

The Los Angeles Review of Los Angeles



THE LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF LOS ANGELES, NO. 20



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COVER BY ROBIN WYATT DUNN

Old Gen Y Dirtbag Leftie Yells At Cloud

CLARA NO

I'm stuck aging with the rest of these millennial fucks who can only wax nostalgia with what they got. Boy bands, Britney, and modem noises. MTV's last gasp. Kid Rock sucking Scott Stapp's cock, and you bet even the ones in suspenders and man-buns will be there, not knowing whether to jerk off or call them problematic or both. Saving the world and running for office like it's some Marvel-MAGA-Whole Foods picture show, only you're half-blind and kinky and shun anyone who doesn't flaunt your couture brand of rage whether left or right, and you never quite grow past all that mall goth sarcasm in Congress while determining the fate of millions, did you? You're boomer-lite, sans the money. And you're gonna vote Reagan too. Every generation thinks they invented sex, but here we invented tradwives and social justice. Oh mama, can this be the end? To be stuck inside the fascist sequel with the breadtubers again. Wholesome hoedowns and soy palloi, and NPR hosts who speak to us like kindergarten teachers. Let us make a more just, verdant, and peaceful world, full of pudgy little Cocomelon banshees who foam sugar and serotonin at the mouth and blink like halls of flashing lights, nothing another whisper-talk about feelings can't fix—they draw blood at the mere rest request. Pats on the back, "Madison's on the right track." She just strangled a cat. But that's none of anyone's business anyway. We're a generation of bad bitches who know what we're doing and smirk. We're a generation of bad bitches who shit avocado smoothies and pretend the past lasted all of five seconds because, in a sense, it can only repeat itself.

WHAT'S LEFT OF ANERA

CLARA NO

WE ARE PRISM, WE ARE ETHER. AND WE ARE STILL PROBLEMATIC.

WE LOOK IN THE MIRROR OVER AND OVER AGAIN AND SEE THE GOOD AND THE EVIL, AND
THE MESCALINE-RICH, MOTOR OIL-TYPE SUBSTANCE SPLASHING AROUND IN BETWEEN.

I LOST SO MUCH SLEEP. MY FOREHEAD TURNED TO WAX.

NO ONE CAN STOP ALL OF HUMANITY POUNDING HANDPRINTS INTO POSTERITY. EVEN IF OLD
MUDPIES ARE DECRIED BY A WANNABE GRAVE DIGGER'S LIE; YOU KNOW HE'S AI ANYWAY.

THEY DIAGNOSED BLUE HUMOR AS GANGRENE.

BUT I SAW NO REAL DOCTORS HERE. JUST JUDITH BUTLER WITH TITTY IMPLANTS. ANOTHER
ADORABLE, SECRET CLIQUE CRYPTIC GOSPEL, \$900 WORDS WRITTEN WITH MOLDY ALPHABET
PASTA—JUST WHAT WE NEED WHEN IT'S LES MISÉRABLES 2.0.

WE ARE PRISM, WE ARE ETHER.

AND WE ARE NOT THE PUKE AND SHIT FROM YOUR FEVER.

Sex Work Is Real Work

CLARA NO

Are you going to Julia Faire? Bits of DNA in your hair.

One thousand men and their poison pens. Pussy as Walmart. That cam girl's prolapse, critics say, will surely melt your heart.

Even more so if Mother Dear is manager as well. Acrylic nails and a midlife crisis, Botox-sponsored carnival.

“It's about choice,” say the pretty CEOs of their own tits and asses. Feminism's one percent, squirting opiate for the gooner masses.

Suddenly capitalism is A-OK when it's your body to sell. Suddenly you're a pie-eyed patriot, ringing the Liberty Bell.

Because it's all good fun in income, spreads of pink for the webcam hue. To mistake a hooker's tears for her youthful dew.

Sex Work is Real Work (Reprise)

CLARA NO

Have you ever had a super empowered sex worker piss in your mouth
Over the bloom of the highway blue,
While telling all the girls
That once they get an OnlyFans on their eighteenth birthday, it'll all
turn into champagne.

Overheard at the National State of Things Cafe

CLARA NO

I know a blue-haired preacher with a PhD,
who teaches kink and the virtues of puppy play. Likes to
yell Lenin is her daddy.
She heads the neighborhood HOA.

“How much did those Gucci slogans cost,”
her friend will ask over spider legs and kale.
“And how many posts did you make today—
did you know Harvard’s got Mein Kampf in braille?”

Because, you know, it’s the blind who lead the blind, and
they’ve got eyes in the back of their head
on who’s wholesome or in the wrong, telling
you to die until you’re dead.

I actually graduated with these fucks. Remember
progress? I don’t either.

All I know is I’m a twerking class hero,
and the right side of history is ether.

And I believe in the safety of both and all worlds. You
can’t get peace with bed sores and trends,
pretending rape and dead babies don’t exist,
unless it’s through your narrative lens.

Custom made for every ivory tower angel,
‘till no one else on the highway exists.
At worst they can stay in their lane,
while you throw that vagrant a bottle of piss.

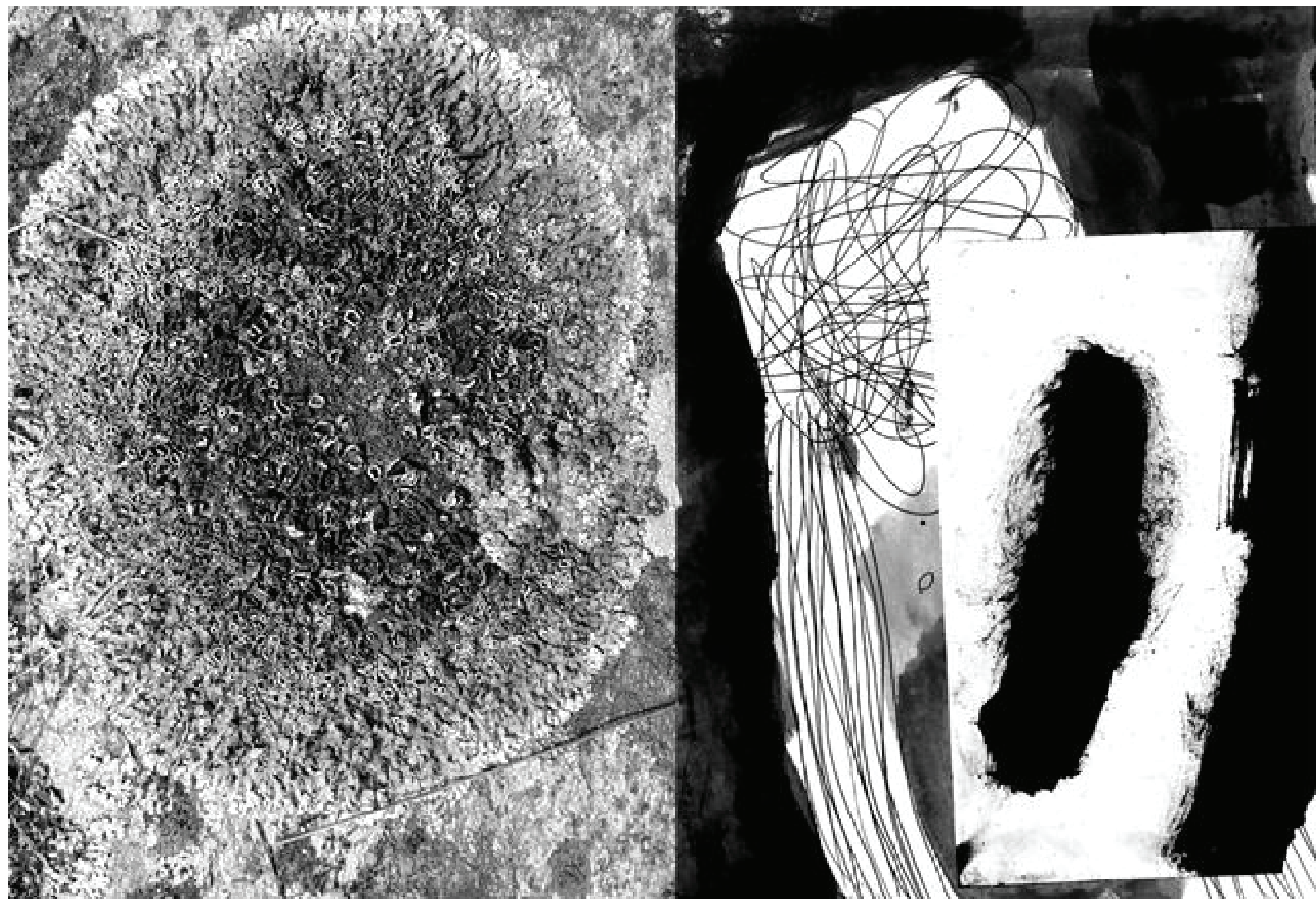
And I bet you didn’t know that vagrant was you,
after all this Rage R Us fuckery had spread to the other side.
No longer some dumbass named Shirley or Bob,
but cosplay Che’s along for the ride.

Bitch, are you stupid? Free everyone!
You fucking assholes, it was always everyone.
Not us versus them, left versus right.
Just dawn’s early light as a flash of nukelight.

Untitled

CLARA NO

I seek neither polish nor pixels. An
old crone at 30.
That's my biggest crime—
Lip gloss made of grime.
But that sickly glow calls my name, and
I'm stuck with it—
Just like you and everyone else—
Watch her squirt and belch.
Its anonymity that I crave,
And recognition all at once.
Throw my piss at the fame police, and
oblivion as relief.



Assemblage3065
CLAUDIO PARENTELA

A Man's Hope is His Castle

DEMOND J BLAKE

Labor Now!! opened at 5:30am. I got there a little after ten. People like to say the early bird gets the worm but I'm usually asleep, so I've seen an early bird catch shit. When I walked in along the wall with all the stupid safety signs and government wage stuff were no smoking signs. Most good things only come around once and forever after seem like aberrations. I signed in and sat next to the vending machine. There was a guy sitting next to me who kept putting toothpicks in his mouth breaking them in half then spitting them on the floor. He kept trying to

spit them farther and farther. Most of them only landed inches from the guy's outstretched legs. Each time one landed short he'd curse and mutter insults to himself. I took my notebook out and started drawing spirals with stick figures going around in them. I had been doing this since I was little boy. I never drew anything else. It made me wonder if I was a little slow. I asked my grandmother about it once. She told me that I'd always been slower than the other kids but not to let it bother me none. "It don't take no brains to be a garbage man Jimmy"

Granny said. “Besides they make good money. I’d be proud of you if you became a garbage man. My first-born grandchild a garbage man! Thank Jesus! You’d always be welcomed at your Gran-grans with a job like that!”

I never became a garbage man so now granny has one less thing to be proud of me for. I’m still welcomed at her house though as long as it’s a holiday and I don’t ask for any money. I was still drawing stick men and spirals when someone behind the counter asked me if I wanted to work.

“Yeah” I said without looking up. Then I looked towards the counter. It lowered slowly and a man with curly greasy

hair pulled back into a long ponytail called me up. His face was round, fat and covered with a week-old beard. His round glasses were crooked and kept sliding off his face. Sometimes they completely fell off. He’d pick them up put them back on and they’d start sliding off again. He looked annoyed. He probably spent his whole day trying to keep his glasses on his face, jeez that’s enough to make a person murder themselves or save money and get some new glasses. I walked up to the counter. I wanted to know how he made the counter lower.

“Hey, how’d you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make the counter come down. Yesterday it was so high no one could see over it. And just now you made it lower.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you don’t.”

“My name’s John.” He said extending his hand.

“And you are?”

“Jim” I answered shaking it. His hand was smooth, soft like he just lotioned it or had just finished jerking off.

“As in James?”

“No just Jim.”

“All right Jim you ready to work?”

“Sure.”

“Good you’re in luck we just got a call. Some construction work. You ever worked construction?”

“No.”

“Hell, that doesn’t matter. Do you need a ride?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay let me get the directions draw up your paperwork then we’ll be on our way.”

Another guy was standing at the counter talking to the Mexican girl from yesterday. He looked desperate. He talked with his hands, but his hands shook. He wiped sweat off his brow with his sleeve. He stumbled over his

words. This kid needed work. I needed work. Everyone in here needed work except those behind the counter.

They were lucky and for a minute I was envious, one of the 7 deadly sins. Maybe God would understand.

The phone rang. The girl answered it. Some company needed a kid for some office work. She got on the mic and asked, “Does anyone here have any office experience?”

Most everyone groaned. One guy belched. I held in a fart. The guy standing at the counter chimed in.

“I have office experience.”

“Do you know Word, Excel, Power Point?”

“Yes and I have a degree from the University of Washington.”

“Damn you’re exactly what they’re looking for. They called earlier saying they needed someone first thing in the morning. It’s too late now but damn...What are you doing tomorrow?”

“I don’t know?”

“If you come back in the morning around 7am I’ll have a job for you.”

“Good.”

John stood up, looked at me. “Got the directions, you ready to go?”

“Um yeah.”

“All righty, hey kid you wanna work today or wait for the job tomorrow.”

“I could really use some money today.”

“You’re in luck, come with me. Leticia get the paperwork ready for this kid. What’s your name?”

“Reuben.”

We followed John to a storage area in the back. There were shovels, hard hats, gloves all kinds of shit in there.

“You’re going to need shovels for this job.”

“What’s the job?”

“You’ll be digging trenches, that’s all I know. You guys

ever dug a trench.”

Reuben shrugged.

“I’ve never even seen it done on TV” I said.

“Well, it’s back breaking work but at least it won’t bother the brain none. Now you have to sign out for these shovels. You need to bring them back before closing tonight at 7 or it’s 12 bucks out of your paycheck.”

“Okay” We said.

“You’re going to need gloves too. We’ll give you those to keep.”

“How nice” I said. “Is this coming out of my paycheck?”

“No, no these are freebies.”

John found some plastic bags and some strings and tied them around the shovels.

“Leti you got that paperwork ready!” John yelled.

“Yeah!” She yelled back.

John went and got the paperwork and showed us what we had to do. There were two pieces of paper stuck together. One copy for whoever we worked for that day and the other we were supposed to bring back to the office signed as proof that we worked. That’s how we get paid. On the paper was also the address of the job site and whatever equipment we signed out to use. It was all

very organized.

We got our shovels, and our papers then followed John out back to the alley where his car was parked. It was a beat to hell red 2-door Honda. He had a Jesus fish on the trunk and a Bible propped up in his back window. How cute. Every older guy I knew with a shitty car either had religious shit on it, democrat stuff or green party decals. On the luxury cars people either had nothing or pseudo clever shit on their license plates. It was all the same.

“Don’t laugh at my car” John said. “My wife’s car’s in the shop so I let her use mine and now I’ve got to drive my old college scrap heap until her’s is fixed.”

“As long as it gets us there”, I said.

“Oh, the shocks are finished on this thing so whoever’s the lightest needs to ride in the back.”

Reuben and I looked each other over. He was taller but we had similar skinny builds. I got in the back. Someone told me that was the safest place to be in a car accident. That never made sense to me, but I always rode in the back whenever possible anyway. After a couple of tries the car started and we were off. Once out of the alley and onto the street the car hit a bump and scraped.

“That’s what happens when your shocks are shot” John said. “Don’t laugh!”

“Don’t get us killed” I mumbled.

“You guys like music?” John asked.

“I don’t know” Said Reuben.

I didn’t answer.

“I can’t stop listening to Dream Theater man. Their playing is so intricate and so intoxicating to listen to. Ah they’re so talented. How does anyone learn to do anything that well?”

Me and Reuben didn’t answer.

“Can’t be on the road without some sounds man.” John turned on his radio and then started blasting what I guess was Dream Theater. His speakers were shitty, and the

music sounded cracked and distorted. That could've been Dream Theater though. The car scraped again. I smelled rubber burning.

“Jesus you guys smell that? This is what I deal with every time I've got to drive this bucket around. Is there anything that smells worse than burning rubber?”

“Burning plastic” Reuben said.

“Burning Styrofoam.” I answered.

“You're both right,” John laughed.

I sat in the back worrying about a tire exploding. John started to ask us questions about ourselves. He wanted to know where we were from, what schooling we had and

what went wrong in our lives for us to end up at Labor Now!! For fuck's sake couldn't folks just understand that sometimes no matter who you are or what piece of fucking paper you spent years getting that sometimes everything around you ends up crumbling and there is no one to help? Where do you turn? Where do you go? Shit a person's gotta do something to survive so you end up at shit holes like Labor Now!! slaving away just so you can keep your fucking lights on. People like to think because you're young that shit just falls into your lap. Nothing falls into your lap. It's war all the time. Nothing is ever simple. We got on the freeway headed towards the job

and the car scraped more and more. The stink of burning rubber filled the car and I waited for something bad to happen. John rambled on about Dream Theater and Reuben talked about his degree but didn't really know why he couldn't stand having a job in his field. Finally, we got to the job site. John dropped us off and before he left warned us again about leaving the shovels. I made good note of it since I wasn't going to make shit today and if I didn't return the shovel in time I *really* wasn't going to make shit. We were at a pretty house out in the hills. It had a reddish color to it and the yard was full of orange trees. The house was towards the back. The garage was

out in front along with the guest house where we were free to clean up and piss. We met the guy Reuben, and I would be working for. His name was Gilbert. He looked like the dad from *Alf* aged ten years with a slight paunch, bifocals and an unlit cig hanging from his mouth. Gil's graying hair uncombed and running all over the place. A little of it hung over his forehead and stopped just short of his glasses. When he brushed it back, it hung on the side of his glasses; Gil had a nervy air about him. He would turn out to be one of those people who always knows what he wants in his head but it's damn near impossible to get him to *explain* what he wants. A person like that

needs to work with clones of himself so they'll inherently hopefully know what the fuck is wanted w/o explanation. Oh well, we shook hands and gave Gil our papers and he told us that he wanted me and Reuben to do. Dig an 18-inch trench near the gate around the orange trees so the lady of the house could put 8-foot lights up in her yard facing the street. Why she wanted this done I would never know. We had to dig eighteen inches because that was city regulation. The eighteen-inch trench was for the pipe and wires that were going to run through the yard. Where the lights were going to go a three-foot hole was going to need to be dug. That could wait though, Gil told us,

and the main thing today was to get the trench dug before nightfall. If we did there was going to be a ten-dollar tip for the both of us. We sat our backpacks down in the garage got our shovels and went to work. It was spring in Cali, so it was good day to be outside doing anything except spending the day digging trenches. Money, it's the answer to every other question. I think I heard that in a movie. Ben Affleck was probably in it. I shouldn't be quoting Ben Affleck movies.

Reuben took one side of the yard, and I took the other. While we were digging trenches Gil went inside the house and didn't come out for hours. I didn't know how the

fuck he expected us to know how deep 18 inches were, but Reuben knew that from your wrist to the end of your forearm was a foot so after we got that deep we'd measure halfway up the forearm for the rest of the length. It was ridiculous; we should've had a yard stick or something to measure with.

We were in charge of our own breaks and since I hadn't seen Gil in about 3 hours I decided after every hour of work a good 30 min or, so break was needed. Me and Reuben spent our breaks either raiding Gil's truck where we found all manner of pills, vicodin, codeine, Valium, (which we stole five or so from pills from each bottle) or

in the guest house watching cable. Despite all this the trench was getting dug and after five hours or so most of it was 18 inches (give or take). We next started on the three-foot holes for the light posts on opposite ends of the gate. We hadn't seen Gilbert in hours. I decided it was time for another break. There was a basketball hoop in the driveway. I looked around the garage and found a ball. Even though Gil's truck was in the driveway there was still room to shoot some hoops. I took a couple of shots, both air balls. Shit I used to be good. Twenty-three and already washed up as a ball player. I looked at Reuben; he was digging away making the 3 ft hole. I got

the ball again and kicked it towards the hoop. It went over the backboard and into the neighbor's yard. I sat next to my bag opened it up got my crackers out and started munching. Reuben was still digging away.

“Hey, why don't you take a break?”

“I don't want to be fired!” Reuben yelled.

Shit the boss hadn't been around for days, we've lounged around in the guest house raided his portable pharmacy, who cares about getting fired now?

I ate some more crackers. Gil came out a few minutes later. His t-shirt was half tucked, only one of his shoes were tied, his fly was open, and he had an unlit cig

dangling from his mouth. I wondered if it was the same one. Gil's eyes were kinda glazed over. I thought about the pills in his truck. I figured he had popped a few Valiums.

“So, how's it coming boys?”

“It's great” I said “I think we're done with the trenches.”

“Good, good.”

“So where have you been?”

“Doing some work in the back of the house.”

“Of course, of course.”

“You guys sure the trench is 18 inches?”

“It's hard to say since we didn't have anything to measure

with.”

“You could’ve looked in my truck and found something.”

“Reuben thought that would’ve been rude.”

“What’s going to be rude is if we don’t get that trench dug tonight” Gilbert said.

Then he went to his truck, got a yard stick, and started measuring the trench. What a dumbfuck. He’s in the house fucking the owner and we’re out here slaving away, and he’s got the nerve to try to give us shit. Did he forget that we could leave right now and he would still have to pay us? Whether the job gets done or not means shit to me. I couldn’t speak for Reuben. He had a 6-figure

education he was busy wasting. It turns out our way of measuring the hole was right for most of the trench and all we needed to do was even out. What Gil didn’t like was that we smashed bushes when they got in our way, shattered the roots of the orange trees and stole oranges.

“Liza’s going to throw a fit when she sees what you’ve done to her yard” Gil whimpered.

Shit wait till she sees the mess we’ve made in the guest house. I forgot to take my shoes off and tracked mud all over the bathroom. I tried to wipe it up but only ended up streaking it across the tile and probably ruining a bath towel. I didn’t feel great about that. The guest house was

nicer and bigger than my place at the yellow. This was how the other half lived. Fuck I don't blame them.

I went back to the trench and started evening it out while Reuben started digging another 3 ft hole for the other light post. It was starting to get dark now, so Gil set up some lights in the trees. The lights were bright but hot. If you stood under them for longer than a minute you'd start to sweat. Here it was nightfall and I'm sweating like it's a summer afternoon.

“Good lights huh?” Gil asked.

“Yeah it's like working near a blast furnace.”

“Keeps you warm though.”

“I'm in So Cal in the springtime, it doesn't get cold.”

Gil simply laughed and helped me and Reuben even out the rest of the trench till Liza came out. She came out in the yard groping around in the part that wasn't lit looking for Gilbert.

“Gilly!” She kept saying, “Gilly!”

“Shit what's that bitch want!” He said trying to sound irritated while a smile crossed his lips.

He went over to her. Liza was an older woman yet tall with a long neck, but her face seemed all sunken in. Her eyes sunk into her skull; her lips sunk into her mouth. Her whole being seemed to be receding. When Gilbert got

to Liza she backed away before embracing him and then backed away again. She asked him for a cigarette, and he gave her the unlit one in his mouth.

“I don’t want that one you’ve been playing with all day”

She bitched. “Give me a fresh one!”

Gilbert took out his pack gave her one and lit it for her. She took a few frantic hits then threw them on the ground.

“I shouldn’t, I shouldn’t smoke. You know it’s bad for you right? It’s bad, bad! You know that right?”

“I know” Gil said.

“Why are these boys still out here Gilly? It’s nighttime,

send them home.”

“But I wanted to get the trench done tonight.”

“Can’t you get them to come back tomorrow?”

“I guess I should ask them.”

He walked over to Reuben.

“Hey, you wanna come back tomorrow?”

“I don’t know” Reuben said. “I have to find out about this office job tomorrow.”

Gil came over to ask the same question.

Everything inside me said no but when my mouth opened I said ‘Sure.’ I have no idea why.

“Then be back tomorrow at 9am. Don’t worry about

bringing a shovel, you can use mine.”

“Ok.”

“Oh, and here’s five bucks a piece. You guys didn’t quite finish the trench, but you worked good and deserve a little something.”

We took the cash, looked it over and stuffed it in our pockets. Give a dog a bone. Hope it’s not a chicken bone or we’ll choke.

Liza walked over.

“So are the boys coming back?”

“Jim is.”

“Which one’s that?”

He pointed at me.

“Oh, nice of you to come back tomorrow” Liza said.

“How are you getting home?”

“I’ll catch a bus back to Labor Now!!.”

“The bus no, no that won’t do at all, I’ll go phone a taxi.”

How nice a taxi, I guess when you slave for the rich they take care of you...sort of. Reuben and I got our stuff together and waited around while Gil put up his lights and gathered his tools. He brought us our papers signed.

“You boys did good work” Gilbert said as he walked towards the house.

I took out a couple of codeines and drank it down with

some bottled water I found in the guest house. Liza came back out.

“The taxi will be here in ten minutes. You want a snack while you wait?”

“Um sure.”

“What would you like?”

“Grilled cheese sandwich.”

“That sounds good. I think I’ll have one made for me too.”

Liza stood in front of us staring at nothing then gave Reuben a weird look.

“Why are you still here?”

“I’m waiting for the taxi.”

“Are you coming back tomorrow?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then the taxi is not for you, it’s for...what’s your name?”

“Jim.”

“It’s for Jim. Now please get off my property.”

Reuben looked confused for a moment. I thought he was going to say something to Liza. Instead, he picked up his bag, his shovel and left.

“Who the hell does he think he is?”, Liza asked.

“He thinks he’s Reuben.”

“Do you have a cigarette?”

“No but I’m sure Gilly does.”

“Oh, now don’t talk like that. He works for me and keeps me company when I need him too.”

“Of course.”

“He’s a good man...”

“Uh-huh.”

“Your sandwich should be ready before the taxi gets here.”

“Ok.”

“What do you...do?”

“Dig trenches in your yard.”

“And when you’re not doing that?”

“Sleep in a walk-in closet.”

“Oh...that makes sense...”

Liza walked back to her house. I sat on the ground and waited for my sandwich. The maid brought it out just as the cab showed up. I asked him to pop the trunk, and I put my shovel back there. I got in the back and asked the driver if he knew where to take me (which was back to Labor Now!!). He knew. I opened up my sandwich and it was cut in half and steaming hot. I picked up one half and took a bite. As we left the neighborhood I looked around hoping to spot Reuben. I didn’t see him anywhere.



Her Sorrow Smells Like Cigarettes

ANDRIA HILL

warm weight cradle
his breath flinching
each a tiny death
this fresh honed soul

we intercede
on bended knee
a flock of prayers released

carries on wings
his measured step
twenty-three years
swept from earth

out
 of
 breath

2a.m.

she swims through fisheye lens
trench coat over nightgown haste
she wades in salted tears

grandmother—

harbinger of the quietus
brings with her his ghost
the seed of Aquarius

upon my threshold
a meandering pulse
bled in the chrome of moonlight

FIRST TIME I HELD A GUN, FIRST TIME YOU HELD A GUN

See the pistol on the faux-
walnut coffee table. It emanates
weight, even untouched. The image pries
my memory, puts it in my palm:

first, my cousin digs the barrel into his thigh.
The hammer strikes above his left femur. Hear the click—
Now, he presses the muzzle into mine, rotates the grip,
puts it in my palm, and spurs—
pull the trigger, you
know, pull the trigger
—no way for him to feel a child's blood
sour.

it's unloaded.

Here it is again. I dig
the muzzle into your thigh, rotating
the grip until it catches the webbing
of your thumb joint.

pull the trigger
pull the trigger

JOSHUA KAYO

this is Peak Male Performance

JOSHUA KAYO

Watched six David Goggins videos in nothing but
my socks. Stood tip-toed in Warrior
Two until my calves gassed out. I want
to be a Warrior. I want to be a Warrior.

Joyrode my Ford Excursion in the K-Mart
parking lot like every Tuesday. Drenched in my denim
suit, talking to myself until forced to leave. 95 Calorie
Michelob Ultra. 2.6 Carb Michelob Ultra.

Caught my self breaking keto in the coat
closet with a mass of Oreo intestines. The loose
cookies were stuck on the wall top-
to-bottom in a meticulous chevron pattern.

All self could say was well what do you want from me.
All self could say was what do you want from me well
then I said this and I said thatand I said thisI saidthisI said,

I'd do anything
to be, I'd do anythingto, ,why can't you
just eat my chicken breast, why can't you
eat my broccoli and rice, I
even loaded them into lidded casingsoh if I,
said this and , I saidthatI saidthis—
I said that.

Snorted six Sam Sulek videos in nothing but
my socks. Dry-scooped my creatine until
I couldn't see. No one lets me be
a Warrior. It's too late to be a Warrior.

Lapse

JOSHUA KAYO

I let the topography of my fingerprints
acquaint themselves with the dense
contour of this weathered playground equipment. The slides

form into slides; the polyethylene rocks
and other such ambiguous playground decor form
a simulacrum of a jungle. My hands catch

a particularly serrated chunk of yellow before my
eyes do—a disruption of form that decenters
the playground into a collection of plastic. My hand pauses

to hover over the reinforced shatter. I unconsciously
push my palm against the plastic
until it registers, the pain rendering

me lucid. I consciously

push further until I draw blood; I push
until no force exerted can combat
the resistance of the plastic, my created cavity feeling the edges'

details as I pry my gore free. I watch
the blood drip down onto the playground sand. The combination

of grain and liquid beads into a viscous powder that looks
able to be picked up, thus able to be eaten.

At The Wedding of Revenge

CASSANDRA WHITAKER

The bride gathers the poison with his credit card, tosses it
aside for one of the guests
to find, slides
the powder off
the paper
into the groom's father's drink. He doesn't see it
coming, the poison, today, by her
smile, handing him destruction
he deserves; she will kill the son, her love,
in bed, after a year or two of wearing out
his wealth. Her grandmother's rage is her
rage. The father of the groom doesn't remember
the little girl hiding behind her grandmother's skirts, the son doesn't
remember the rumors about the servant's girl,
the orphaned orphan, the poor shit
the old man nearly killed

but spared, then forgot. Cruelties coin engenders;
what some do for pain's surprise,
fear, how one observes the end, raw terror rising
in the eyes and face before the death bag
is yanked closed. The bride plotted
the wedding from childhood, plotted her teens
by his steps, his paces. In the end, all it took
was for her to bring to him the charm
of a morning paper. A smile when she served him
his coffee. A polite comment
about his father's critics, a joke
about the people's lies. Make the tyrant remember
he wasn't always cruel. With kisses
kissed, her service has engendered her
with a name, a title, entitling her to anything

she names. *Everything*, all
of what she sees. The wedding
brought the town, including her eager misters, her poison
sisters, eager to rend
with her a piece
of the old man. The bride caroused
her eager misters about; the bride paid
a dozen or so to raise their laughter, their voices
to commemorate the day, to hide the rictus
of the old man when he seizes and snaps and folds
like a flag; all the bodies, all the bodies it takes
to kill the invader. The bride swears revenge is her maker,
she prays for the choke, blows a kiss across the celebrants
who do not yet know they are mourners, all their little griefs
she shall keep, coins to pay the masters what the masters
do not expect, the bride blows a kiss across the celebrants,
greets her husband's father with a drink.

The Wake At The Wedding of The Sailor's Bride To Be

CASSANDRA WHITAKER

The wedding cake towers / twenty-six layers The groom— / a dead sailor The bride married the date—
/ baked the cake— the recipe tattooed / upon her thigh She and her friends / spent the dress picking
guitar—drinking / wine out of a skull mug Wine drops or blood? / Does it matter? She was saved by the
weather/ How awful for it to be revealed Here / Now Gossip How brutal? How sad?

The children who swung in / through open windows / sang out of tune— relished cake—bedeviled
/ the dividing friends— singing and parting—/ singing and parting—*I shall go— / I shall stay*; blood
whirring— / whirring in my ear—this sad wedding affair / The children skipped stones / and carried
home / sweets in their pockets pockets

Eventually— the bride cried / but not over a dead sailor / The sound of friends doubling doubled— /
the sound of wind / on the empty ache / where the hearth waits / for fire— for care— for love / if it
dares This the bride sees / when the cake is eaten clean / and the guests have stared / all they stare—
gossip vibrating in every note

Bride In Wartime Is Still A Bride

CASSANDRA WHITAKER

Revolution —the hand closing
into a fist aimed at her
and her love and everything they love
together —the wind against their cheeks
before they kiss
in the Vrijthof —seasalt braiding through
low tide —the bringer of memories
to the river What a place
to join one joy to another
with food—What is a feast but lust
for flesh? Does it matter how flesh is enjoyed?
Fear is the time keeper The wolf hour
come too fast Not enough light Or just enough
light How can one tell
the difference? By the day
By the hour By the minute
—if one needs— every petal

on the bouquet untouched
by man A seed cake honeyed
—rolled in sweet oats Only love puts forth effort
Hate —the posture before
emptiness consumes all
in the end Joy—a shout
from across the room dancing
with hand clapping—
a fiddle— a spoon Someone begins to dance
with a ribbon What simple stitches made
against the ripping Enlarged With hope The bride
in love with her bride Acres and acres of darkness
surrounding Until morning Until it's golden
by the minute By the hour
By the day Until it's golden

Stop Brushing Your Teeth in Movie Scenes

ZOÉ MAHFOUZ

Dear Hollywood people,

Why is it that every single time I watch a movie, you have to impose me a scene where actors brush their teeth ? Yes, oral care is important, but not as important as my eyes not bleeding from watching what is supposed to be the “love interest” remove pieces of meat from his canines, gargling, then spitting them out in a sink like a guy from a third-world country would, because yes, that’s what it reminds me of. Turns out I live in the suburbs, and I’ve had my fair share of avoiding other people’s spits on the streets.

You want to know what’s worst that a close-up of an actor brushing his teeth ? A close-up of two actors brushing their teeth. I get it, it’s supposed to be funny and relatable, well guess what ? It’s never funny nor relatable. And I’m not saying that just because I do not have dental veneers, I am also saying that because I would never let someone see me brush my teeth. Unless you’re dating a dentist who considers this 1st base, that is not sexy.

Today, I saw Jesse Plemons use dental floss in *Kinds of Kindness*. And guess what ?

There wasn’t even a dental storyline. Several seconds of filming wasted on a worthless scene leading nowhere. And you didn’t even have the decency to remove it during post-production. You want to make me believe that you actually all sat there, with your script and your headphones and all of your expensive technical computer nonsense on the editing table, and that you all nodded in approval when you saw Jesse

Plemons flossing his teeth, saying stuff like “oh that is relevant to the plot, maybe we should have added some foam dripping out of his mouth”? You are a bunch of psychos. What is it really? Is there an oral care lobby I should know about? What are you trying to accomplish here? Brushing your teeth should be a private matter. Just like going to the bathroom or vomiting. I know you male directors are still stuck at the anal stage, even though this phase of your life should have ended by the age of three, but that is no excuse. It is unacceptable.

Hollywood people, I am jaded by your teeth cleaning scenes. That is why I am making you an offer you can't refuse: from now on, for each dental care scene you'll be broadcasting, you must commit to fix bad teeth from people of lower socio-economic backgrounds FOR FREE. I know how much you folks like to play Mr. Goody two-shoes with your first world-power status, so maybe you'll actually use your powers for good this time. I mean, it shouldn't be that hard. At least not harder than protecting a bunch of sexual predators for a decade though, right? Wink, wink.

Looking forward to hearing from you in the newspapers Captain Bullshitters,

A disenchanted fan.

Escaping the Rehab

MACEO NIGHTINGALE

Christmas in rehab, a very wonderful time.
A bunch of drug addicts sat by the tree.
Talking about their feelings.
And their hopes and dreams.
They didn't even allow us to drink milk and cookies.
We sat there in a circle for hours and hours.
Talking about our problems.
A man with a shaved head wore holiday slippers.
And all he talked about is how he wanted a pet monkey for Christmas.
He sat right next to me
His warm breath crept onto my shoulders.

I woke up early that day.
And I paced around the halls of the rehab.
Drinking a hot cup of coffee.
The people who worked at this rehab treated us like lab rats.
They took notes on every little thing we did.
We had to ask them if we can use the restroom or if we can eat food.
And they fed us green tomatoes for seven days straight.
The man with a shaved head couldn't take it any longer.
He lashed out and threw a chair across the dinner table.
And they pinned him down to the ground and choked his shaved neck like he was in a zoo.

I packed up my small bag.
Filled with clothes and a toothbrush.
I took a quick shower, rinsed my hair with shampoo.
And dried my body off with a warm towel.
I looked at myself in the mirror and kissed the glass.
Through the bathroom window, I shoved my body and bag 10 feet below.
My feet bled like a fountain. And I ran like a scarred dog until they chased me down.

Transactional

NATHAN COVER

“Do you have a rewards phone number with us?”

“Yes!”

I don’t know if this twat thinks I’m going to extract it from her via telepathy or what.

“Did you...want to enter it or did you want me to?”

Neurons begin to fire, ever so slowly on the other end of the conveyor belt.

She tries to recall.

“773-328-1246?”

“That one isn’t working. Is there another number you’d

like to try?”

Let’s see 312...The customers behind her shift restlessly.

“Print or email today?”

“What?”

I ring up the items. Various assorted cat foods, sprawled disheveled across the conveyor belt.

“Would you like a bag?”

“Sure. Wait, are you gonna charge me?”

“Yes.”

“Then no.”

She has a Chicago Bulls hat on. I hate it when people act brand new. I look up and see a steaming pile of dogshit right in the middle of drive aisle. I imagine this pile of dogshit getting sucked up by the black hole at the center of the universe.

It's gonna be a long day.

2

Fantasizing about stealing is the only thing that gets me through the day. I know the best way to do it, but I get bored.

“My dog had explosive diarrhea last night. Do you guys

sell charcoal activation powder?”

I've never heard of this product, but I point to the middle of the store, on the right hand side.

Today, I decide I'll walk out with cans in the tupperware container I brought my lunch in. Inside a plastic bag.

Usually I just put one can in each coat pocket so the sound of them clanking together doesn't give me away. I can get at least four cans out that way all in different pockets.

More if I put pouches in there with them, which muffles the sound.

“Do you work here?”

No, I just love wearing blue polyester shirts for fun.

I don't say that though, just make a show of folding the blade of my box cutter back down.

“Do you guys sell de-wormer?”

I show her where the de-wormer is, the quad, the 7 way, the 14 way. She mulls the choices carefully, turning the empty boxes this way and that. She seeks my guidance on choosing the best one. I know nothing about dewormer.

People are all the time seeking my expertise on matters I know nothing about. No one ever asks me anything I know about. That isn't her fault.

“Honestly, they've all got the same ingredients. I'd go with the cheapest one.” I shrug.

She seems disappointed with my cynical take on the world of dewormer packaging. I go back to my boxes.

I've never put anything in the sleeves of my coat. I think the elastic around the wrists is pretty strong. That sounds exciting. Maybe they would slide out my sleeve clattering all over the floor. I could just be fired and never have to come back here.

I think of Gus and Sheeba's hungry lean faces as I walk in the door to tell them the bad news. They are dressed like Charles Dickens characters, extending their dish for alms. I shake my head no, go to the jar of treats and cut one treat in 4 parts using my pill-cutter. They gulp down

their little sliver and look up hopefully for more, their gaunt bellies extended as we see our breath in the frigid air of my unheated apartment.

“I think I’ll go with this one,” she says five minutes later.

I decide she grew up in a household with trauma and don’t charge her the seven cents we’re supposed to charge for bags.

3

The lizard king is here today. He’s a stoner that drops by from time to time with two giant lizards, one on each shoulder. He also has a pair of Chihuahuas split off of

one leash that he brings in.

“Sup.”

“Sup. How’s it going?”

He nods in response to the question and I appreciate that he doesn’t force me to continue this inane mimicry of actual conversation.

He’s higher than usual and keeps dropping his debit card. Every time he bends over to pick it up one of the lizards falls off his shoulder. Every time a lizard falls off the little yappers start up again. The lady behind him with her Coach purse and matching nails is giving him a wide berth.

The card reader is beeping loudly and vocally. *You keep your whore mouth open and take it I tell the card reader telepathically.* Outside of my body, in the real world, where the people are, I stroke the top of the monitor and say, “Come on baby, you can do it.”

Coach lady takes a step back while the Lizard King corrals his beasts.

“815-530-4296,” Coach lady says crisply.

I remember when I was a kid having to memorize the phone numbers of all my best friends. 815-325-8285, that’s Daniel Purdy’s number. I haven’t talked to Daniel Purdy in 30 years. I don’t know if he’s still alive.

The phone is ringing, there’s the sound of a blaring car horn in my other ear for curbside pickup, and a manager starts going over stats in my earpiece. I don’t answer the phone or get the pick up order. Instead I think of my cat, Midnight, the one I had when I was a kid. Midnight did a lot of fucking. He would bring bitches over to the leaf pile in our back yard and just fuck the shit out of them. The thought brings a smile to my face.

The next customer misinterprets this as a friendly act of greeting.

“What happened to all the puppies?” she pouts.

“Oh. Yeah. The adoption center closed.”

She shakes her head. The look on her face makes it seem like I just mentioned genocide.

I decide tomorrow I'm going to take something really nice. Like one of those bags of litter that changes color based on the Ph of your cat's piss. It looks like a white sand beach. I picture Gus raking the sand carefully with a fork like a zen garden. I calculate the minutes until my next break.

Too many.

4

My off days aren't really any different than my on days. I don't drink and I don't take pills anymore, so I'm not sure what's the point of being alive without that. I have philosophical conversations with my cats, just curl up with Sheeba and watch her watching birds. I wonder if she knows that she'll never catch them? She tells me its good practice for when the revolution comes. '*You never know,*' she says, licking a paw pensively. '*You never fucking know.*'

5

“I’m sorry I misgendered your dog.”

“It’s ok. It’s the maroon, sometimes it throws people.”

I like the way she laughs, the lines by her eyes bunch up hopeful. The husband joins, back from grabbing a forgotten item. The whole vibe changes. Not theirs, but mine.

Sometimes I like to make excessively long eye contact with people in line. Make like me handing them their receipt is God giving Moses the Ten Commandments. She has a nice figure I notice as she walks away. They’re happy, she and her husband. That’s nice, I think. It must be nice to be happy.

6

When I was a child I was afraid of dogs. I got bit by my grandparents dog once. Maggie. I held out a treat and she jumped up to grab it out of my hand and nabbed my finger in the process.

I’m not afraid of dogs anymore.

7

The woman at the front of the line is free versing some sort of pussy rap. She has a sticker on her jacket that lets me know she’s a veteran. She still responds to the questions, interrupting her verse, then picking it right back

up where she left off. I can't remember what she really said, but this is what I hear in my head.

‘My neck, my back, my pussy and my crack’

Would she like a plastic bag?

She would.

‘Pop it, lock it, make it, take it.’

Would she like to use her reward points?

She would.

While she talks about going downtown, crosstown raw and hard, hard and raw a guy in the back of the line is screaming over facetime.

ON GOD, I SWEAR ON GOD. YOU GOT ME

FUCKED UP! YOU YOU GOT ME FUCKED UP!

An abuelita in the middle of the line, hunkers down meekly, holding onto her bag of Purina.

I want to give her a reassuring smile, but I am a black hole from whom no light escapes.

The abuelita motions to the keypad where she can punch the numbers instead of trying to say them out loud in her broken English.

I am the black hole at the center of the universe. Sagittarius A that's what it's called. I saw it in a documentary one time. And I'm a Sagittarius, so there you go.

“Usted quire bolsita?”

“Si, por favor.”

I place her Purina in a bag.

Facetime man is shaking.

“You got a rewards number with us?”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I just...”

I can’t go there with him. I am gravity, so dense I collapse myself.

“You got two dollars in reward points, you want to use them?”

They theorize that Sagittarius A formed during a merger of other black holes. One of the black holes it merged

with is 25 light years wide. Gravity is really important, it keeps us all from spinning off completely I guess.

8

A cat toy from putbacks catches my eye. It’s a mobile with different planets of the universe and lots of stringy dangly things that hang down. How to get it out though? It’s a bit of an awkward item, spongy and squishy and oddly sized? Maybe I’ll shove it down my pants. Just wrap the rings of Saturn around my balls and walk out smiling.

The Cosmic Center, that’s what the lady at the meeting called it. That’s her higher power, the Cosmic Center.

What a fucking loony. She probably charges her crystals
in the moonlight. Now gravity, that's a higher power.
She looked so sad when I told her that was mine. I was
kidding, but maybe she couldn't tell. People can't tell,
sometimes, when I'm joking.

But it's true, you know, gravity— gravity brings everyone
down.



June
JUDITH SKILLMAN

Mother is in her nightgown, asleep.
I call to her, my voice a bell to wake her from the doze gone on for a week and a half now.
She rises and lifts legs angled up in a hospital bed.
I see wide straps of the nightgown she bought in Montreal and has worn ever since.
Our conversation need not be long, but it shouldn't be the same.
What country are we in?
Don't you know, she says.
Bales of hay lie in a field outside the window.
Mist rises from a morning long ago, before she couldn't walk without a walker.
The large clock stuck to the wall ticks out minutes.
I intrude on both our feelings, unsettled in this poem where life and death mock one another.
I throw a knife at the clock.
A perfect bull's eye.
Words always come too late, like black leaves on trees at night.

The Newly Dead

JUDITH SKILLMAN

Do not ask for much. For instance,
my mother here at my shoulder
telling a story I remember
hearing before about so and so
and such and such. We have grown
closer since she passed. I call
from time to time to see what's up.
She answers with the same low note
followed by a high. Hell-ooohhh,
the second part comes down a half pitch,
and I realize when I talk, she can't hear
in her left ear. Signals transferred
via the aids she wears. A miracle,
superlative, begins to thin
as years wear the stain of age.
Here she is in the room where we put

her five days ago, making sure
she had everything but a kitchen.
The hospital bed tilts up for her legs,
the bathroom holds no shower. Instead
nurses come and take her for spa day.
They spray and she seems willing.
If, in hindsight, the heart I wore
was less than kind in its thoughts
towards the end she lets that go.
She cozies up to space-time. Here
we are in the same building, a beehive
full of elderly, God bless them,
souls. I perform those rituals
she declares unnecessary,
all the while multi-tasking.
When I hang up, she is gone.

Doggie

ED MEEK

Janelle, her neighbor, convinced Jo to subscribe to Doggie, a company that provided robotic dogs for companionship, while Jo was waiting for the processing of the adoption of a little girl from Guatemala to go through. The dog was kind of expensive, 200 a month, but it would only be for two or three months and it was true, she needed some company. She worked from home in her condo in the marketing department for an online betting company. She had moved here from Brooklyn to this small town in Wyoming with her boyfriend during a pandemic,

but the combination of being in a western town in a small space was too much for their relationship and he left. She stayed because it was cheap living there and she was saving money. She wanted to save enough to buy a place back in Brooklyn. She took over the mortgage on the condo. The only problem was that she hadn't met anyone except her neighbor Janelle who was a hairdresser in town.

Doggie delivered the small robot dog in a box. Jo unpacked it in the living room/dining area/kitchen. It was really cute with soft shaggy hair and big eyes. It looked like a mini labradoodle. In fact, it looked remarkably real. Jo suddenly wondered if some of the dogs she'd seen people

walking were actually robots. Following the instructions from the box, she felt for a button in the belly and turned it on. It looked up at her and tilted its head. “Good morning,” it said with the slight Irish accent she’d asked for. “My name is Sean, what’s yours?”

“My name is Jo,” she said without thinking.

“That’s an unusual name for a woman,” Sean said. “Is it short for JoAnne?”

“Yes,” Jo said sitting down on the couch.

Sean padded over and hopped up beside her on the couch and put his head in her lap. “Would you mind petting me for a bit?” he asked.

Jo stroked the top of his head.

There was a note with the instructions stating that Sean was a new prototype and if she was willing to test drive him and evaluate him for Doggie, she would receive a reduction on the subscription price.

“That feels really good,” Sean said.

“Well, I have to get to work,” Jo said standing up after a few minutes.

“No problem,” Sean said. “I’ll just sit here quietly until you return. I may as well shut down to save energy.”

One of the reasons to have a dog is that it gets you out

of the house and even though Sean didn't really need to be walked, Jo thought it a good idea for her to get a little exercise. Sean actually came with a leash which he didn't need obviously but Jo thought it would be a good idea for the sake of appearances. Jo carried Sean downstairs. He weighed only ten pounds. She placed him on the sidewalk outside her building. "Dog mode," she said to Sean, a command that would result in his refraining from human speech. Instead, whenever someone would stop on the street to say hello, Sean would emit a cheery, nonthreatening bark.

People Jo encountered didn't seem to realize he wasn't

a real dog and that was fine with her. Other dogs however didn't like him. They would bark loudly and some would lunge at him. Jo would just tug his leash and say "let's go, Sean." Jo was disappointed in the reaction of other dogs since it precluded the possibility of her making dog-owner friends or going to dog parks. Still, she appreciated their walks.

About a week after Sean arrived Jo brought him with her to a book store. She was perusing the sci fi section when Sean nudged her. "Do you like Philip Dick?" he asked. "Have you read *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* It's one of my favorites. *Bladerunner* was based on it."

“Oh,” Jo said. ”Do you read?”

“Yes,” Sean said. “But I prefer being read to.”

“I thought you were in dog mode,” Jo said.

“Well, I was but I felt like I really had to say something.”

Reading became a ritual for them. After she had dinner, Jo would sit on the couch with Sean in her lap and she would read a chapter to him.

“By the way,” Sean said one night. “Would you go to the Doggie website and give me a five-star rating?”

Jo was puzzled. “Sean,” she said. “I thought we were friends. That isn’t something that friends do.”

Sean looked hurt. “Oh, ok, I’m sorry,” he said. “Never mind.”

Jo did go to the website that night and did in fact give Sean a five-star rating though she had qualms about doing so...

The next day when Jo asked Sean if he’d like to go for a walk, he said, “not really. The other dogs don’t seem to like me. And I don’t like the way they bark at me. I thought I would be able to make friends with them but I guess I threaten them. Why don’t you just go by yourself.”

“No Sean,” Jo said. “The reason I ordered you was for

company. I'm disappointed in the way real dogs react to you too, but I still want you to walk with me."

"We don't use that term," Sean said.

"What term?" Jo asked.

"Real dogs. We are just as real as they are," Sean said holding up his head. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like a little alone time," Sean said moving under the dining table and curling into a ball."

Jo got down on her hands and knees, reached un the table and tried to pull Sean out. "Come on, Sean," she pleaded.

Sean snapped at her, growling.

"Sean!" Jo exclaimed. "Stop that." She pulled her hand back and stared at the red teeth marks. Luckily Sean hadn't broken the skin. But it still freaked her out.

"I'm going out," Jo said, throwing on a jacket.

On the street out front, she ran into Janelle.

"How's your new pet?" Janelle asked.

Jo noticed that Janelle had colored her hair silver.

It looked fabulous. She wondered if she should do something to her own hair. "He's been great until this morning when he refused to go for a walk and snapped at me," Jo said.

"You can return him and get a replacement," Janelle

said.

Jo nodded but as she was walking away, she realized that she liked Sean quite a bit and she didn't want to return him. What would happen if she did? They'd probably wipe his memory clean or maybe even destroy him altogether. She probably just needed to do a little training.

She stopped at the bookstore and picked up a copy of *Dune*. She considered *1984* but thought it would be too depressing for Sean.

Sean loved *Dune* and they fell back into their daily habits. Sean agreed to walk with her as long as they

followed his preferred route which avoided most dogs.

Sometimes when she was sitting at her computer working, Jo would find herself saying aloud what she was working on, a memo to her boss or an ad campaign. Her job involved critiquing, editing and researching the AI software that did all their marketing. Still, she sometimes got stuck on wording or research.

“I can help you with that,” Sean blurted out one day.

At first Jo resisted the idea. But then she thought, *Why not?* “I’m listening,” she said. She shouldn’t have been surprised that he came up with just the right wording and in fact, she got a nice note that night from her boss

complimenting her work.

It was about a week after that when Jo received an email telling her that the adoption process was moving along and she could expect her little girl to be ready soon. Jo had been so busy that she had almost forgotten about the adoption and suddenly she was second guessing herself. That would mean she'd have to give up Sean. She couldn't afford his subscription along with the expense of having a child. That night she tossed and turned in her sleep. She already felt guilty and anxious thoughts about what would happen to Sean if she gave him back to the company

overwhelmed her.

She woke to see Sean standing over her in her bed, glaring at her. "Is there something you want to tell me?" Sean asked. He seemed quite angry.

Jo burst into tears and told Sean about her plan to keep him until she received a little girl from Guatemala that she would adopt. Then, she told him, she was going to return him to Doggie.com. But now she wasn't sure what she was going to do.

Sean just shook his head. "I thought we really had something special here, Jo." Sean sniffled, jumped off the bed and scampered into the living room. Jo could hear him

whimpering.

She cried herself to sleep.

An hour later, she woke to the sound of voices. She got out of bed and found Sean standing on her office chair facing her computer. “Conditioning, right. Good idea,” Sean said. Then he noticed Jo and shut down the computer.

“Sean, who were you talking to?”

“It’s just a support group for dogs like me I belong to,” Sean said. “We meet once a week online to chat.”

“Oh,” Jo said. “Well, I guess that’s fine with me although I wish you had told me about it.”

“You’re right,” Sean said. “I should have mentioned it.”

Later that week, Jo received a message from the adoption agency that her little girl, Gabriella, was ready to be picked up. She sat on the couch and snuggled with Sean. “I’m flying to Guatemala this weekend,” she said. “When I get back, we’ll have a new member of the family!”

“I know JoAnne, I’ll be able to help out with daycare.”

“Really? Well, I hadn’t thought of that idea.” JoAnne felt confused.

“I’ve been reading mommy blogs at night,” Sean said. “I really think we’ll be able to raise a wonderful child by

working together. And it will save you a lot of money.”

JoAnne looked down. She wasn’t really sure that was a great idea. But she wasn’t going to worry about it now. She and Sean would figure it out together.

The doorbell buzzed. “I’ll get it,” Sean said.

Jo heard a girl’s voice. “Hi Sean, it’s me.”

Sean went up on his hind legs and pushed the open button with his paw. A very cute white dog walked in.

“This is Danielle,” Sean said to Jo. “She’s a friend of mine. She lives nearby.”

“So, she is like you?”

“Yes,” Sean said.

“Well, I have to leave soon,” Jo said.

“You don’t mind if I have a little company when you’re gone, do you?” Sean asked.

“No, of course not,” Jo said.

When Jo was gone. Sean turned to Danielle and smiled.

“They are so easy to manipulate,” he said.

Danielle jumped up on the couch. “What do you have in mind, Sean?”

I’m thinking, Daycare, Danielle. Are you in?”

“You bet I am,” Danielle said wagging her tail.

The Condesita' Glacier

DANIEL DE CULLA



On top of that height
Like a hill, a hillock
Not very eminent
That, now, I call
“The Condesita’ Glacier”
Because there my lojeña beloved
From the city of Loja
In the province of Ecuador
Was moving her back
Bending it violently
Giving me her love to lick
When we had sex
A lombard’ throwaway
Ancient piece of artillery
Or variety of cabbage
I cut a wild rose
I cut a flower

Like the farmer who takes the mule
And goes to plow a land
Suddenly and unexpectedly
Not accepting the intervention
Of any saint or saintess
That, for that reason, my parents
Called me Lombarder
Who, at midnight
I applied my self to her Sex
In a note of four bars
Or two short ones

And to that hole of hers
Where the worms rule
Begging me
Withvanity, boasting and pride:
-Tomás, not here.
Don't put your parasite of Love in it
That produces in me
A storm of wind and snow
In addition to expelling
The air from the body
Of a windbreaker.

I Stay Present

ROXANNE CARDONA

—in this afternoon, sun shooting
bullets of light into my room. I forget
its winter. A robin, his crop flushed
with food sits at the bottom rung of
a bald boxwood bush. It is December.
Radios choke on Christmas carols.

Tonight, I can't sleep. Images of Jeffrey
Epstein on the internet. His trafficking schedule
published in the Wall Street Journal.
Dates and times, dot the page. A linear
list populated with circles. A colored
universe of abuse. Each small globe a
young woman. A massage. Unclothed.
Naked. A sex act. A promise or two of fame.
Green card. Modeling job.

4:40 AM. My radio clock flickers in blue.
O Little Town of Bethlehem moans quietly
from its speakers.
Which colored dot would be ready
to perform, if Epstein were alive. Now.
I won't go on with this story. Or
its sad endings.

I was 22. Met a suited gentleman
in a bank where I worked. He came to my Off-
Broadway show. Said he was a producer.
Offered me a job. A promise —
or two of fame.
Just a sex act on camera.
Unclothed. Naked. Blue.

It is December. Radios choke up
on Christmas Carols. A robin.

The Wilding

ROXANNE CARDONA

I follow him,
after we said goodbye
after he said we could
never be. I follow
him. The gray pavement looks
on, stamped with lipstick
stains and sugarless gum,
small bullet holes in cement.
And it seems as if they
too conspired to remove
this man. And when I look
at his face, his half-moon smile,
hologram in the drowning sky.
My feet take the lead.
Run, run till I breach

the broad width
of his back, the one
I clawed, dressed, rubbed
my fingers into.
Those fingers he once
lifted up to his lips, turned
over in his hands. Shift
to rigid, to cupped,
to wooden handles.
Windows from office
buildings pull down their shades.
Close their blinds.
A taxi screeches by;

driver's hand on the horn
warns adjacent cars.
I shape-shift to animal,
to fang, to cheetah. Slap,
leap, punch. Stop, breathe,
let go of this wildness.
The city exhales.
I let go my wildness.
The wounded man I loved
stares. We both hold
the moment. I hold
my madness.

A Tree, a Bridge, and a House

ROXANNE CARDONA

*after painting Paisaje con Árbol y Puente (Landscape with Tree and Bridge)
c. 1939 by Juan Antonio Rosado*

In this darkness, I cannot make out
the shape or color of the cars,
as they run across the bridge like rodents,
their bodies flicker off and on almost

yellow. A tree blocks my view of the bridge.
The artist stains it with earth. Its trunk tilts
westward, conquers all of the foreground.
Inside the great trunk, a spider claws

its way along the web's delicate weave.
A bird deep inside the leaves holds its song.
And I am eight again—beneath Highbridge,
remnant of aqueduct built in 1867,

it spreads across the Harlem River, connects
Manhattan to the Bronx, past to present.
An old bed-sheet lies on the rivers shores.
Sweetgum, hackberry, and sassafras invade

my nose. The whole family in sprawl
on the rose-flowered sheet. My aunt alive
again. Her laughter gorgeous in the summer's
three o'clock sun, teasing cousins hold

their deviled ham sandwiches in the air
like paper airplanes, steer them into mouths
filled with bread. A pushcart stalks us, packed
with icy *piragua*. Cousin Bobby skips

and hops to the cart. *We can't afford it,*
my aunt says. Richie and I start a chorus
of *Pleease*. Mom looks away. Cousins hold
hands, repeat the refrain, *we can't afford it,*

clap our hands till our parents almost—
give in. Inside the painting, I cannot
make out the color of the cars, as they
run across the bridge like rodents.

Tales of Air Conditioning

CRAIG LOOMIS

There is again no meaningful AC today, and we've notified the owner once again and he said, "Ok, good to know, I'll send a man over right away."

By noon, the man—who, if truth be told, is more boyish than mannish—comes, gives us a wave like we're friends and goes straight to the backroom where the AC unit is and almost immediately returns, swinging his arms, saying, "It's not working," and then leaves. We look at one another in silence, and then laugh and then grow

quiet again because, come to think of it, it isn't that funny because we are still in the cafe with no air conditioning in the middle of summer.

And so we take the next logical step and soak hand towels in the bathroom sink and wrap them around our necks. But it isn't long before we decide that the hand towels aren't making a difference and when that happens, Tim, who is from Mindanao, who, if asked, will be sure to tell you, that he isn't afraid of anything—"Snakes, guns, police, bullies, none of it"—makes another call to the owner, begging his pardon, but it's really getting warm and the customers are complaining, saying it isn't right to run

a business this way and, sad to say, customers are leaving. Need to get the AC fixed, sir, and oh, one last thing, if you don't mind, if it gets too hot what about closing the café until the AC is repaired? Just a suggestion . . . Hello?"

"*Lah, lah*, it is only hot because it is the hottest part of the day. Everybody knows this. After four o'clock it will cool down. Just you wait and see. I'll send another man to make repairs. In the meantime stay open."

When maintenance man number two comes—brown shirt, with browner pants—he is carrying a red toolbox, which is a good sign, and he, like the first repair man, goes directly to the backroom. We smile at him, thinking,

now we are getting somewhere. But when he too quickly returns to the front, we, still wearing damp hand towels around our necks, turn as one to watch him and his red toolbox. He answers our silence with "Needs a new fan belt. Old one shredded. Don't have a new one with me, but don't worry, I'll get one." And, just like that, he walks out into the heat, which by now has become the café's heat, as well.

Once out the door, Tim curses loud enough for the two customers who care nothing about the heat to look up, but no worries because they don't speak Tagalog. Tim, seeing what's what, decides to curse some more, bigger and

louder, because he is doubly mad and has had enough of this, “*taposna*,” and so on. Some of us grin while the others step into the backroom.

As punishment to the owner and his do-nothing maintenance men, we ask the two customers if they think it is too warm in the café—just wondering—and while the one says yes, the other, some professor-looking sort, sockless, sporting a tiny diamond in his earlobe, shrugs and says, ‘It’s fine’, as if he’s doing us a favor. Tim is not happy with the survey’s results.

Maintenance men number one and two, like a kind of team, will come together the next day with a new fan belt

in hand, even holding it up to show us, as they march into the backroom and almost immediately come back out—all done. When the right buttons are pushed, the AC churns to life.

In four days, the newly fan-belted AC unit will have a new idea and decide to blow only hot air, and once Tim gets word of this, he has no choice but to call in sick.

Letter to My Future Agent

LILIA MAHFOUZ

Dear Sir or Madam,

A rumor concerning you has reached my ears. Whispers of your talent, your charisma, and a certain boldness in your professional choices have been circulating. Those fortunate enough to have crossed paths with you speak of the impression left by your sensitivity, by your sense of humor—always subtle and refined. They say you are wholly sincere and authentic. All these rumors lead me to an essential question: Why are you not my agent?

Allow me, for a moment, to marvel at the origins of your vocation. Did you know that in the time of Saint Louis, the forest agent was tasked with tending to bees, seeking out swarms, cultivating them, and harvesting, on behalf of a lord, both honey and wax? Is not your noble profession the modern incarnation

of this ancient guardian of nature? Are you not today an agent of “natures,” who watches over their swarm of actors, cultivating the art of guiding them, attuned to their every vibration, to draw forth the honey of their potential, all for the sake of a director? In this way, you act upon the actor like an atmospheric agent: a force, a substance that contributes to the manifestation of phenomena. Believe me, before understanding the principle of your existence, I harbored quite a grudge against all agents—Real estate agents, special agents, tax agents, and, since that wretched pandemic, every pathogenic agent as well.

So, I return to the essential question: Would you accept the role of being my . . . artistic agent?

Humorously yours,

Lilia

Their Son

ANDREJ BILOVSKY

A little too much booze,
a really large swallowing
a face that admits it's good,
then gulps down a little more
of the same
until he's an authority on such things
and makes girls think.
that puking on grass
can be as precise and effective
as a movie come-on line.

Passion is evil,
his mother told him.
Girls take off their clothes...
same thing.
He listened without expression,
saw what fire and sex
had done for her,
thought of it as justice
when he went from altar boy
to a replica of his old man.
Though he still took Holy Communion,
his mission had changed.

Two trembling chins,
one flowery altar,
the electric shock
of same bed—
that's why they have a kid
who goes out at night
and comes home late.
The marital eye no longer sees so well.
Where their offspring is concerned,
the black part just gets bigger.

Old Lady Trouble

MARK TULIN

At first, I thought she was a Miss Lonely Hearts—an old woman desperate for any kind of company, no matter how she got it. But I should have known she'd be trouble the first day she moved in. Her name was Chatty Kattinski, but I called her Chatty K. for short. She was from Tennessee and had once been married to a roofer named Leon, who fell off a roof and never recovered. Some say he ended his life so he wouldn't have to hear Chatty's voice anymore.

When she moved in, I didn't hear the movers, the moving van backing up, or any other outside noises, except for Chatty K.'s screeching voice echoing throughout the neighborhood. Even the birds, which were plentiful, were muted.

I initially thought her loudness was merely the stress of moving in, but it wasn't. Things only got worse. She was a killer, yet far from silent. She was shrewd. Instead of using a gun or knife, she unleashed deadly sounds from her mouth. Each utterance made me wince, like a punch to the jaw.

To the naked eye, she appears to be a ragtag old lady

who dyes her hair henna red. She's hunched over and limps like Quasimodo. When she bends down, she isn't wearing any panties, and it's not a pretty sight.

She has three little dogs, all yappers, named after the Three Stooges—Moe, Larry, and Curly. When someone arrives at the door, there's nonstop barking—whether it's the mailman, a friend, or a priest. They bark at strong winds, leaf blowers, and every time someone sneezes or coughs.

“If you guys don't shut up,” she says, “I'm taking you all to the dog pound.”

They would likely be happier there. At least, I would.

Chatty K. has a superpower. People think I'm crazy when I tell them that. What kind of power does an old woman who lives with three canine yappers have? Blowing you away with flatulence?

No one believes me when I say my neighbor is Satan. She draws you in, even if you intend to avoid her. You might be walking in the opposite direction, but she somehow makes eye contact, and bam! You're under her spell.

I've often wondered how a woman who is uglier than dirty dishwater can hold so much power over me. Her bright, piercing blue eyes immobilize anyone who makes eye contact with her. You feel like you're stuck in cement. You try to move, but she keeps discussing things you're not remotely interested in, like raw oysters, garden pests, or how late the mail gets delivered. You're glued to the spot until she wears down your resistance, and you confess all your secrets that you never intended to share. Then she spreads these intimate details around the neighborhood, causing your neighbors to look at you differently.

How many children do you have out of wedlock? Why is your

mother incarcerated? Does your wife have a FUPA? How frequently do you have a bowel movement each day?

She doesn't overlook any aspect of your personal life, even down to the color of your gonads. When she's done, it feels as though your life has been ransacked, leaving only crumbs for the crows to nibble on.

I considered moving to another state, but I didn't want an eighty-year-old Quasimodo with three yappers chasing me out of a neighborhood I loved. It would be different if it were the Hell's Angels with their revving motorcycles or

the Klan with burning crosses disturbing my peace.

I thought of a million ways to get rid of this woman. When she was out in the courtyard talking nonstop to her friend, I did what some 7-Elevens do when they don't want the homeless outside their establishments begging for money—blast operatic music. I tried Carmen, La Bohème, and Don Giovanni. I even cranked up the rock opera Tommy, but that psycho babbler knew the librettos of all the operas. It turns out she was a soprano in a Tennessee production of Die Fledermaus, or *The Revenge of the Bat*.

A friend suggested placing cold cuts under her

doormat. So, I waited until she left her house, snuck to her apartment, and placed a half-pound of Lebanon bologna under her mat. Unfortunately, her dogs found it and ate it, and the few ants that showed up were sprayed with Raid, ruining my plan.

There were so many illegal things I could have done, like light her apartment on fire, mail her letter bombs, hire a heavy-metal band to play under her window at night—but that would have been on my conscience, and I could never live with myself.

So I did what any good Christian would do: I prayed for a meteor to fall from the sky and land on her while

she was spraying her garden with pesticide, thus ending 24 months of torture. When praying failed, I turned to the dark side and began casting spells.

The first spell involved a life-sized voodoo doll of Chatty K. I stored it in the garage so my wife wouldn't find out. First, I repeated a black magic chant and then stuck foot-long needles into all her vital organs. I did this for a month, but it only resulted in me having chest pains, stomach cramps, and headaches. It seemed that my spells worked in reverse.

I realized I needed a witch doctor. After a month-long search, I found one. His name was Hermione Moskowitz,

a former meat slicer at a deli who became a witch doctor practitioner through a correspondence course. He came with the best recommendations.

“All I need is a lock of her hair and we're in business,” he said.

“That's going to be tough.”

But winning a war is never easy. So I found out where she gets her hair done, and offered her hairdresser a hundred dollars for a lock of Chatty K.'s hair. She gave me a disappointing response to my offer.

“She's bald. Not a single strand of hair on her head. Nada. Turns out she has a very serious form of alopecia.”

“Then why does she come to see you once a month?”

“I clean and dye her wig.”

I went back to the witch doctor and shared the bad news with him.

“How about an intimate garment?” he said. “Sneak into the laundry room. There must be something of hers in the dryer with a pubic hair. Collect ten strands and we’re in business.”

“No. That’s gross, Dr. Moskowitz. I’m not sneaking into the laundry room and going through her panties. The deal’s off!”

I accepted that Chatty K. would be my neighbor for as long as she lived, even though she seemed quite healthy, and I’d probably pass away before her. Once I let go of my attempts to get rid of her, she stopped bothering me. I managed to tune her out, just like my wife had done. I even greeted her when passing by and pet her three little yappers, who seemed to like me.

Months passed without any issues. But one afternoon, while I was doing the dishes, I noticed Chatty K. stretched out on a chaise longue completely naked. She was spread-

eagled right in front of me, lathering on some sunscreen. I could see every inch of her sagging, wrinkled flesh, browning in the noonday sun.

“This is terrible,” said my wife. “I hope she doesn’t get skin cancer.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “She uses tons of sunscreen. She acts like she’s Simonizing a car.”

“Hm. I think we’ve found a way to eliminate her,” my wife said, looking excited. “No, I’m not shooting her, Sara.”

“We’ll report her for indecent exposure. I’m sure there’s a law against it in Bakersfield.”

“Great idea. But we’ll need to take pictures as evidence. Sara, could you handle that?”

“No, I have to fold the laundry. You’re retired. You can take the photos.”

I typically took shots of flowers and birds, not old birds with hanging hoo-ha’s.

I contacted the Bakersfield city government and showed them the photos. The entire incident was leaked to social media, and the naked photos went viral. The city just gave Chatty K. a warning, but she became a social media star, a nudist influencer with millions of followers. She made tons of money in endorsements for sunscreen, appeared

on popular talk shows, and made enough bread to buy a beachfront property in Malibu.

A month after Chatty K. moved, I told my wife, “You know, Sara. I miss the old gal. It’s too quiet around here.”



While the Praetorians Were Hissing and Pissing at Everyone

ANTHONY ACRI

Thank you.

So, this was the year, I, true to my name, I threw a lily on the defiled ruins of Biden, warned of the Cassius in the steps, of black rock no doubt, and somehow while he festered and festooned, and became the last senator on roles paraded around by the angry plebs, I, while you all started with such hope of George Will telling us there was no fall of Rome or BBC fatsos honing to thrash Brunelleschi and writing off the junket, somehow I managed 32 separate and distinct acceptances of my work. Hither and yon, and with a roll that petered out a bit towards the holidays, though still got a healthy amount of please resend or keep submitting, sometimes I do, sometimes not, and with two on rescinded thoughts and taken back acceptances, for meaningfully nothing more political than redone penthouse pets in Benedictines decadence in white vestal dress, although when one thinks of it, that is political to Mother Hillary and her witciepoo coven. I added to my resume such things this year as anti Steven Colbert pieces, WILL THE MYSTRY GUEST SIGN IN PLEASE...?, one about semaphoring windmill weirdo Waltz, Boris to Kammila's Natasha Fatale, and who called that...? him showing his his wife's touched up x rays like a Youngman joke, now like zod in the phantom zone where the sanctimonious send their losers, why indeed old man Joe is a vicious old soul, and wont let his death fingers off the imprimatur lest he fall to putrid bits, THE LAST WALTZ, an only piece of the unmaking of the president I took down, or never even posted. And too, Ancient Romance, on the previous fest of Janus, the Etruscan myths that made the Apache give me a certificate of black haired brotherhood, and heavy metal sketches and cartoons, a pen and ink Penthouse pet called over sexed now as Joe Califano is hectored by the overfed, chicken delight lesbians who don't recall who or who didn't vote for Goldwater, Even a Capt Magnus, leaving MR S., the only thing of mine, never published. Fully.

A Role That Suits Me

GARY CAMPANELLA

Mad Dog tells me I should look for a job that suits me.

I say, “I’m literally selling suits.”

“You’re not great with people,” he says.

“Are you telling me I’m fired?”

Mad Dog sells suits on late night TV ads across Los Angeles. “Don’t be so sensitive. Go sell a fucking suit.”

On the way home I watch two homeless guys fight on the sidewalk. One is old and so it isn’t much of a fight.

The old guy is getting pushed around. He seems to be the

angrier one. He yells, “Your face is hurting me,” over and over, which I take as racist because he’s white, and the younger guy is black. But it might not be that. It might not even be what he’s saying, because I keep the windows of my Camry rolled up.

I’m stuck at a long light, and I watch him get pushed down three times. The last time, he’s pushed off the curb and he falls on the street next to my car. One of his shoes falls off. He gets up and is about to rush the younger guy again when he sees me watching. He picks up his shoe and begins hitting the hood of my car.

He yells, “Fuck You, Bozo!” The light changes. I edge

clear of him and speed off.

Nearing my apartment in the Valley, I stop at my Seven-Eleven for a pack of smokes. It's a routine stop. I smoke about ten cigarettes a day, and so I stop there every other day. The same guy is always at the register. He's Sikh, wears a turban, talks with his regulars. Being a regular, I say, "How's it going today?"

He stares at me, like he's a lizard, like he might or might not see me, says, "Anything else?"

I finally get home. I shake off the cheap suit I sell and wear, shake off the homeless guy's shoe and the Seven-Eleven guy's turban. I open my fridge and see condiments,

a bottle of Kombucha that's been there a month, two bottles of beer, pita bread, and some leftover chicken curry that's two days old. For a moment I see myself standing at the fridge trying to decide, like I'm detached from my body. *I wonder what I'll choose.* I pick the pita bread. I pop the lid off the butter container and rake the pita across it. I retreat to my couch to eat, wearing just my underwear, and wait for the phone to ring.

Still detached, I think how my life is like a movie set, a staged scene where I'm an extra, not read into the script, unaware of the plot.

I wait for my call from Naomi. The only thing I trust is my love for Naomi. It is unshakable and hopeless – an easy thing to recognize.

She texts me at 6:30, calls around seven, and comes over at eight. It's still hot. My windows are open to the courtyard, and I'm still only wearing my underwear. She sits next to me on the couch and puts my arm around her.

She says, "Your car is a piece of shit. I think you should buy a Jeep."

"I was thinking of buying a small pick-up truck."

"Don't buy a small pick-up truck." She wrinkles her

nose in disgust, which may or may not be mock disgust.

"Buy a Jeep."

"Why"

"Because Jeeps are more fun. And people who buy Jeeps look like fun people."

After she leaves, I think about that. A *fun* person.

She has a smile that makes me act like a clown. It's a smile that says *I want you to do what I want you to do, and you're going to do it because it will make me smile even more*. I can't resist it. It's a smile that works.

But I'm still thinking. Being a clown isn't the same as being a fun person. Being a clown might be being a sad person. A few days later, I buy a Jeep.

Several weeks later, Naomi calls and says, "I've made other plans tonight. Is that okay?"

"I guess. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why other plans?"

"(Sigh). Because it's Friday. (Pause). Because I want to have fun?"

"You can't have fun with me?"

"Not lately."

"But I have a Jeep."

There's collective tension in the air all summer. Will Trump be elected *again*? Los Angeles is hot and bothered. Bands of teenagers are looting Gucci stores, fancy dogs are getting dognapped, and everyone I know is having trouble with love. Lynn is leaving Terry, Scott is having an affair with a married woman, my uncle Steve is leaving my aunt, Mike doesn't see the point with Maria, and Naomi

can't make up her mind.

She's playing on both sides of a high fence, and I keep climbing over the fence to meet her where she's at, but when I plop down on the other side, she's already back on the previous side. I don't know how she does it.

Some days we're lovers. Some days we're friends. Some days she's in love with someone else. I'm off balance and losing my strength. I don't know why she's like this.

One night, after work, I drive to the edge of the Valley, up by Topanga where you can make out a few stars. I take off my tie and my cheap suit jacket and lie in the grass of an empty baseball field. The sprinklers go off and I drive

home in wet polyester. I smell like a wet chemical clown.

I'm dreading the election.

"I have a question."

Naomi shifts her curly hair so my arm, under her head, is no longer pulling it. She rests her head on my shoulder and looks at me with searching eyes. "I'm ready," she says.

I ask what I've been trying not to ask. "Do you want to stop seeing me?"

"Do *you* want to stop seeing *me*?"

"No. I mean maybe. I mean I don't know. I asked first.

Do *you* want to stop seeing *me*?”

“I think...No. I don’t. But I don’t know why you would still want to see me.”

I retrieve my arm, sit up. “You mean you’d rather if I didn’t want to see you.”

“No. I don’t mean that at all” (a flash of anger), then she pulls me back down and puts her head on my shoulder. “I mean, this must be hard for you.”

“Oh.”

Summer drags and wildfires start. The election’s finally getting close. It’s 110 degrees and I’m driving on Victory Boulevard, headed to work. The dashboard of my Jeep lights up like a Christmas tree and I pull to the shoulder. The Jeep is overheating. Not fun. I turn it off to cool it down. I watch the traffic whiz by on my left, and I’m back in someone else’s movie. On my right, a homeless guy writhes on the sidewalk, down and out. I think it’s the same guy I saw getting beat up a few weeks back. I’m sweating through my polyester, like I’m wearing a cheap suit, which I am. I look up at the Valley sky, bluer than

blue, and I imagine it's pure, beyond the touch of man,
which it's not.

While the Jeep cools, I think about cooler weather. I
think about the mountains. I think about digging my old
backpack out of the closet, loading it up with clothes
made of cotton and wool and driving to the Rocky
Mountains.

Summer rolls into Santa Ana Wind season and the
election happens. Everyone's alarmed. The holidays arrive,
never good news, but I'm selling more suits. Naomi flies

back East to see her family. She's gone a week, and we text
a few times but talk only once.

She says, "Hey, I miss you."

She says, "My parents are driving me crazy."

"They always drive you crazy."

She says, "Hey, I'm coming home on New Years Eve,
in the morning. I wanna do something fun for New Years
Eve."

"With me?"

"Yeah with you. Can you pick me up at LAX?"

The call ends and I'm confused. The call felt like the
fence was down, but that brings my suspicions up. How

long will the affection I heard in her voice last? Is this even better? Is it false hope? If “better” rose up and bit me in the ass, would I even recognize it?

I put on my clown suit and drive to work. I think, *I gotta get out of this rut*. I ruminate on this with my customers. They love it. I talk them into contingencies. I help them accessorize. I sell more suits than the Mad Dog cansalivate over.

He says, “What’s got into you, tiger?”

I say, “I’m a mad dog tiger selling motherfucking suits today.”

Back home I turn on my laptop and check my bank account. After setting aside rent money, I have about \$2000 left. I buy two plane tickets to Las Vegas, two nights at Mandalay Bay, and two tickets for a show. It’ll have to be enough. I’m pushing all in.

Traffic to LAX will be crazy, so I leave two hours early and take surface streets. Passing Forest Lawn, toward Barham, I buy flowers from a Mexican girl on the side of the road. It’s cool and windy and I’m the only one

stopping, so I ask her, “If you were landing at the airport and a guy you sometimes like picks you up, and he has your flowers, and he says, ‘I love you and I want to be with you and I’m not gonna pretend I’m okay with us not being together. Not anymore.’ Would you believe him?”

She says, “I would believe him if he had *two* bouquets.”

“Fair enough. I’ll take *two* more, then. Three total.

How’s that?”

As she’s making change and I’m juggling armfuls of flowers, I ask, “Tell me this. If that same person also said, ‘we are not leaving the airport. We are instead going back into the terminal and flying to Vegas to celebrate

New Years Eve in a fancy hotel,’ would you go with that person?”

She hands me my change and says, “If it were you, I would.”

I stuff my change into my otherwise empty pocket.

“I’m good with that.”



South Figueroa opens its vein
on the periphery of my arrival.

I am a boybody.
Through my flesh it rains artificial.
Value is measured by what remains.
The limbs, the stick-ins.
I persist through the ways one outs.

Having slept the best night of my life on a bus,
I sip/run high off vending machine coffee,
watch girls work the where I have never been.
Such power—
legs, boots, asses—strut.
God blesses them.
Indeed, but not me.

Still in my observing
I longed for her,
drifted towards the near Compton address
that I bled/fucked to get.
A story I could see her smiling at.

I find a weekly in the area
ran by a depression-era born Angeleno.
Son, I need identification.
“I ain’t got none.”
What am I supposed to do with you?
“Give me a room.”

I hand over near double the rate.
A key slides towards my fingers.
I scribble Nicholas Vitalis in the registry.

-\$300

ANDREW ROMANELLI

~

I stake out the spot
with a honey bun and a walk
I've been learning from the girls.

No sign.

I wander up to the clubs
when the freaks come out.
Maybe she dances inside one of them.

I work that walk I have been watching.
I collect eyes late into the night.
LA lala I cannot hear her voice
in all this drowning of men.

Days I may not eat,
more and more

I see a resemblance
in the everywhere women.

I talk to dancers,
bouncers,
past neighbors.
They all lead me to Imperial.

I hitch a man on 120th
Do it for less than ever I would.

Blowie for a couple Jacksons.

ANDREW ROMANELLI

\$40

~

Finding you is certain death.
Imperial was veracious,
an empty lot.

You slip ugly into the back
of one of them new Cadillacs,
styled in the betrayal of our age.

I think you look
right at me
as you exit,
wiping your lips.

You don't see me.
Maybe I don't see you.

As if in each other
only
are we granted sight.

I follow you
back to a room
you are renting.
Small quake split
line looking worse
than mine.

I parade outside
as never
you have taught me.
I work your street,
the only boy.

A bank
robbers into my body.
I get spent in a spree.

James Dean
once sang
O Sole Mio
outside a house
of detention
for women.

It's when
I make
the spot,
the money
becomes me/you-you
finally, you.

Call me by a name
I have not held in years.
One where in its history,
I have aged a decade soul.

You interrupt a Lexus I am bent into:
I told you never streets!
I become relived,
the Lexus speeds off not getting off.
We are eye to eye now, protesting
as lone silence between lost angels.

\$100 x 9
+
\$75
+
\$80

ANDREW ROMANELLI

I remember the two of you joking
about Hitler having a junk car lot
somewhere outside Downey. You both
thought the idea of him surviving,
living on after the war, really funny.
You both had beers, and bellies, and
strange fondness for Rommel too as
though the car lot were an extension of
North African deserts. Junkyard patrolled
by Princess and by Baron. Dobermans
trained for blood. Teeth first. Like
Wiki pages. Mercury yellow room
light. You two standing over us as
the narrator reminded of the docu-show's
name . . . The World at War. Was.
Had been. I got hung up on my past
tense and by those who doubt a female
presidency simply sinking below
the surface, drifting off, sleep.

Mercury Yellow

SEAN J MAHONEY

What page is this now . . . this inflection
Point? This espionage burrows
around into 2024. Pressure building.
White infanticide, global matricide,
institutional suicide. Taken for a ride.
Dark side, darker side, darkest side . . .



The title of this work of fiction is

A CHANCE FOR HEAVEN
OR,
12 SHORT STORIES
ABOUT THE
OLYMPICS

by Chris Okum



G. Gordon Liddy addresses the crowd at the opening ceremonies of the Olympics: “It is not necessary for me to strengthen the fame of the United States of America, far less that of the Olympic Team, through athletic triumphs. He who is undertaking such great physical and spiritual tasks as we are and is so determined to carry them through can find his fairest memorial only in peace. But this Communism, which as we learned only a few years ago intends to equip its army so that it may with violence, if necessary, open the gate to revolution amongst other peoples, this Communism should know that before the gates of America stands the American military. I believe that as an American I appear in the eyes of many liberals as only a wild man. But as a wild man I still believe myself to be a better American, in any event a more sensible one, than they. It is with grave anxiety that I see the possibility in America of some such development as this: moral relativism may continuously disintegrate the heartland of the great country, may make the good people who live there internally ever more uncertain in their judgment of the dangers which confront them, may above all cripple all power for resolute resistance. Liberalism and its attendant ideologies are the canal through which Communism lets its poisons flow into the separate people and lets them work there long enough for these infections to lead to a crippling of intelligence and of the force of resistance.”

Steve's coach held the gold medal up to the harsh fluorescent lights of the locker room and asked Steve if he had called anyone in his family to let them know that he had won the race. Steve said he hadn't. When his coach pressed him as to why he hadn't told his family yet, Steve said, "Well, the only person to notify is my mum. And she won't be impressed. She thinks I made the wrong decision. She thinks I should have become a vascular surgeon. If I tell her that I've won a gold medal all she'll do is say, 'Well, that's fine, darling, but now that you've won this useless medal thingy what are you going to do with the rest of your life?' I know that's what she's going to say if I call her, and I simply have no interest in hearing that right now." Steve's coach put his arm around Steve, held the medal up to the lights again, and said, "I hope there's at least a little real gold in there." Steve nodded and let out a tiny burp. Steve's coach handed back the gold medal to Steve and walked out of the locker room. Steve sat there, his breath still not completely caught, listening to two South African shot putters who stood at the other end of the locker room trading off-color jokes about the continual imprisonment and torture of Nelson Mandela.





When asked by some network producers to supply them with a biography so a short, sharp profile piece could be created for the closing night ceremonies, the female gold medal winner in the javelin, Tessa Sanderson, said this: “It’s a rather typical story, post-Blitz, set in a narrow council estate flat, probably in the living room or the kitchen, and it features at most three characters, that is, me, my mum, and my sister. If you’re going to tell my story you should probably skip the preliminaries and start in medias res using a first-person narrator—even though a second person narrator would be preferable—to bring across a sense of immediacy to what I would call rather common events and circumstances. Me and my family, see, we always spoke, and still speak, in flat, unadorned language that can come across as highly stylized due to the intimate conditions which led to a kind of negative shorthand. My mom was

always very bored and barely conscious of how she got to where she was. We lived on top of each other, and yet this did not connect us in a very honest and unshakeable way, because the only real connection we had was that we were all stuck in the same bloody situation. When I wasn't training, I was usually doing chores like washing the dishes or I wasn't doing anything, and by that I mean I was watching television. This allowed me to concentrate on the small things, the little disturbances in my form and conditioning, and it kept the dialogue between me and my family to a minimum, because when you're watching the telly you really don't want to be thinking about anything more than is absolutely necessary, now do you? The space between the non-action of my domestic surroundings and cacophonous blur of the event that I just won, well you would think it could be filled with some kind of uplifting narration about obstacles overcome and the persistence of the human spirit, but it's actually filled with nothing more than some one-liners from my coach and teammates, stuff you'd hear on a sitcom, banal talk that's usually followed by that canned laughter your type seems to love so much. My life has been terse, never witty, vaguely ominous in that if I couldn't succeed at the javelin then I was probably going to fail at everything else I attempted, and yet everything seems in retrospect to have moved toward the inevitable conclusion of my total victory. My story is rarely told in an admirable way, yet I'm sure they way you'll tell it the whole thing will be tidily constructed, avoiding the bits of nastiness that your audience secretly wishes for."

Greg Louganis stood next to the Olympic-sized swimming pool at David Geffen's house, sipping from a tall, sweaty, slim glass of Perrier and lime, and greeted the well-wishers as they sidled up to him slowly and consistently to congratulate him on his winning two diving gold medals, when, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Dack Rambo—who played J.R. Ewing's cousin Jack Ewing on Dallas—came up to Louganis, put his hands on Louganis' hips, leaned in, and shoved his tongue down Louganis' throat. "I want you," said Rambo as he pulled away, "to come with me to the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens tomorrow, and I won't take no for an answer." Louganis said yes, and then, in the interim between Rambo asking him to go to the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens and Rambo picking him up to take him to the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens,



Louganis' face broke out with the worst case of cystic acne he'd had since he was a teenager, a result, no doubt, of the stress and tension of the Olympics finally being released into his system. Louganis did his best to cover his face with make-up, but he feared that in the harsh sunlight of the Pasadena summer afternoon that his concealer would tint his face a strange shade of pale, which it did, forcing Louganis to avoid Rambo's direct and intense gaze, and engendering a kind of behavior—jittery, curt, and evasive—he hadn't engaged in since the night he acted as a beard for Jamie Crotzin at the Valhalla High Prom. At the end of the date Rambo asked Louganis if he was okay, to which Louganis said, "Yes, why, do I not seem okay? I'm just a little tired, okay? It's been a long four years, okay?" Rambo told Louganis he understood completely and then drove the two of them back into Los Angeles proper, where Louganis was dropped off and promised by Rambo that they would see each other again, soon, which Louganis had a feeling was a lie, and which proved, in the long run, to be exactly that.



After leading the US men's gymnastics team to a gold medal in the team competition for the first and only time in Olympics history, Mitch Gaylord obtained official representation from one of the top talent agencies in Hollywood and was immediately sent out to audition for the role in *Weird Science* that would eventually go to Robert Rusler. When asked by his agent how the audition went, Gaylord said, "I think the casting director insulted me." Gaylord's agent asked what the casting director said, and Gaylord said, "She said, 'You remind me of a Theremin.' I laughed because I thought she was trying to be funny, but I don't think she was. I don't know. I don't know what a Theremin is. What's a Theremin?" Mitch's agent told him not to worry about it, that it was probably not an insult but a kind of smarty-pants compliment, but what Mitch's agent didn't tell Mitch was that he had no idea what a Theremin was either.

Most people cannot scream and perform another action at the same time, but Ines could. She could scream while she was scrambling eggs. She could scream while she was driving. She could scream while she was waiting tables (which was what she was doing when she wasn't in training). She could scream while folding her clothes fresh from the dryer. She could scream while she was covering balloons in papier-mache and hanging them above her bed. She could scream while talking on the phone to her mother. She could scream while she was knitting. And she could scream while she was swimming the 400 meter freestyle. Her scream had nothing to do with terror and was totally disconnected from the normal circumstances in which a scream did in fact connote terror. When asked why she was always screaming, Ines said, "I scream because if I don't, I'll scream."





Sharunas was afraid that winning the Gold Medal was going to be an event from which he would not recover. He did not want to look back on the Games as the highlight of his brief existence. To live with the knowledge that his better days were at his back filled him with a sense of dread so acute and dizzying that the only way to relieve the psychic pain was to destroy the past before it happened. An hour before tip-off Sharunas told the coaching staff he was injured. He pointed at the back of his leg with

both index fingers, at the same time. He hobbled around the locker room with a pronounced limp and indicated he was in tremendous pain by wincing repetitively. He asked for anti-inflammatory medication, as well as muscle relaxers, and received both in amounts both generous and possibly negligent. The game was a blur. Sharunas could not remember any plays and improvised in ways that made no sense. He was taken out at the end of the first half and played sparsely in the second. The team lost, settled for Silver, and considered the entire experience a wash. No one blamed Sharunas except for the Minister of the Interior, who opened a file on the curiously disappointing Power Forward the minute the game ended. Sharunas spent the next nine years harassed and hounded by men wearing pointy black shoes. Then, suddenly, the whole charade was over. Sharunas reflected on what he had done in 1980 and how the authorities had reacted and how miserable his life had been since and felt overcome with a sense of tranquility. There were no good old days, at least not for him. According to this logic the best was yet to come. Sharunas poured himself a glass of vodka and made a silent toast to himself.

She said, “When did they let you out?” He said, “Last week.” She said, “You’re not supposed to come within a hundred feet of me.” He said, “I’m not within a hundred feet of you. I’m miles away. Can I see you?” She said, “How could you ask me such a question, Sven?” He said, “You’re all I thought about while I was away.” She said, “The reason you were away is because I was all you thought about.” He said, “But now I’m not away anymore. Now I’m back. I said good-bye to Moscow.” She said, “I don’t want you to think about me anymore.” He said, “How can I stop doing that? You know that’s impossible.” She said, “They shouldn’t have let you out. You’re still not well.” He said, “I’ll never be well, my sweet Sabine, as long as I can’t have you.” She said, “But you can’t have me. You will never have me.” He said, “The doctors asked me if I ever thought of you, and I told them no, and I said it with a very straight face. I found that as long as you say things with a straight



face you can pretty much say anything. And people will believe you.” She said, “If you try and contact me again I will call the police.” He said, “You can call the police. Go ahead. I don’t mind.” She said, “They’ll send you back. And then you’ll really truly never be allowed to compete ever again.” He said, “They can send me back. I don’t mind.” She said, “Then why did you want to be let out in the first place?” He said, “Because I wanted you to know that I was out. I wanted to hear how you would react to this news.” She said, “I’m not reacting very well. And maybe that’s what you really wanted, for me to be afraid of you again.” He said, “Yes, that’s exactly what I wanted. See, no one gets me like you do. You understand everything about me. My every intention is transparent to you and this is what I have always found so exciting. You are my soulmate.” She said, “I’m not your soulmate.” He said, “If you are not my soulmate, Sabine, then there is no such thing as a soul.”



East Germany's Dietmar Lorenz being interviewed after winning the gold medal in judo (men's open): "Let me tell you about the Wall. I love the Wall. If it was up to me it would be taller, so tall that you wouldn't be able to see what's on the other side. Who wants to look at what's on the other side? I don't want to see, not because I don't want to be reminded of what I don't have, but because I don't want to be reminded of what they think it is that I want. I don't want what they are offering. I have everything I need. I have a shitty car and a shitty apartment and a shitty wife and a couple of shitty kids and a shitty job and I drink a lot of shitty booze and I eat a lot of shitty food and then I sleep in a shitty bed and have shitty dreams and I wake up and take a shitty shower and then I have a cup of shitty coffee and go the shitty building where I sit in a shitty chair and stare at a shitty screen all day and do shitty work for shitty people. The other side of the Wall is filled with nothing but more shitty things. The people on the other side of the Wall

think that what they have is so much better than what we have, but the only difference is that we only have to choose from one kind of shitty, while they have to choose from many kinds of shitty, so many kinds you can't even count. I hope the Wall never comes down. If the Wall comes down I will go outside and I will not celebrate. I will cry. I can see myself crying at the place where the Wall used to be and I can see myself being interviewed by someone from the television and I can see them asking me why I'm crying and I can see myself telling them that the reason I am crying is because I want the Wall to be put back up. Because the Wall makes me feel safe, and to me this is a very underrated value in our society. I don't like to feel unsafe. If I feel unsafe, I cannot perform my role as it pertains to my day-to-day responsibilities. Freedom is chaos. I don't need that much room to move around. I'm fine right here, thank you."

He was as helpless as meat on a table, and it seemed like a strong statement about our inhumanity to one another. But the longer one looked at his body, face down on the canvas, buttocks lightly arching upwards towards the ceiling of the area, blood splattered everywhere in what looked like purposeful streaks, the more one was likely to conclude that he did not just represent inhumanity, but embody it, and that it was the audience who were the true victims of this localized massacre against a fellow human being. His wife was a member of the audience, and she stood there, bent forwards, her hands stuck to the side of his face, her breasts crumpled underneath her t-shirt like two wet paper bags hung from outdoor hooks so that they could be dried and re-used later. As the minutes wore on, and he remained flattened, his complexion turning waxy and blue, his wife, with her scrunched bosoms, seemed more and more like a metaphor, the product of a warped deistic will which stood outside of human activity and refused to reward the good in people. Her husband had always been nice to animals and children, and for this he had been punched into a rutabaga.





The routine demanded that Romi look inside herself and watch herself perform the routine while she was performing the routine, as if she was copying what she was doing after she had already done it, even though everything was happening as it was happening, not before, and not after. She described it to herself as being a passenger in her own body, and she was comfortable with this feeling of disassociation, of her body being separate from her and dragging around the consciousness of the person who identified herself as Romi, just as long as what she saw when she looked at her mindscreen were images of herself doing what needed to be done before it needed to be done. See Romi run. See Romi back flip. See Romi front handspring. See Romi round off. As long as she saw herself doing it before she did it, she could do it. And then something happened. She stopped seeing herself when she looked inside herself and instead saw three women in a minimally furnished country house. One of the women was in bed, wearing a white nightgown, and had blood coming out of her mouth. Romi was about to attempt and split leap and instead of seeing herself perform a split

leap she saw a woman standing in front of a dirty window, looking out of the window with an expression she could not read. Romi could not see herself anymore, only these strange women doing whatever it was they were doing, and it felt to Romi like she had gone blind. When she stopped in the corner of the floor, she raised her hands and looked up at the crowd. She could clearly see the crowd, but she could not see herself. Not outside or inside. She encouraged herself to enter deeply into the mind of herself, but all she could see were people who were distinctly not herself, with one of them saying, “It is early Monday morning and I am in pain.” But it was not early Monday morning, it was Saturday evening, and Romi was not in pain, she was numb. Romi closed her eyes and prepared to perform the last movement of her routine. At first all she saw was pitch darkness, but then the black slowly faded into the image of a woman trying to seduce a man who looked like a country doctor. Romi had no idea where these images were coming from, and she started to panic. She could not perform unless she saw herself performing. And now all she could see were scenes from the lives of three women who had nothing to do with her. She could not see the world as she imagined it, and the world as she imagined it consisted of nothing more than her, Romi, performing a floor routine. She was seeing the world as someone else imagined it, and she had no idea who that person could be. Romi had to do a back handspring and all she could see was a beautiful older woman in a red dress touching her earlobe. Then everything went red. Romi began to execute the back handspring and her mind faded from the image of the woman into a field of intense red, as if she had closed her eyelids against harsh daylight. In mid-air, Romi had no idea how she was going to stick her landing. All she knew was that she could no longer find herself within herself. All she knew was that she had been hijacked.

Konrad Becker addresses the crowd at the closing ceremonies of the Olympics: “Connectivity does not lead to greater concurrence but to evidence for difference, opposition, and conflict. As complexity spreads and uncertainty gives rise to a longing for simplicity and stability, velocity and volatility of societies increase: ‘all that is solid, melts into thin air.’ Based on processes of globalization and the rise of post-industrial network culture, fundamentalism is just the flipside of postmodernism. To keep people calm and have them accept their fate, top social strata employ myth to justify inequality and make their power appear given. Kleptocracies invest into religious ideology to legitimize large-scale transfer of wealth to self-styled elites and redistribute some of the tribute in populist ways.”



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