ball point from behind his ear and jabbed it in front of Anthony.

"Let me tell you something pal. You got some set of balls."He spoke in that half serious half joking way of the tough guy greasers . "You get here tree hours late and you expect us to just stop and drop everything."

Danny just shook his head, half amused and half-annoyed at Anthony's usual antics.

It was hard to say how old he was. He might've been twenty, or even forty. Though he was big he inched up to the counter with painfully slow steps. In his shiny new, high blacktop converse sneakers with a shy hesitation like an innocent child . His brightly colored floral print shirt which was tucked neatly into the waist of his shirt dungarees was as loudly provocative as the surrounding boardwalk. The stiff blue jeans were folded into big cuffs that were several inches above the tops of his sneakers. With excitement he pointed at the grill and mumbled something to the tired looking middle-aged woman who had been leading the man by the arm.

The woman paid for the steak sandwich that she had

ordered, thanked me and carefully passed it over to the man.

In the man's haste to eat he spilled some onions and sauce on his shirt and the counter. He stopped eating while a look of panic came over his face.

"Don't worry Victor." The tired woman in the print blouse said as she took some napkins from the dispenser on the counter. "We'll take care of that." She wiped his shirt and then his trembling face. "There, Victor. You see now, it's all better." She crumpled the napkins and looked around for a place to discard them.

"Don't worry about that. I'll clean that up. "I said trying hard to seem like I hadn't been watching.

"Thank you." The woman said and began leading Victor away in a ritual that appeared reflexive, after tending so long to the grown man who had remained a child.

"Fucking retard." Anthony stepped over. "Look at that counter."

Anthony took a rag and handed it to me. I leaned over

the grill and began wiping up the spilled onions. "You believe the friggin mess that big dope made."

"Like I always say about you Anthony. You're such a nice fucking guy."

"Fucking retards are all the same. There's one of them in my neighborhood. "He laughed. "Yeah, kids in the neighborhood used to give him dog shit to eat. They'd tell him it was candy bars. Friggin riot."

I shook my head. "There really is something wrong with you man."

"The guys name was Henry. Never forget him. He looked just like that retard." He nodded his chin at the distant pair who had slowly made their way into the shadows of the arcade. "They all look the same. You know, they all have big dicks though. It's true. All retards have big cocks. You hadda see Henry's. He used to whip his out all the time. I don't know. I think they hadda finally put Henty away. After a while I never saw him in the neighborhood."

I shrugged my shoulders and went back to work.

The afternoon had eased by like the ocean's tide, steadily, but imperceptibly, until I stopped and looked out onto the boardwalk and the results of times passage- quiet, long, late afternoon shadows had filled in what had been a riot of midday sunlight, while the sea itself had gone from a shimmering white to a cool infinite blue.

“Remember. I said I had a surprise for you.” The girl with the waist length blond hair lifted her leather, tasseled handbag and dropped it on the front counter. She had appeared suddenly and had broken my reverie. I had met her the week before on the boardwalk on my way home from work. It was about three-thirty and many of the stands had just folded down their metal shutters. Here and there were myriad gatherings of the late night groups that reflected the expansive gaps in the culture of 1968. There were the somewhat older than me club-goers, rushing a bite to eat after a night of fifties doo-wop. And the stoned or tripping hippies. But the huge earlier night crowds of mixed humanity were gone. It was my

favorite time of night. Peaceful and quiet, with the gently rolling sea glistening under a magical moon and sparkling stars.

It wasn't unusual to meet someone, as I casually walked the boards afterwork on a night like that. Often a freak I knew well, or maybe barely at all, someone who just wanted to share a joint. Or like that night, a pretty hippie chick who just wanted to talk.

“Isn't it beautiful?” And she twirled a barefooted dance around me like we had known each other for years. Her ankle length colorful cotton dress dancing with the many beads that clicked around her lovely neck. I never saw her before, but that didn't matter. It was that kind of night, in that kind of year, in that kind of special time.

Later that night or maybe it was later that morning when I learned her name was Patty. She told me we'd get together again. Sometime.

And now here she was. The night shift had come on and I quickly removed my apron. She scrambled through

the interior of her bag and came up with a small, round, embossed tin in her hand. She laid it down on the counter and twisted off the lid. I stepped out onto the boardwalk where she was standing and looked down into the opened candy tin.

“Here they are.” Patty winked as she lifted her hand from the top of the small can revealing its contents- two tiny rolled up pieces of aluminum foil. “Remember . I told you I’d come through with something.”

I picked up the canister and allowed one tiny silver cylinder to fall into the palm of my hand. Carefully, I unrolled the foil between my thumb and forefinger. Inside was an orange cylinder- the size, shape and color of an ice-cream jimmy. “Orange Sunshine. Four way barrel.”

“A friend of mine laid those on me. He said to do it with someone I love.”

To our left, across the aisle, a gust of wind flapped the patio’s awning, revealing the blinding flash of afternoon white light. Down below, on Ocean Avenue, a group of

bathers filed out of the Bath House. I watched for a moment, the while feeling Patty’s gaze.

“Well. Then...” I paused for another moment. “You never did Orange Sunshine ?”

“No. And I’m a little bit freaked about it. I’ve only tripped a few times and that was just mescaline.”

“This is a little bit different.” I said with exaggeration. Acid was more, much more than just a little bit different.

“OK. Let’s go for it.”

So it was just after six when Patty and I began our long Electric Journey to her hotel which was somewhere in the now pulsating, revolving, undulating, shimmering Wonderland of Seaside Heights, New Jersey. It was five-thirty when I had met Patty out on the patio and about five-thirty five when I dropped my hit. Patty did hers with me, relying foolishly on my judgment- “don’t worry,” I had promised, “it’ll still take a good hour to get off. We’ll be back to your room by that time.”

By six however, time had diminished into insignificance-

hours, minutes, seconds- all the arbitrary divisions that we use to define where we are, where we will be or should be, all the minute compartments into which we segment our lives had vanished into the nothingness where they belong- and all things were as William Blake promised they would be when the soul was cleansed- infinite.

Under a glowing sky of sparkling blue Patty and I started down the street. Parked cars along the way shimmered as if composed of a metallic liquid, while those moving drew silently nearer, lifting and then sailing away on an undulating river that once might have been roadway. A large rooming house came into view, it's white columned porch was a rising spiral of gray smoke. The whole building smoldered and then in a flash ignited into flames of gold and crimson.

The faces of passing strangers became the faces of friends. I felt a sudden desire to stop anyone and everyone. . A desire grew in me, a fierce glowing energy, an uplifting surge started in my legs, rose through my chest,

out to my arms, through my hands and finally flowed from my fingertips in an aura of light.

Every child I passed was the essence of purity, every woman a fountain of compassion and in each man's eyes was a budding flower of love, struggling to emerge from a husk of confusion. The feelings of love and brotherhood for each and everyone passing were overwhelming, powerful and joyful to a height of ecstasy that I had never believed possible to achieve. My body convulsed with rush after chilling rush.

From somewhere a hand grabbed my arm. I whirled around and saw that it was Patty clutching my wrist, a sudden look of alarm on her face.

Then I felt it too.

The radiant sunlight was gone. Night had come.

But it hadn't. It was still now. We stopped and looked up. A mountainous summer cloud, moving with an impossible slowness, drifted across the sun. Patty said something and laughed. Or, I said something to her.

From the Mouths of Bats

WILLIAM SLATTERY

Universe, speak.

Into your darkness, essential & safe,
from what's deepest & farthest in you,
rustle ten thousand pairs of limbs
outwaiting the faintness of distant light.
Soon the darkness will be complete.
We will be free to sweep out of here
through the cave's throat, streaming shrieks
urgent for sweet groves smelling of fruit.

Cry sharp with me, brothers, sisters.
Our echoes locate walls' protrusions,
edges & flats, the fuzz of nests;
keen out the sheens where water in sheets
spreads its wide tone,
or bright notes gleam where water beads
fall to dull splats. Let me sing part
of this concert we reverberate.

Darkness is here.
Hurry, scurry, flee in flurry,
scatter like tatters of black skirts
knocked by knees running rattled;
our wings a-flock, our leathery flutter
heather in air; cave weather hustled
by hypersonic ghosts of gusts
spattered hither, aroma for ears.



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