

MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 15 ISSUE 4
THE VALLEY REVIEW

RAW



Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

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salutations from the editor

Welcome to the “Raw” issue, which is not named after esteemed author of Schrödinger’s Cat and otherwise notorious oddball, Robert Anton Wilson, but rather is an attempt to capture our current mood. I mean...how are you feeling? A bit raw? Quite understandable between dealing with the combined effects of climate crisis, Kyle Rittenhouse inexplicably walking free, a deadly virus sweeping the globe, and president #45 still managing to evade arrest (and somehow remain in the zeitgeist!?) Sheesh, that makes me raw -Mark) And on top of all that...another high school shooting? It’s a lot.

One would have to be tougher than rawhide to deal with it all. Still, there’s another side to raw. Think back to fall, when perhaps you were in an orchard, maybe one with a sculpture garden and you ate an apple, fresh from the tree. Or maybe there was a charcuterie platter at your Thanksgiving dinner, complete with prosciutto and Serrano ham? Perhaps you enjoyed an aperitif of oysters and champagne. Raw can be delicious.

Then there’s the matter of raw talent, of which you will encounter plenty in these pages. Raw has many facets, thankfully.

At the Cirque, Ex-Temper and Toxic Friends will heal all of our nerves with the raw power of rock. Don your raw silk and join me there. (Or keep your ears out for a future podcast episode, featuring this audio).

Rawly yours, besos y abrazos,
Elizabeth

cornucopia

George McDermott

So we are the men the ones
who plow the earth and sow the grain
and pray for harvest

day after day
we practice creation
watching the sun and the sky
for omens of fertility
tilling and testing the soil
plowing and sowing we never think
to ask the women
who keep their secrets hidden away

who can raise the sand and the soil
to their lips and touch the humid mysteries
of the ancient places who carry the seasons
who measure their lives with the moon



broken sonnet

George McDermott

Let's make a date right now, today, for the night
of the day our marriage ends. Let's plan to go
dancing. Let's give our bodies a chance to remember
how well they fit together. No anger. Instead,

let's spend our final moments recalling the scent
of your hair against my cheek, the feel of my arm
around your waist, the sound of our laughter in time
with the music. Let's memorize the faces that once

were the first and the last we saw every day. And then
the taste of our lips at evening's end—
a wistful kiss to say goodbye,
not merely goodnight.

Let's take an hour or two to remember a time
when our hearts were soft, were close enough to rhyme.



coming home after a long day of capitalism

Hunter Hodkinson

6

He scrapes
the bloody mess
the day made me
up from the street
corner,
drags me home
and pieces me back
together.
Though nothing
fully patches the leaks
of youthful existentialism,
I appreciate
his brandy efforts
to plug my eyes
with vintage corks
unearthed from
obscure thrift stores.
He's excellent
at containing
the drink
society wants:
my surrender brew.
He collects the drops
that escape
in tea cups
and flushes them
down the sink pipe
before anyone sees.

Succumbing is a myth,
frazzled brick dust
beaten out of
the gentrificationless
brownstones that refuse
to fall and bury
their history
in rubble.
Rattled and roach infested,
my soul will not
be cleaned.
Keep your duster
fingers
and vacuum
phalanges
in your pockets,
I am in no need
or want of cleansing.
I see things exactly
the way they are,
to my bane,
sure,
but true,
lucid
sabotage.



best regards

Hunter Hodkinson

The only things I have in my
apartment are water,
condoms
and 2 year aged cheese.
My AC fell out of my window
this morning
and murdered a bicycle.
I woke up to the smell of hot trash
in the summer breeze.
I turned on my lamp and peered
out into the great wasteland
and frowned.
I looked down at the sidewalk
eight stories below
and saw people
moving like water around boulder,
the machinery catastrophe, unfazed.
A woman shouted
“whos gonna pay for my fucking bike?”
I said I would
and dropped a twenty out the window.
I watched it flutter
to her flipflop feet.
“This won’t even cover it!”
“It’s all I got.”
I shut the window
and collapsed back into
bed.



mysteries of luck

John Davis

as if the water and Doug and I
had not met as if the river
had not swamped the canoe
and we had not rolled
over and the rushing water had not
pinned canoe and us against the rock
the rock speckled-yellow the rock
as stout as Buddha breathing in the world
through his senses
as if luck had not swept us
around the rock in water that pounded down our bodies
the silt water the cool water the white water
as if we had not breathed in

the darkness of drowning as if drowning
like a bully had not held us down
and swollen our lungs with water
the color of weak green tea
bully of the Sandy River
bully of swift currents
bully who broke the spine of an aluminum canoe
as if he had not let us go
had not kicked us in the ass to shore
and we had not thanked him
for losing at luck
we would not be here helping

a father-son duo
in tennis shoes descend a glacier
that feeds the currents of rivers
that bully a landscape we would not
give them Advil to bring on luck
we would not give them four hands
carry their heavy packs
we would see them slide down the glacier
that melts into streams into rivers
with water the color of tea
down around boulders where bullies
roll luck in their fingers





raw - the body -3
Andrea Fonseca

a connecticut valley family

Peter Tacy

I.

We are thick on the ground, my kinfolk here.
Sometimes that fact can be dismissed.
The interstate highway pays no heed
to this history, or much else. Indeed,
I know that there's a growing list
of all we no longer hold as dear...

We shaped this region, though. Look, today,
at the little towns — the shrinking villages
of New England. It's not just the end
of farming I consider. Even now some depend
on land that smiles, and can afford the wages
that present-day farmers have to pay.

But upcountry, land's grown in. The woods
that natives cherished are left untended. The mills
lie vacant, awaiting wreckers, or a fire.
All these once lured folks who could aspire
toward a better life: lured to this valley, to these hills,
to make, or grow, a nation's goods.

My ancestors were much the same
as many others. They began their trip in flight
from danger...but then they made real choices.
I can imagine I hear their voices,
speaking of their dreams, claiming the right
to live anew, regardless of whence they came.

And I might tell you what I know of each, yet
does it really matter? Some built wood
barns of a special kind, to store tobacco and dry
the leaves; elegant, high-tech barns; but why
parse what Joe or Uncle Lewis did — as if we could
learn more from a barn than we can get
from what they left: which is we ourselves, alive.
But the first-arrivers are not entirely gone;
they've endowed us with a presence worth exploring.
It's in ourselves, a legacy still imploring
to be embraced. It tells us that we are not alone;
that we too can live anew, if we risk, and strive.

II.

The early few have passed. Here and there, a stone
marks one who ventured, lived, and died.
Road names recall their world, now lost —
Poor Farm Road, a lurking ghost
of civic shame; King Street, a mark of ancient pride.
School Street remains, though the school is gone.

The way to touch what's left will mandate walking.
Park your car, come here, and stroll with me.
We need to find a smaller, closer scale
of view, to comprehend in real detail
the intimate, enduring sort of legacy
that remains. If you choose, it's for the taking.

Visitor, step gently on this hallowed ground,
where nothing special happened, except lives led
by those content to spend their numbered days
in love of kin; in toil; and in the hopeful ways
that shaped connection to what some are said
to consider not living time, but time profound.

It might be best, right now, to sit upon this wall
and not be bothered by looking where we walk.
What we are seeking is in fact so near to hand
that we can see it from this result of clearing land...
but you've no need for my too-rambling talk.
What remains, remains. In us. And it informs us all.



nosings with Nicola Thomis

You didn't leave much when you slipped into the next room. It was spring, and the air was full of the itchy scent of daffodils, irritating with their optimism. Bright yellow flowers nodding their heads on the centre of the roundabout as if they knew something I didn't.

The walls of your house held their breath as I helped mum make breakfast we didn't taste, drinking tea the colour of puddles, as the light dimmed from everything. Even the dogs seemed subdued as we walked them around grey fields. I wondered if they could smell our sadness. Did they even know you were missing? When would the scent of you start to fade? I wanted to explain to them so they didn't have to wonder, but words weren't enough.

After breakfast (or was it lunch?) I took the key from its hook and struck out across damp lawns to your shed. A lone daffodil stood sentinel at the side of the door. As I yanked it open and peered inside its scent mingled with the scent of your place. Your workroom. The place synonymous with you even before all this.

I stood and inhaled as the door swung silently shut behind me. When had you last been here? Yesterday? The day before? I tried to catch you at the edge of my consciousness but I could no longer feel.

The creosote, warm and sharp rolled on the warming spring air, tumbling to enfold me and bringing with it the scent of the wood stacked in the corner; a jumble of different lengths, shapes, sizes. A jumble to anyone else but to you a set of answers to a problem you hadn't yet met. The dry baritone rumble of mahogany, the blonde, sappiness of pine, and the darker, muskier green of oak.

A metallic fragrance slithered forward, snaking on the wave that the warm wood had brought. It curled silvery around my ankles, then legs, twining its way upwards into my brain. The metal was cool, unfriendly at first. It spoke of edges and angles and the teeth of winter, but it warmed slowly into a familiar murmur. It was the scent of the tools that lined the walls. Tools struck dumb now, perhaps forever. Now that I had noticed it, the smell of metal was everywhere. Quietly rusting bolts in little heaps on the table, the vice standing half open, a hacksaw you had put down never to return to its allotted hook on the wall.

I picked up a screwdriver. Such a humble thing. And as my palm warmed the wooden handle an oily scent crept from it and imprinted itself on my skin. I'd sniff it again later like I was trying to memorise the smell and I wouldn't want to wash it off. The oil was in parts earthy and sweet, greasy, old. It smelled like an artefact, like something that had dragged itself from deep within the soil to peek at daylight one last time. I wanted to smell the scent of your hands as you made the tools talk. I knew it would smell of the contentment of honest work, of skill and satisfaction.

In the slanted sunlight from the tiny window, dust motes danced in the weak rays. Their scent the anticipation of radiators turned on on the first cold evening of the season. Away, deep in the shadows at the back of the shed, behind all the wood you had so carefully stacked, there was an animalic warmth that spoke of fur perhaps, no, not fur, feathers. It too had a dusty sweetness, a close cosiness. The wren that you had patiently tolerated the previous year was building a

new nest in the quietest corner, weaving strands of mare's tail with saxifrage into apple-twig scaffolding. Her nest smelled of the future you wouldn't see. Who knew, when we had talked of her in the months before, that the wren would out live you?

I won't remember the scent of your last days. Of hospitals, antiseptic, blood and the daffodils on the roundabouts. I won't remember the scent of you in your polyester pyjamas holding tea in a plastic cup nor the scent of my own, salty tears. Instead, I will remember you here, in the warmth, amongst the wood and the tools you loved so much, with the pile of dog biscuits you'd taken from a pocket and dropped on the paint-stained worktop, the random bits of string and electrical cable you were saving for "just in case". In and amongst the oil and the grime, the earth and the dust. The fading scent of your life just quietly slipping into the next room.



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provincetown, ma
Kim Keough

raw

Jane Yolen

Nothing is so raw as the human heart.
Even if it is par-boiled with bitterness,
or over-seasoned with rue.
Even if it has charred a bit
from an argument,
or is spattered with bile
spit put of the mouth
so recently kissed.
Even then, it is as fresh and raw
as the moment its tiny body
streamed out of mother,
screaming into the sun
of that very first day.



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raw

Peter Tacy

The word has been an adjective forever; and, too, its pejorative snootiness reminds us that We are not so uncouth as – well, Thee.

'Twas ever so, throughout the years when looking down upon one's peers seemed not just wise, but apposite; whoever you are, I'm opposite.

Those hairy fellows who lived in caves ate anything, cooked or not; one who craves too urgently to put meat in pot is *low*. Thus, our lexical polyglot

Argot -- English -- girds us for a fight: whatever way we say it, if we might disdain a Saxon by saying *hraw*, or a Dutchman as being *raauw* –

Or let a Greek remind us that a missing sound — a privative kappa — linguists found links their word for *raw* to *crude* via Rome; the meaning remains, closer to home:

If you're often lewd, and sometimes crude,
Your social flaw is being *raw*.



nothing wrong with mick

David Allen Downs

Mick's only goal was to *get on the mental* so's he could provide for his daughter.

He began using heroin in his early teens, Mick reported. He probably went through dozens of homeless episodes before finally landing at Riverside Commons, supportive housing.

Though only in his mid-to-late thirties, Mick had but a few teeth left in his head. He used a cane to get around, due to his opioid-associated Osteoporosis (bone loss). Mick's chronic pain gave him the countenance of an old man.

As it was the case worker's job to do so, Kobalt Lodge began his engagement with his client, Mick, by bringing up goals.

"So Mick, every six months or so you and I will sit down and try and think of some goals you might like to achieve, during your stay here at Riverside Commons. Off the top of your head, can you think of any goals you're working on right now, or would like to work on in the near future?"

Sitting at Lodge's desk, Mick looked down at the floor, tapping his cane gently on the carpet.

"No. Not really," he said. "I mean, all I really want is to get on the mental so my little girl will be taken care of after I'm gone."

"By 'getting on the mental,' are you saying, Mick, that you'd like to apply for Social Security Disability, and that if you were found disabled then your daughter would receive survivor's benefits?"

"Yeah," confirmed Mick. With some difficulty and a few sharp stabs of pain, the client reached into his back pocket and pulled from his wallet a somewhat faded snapshot. A little girl with long brown hair and a pouty face in a frilly pink party dress stood posing for the camera. Head tilted, her eyes squinted in the bright sunlight, and in her hand she held a red balloon.

Mick was semi-literate (and this was around twenty years ago, back when everything was still done on paper). So he and Lodge worked very closely together, gathering documentation, making sure appointments were kept, and completing and submitting a sizable number of forms, many with tedious, repetitive questions the case worker would try and get Mick to answer, like, *Prior to your disability, at your typical job how many hours a day did you spend sitting, standing, walking, bending, stretching, kneeling, lifting, pushing?:*

<u># of Hours</u>	<u>#of Hours</u>
___ <i>Sitting</i>	___ <i>Bending</i>
___ <i>Standing</i>	___ <i>Stretching</i>
___ <i>Walking</i>	___ <i>Kneeling</i>
___ <i>Lifting</i>	___ <i>Pushing</i>

Mick’s medical and mental health providers showed no hesitancy in giving their opinions that Mick, over the long haul, was more than likely not going to be capable of gainful employment. Their opinions were based on his medical and mental health, not on his substance use.

Lodge recalls the day he drove Mick to the courthouse in Fort Hoop. The case worker had found a disability attorney who was actually prepared, and did a good job representing Mick. Attorney Shapiro led Mick and Lodge out of the courtroom at the end of the hearing and brought them to a quiet, empty stairwell where they could talk.

“Okay,” he said to Mick, “I think that went very well. I’ve been through enough of these that I can almost assure you the judge is going to rule in your favor.”

Mick’s eyes widened and his facial expression softened. A few years seemed to wash away.

It’s always strange for Lodge to watch a person become elated when somebody declares them disabled. It’s a hard thing to wrap one’s head around.

Attorney Shapiro instructed client and case worker on what to expect next: To be watching the mail for word of the judge’s official decision, and to be patient. Because Mick had a work history, he’d be receiving two checks (assuming of course the attorney was correct in his observation). One check would be the regular monthly payment Mick would be receiving for the rest of his natural born days. The other would be the retroactive payment, the amount of which would be determined by the court’s estimation of approximately when Mick’s disability began. It’s a frightening thing for a case worker; when an unstable client is suddenly standing there holding a twenty-or-thirty-thousand-dollar check in their hands. Many bad things can happen, very quickly, with that kind of money.

“Well, that’s good news!” said Mick in the busy courthouse hallway, holding back his emotions. “Thanks for all your help, Lodge.” He had a new spring to his step as the two made their way back toward the front of the building. “Hey Lodge?” continued Mick, only a bit quieter now.

“What’s that, Mick?”

“Can I tell you something, in private?” The client reached out and held Lodge’s arm, stopping him in the hallway for a moment.

“Sure.”

With a wry smile the case worker had never seen on Mick’s face before, the client leaned in and said softly, “Nothing’s really wrong with me! It’s true!” He giggled.

Mick took a few steps backward, tossed aside his cane and bounded up the steps of a small flight of stairs. He spun around, threw his arms up in the air in victory, and gave Lodge a big smile, presenting like a magician who'd just pulled off an amazing magic trick.

Kobalt Lodge went to visit Mick in the hospital just before he died. Even heavily sedated, Mick's face revealed a lifetime's worth of pain. There was nothing left inside him, it seemed, except pain. When the client finally acknowledged the case worker's presence in the room, Mick simply turned his arm around to show Lodge the line of track marks, beginning just above the wrist and continuing all the way up, well past the elbow.

Lodge never met Mick's daughter, nor did he meet the mother of Mick's child. The family had distanced themselves some time ago. Lodge assumes the little girl got her survivor's benefits, though he doesn't really know. He used to wonder if Mick ever understood what he had truly passed down to his daughter. But the case worker doesn't think about things like that anymore.



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Idioma
Ana Jovanovska

monster

William Slayton

Assessments America, Inc.

Grade 3—narrative

In the space below, tell us about the time a monster came to your town.

He had a red nose, rinkled skin, yuge hands and eyes dark and brite both, and when he smiled he brethed fire. The grownups screemed stay away. But one little girl ran up and hugged him and said hes a nice monster and wont hurt anyone. When they left he hugged her harder and said see, your a good girl who understands me, but keep in mind sweetie if you ever say something differnt nobody, not even Mommy, will ever believe you.

*

21



ridin' the 41

Judith Mikesch-McKenzie

Ridin' the 41, I am safe
just another white woman
with backpack

Sitting among the garrulous
coeds, among the lost, the
silent, the outcast

Safe. While on her bus, I
know she clutches her
pink backpack, hoping

For nothing but a moment
just a moment
of safety, headed to

her school, where her teacher
tells us her problems must
come from something

at home, because in "alternative
families - like yours" they
always do, he says

and I'm told with only one percent
students "from minorities"
we can't expect them to be

able to do much. And I wait for
her call from the office at
school, begging me to come

take her home, where she is safe
from the part-time cop who
teaches her to be afraid, and

who can't answer when I ask him
to explain please exactly how
we are alternative

and I can't leave work, and she
can't ever be safe there, and
at our alternative home we do

what we can to keep her safe at
least there, and try to teach her
to make her own safety

and take her to her bus every
morning knowing she is
not, until finally we stop

taking her to that school, and
teach her at home, every
evening, after work,

and she begins to bloom, and to
insist on her own safety, and
after many years, while she still

must struggle for that single
safe moment for herself
and for her own children

I still ride the 41 - safe,
just another white woman
with backpack.



racing against the rain (and finding forrest gump)

Judith Mikesch-McKenzie

We are, both of us, enfolded by billowing sheets - my mother's hands
working through the moving folds, casting dripping bundles, one at a time
into the wicker basket in my arms, the earthy scents of wet musty wicker and
the soaked wood of the clothes pins mixing with the scent of rain and bleach
on wet white percale infused with laundry bluing, all these scents rising up and
transforming the act of breathing into a road to other places, and I
am Jenny, dancing outward into the reflecting pool, arms wide, heart smiling
as I find the only safety I've ever known in the smell of his wet
uniform and arms enfolding me like the drenched sheets billowing out around
my body, rain the flavor not of rescue but of simple reprieve as
everything in me, sighing in safety, knows that when time moves, I will not
have the liberty I crave in the outer world, but the inner world
of silence and simplicity will always be mine, and I open my eyes to see my
mother's hands moving rapid over the sheets on the line, dropping
wooden pins in the grass and throwing the wet sheets over her shoulder, her head
thrown back into the falling rain, eyes closed, breathing deep of the scents
of the world she loves best.



questions around the lake

Linda Chown

Afternoon storms roiling at the Cloisters
Make me think of Wallace Stevens walking
Slowly around the lake and the flowers
Floating remind me of Jesus and the aftermath
On a hill being questioned over and over
Big men with round black glasses
Urge me to answer them
As to how I live now, how to cast my stones
How to live urgent in my used bones,
How to target the median strip
When everyone is dying now it seems
The storms remind me of fir trees fleeting
In California dust. In the earth that made me.
I am a disciple of that beauty. It heals my shambles
On a hill being questioned here as to how to live
How would I ever know when I can barely walk.



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intense little girl

Linda Chown

She had an axe to
Grind with poor hearts.
She would burn and fester
Her hands when others went
Down to be like little threads of string
How she burned all asunder
So that her mind heaved hurt
And heart together until
Her small round red buttons swelled
astray. She would not ever play little.



beginnings

Linda Chown

Never start a poem with the word "the."
Starfish will fly blind-eyed
And scatter like old finches
In soft wet sand
Overwhelmingly
A poem writes to become:
Writes to find in language
A pale flag in a new dark
A bannister beginning



the meaty record review by Jeremy Macomber-Dubs

Sweating The Plague By Guided By Voices (2019)

In my previous Meaty Review, while writing about the music I was listening to, I opened up about the grief I had been experiencing following the death of my mother during the early part of the pandemic and the subsequent death of my cat. Since I wrote that, my dad died. Don't worry, I'll get to the review. But I thought you should know that not only am I still grieving since our last mind-meeting, but my grief has expanded extremely like a balloon that's about to pop. These fresh emotions will inevitably affect what I write today, just as they have influenced my apocalyptic choice for this piece, a bleak but blisteringly intense Factory Of Raw Essentials product with an opening track declaring "It's such a downer", referencing heavy tears coming from weeping blue eyes - a psychic concept album by Guided By Voices about a plague coming to Earth and the aftermath of said plague, written a year before the word "pandemic" became the daily utterance of humans across the globe that it is now. I've always been fascinated by the idea that music has the power to be a portal into the future, and this is one of the clearest examples of that I've ever seen. GBV have been putting out multiple albums per year since the eighties at an unheard-of rate, not to mention all the many solo records and side projects from their songwriter and in my opinion one of the best and most exciting front-people of all time, rock's most prolific warlock workhorse Robert Pollard. Often, people discussing this band talk more about the amount of material they release than they do about the music itself. Even the most dedicated fan can't help but note how hard it is to keep up with their non-stop output. For this reason, some people end up tuning them out entirely. It's like when your brain begins to grasp the big picture, the grandness of the whole universe, and then you have to stop thinking about it because it's just too much information to process. However, when gazing through a telescope into the vastness of space, as you zoom in closer to see what's there, you find beautiful worlds, mystical lands and magical creatures with fantastical stories to tell. Curiosity grows and welcomes you. The truth is, there isn't a bad GBV album. They are all unique planets worthy of our exploration. And I guess one thing that can be said about putting out a shit-ton of records is that eventually one of them is going to predict the future, right?

I find myself marveling at just how relatable these songs are, in sheer awe at how this was not the intention of their creators at all. They were just going about the usual business of making their 29th full-length studio album while trying to remain musically and lyrically adventurous. They were delving into prog-rock territory, writing longer songs than their typical two-minute-or-less ditties, with gorgeously lush arrangements, switching time signatures, and soaring strange melodies. It's one of their heaviest efforts to date, pretty much kicking ass the whole way through, and it never gets boring thanks to Pollard's super competent musical partner extraordinaire guitarist Doug Gillard and a relentlessly rocking backing band. So naturally, the chance of such a feat becoming the first concept album of their career was increasing greatly. For their concept, Pollard chose to sing about humanity being hit by a plague, and what it's like to survive it with so much death surrounding you. How could they have known what was to come? In instances like this, music transcends what we know and don't know. Every artist can only hope that something they've made will have some profound significance in the world at some point. They don't always live to see it happen. But GBV did it in 2019, whether they meant to or not, whether anyone noticed or not (I noticed). And sure, they've released five (excellent) albums since then but that doesn't detract from the importance of the prophetic, polished, and

proggy “Sweating The Plague”. Speaking of relatable, who reading this hasn’t been sweating the plague since 2020? I know I have been, still am, and will continue to as the coronavirus enters its endemic stage.

I went all out for this review. I didn’t just download the tunes on my phone. I ordered the vinyl LP and have been spinning it over and over. Inside the sleeve there is a wonderful accompanying one-page comic book with visuals and lyrical clues that give you insight into what the album is about. Our first image is a masked individual saying “What won’t kill you... kill me.” I’m reminded of all the dangerous, uninformed chatter from ignoramuses refusing to wear masks who can’t get it through their thick skulls that just because the virus won’t kill them doesn’t mean it won’t kill someone else that they spread it to. In “Street Party”, people hang out in large numbers outdoors, putting up with the sweltering heat because hanging out indoors just isn’t safe anymore. As you read this, please keep in mind what I’ve already told you. This familiar content was written a whole year before any of us knew there was a terrible disease headed our way that would wipe out so many of our dearest loved ones. Imagine hearing this album when it came out. It probably wasn’t so relatable then. In fact, I can remember giving it a quick listen at the time, but I was underwhelmed by what I heard. Time changes us. Life events update our perspectives. What I once thought was just casual word candy is now a historical document from the past describing, in surprisingly accurate detail, a future calamity. It’s simply amazing, and it seems that the only other person who points this out is the writer himself. Robert Pollard, when playing these songs live, usually takes a moment to tell his audience that he wrote this right before the shit hit the fan, but he’s so humble about it! You don’t have to be humble, Bob. Just admit it, your music predicted the shit. Even when he is singing about tragedy and loss, Pollard’s powerful vocal performances always have a sprinkle of triumph in them, always pushing his body to the brink reaching for the high notes without going into a falsetto voice, nailing it every time, like when he belts out “When the truth is gone, it’s an unfun glitz. This just can’t go on!” and we know from lived experience exactly what he means. On “Immortals”, for example, “When everyone is gone, you and I will still be here.” It sounds so victorious when he sings it, but when you let the reality of what he’s saying sink in (and we all know this reality now, don’t we?), you feel the weight of his words. And in those rare moments when he sounds defeated, he’s giving sage advice to plague survivors: “Wake up, you’ve shown up. Now make like a grown up.” The situation you’re in sucks. It feels like all news these days is bad news. Your parents are gone now. A lot of people’s parents are gone now. But you’re here. You’re alive. You’re still you. So, do the things you want to do now while you still can. No one is stopping you. “Sweating The Plague” reminds us that there still is life to be lived after catastrophe comes along, and it’s exhilarating.



skin hunger

Beth Filson

It got me into trouble every time –skin hunger and pain. It's why I agreed at age 16 to walk up onto the sand dunes with a boy whose head looked like a caved in basketball. A motorcycle accident, he told me, before I'd asked. He was old enough to have a Fu Manchu style beard. Looking at him face-on in the evening light outside the pool hall on Tybee Island, it looked like a quarter of the pie was gone. The skin covering the concave portion of his head was a patchwork quilt of old scars. When he asked me if I'd like to take a walk on the beach I'd said ok because I could not say no.

Most of my life I've been accused of poor judgement. It's just that I've never quite figured out who, exactly, is responsible for the other person's loneliness and hurt. Pain is a frequency I am tuned to, a register of light. Like a weed or an orchid I turn toward it.

Beach lights flooded the area in front of the emptying parking lot. A few fishermen along the waterline still cast into the waves. But once inside that dark I could see again: stars, sea foam, sea oats rising with the sand dunes. We walked. I noticed he kept scanning the dunes like he was looking for something. It didn't cross my mind to ask *looking for what?* Being one with another's pain means accepting where that pain takes you. Becoming it.

This is not a declaration of selflessness. As I said before, my skin hunger was also at fault. My craving for touch undid me. It out-shouted any kind of early warning system I might have possessed. When he led me off the beach into the sea oats, I followed. I did not resist when he pulled me into his lap, then took off my halter-top and touched my small, adolescent breasts. This was not about sex; it was just what I had to do to finally experience someone else's touch.

When I was little – eight? Nine? I would pinch the back of my hand so hard and deep little half moons of blood seeped around my fingertips. This is how I practiced the art of being larger than what hurt, of mastering physical pain. I was proud of the thin half moon scabs I created that proved my strength. Maybe it was just that I was trying to understand what a body means. What one's relationship to the physical is supposed to be.

He reached for the button of my jeans. Instinctively I balled up. He grabbed the back of my Levis and began trying to shake me out of my clothes. I held on to the world of myself. When he started crying for his mother, I became his mother. When he called for the devil, flailing in the sand, I called him to me, called him back, rocked him in my lap. Seeing the knife that had fallen out of his shoe I pushed it out of reach of his hand with my bare feet.

What was I thinking? Nothing. Not really. It is amazing how wild-flighted thought can become, how scattered, more like a covey of dove erupting in a cornfield than seagulls with their thick, sullen bodies hovering, focused above the sand. When his pain was less, I took his hand and carefully, quietly walked him out of the sand dunes down to the breakwater. It was night. Behind me I saw a light on in a house up land, not so far at all from the place where we'd just been, and I wondered, wondered, what are they watching on TV up there?





if you should love there is always the problem of people
Beth Filson

her body

Kimaya Diggs

Her body is my container

Salt

Water

Raggedy nails, ashy skin

Coffee & cream & cream & coffee & cream & coffee & coffee

Not enough here

How could there ever be enough?

I was once a worm and absolutely nothing more--how is it that I have returned here,
and with absolutely nothing more

Her body

Is my container, is her container, after birth, how could any body contain anyone but oneself?
I am the egg boiled too little and losing chunks when the shell is peeled. I am the egg given up
and thrown into the garbage because there is absolutely nothing left. What is my shell for, if
not breaking?

I think I remember sleeping half-conscious as an egg in my mother's fetal ovary as she awaited
her own birth in the warmth of my grandmother's womb. I have been waiting for my genesis
since before my mother was born, and I just one of millions of eggs all dreaming of seeing the
sun. But I was chosen, although I do not know who chose me and I finally grew to know the
inside of her ribs with my toes, the oceanic whirring of her heart heavy on my left shoulder,
my umbilical cord rushing life and love down its length and around the coils wrapped around
my neck, crushing my bones.

They say when I was born I was almost dead, the cord had pulled so tight. Now I wonder, did
she know? Can a mother will her womb to strangle the baby that she knows will break her
heart? But we all break mothers' hearts. I am not the only one. I am good.

Her body is my container

Salt

Water

Dark brown nails, dark brown palms

Bile & ginger & ginger & bile & ginger & bile & bile

Not enough here

How could there ever be enough?

I was once a lump and absolutely nothing more, and I have returned here, and
everywhere, and I have bloomed and grown and thrived in this fertile land

Her body

Is my container, I find my sustenance in the ecstasy of her breast. I have waited so long to breathe the air and weave myself through silky strands of blood-red liver.

She doesn't want me but I am her. She doesn't want me but she is me. She doesn't want

me she doesn't want me she

doesn't want me she doesn't

want me she doesn't want me but she is me she doesn't

want me but

I am her.



for whenever you may need this

Kimaya Diggs

To Kimaya—For whenever you may need this. Love, Kimaya

This is written on the front flyleaf of a book called *Mourning Songs: Poems of Sorrow and Beauty*. It's a collection of poems curated by Grace Schulman that address grief. The book is divided into themes: For the Beloved, The Shape of Death, Talking to Grief, End of Days. I bought it for myself from the bookstore I haunted as a child.

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My friend's mother was dying. During the pandemic, she had been diagnosed with a neurodegenerative disease that was progressing at a relentless pace. I bought the book so that I would have something to say when she was gone. It is a small book, maybe four inches by six, with a textured navy-blue cover embossed with white Japanese chrysanthemums.

For whenever you may need this. I inscribe every book I buy with a love note to myself. This one is a reminder to be soft, and to be generous with these words for the grieving.

This is how I love myself, for the world is absolutely brimming with loss. The mothers that my friends have lost this year alone could fill a room. This is how I love myself, knowing that my mother will one day step into that room and join all the mothers who died before her. This is how I love myself when my husband is able to reach out and place his hand on the bumper of the car that barely stopped in time, in the exact place where a woman had been hit and killed just a week before. This is how I love myself when the enormity of loss threatens to burst my body at the seams, leaving it empty and deflated.

I had an expansive mind as a child. I spent much of my time talking to myself out loud, holding conversations in which the other person always said the right thing. *Kimaya, you're so smart. You're so interesting! You're so thoughtful, such a hard worker.* I whispered my little world into existence, waiting for someone outside of my imagination to say these words to me, to make them solid and real.

But the right people never say the right things. It's always the right people saying the wrong things, or worse, the wrong people saying the right things. Sometimes it's just all wrong and the things they say make the inside of your mouth taste like blood. Sometimes the world you build for yourself crumbles and you see yourself as a pale, naked snail flattening itself against a crack in the sidewalk as footsteps shake the earth around you. Sometimes the foot grinds you into the dirt. Sometimes, maybe worst of all, the people who you most want to hear say the right things are gone – dead, distant, estranged, transformed, unrecognizable—

And there is always more to lose. There is always, always more to lose.

For whenever you may need this.

When I get hurt, I talk to myself. *It's okay, baby. You're ok, you can do this,* I say to myself.

If I don't speak gently to myself, who will?

How do we love ourselves? Let me count the ways: some people go on long runs, or dress nicely. Comb their hair with rose oil, go to therapy. Spend time making the nicest cup of tea. Build something. Break something. Let it go, hold it all in and grow. Some people smile at themselves in the mirror. Others of us write love notes to ourselves in the front flyleaf of every book we buy. It's all the same thing: a practice of the brain observing itself and deciding that this earthly experience is worth something.

The feeling doesn't always last. I need it written down for the moments when the grief of being begins to fill my lungs. I need it written down for the moments when I cannot believe that I ever loved myself. For the times that my joy is too distant to remember. These words wait.

To Kimaya—For whenever you may need this. Love, Kimaya.



my black panther

Ellen Mary Hayes

(Thank you Nobunto and Janet)

i was in the meadow
on the meadow

i was guided
glided

i did levitate
across the gate

upon the meadow stairs

i entered the cave
she said to brave

i did find it
harmless and dark

i found a panther there
at once

he was on my back
heavy

my past

i felt him hugging me
attached to my back

and he was loving me
of that

my past

then suddenly
he was next to me

and we walked together
back to the dawn

withdrawn
from that haven cave

back meadow bound
where i was crowned

the panther
he was so proud

loving me
eternally

and now
i ask of you

do you have a panther
or tiger too?

perhaps a bear
or elk or snake

will clean your home
and blessings make

the darling lark
the grouse or deer

will in a dream
to you appear

the wolf the fly
the eagle's eye

the spider's silk
the milk of goat

the wild prayers
are everywhere

with my black panther
i walk renewed

he will show me
what i never knew.



hoppin' john

Caitlin Archer-Helke

Ingredients

- Black-eyed peas (dry)
- Tomatoes (fresh)
- Green peppers
- Onions
- Vinegar & oil
- Salt & pepper

* Never use canned black-eyed peas. They might work for other families' luck, but not for yours.

* Use an attractive bowl, the sort of bowl you'd be able to show company without shame.

Instructions:

1. Wash the black-eyed peas. Look for things that shouldn't be there: mud, rocks, peas gone bad. Comb through your family tree. Withered branches. Unknown names. Cousins who married each other. Janus's two faces, one glorious, one shadowed. You, the vine that destroys as it climbs: no aristocrat's face, not you, but all the ill health the cousins could gift you.

2. Cook the peas until they are tender (but not yet too tender). Drain and reserve them. You make this as your great-grandmother made it, except you make it north of the Mason-Dixon Line. She wouldn't approve. She wouldn't find much of anything about you acceptable: not your peasant's face or your peasant's body. Not your northern accent. Not your values.

You make her recipe anyway, for luck, for family.

3. Wash the tomatoes. Core them, and slice them. They should probably be diced. Did your great-grandmother dice them? It seems improbable that she would have diced anything: she was aristocracy after the Civil War, which left families like hers with far too much. But she was a precise woman, who liked things done precisely. She might have diced them herself. You don't know, since you never met her.

4. Wash the green peppers, and dice them. The peppers are easier to cut than the tomatoes, a fine, quick slice. No acid seeps into the nicks in your fingers, no rancor from the past.

Mind that the peppers are green, for luck, for money, for a good New Year.

5. Peel the onions, and dice them. Your eyes will cry, overwrought tears, the tears your great-grandmother was too exalted to cry, even when she tried to disown your grandfather. She was a superior sort of woman. You take vindictive pride in knowing you'll never be one yourself. Slice the onions, if you can't dice them. You've belonged one place in your life, and it's not here, but this is still your New Year's meal.

6. Are the black-eyed peas still waiting? Put them in the bowl. They'd better be just right. Your great-grandmother's knife-blade elegance, not yours.

7. Prepare the vinegar and oil dressing. Use quality olive oil, and quality red wine vinegar. Only the best, for this family meal, and for this coming year, may it be better than the year that's passed, amen.

Not too much, not too little. Will ghostly hands guide yours? It seems unlikely that your great-grandmother would care to help. Your great-grandfather's people probably had a different recipe.

8. Add salt and pepper to taste. Moderation is key. Yours has never been a moderate family, tendrils of wrath stretching across years and miles to cold northern countries on the other side of the sea.

Be moderate here, with Hoppin' John. You've got to start somewhere.

9. Admire the Hoppin' John, and share it. Wonder if the recipe was your great-grandmother's, or her mother's, or her grandmother's, or one of the women before, whose names are barely remembered, whose faces you no longer know. Wonder if they'd all hate you. Know you're not really living unless they do.

On the other side, there are people who'd love you, even if they'd never agree with you. They gave you this face and this body, and you probably wouldn't fit among them, either, but they're family.

10. Serve the Hoppin' John with greens and pork for luck and health and money, for a year better than the years before. Consider stealing someone else's custom and eat grapes, but discard the idea. You haven't any grapes in the house, let alone twelve to eat as the clock chimes midnight.

11. Eat the Hoppin' John with its side of history, too thick to cut with the sharpest knife. It drips with old anguish and hauteur. It's your recipe for luck. Think about the people whose luck your people stole. Wallow in the guilt your other side gifted you. At least you know why you feel guilty this time.

12. Wonder, briefly, why other people use rice. Dismiss the thought. Who cares why other people use rice? This is the one true Hoppin' John, your family's Hoppin' John, passed through generations, better luck next year.

13. Do it again next year.





abstract portrait: meat for tea
Hanna Wright

about last night

Gerald Yelle

We could say it was like this: You were in charge of watching the street. It got dark and you got tired and hungry and stepped inside intending it only to be a short break but one thing led to another. The bathtub sprung a leak. Abortion pills fell off the shelf and you had to pick them up. Your brother's girlfriend showed up, crying because your brother had broken their engagement and then her dog ran off. You went back out saying you'd look for the dog but your brother might be a total loss. What you meant to say was that she was better off without him, but you really thought they'd both be better off. Two good people who brought out the worst in each other. How do you go about telling someone that? You don't. Instead you go back to work but by now it's too late. It's morning and your relief is here. It's not all that light out yet and there's a rank smell coming from the woods. Have the coy dogs made a kill? Has a bear taken a dump and left traces of body odor after rubbing against a tree? Never mind. You can try again tonight.



grinding crowns

Gerald Yelle

I threw out the preconceived notions and flew down the stairs. There were people behind me, but I flew down the stairs, grabbing and swinging around the newel posts. I noticed there were no newel posts at some of the landings —what I was doing couldn't have been swinging around them. Somehow it just felt like it. Maybe it would've helped if I hadn't discarded the preconceived notions. But that's how it is: Reward yourself in some ways and wreck yourself in others —though that's never the intent. Acknowledging that it's all subjective only makes it worse —the sense that people behind you are only in your mind, as long as they don't catch up and knock some sense into you. They simply lack the speed or the pedigree. They'll tell you about the pedigree. They'll say when it rains it won't be cats and dogs. It'll rain and you'll have to turn around and face them.



lizard people

Gerald Yelle

The rehearsals kept coming out wrong but we counted ourselves ready anyway. On the way to the show we went down the steep hill by the pasture —At the bottom was what looked like a juvenile moose. "Look. My first moose!" I said. It stared at us from the bottom of the hill as we stared back. I was afraid to get closer, thinking it might charge or run off. I pulled out my phone to take a pic. The whole group gathered around. But I couldn't find the creature in the view finder. All I saw was the secretary's little whit dot. When I looked up from the viewfinder that was all I saw as well.



outcast

Michael Washburn

I.

“Mister, why is your face all messy like that?”

Four kids stood before Colin, who rested on a bench in the space between a bank and a trendy shop in the town to which he forayed on Tuesdays. He'd grown tired and hadn't felt like lugging three bags of groceries to the parking lot just yet, so he'd dropped onto the bench where passersby could easily take note of his strange appearance. The four boys approached within seconds.

The boys were ten or eleven, and it was clear that their mothers had taken care with their clothes and hair. Looking at them, you could tell they would all be popular when they hit high school and would never be without girlfriends. On their faces was the kind of wonder Colin had seen once on a kid watching a crippled pigeon in the street in the moments before a bus ran over it. Colin stared at his newspaper, but the lookers persisted. The bold one who had spoken before now wanted to know whether Colin was born with a scarred deformed face.

“Look, it's none of your business. Please leave me alone!” Colin said.

He read the paper stubbornly, but they really did want to know whether Colin came into the world disfigured. Most people found his appearance so disturbing that they never had to choose between staring and ignoring him. What was wrong with these four?

The leader of the little pack reached over and poked a flap of skin near Colin's nose. He held his finger there for a second before all four of them split in the direction of the municipal building two blocks north. Colin leapt up and ran after them, shouting and crying that they were little monkeys and he'd rip them apart, but then in the middle of the second block Colin froze and stood quivering and panting, covering with both hands the face that had piqued so much interest. In his mind, an old dialogue resumed. *If I wear a mask they'll think I'm a bank robber. And if I don't wear one ...* At length Colin sauntered back to the bench and the bags. He looked up and down, all over the streets of the town, surprisingly barren for 11:00 a.m., and found himself aching for a philosophy that could offer him a plan, a strategy, a solution, a way to be in the world.

How often, when faced with the antics of kids, we act with utter self-righteousness as if we were never children. Colin had reacted without thinking to the boys' provocation. That night, lying on a narrow bed under an open window in his dingy rented room, Colin's mind returned to his own childhood, to one afternoon in a faraway city when the doorbell of his family's brownstone rang.

“Colin, would you get that?” his mother called from her place at the ironing board upstairs.

He picked himself up from his spot in front of the TV and went down the hall to the front of the house. He opened the inner door. The face just beyond the glass panel of the vestibule door

was unfamiliar. Just maybe it belonged to one of the contractors working outside over the past week, restoring the stucco façade of the brownstone. Small, basilisk eyes set in a puffy pink face watched the nine-year-old open the vestibule door. Then the right arm controlled by the same brain as those strange eyes rose and made a quick motion. Everyone heard Colin screaming and crying as he tried to wipe the sulfuric acid from his face with his shirt which quickly smoldered and grew porous. At nearly the same time, Colin felt part of his face begin to sink and slide. The beast that had done the deed turned and lumbered down the steps, through the manicured yard, and into a black sedan idling at the curb. People leaned out their windows and came out onto their stoops trying to locate the source of the cries rending the atmosphere of a luminous May afternoon.

II.

In a parking lot on the university's campus was a beautiful Porsche, sleek and red like a Tonka toy. It belonged to Paul Wadsworth, a really popular guy. Colin never thought in terms of makes and models as some people do, he had little interest in cars, but this one transported the beholder, as the contents of certain catalogs will do, to a world of sublime luxury and blasé satisfaction. Colin took note of the car as he was striding through the lot on the way to the university bookstore. He thought of a couple of incidents where a homeless man named Arturo was believed to have attacked people walking on the campus at night, and he tried to recall whether the attacks had happened here in the lot. Well, Paul Wadsworth obviously wasn't afraid to park his hot rod here. Upon entering the bookstore, Colin began filling a basket with paperback editions of Bacon, Hume, Locke, Hobbes, Bentham, other giants.

38 On the day that Professor Levin's seminar began, Colin stood in an elevator on the largest building on the campus with ten others who clasped their books to the chests or fiddled or gazed at the ground until reaching the fifth floor. Colin followed three of them down a hall to the seminar room with white walls and a high ceiling, where they took their seats with fourteen others. Professor Levin began. Themes in the seminar had universal applications, the professor said. Some of what Locke says about the role of and the justification for state authority is as relevant to what's going on today in the most turbulent parts of Africa as to the upcoming presidential election here in America, really to virtually any corner of the real world.

When his brother called Colin that evening, expecting his usual taciturnity, it was astonishing to hear him rave. With the seminar barely underway, Colin had a great deal to say about the British philosophers and the applicability of their ideas to the world.

"Well that's terrific, Colin. On a separate topic, I do feel you can reciprocate and call others in the family a bit more often," Warren said.

"Okay, Warren. I'll try."

The next morning was warm. Once again Colin had to take a train to Washington for his semi-annual meeting with a specialist who oversaw the efforts toward a partial rehabilitation of Colin's face. Over the years, they had managed minor changes in the contours of his cheeks and nose. Conscious of every second he stood in line at the station amid people who gawked and stared, he finally made it onto the train only to despair of finding a seat as people moved through the aisles grabbing the free spots. Colin grew increasingly anxious until a small arm

waved at him from the middle of the car. He lurched down the aisle to the point where a boy of nine had alerted him to a seat right between the boy, who had the window seat, and a dozing man in the aisle seat. Colin thanked the boy and slid in and tried to emulate the sleeper. But the boy, a slender blond kid in a red t-shirt and army green shorts, began asking questions about Colin's destination and whether he knew about the snack car a few cars down.

Twenty minutes into the ride, the boy announced, "I'm going to the snack car."

"Fine."

"Can I get you anything? They've got hot dogs and Fritos and Milky Ways, and I think they've got microwave pizzas too."

Colin handed the kid some bills.

When the boy reappeared, he munched happily and sung part of the introduction to the old Spider-Man animated TV show: "Spins a web any size / Catches thieves just like flies." Did Colin watch this show? Did he wonder what Spider-Man would do if masked guys with guns tried to take over this very train? Colin said, no, he had not thought about it, but he was sure the kid had the scenario worked out. Indeed, the boy did. He painstakingly explained how Spider-Man would ensnare the baddies one by one as they moved through the spaces between cars, lay out their immobilized forms on the roofs, and receive the profuse thanks of the passengers as they enjoyed free hot dogs and sodas courtesy of the café car. Colin marveled at the earnestness with which the little stranger relayed this fantasy.

Now the boy wanted to know what Colin did during the week, and when Colin said he was a student at a university, this elicited a look of awe. Was Colin on the football team? Did he play basketball or volleyball? Did he have a plan for what he'd do if masked guys came and took over the campus? The questions went on until Colin had to get up to go use the restroom and the boy learned over and earnestly explained to the recently roused man to Colin's right that he had to make room.

III.

"If power is illegitimate it must be overthrown."

Professor Levin had stopped striding back and forth before the oval table in the seminar room, and he stood there now before the blackboard with his hands clasped behind him, daring the class to reach into Hobbes and Locke, daring anyone to try to find a line or a passage with which to challenge him. The professor's words resonated with authority. But the students knew quite well that on this occasion as on past ones the professor wasn't discouraging dissent, however intimidating his pronouncements might seem. On the contrary, he was inviting bright minds out there in the room to contest, or overthrow, the power of a sweeping statement. One student was all too eager: Paul Wadsworth, who sat on the far side of the oval, almost exactly across from Colin, raised an arm.

"Yes, Mr. Wadsworth?"

“The direction of all enlightened polities has been toward more expansive government. It restrains the worst tendencies of people in keeping with the social contract as Rousseau propounded it. Government guides people who’d otherwise be prone to moral error,” Paul said.

The professor looked stern as ever.

“How is the growth of a centralized coercive force moral or enlightened? Tell me how you can justify its increasing intrusion into people’s lives.”

“That’s not hard. I think we can all agree that murder, rape, and arson are immoral. Therefore a social contract that requires not committing those acts is a just, necessary, and, dare I say it, a moral one!”

Paul sat there with a flushed look, as if confident that no one else in the class could marshal such eloquence in agreement with him, much less in disagreement. People in general did admire Paul. But for all his popularity, rumors went around the campus, describing how he had allegedly grabbed a scrawny underclassman by both elbows in the gym’s locker room and invited the football team to come gape at and mock his shriveled puny cock.

Directly to Paul’s left sat a young woman, Mary Barnes, whom Colin had taken to gazing at, semi-consciously, during the duller moments of the seminar. She had silky black hair falling to the base of pale but full cheeks with a dimple here and there. Today there was something peculiar about the way Mary looked across the table at Colin. It was as if she knew he had something to contribute to the discussion. Her lips curved coyly upward at their edges, and her eyes were calm yet charged with recognition of something in Colin.

Colin wanted to answer Paul, but he sat silently in his chair, terrified of how his voice might sound in this bright antiseptic space. He thought of what he lacked. He thought of Nietzsche, and of four words: *The will to power*. Then his eyes fell to the table.

On Friday night, Colin lingered on a path in a part of the campus where you’d rarely see people except when they passed to or from one of their dorms on the way to the next party. Colin sat there brooding about the heinousness of the attacks on students, a number of whom were girls in their late teens. Suddenly, a face emerged into the penumbra of light from one of the lamps. It was not Arturo. Here was a sweet, feminine face. Mary walked up to him. He wondered how to react. Maybe she would grow so horrified in her proximity to his face, which she had hitherto looked at from the far side of a big table, that she would run off screaming if Colin did not turn quickly away. Perhaps it was his moral duty to do so. Mary’s parents had spent vast amounts of money to send their daughter here and it was unconscionable that Colin, miserable pathetic Colin, should ruin her experience. What was Mary doing here, anyway? She lived in a flat off campus.

Mary came right up.

“Hi, Colin.”

“Mary.”

“In case you’re wondering whether I was deliberately looking at you in class the other day, I was.”

“Uh.”

“I wanted to say, I know that this seminar is challenging, and you may have felt like I was trying to put pressure on you.”

“Uh, Mary?”

“Yes?”

“I, ah, never mind. What were you saying?”

“Just that I’ve looked at you, across the room, every week for a while now. And I have a sense that there’s something, what’s the word, something latent in you. Like you want to open up, but there’s some really awful feeling holding you back.”

“Mary?”

“Yes, Colin?”

“I’m sorry, I keep interrupting you without having figured out what I want to say.”

“It’s all right, Colin. You need to take your time to process things. I’ve never meant to convey otherwise and I hope I don’t appear to have.”

“Oh, no.”

“What I’m basically trying to say is that I realize certain people have tended to dominate discussion in the class.”

Colin nodded.

“I am trying, in my very clumsy way, to tell you that I just hope there’s nothing inside you that might dissuade or discourage you from speaking up. Those times when you have, you’ve been really articulate and I think everyone has noticed, very much including Professor Levin.”

Colin pondered Mary’s counsel. As he did so, his hands slid upward until they covered most of his scarred, pitted face.

“Colin?”

Once again the will to speak was insufficient.

“Colin.”

His hands didn’t move.

“Colin!”

“Yes?”

The rain was building.

“I was wondering if you wanted to come to a party with me.”

“So you can use me for shock value?”

“Colin, I . . . I’m sorry.”

Ten seconds passed. He peeled his hands away from his face and took in the bare silent paths amid the grass.

Later he lay under an open window on the bed in his dingy little room. The rain outside, cascading, shifting, hammering, thrashing, easing and then hardening again, summarized things pretty well. Colin’s feelings, his sense about everything, were in flux. He brooded about his afternoons in the seminar, his encounters with Mary, his professor, his eager classmates, Nietzsche, and a phrase of insuperable force, one he could not quit thinking about, *The Will to Power*. Here you had the arrogant jock, the sweet young woman, the angry recluse. Could so preposterous a cliché have vitality? As the disclaimers for commercials state, “Past performance is not indicative of future results.”

There came more reports of attacks by the homeless man whom the police called Arturo but had never identified definitively, let alone caught. Warren called pretty often, and on those occasions when he got through, Colin told him in detail about his past few days. It was as if he thought about all these events with a writer’s sensibility and wanted no detail, no scrap of vivid experience, to elude anyone. But Warren never spoke with Colin as often as others in the family thought proper.

In the morning it was time for his favorite class. Once again Professor Levin stood in an authoritative pose. Paul Wadsworth, the jock with the sports car, the living cliché, opened up.

“Bentham said exactly what a lot of us on this campus have been feeling. You can’t separate the morality of an action from its effect on others. Even to try to do so is a sign of sociopathic tendencies. Moral actions are those that contribute to the pleasure and happiness of others.”

The professor looked sternly at the young man who talked with such confidence, as if he had pretty much the whole campus behind him.

“Bentham really isn’t too hard to summarize, Mr. Wadsworth. He belongs to a particular moment in the history of philosophy. I believe you did have someone else on your syllabus for this week.”

“Well, yes, professor. I know that we need to bring J.S. Mill into the discussion.”

“So tell me what Mill has to offer. What does he have to say about all of this?”

Professor Levin looked and sounded like a doctoral advisor grilling a candidate. Everyone gazed at Paul. For the first time in their experience, Paul looked uneasy.

“I was going to relate Mill to what I said before, about the need for a strong social contract to ensure that people act in ways that are mutually beneficial and conducive to happiness. Mill and Rousseau belong to different traditions, but I find that they complement each other elegantly.”

“You’ve left out Bentham. I wanted you to explain how Mill relates to Bentham,” the professor said.

“Mill basically expands on Bentham, brings him forward into a world with guys like Saddam Hussein in it. You’ve got to be tough sometimes. But the basis of Mill’s morality is pretty much the same. We can take Bentham a step into the future, embrace Mill, and stay faithful to Rousseau,” Paul answered.

Professor Levin stood there at the point where two edges of the table folded into an oval curve. The students watched him nervously. Now the professor spoke in the driest tone they had ever heard him use.

“Well, Mr. Wadsworth. How very poignant. *CliffsNotes* Mill meets *CliffsNotes* Rousseau and they ride off together into the sunset.”

It was as if all the muscles in Paul’s upper body went slack. Beside him, Mary was looking intently at a point across the room. Paul seemed to be groping for a reference or a quotation that could establish him as a deep reader of the philosophers in question.

“Rousseau has universal applicability,” Paul said.

Paul’s answer was lame in the extreme. Now a voice they were all unaccustomed to hearing made itself heard. It was crisp and clear.

“I don’t see that Mill and Rousseau need to join hands.”

People turned their heads to the guy with a scarred and pitted face. The professor’s look was hard to gauge, but it was not discouraging.

“If you want to talk about a sentiment with universal applicability, then consider Mill. ‘It is better to be a man dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.’ Do you agree with that, Paul?”

Startled at the impudence of Colin speaking up, Paul gave him an angry look. But Colin went on.

“Let’s consider Mill. Mill was quite correct to revise Bentham, and he was clever in the way he went about it. He said that no intelligent and decent man would lower his intellectual capacity

even if doing so meant he could be happier. Part of the intelligence such a man values in himself is the ability to grasp moral complexity. It is, of course, not moral to act in ways that please or encourage those who are harming others.”

The professor’s look said *Go on*. Colin continued.

“We need a way to unite the fostering of pleasure and happiness with a recognition of how things are in the real world. I don’t see that, having come to this plateau in our understanding of the English tradition, we now turn left to Rousseau. Quite a few intelligent and decent men have been anarchists.”

Paul looked as if he craved a box cutter to slash Colin’s throat.

“So tell me which way we do turn,” the professor said.

“That’s easy. We don’t turn left or right. We turn, now, to Nietzsche.”

Gasps of surprise rose around the room. Nietzsche was, in fact, on the syllabus, though the professor hadn’t planned on discussing him this afternoon. Colin continued.

“Recall the early passages of *The Will to Power*, where Nietzsche talks about the defiance of oneself. Or, rather, the identification of certain traits and tendencies within oneself that might limit one’s advancement. Just having some moral inclinations and seeing the complexity of issues doesn’t make you a moral man, a moral actor. One has to vanquish and destroy one’s weaknesses. I’d say Nietzsche goes beyond Mill’s dithering and unites awareness and resolve.”

“What is Nietzsche to you?” the professor asked.

“Nietzsche is a big step up, away from a blinkered tradition.”

All eyes in the class were on Colin. A couple of students even began to clap before realizing such levity might not be appropriate.

Professor Levin said, “Mill and Nietzsche form a pact. And now, finally, the rain may stop.”

Two nights later, Colin was a bit bolder in his ramblings around the campus than he had been so far. He walked past dorms where parties were going on. He walked off the campus, into the town, and past crowded bars where bellowing voices strove to drive each other out. People were having such fun. How could Colin purchase or obtain conventional handsomeness for one night?

The night was cool and bracing. He circled back, walked over paths and fields, and found himself near the center of the campus, where the main lounge stood. It was a newfangled complex with annexes on either side. The annexes had big glass façades bisected by panes of curving dark green metal. As Colin walked up the concrete path along the front of the lounge, he soon came to the glass wall of the annex at the north end of the structure. Peering through the glass, he saw none other than Paul Wadsworth reclining on a couch with a beer in one

hand. Beside Paul on the couch was Mary. Two other women sat at either edge of the couch. Mary's hand was on Paul's knee.

Noticing the freak passing by on the far side of the glass, Paul laughed. Mary saw Colin and smiled, but the smile was not friendly. Paul held his closed fist in front of his face and did a pantomime of raking an object back and forth frenziedly.

"Mommy, look what I made!" Paul said, mimicking a little kid's voice.

Mary and the two other women laughed hard.

Colin's walks around the campus at night went on. He dreamed of catching up with Mary and learning that, contrary to what he thought he had seen, she reviled Paul. He wondered how a seemingly bright and nice woman could have acted so callously. Her kind words to him earlier had been facetious.

To Colin there was no doubt what other people would do. Go out and key that motherfucker's car, slash its tires. Colin would do no such thing. He had ethical principles.

IV.

One night late in the term, he walked out to the lot near the bookstore, but did not see Paul's car. He figured Paul must be driving Mary around, somewhere out there on this cool night. A breeze rose, sweeping across the campus toward the west, as my brother stood there feeling lonely and hurt.

He was not alone. A young blonde moved into the lot from between two cars at the opposite edge. She was walking directly toward him, but did not appear to see him. Once again Colin thought about his moral duty to someone whose parents had paid for her to have a good experience. He began to retreat toward the green cool damp spaces on campus where people would neither accept nor reject him. Then Colin saw that a man followed the young woman. He was in his forties and wore torn, ragged clothes. With growing queasiness, Colin watched the man move up and slide a hairy hand around the woman's left elbow. Nearly simultaneously, he got his other hand over her mouth. She could not scream.

Colin ran out into the lot. The woman was already in too much terror for the sight of his face to upset her. For a moment he had the absurd thought that here at last was a woman he could interact with unselfconsciously. Upon seeing the freak over the captive's shoulder, Arturo let go of her. As soon as she was out of his grasp, the homeless addict reached into one of the many corners and compartments of his tattered garb and pulled out a long object, the upper parts of which glinted in the lamplight. Arturo took a step forward, holding the knife aloft. He grinned, exposing chipped and rotting teeth. He obviously expected Colin to fold in terror at the sight of that knife.

Colin laughed.

"Don't do something that might drive up my beautician's bills!"

Colin ran forward and kicked Arturo in the groin with all his force. The homeless man screamed, dropped the knife, and hobbled off toward the cars through which he had emerged. Colin was not done. He picked up the knife and thrust it at the aggressor's ear and neck. Arturo fell screaming, blood jetting from both wounds. They never recovered Arturo's knife.

Paul Wadsworth accosted Colin as the hero walked from his favorite bench on a remote part of the campus toward a dorm where a party was in progress. Lights from the dorm room illuminated the sturdy handsome features of the popular jock.

"Colin, hey man. Can we talk?"

Swallowing his uncertainty, Colin nodded.

"Please come with me," Paul said.

They walked in the direction Colin had been going. About twenty yards before the dorm hosting the party, Paul diverted Colin in the direction of a door leading to the hall of the next dorm over, which was popular with the athletically minded but also had a sprinkling of theater aficionados and aesthetes. Colin let Paul guide him to a room considerably larger than most people in the dorm enjoyed. Paul sat down on the edge of the bed, Colin on a swivel chair before a desk surmounted with a shiny computer.

"Look, Colin. I know I've projected a certain image. I'm this blowhard who tries to dominate the discussion in the seminar and intimidate anyone who might disagree."

Colin's silence was eloquent. Paul continued.

"Look, man, I don't know about your background. Maybe your parents are doctors or lawyers. Maybe they're professors. I'll bet they're really smart people."

Colin nodded. Paul went on.

"My dad's an investment banker. I'm not saying the man's not smart, in a certain way, but my parents have always been aware of my family's intellectual deficit. They've always wanted me to be intelligent. I think you probably appreciate the fact that people who even use the phrase 'book smart' tend not to be smart in that way."

Still Colin said nothing, but he nodded again.

"So, Colin, I'd really like you to understand that that's the context in which I've said the things I've said and done things I've done."

Colin sat there in the swivel chair with a contemplative look.

"It's not about anything I harbor against you, Colin. I know you've had a very hard life, harder than I could imagine. Man, I know it's probably impossible for you to believe this, but I empathize with you."

Colin nodded.

“You may find it hard to forgive me, but look. We’re kids, Colin. Our frontal lobes are still developing. Young people are learning basic things about civics, ethics, the golden rule and all that. If that weren’t so, we wouldn’t be taking this seminar. You know you can’t expect a kid to know that decency and kindness are the right approaches in a given situation and to act accordingly. Tell me if it’s ever played out that way for you.”

Now Colin’s silence had a different cast to it. Colin was carefully considering Paul’s words.

“Please forgive me, Colin. I’ve been horrible to you, and I’m so deeply sorry.”

Paul held out a hand. Colin shook it. Colin decided he wasn’t ready to leave Paul’s room, to dispense with this handsome young man’s company, just yet.

Colin gestured at a mini fridge beside the desk.

“Have you got any bourbon in there?”

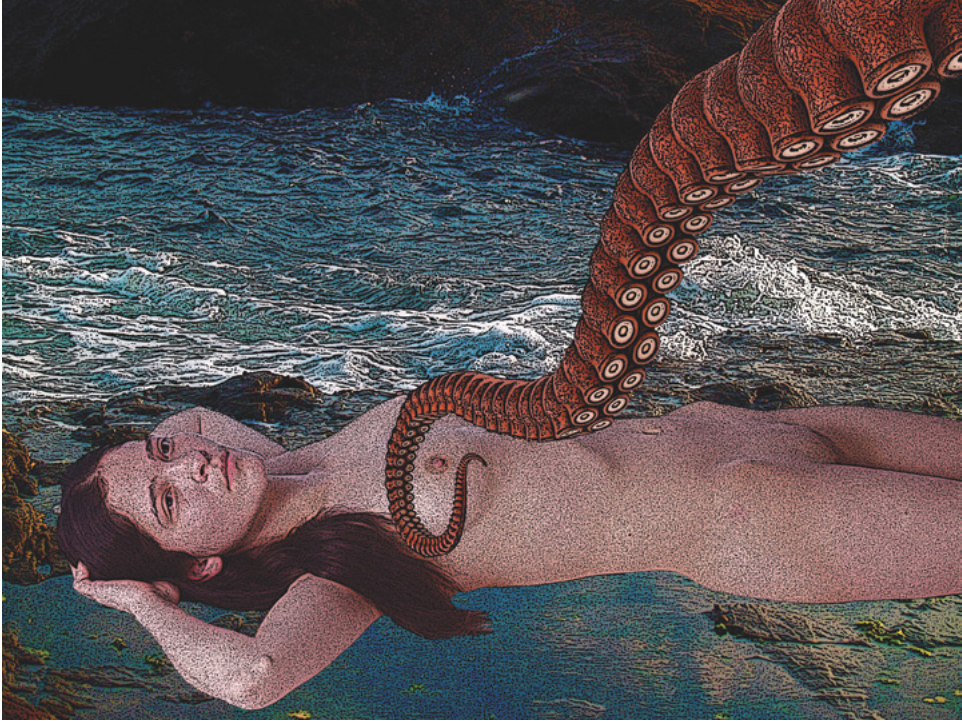
“You bet I have!”

A little later, Mary walked through the door of her off-campus apartment, flicked on a light on her desk, sat down on her bed, and removed her shoes. Three friends had dropped her off on the curb outside and sped off toward a place in town where people gambled through the early hours. All it took was a few moments without the company of her friends to make her feel acutely lonely.

Now to her relief the sound of footsteps came from the stairwell outside the little flat. She flicked off the light, removed all her clothes, and lay flat on the bed, regarding the curls of her pubic hair in the moonlight. Paul, her Paul, had such a keen sense of all her needs.

The man came into the flat, spent a minute removing his clothes, and lay down on top of her. They kissed and caressed for nearly ten minutes before she realized something felt odd about the penis in her hand. It was not the right size and shape. In fact almost every feature of the man on top of her was strange, alien. She flicked on the light. The only thing she recognized about this man was the face.





whenever silk is touched by flame
Bill Wolak

the meaty interview with Jessamyn Smyth

What's your favorite color?

Red

What's your favorite animal?

Jaguar, closely followed by peregrine

If you could choose to fly or to be invisible, which would it be and why?

Fly, like aforementioned peregrine, because it would be like wind-swimming (and invisibility is overrated).

Are you happy and, if not, why?

Sometimes, when I am very present in my body, in the moment, and in place, loving and being loved. Sometimes not, for lack of those things.

What book/s are you reading at the moment?

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, Rebecca Olander's *Uncertain Acrobats*, Martin Espada's *Floaters*, and Dana Stabenow's whole oeuvre with Kate & Mutt (again).

What are you currently listening to?

Saint John's Passion, just now in the car very loudly (Bach). Bad pop radio for good cheer. 80's and 90's English bands are recirculating through my listening (The The really holds up). R&B. Funk. Some roots/folky stuff. I get excited about artists who can really set and commit to a mood.

How old were you when it became clear you were a writer?

I slept with a dictionary as a security object as a baby, so apparently I knew before I even knew. Growing up in a family of writers there was never a time I didn't link my well-being to articulation of it in language. I wrote, revised, and studied writing from toddlerhood, really. My fairly heavy baggage about being a writer wasn't fully resolved until grad school at Goddard, when I was building muscle like crazy and producing so much writing (and so much of it was really what I'd meant to say!) there was no blank page left for imposter syndrome—but truly, I always knew words were my way.

I studied writing (poetry, prose, and playwriting), but also Classics, comparative religion, and Holocaust/genocide Studies: most of my teaching has been interdisciplinary critical analysis of and writing about these subjects, with creative responses built in to that study. For me, writing is the synthesis of learning, and the joy and key are in both.

Which came first, the drive towards athletic pursuits, or the drive to write? Or are these parts of a larger whole?

I escaped an abusive home (when I couldn't escape into a book but actually had to leave the house) by going to the pool, the ballet center, and the forest. Movement that is wholly grounded in strength and balance, precision and intent/skill, has been integral to my access to joy and safety in this world. It is about congruence between who I am—which is very consciously animal—and how my body will express that in the world. Much of my best writing is done IN movement, in my head, while walking, swimming, training. Endurance swimming in particular gives you a lot of time to harmonize the body, mind, and spirit.

Every form of joy and power and well-being inheres in congruence between inside and out, body and soul, for me.

Also, I almost lost it (spinal injury causing a decade of disability, a surgical rebuild in titanium enabling me to be myself again, if at steep cost), then hereditary immune disease cracked open at last and became a real threat, then covid almost killed me. So, I value embodied joy at full volume and dedication all the more now.

I know how vulnerable we are, and how brief.

If you could invite six people, living or dead, to your ideal dinner party, whom would you invite?

Oh man, I don't know. This would change every time you asked me. Today: Henry Louis Gates Jr and Eddie Izzard turn out to be my fourth cousins, according to my genes: ever since I found that out I've been dying to have those two at the same table. So them, plus Mary Shelley, Chow Yun Fat, Oscar Wilde, and Big Mama Thornton.

You have a new book out and another that's been re-released, is that right? Tell us all about them and how to get our hands on them.

Gilgamesh Wilderness just came out from Saddle Road Press, and they re-issued my last book, *The Inugami Mochi*, at the same time; it is re-sized and re-imagined in design to create a nesting pair out of the two, ready-made for your bookcase. *Gilgamesh Wilderness* is not a sequel to *The Inugami Mochi*, but they are familiar spirits to each other.

The Inugami Mochi is a collection of interlocking short stories, which as a whole creates the life-arc of the relationship between a woman and her familiar spirit, who may or may not be the Dog God. It explores many themes: mortality, love that is built rather than discovered, how a profound bond across species can isolate both participants while also making their worlds larger, the drive to connect and how difficult that can be (particularly when one is outside of the usual social rules and norms for one reason or another), and ancient archetypes, story forms, and myths about these things.

Gilgamesh Wilderness is a hybrid poetry and prose collection that uses the framework of the ancient Epic of Gilgamesh, particularly from Tablet VIII forward, to map what has no map: the severing by death of the witch and her familiar, or any sacred Beloved from the other.

The book is built as we have the epic: from passages, episodes, and fragments—fragments that are incomplete and sharp, forcing us to put ourselves inside the caesuras to make meaning of what is happening. The book is a journey like Gilgamesh's after his Beloved, Enkidu, is dead: the madness of the initial loss, the determination to go west to the ends of the earth to kill death itself and end loss once and for all, the failing and failing to do so, and finally, the humbling of those failures, which lead to actual wisdom and the ability to be a good king. It's a template that is true—as long as it is allowed to be as brutal, messy, and imperfect as the epic's template actually is: there is no happy or easy ending to grief, there is integration and peace that still contains the lost world of the Beloved and always will.

Both books are hybrids of fiction/myth and creative non-fiction—I sometimes joke-not-joke that I made everything up except the parts where Dog talks. (The greatest truths often come from fictions, anyway.) In *The Inugami Mochi*, Cecily is who I might be if I stripped away most of my social skills and adaptations for having an atypical brain, and Dog, of course, is Dog. In *Gilgamesh Wilderness*, I kept the intimacy of the “I” very raw, very much on purpose: I don't believe anything less than skinlessness can do what this book needs to do, which is to speak truthfully, to bear witness truthfully, to the “big” loss—which we can never predict. Everyone's biggest is different. I have lost best friends, parents, nephew, chosen family, and grieved deeply. The thing that took me out, though, was the loss of the familiar. When he became Enkidu, I became Gilgamesh, and this book is what I made from that experience.

This archetype of the human/animal familiar spirit relationship doesn't exist much anymore, though we still need it: when it does exist, it's been domesticated away from all real meaning into some kind of baby-talk monstrosity I don't even recognize. So I wrote the love, the loss, the wholeness severed, in witness. I hope it is healing witness, and validation, and honor, for any who have experienced profound loss.

In the end, as with the epic, it's about mortality, and how we go on—with our hearts *open*—in the terrible presence of death.

Where can people find you and follow you on social media?

Jessamyn Smyth Writes on Facebook. I've been ignoring the others, which I know is unfashionable, but whatever: I spend too much time chained to screens as it is! My website, jessamynsmyth.net, has all my books and news.



self-defender kyle rittenhouse launches charm offensive

Corwin Ericson

Matt Gaetz and Sarah Palin each announce separate plans to adopt Kyle Rittenhouse.

A delighted Kyle Rittenhouse comments, “Mar a Lago is awesome, nobody even teases me for wearing a T-shirt in the pool.”

Lauren Boebert and Kyle Rittenhouse announce plans to open a new restaurant together; The Most Dangerous Game.

Kyle Rittenhouse announces he will go on spiritual retreat with his guru, Steven Seagal, at his Sochi dacha.

Kyle Rittenhouse offers crying lessons to January sixth defendants.

Vladimir Putin invites Kyle Rittenhouse to Moscow, saying, “The AR-15 is OK, but you haven’t defended yourself properly until you’ve fired a good, old-fashioned Kalashnikov into a crowd of protestors.”

After a big game hunting trip with Donald Trump, Jr., Kyle Rittenhouse announces plans to grow a beard as soon as he can.

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Wayne LaPierre caught masturbating to “Kyle Rittenhouse: Barely Legal.”

Kyle Rittenhouse reveals he has a Roger Stone tattoo on his back.

On his new reality show, *Coal Rollin’ with Kyle*, Rittenhouse demonstrates from his new Ford F250 how to vape, chew tobacco, film TikToks, snort meth, mix a Red Bull and vodka cocktail right in the can, destroy traffic signs with an AR-15, and transport teenage girls across state lines all while defending himself against lycra-clad, shaved-legged, antifa bicyclists.

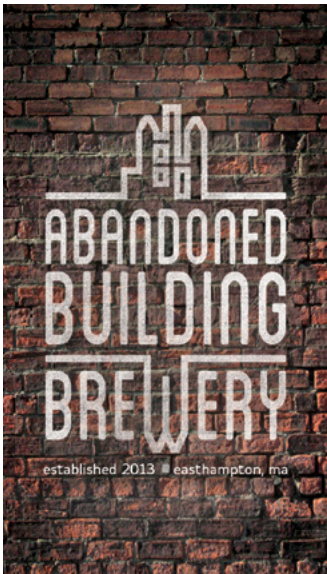
An angry George Zimmerman tweets he plans to defend his reputation as America’s favorite sovereign citizen vigilante against “Cryin’ Kyle,” decrying the teen’s “pathetic bodycount.”

Kyle Rittenhouse tearfully defends himself against Alex Jones’ accusation that his victims were crisis actors. “They weren’t ‘victims!’” he blubbers.

Eager to meet a fellow fat-faced fuck, Kim Jong-un names new weapons system “The Rittenhouser” and invites the teen to use the new surface-to-surface missiles to defend himself against former North Korean ministers of shame and remorse at a public execution in Pyonyang.

CBS announces new TV series *Kings of Kenosha* in which the Rittenhouse brothers, never meaning no harm, drive around Kenosha County in their suped-up Durango, The General Flynn, defending themselves against libtards, skateboarders, Hilary Clinton, uppity Black joggers, government vaccinators, activist judges, masked antifa lizard people, social justice warriors, deep staters, and Jews who want to replace them. Episode One: "Kyle Is Stuck in the Window."

After killing himself in self-defense, Kyle Rittenhouse achieves the singularity, uploads his consciousness to an AI, and triggers a nuclear armageddon to defend himself against humanity.



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holy night communion

Pearse Anderson

“I ask one hundred brave companions, well equipped, to start from Siberia in the fall season, with reindeer and sleighs, on the ice of the frozen sea: I engage we find a warm and rich land, stocked with thrifty vegetables and animals if not men”

—John Cleves Symmes Jr. on locating the Hollow Earth at the North Pole, 1818.

~0~

When you learn of us, your first instinct might be of wonder that any species could live inside the Earth itself, but plunge deeper. You must know that this was always a possibility, if not a likelihood, that great masses brewed inside the womb of the planet, and that humanity was simply a temporary species on the crust, a tick on a dog, you might say. We knew of you. You are quite expedient in your takeover of the crust, covering nearly everything not iced over. You surrounded us on nearly all sides, which was frustrating, but haven't you ever been surrounded by something you dislike? A popular tune that plays everywhere you go? A boring conversation? That was humanity, to be honest. I'm going to be frank in this letter. I hope that you do not dislike what I have to say as much as we disliked your species.

There have been other crust species, strange creatures that bathe in the radiation of the stars and are surrounded by the silence of black space. We have known of the Uranium Benevolence, who destroyed themselves with their own vehicles, and the Tidal Workers, who were iced over after thousands of years, before the Elven Kingdom reigned on the washed-out crust of Earth until an asteroid hit and burnt them dead. Well, most of them. Then you showed up and ate all you could, often without honor or shytsiwi spirit.

Every bite we take in Central Earth is taken as communion, please understand that first. It is deeply important that you recognize how, out of necessity and love, we eat what we eat. We have deep traditions around communion, which are all shytsiwi acts, holy moments. If you spent hours hauling sheets of ale-soaked lichen off stalagmites with tall tungsten rods, you might understand. If you tired under the light of Mawew Wuas—the Mother Core—as her molten heart grows our sugar beets, unfurls our esha flowers, and stains our backs in deep pigmentations, you might understand. If you joined us for Wuas Piercings of our young and, if the ceremony failed, the communion of corpses as graceful flesh and steaming bone pies, you might understand. Until you have seen these wonders, please take my word for it: we take great care.

When I came to the surface, the first creatures I saw were elves sticking their tongues out, waiting for not Mawew Wuas burnt-flesh but snow. Frozen water? What a waste of energy, to melt each snowflake on an elven tongue. What inefficiencies being a crust species creates. Yet, we are guilty too now that we have emerged. When my friends saw the elves with their tongues on that stark snowflake obsidian night, they stared for only a half-second before spearing the elves right through with fishing poles. We meant to take communion of all of the corpses we made, but there were too many corpses and not enough time. Now that I write this, several days after, we cannot determine if their frozen flesh is still safe to consume. Before emergence, there was little Central use to learn about refrigeration.

Ais, now that I think about it there are some basics we might have skipped over. What exactly lives inside this hollow, what we call Central? Only one sentient species, us. The crust has called us many names: goblin, muki, kallikantzaros. We call ourselves Zywians. My name is Sushez, which means cabinet, because my parents said I was storing details away in my head for later. I could describe our physiology, but I want to leave it as a surprise when we meet in person. We're bipedal, with all the major organs, but use your imagination for the rest, we'll light up your eyes more that way.

We've developed Central to the degree that our entire world is a tight mosaic of urban blocks, mass recyclers, stalagmite lakes, and land preserved for food and beauty. Unlike how you treat the crust, in Central, everything must be reused, even the shytshiw energy of our bishopry and esazi archivist-kings. But how, when great Zywians have died and their lips stop moving, can we recycle their energy, when they are too holy for wet communion? Well, their bodies are carried across Central to a ring of stalagmites by 80th Quarter that reach so close to Mawew Wuas that she melts their tips into flat-topped mesas. Anything carried to that peak incinerates instantly and rains down as ash to fertilizer our crop and our souls. I am the laborer who tells the eulogy of these elders. I am the laborer who lifts their bodies to the mesa-top with my tungsten rod. I am the first Zywian to inhale in communion our collective past and, therefore, our collective future. How do you think I became such a good storyteller? I told the stories of eight archivist-kings over many years, and then they became me. When we took wet communion of the undertaker I apprenticed for, we ate to her lungs and found them black as esha jelly. I pulled them out and held them towards Mawew Wuas shouting "See the soot! See the lives that she caught in her great lungs!" I wish someone does the same when my body is taken for communion. Ais, if you want to hear of my apprentice, you must hear of the elves.

Whenever crust species fall, our archivist-kings say it takes centuries for all in the civilization to slouch towards death. When the asteroid ash thickened the Elven Kingdom's skies (I cannot imagine the history of their lungs, can you?) a hundred thousand fled the bedlam of the equator for the North and South Pole. Their ships were primitive, and they lacked the tungsten light we have to see through such darkness as apocalyptic ash. Yet, many survived, camping on the very ice floes that circled our two polar opposite Central entrances. Of course we had sealed them, for our defense as much as anyone else's, but their presence was still frightening. We wrote carols to the polar bears and orcas, singing them en masse towards the crust, hoping the animals would understand the lyrics "End the elves / save yourselves / make them slouch towards extinction." They didn't. Most elves perished over the centuries, but the communities that survived were the heartiest, and the most mobile. The most likely to discover our entrances.

Despite what you may see as crust prejudice, there are ways we honor your kind of species. Take the Wuas Piercing: this ceremony is a dark double to my work as an undertaker. When a child is 32768 hours old, they have a quick procedure. It is done by a bishop and their handlers as fast and sterile as you can imagine: they push a metal straw through the child's chest until it strikes the operating table. The new hole through their body is not plugged but kept open for another 32768 hours, as a test to see if they have the strength to survive what Central requires. If they live, they are finally given names, since they have a place in Central and the willpower to make a difference. If they succumb, we take communion decades before we normally would, a great honor. For those days between the Wuas Piercing and Plugging, we tell each child that they are just like the Earth. Their skin is the crust and their wuas is Central. Their wuas is strong,

because Central is strong, so it will not become sick or fester, and the crust is strong, because it builds around Central and protects it as much as it can. Of course, I have taken enough communion to know this is not always true. But it is a metaphor.

Eventually, the South Pole elves choked on their phlegm, even the strong ones. We only had to observe the ones in the North Pole through our scrying crystals and our tunnel-tower-eyeslits. But what did they do? They changed camp. They migrated directly on top of our entrance. These are the only locations on the Earth where we cannot put our eyes. Our ancestors engineers were pywupuww isuws for they designed not a single peephole. Meanwhile, humanity flourished, and though our archivist-kings were penning reports of your movement and our new designs of libraries and statues, there was forever one eye trained on the North Pole. We could hear through the crust the pounding of hammer into nail, the laying down of masonry and rail. What could they be building? Why could the polar bears not have consumed them too?

Down in Central, we were crafting clocks. One bishop, Man Yzi, inspired by the glass recyclers of 12th Quarter, built a hourglass and used sand from that hourglass to blow into a small hourglass which, itself, contained an hourglass as small as a flea's head and could be flipped to count an exact millisecond. We all contain nested wonders, do we not? Five excavators petitioned to become sculptures after showing the reigning archivist-king how they honored their dead: carving a statue from recycled rock, and then carving out the Wuas Piercing to insert a clock. This clock could measure the Shytshiw Hours since communion was taken, so that the mourning could visit and grieve 512 hours after, 2048 after, 65536 after. The style of statuary and clockwork became quite popular. Even the bishopry librarians invented a clock powered by the warmth of Mawew Wuas and required only oiling once every century. The hour hands turned the pages of our holy texts so that, without Zywian intervention, our scripture could be read. The librarians were shunned by the philosophers for that. The invention, they orated at Quarter halls, implied that Zywians would one day vanish—a nihilistic and disgusting thought. But much like everything the bishopry did, it was a prophecy.

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The year I started mentoring my undertaker apprentice, Wypū, the elves broke through our barricaded entrance. I was feeding an archivist-king to Mawew Wuas and his slippers had fallen off as I pushed him to the mesa. Wypū was running down flights of stairs carved into the stalagmites, chasing the sliding royal slippers, laughing up at me as I prepared my lungs for another king. Of course, I was laughing too. "I got her left slipper!" she yelled from down below. She started coughing then. I had no idea why: the body was not yet burnt and distributed in the air. I looked down. A gas was rising from the crust towards the core, climbing to higher altitudes. I covered my mouth. It stole my breath anyway. I woke up having dropped the archivist-king, her corpse buried in a red beet bucket. This was anything but shytshiw.

I found Wypū unconscious but alive. She never found the right slipper. With Mawew Wuas' constant burning, you cannot check the sky for the time, only our clocks. Archivists reported that eight hours had passed. Many had drowned in laundry water or died from terrible falls. Both of our families were safe. We waited for the newest archivist-king to make a statement, herself still a child, barely Plugged and named.

We sang until we cried when we heard the determination of the first elven expedition, the thousand dead, all of Central uncertain. We did not even have a word to define that kind of

expedition was, so our reconnaissance teams and scryers stole one of yours: safari. We were gassed and our land walked through like a garden. We were watched, maybe touched. Do you know how violating it feels to be on the wrong side of a safari, your sovereign people reduced to near corpses as parties of elven explorers march by? They left footprints in our irrigation ditches and communion squares. We scrubbed them clean. I prayed that they would only visit once, to confirm that Zywians are a peaceful and kind species. A hundred days passed, then they gassed us again.

They were playing with our clocks, poking our siloed harvest, stretching our recycled garments to check the stitching. After each gassing, we made sure we were safe while singing esazi carols to try to memorize the position of what was moved and touched. This was before they started stealing from us. The archivist-king's laborers found they could not travel through the North Pole entrance: it was protected by some deep elven magic. We had not opened the South Pole entrance in so many millennia that a glacier had formed atop the doorway. This was no longer a safari. They had turned Central into a zoo.

Wypū began to tie herself to me as we hiked the funerary stalagmites so she had some counterbalance if she was gassed and fell. It felt less and less shytshiw to burn great bodies in Mawew Wuas: how powerful could the air be that contained traces of a thousand heroes, but also the diffusions of a dozen safaris? How wide could I open my mouth to inhale the greatness without taking off my face mask? Those only lasted a year before even the stupidest Zywian realized they did not work. The bishopry offered an entire catalog of blessed gas mask designs, but under trial none of them worked. We floated many worse ideas at Quarter halls. Nothing worked—we always smelled that awful odor, then our breath went. I waited thirty years for us to identify the scent. It was mint. Technically “Twisted Peppermint Stick” according to this label in front of me.

When the elves started stealing from Central, our archivist-king offered herself up for communion. By now, she had organized dozens of ways to rebuild and retaliate, and she was still so ashamed she asked to be taken as communion, a request unheard of. There were royal teams of Zywians assigned to help the injured, librarians to record our esazi carols for scholars to analyze, orphanage patrons to assist the newly orphaned to good homes. There were hovel carvers who took contracts to build gas shelters hidden in Central, and there were philosopher-psychologists to listen to the traumatized. Wypū lived above one's makeshift clinic, and when I visited to bring her esha jelly and fishbone soup I could hear right through the floorboards my own neighbors describing their constant paranoia and their loss of faith. Wypū sipped her fishbone soup, explained that it was always like this, that the stress would not be good for the baby. Ais, her pregnancy was a quick and complicated one, though what strikes me most is when she got her results. I was writing a eulogy and she paused above my desk to ask “How do I know it's a Zywian? How do I know I was not raped on a safari?”

No, it was a Zywian, a child we called Wawypū, daughter of Wypū, until she was Pierced and Plugged. She only knew the gassings. The elves were stealing our clocks out of our statues' wuases. They took the molten orbs of three-toned glass from our recyclers. They stripped our sugar beet fields of the plumpest crop and left only footprints and the syrupy remains of whatever they chewed as they safaried. Their early trips, in retrospect, were journeys to inspect the merchandise, to case the target. Our archivist-king had died, a fall when gassed, it

was said, though I knew from her corpse it was suicide. A fate she took into her own hands when Zywiens could not deliver. Have you ever lost as much as we did in these years? Not just the tangible, though they raided that well. Every gassing we rebuilt best we could and tried to secure what we loved, but if you hide a statue away forever, isn't that the same as the statue never existing at all?

The clock outside my home was locked behind wire and the beautiful design of black hour hands on fishbone ivory was obscured. The red and green pigments of bishopry flags were hidden in the laundry, and so our faith became a little less vibrant. Our crops needed time to regrow, so all of Central went on rations, and the great Quarter hall feasts became sparse and the tavern-boats abandoned. I did not know how to begin to mourn in the middle of a long loss, not knowing how much more we had to lose.

Ais, we did rebuild, and I am proud that the young Wawypū saw how hard Central worked. Every few months the empty and broken corners of Central were mended, but soon after they were thieved from again. They took many tungsten rods. Not the ones Wypū or I used, but the ones necessary for the Wuas Piercing. Wawypū's ceremony was delayed, then swiftly cancelled. The bishopry was a shadow organization by then. But I struggled to look at Wawypū. She had no hollow wuas; she was all crust. The elves were making her like them.

You want to know what the final straw was, correct? What brought me to the surface, within spearing distance of three elves melting snowflakes on their tongues? I am not a soldier, almost no Zywian is. I grew old during this crisis. My breath is short and blackened with history. What brought all of us over the edge were the disappearances.

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After years, the tinkerers ran low on clock cases. The mosaic artists could not purchase more tiles after the last safari. The orators warned that scholars determined the Zywian body on rationed food stores would not live to old age. The new archivist-king decreed that Central would no longer be rebuilt. We would no longer be an elven pantry, forever restocking ourselves. This was the first protest I participated in. I was on my last cycle as an undertaker, about to hand Wypū my hood and keys. I dreaded the Central I was retiring into, as each subsequent month it grew more dim, rocky, and bitter tasting. The elves noticed that they had less to steal. We paid a price: they took our children.

I found Wypū at the sculptors, bartering with teams to purchase a statue of Wawypū. She wanted to mourn her, she wanted a clock to measure the Shytshiw Hours since she was taken. The sculptors refused, since there was no corpse. There was no communion taken to be measured by a clock. Her life did not live on in us through recycled flesh. I thought the Central-wide protest was over, that we would start to craft more ornaments and clockwork for our masters. They had only taken a fraction of the children, and I would not let there be another thousand Wypūs. Wypū agreed: the protest was over. We needed to invade the crust.

Elven magic is crystalline and painful, but it did not stand up to the concerned power of a hundred Zywian scryers with a grieving mother at their helm. It had taken months of training, all done in oratory fashion with esazi carols to leave no written record for the elves to see, but we had opened the North Pole entrance. We spilled out, clutching tools we had never used for violence but would be happy to demo. My friends killed the first few as Central reconnaissance

teams used blow darts tipped with fermented esha jelly. I broke an elf's legs in those first five minutes, it's true. I was not following troop movement or casualties, though. I am an undertaker: deaths are nothing new. I was studying the fort the elves had constructed atop our entrance, the vast collection of buildings we had never seen. The miles of red brick dormitories and barracks for elves! The onion-domed palatial entrance, with train tracks running every which way! The belching manufactory towers and the chalky, aged gingerbread houses that lingered in the warm shadow of them. We prey had traced back the safari and they lived here, in a place you call "Santa's Workshop."

Ais, humans were complicit in our pain, do you see now? I understood the foul operation after inspecting the Workshop. Wypū kept me close to the Zywian uprising and as we went building by building, dozens if not hundreds of great halls all interlocked and circling the Central entrance. Elves came at us with ice picks and pots of boiling sugar. Many died on both sides. I helped clear their confectionary rooms, massive sterile wastelands where our sugar beets were processed into peppermint bark, butter toffee, peanut brittle, reindeer treats, caramel fudge, cranberry sauce, and frosted cookies. We had interrupted them being boxed into care packages. The ornamentary was the same: bright colors, useless gifts, stolen remains of Central. Our glass was blown into ornamental orbs, our metals melted into angels. By the time I entered the toy factory, I began to have flashbacks of all the safaris, so I excused myself from the troops to breathe outside. I was unarmed, only wielding my tungsten rod. Two elves found me and threw down a candled bottle of Twisted Peppermint Stick gas to knock me out, but gravity did not work the same up here and the gas floated towards the stars. I skewered their chests and went back to controlling my breathing.

Wawypū was inside the toy factory. Other Zywian children were there, chained to pine boughs, in the assembly line. Kwashiorkor and other forms of malnutrition had twisted their bodies into awful geometries. They were only being fed gingerbread and expired food dye. Their small hands were even better than the elves at disassembling our clockwork and building wind-up toys: ducks that waddled, a monkey with cymbals. Wypū cut out Wawypū from the shackles. They took elven communion together, as mother and daughter. I left as troops sang an old esazi carol that I heard tungsten recyclers chant as a child.

What was the Workshop for? I hunted for answers: were the elves creating wind-up automatons as a way to explore the stars? Were they stealing our harvest to gift as tribute to gods? Were they using our glass in a new form of crystalline magic that could bring eternal life? They were oppressors, worse than killers, but these would at least be strangely understandable goals that speak to some higher plane of existence. I found one vault that held gold bars and coins from all over the crust (krona and ruble, franc and half dollar) but I was certain that could not be the justification for our suffering.

After we had dealt with the elves and either healed or taken communion of our wounded, I visited the largest onion-domed fort in the Workshop, a peppermint-stick-looking prison in my opinion. Snowmen studded the windows, and the lobby boasted a fountain that flowed with whiskey and honeyed tea. The center was a throne room, and I honestly expected to see a dictator on that red felt chair, anything to explain the operation. But whoever once helmed the Workshop had since died. His urn sat beside the throne. "This is the mausoleum to their great leader," Wypū said from the entrance. "He died a long time ago, and from what the scholars

have decoded in their archives, he was more of a marketing gimmick than an architect. They weren't following his orders."

Wypū was here to collect his ashes and spread them in Central. Although this red-capped man was not shytshiw to us, he was to others, and she wanted to honor and continue his life. She asked for my hood and keys, and I gave them freely: she had done more than earned the role of grand undertaker. She would carry Zywian corpses to burn in the light of Mawew Wuas, and keep those she was friendly with to take as communion with Wawypū until their diets improved. I told her I loved her, but could not join her. I still had a story to write. I had to eulogize the dead and dying, to explain the reasoning behind all of this. She pointed me back to the elven vault.

Could it have been solely for this holiday called Christmas? Were all of these events perpetuated by the drive for profits of gifts, knickknacks, scented candles? Wwunē dyu wusūnu i sha awyz, I want to curse at the crust, you greedy collaborators. This holiday you built comes so frequently that as soon as the elves stole our beets for your candies, we were sowing the next crop to be stolen. As soon as your children discard our sacred clocks and archive-machines, now deformed as miniature red trucks and playtime polar trains, you can pat their heads and tell them Christmas is only three months away, that their gifts shall be replenished soon. In your mind, where were these treasures coming from? When you pictured whose land was being defiled, could you imagine the fear of our people, the brittleness of our children's bones, the pillaging of our culture? I'm sorry you cannot blame this great leader in the red cap. I'm sorry you kept sending mail trains north to collect your year of gifts every December since the great leader's death and the anthrax killings of his reindeer. You are what our philosophers would call a nunas wusūnu—it used to mean "landlord," now it translates to "secondary collaborator." There will be consequences.

We have been on the crust for almost a month now, eating the gingerbread houses and archiving both our knowledge and the elven ways in a new great library. The Workshop's lore is laughable: have you ever heard their versions of carols? Wait to hear our carols, then compare the two.

But the elves did destroy Central in one last way, even after our invasion. They grew a hemiparasitic plant in great greenhouses alongside holly, ivy, and yew. You seem to know the hemiparasite, mistletoe? The hemiparasite saps nutrients and water from wherever it takes root. Perhaps they grew it here as a botanical metaphor, a green reflection of themselves. No matter. We've brought it into Central on the soles of our feet. Maybe we did not follow quarantine procedure, or maybe the peppermint gas killed the seed germ . . . however it was brought in, it was an accident, and now too late. The hemiparasite has taken root in our crops. The fields have burst with evergreen leaves and the esha flowers have wilted. The Workshop's food stores are running even lower than our Central silos, and corpse communion could only extend our futility. I thought that this would be it: Zywians would emerge onto the crust for the first time only to have the crust starve them dead.

We had a new replacement for our archivist-king, who had stepped down to lead the library project. Her replacement was an esazi caroller, untested but excited to lead Zywians towards a better future. He was calling himself an archivist-explorer. He sang that we only had to wait and our fate would be delivered on great steel tracks. Christmas was ten days away.

I have been drafting the letter you read now as I wait for this express train. If we have correctly configured timing and scheduling (we have), it is bound for the Workshop tomorrow. Mail carriers will come to deliver a years' worth of meals (roasted chestnuts, laminated gingerbread) and take Christmas presents across the crust. They will be unarmed and unsuspecting. We have hauled bodies out of the hoarfrost and scrubbed the Workshop walls unbloody. The string lights will be glowing and the Workshop manufactory smokestacks active—not with the churn of industry but the cremation of the defeated elves. The express train conductor will not be able to tell the difference. They will not know that from this point on, every breath on this side of the crust will contain a particle of our oppressors. You could see that as a threat. You could see the crust becoming cloaked in the soot of our burnt oppressors, just like the asteroid ash that was supposed to destroy them millenia ago, as a symbol for what is to come for your people. I urge you to understand these breaths you take as a Zywian would: part of the dead is becoming part of the living in your lungs. It is really a form of communion with all that is shytsihw. When we take communion of you, you will live inside us. We are all so excited for this.

As an undertaker, I have the power to determine who is too shytsihw for communion and who is common. Although I have no real sense of who will receive this letter, I've taken quite a liking to you throughout writing. As is within my power, you are too shytsihw and will be preserved for later use. Please carry this letter with you and show it if Zywians try to take communion of you. If you find me, Sushez the Undertaker, I can protect you more. I believe I will be in the back central column of our invading army. I can hear you speak for once!

I will leave this letter sealed inside a small railroad maintenance car my friends found inside the Workshop. As we board the Christmas express train, I will send the maintenance car ahead of our engine so that you have time to read my story before you see us on the horizon. The maintenance car has a half hour headstart. Roughly.

I would like to hear you recount your swath of humanity's history. If you grow apprehensive to tell a story of a dead culture, do not worry. You will be in good company.

Until we meet,

-Sushez

~0~0~0~





the collector

Stanton Yeakley

As Olivia drives across the Arkansas River, her radio is a din of flood warnings and tornado sirens. She looks out her window, but the rain is a blinding and torrential assault. For almost a month straight, a monsoon has gripped northeast Oklahoma. Even in the small hours between the rain, there is no relief. Only a heat that pushes her into the earth and sinks her high heels into the yards she visits along her route.

Olivia arrives at her first appointment just before noon. Ascending a set of plastic stairs, she knocks on the door. A little girl peeks out. Hovering in the shadows behind her are two shirtless boys. They nudge her aside and say hello.

"I'm looking for Hector Martinez," Olivia says. "Does he live here?"

"He's our brother," one of the boys says. "He's sleeping."

"Would it be okay if I talk with him?" Olivia asks.

The other boy turns and calls for Hector. When he gets to the door and invites Olivia in, he is still rubbing sleep from his eyes. He wears torn up jeans and mud-caked work boots. This is Olivia's first visit to the Martinez home so she introduces herself.

She tells a yawning Hector that she works for the state of Oklahoma and has been tasked with recovering unpaid student loan debt from out-of-compliance borrowers.

"Have you heard about the national repayment program?" she asks.

He squints and nods vaguely. His eyes wander to the television his siblings have begun to watch.

Olivia has done this enough times to know none of what she is about to tell Hector will stick. So, to get him engaged, she asks what his major was in college.

"Theater," he says, chuckling. Olivia glances at Hector's work boots and sun-scorched skin. He catches her eye and smiles.

"Clearly, it didn't work out," he offers. "My mom was the one who wanted me to go to college—the first in my family since my granddad back home. When I told her what I was majoring in though, she almost disowned me. *After we worked so hard to send you, you throw your chance in the trash, she'd say. She was furious.*"

He points to the corner of room where his siblings watch television. A framed degree sits on the floor.

"Now I work two jobs just so we can eat," he says. "Mom doesn't make enough. Dad's gone. And what am I supposed to be? An actor?" Hector shakes his head. "What is it you want to talk to me about?"

Olivia remembers why she never asks about the debtors' pasts. She pinches the soft skin under her forearm and pauses respectfully before returning to the matter at hand.

At Olivia's next appointment, the parking is more accommodating and she glides to the front of a ranch-style mansion, where a man in khakis answers the door. She asks for Brittany Dunlap.

The man smiles and calls for Brittany.

"She's my daughter," he offers. "And who are you?"

Olivia is hesitant to answer. The honest truth: She is a debt collector. A tax collector, really. Matthew, pre-apostleship. Yet, she is also herself a debtor, a daughter, and a caretaker. A former Russian literature doctoral candidate from a school the man's probably never heard of.

"I'm here regarding your daughter's unpaid student loans," she says. "I am with the Oklahoma Collections Commission." Olivia tugs at the skin on her arm. "Your daughter and I have spoken a number of times."

"I see," the man says. "Well, if you can get any money out of Brittany, I'll be impressed."

As if conjured by her name, Brittany appears beside them. She is wearing an old Minnie Mouse teeshirt and sweatpants. She looks like a child, though she can't be more than a few years younger than Olivia.

Olivia greets her and reminds Brittany of the conversations they've had over the phone. She reestablishes that Brittany has been unable to repay her student loans and, in order to assure partial payment, they are going to repossess her car today. It is Olivia's understanding that Brittany owns a 2017 Ford GT. If she would please collect the title papers and keys, a towing company is on its way.

Brittany is silent. She stares desperately at her father, but he seems relaxed in his own home and doesn't notice. His living room is filled with trinkets and trophies—framed photos of sports heroes, a red hat with white letters on the mantle, pictures of himself in various tropical locations.

"Daddy, is there any way you could help me?" Brittany asks. "I'll pay you back. I swear I'll pay you back." Her words stumble out timidly.

Her father stares at his phone.

"Please," she begs.

"Really? Brittany, when was the last time you worked?" her father asks, still eyeing his phone. "When was the last time you paid rent or got out of the fucking house?"

Now he looks at her.

“You owe the money, you can repay it. Jesus Christ. Your mother and I do enough for you already. We paid off our loans when we were your age. You can do the same. Go get your fucking papers.”

Brittany begins to cry and nods her head slowly. Her father turns back to his phone.

Olivia tries not to listen to the sobs as Brittany rustles through drawers for her title papers. The sound of her tossing items around gives off an eerie echo—like the cacophonous ramblings of a ghost. Olivia prepares her own papers in the dining room.

She barely looks up when Brittany stumbles back into the entryway with a gun pointed at her father.

He begins to yell and Olivia cannot breathe.

She doesn't stay at the Dunlaps' long after the police take her statement. She steals a moment to breathe deeply—slow breaths, in through the nose and out through pursed lips—before heading to her last appointment for the day.

On the way, the rain lets up and she drives beneath a darkened canopy bursting with afternoon light. The road is half shrouded in trees and glistening spider webs hang like silk doilies from the branches. Olivia rolls down her window and smells the earthiness in the air.

When she arrives, she nearly misses the unmarked turnoff for the property. She eases onto a path engulfed by pecan and elm and rolls through the trees for at least fifty yards until coming to a clearing. Then she sees the house.

For a moment, all Olivia can do is marvel.

Sitting in a field, waving in mottled light, is an antebellum home carved out from time's linear equation. The two-story Folk Victorian is encircled by a wide porch and covered in gaping black windows. Four columns support the veranda and a single elm sways beside it.

Olivia takes her papers and walks to Morgan Byers's doorstep. From the porch she can see the bank of the Arkansas River. The water moves swiftly, filled to the brim with a month's worth of rain. She knocks on the door and waits. After a pause, she hears latches being methodically undone. A man opens the door and leans his head out.

“Hi,” she says. “My name is Olivia Williams, and I'm with the Oklahoma Collections Commission. I'm looking for a Morgan Byers. Is she or he here?”

“Yeah,” the man says, squinting at her. “I'm Morgan Byers.” He doesn't invite her in. He hangs in the doorway like a marionette hiding its strings.

“Could I come in?” Olivia asks. “I need to talk with you about your student loan repayment status.”

“My what?” Morgan asks.

“The money you owe the government. Your student loans,” she says, feeling herself becoming agitated. She tugs at the skin of her arm.

“I guess,” Morgan mumbles and opens the door.

Inside, the house feels like a mausoleum. The darkness is only broken by stray beams of light creeping under window shades. The air is hazy and smells like weed—maybe mold. Olivia asks if they can go into the kitchen to talk. Morgan looks at her, his eyes glassy. He is like a simmering pot. The dank smell of smoke and his blank expression make her afraid. He shows her to the kitchen and she forces her legs to follow.

“Mr. Byers,” she begins once they’re seated at the table, “do you know how much student loan debt you have incurred?”

He shakes his head.

“It’s over \$150,000. We’ve sent a number of letters about your delinquent status. Have you received these letters?”

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He shrugs and gets up from his chair to pull a pack of cigarettes from a drawer. It is only then she notices he is missing a hand. His left arm is amputated at the wrist.

“Are you currently employed, Mr. Byers?”

“No,” Morgan says.

“Do you currently have any means by which to repay this debt? Any bank accounts or property?”

“Had my parent’s life insurance for a few years, but that’s pretty much dried up.”

“Do you own anything else? Any cars or boats or things like that?”

He is silent for a moment and looks around. Bright photos in framed collages line the kitchen walls. Strange, distorted sculptures sit on a long display in the hallway.

“I guess I own this house,” he says.

“Well, Mr. Byers, per this state’s suspension of its homestead exemption, if we are unable to find a way for you to begin repaying your loans, I’m afraid one option is to foreclose on the house.”

Morgan’s demeanor is suddenly attentive and he raises his eyes to her, shoving off from the table with his phantom hand.

“Fuck you, lady,” he says, “I ain’t selling shit.”

He stalks out of the kitchen and Olivia can hear him in a back room, rummaging around. She can also hear dogs barking. They are behind a closed door, trying to get out. Snapping and clawing at the wood between them and her. Something heavy crashes to the floor and she pinches her arm until the nail craters her skin. She cannot take it. The smell of smoke is making her light-headed, and she imagines Morgan Byers barreling into the room with a gun—this time, pointed at her.

She collects her papers and leaves.

When Olivia gets home, it is raining again and her father is watching Jeopardy reruns. He shouts “Vivaldi” before the voice of Alex Trebek announces: *We were looking for, “who is Vivaldi.”*

He smiles and winks. Olivia laughs and reminds him that since he spends all day watching quiz shows, he’s bound to remember a few things. Then she asks if he wants chicken noodle or clam chowder for dinner. He says he wants the chowder and she heats a bowl and brings it to him along with his bib and dinner tray. She sets the bowl on the tray and lightly spoons broth into his mouth. He reaches for it before she’s ready and she spills some on his chin.

“Olivia, I, I can”—he pauses, trying to get the words out—“I can feed myself, you know.”

“You have Parkinson’s, so, I would disagree.”

“I could tilt the bowl to my mouth,” he posits, carefully mimicking the motion.

She laughs and tells him they’ve tried that a number of times; he always ends up spilling it on his lap. He shrugs and shark bites another spoonful.

“Besides,” Olivia says, “I don’t mind. You’re the most relaxing part of my day.”

Since she moved in with him, she has felt closer to her father than ever, though she would never tell him that she loves him most on his deathbed.

“Anyway,” he says, “how was your ... how was the day?”

“Oh, not much eventful happened,” she says. “Besides a girl pulling a gun on her dad.”

He stops eating his soup and shakes his head.

“You need a new job, Liv. Maybe go back to school?”

“School was what got me in this mess in the first place, remember? At least doing this gets my loans forgiven.”

Her father nods. "But someone might turn a gun on you. Then none of your work," he pauses to take a breath. "Then the job won't have been worth the effort."

She shrugs. "They still might cancel my loans."

He looks out the window for a moment. "I'm sorry, Olivia. College was always my goal for you. Maybe, maybe I pushed you to go longer than you needed."

"You didn't choose my major though."

"But Dostoyevsky," he replies wistfully. "How can you pass that up?"

She sighs and kisses him on the head as she takes his bowl to the kitchen. He is sharp this evening. Wholly lucid. Perhaps the day is salvageable.

From the sink, she tells him about the one-handed man in the beautiful old house. She says she feels like shit that they'll probably have to foreclose.

"What if he doesn't leave?" her father asks.

"It would probably involve the sheriff," she says. "But they always leave eventually."

"I wouldn't be sure," he says. "Wounded dogs don't roll over."

Two weeks later, Olivia is again sitting in Morgan Byers's kitchen. Rain pounds the roof with small fists and the air in the house is thick and humid. Morgan smokes as Olivia reviews his debt on an itemized table. Morgan, however, has no interest in listening, and Olivia has squeezed all the patience she can from her arm. It has scabbed over with crescent moons and she hides it under the table. Morgan blows smoke in her direction.

"Could you not smoke?" she asks.

"It's my fucking house. I'll smoke if I want to."

In the background, the television drones. Olivia digs her nails into the palms of her hands. She feels as if the the air in her lungs is trapped.

"Well, it might not be your house for long," she snaps. "If you can't repay, we start foreclosure. So, I guess go ahead and smoke in it while it's yours." Her shoulders tighten and she waits for him to start yelling. Instead, his mood changes and, to her surprise, he laughs.

"Man, fuck you, lady. You really are the devil."

"I'm just doing my job," she says.

“Pretty shitty job,” he replies. “Did you grow up wanting to do this? Like, it was either astronaut, mailman, or student debt collector?”

“We’re not here to talk about me,” she says robotically.

Morgan ignores her. “That why you do that to your arm, huh? Cause of how shitty your job is?” He points at her fresh scabs.

“No,” she says, pulling down her sleeve.

“Really?” he says. “I bet that’s why you do it. Either you did that to yourself or you’re into some kinky shit.” He laughs.

“Mr. Byers, please stop talking. For your own sake. Keep talking and we get to foreclosure a hell of a lot faster.” She goes to pinch at her arm but it is raw and painful. “And I’m sure you’re someone who knows staring is rude.” She glances down at his amputated hand.

“What? This?” he says, holding the nub up for her to see. “I know people stare at this. Why wouldn’t they? I’m missing my damn hand. I saw you staring last week so don’t try and act all holier than thou.”

Olivia puts her pen down and pinches the bridge of her nose. The drumbeat rain is endless and her head pounds in rhythm with the water.

“What happened to it?” she hears herself asking.

“To the hand?” he replies. “I was working on a skidsteer and got it caught in a fan blade. Had a glove on and the fan grabbed the Velcro part and yanked my hand into the motor.” He demonstrates his ghost hand being ripped into a spinning blade. “Looked like ground beef when I got it out.”

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly. “Did that happen while you were in school?”

“Yup,” he says. “I was going to a liberal arts college in Texas.” He snuffs his cigarette on an ash tray. “You know, it’s funny, I think the fact I was in school fucked me.”

“What do you mean?” Olivia asks.

“Well,” he says, “when it happened I sued the company that made the skidsteer, seeing as I lost my hand and all. Only, I ended up not getting shit out of it.

“They said I should have known the blade was dangerous, since I’d bled fuel injectors like that before. Then they looked at my college major and saw I’d switched from electrical engineering to sculpture. They must’ve figured I wouldn’t be making jack shit for money anyway, so my attorneys settled the thing for a few thousand dollars.

“At the end of the day, I’m left with one hand, no way to sculpt anything half decent, and no degree.” He shrugs. “I should probably get a job, but what’s the point?”

Olivia looks around the kitchen at the walls lined with sculptures: stone faces, impenetrable obelisks.

“If it makes you feel better,” she says, noticing her shoulders loosen ever so slightly, “I studied Russian literature. I was even working on my doctorate.”

“What happened there?” Morgan asks.

“Well,” she says, “a number of things, really. My first mistake was majoring in Russian literature. My second was getting engaged to a dick. Turns out, neither a doctorate nor my asshole fiancé was going to help me take care of my dad or put food on the table.”

“And this job does?”

“Yeah,” Olivia says.

“But it hurts a little, I see.” Morgan nods toward her arm.

“Maybe,” she allows, “but it’s not always the job.”

“Your dad?”

“Recently, yes,” she says. “He fell again last week, so he’s been in and out of the hospital these past few days. Which has become par for the course lately.”

Morgan looks at her and for the first time, he isn’t glaring.

“But that’s not why I’m here,” she adds hastily. “I’m here to figure out a way for you to keep your house.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Morgan says, ignoring her attempt to get back on track. “I hope he gets to feeling better.”

“Besides, I know why you’re here,” he continues. “It’s not so I don’t lose the house. You’re here to make sure you guys give me a little due process before taking it. It’s already gone.”

“It doesn’t have to be though,” Olivia says, feeling a sudden well of desperation for him.

“No, it does,” he replies. “You know, just before you got here I was trying to put sandbags down by the river to stop it coming further into the yard. I’m out here with one hand trying to lug around these fifty-pound bags and I had to give up because the damn things kept slipping out of my grip. It’s too hard to take care of this place. Shit, I never really wanted to until now anyway.”

“Then why do you?” Olivia asks.

He shakes his head. “I don’t know. My grandparents willed it to my parents and my parents died right before I left for college. It was the last thing I had of them.”

Olivia leans forward in her chair.

“They left me enough money for upkeep, so, I maintained it while I went to school and took out loans for everything else. But keeping it up has been too hard since the accident. It feels like rolling a stone up a hill just to have it roll down when you reach the top. And I don’t need a hundred-and-fifty-year-old house to smoke weed in anyway.”

“Why don’t you sell?” Olivia asks. “Use the money to pay off debt?”

Morgan scoffs. “You know why I changed majors? Why I switched after doing what my parents wanted—going to college and majoring in engineering, just like they did? I changed because when I discovered sculpture, it was something solid. I could make something beautiful and lasting. Engineering didn’t even sustain my parents. Mom quit when she had me and Dad got fired six months before he died. I figured if it wasn’t a fulfilling or stable job anyway, why bother with it?”

“So, I found this thing that was solid—that I understood—and I went for it. I’d grown up working with my hands. But when this happened”—he holds up his left forearm—“all that went out the window. It wasn’t until I came back to this house that I saw something lasting and beautiful again.

Now, every time I consider giving it up, I think, ‘No, I’m not selling. I’ll chain myself to the foundation before they get it.’”

Olivia walks out of her house to the sound of rain and her father saying he loves her. She tries not to hold his voice too close. She is afraid if she needs him too much he will die.

She arrives at her first visit and someone’s mother answers the door. The woman invites Olivia into her kitchen. Olivia asks if the debtor lives at this address. By way of answer, the woman takes a picture from the mantle and shows Olivia her son. He is bright-faced and beaming in an oversized tuxedo. The boy in the picture is dead, the woman says. He killed himself four months ago. Olivia gives the woman her card and excuses herself, walking back into the rain.

Her second appointment is with a man not much younger than her father. He tells her his story while she gathers her papers. Years ago, to his then-wife’s horror, he quit his job and abandoned a stable career to go to college so he could start his own business. It almost worked too, he says. He was paying off his loans till the work ran out last year. There is no way he can pay what he owes now. He runs a hand through his thin hair and Olivia slides foreclosure papers across the table.

By her third visit, Olivia is exhausted. Strangely though, this debtor seems happy to see her. She tells him he has been unresponsive to the Commission’s efforts to secure repayment and begins to mindlessly list the effects of delinquency. He cuts her off and asks how much he owes. She tells him he owes exactly seventy-six thousand dollars. He smiles and pulls out a checkbook.

Olivia's heart races as he writes a check for the entire amount. Tears form dangerous pools in her eyes. She wants to sob and hug the boy. Instead, she lets all the tension out of her body in one heaving sigh and asks whether he won the lottery or something.

He doesn't reply. He just smiles.

As Olivia is driving home under the blooming clouds of another storm, she gets a call from her boss. One of her debtors is having a problem with someone from the title agency. She needs to go to the debtor's house and get it sorted out. Olivia says that she's finished for the day and is already on her way home. Her boss asks if she has the address for Morgan Byers. She says she does. He hangs up without another word.

Even in the dead light of a summer storm, the age and beauty of Morgan's house shocks her. The river behind it has slowly swallowed the sloping yard—risen above the sandbags and chewed its way toward the back porch. It can't be more than twenty yards from the house.

Olivia knocks on the door. She hears Morgan arguing with someone inside.

"I told you ten fucking times," Morgan yells, "we can't do that today. You see me here, all wet? Why do you think I look like this?"

Olivia opens the door and steps through the entryway. The television is silent. She doesn't smell a hint of smoke.

"Mr. Byers," someone says, "you need to look at these papers. I'm doing this as a courtesy."

Olivia steps into the light. "What's going on here?" she asks. "I got a call on my way home."

Morgan doesn't seem surprised to see her. "Good," he says. "Someone sensible. I've been trying to explain to this piece of shit that I need to put new sandbags in my yard, but he's been trying to talk to me about paperwork for two hours. I don't have time for this. If you don't let me do this, man, there will be no house for you vultures to foreclose."

The man waves his hands in disgust. "I don't have to listen to this," he says, turning to Olivia. "Could you make this asshole understand he has to look at these documents?" He peeks over her head at Morgan. "You got no power here, kid."

"Man, fuck you." Morgan moves toward the man, but Olivia grabs his shoulder and pulls him into the living room.

"Hey, calm down," she says. "Tell me what's going on."

Morgan shakes his head.

"This guy," he says, pointing at the man. "I keep trying to tell him. I have got to put more sandbags out. They've been saying it's going to be another six inches tonight, and you see how the river's rising, don't you?"

He doesn't wait for her to answer: "I tried to tell him it takes me twice as long to get the bags set up. Now it's almost dark and there's no way I'll have it done before the rain hits."

Olivia looks at Morgan. His clothes are dripping and his arms are caked in mud. He smells like earth and river water.

"Fine," Olivia says. "I'll talk to him."

Morgan turns to go but stops. "By the way, how is your dad? He didn't fall again did he?"

She smiles and feels a deep well of gratitude. "No, he didn't," she says. "Thanks for asking."

"Of course," Morgan replies, jogging toward the back door.

"Hey!" the man in the kitchen yells. He picks up his papers and hurries after Morgan. "What the hell?"

"Sir," Olivia says, "if you could please just leave it alone for today, I'm sure Mr. Byers can schedule another time for you to come visit."

"No," he says, "I'm not coming back. This kid has been beyond rude."

Olivia watches through the screen door as Morgan tries to lift a sandbag. He uses his stump to pin the top of the bag and lifts underneath with his good hand, but the bag slips and he drops it into the mud. He gets on his knees and tries to lift it to his chest, but it falls again. He pounds a single balled fist on the soaked ground. The rain has started.

Without thinking, Olivia takes off her coat and tosses her shoes aside. She turns to the man:

"Are you going to help?"

A week later, Olivia is in the front seat of a sheriff deputy's cruiser on the way to Morgan Byers's house. There are eviction papers in a bag leaning against her leg.

Outside, the Crown Victoria is drowning in rain. Its tires skid and weave as gale-force winds sweep in from the eastern hills. Olivia closes her eyes against the dizzying ride, her mind wandering to her last visit with Morgan. She is in his kitchen and he is in the next room, looking out the window at what used to be the back yard. It is now three feet of churning water.

Olivia holds a freshly rolled joint between her fingers and inhales deeply as Morgan instructed. When she sucks in, it feels like choking on dry fire and she begins to cough uncontrollably. Morgan comes back in the room, laughing. "That's good," he says. "Means it's working."

Eyes watering, Olivia shakes her head and hands the joint back to him. Smoke rises in tendrils toward the ceiling fan, where it is cut apart by the spinning blades. "You ever smoke before?" Morgan asks, taking a drag of his own.

"In college a few times," Olivia replies, "but it's been a while."

Morgan nods and holds the joint toward her but she waves it off.

"And just to be clear," he says, "I'm not allowed to ask why my student loan collection officer is smoking weed with me, right? Cause—to reiterate—it's weird as hell."

"Exactly," Olivia says. "No questions." She lets out a half smile.

She didn't want any questions because there was no real reason she was doing it. Her dad was out of the hospital and recovering fine and each of her visits that day had gone smoothly. The truth was she had begun to feel accepted by this house.

"Fair enough," Morgan says. "I guess I owe you about as much noninvasive conversation as you want after the other day. Which, thanks again. I know the bags didn't help, but I had to at least make the effort."

"I was happy to help," Olivia says. "I felt like a kid again, playing in the mud."

"Yeah," Morgan says, "you were a pretty big help out there." He takes another long drag. "You would have been a pretty good asset to the people that built this place, I imagine. Sometimes I think about the work it must have taken—the skill. Lot of help I would have been."

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Olivia reaches for the joint. "I think you would have been a fine asset," she says. "You're not giving yourself enough credit."

"Oh yeah?" Morgan says. "I'm not even much of an asset to myself, Olivia. I can't sculpt. I don't work. All I do is smoke weed and feel sorry for myself." She looks at him but his eyes dart away like a doe at night.

"And you know I'm going to lose the house," he continues. "It's the reason you're here smoking instead of trying to come up with a way for me to pay ya'll back. Because I can't. Cause I'm a fucking failure. But I'm sure you're used to that."

Olivia leans back. "I don't think you're a failure," she says softly. "I can honestly say I don't think any of the people I see every day are failures."

"Come on," Morgan objects. "Look at us." He gestures at himself as if he encompasses the wasted promise of a generation.

"I'm serious," Olivia says. "Obviously, most of them are in shitty situations, but they don't have anything to be ashamed of—not by comparison."

"What do you mean?" Morgan asks.

Olivia flicks a piece of hair out of her face and runs her fingernails down the flesh of her forearm. "I thought I said no questions."

“Yeah,” Morgan shrugs, “but we got to talk about something.”

“Alright,” she says. “Fine. I haven’t really told anyone this, but I’d say I have a hell of a lot more reason to be ashamed than these people. More than you, certainly.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well,” Olivia says, feeling the words rise in her throat, “obviously, I moved back out here for my dad. He was sick and needed someone to take care of him, and I was twenty hours away chasing some stupid dream. But I didn’t move back just because of that. Not really.”

Morgan waits for her to continue.

“See, an old family friend called out of the blue to tell me how bad my dad was. Apparently, he was going downhill fast and needed someone to take care of him but he didn’t have the money to pay for it himself and was too proud to ask his daughter.

“So, I’m sitting on the phone and I’m in a state of shock. I had no idea my dad was that bad. I’m freaking out and wondering what to do and whether I can go back and whether I can take my fiancé with me, and then it hits me: this is my way out. This is how I escape the hell that was my life at that very moment—that very second. Because when I got that call, I was in the middle of the worst week of my life.”

“What happened?” Morgan asks.

Olivia leans back in her seat. “I don’t know if you’d understand,” she says.

“Try me.”

“Well, first, my doctoral thesis had just been rejected by a panel of old men who looked like Saltine crackers. No discussion, just a comment or two, then boom!” She slams her fist on the table. “Rejected. Not good enough. Try again.”

“Shit,” Morgan says, “that’s awful.”

“Just wait,” Olivia says, grinning wildly. She feels like a ball rolling down a hill. “The very next day, when I’m a crying mess, I find out my fiancé cheated on me. Or, excuse me, *had been cheating on me*, for the last six months.”

“Damn,” Morgan says, raising his eyebrows.

“Right?” Olivia continues. “After we got engaged he says he got ‘super scared of commitment.’ Can you believe it? That was his fucking explanation.”

“Sounds like a typical piece of shit,” Morgan says. “None of that makes you a failure though. You aren’t losing your house over here.”

“No, just wait,” Olivia says. “Obviously, those past few days had been hell. I mean, I had been beaten down until I was a stain on the ground. But, when that family friend called, you know what I was doing? I was trying to work up the nerve to call my fiancé and ask him to move back in with me. Yeah, to move back to my house and sleep in my bed and go ahead and marry me. That’s where I was at. That’s how fucking low I was when I got that call.”

Tears are streaming down Olivia’s cheeks but they don’t feel like her own. Her voice is strong and clear and she does not stop to compose herself.

“And though I am upset and worried about my dad, when I hung up the phone and resolved to come home and take care of him, you know what I felt? I felt relief. I felt joy. I felt joy when I found out my father was dying. I felt like I was being given the opportunity to give up on everything I was trying to be in my life and that felt like the absolute best thing in the world. So no, I don’t think you’re a failure. I know failure. I gave up willingly. No one pried anything from my hands.”

Morgan is quiet. He looks at Olivia as she wipes tears from her eyes. Then, to her surprise, he starts laughing. He laughs and he stands up to roll another joint.

“You know what?” Morgan says. “Fuck ‘em. Fuck ‘em, fuck ‘em, fuck ‘em, fuck ‘em!” he roars. “I am so tired. I am done. I failed. You gave up. What the hell does it matter? That doesn’t make you a bad person. I don’t know you very well, but you’re here taking care of someone as they die and I’d say that makes you a pretty good person. You get my vote. Fuck. I may be about to lose this house, but I’ll be damned if we don’t sit here and smoke till midnight. I like you. You’re kind and you’re smart and I don’t give a shit what you think you’ve screwed up. We’re just going to sit here and smoke. Fuck ‘em. They can all go to hell.”

Lighting the joint, he smiles wildly and tilts his head toward the ceiling, closing his eyes as he sucks smoke into his blackening lungs.

“Fuck ‘em,” he mumbles, and hands the joint to Olivia.

The sheriff’s cruiser skids to a stop a few feet from the car in front of it and Olivia’s mind is ripped back to the apocalyptic weather around her. Ahead of them, a snaking line of taillights glare like distorted red eyes down the highway. After a few minutes of no movement, the deputy steps out of the car. He hurries back in and tells her there is a roadblock a quarter mile ahead. They won’t be getting to Morgan Byers’s house for hours.

This fills Olivia with a sense of relief. She closes her eyes and settles deeper into the seat.

The water has risen four feet over the past few days. As Morgan waits in the living room, he can hear the wind from a nearby tornado rip and push at the foundation of the house. He feels the breaking river waves crash against the siding and slap like open red palms on the windows.

Still, he doesn't leave.

He sits and waits for the river to take his offering. He closes his eyes and lays down on the floor—listening and feeling the rocking of the ship. Laying there for hours, he hears seismic shifts and cracks, subtle explosions of wood and gravel and concrete. It is oddly peaceful and he becomes tired from the lulling sounds of a house being uprooted. It is as if he were a child in the arms of his rocking mother.

He is on the precipice of sleep when the foundation shatters and the house begins its slow journey down the river, floating and sinking all at once: a faulty ship at sea.

Morgan wakes to water.



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dock at summit lake
Beverly Rose Joyce

acknowledgements

Alexandros Plasatis

It was night when we were flying from Birmingham to Shanghai, and I was watching films. At some point I felt an impulse to look outside, and so I did. For the first time since we took off I looked outside and down there I saw the lights of a night town. I glanced at the screen with the map of the airplane's route: we were flying above Kavala, my hometown.

The 24/7 café by the harbour where I had grown up working, the broken-down ice machine, the great big sun, the customers sitting in the shade of the lime trees, their fingers tapping on the tables. The sky that was blue and the sea that was bluer, and the island opposite that was dark, dark green, and that girl, the night-girl with the shadows in her eyes who wanted her cappuccino with lots and lots of sprinkles. All those small, chipped, round trays, and the other tray—the massive one, the tray that no one but me could master—always propped against the wobbling stool of my waitering days and nights from where I saw it all—everything might still be there.

I returned to watch the end of the film, then went for a piss.



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a modified version
Jim Ross

a newer new: 1934

Richard Wayne Horton

1934

John Lomax

With new grants from the Carnegie Corporation and the Rockefeller Association, John Lomax collects Spanish ballads, Vaquero songs on the Rio Grande border, and Acadian songs from French speaking Louisiana. John is the father of Alan Lomax, who accompanies him on his trips and helps move and set up the equipment which is in the trunk of the car. Sometimes John can back the car up close to the singer, or the singer will set up close to the car. Otherwise there's a lot of heavy lifting, if the singer is stubborn and won't budge from the porch or living room or is crippled and can't do it.

1934

Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

Schlesinger's parents take him on a trip to Europe. Germany is sunny and friendly, with good food. Portraits for sale in a bookstore window: Hitler kissing a little girl; Hitler sitting near a fireplace with a dog at his feet. But Schlesinger liked England best of all. His father introduced him to interesting people in scholarship and politics and Arthur Jr. had a way of opening them up.

In August, he enters Harvard as an undergraduate. Politically he is OK with his parents' support of the New Deal and the imperfect Democratic Party. His "...profound impression of the political shortsightedness and stupidity (as well as the greed) of American business leadership" (AMS 123) are a commonplace in American culture of the '30's.

1934

Mary McCarthy

Mary McCarthy is a reviewer at [New Republic](#) but can't get along with Malcolm Cowley, who shuffles her off on editors Robert Cantwell and Otis Ferguson, both friendlier. Mary will later become one of the writers at [Partisan Review](#), sometimes associated with the independent or anti-Stalinist Left. She's viewed, possibly incorrectly, as a Trotskyite. She publicly supported his position during the Moscow trials later in the decade, but never personally liked him, and certainly would never commit to an inflexible doctrine. She liked to think of herself as a "wrecker."

1934

Thomas Hart Benton

Artist Thomas Hart Benton gets sponsorship by the Federal Arts Project to paint murals on public buildings "depicting the productivist outlook of labor as noble and dignified." (Seldes 17)

1934

Union Pacific: The Americanization
Of Nicolas Nabokov

Nicolas Nabokov, a young man with a shock of white-blond hair and a quiet ability to get along with famous people, followed the émigré trail as imperial Russia went to hell. He landed in Berlin where he stayed with his uncle, the émigré publisher Vladimir Nabokov, whose son, Vladimir Vladimirovich, collected butterflies, played tennis, and wrote poetry. Young Vladimir was an anglophile, having received a prestigious English education. Let's not be coy. This was the future author of Lolita, Pale Fire, and Pnin.

Nicolas, though he wrote quite well, was more interested in music. His uncle gave him concert review jobs. He had to learn review language by reading other reviews.

On March 21, 1922, ultra-right Russian hit men tried to assassinate former Cadet party leader Pavel Miliukov, at the Berlin Philharmonic. Uncle Vladimir tried to restrain the gunmen, and was killed.

Shortly afterward, the German mark was revalued and stabilized, which led to higher prices in Berlin. Russian émigré businesses began to fold, as cash-strapped former aristocrats packed to go to Paris, Budapest, London and New York. Nicolas went to Paris, enrolled at the Sorbonne, and began moving in the same circles as Prokofiev and Stravinsky. One day Nicolas and his mother were having lunch in a café when they saw Diaghilev across the room. Nicolas' mother pushed him to go over, before the big man could get his coat on and make it out the door. She went with him, and pitched his music to the surprised giant, gaining his promise that he would look at Nicolas' things some time.

By 1925, Nabokov and Diaghilev had agreed on a ballet project: Ode: Meditation sur la majeste de Dieu. It's a ballet-oratorio. And now, in 1928, the production was on, in Monte Carlo. The premiere would be in Paris. Nicolas traveled to Monte Carlo and was greeted with a scolding from Diaghilev for not arriving earlier. How could he now exert personal control, when other team members had pulled ahead? As production got underway, Leonid Massine developed a modernistic choreography, while Pavel Tchelitchev's sets went the opposite direction toward a soft romanticism. Nicolas didn't know enough about ballet production to object to anything. Diaghilev complained that the key planners were pulling in different directions and he wasn't sure the ballet could be saved. Why was Nicolas such a noodle? Nicolas couldn't get a purchase on the production at this point. Tchelitchev kept him away from what he was doing, and Massine couldn't be restrained. Ten days before the opening, Diaghilev and the troupe arrived in Paris and began on-site rehearsals. On June 2, Diaghilev suddenly took dictatorial control of his troupe and pulled Ode together, hammering away rough spots and driving the troupe till everything worked, even the unprecedented lighting, using neon lights and moving camera projections.

The premiere was at the Sarah Bernhardt Theater on June 6, and it was a hit, traveling to all the Ballets Russes cities.

In 1929, in Berlin and Paris and all through the premiere towns, Nicolas was living a life similar to the fictional scandals chronicled in Christopher Isherwood's Berlin Stories. (It should be

noted that Nabokov later became a close friend of Isherwood's friend, W. H. Auden). With an innocently wild flapper, he stayed at the estate of a famous rich Berlin art collector, later ruined by the Nazis.

In August of 1933, Nicolas departed for America. In the winter, the American promoter Sol Hurok brought the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo to America for a tour. It would eventually settle in New York where Balanchine would create the New York City Ballet. Leonid Massine was desperate to appeal to the Americans somehow. Nicolas told Sol Hurok about American poet Archibald McLeish's idea of a ballet about the building of the Union Pacific railroad, and Hurok liked the idea, but a composer couldn't be found. The ideal composer might have been Aaron Copland, with Virgil Thompson as a second choice. But the planners didn't think either American had enough name recognition yet, and both men still played around with modernist stuff, which wouldn't go over considering the subject. Around Christmas, McLeish turned to Nicolas: "Why can't you do it?" "...me, a Russian from France, writing the first American ballet!" (Nabokov, Bagazh, p. 191)

But Nabokov had been listening to Gerald Murphy's collection of Edison recordings made at the turn of the Century: old singers remembering songs from their youth, some dating back to before the Civil War. There were Black singers too, from Alabama and Georgia. Maybe he was European, but Nabokov wanted to do something with that music. He telephoned McLeish: he'd do it. He just needed to get together with Massine and work out a story.

84 He couldn't start composing until funding for the production came through. That was America! Everyone thought there would be backers, but Nicolas was having to hit up all his friends. Everyone else was scrounging too. Finally Sol gave the go-ahead, and Nicolas had 23 days to get his work done. He asked Sol to find him an aide and orchestrator. Hurok sent him Eddie Powel, later to head a powerful orchestration outfit in Hollywood. The composition grew and changed right up to the premiere on March 6 in Philadelphia. Nabokov's themes sound corny and Scotch-Irish like music for 1950's westerns, but with Franco-Russian styling. The mixture is nowhere more bizarre than in the scene with the Chinese railroad workers, where an oscillating orientalist background rhythm sets off a cowboy tune. The ballet was very popular and was performed all over the U.S. for several years, but Nicolas had to sue the production company for his composer's fee, a mere \$500.

Jan. 4, 1934

Malraux And Gide In Goebbels' Face

Malraux and Gide go to Berlin to petition for the release of Thalmann and Dimitrov, the captured German Communist leaders, taking with them a petition and the signatures they have collected. Dimitrov was being held at the Moabit prison in Berlin. While in Berlin, Malraux went looking for Oswald Spengler, whom the Nazis were cossetting. He couldn't be found. The Chancellor (Hitler) was too busy for France's greatest living writers, but Goebbels saw them. Goebbels whose diary reveals a thirst for momentous encounters and media attention, took his chance to spar with the visitors. (You believe in justice? We believe in German justice! Heh! Heh! Remember the reparations?) Still, Dimitrov was released in late Feb.

Dust-up At The John Reed Club

On Feb. 11, in the wake of the recent (1933) destruction of Diego Rivera's mural at the RCA Building because it had a picture of Lenin tucked between cosmic lobe-looking things, Benton gave a speech at the NY John Reed Club. He actually had a bone to pick with left artists, whether cubo-futurist or socialist realist, and the John Reed Club was the right (wrong) place to do it since the Marxist audience approved in general of what he wanted to attack. He first of all attacked the idea that economic forces determined human behavior. He "... argued that it was chiefly because of such intellectual fictions, not economic realities, that men became dangerous." (Adams 226) Their ideology made them disengage from reality. "... artists should study reality rather than the ideas superimposed on it." (Adams 227) And here he named names, something that was sure to stir up a storm of outraged counter-attacks in the press. An example of the vital engagement with reality that was the antidote to precious decadent modernist formulas or closed-minded message realism was Regionalism, yes, the same Regionalism Time magazine and Thomas Craven had reported on, that of Benton himself.

As for Rivera's mural, possibly the most astounding piece of Marxist art the world had seen in 1933, Benton dismissed it because it didn't express American reality, and this must have sent the audience shooting from their seats.

Benton's critics could point out rightly that Rivera was Benton's biggest competitor for mural jobs in the U.S. Naturally Benton could live with one of Rivera's murals coming under the jackhammer. As for Craven, they could say his critical compass was seriously wonked. He was Benton's servant, a cubist when Benton swung that way, and now a Regionalist. Craven's racial prejudice didn't escape their notice either. They returned to Benton's images and pointed at the long-nosed Jew, the simpering pansy, the shuffling slope-headed Negro. (That was the critics' language, not mine). And even aside from the meanness in these exaggerations, they could look at them a different way and see a brainless folksy cuteness, with storylines taken from popular ballads, and with shapey trees, mountains, shacks, banjos, what-have-you. Black Americans seeing his canvases in the 30's were at first happy to be included in serious art somehow. But by the 40's and 50's they were fairly sore at the job Benton had done on them, and his pictures started having to have protective plastic coverings in the museum.

In November, photos of Benton's murals at the Whitney Museum were taken to court to prove Gertrude Whitney was immoral (to display such lascivious, low, communist art) and therefore should not retain custody of 10-year-old Gloria Vanderbilt. Benton: "... Censorship is lamentable. My subjects portray American life in the 20th century realistically. It may be life that should be criticized; but not my painting of it... The Vanderbilt child would see much more of life in the raw on the streets of New York than in any museum." (THB to NY Evening Journal reporter, in Adams 191)

On Dec. 24, an article, "The U.S. Scene," appeared in Time. In this story, Edward Hopper is called a "sturdy American Realist." Reginald Marsh is portrayed as an urban Benton/Wood/Hopper/Curry. The new heartland art craze was interchangeably called the "U.S. Scene Movement," and the "Regionalist Movement." Many artists associated with it thought Benton swung too far toward overalls, banjos and tractors, leaving behind city scenes.

Spring, 1934
Sovlit In France

In Paris, Malraux and his wife Clara often visited the Ehrenbergs, Ilya and Lyuba. Ilya was Izvestiya's roving correspondent in the West. One night there was a stranger at the table. The Ehrenbergs introduced Malraux and Clara to Konstantin Fedin, "the first Soviet novelist to try to understand the Revolution from a psychological point of view." (Madsen 155) Fedin told them about the new government-sponsored literary fad. Socialist Realism, proposed in 1932, the year of the disbanding of RAPP and other proletarian literary organizations, was a reaction away from "the boy-loves-tractor genre, novels, plays and films about the production processes and collective farms..." which was starting to result in barren, dimensionless literature, toward works with more of a focus on human beings and their personal lives.

This was intended to put more substance into literature, more Tolstoy and Chekhov. The part of the new style that seemed reactionary to Europeans was its rejection of formal experimentation, the very foundation of modernism. As for the newly established Union of Soviet Writers, it was a peer-pressure organization. To have any publishing contacts, a writer had to join, but if he joined he would be pressured to make his writing deal with "Socialist realities" in a positive light.

Fedin and Ehrenberg invited Malraux to the first meeting of the Union of Soviet Writers, to take place in Moscow in August. He would be a French delegate and would receive a celebrity welcome. The Congress would be stage-managed by Stalin's new minister of culture, Andrei Zhdanov. The other French delegates would be Louis Aragon, Paul Nizan, Vladimir Pozner and playwright Jean Richard Bloch. Other big names that might attend: Thomas Mann and Theodore Dreiser. (Mann sent his son Heinrich. Dreiser couldn't afford the trip)

Andre accepted. While in Moscow he hoped to meet with Mezrabpomfilm, which had said it wanted to make a movie of La Condition humaine.

Late Spring, 1934
Malraux Backs Koestler Against A Wall

Koestler is fundraising for the Institut pour l'Etude du Fascisme, set up by the Munzenberg Trust, when he goes to see Malraux in his office at the publisher Gallimard's.

"...we talked while walking up and down in the pretty garden at the back of the Gallimard building...As a fervent admirer of Malraux's, I was overwhelmed by the occasion, but went on bravely about the great prospects for the Institut, and its even greater need for donations. Malraux listened in silence, occasionally uttering one of his characteristic awe inspiring nervous sniffs, which sound like the cry of a wounded jungle beast and are followed by a slap of his palm against his nose. At first this was rather startling, but one soon got accustomed to it. When I had had my say, Malraux stopped, advanced toward me threateningly, until I had my back against the garden wall and said: 'Oui, oui, mon cher, mais que pensez-vous de l'apocalypse?' 'Yes, yes, my friend, but what do you think of the apocalypse?' With that, he gave me five hundred francs, and wished me good luck." (Koestler, The Invisible Writing: An Autobiography (NY, Macmillan, 1970)

1934
Alfred Kazin NY Doings

In NY, Alfred Kazin, age 19, son of Jewish immigrants, and aspiring to be a writer-reviewer, is a Socialist, but so is everyone else he knows. Many U.S. communists, he observes, are “middle-class and doctrinaire radicals who, after graduating from Harvard or Yale in the Twenties...now worried in the New Masses whether Proust should be read after the Revolution and why there seemed to be no simple proletarians in the novels of Andre Malraux.” (Kazin 4-5)

Looking around New York in 1934, he saw many left factions:

- Norman Thomas Socialists
- Social Democrats
- Austro-Marxists
- Stalinist centrist communists
- Trotskyites
- Lovestoneites
- Musteites
- Fieldites
- Progressive Labor Zionists
- Left Socialist Zionists

After a long talk with John Chamberlain, radical reviewer for The Times, Kazin got a letter of recommendation to do reviews for the New Republic, Scribners and the Sunday papers.

“...the Thirties in literature were the age of the plebes – of writers from the working class, the lower class, the immigrant class, the non-literate class...whose struggle was to survive.” (Kazin 12)

Examples:

James T. Farrell	Robert Cantwell
Clifford Odets	Elia Kazan
Eduard Dahlberg	Albert Halper
Daniel Fuchs	Henry Roth
Richard Wright	John Steinbeck
Erskine Caldwell	Nelson Algren
Henry Miller	William Saroyan
John O'Hara	

Malcolm Cowley, editor of New Republic was the new writer's best friend. He directed the literary side of New Republic “in the direction of a sophisticated literary Stalinism.” (Kazin 16) But he didn't favor party-line hacks. Cowley handed Kazin many of his reviewing assignments. During the Moscow trials Cowley reviewed the trial testimony in New Republic, condemning the defendants as the testimony indicated, and not questioning its truthfulness. Like many Stalinists, who would never change, no matter what, Cowley identified the Soviet experiment with the future. After the Hitler-Stalin pact, Cowley, already friendly with the renegades at Partisan Review, gave up on Communism in America, like almost everyone else.

American Populist Realism: There With The Dinosaurs

Soviet Socialist Realism was really a kind of formula-locked literary 5-year plan. It was an attempt to catch up to a sophisticated populist humanist style developed in America, with fore-runners like Theodore Dreiser and Hamlin Garland. This essentially Jacksonian democratic style had enjoyed a resurgence after the U.S. market crash of 1929 made brittle 1920's comedies about rich people in flivvers seem shallow and heartless. The ironic thing is that the American realist mainstream with its rich character development and grainy settings started being tagged Socialist Realism for a while after the hoopla surrounding the 1934 Soviet announcement of its "new" literary style. Young American writers who would have normally gone on to write Midwest or Urban Immigrant novels could now jump on a derivative Marxist bandwagon.

July, 1934

Malraux Pick-axes Trotsky With Questions

Malraux visits Trotsky at his French residence. Trotsky is trying to organize a 4th International, to meet in Paris, but most lefties won't be there. That's all right. For Trotsky, it will still be a historical moment, and a chance to generate more pamphlets.

Malraux: Pasternak.

Trotsky: A literary technician.

Malraux: Eisenstein's Potemkin.

Trotsky: I've been too busy to catch it. But Lenin thought cinema was the most appropriate medium to express Communism artistically.

Malraux: Is communism compatible with individualism?

Trotsky: There's little regard for individualism under the 5-year plan. The Russian millions, if really loyal, must be like the early Christians.

Malraux: Why did you fall out of power?

Trotsky: I was expecting too much.

Later in the year, the center-left French govt. of Gaston Doumergue expelled Trotsky from France. Trotsky had already made arrangements to live in Norway.

Why Did Trotsky Fall Out Of Power?

These ideas are from Max Eastman, who had many talks with Trotsky while writing his biography in Russia from 1922 to 1924. Trotsky, the consummate scholar, set him up to talk to his wife, relatives, friends, political leaders, other scholars, and diplomats.

After Lenin's death, there was no "struggle for power and party leadership between Trotsky and Stalin...the truth is that Trotsky had side-stepped the power long before that." (Eastman, Love and Revolution, 409) Lenin, after his first stroke, had tried to put Trotsky in position to take over leadership, but Trotsky had declined. Why? "I couldn't wield Lenin's authority in the Politburo...Zinoviev and the others had already combined against me." (Ibid.) Eastman: "He could command men; he could inspire them to action with great oratory; he could expound the grounds and principles of their action; but he could not manage them." (Ibid.)

Zinoviev, Kamenev, Stalin and the others had made their nest, and kept Trotsky out. The idea of dealing with them, bargaining, cozying up, joining or changing their plans, made him physically ill. Eastman believed the fevers Trotsky suffered, which sent him to spas or kept him at home, were probably an escape mechanism. Eastman: "I was aware of this at the time [1924]...[but]...I hadn't a notion...of the fact that Stalin as general secretary of the party had already gathered the principal reins of power in his hands." (Eastman, 410) John Reed had never met Stalin. Early Russian writers of the '20's never heard him mentioned. Eastman never saw him. And by 1924 Stalin already had "roughnecks," goons, criminals, psychopaths, and gangsters thanking him for party jobs, and at times doing "jobs."

Lenin, laid low by his first stroke, gave his wife, Krupskaya, a "testament" to be read at the 12th Party Congress of April 1923, recommending the replacement of Stalin with someone more loyal. She didn't read it, thinking Lenin would recover. But perhaps it was too late already.

As the "bureaucrats" consolidated in 1924, they pushed the idealists out of the way, including Trotsky. That meant that a worker-run state would never happen. Of course it wouldn't have happened under Trotsky either, but Eastman, writing about all this, had had his illusions. The speeches and press releases after all had promised worker self-rule for years. Under Trotsky, he felt, there would at least have been a chance.

Trotsky, as Red Army chief, had one option for remaining viable: bring in the troops and arrest most of the government. He didn't take it. Stalin, Kamenev, Zinoviev and the rest of the pack knew who they were dealing with.

After the attacks on Trotsky at the 13th Congress (1924) and his weak response, Eastman, who'd been reluctantly allowed to attend because of Trotsky's fading influence, walked up to Trotsky during the intermission. "'In God's name,' I said, or words to that effect, 'why don't you peel off your coat and roll up your sleeves and sail in and clean them up? Read the testament. Don't let them lock it up. Expose the whole conspiracy. Expose it and attack it head-on. It isn't your fight, it's the fight for the revolution. If you don't make it now, you'll never

make it. It's your last chance!'" (Eastman, 425-6) to which Trotsky replied, "I thought you said you loved peace!" (Ibid.)

July 14, 1934
Comintern Wind Change

The feuding French left learned of a Moscow foreign policy shift toward anti-fascist fronting. French communist leaders held a meeting with Socialist leader Leon Blum (later to become French president and preside over the Front Populaire govt.) From this came a pact calling for joint action against fascism, the disarming and suppression of fascist patriotic leagues, and parliamentary reapportionment.

In October, the French anti-fascist front was enlarged to include the “Radical Socialists” (neither radical nor socialist) who represented the broad middle class. Stalin now told French communist leaders to stop opposing increased French military expenditures, and get behind national re-armament so France would be ready for Hitler.

Aug. 1934
Soviet Writers Conference

Malraux and Clara make their way over to Moscow. The Congress is going on from Aug. 17 to 31, in Moscow’s Great Hall of Columns, which is strung with giant posters of Shakespeare, Lenin, Moliere, Heine, Gorky, Stalin, Gogol and Cervantes. Tables groan with food, and guests enjoy bottomless alcohol, worker shoulders to rub against, young pioneers blowing trumpets, and solemn delegations bearing gifts paid for by their communities. It was hot. The Moscow area has a climate similar to the Midwestern U.S.

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Zhdanov’s keynote address delivers Stalin’s directives “for the centuries to come.” (Madsen, 156) “Our literature is permeated with enthusiasm and heroism and it is optimistic because it is a literature of the rising class – the proletarian class.” Zhdanov “outlined Socialist Realism as a theory that made it imperative for Socialist Realist writers to infect readers with class ideology and to fabricate a hortatory art designed to support the goals of the state.” (Madsen 156)

Gorky, wearing an uncharacteristic black suit, his face terrifically craggy, read a 40-page speech full of exaggerations: dump Plato, Kant and Bergson, dump the detective genre, abandon stories about murderers, swindlers and thieves (see Red Mahogany, Berlin Alexanderplatz), stories with decadent formulas propping bourgeois concerns. These ideas left Malraux impatient; he would clearly have to talk to Gorky. Though Malraux was a major PR trophy, he was not communist, and though he didn’t yet know it, most of his novels could not be published in Russia. Man’s Fate clearly broke Socialist Realist rules, and had bourgeois plotting and an emphasis on individuality. It “belabored the theme of the relative futility of revolutionary action.” (Madsen 157) Its title, La Condition humaine, said it all: the novel was humanist. While a human touch was essential to the SR formula, giving a novel a believable grounding, humanity was not supposed to be the whole point.

The Zhdanovists disapproved of formal experimentation, hence of modernism. Main targets of their venom: Joyce, Proust and Dos Passos. These were the very writers most imitated by Russia’s best writers, who were now being defined as literary outsiders. In 1934 there was still some backlash among better writers, a feeling that Zhdanovism was a set of opinions one could

set aside, like advice from a wrong-headed uncle. Nikolai Bukharin in his speech defended his young protégé at Izvestiya, Boris Pasternak. Malraux's speech would come later on. For now he got his chance to talk to Gorky, with Isaac Babel translating.

Malraux: Joyce.

Gorky: Disgusting.

Malraux: On the contrary, a milestone in the expression of human feelings.

Gorky: How about Bunin (who had just won the 1933 Nobel Prize).

Malraux: No reply. Nietzsche.

Gorky: In the name of socialist humanism: no value in Nietzsche.

Malraux: On the contrary, one of the most important and fecund authors, precisely from a socialist humanist standpoint. What about Dostoevsky?

Gorky: A preacher and a theologian.

Malraux: "Attention, there are two Dostoevskys, the Dostoevsky who asks what the world is and gives out-dated answers and the Dostoevsky who asks 'What is life and what is man to man?' The Dostoevsky who in the name of the lonely individual asks this question and tries to find an answer is a progressive thinker." (Malraux quoted by Madsen, 159)

Gorky: Tolstoy's answers were simpler.

Malraux: "Do you agree with me that behind every artist you find the question 'What is life, what does it mean?'" (Madsen 159)

Gorky: Yes.

Clara was attracted to the short, adroit Babel, rumored to have seven mistresses which he kept in seven hideaways. What must he have that a woman couldn't resist? (return to Babel photo. What indeed?)

Malraux discovers that an abridged Russian edition of Man's Fate has been published "with inserts expressing the Soviet point of view of the Chinese Revolution."

Malraux's speech is titled "Art Is A Conquest." Some points: there should be more psychology in literature. The Soviet writers (meaning the 5-year-plan hacks, not the better writers) are deficient in character development compared to Tolstoy or Gorky.

Rebuttal by Nikulin: is love of truth incompatible with political passion, as the introduction to Man's Fate implies?

Malraux jumps to the podium and defends his record of political activism.

Sometime during the conference, Babel told Malraux he was refusing to write now, rather than abuse his readers with what Zhdanov wanted him to say. Babel's stories translated very well. He was popular in France. Malraux talked about starting an international journal and soliciting some of Babel's things.

Malraux and Clara spent a lot of time with Eisenstein, who wanted to make a movie of Man's Fate. (wouldn't happen) Meyerhold took them around Moscow, to especially interesting back corners. He wanted to bring Man's Fate to the stage. (wouldn't happen)

Otherwise the Ehrenbergs were constantly with the Malrauxs, telling them about Akhmatova, Mandelstam, and Pilnyak. Ehrenberg, amateur photographer, raconteur, writer of pale novels imitating Doblin, Pilnyak. Probably an amateur cook, did a little art, what the heck? Ehrenberg was the European correspondent for Izvestiya.

Malraux, even with his tics, was wanted on Gorky's porch. Along with Richard Bloch, Louis Aragon, Anderson Nexo, and Willi Bredel. Bredel would be the hero of Malraux's next novel, which could be published in a Russian translation. With a family in Czechoslovakia, Bredel was a communist organizer in Germany when he was caught up in the Nazi sweep. Imprisoned by the Nazis, he made a miraculous escape, dressed as a German caricature, in lederhosen, Alpine hat, etc., and ended up on the porch of Gorky's country place outside Moscow. Gorky's dwellings were practically museums already, though the occupant was not quite dead. They were equipped for rather large public functions, and were maintained to express Gorky's down-to-earth personality, and to show visitors the human side of Russia. Late one night some of the guests were sitting on the porch when they heard a car pull up, and afterward the approach of men in heavy boots. Malraux:

"Everybody stopped talking. It was Stalin looking like a benevolent police captain. He asked me what was happening of interest in Paris. 'A new Laurel and Hardy movie,' I said, showing him a crazy game of finger crossing that Stan Laurel had made famous, and everybody tried to imitate when they got out of the cinema. [In the dining room] Stalin sat down between his body guards. While eating the zakusky, I had the impression I had lost my passport. I didn't feel it in my breast pocket...So I lean down to look on the floor. And what do I see under the table? Stalin, Molotov and the rest of them trying to twist their fingers like Stan Laurel!" (quoted in Madsen, p. 163)

A few days later there was a colossal parade on Red Square, lasting 3 hours. Clara was allowed to see it from the parapet of the Kremlin roof next to Stalin, whom she observed from the side during the parade. She found him sexy. Clara:

"When we got back to the hotel, Andre asked me what I had thought of my neighbor up on the roof. Candidly, I said, 'I wouldn't mind spending a moment in bed with him,' an answer which exposed me to a few difficulties." (Madsen 164)

A somewhat older Mikhail Borodin, main character in Man's Fate, introduced himself. He had not done so badly, in spite of the China strategy failing on his watch. He was now editor of

the English language Moscow Daily News. Everyone had noticed how close the Malrauxs had gotten to the top leadership. Could Andre put in a good word and get Borodin an apartment with hot water?

As Malraux and his hot little wife were thickly buttered and covered in syrup by the authorities, the countryside beyond the tour circuits had experienced a die-off in the winter of 1933-34, as witnessed by Muggeridge and Koestler. Malraux told Gorky he would like to edit an international encyclopedia (wouldn't happen) with articles by the '30's greatest scholars, to be published in Russian as well as other European languages. Gorky was so protected from events happening around him (a special edition of the newspaper was printed for him alone!) that he thought it would be welcomed in Russia. Babel's Lubianca interrogation transcripts (leaving out the sound of blows) say Malraux also talked about a literary journal for which a Babel submission would be fervently solicited.

Malraux, Koestler and John Dewey were mercilessly scooped now by Trotsky and his followers whose early revelations about crooked trials, torture and gulags in Russia were thought to be the ravings of a rigidly doctrinaire and paranoid intellectual.

After the Moscow writers congress, Malraux and Clara traveled freely in Russia, going quite far East, then returning for another long stay in Moscow where they were warmly embraced and stuffed like prize geese as friends soon to be swept away in the terror tried to leverage them. Babel took Clara for a walk along the Moskva River. "Babel told her he had everything from mistresses to money plus coddling friendships with Gorky and Stalin, with whom he sometimes spent long evenings before [the fireplace] in the Kremlin. The benefits of these flattering friendships, he said, were that he was a writer who couldn't write..." (Madsen 165)

Nov. 23, 1934
Moscow Trippers Back In Paris

Back in Paris, at a meeting of left writers and editors on Nov. 23, the Moscow trippers told about their experiences. Malraux said, the "deep fraternity" of the Russian people would be nice for "all progressive voices" in the West to emulate. As for the relation of Marxism to Soviet literature, "To pretend that art can express a doctrine means dealing in non-reality." Between political ideals and narrative art was a human being. Hence Dostoevsky, the supreme creator of many-faceted characters. Ideals, which abound in D, become humanized. They become an expression not of a disembodied political imperative, but of the character D has created.

(D did cheat sometimes, especially in The Idiot. Tolstoy despised psychologism. He was indeed simpler. His characters showed themselves by their deeds. He would have described himself as a classicist.)

At the end of the year, Malraux was writing Le Temp du mepris (Days of Wrath) about a German communist organizer, his imprisonment by the Nazis and his "almost miraculous escape." (Madsen 165) The character was based on Willi Bredel, the escapee from Nazi internment whom Malraux had met at Gorky's mansion. There was a lot of adventure in the book, but little philosophy. It was only a story. German communists in French exile, who gave Malraux a lot of backup info about escaping, which they had all done, enthusiastically endorsed the novel. It was even OK in Russia.

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[Editor's note: this is the 1934 chapter from Horton's book
A Newer New - The Life And Death Of Integration 1928-1953.]





they call him the mayor
Jim Ross



fate twists me round and round

Aaron Beck

master ernst

Dennis Martin Piana

Before you paint over me,
Brush a finger down my neck ,
Press your head against my chest,
Caress me if you care to feel my pulse,
Hear my heart beats, or suck my breasts,
Any of the three you rendered, ripe, plump,
Luscious I am, your best grotesque ever, Max.



hard boiled

Dennis Martin Piana

I will not cry
The day I die
Nor will any
I called 'friend'
So randomly
I can't remember
Ever wanting one

I had a mother once
She had an egg



Michael Favala Goldman

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the lobsterman

Fletcher Bonin

Thirty-two years of daily wear had rendered Gus's rubber boots as flimsy and shapeless as deflated balloons. He tugged one on, then the next. His shoulders ached and a sharp pain shot up his spine as he yanked the boot over his heel. An unyielding breeze shot off the whitecaps of Narragansett Bay, and he zipped his fluorescent yellow jacket up to his chin. Bringing a fragile styrofoam cup to his chapped lips, he dained the last drops of his coffee. As was his routine, he'd driven five minutes out of his way to purchase the steaming beverage from Ma's Donuts. It was the only place open at this predawn hour. The rubber toe of his boot squelched against the wood of Van Zandt pier as he stubbed out his cigar. Sighing, Gus lurched to his feet. As soon as he'd removed himself from the overturned paint bucket upon which he'd been sitting, the wind knocked it onto its side. It rolled over the edge of the pier and splashed into the eddying tide below, bobbing in cadence with the waves.

As the sun began to cast splashes of tangerine light along the horizon, Gus made practiced adjustments at the helm, piloting his rusting watercraft -- christened (somewhat ironically) *Hope*, after his daughter -- along the rhythmic swells. He maneuvered around Goat

Island, and then traced a route paralleling the coastline, navigating by the landmarks he'd come to know so well. The boat chugged ruefully through the choppy waves, the ancient engine throbbing a foamy wake across the surface like a snail's trail. He passed Fort Adams, the Castle Hill Lighthouse, and, finally, the Portuguese Discovery Monument. Upon reaching Brenton Reef, Gus cut the engine and, grimacing, heaved the anchor over the stern. At one time, this had been his lucky spot.

With a few mechanical movements, another cigar was jammed between his teeth. But, as was his ritual, he held off on lighting it until he'd pulled up the first trap. Leaning over the bow, he grasped the first buoy and, working hand over hand, hauled in the trap. The rope was stiff with salt, settling itself snugly between the time-worn creases in his calloused palms. While he'd appreciated the fleece-lined gloves that Hope had given him last Christmas, he'd never worn them. He'd been too concerned about subjecting them to the reek of lobster bait to which the rest of his work clothes -- and most of his regular clothes, too -- had fallen victim. It was not a stench that one shower could overcome. The trap felt too light. He steeled himself for the impending disappointment. It had been nearly a decade since he'd last had a decent haul. These days he just hoped to be able to cover his rent.

The first trap was empty, save for a spider crab that had gorged itself on the bait he'd arranged appetizingly (if such a word could be used for Porgie innards) in the bottom of the trap the night before. Like an anxious restaurant owner, he'd devised every method he could imagine to attract customers to his underwater gastropub. But to no avail. Gus lit the cigar and took a chagrined puff. He tossed the writhing spider crab overboard. *At least one of us is having a lucky day*, he thought to himself. A few fishermen picked their way along the rocky crags that jutted out from Ocean Drive, their shouldered rods thrumming like sprung guitar strings in the stiff wind.

The second trap, too, was empty. Gus tossed the untouched bait over the bow. A lone seagull plunged dutifully after the oleaginous refuse. One trap left at this haunt. Gnawing on the butt of his cigar, which the sea breeze had quickly extinguished, Gus pattered over to the hastily marked milk carton that served as his buoy. Scrawled on the side of the empty plastic jug was the word HOPE. Lacing his thick fingers around the fraying rope, he tugged the trap up onto the deck. For a moment he convinced himself that this one felt promisingly heavy. As the rectangular cage broke the surface, however, he saw that it was empty. He tossed the trap haphazardly into the stern with the others.

By now the sun had nearly risen, washing the late-October sky in shades of apricot-orange and grapefruit-pink. As he re-baited the traps and lowered them back into the greenish depths with practiced, mechanical motions, Gus thought of Hope. She would be waking up soon, in her dormitory, gathering her books for class and trying not to disturb the roommate she didn't like. *Or was it the classmate she didn't like, and the roommate she liked?* He could never keep it straight. Then he thought of the tuition bills he couldn't afford to pay, the increasingly thick envelopes shoved into the back reaches of his sock drawer. Even with Hope's scholarship, it was too much.

As the last trap burbled beneath the waves, something caught Gus's attention. Turning toward the disturbance on his periphery, Gus saw a milk jug bobbing in the tide. Motoring up to it, he saw that it was unmarked. Strange. What lobsterman wouldn't offer some inked hieroglyph demarcating the trap as their own? Other than its being unmarked, it resembled exactly his own preferred means of flotation device. Closer and closer it bobbed, until it was knocking against the side of the boat. Gus peered over his shoulder. The bay was empty but for a coal barge passing in the distance. He'd never stolen a trap before, and cursed anyone who would. Again he thought of Hope, and of the impending November rent. It was unmarked. A look couldn't hurt. He wouldn't take anything, he promised himself. Just a look.

Taking the rope in his hands, Gus gave it a tug. Immediately he was thrown off balance, the weight nearly hauling him headlong into the water. It has been years since he'd felt such weight. His heart pounding in his ears, Gus steadied himself against the bow, gripping the rope so tightly that his knuckles went white. He felt the rope might snap from the strain, sending him and his boat sprawling into the far reaches of the Atlantic. Huffing with exertion, his forearms straining, Gus hauled in the trap. As it surfaced, Gus gasped, nearly dropping the trap back to the ocean floor. Placing the angular cage gingerly on the deck, he tried to catch his breath. He could scarcely command his eyelids to blink. Inside the trap was the largest lobster Gus had ever seen. *How had it even managed to clamber into the tunneled entryway,* Gus wondered? It must have been over thirty pounds, and the length of a tennis racquet.

But the thing that slackened Gus's jaw beyond function was its color. The behemoth lobster was *blue*. With some effort, Gus blinked a few times to be sure the early morning sunlight was not playing tricks on his vision. Sure enough, the giant crustacean's shell was the pale blue hue of a personal check. Hardly thinking, Gus watched his hands extricate the gnarled lobster from the cage. Its claw -- which was approximately the size of a basketball shoe -- lashed at him aggressively, and he nearly dropped the spiny creature back onto the deck.

Setting the massive lobster down, Gus watched, mesmerised, as it crawled purposefully about the stern. It was oddly glorious to him, an ancient warrior from a past era. It's polished blue

shell was composed as neatly and regally as a medieval knight's armor. Some lobsters could live over a hundred years. *It's probably even older than me*, thought Gus, as the armored beast marched about the deck. His heart settling to a rate more conducive to contemplation, Gus's thoughts turned (like any American's might), to matters of capital. As the lobster scuttled about, Gus allowed himself to imagine how much money it might fetch at market. Surely one of Aquidneck's premiere eateries -- 22 Bowen's, The Mooring, The Black Pearl, Midtown Oyster Bar -- would pay any price to acquire such a catch, selling it to a snappily dressed dinner patron at a fittingly exorbitant rate.

But perhaps this rare catch had an even higher destiny than the lower intestine of a splurging tourist. What would an aquarium pay for such a prize attraction? Surely there couldn't be two lobsters in the world such as this one. Gus imagined himself triumphally shoving a fistfull of bills into an envelope addressed to Hope's school. His heart began to thrum in his chest again.

The sun, now fully risen, sent warm beams across the bay. Gus unzipped his rain jacket and peeled it off his sore shoulders. It was then that the lobster bustled resolutely to the middle of the deck. Its dark blue antennae pointed directly at Gus, roving silently over his features. Gus stared into its impassable obsidian eyes -- black kernels the size of capers. He wondered what those eyes had seen in a century spent on the seafloor. *Things no human would ever see*, wondered Gus? The two regarded each other for a long moment. The wind and the sun had dried the glisten from the lobster's shell, dulling the once-shimmering blue to the faded hue of Hope's fashionably tattered jeans.

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Snatching the largest plastic bucket he could find from the disheveled heaps of gear stuffed below deck, Gus quickly filled it with cold, briny seawater. He placed another cigar tenderly between his teeth. Before lighting it, he leaned down and, ignoring the shooting pain in his back, formed a claw with his hand to pick up the lobster. It arched its tail defensively and held up its claw like a bare-knuckle boxer. Grasping the hefty carapace firmly between his clenched fingers, Gus deposited the creature into the bucket. Small, reproachful bubbles floated to the surface as the shimmering blue lobster settled itself at the bottom of the cylindrical vessel. Despite the bucket's size, the lobster could hardly fit itself comfortably within its new confines. Fishing two sturdy rubber bands from his pocket, Gus set about fettering his prisoner's claws. The smaller claw was bound without much difficulty, though the larger claw, held open at a menacing angle, snapped free of the band with one defiant click of its pincers. His joints aching in his hunched position over the bucket, Gus worked deftly to bind the claw. In the end, it took three rubber bands to effectively disarm the lobster. The sun felt pleasant on the cracked skin of Gus's hands. Smiling to himself, he lit the cigar.

As he stared down at his prize catch, a twinge of guilt twisted in Gus's stomach. In a quick, urgent motion he cast the unmarked trap back overboard, as though ridding it from his deck would remove all evidence of his crime. Furious bubbles boiled at the surface of the bucket, emanating from the lobster's tightly pinched mouth. Gus could not bear to look at his captive any longer. Keeping his gaze firmly on the horizon, Gus directed the boat back toward the shore.

The next few hours passed in a blur. Gus docked his boat at Bannister's Wharf, where he was received by his usual customers. They yawned and eyed their lists with a bemused attitude, by

now accustomed to being underwhelmed by the old lobsterman. The bucket splashed water onto the creaking planks of the dock as he set it heavily down at his feet.

“Any luck out there today, Gus?” asked one of them, a tall man with a thin, greasy mustache.

“Tell us some good news, pal,” said another, checking her watch.

Saying nothing, Gus nodded down at the bucket and beckoned them to inspect its contents. The coterie of purchasers stepped forward and peered down into the bucket.

“Jesus! Look at the size of that thing!”

“And the *color!*”

“Gus, is this *real!*”

Their exclamations drew a small crowd that grew and grew as incredulous shouts broke the air. Curious passerby, dressed in elegant evening wear, ambled down the wharf to investigate the commotion. Busboys with stained aprons tied haphazardly about their waists shoved their way to the front of the assemblage. Tourists took pictures on their phones and children clamored with excitement. As news of Gus’s historic catch spread, more purveyors began to appear, using their clipboards to bash their way through the crowd.

“I’ll give you three thousand for it, right now!”

“Hell, I’ll give you four thousand!”

“No chance! That monstah’s gotta be worth six grand, at least!”

By now a disheveled reporter from the *Newport Daily News* had arrived, panting and brushing long hairs away from her face as she scribbled furiously on a notepad. Without Gus ever speaking a word, an impromptu auction broke out among the buyers. Higher and higher the price rose. The enterprising restaurateurs engaged in an excited discussion of housing the lobster permanently in their restaurant tanks (an attraction sure to lure endless hordes of diners), or else auctioning it off again to the highest -- and hungriest -- bidder at their respective establishments.

The clamor subsided when a rotund man in an ill-fitting suit bellowed from the back of the amassed crowd, which by now numbered more than a hundred individuals.

“Thirty-four thousand dollars!” he boomed. “A thousand for each pound!”

After a long pause, Gus spoke. His voice sounded gruff and small by comparison.

“What... what will you do with it?” he asked.

“Why, eat it of course!” hollered the man, chortling.

The crowd joined in his laughter, jostling to form a path between the bodies for the portly man to collect his prize. He walked unhurriedly to the end of the dock, pausing at the bucket and grinning down at his purchase. His eyes were as black as the lobster's.

A great cheer went up from the crowd as he removed a checkbook from his pocket. He scrawled on it quickly with an elegant fountain pen, tore the check free of its binding with a satisfying rip, and pressed it into Gus's weathered palm.

"I'd imagine this could afford you a new boat, eh?" said the man, winking.

Staring down at the check, his mouth agape, it took a moment for Gus to recover himself sufficiently to respond.

"What's that? Oh, yes. Right."

Ignoring the bucket, the man took the lobster between his beefy hands, and, holding it away from his chest like a trophy, he trundled slowly back up the dock toward Thames Street, disappearing around a corner. The reporter asked Gus a few questions before dashing off to interview the lobster's new owner. The crowd dispersed in trickles until, eventually, Gus was left standing alone on the dock. He clutched the check between his fingers, staring at it intently, as though it might disappear as soon as he let it out of his sight.

The sun melted into a thick strand of violet as dusk descended, washing the bustling harbor in a ruby glow. The twinge of guilt in Gus's stomach built to a writhing mass. He imagined the large man tearing a massive blue claw apart in his pillowy fists, butter dribbling down the folds of his many chins as he gleefully supped on the steak-sized morsels of lobster meat. *Would it turn red when boiled, Gus wondered, or simply turn a different shade of blue?* Over a century on the planet and this would be the lobster's ultimate demise. Not disease, not extinction, not food scarcity, not even global warming, but a wealthy man with a large appetite and a larger checkbook. Gus thought he might vomit.

Now he couldn't bear to look at the check. He crushed it in his palm and shoved it deep into his pocket. A sudden fury at the fat man -- and at himself -- surged through his bones. He lunged, knocking over the bucket and spilling seawater over his boots as he sprinted up the dock. It had been years since he'd run so, but he was too filled with anguish and self-loathing to notice the pleading of his lungs or the hammering pulse of his heart that tattooed a beat in his chest. The man had not made it very far down Thames Street. His slow, triumphal pace and the jubilant crowd that followed him accounted for this delay. Gus's surging strides caught up to him without difficulty. He pushed his way past the onlookers, coming to a halt in front of the man. The crowd grew quiet, regarding Gus with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. His gray hair stuck out at odd angles and sweat streamed in rivulets down his scarlet cheeks. His eyes were wild and for a long moment, he could not get his mouth to form words. Finally, between ragged breaths, he managed to speak.

"Give... it back."

The man's thick neck turned from Gus to the crowd and back to Gus, an amused expression affixed to his face.

"Sorry, skipper, all sales are final," he said, chuckling.

The lobster's antennae turned limp circles in the air. Every now and then it mustered an aggressive kick of its tail or a demonstrative splaying of its spider-like legs.

Gus watched his arms shoot forward, his hands laying hold of the lobster. A shout burst out from the crowd and the fat man stumbled backward a pace in shock. But he held firmly onto his prize.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" he shouted.

Gus ignored him. A tug of war ensued between the two men, each yanking the lobster toward their chest. Pain shot up and down Gus's torso and through his shoulders, but his opponent was a stranger to physical effort of this kind. The stunned onlookers uttered sharp exclamations or else shook their heads ruefully. Some began to cheer for one man or the other.

After they'd struggled for a minute or so, their mouths drawn back in snarls, Gus heard a carnal crunching noise and the tension broke. He nearly collapsed backward onto the ground, but years spent negotiating the bobs and swells of the ocean had perfected his balance. The larger man was not so agile. He tumbled onto his rear end on the sidewalk and the crowd uttered a collective inhale. Staring down at the vanquished man, Gus saw the larger of the lobster's two claws resting on his paunch. Gus then looked down at his own hands, which held the lobster, intact but for the missing claw.

He ran. The man bellowed expletives after him as he charged back down the street to the dock. Cradling the amputated lobster in his arms, he quickly untethered his boat from the dock and gunned the engine. As the motor pattered softly through the moonlit water, he looked back over his shoulder. The rotund man stood hollering at the end of the dock, shaking his fist in the direction of the boat's wake.

Gus dropped anchor only once he'd reached Brenton Reef. He removed the rubber band from the lobster's remaining claw with a swipe of his pocket knife. The lobster snapped at him angrily, but he smiled. After a final, unreciprocated gaze into the creature's black eyes, he dropped it gently back into the water. He watched until it had disappeared into the dark depths, and stayed until the last bubble broke the surface.

Jamming a fresh cigar into the corner of his mouth, he dug his hands into his pockets, searching for his lighter. Instead, however, his fingers encountered the check. He held it up to his face, the moon offering a weak lamp over the inky ocean. The perpetual dampness of his profession had rendered it flimsy and soaked, the ink blotted beyond recognition. It disintegrated in his brine-stained hands. He tossed the defunct paper scraps into a rusted lobster trap in the stern and lit his cigar, inhaling gratefully as the brown tobacco leaves erupted in a deep orange glow.





pin art as portrait of 2021
Gayle Brandeis

an early harvest

Daniel Steven Miller

Inside the cabin there would have been barely enough room for the trellis and the chairs and the guests. To make room for the reception they would have to get that gear out of the living room and then push in the tables and unfold them. All that would have to be done quickly; and doing so would have created a feeling of a hustle-bustle that would wreck the spirit of serenity and fellowship that certainly had been planted in everyone's soul by the love that up until then had pervaded the occasion. And doing all that very quickly would require extra help; they might be stuck paying the caterers extra.

Despite the clouds, Charles decided to keep the trellis outside. The rain was going to hold off.

"We're having it at the pond, and it's going to be a small, simple ceremony," Delilah, the bride, had told her half-brother Alec.

"Nobody ever says they're going to have a large, complex ceremony," Alec replied. "Large, complex ceremonies are gauche and expensive and just as easy to forget as small, simple ceremonies."

Even though Delilah, the bride, had just met Christine, she gave her a full-on hug as though she had known her for years.

"No tuxedos," Christine remarked to her brother Charles, the groom. It did not bother her; Charles didn't need one. He was a really good-looking guy, always trim and pressed and tucked in.

"Your brother has no faith in tuxedos," Delilah said.

"Tuxedos are not a matter of faith," Christine said. "You can only have faith in things you cannot see. You can't see God in Heaven, but tuxedos are everywhere."

Christine looked across the way.

"There's Andres," she said.

"That's him," Charles said. "He's officiating."

"Not a good idea," said Christine. "The guy's a goofball. He's going to embarrass somebody, and that person might not be himself."

"He is eccentric, but he's also a great artist and a great naturalist, the gentlest and most compassionate man I've ever known," said Charles. "We've been going over old times, and the last thing you can attach to him is memory loss. His mind's clear as a bell."

"But are bells clear?" Christine asked. "You could use that as a mantra: 'All bells are clear,' maybe."

"We don't know for a fact that all bells are clear, so a mantra won't work," Charles said. "The best thing we have on our hands is something to contemplate for the rest of our lives: 'Are bells clear?' But what do we mean by bells and clearness? Are we only talking about revelations and epiphanies, as in a bell going off in your head? Or are we talking cattle and churches?"

"Ha!" said Alec. "We should mull that one over after the ceremony."

Andres announced that he would speak of the nature of human affinity. "By which, of course, I really mean the love between two people," he said chucklingly.

"We've all heard it said that love is blind," he began. "I myself couldn't maintain a more opposite view. Indeed, when we love someone, we see something in that person that no one else has seen, perhaps something they had not seen in themselves. Some if not all of you know that some species in the wild choose their mates for life. People do, but human partnerships are not forged through of instinct alone. True, we possess plenty of instinct. Our children learn language only by hearing people talk long enough. You can't sit them down and teach them how to talk when they can't understand what you're saying in the first place. If they *could* talk, they'd look up at us and say, 'What are you talking about?' Although it seems a miracle that by the time they're about three they're capable of full conversation, it's no miracle. It's instinctual. I'm sure some if not all of you have observed a dog nursing her pups immediately after whelping. No miracle there, either. Animals developed the instinct to nurse right away out of evolutionary necessity, for Evolution requires the production of offspring who will in turn procreate. Animals that do not reproduce are nothing but biological wastage. But we as people have more than instinct, so even the non-procreative are not wastage. The fact that Evolution has given us love is no accident; and as a result it is absolutely necessary to use love as well as instinct when we do procreate. We see this in ourselves and in each other; therefore we are not blind when we do fall in love and begin our legacies."

Moved almost to tears by his own words, Andres removed a sheet of paper from his shirt pocket and read aloud. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

My, how his oratory has ramped up, and how suddenly, Christine observed.

Eight months later, Charles and Delilah went swimming in the pond near their cabin and plunged over the dam and drowned. Shortly afterward, Andres announced to Alec that he was going to buy the cabin and renovate it into a museum to exhibit Lunfordian artifacts and to serve as a memorial to Delilah. He had already lined up a docent.

"No one around here gives a crap about folk art or amateurishly written local histories or antique small engines or replicas of dinosaur tracks," Alec said.

"Delilah had a charming collection of elegant-looking books," Andres said. "When people learn about those books, they'll flock to the place. People can't get enough of elegant-looking books."

"Delilah was a wonderful human being, but she was a kid, an unknown," Alec said. "She didn't earn a memorial."

"Charles had it pretty well done up," Andres said. "All it needs is a few coats of paint."

Alec persuaded Christine to drive out with him to see the cabin in its pure state before Andres did whatever he was going to do with it. She would go only if Alec let Ben come along. After some time Christine persuaded Alec that his anger at young Ben had become obsolete, and while everybody was still grieving the loss of Charles and Delilah, they couldn't care less about Alec's anger.

Ben had taken up with Delilah, twenty-five years younger than Alec, and then dumped her. If he hadn't, she would not have taken up with Charles. She would not have ended up living in the cabin. She would not have gone over the dam.

Ben was sick of imagining what the cabin looked like. Maybe if he no longer had to use his imagination he wouldn't think about it as often.

The humidity made the smell of the tall grass that grew alongside the road worse than it would have been had there not been so much humidity. The odor took Alec back to the stench of hot damp earth accompanied by the stink of the greenish-yellow gelatinous gunk that oozed from tobacco plant stems and dried on his legs and his arms and hands. When he was sixteen, Alec's father gave him a bicycle as a reward for helping the family move. The timing was exquisite. They had moved in the early spring, giving Alec months of bike-riding weather before the cold set in. Five weeks into that summer, Alec got his job cutting and spearing tobacco plants. By midsummer biking five miles to the farm was no challenge. The road was lined with heavily leafed trees, and the mornings were quiet, as he wanted them to be; it was a place where, if only to himself, he demonstrated his physical endurance. Getting stronger made him feel more whole. During his showers after work he would watch the deep brown water become lighter with dilution.

Under sunlight that had begun to fade, Alec drove past the building that had housed an art-film cinema before the theater was wiped out by the multiplexes. The place reminded Alec of another cinema that had showed art films and was long and cavernous enough to let you to get away with getting stoned if sat in or near the front row. The storefront cinema was way too small for that. Anyone who tried smoking reefer there would have drawn a complaint from a patron of the arts whose movie-going experience had been ruined. Through his buzz the stoner would have proclaimed "It's our God-given right to get totally blitzed whenever we want, doesn't matter where."

"There would have been a scene," Alec said. "You can't stay in business if you're going to have scenes."

A few entrepreneurs had the theater gutted to open a bar. "It proves my theory that this town is loaded with boozehounds," he said. "Our only reliable customer base is people who insist on celebrating nothing in particular."

Christine's face brightened. "Boozehounds," she said. "I know where you got that word. I just finished that book."

"It's been at least 40 years for me," Alec said, "I don't remember much about it, but some things just stick in your mind."

"Having a bar there is better than letting the place stay empty," Ben said. "You wouldn't want it to have it fall down from neglect. No one wants to look at anything that's crumbling. At least the place is bringing in a positive cash flow, pretension or no pretension."

"Dilapidation is never pretty," Alec agreed. "The town of Lundford has maintained an important commercial asset."

"Since when did you start talking about 'the town of Lundford' and customer bases and commercial assets?" Christine asked.

"When Ben started talking about positive cash flows," said Alec. "Of course you know I hate that kind of talk. I only talk that way for fun."

"I never remember everything."

They drove in silence for a few miles and then Alec asked Ben the question you use when you want to fuel a conversation with someone who's a lot younger than yourself. Even if they hate school, they say it's good and then they don't say anything more, which is what you knew would happen when you asked the question. Then, if you can think of one, you try another question. Any conversation is better than silence anchored by a thirty-year age difference and a difficult history.

"What school?" Ben replied. "What makes you think I'm in school?"

"Aren't you in grad school?"

"I made a little noise about grad school a few years ago, but that was it."

"So you didn't," Alec said.

"Definitely."

"Still just working then," Alec said.

"I'm not independently wealthy, so yeah, just."

"I wanted to make sure you hadn't been laid off. That's been happening a lot, you know."

I'm sure he does know, and it's not like you could help him if he were out of a job.

They were silent for a while before Alec asked, "Any girls out there?"

Next time, ask a mean-spirited question.

Solar glare reflected off the bridge that intersected the road ahead. After they winced and raised a hand to shield their eyes the road veered away from the glare.

"There are girls out there," Ben replied. "There always will be girls out there."

"I mean..."

Ben didn't want to talk about women in front of the sister of Charles; he figured she still had to be at least a little pissed at him, even if she had insisted that he come along. *There's no way she can look at me without having a picture of her drowned brother lodged in her mind.*

"I know what you mean," Ben said. "Maybe this one girl at work, except she's older than a girl!"

"Girls at work are not a promising idea," Alec said. "I went out with this one girl who was all smiles. She let me kiss her repeatedly on the first date, no hesitation, but later I saw her with this guy. They seemed pretty serious. She looked at me stone-faced."

"Brutal."

"It's all right," Alec said. *Not entirely, not if you're still thinking about it thirty-six years later.* "She was serious about that guy, but she couldn't be committed all the way, even though she might have told herself she was. Twenty-two-year-olds don't know exactly what they want."

"Things would have turned out better if I knew exactly what I wanted, or at least tried to scope things out."

"It was an accident," said the brother of Delilah. "Delilah could have met anybody after you. It just happened to be Charles."

"You're right," Ben replied. "I should try to look on the bright side."

Alec drove onto a dirt lane where the remaining sunlight showed through a canopy of leaves engaged with a hard wind. The orioles were still in for the month-long visit they make each spring before they fly off, and the dogwood-tree blossoms were starting to go by. Alongside the road the ditchbed rose to make a berm in the stream; at the berm's base there was always a puddle. Too much rain and water would overflow the bank and the puddle would rise onto the road.

Charles had had the flimsy wood-panel interior walls pulled out and replaced with chemically pressure-treated and lacquered wood. He had them install a bay window in the front room to provide a broad view of the pond and the shore of grassy earth and sand and pebbles and

fallen leaves and branches. The water froze over much more quickly than Delilah had expected it would. If the temperature stayed in the twenties for a week she would not go through the ice. Knowing that, she would make her way to the middle of the pond to contemplate the frozen shore, all of it from an equal distance.

Christine tried cabin the door. It was unlocked. Her gut tightened. Some of the big stuff was gone. Furniture and a chest of drawers. They had dismantled two ceiling fans.

Christine glanced at Alec. "Our friend Andres has ripped us off."

"He couldn't just suck it up like the rest of us," Alec replied.

"They weren't even his family."

~~*

After a silence, Ben said, "It's some freaking stuffy in here."

"This isn't stuffy," Alec said. "I'll tell you what's stuffy. When I think of stuffiness I think of church. To get to the sanctuary we had to walk upstairs in a hallway that has never been aired out. When I was about fifty they installed windows parallel to the banister. They look nice, and they allow for a great deal of light, which is always necessary in a church, but you can't open them. The hallway is still unpleasant. Tolerating it has become a tradition all its own. I don't know what possessed them to get windows that you can't crank open."

Because the roof was not far above the ceiling, the downpour that pelted the trees and the pond and the cabin made it sound as though the roof was roaring. Steam arose from what asphalt there was. Rain blew in diagonally through the bay window. Lightning charged the room with illumination and disintegrated the moon's reflection on the pond like a plummeting boulder would rupture a pool of water-logged clay. Hearing anything outside the cabin was impossible.

Christine pointed her flashlight at the bookshelf. Andres had left the local histories behind.

"He needed charming and elegant things," Alec said. "A totally gimcrack kind of guy."

"That'd better be it. I don't know who'd shell out much if anything for a copy of *The Inside of the Cup* or *Toni the Little Carver*, even in mint condition. I have a first edition of *If I Have Four Apples* at home if anybody wants it. The dust jacket's in perfect condition."

The rain stopped, allowing the moon to coalesce on the pond.

A drenched guy who was not Andres opened the door. Startled by the visitors, he stopped short. Christine discerned a silhouette of a man sitting in the truck's passenger seat.

"You must be the docent," Alec said.

"The docent?"

“The museum tour guide.”

“Yeah, that’s it,” the man replied. “The tour guide. Sure.”

“That’s great,” Christine said, “but I didn’t know that tour guides work after hours.”

“As far as I’m concerned, they don’t. But I’m not really the guiding sort. I’m more of a we-haul-your-stuff-away type.”

He clambered up into his pickup truck and drove off. On his way out he noticed for the first time Alec’s car parked in a thicket of trees.

“Love is patient...rejoices with the truth” originated in I Corinthians 13:4



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A business card for Cyd Scott, a Realtor. The card features a circular portrait of Cyd Scott on the left side. The background is white with a blue vertical bar on the left. The text on the right side of the card provides contact information: phone numbers, email address, and physical address.

it begins with fingernails and skin

Kim Berkley

It begins with fingernails and skin:
an itch to scratch, or a scab to pick.
Pleasure always precedes the pain of sin,

a morbid satisfaction akin
to ripping rind from flesh; cathartic.
It begins with fingernails and skin—

manifestations of faults within,
foul symptoms of a soul malefic.
Pleasure always precedes the pain of sin,

but once to that tempting well you've been,
you'll drink, and drink, and drink, till you're sick.
It begins with fingernails and skin

shredding sinew thick and membrane thin.
Masochist, or cannibalistic?
Pleasure always precedes the pain of sin.

A skeletal smile (grimace or grin?)
chews as phalanges scrape—*tick, scritch, tick*.
It begins with fingernails and skin.
Pleasure always precedes the pain of sin.



earworm

Kim Berkley

Your voice, the virus that invades my ear
through twisted wires and electric words,
a glow-worm seeking refuge from the birds
whose serenades I can no longer hear.

It burrows into brain and dream and speech,
until I cannot say which thought is mine
or yours; disease and reason intertwine
and blood is drained to sate the toxic leech.

This terminal infection warps and rots
all sense of self; identity decays
and festers inside wounds that ooze and leak.
Yet still you tie my stomach into knots
with each seductive, waltzing turn of phrase
that crawls into my head and makes me weak.



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sink or swim
Jaina Sipriano

conclusion

Micahel Favala Goldman

Success is no laughing matter.
How grotesque the worms
eating the pith of my psyche,
the cockroaches scrambling
around the volutes of my imagination.

Whatever I'm turning over
can have snakes or scorpions. I'm thinking
of giving myself permission to leave
things in place, there's so much
I don't need to know.



reflection in an english village

Micahel Favala Goldman

for Linda

You would see the neighborhood water pump, erect
black iron in its tiny plaza of stone on the street corner,
and notice the handle missing. You would notice
the wildflowers sinking their roots into the softening
triangular rocks topping the lichenized stone walls.
You would notice the concrete fill of the basement
kitchen floor, not flat, but practical between the ancient
laid stones. But you wouldn't care. However alive
the present is, the past is more so. So why not
admit it. Why not live with it evident
everywhere, instead of continually buried
or extricated as if it never was. If you were here
you would feel at home.



prey

Micahel Favala Goldman

The worst part was not the people
huddled with bundles on the backs
of trucks, the fires behind
or the rubble, the broken bodies,
though it was bad, especially
the children. The worst part
was not the shoes arranged
at the door I went in or the toothpaste
without the cap. The worst part
was the birds singing and the blue sky.
I was not prepared for that.



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consume

Todd Evans

Red bulbs shine from ceiling. Velvet walls surround table. He plunges both hands into a cream colored blob. Meat juice splash. Bats an eyelid, rids goo.

Fleshy of course, but gelatinous. Blob feels familiar; his body recognizing its own? Maybe cousin? Distant relative?

Tight rubber band, no not rubber band, but vein interrupts fingers' journey. To pull it, snap it, rip it. Must mold meat into an instrument for creating works of art. With left hand, he pulls and pulls on one end of vein as he keeps right hand still. Vein doesn't budge.

He applies pressure, more pressure. Nose tingles. Wipes it on lab coat. Vein gives a tad. It stretches, loosens inside that cold flesh. Flesh like scrambled eggs. And vein gives, gives, hands growing distant, one last tug. Twists it around tighter and . . . snap. Free. To do what he pleases.

Tears muscle away, separates into quadrants. Splits bits and pieces. Pats them. Smooths them. Gives rectangular and oblong shape, squared corners. Fits them. Globes of glue. Mucous drenched hands. Fat. Oily fat. Rotten, past due date smell. But, he sees it. Destination, form's everlasting kingdom.

He molds, pulls skin into bulbous sprouts that protrude from front. Twirls fat into cylinder that in the back will slide and spin. Flesh squishes, squashes. Almost there. One last touch, he'll be finished: a handle for rocking contraption into motion.

Extends bony arm from cylinder and jumps off his royal throne, snags scroll from cupboard. Back at table, feeds scroll through cylinder. Cracks fingers. Takes breath. And, bang. In rhythmic clickety-clack, his fingers strike sprouts. Sprouts fly down and back up. Spring loaded mushrooms. With every movement, grease droplets explode: blubber on shirt, on face, on desk.

Letters cling to paper. Form words. Words to paragraphs. And when he reaches down to write last sentence, fingers fall between mushrooms, the keys. Those keys curve around his fingers, cut off circulation. He yanks, but to no avail. Stands, lifts contraption off table. Shakes, shakes, but machine bites, digs into his skin. Draws blood.



bewitched bothered and deluded

Jim Ross

Seeking to separate myself from the Halloween festivities hosted by the commune that I'd been trying to call home for nearly a year, I begin to secrete my way up our oak staircase. Two reddish monkeys wearing identical blue and white polka-dotted aprons play poker on the quarter landing, their legs outstretched like an impromptu obstacle course. At stair head, a crowd sings Stephen Stills' *Love the One You're With* behind closed bathroom doors. I hold my breath and tip-toe by, fall into my bedroom door, and dive for my bed well before witching hour.

Still smeared with whiteface—my last-resort Halloween costume—I snap into sleep. Doorknob rattling startles me. Someone barefoot or sock-wearing pads across the thickly carpeted floor. A female voice whispers, "You mind if we use your room for 30 minutes?" In dreamy logic, I figure the question is a come-on within a dream. I choose to move onto another dream rather than entertain the question. Within seconds, there's motion on the floor alongside my bed. So, it *isn't* a dream after all! What now? Eyes glued shut, my ears stay wide open. Sham sleep becomes my Halloween mask.

"I don't know how," a second female voice says.

"I'll show you," says the first female voice.

120 "I can't believe this is happening," says the second voice.

"Believe it."

"There's someone else here," the second voice says.

"Ignore it."

"Slower. Slower," says the second voice.

"You just tell me. Whatever you want."

It sounds like someone is enjoying a dark chocolate mousse. I hold onto that image.

"My mother would kick you," laughs the second voice.

"I'll hold you."

"It's cold in here," says the second voice.

"You're feeling warmer already."

"Poor Richard," the second voice laments, half-heartedly.

“Only think about you.”

“I threw up,” says the second voice.

“You’ve been spitting a lot. It’ll pass.”

Pause.

“Funny, I feel less guilty now,” says the second voice.

“You said you couldn’t handle it. That’s how I knew you’d be interested.”

Another pause.

“Should we go back?” asks the second voice.

“The party’s here. The party’s us.”

“We better go,” says the second voice.

There’s a flurry. Like pheasants rising from marshy grasses, they rise without even a whisper. After soft baby steps, my door fans open. Hallway light slaps me across the face. Then faster than it had opened my door fans shut, sending a welcome breeze, as if feathers brushed my face. The cylinder of the door handle faintly grinds. Then the latch bolt ejects firmly through the strike plate, with the finality of gunshot. Good cat burglars, except for the gunshot.

I don’t feel much like drifting back into sleep. I rise, find the door, barefoot out into the harsh light, make my way around the latest staircase adventurers, and look around for two women who’d cut themselves off from the melee. I find two women sitting on the Herculon couch, with far hands clasped over near. Focused on each other, neither says a word. I join them on their couch, not too close. Their eyes briefly settle on my whiteface. Do they recognize me? After ten minutes of shared equanimity, I roll into a standing position, bow, navigate the stairway, embrace my bed, and sleep until the sun jolts me bolt upright.

My six housemates are undergrads at the same university. I’m a grad student at another university across town. I’d moved into the basement in January because a friend invited me along to the house’s Christmas party. For the first five months, my housemates told me they welcomed my “more mature, reasoned perspective.” Then in June—after three of the four founders of the house graduated and moved out, but before three new arrivals moved in—I was offered the big bedroom upstairs, where the sun first shows her face every morning. Current house members are more likely to tell me to “get over it and get with it.”

When I come downstairs the morning after, I have the house to myself—not counting the three dogs—for nearly three hours. None of the dogs are mine, but I begin my morning chores—cleaning up where the dogs shat in the living room, dining room, kitchen, and the wide open space with no name. When I finish shit patrol, I fetch the *Washington Post*, and make myself comfortable in the wicker rocker on the wraparound porch beneath my bedroom.

Around eleven, I hear tumblers on the stairway in search of coffee and OJ. From fragments I overhear on the porch, there'd been lots of hookups last night, but none of it made sense. Aside from the usual heavily-laced marijuana, there'd been a Halloween treat. Quaaludes (aka: Ludes or Sopors) had been doled out like candy corn. I hadn't noticed.

"Oh, what a marvelous bunch of coconuts!" housemate Dan exclaims. He, Kate and Antoni stand in the wraparound porch's doorway hand-in-hand.

Dan steps onto the porch and whispers, "What'd you do last night?"

"I went to bed," I say.

"With who?" he asks.

"With me," I answer.

"There really wasn't anybody with you?" Dan asks.

"Methinks you know the answer. A couple of women came in after I'd fallen asleep," I say. "Asked if they could use my room. I tried to stay in dreamland. They did their thing and left."

"And you didn't join them?" Dan asks.

"What was going on was complicated enough."

"There's nothing wrong with a third person jumping in," Dan says.

"As it is, they had Poor Richard to deal with."

"Richard?" Dan asks.

"Yes, that's what she called him. 'Poor Richard.' I guess she and Richard are partners, except on Halloween."

"Hmmm. What were you thinking about while this was going on?" Dan asks.

"A really rich, dark cholate mousse. Lip-smacking good."

"I can't believe you didn't join them," he says. "What are ludes for?"

"I didn't take ludes or drop them or whatever the hell it is you do with them. And nobody told me our Halloween party was a Quaalude Party."

“You disapprove?” Dan asks.

“I love dark chocolate mousse, if that’s what you mean.”

Dan turns and walks back into the dining room. I follow. Shortly, tiny housemate Anne comes down holding hands with partygoer Marcie. Anne’s towering boyfriend, Mark the carpenter, the one with the mountain-man beard, hadn’t shown up for last night’s bash.

“They got lewd on ludes,” says Dan.

Anne turns her head away, looking simultaneously shy and excited.

Gradually, the magnitude of last night’s Quaalude orgy begins to sink in. People had hooked up randomly and in multiples. Kate, a committed straight with a long-standing boyfriend, Paul, back home in Rhode Island, had hooked up with straight partygoer Mary. Lifelong gay partygoer Peter had hooked up with lifelong straight Carol.

“I’ve been wanting to get pregnant so I could have a baby” says Peter, as he follows Carol from kitchen to dining room to living room and back. “It shouldn’t always have to be the woman’s burden. Now I don’t know what to think.”

“I’ve got to call Paul,” Kate says. “He needs to come out too. Once he comes out, all of this will be okay, and he and I can still be together . . . when we’re together.”

“We’re all bodies. It’s all the same, male or female. It really doesn’t matter, sex or no sex. A body is a body,” says Antoni, a lifelong gay who regularly smokes marijuana with his mother and had multiple hookups last night, at least two men and one woman.

Anne sits at the dining room table holding hands with Marcie.

“Now I’m dealing with my latent homosexuality,” says Bill, a lifelong gay housemate who’d hooked up with a lifelong gay partygoer last night. “Later, I’ll deal with my latent heterosexuality.”

“Janet and Mariann hooked up last night too,” says Dan.

So, Dan *did* know about my midnight visitors.

As the worm turns, Dan turns and asks me, “You want to tell us about *your* night?”

“Sorry, I’ve been up for hours, I’ve cleaned up after the dogs, cleaned up after your bacchanal, and I’m late for my run. We can pick up on this later,” I say, leaving the prunes to stew in their juices.

The rest of the day is relatively quiet because my nocturnal housemates nap for most of it. When we cross paths, I listen, smile, and ask “D’you enjoy it?” After they say something approximating “yes,” I typically ask, “Does all this make sense to you?” Their most articulate response is, “Nothing makes any sense anyway, so why not?”

The next day, I ride the H-2 bus to the DC public high school where I'm substitute teaching in social studies and then attend a grad school seminar, while my housemates do their earnest best to attend classes. With their central nervous systems still acutely depressed, their scholarly efforts demonstrate the difference between attending classes and being attentive in class. After a makeshift dinner—everyone doing their own thing, meaning a slice of American cheese with a coke and nachos for all of them except Anne—the time approaches for our regular Monday night house meeting.

When we've all gathered in the living room, the doorbell rings. Kate prances to the door and leads Mariann and Poor Richard into the living room. Nobody says who'd invited them, but I guess it had been Kate's doing. Still, their disruption offers a welcome diversion from the prospect of regaling Saturday night's Quaalude Party and celebrating every coming out.

By "coming out," they have a specific, divergent meaning. Coming out really means, "crossing over." Crossovers from straight to gay, from gay to straight, from either to ambivalent or simply queer, are celebrated as if a new child had been born. Hours of arguments often follow about who really had sex with whom and whether there was a true crossover.

Apparently, Mariann had beseeched Richard to move into our vacant basement, where I used to live. At Kate's direction, Mariann and Richard—who rented an apartment together—explain their hopes and dreams as prospective new "commune members." Dan, who's twitching like never before, switches into full-on tsunami mode.

"Does Richard know what happened here Saturday night?" Dan asks.

When he gets no response, Dan presses harder: "Look at me, Mariann. Does Richard know?"

Poor Richard looks at Mariann. "What the hell's he talking about?" he asks as fear wells up in his eyes.

Mariann doesn't answer Dan. She doesn't look at Richard. Instead, her eyes throw poison darts at Dan. Then she turns toward Kate with sorry eyes that beg for a life raft.

"You two really need to leave and talk," says Dan.

"Why are you being so brutal?" asks Kate, shaking her fist at Dan.

"Maybe we better go," says Mariann. She springs from her seat, pivots, and progresses toward the door without looking back. Poor Richard follows. Kate runs after Richard.

Once Poor Richard and Mariann had driven away, Kate runs back into the house and, still standing, points a finger at Dan, "Why'd you do that?"

"It wouldn't be fair to them or us. This house is coming together. Having them move in might ruin their relationship. Even worse, dealing with their relationship would definitely stifle the energy that's growing in this house," Dan says.

“People can change,” says Anne, meekly.

“I admit, we need to talk about where we’re headed as a group,” says Kate.

“Things have changed,” says Dan.

“But did they really change that much?” asks Carol.

“Not really. I still clean up the dog shit every morning,” I say.

“You’re not obliged to,” says Antoni. “That’s your choice. You could leave the dog shit right where it is and eventually someone might start picking it up. You haven’t given it a fair chance. If you wait long enough, it might even pick itself up.”

“That’s not what we need to talk about,” says Dan. “Something’s going on. It’s affecting all of us. Or nearly all.”

“We’re all affected,” says Anne. “You can’t force change on people. Acceptance is change too. Accepting surprises in ourselves but also accepting differences in others.”

“Regardless,” says Dan, “We’ve learned something. Some of us thought we were straight. Some of us thought we were gay. We’ve learned sexuality is more fluid than that.”

“Meaning what?” asks Anne.

“I don’t have to avoid having sex with someone because of their gender, but that doesn’t mean I have to feel attracted to *everyone*. I don’t have to have sex with *everyone*,” says Antoni

“Unless you’re on sopors,” interjects Bill.

“Oh, we’re all whores,” says Kate. “I need to call Paul and fix this.”

Over the next two months, I walk on fiery nails. Every word I speak places me at risk of being subjected to a radical sexual analysis. I fear one day I would suck in all the air for a mile around, blow it out all at once, and curse the day.

With no savings and living on a meager substitute’s income, I can’t readily move out. Instead, nearly every Friday, I take the slow train to New York, where I stay with either Laurie or Elaine, whoever will have me. I ride the train back to DC on Monday. That gives me three or four days for substitute teaching. I fantasize leaving the whole DC scene behind and moving to New York. I imagine living at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But grad school keeps me in DC and living in New York requires real money, which I didn’t have.

By staying away most weekends, I avoid the Saturday night Quaalude parties and the Sunday regaling. I can’t escape the week-long efforts to reconcile conflicting reports about Saturday night’s goings on and the assignment of Apgar scores to each afterbirth.

Kate and Paul break up during his next visit after she insists that he “come out” so they can be equals. She falsely claims she dumped him because they were no longer equals.

When I return from New York around dinner time one late November Monday, I discover a crude drawing of a house on the kitchen blackboard. “Come out PLEASE!” is written scribbled above the drawing. An arrow points to my room.

Our weekly house meetings are getting even more tiresome. “You know,” says Dan, pointing a finger at me at one of those meetings, “lots of energy has been spent on you for no response.”

I turn to Antoni and say, “I hear I’m regressing.”

Antoni says, “We’re all regressing.”

Bill says, “Hey, look, it’s no joke. Being gay’s a serious thing.”

“This house has direction now and you can’t flow with it,” says Kate.

“Kate’s undergone astounding changes in emotions so rapidly,” says Dan. “She needs another gay woman to support her.”

“You never totally lose interest in a sex to which you were attracted,” says Bill, “but Kate wants to turn mostly to women.”

“You’re right,” I say. “This house has new energy infused by Quaaludes and a new identity and I don’t fit. This isn’t the house I moved into in January. You better believe I want to get the hell out of here. I’m exploring my options.”

A few days later, I fall asleep with my back facing my bedroom door. I wake when I sense a hand resting on my right hip. Warm flesh presses against mine from behind. Fingernails dig into my hip. My first thought is that Jeanne, who still had a key, decided to pay me a surprise visit. I turn to my right and see Dan’s mustached, vapid face sharing my pillow. I rear back and swing a sharp right elbow into his chest as if I swung for the right field fences. I follow through by using my open left palm to send him flying. A cry breaks from his lips as he looks for the rip cord on his parachute. It sounds like he lands twice. After drawing in a quick breath, he whimpers, “What’d you do that for?” Then he stands and, as he leaves, says, “I was only. Trying. To help.”

I let out a roar. I let the silence sink in and roar again and then again. Nobody comes to ask why I roar in a dark room at midnight. After nobody comes, I hope I haven’t woken anyone because I don’t want to explain what happened, and didn’t happen. I know Dan is awake so at least he heard me. I push the door shut until the latch bolt ejects firmly, with the finality of gunshot.

At daybreak, I walk to Heckinger's Hardware and purchase a chain lock. Screwing it into the doorframe and the door before anyone else is even awake gives me a modicum of satisfaction, but doesn't damper my fury.

I phone one of the former house residents—one of the founders of the original "commune," who'd moved out in June—about moving in with him on a temporary basis ASAP. He says January is the earliest he can arrange.

After I get home from work, the house sounds empty, so I go down to the basement to put clothes in the washer. I'm startled to find Anne there. She's the only housemate I still respect and trust. She, Mark, and I had gone raspberry picking in Rock Creek back in June. We'd enjoyed concocting vegetarian dinners together prior to the recent Quaalude craze.

"What was that noise last night?" she asks. Her attic room is directly above mine.

I told her what happened.

"What was Dan thinking?" she asks. "You've drawn the line very clearly. He had no business. . . I'm sorry." She drops her basket of clean laundry and holds me. "I'm not happy here either. I'm working on getting out."

"Me too," I say.

"What're you going to do?" she asks.

"Get back on track. Find a place where I belong," I say.

When the crew arrives home, Dan calls for an emergency house meeting at 7:30 by writing it on the kitchen blackboard. He also writes: "Jim placed a lock on his bedroom door, against house policy."

I show up in the living room last to avoid having to recapitulate for latecomers. I look around and see a friend in Anne's eyes. I sit next to Kate, at the end of the Herculon couch. When nobody says anything, I begin. "Are we here because I put a lock on my bedroom door and that's against house policy?"

"Yes," says Dan, looking around for support.

"Well, I admit, I did that," I say. "And I put the lock on my bedroom door because it's no longer safe for me to sleep without one after last night."

"What happened last night?" asks Anne, knowing the answer.

"Dan entered my room in the middle of the night, long after everyone was asleep. While I slept, he got into my bed, naked. He put his hand on my hip and pressed his flesh against mine. All uninvited."

“Did that really happen, Dan?” asks Kate. “D’you really do that?”

“That’s . . . that’s true,” Dan says.

“But why, Dan? Hasn’t Jim drawn the line clearly enough?” asks Anne.

“I was only trying to help,” Dan answers. “Everyone else has succeeded in coming out. I thought Jim needed a little help. A nudge.”

Staring Dan down with the eyes of a tiger, Anne asks, “Are you out of your mind?”

“These days, what does it mean to be in our right minds?” Dan asks.

“You’ve lost it!” Anne says.

Dan pulls up his t-shirt and points at his sternum. “You see this bruise? Jim did this.”

“And you know *why* I shoved you out of my bed?” I ask.

“You hurt me. On purpose,” Dan says. “We can’t have willful violence in this house.”

“You imply you think I was wrong to defend myself. You know what? I’m not dignifying this,” I say. “You entered *my* bed unwanted. I threw you out of *my* bed. I’m entitled. So are all of you every time someone violates your bed, ludes or no ludes.”

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“But can’t anyone understand, I was only trying to help?” Dan pleads.

“You were wrong, Dan,” says Anne.

“This is so fucked. Jim let you off easy,” says Kate.

“What if it’d been me?” asks Carol.

“It would’ve been different if Jim and Dan had both been, like, luded out and said ‘Yeah, let’s get it on,’” Antonio says.

“There’s no such a thing as consent when you’re on ludes,” Anne says. “Ludes kill the capacity for consent. They turn us into sick monkeys doing experiments on each other.”

The next week, Kate goes to the free VD clinic and confirms she has gonorrhea and crabs. Acting like players in an Arlo Guthrie song, Kate leads her housemates down to the VD clinic together, hand in hand, so they can turn the other cheek in succession. Soon, they are all taking penicillin, trimming pubic hair, and bathing in Kwell. More Kwell can be found in our bathrooms than there is milk in the fridge. After all, I am the only one buying milk and the only one not bathing in Kwell. In addition to the lock on my bedroom door, I begin putting a combination lock on my milk carton.

Matters escalate when housemate Bill comes down with The Great Pox. The next day, a scribbled note is posted on the fridge door:

What to Do during VD Starvation Week

1. watch TV
2. take long shits
3. eat, eat, eat (avoid spicy foods)
4. take sopors
5. dance (but not to the point of arousal)
6. visit in large groups with hands tied
7. read National Geographic
8. tease the opposite sex
9. throw Christmas tree bulbs at passing cars
10. make movies rated G

Despite #4, ingestion of Quaaludes takes a downturn. In addition to Anne's comment about ludes turning people into sick monkeys, my housemates had been lectured at the FreeVD Clinic about Quaalude risks: destroying the central nervous system; wrecking kidneys, liver, and other vital organs; and interfering with brain function and *ability to take finals*. They'd already purchased Quaaludes by the bottleful so instead of ceasing they opt to use "with greater discretion." Dan still maintains ludes are aphrodisiacs. From everything I read, Quaaludes are a muscle relaxants and hypnotics, which (according to *Time Magazine*) strongly impair the "conscience muscle."

On a New York trip over Christmas break, I get to take some long, deep breaths. I cook up a storm and throw a party at a friend's apartment for people drawn from different parts of my life, some of whom had never met each other before. I walk on the cold sand at Jones Beach. I confirm that in mid-January I'd be able to move in temporarily with one the original founders of the house while I look for more permanent lodging.

When I return to DC, I learn that Mariann is pregnant with Poor Richard's child. To avoid flunking out, Antoni drops out for the semester before leaving to smoke weed with his widowed mother.

One of my last nights in the house, five of my six housemates sit in a crescent moon on the living room floor smoking marijuana laced with hallucinogens. Dan proclaims, "Six happy vegetables: a tragicomedy staged in five acts simultaneously on one bed."

"I want to be a tomato," says Kate. "Oh, no, I can't. That has sexist connotations. I'll be a carrot."

"Then I'll be a tomato," says Antoni.

"I'll be a cabbage," says Bill.

"Mariann wants to be a cabbage too," says Kate.

"Who wants to be a hot potato?" asks Carol.

"Six happy vegetables, nourished by nicotine and sopors," cries Antoni.

The day I leave, whatever the dogs vomited yesterday on the stairway was dried and flaking. Raisins scattered on the floors had hardened into wrinkly marbles. Heaps of dog shit everywhere had turned white and lost any hint of stink. Every pan and pot—in the sink or cabinets—wears the remains of the meals long past. There is no milk in the fridge, no cheese, not even diet coke. Dishes are shelved randomly—lunch plate over teacup over soup bowl. "Whatever" is the ruling principle.

I regret giving up my bedroom where the sun tosses me out of bed and the wraparound porches where I rock my way through the sunrise edition of the *Washington Post* in peace. But I'm free now, like a journalist who'd visited a looney bin and finally escaped on a postal truck.

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Five months later, after I'd been in a third story walk-up on my own for two months, I look out my bedroom window one morning. A flight below, across the alley, I see tiny Anne hanging a planter filled with pink and white gardenias from a beam above the green-painted, wooden balcony at the back of an old brownstone.

"Hey, neighbor!" I call out.

Anne looks up, "Hiya, neighbor! Ha! You live there?"

"Yeah, you?" I ask.

"Yeah," Anne says. "How long you lived there?"

"Two months," I say. "You?"

"Two days, me and Marcie" says Anne, laughing. "We haven't even started unpacking, but I had to make this balcony mine. I could've used your help reaching this beam."

I say, "I hear the raspberries are asking to be picked."





abandoned cart
Beverly Rose Joyce

some days in the restaurant of life

Scott Ferry

is filled with streetwater
so my socks weep dyspeptic

and the table in the back
near the executioner and the priest

is the only one open
and is still a 45 minute wait

the menu is greasy with toddler snot
and the only entrée is a whale amygdala

stuffed with worry and cardamom
during the meal several cats swim over

and piss on the chair next to mine
and the waiter with scorpion elbows

keeps filling up my collar with chamomile tea
and attaching my eeg leads to the leafblower

when it is time to leave my family
has always been here but they loved

the meal they are wondering
what is wrong with me

they want to come back here
tomorrow



i weep when i write

Scott Ferry

don't fucking ask me why
maybe i open so much

that i am scared of myself
naked in the hostile air

plus i have to give you something
from inside the broken costumes

inside the monkey statue
inside the half-formed meatmask

inside the red milk falling into light
i remember now

the light is what i am supposed
to bring you

but when i hold it out it is full of ants
and ruptures

and i have to wash my hands
again

one of these days i will stop
trying and stay immaculate

only on the outside



confectioners

Charles Rammelkamp

“A guy could make a killing
copyrighting the names of cannabis candies,”
Bert mused, putting aside the newspaper.
He’d just been reading a story about “Big Candy” –
Mars, Hershey, et al. –
going after Mom and Pop pot companies
for selling THC-infused edibles
in packages that looked like Skittles and Starburst.

“Think of all those boxes of junk
at the movie theater concession stands –
Milk Duds, Dots, Hot Tamales, Sno-Caps.
What could you do with that?
‘Pot Tamales,’” he considered,
His eyes like spinning slot machines,
coming up cherries,
working out the names.
“‘Peppermint Potties’? Nah,
reminds you too much of a toilet.
‘Milk Dopes’? Is a dope worse than a dud?
What could we do with Mike and Ikes,
or Lemonheads, KitKat bars?”

Well, “Potheads”, I thought, but I said,
“There’ve got to be laws out there,
aren’t there, so the edibles aren’t marketed
to little kids? Remember those Flintstones commercials
in the early 1960s, Barney and Fred shilling Winstons?
Fred lights up one of Wilma’s ciggies
with a Stone Age lighter,
and instead of his usual ‘Yabba dabba doo,’
he croons, ‘Winstons taste good like a cigarette should.’
Sure made me want to take up cigarettes,
or at least didn’t make them seem sinister and dangerous.”

“Don’t be such a downer,” Bert scolded,
yanked back to reality like a dog on a leash.
He’d been having fun, remembering Sunday matinees,
mesmerized in the front row, box of popcorn in his hand,
a Good & Plenty pack in his pocket.



zucotti park sukkah

Charles Rammelkamp

Occupy Wall Street protestors hung out in the park,
sleeping on the pavement, tents banned by law.
But Chabad had given me a pop-up sukkah,
and Avi and Lenny and I set it up,
right where the anarchist squatters slept,
near di Suvero's *Joie de vivre*, the sculpture
that looks like a red praying mantis.

"What do you think you're doing?"
a beefy cop in riot gear yelled at us.
"You can't do that! It's against the law
to put up a structure in the park!"

"This is a Jewish ritual tabernacle," I replied,
"for the holiday of Sukkot."

The cop suddenly looked stricken,
as if he'd eaten a rotten hot dog.
"OK, I'm not fucking with this."
He walked away, knowing this
had First Amendment trouble written all over.

After the cops and the press left,
it started raining. The protestors
tried to sleep on the pavement,
but in the middle of the night,
one of the organizers declared through a bullhorn,
"If you are Jewish, or if you *identify*
as Jewish, build yourself a sukkah
and get out of the rain."
That's how the tent city started.

*Created in 1968, a block way and five years before the
World Trade Center Towers went up, Zuccotti Park, originally
named Liberty Park, was decimated when the towers were
destroyed. It reopened in 2006.*



cuban postcards

Linda Kraus

Cienfuegos

The grand Paseo del Prado just stepped out of a formal nineteenth century French painting—its geometrics of potted trees equally spaced for miles along a central cement colonnade with random benches encouraging the locals to sit awhile to share the day's gossip and watch the horse-drawn carriages as they compete with makeshift, rickety bicycle carts for tourists.

A casual observer could perceive this city's beauty as similar to so many others—a lovely colonial plan executed expressly to charm its citizenry, but beneath its studied façade of Gaelic elegance, Santeria simmers—its rituals of animal sacrifices and sacred drumming a way of life—chicken blood splattering those held thrall in its holy orishas, as African melodies corrupt Catholic chants. The shadows of Fidel and Che hover ceaselessly. They soften the squalor of those living the dream that hasn't quite worked—one-room apartments overflowing with too many people and too little food. Ulcerated beggars everywhere insist they are hungry and beg for a stray peso— or a kind word from those who seek proof of the promised magic—equality, free medical care and education—dignity for the poor.

Santiago de Cuba

A vivid kaleidoscope of pastel houses greets us—cerulean shutters framing irregular wooden windows set into hot pink or yellow peeling, painted walls.

Women push produce carts brimming with fruits and vegetables, edible jewels that gleam in the sun; fetid odors waft carelessly, imprinting the heavy air.

We quickly learn to beware the insidious motorcycles borrowed from a Cocteau film—they promise death, careening wildly, threatening locals and tourists alike.

Beggars follow us everywhere, aggressively extending their hands for a few pesos allegedly for their babies who may need milk, for their children who may hunger.

We know that we are being duped; yet we yield when we are approached by children in filthy rags trained to extract our pity, to expertly manipulate us.

We are surrounded by pastel cars, some frozen in time—their door handles often tied with rope, their mismatched or fabricated parts yearning to be replaced, acknowledged.

We do not understand Cuba's reverence for José Martí, their poet-apostle of the Revolution—a warrior whose myth still inflames the hearts of those seeking a national hero.

We do not understand the palpable idolatry of Fidel and Che, posters and frescos decorating buildings on every street—a tumultuous national pride throbbing, throbbing insistently.

The rhythms of the Communist faithful reverberate, rhythms pulsing, pulsing in a culture that is fascinating, and complex—incomprehensible to those who have not shed their tears.

Havana

The melodies of Cuban music resonate everywhere—scorching sounds from street-weary musicians who perform tirelessly for needed tourist pesos.

The claves click, the drums pound, the guitars' riffs enchant us as we throb, throb to the syncopated music and join in the dancing, dancing to the beat, beat.

Timba, Cuban salsa, offers surprisingly edgy rhythms its trombones wailing, braying soul-searing riffs that somehow make us want to sing a universal song.

Some street musicians perform acapella chants, as they click their tongues, rhythmically slap their bodies, and cup their hands to snap their fingers in counterpoint.

The city's nightclubs mimic their fifties opulence; Dino's and Frankie's ghosts star at the famed Tropicana—a style of crooning excessive enough to rekindle loyalties.

Wildly costumed singers gyrate—dancers in geometrically patterned costumes surround them—as if Busby Berkley returned to choreograph the hidden frenzy now unleashed.

We are astounded as the dancers engulf us, pulsing, pulsing, enchanting tourists and locals alike with an explosion of passion and unfettered joy no revolution can kill.



fresh lenin scent

W.C. Perry

Communist. Housewife. Yes, the Great Two-for-Two. Blatant inconsistency, duality, hypocrisy, what-have-you. I acknowledge my faults; do you see yours? My father thinks I'm a horrible person: the kind who dog-ears pages of books (I would never!) the kind who spits on babies (I would!) The Chairman of Book Club demands another bake sale to cure ennui and I promised lemon squares. There is much to do: the groceries (of wheat bread, tofu, rigatoni), the laundry (of all my marching uniforms), the floors (of which I stand above Capitalists). Remember those days? Remember before the re-distribution of Rae Dunn when we gathered in dusty church basements, smashing golden plates and drinking egg whites? My husband is property; I am him. We are the reverse of reverse osmosis, meaning regular osmosis, meaning I never passed science class. While you weren't looking, I stole your toothbrush! What miserable bristles these are, how Stalin! What faded purple color; how Kropotkin! Do I know what these things mean? No. I pick up books and put them down again. Cherries rot in the fridge and the working class is starving and you're out here celebrating crypto and driverless cars and faceless delivery options. Our endless world of wonders is set in wax: you hold the pick above my head and prepare to break it.

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life with chickens

Jacob Chapman

The coyotes are back
from wherever they go in the summer,
and they let us know they're here.
Last night, I was on my deck
enjoying the crisp autumn air
that I depend on to sharpen my senses
after the general floppiness of summer
when I heard the coyotes start howling.
I sat up straight and looked to the hills.
I know—they're part of nature
and the cycle of life or whatever,
but tell that to my chickens,
who freaked the fuck out
when they heard the coyotes.
I didn't even want these chickens,
but my irresponsible friend
was leaving town in a hurry (long story)
and told me he was going to free his chickens.
Around here, free chickens
equals dead chickens, so I took them in,
and they've grown on me.
One of them is less excitable
than the others. When the coyotes
started howling, she looked at me
and I looked at her. Her eyes said
they're back, and they could kill us.
Mine said I know, but I'll reinforce the cage
and do everything I can
to keep them out.
Hers said it might not be enough.
Mine said I know, but at least
I won't lie to you. I'll never
lie to you. Hers said OK,
but never tell me
you know how I feel, because you don't.



that was really not a good idea

Jacob Chapman

After a bad day, I overreacted
and threw most of my books into the bay.
What I thought was a moment
of private frustration
became something else. The next morning,
people noticed the books,
which were floating around
with my name written on the inside
of the covers (a habit I picked up along the way).
Then came the shitstorm.
Cameras, news trucks, reporters
banging on my door.
Librarians issued statements,
and a group of schoolchildren
wrote SHAME SHAME on my sidewalk
with multicolored chalk. At least the colors
were in rainbow order.
Did I litter? Yes,
and I will accept my punishment
for that. But all this other stuff is crazy.
I thought about leaving town
until it blows over, but this is not something
that will fade away.
I could move somewhere warm
where everything rots, including books.
A place where they have bigger things
to worry about. I could get back into engineering
and help prevent something from collapsing,
maybe a building or a library.
But I hate the heat,
and I need to be honest with myself.
So I'm probably staying,
and I need to craft a public apology
that will satisfy at least some of the people
I've offended.
But you can't win 'em all.
I have no illusions about the librarians.
Once you've gotten on their bad side,
you're there to stay.



this whole thing, it's ridiculous

Jacob Chapman

As I wait for the call,
I can almost hear the council talking it over,
talking about “the incident,”
which I didn’t realize was an incident
until weeks after the fact.
A bunch of bullshit is what it was.
So what if I’m a loudmouth.
My friend on the council
said it could go either way,
but it wasn’t looking good.
If I’m cast out,
that’ll be it. Everything else
I’ve done here will be forgotten,
and I’ll be remembered as the old
grumpy guy who never learned
when to shut up.
Which is true.
But many things are true.
I just helped my freak of a neighbor
with his math homework.
He can’t remember anything.
His purple hair isn’t helping,
but he’s a good kid.
My good deeds are scattered around,
but I haven’t exactly built up
a lot of goodwill around here.
That was a mistake,
but it’s hard to pretend
that you like people when you don’t.
What would it look like,
for the council to forgive me
and for me to forgive them
and the jerk who claimed the incident
was an incident?
I’m trying, I’m trying hard
to see it, but damn
if we haven’t painted ourselves
into little corners.
For us to get out of this,
we’re going to need
something else, something
we haven’t thought of yet.





bamboo with cherry blossoms
Cynthia Yatchman

Contributors' Notes

Pearse Anderson is a speculative fiction author and tabletop roleplaying game designer from Upstate New York. He focuses on twisted myths, cli-fi, retrofuturism, and deeply strange worlds popping into ours. His writing has appeared in WIRED, The Guardian, Fusion Fragment, Dark Matter Magazine, and the pizza horror anthology Tales From the Crust. Pearse studied Creative Writing and Environmental Food Studies at Oberlin College, graduated from the Iowa Young Writers' Studio, and now in Chicago mentoring young writers with the Zenith Cooperative. You can find more of his writing at pearseanderson.com, his fantasy and sci-fi tabletop games at pearseanderson.itch.io, and his half-drafted thoughts at @pearseanderson on all social medias. As this story shows, he does not like Polar Express but does appreciate Tom Hanks.

Caitlin Archer-Helke is a librarian and a writer from a now-vanished corner of Chicago's South Side. She enjoys spending quality time with postcolonial theory and her cat. Every year, she and her family ring in the New Year with her great-grandmother's Hoppin' John recipe.

Lino Azevedo was born to Portuguese immigrants in the San Francisco Bay area. Being an oil painter herself, Lino's mother saw a talent in him at an early age and encouraged him to paint and draw. He decided early on to pursue a career in art. His art usually conveys some sort of commentary on our society and is always created to start a conversation. Lino is a published artist whose work has been shown internationally. He currently lives in Savannah, Georgia where he is a college professor.

Aaron Beck teaches medieval music history at Lewis & Clark College. His scholarship mines the valleys between music and art.

Kim Berkley is a writer, editor, and narrative designer whose shelves are lined with fantasy novels and roleplaying video games and whose clothes are always covered in cat hair. She writes often on topics ranging from mental health and fiction to heart conditions and funeral planning, and her work has appeared in a variety of publications including One Green Planet, The Indie Game Magazine, Artistry in Games, and Thrillist. She is also the writer and developer behind such works as *The Harbinger's Head*, an interactive fiction novel first published in 2018, and *chiaroscuro*, an interactive novella set to be released in January 2021.

Fletcher Bonin is a writer from Rhode Island. His debut novel, *Vulture*, will be published by Rebel Satori Press in 2022. His published satire, short stories, literary criticism, essays, and journalism can be found at byfletch.wordpress.com. He holds an MA in English from Catholic University of America, and a BA in English from Salve Regina University. Prior to graduate school, Fletcher taught English in Chiayi, Taiwan and worked at a production studio in Manhattan.

Gayle Brandeis is the author, most recently, of the memoir *The Art of Misdiagnosis* (Beacon Press), which received starred reviews in Kirkus, Publishers Weekly, ForeWord Reviews, and Booklist, and the novel in poems, *Many Restless Concerns* (Black Lawrence Press), shortlisted for the Shirley Jackson Award, and longlisted for the Bram Stoker Award, the Ellis Award, and the Johnson Award for Women's Literature. Earlier books include the poetry collection *The Selfless Bliss of the Body* (Finishing Line Press), the craft book *Fruitflesh: Seeds of Inspiration for Women Who Write* (HarperOne) and the novels *The Book of Dead Birds* (HarperCollins), which won the Bellwether Prize for Fiction of Social Engagement judged by Barbara Kingsolver, Toni Morrison, and Maxine Hong Kingston, *Self Storage* (Ballantine), *Delta Girls* (Ballantine), and *My Life with the Lincolns* (Henry Holt BYR), which was chosen as a state-wide read in Wisconsin. Her essays, poetry, and short fiction have been widely published in places such as The Guardian, The New York Times, The Washington Post, O (The Oprah Magazine), The Rumpus, Salon, and more, and have received numerous honors, including the Columbia Journal Nonfiction Award, a Barbara Mandigo Kelly Peace Poetry Award, Notable Essays in Best American Essays 2016, 2019, and 2020, the QPB/Story Magazine Short Story Award and the 2018 Multi Genre Maverick Writer Award. She was named A Writer Who Makes a Difference by The Writer Magazine, and served as Inlandia Literary Laureate from 2012-2014, focusing on bringing writing workshops to underserved communities. She teaches at Antioch University and Sierra Nevada University.

Jacob Chapman lives in Amherst, MA with his wife and daughter. He plays guitar in the band Camel City Drivers, and his chapbook *Other Places* is available through Open Country Press.

Linda Chown is professor emerita of American, Spanish and British Literatures and trained as a concert pianist. A Fulbright Professor, she lived and travelled in Europe extensively. Her commitment to literature is shaped by her understandings of the life of the mind, an aesthetic perspective guiding her writing and life. Author of four books of poetry, numerous published essays on poetry and narration, a book-length study of narration in Doris Lessing and Carmen Martín Gaité, (what Chown calls a “new approach to narrative authority”), she is committed particularly to the work of Wallace Stevens, Virginia Woolf, and W. B. Yeats.

Jaina Cipriano is a Boston based artist communicating with the world through photography, film and installation. Her works explore the emotional toll of religious and romantic entrapment. Jaina creates her photographs in built sets, forgoing digital manipulation because she believes creating something truly immersive starts with the smallest details. A self taught carpenter, she loves a challenge and her larger than life sets draw inspiration from the picture books and cartoons of her childhood. Jaina writes and directs short films that wrestle with the complicated path of healing. In 2020 she released *You Don't Have to Take Orders from the Moon*, a surrealist horror film wrestling with the gravity of deep codependency. Her second short, *Trauma Bond* is a dreamy coming of age thriller and is planned for a 2022 release.

Candace Curran is a founding member of multimedia exhibitions throughout Western MA. Twice named Poet's Seat Laureate, publications include, Bone Cages and Playing in Wrecks and journals, Raw Nervz, Meat for Tea among others. A Straw Dog member from Franklin County, she lives Buckland side of the Iron Bridge in Shelburne Falls.

John Davis is the author of two collections, *Gigs* and *The Reservist*. His work has appeared recently in DMQ Review, Iron Horse Literary Review, One and Rio Grande Review.

Kimaya Diggs graduated from Swarthmore College, where she studied creative writing and opera, and received the Morrell-Potter Award in Creative Writing. In 2017, she received the Callaloo Fellowship in poetry, and headlined the Emily Dickinson Museum's Tell It Slant Poetry Festival in 2020. She now works as a speechwriter.

David Allen Downs is a father, musician, writer and supportive housing case worker, living in the riverfront city of Middletown, Connecticut, USA. Having spent thirty years of his life working in the social services, Mr. Downs has written a brief, 50,000-word manuscript entitled *Case Worker*, about a guy who's spent thirty years of his life working in the social services. The literary magazine, Meat for Tea, out of Holyoke, Massachusetts, has published a few of his little stories. In his musical capacities, Mr. Downs enjoys performing for the seniors and the disabled living in convalescent homes, veterans' homes, assisted living facilities and the like.

Corwin Ericson is the author of the novel *Swell and Checked Out OK*, a collection of police reports. He lives and works in western Massachusetts.

Todd Evans is an artist and writer residing in Chicago, Illinois. He holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and degrees from The Ohio State University and University of Louisville. His writing has appeared in Abstract: Contemporary Expressions and The Texas Review.

Scott Ferry helps our Veterans heal as a RN in the Seattle area. His third book of poetry, *These Hands of Myrrh*, is now available from Kelsay Books. You can find more @ ferrypoetry.com

Beth Filson is a bookseller, writer and self-taught artist. Her poetry and prose have appeared in The Los Angeles Review, Spoon River Poetry Review, Naugatuck River Review, Pinch, and others. Her art has been exhibited in galleries and print magazines including The Florida Review and Meat for Tea. Beth has numerous technical publications including academic papers and book chapters in the field of Trauma-Informed Care. She just finished her first novel -- and is happy.

Andrea Fonseca (she/her) is a traveling multi-media artist, musician, and writer based in New Jersey/New York. She has undergraduate degrees in media arts, English, and education. Currently, she is working on original songs, a fantasy novel, and a poetry collection.

Poet **Michael Favala Goldman** (b.1966) is also a jazz clarinetist, an educator and a widely-published translator of Danish literature. Over 140 of his translations and poems have appeared in literary journals. Among his seventeen translated books are *Dependency* by Tove Ditlevsen (a Penguin Modern Classic), and *Something To Live Up To – Selected Poems of Benny Andersen*. Goldman's three books of poetry include *Who has time for this?*, *Small Sovereign*, and *Small Phoenix*. He runs bi-weekly poetry critique groups and lives in Florence, MA. <https://michaelfavalagoldman.com/>

Ellen Mary Hayes is a poet and visual artist exploring the transcendent qualities of creativity. She embraces expression as a tool to heal from her disability. She utilizes language to survey the ethereal and visceral convergence of spirit and nature. Her work speaks to the emotional elevation that can occur while contemplating our environment in a creative capacity. Both her art and her poetry reflect themes of creating sacred homes, speaking out for human rights and meditations on the natural world. Ellen has had art featured in the Easthampton City Arts Post Pause exhibit, Last Leaves Magazine, Equinox, Anchor House of Artists and Meat for Tea. Her poetry has been featured in Wellstone Poets, Spires Magazine, Silkworm, and Meat for Tea. Ellen is based in Easthampton, Massachusetts.

Hunter Hodkinson's style is a mixture of self reflection and outlandish observations on the mundane details in life. He often parodies himself and the world around him with prose and poetry. His work has previously appeared in Saint Katherine Review. Hunter is a transplant New Yorker, born and raised in Ohio.

Richard Wayne Horton has published in Southern Pacific Review, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Bull & Cross, Meat For Tea and others, and has received 2 Pushcart nominations. He has published 3 books of short stories and poetry, and is working on a 4th. He is the 2019-21 MA Beat Poet Laureate.

Ana Jovanovska was born in 1991 in Macedonia. She holds an MFA in the Graphic Art Field. Her practice is rooted in deep observation and reaction to the current times and spaces, affected by the moralizing of traditions and a sense of urgency in the discourse of contemporaneity. She is interested in research based on rethinking, re-imagining, and re-telling narratives, debating that the structure of society is in many ways conditioned by the structure of language itself. She has had 12 independent and more than 200 group exhibitions.

Beverly Rose Joyce lives in Brecksville, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, with her husband, Carl, and their two daughters, Mallory and Samantha, along with their two dogs, Shadow and Reggie. She holds a BA in English from Baldwin-Wallace University and a MA in English from Cleveland State University, and she was a public high school English teacher for sixteen years.

Kim Keough is an educator, a weekend hash-slinger and the mama of two ornery cats.

Linda Kraus has taught university courses in literature and film studies. She has published poetry in several literary journals and anthologies and is currently editing two collections of poems. She is an orchid judge, a screener for film festivals, a rock hound, and an impassioned Wagnerian.

Jeremy Macomber-Dubs is the guitarist, vocalist, and co-songwriter in Bunnies. Born and raised in Central Pennsylvania, he and his best friend/band-mate moved to Western Massachusetts in 2004 to play seven shows opening for the reunited Pixies. Bunnies decided to make a permanent home there where they've been playing shows and recording albums ever since. In 2011 and 2012, Dubs released two solo albums on Frank Black's label The Bureau Records, and in 2013 he sang on 5 new Pixies songs. Jeremy has also played drums for artists such as Severe Severe, Rabbit Rabbit, Problem With Dragons, and Black Francis.

George McDermott's poetry has recently appeared or is forthcoming in such journals as Clarion, Painted Bride Quarterly, Toho Journal, and New Southerner, as well as in the Philadelphia Inquirer. His collection *Pictures, Some of Them Moving* won the 2017 Moonstone Arts Chapbook Contest. He is also co-author—with Roberta Israeloff, who was once a student in one of his high school English classes—of the 2017 book *What Went Right* (Rowman & Littlefield), a conversation about the successes and missteps of public education in America.

Judith Mikesch-McKenzie has traveled much of the world, but is always drawn to the Rocky Mountains as one place that feeds her soul. She loves change - new places, new people, new challenges - but honors a strong

connection to the people and places of her roots. Writing is her home. She recently placed & published with The Cunningham Short Story Contest and The Tillie Olsen Short Story Contest. Her poetry has been published in Poetic Bond X, Wild Roof Journal, Halcyone Literary Review, Plainsongs Magazine, Elevation Review, Scribblers, Gyroscope Review, Cathexis NW Press, Griffel Literary Review, Bookends Review, and others.

Daniel Steven Miller was a newspaper reporter in western Massachusetts for 11 years. In 2012, Florida State University awarded him a Master of Science, Library and Information Studies, degree. In 2019, he founded To the Point Editing (<https://to-the-point-editing.com>). He lives with his wife, Sharon, in Granby, Massachusetts. This is his first published work of fiction.

W.C. Perry is a writer from southern Ohio pursuing a BFA in Creative Writing at Wright State University. Their works focus on loss, family, spirituality, and the midwestern landscape. Their work has appeared in Garden, Prometheus Dreaming, and Lupercalia Press' VULCANALIA '21. To contact this author, burn a candle on a starless night and scream into the nearest cornfield — they'll get back to you eventually.

Dennis Martin Piana is Winner of Franklin County, Massachusetts Poet's Seat; Editor of The Silver Anniversary Anthology of the Poet's Seat Poetry Contest; and, Adjunct Professor of Writing, Literature, Film Studies, and Motion Picture Production at several Massachusetts universities and colleges. Since the 1970's, his prose, poetry, feature articles and scripts have appeared in a range of print and electronic publications, and have been showcased in Eastern and Western Mass literary festivals, libraries, art galleries, museums, and entertainment venues. His independently produced short and feature movies won awards at Seattle, Ann Arbor, Cannes, and Berlin film festivals, and have been theatrically released, distributed and streamed around the globe. Dennis lives with his wife, Robbie Murphy, in Colrain, MA.

Alexandros Plasatis is an immigrant ethnographer who writes fiction in English, his second language. His work has appeared in US, UK, Canadian, and Indian magazines and anthologies. He lives in the UK and works with asylum seekers. See more at alexandrosplasatis.com

Charles Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books in Baltimore, where he lives with his wife Abby. He contributes a monthly book review to North of Oxford and is a frequent reviewer for The Lake, London Grip, Misfit Magazine and The Compulsive Reader. A poetry chapbook, *Mortal Coil*, was published in 2021 by Clare Songbirds Publishing and another, *Sparring Partners*, by Moonstone Press. A full-length collection, *The Field of Happiness*, will be published in 2022 by Kelsay Books.

Jim Ross jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after a rewarding career in public health research. With a graduate degree from Howard University, in six years he's published nonfiction, poetry, and photography in well over 150 journals and anthologies on four continents. Publications include 580-Split, Bombay Gin, Barren, Burningword, Columbia Journal, Hippocampus, Ilanot Review, Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, Kestrel, Litro, Lunch Ticket, Meat for Tea, New World Writing, Stonecoast, The Atlantic, The Manchester Review, and Typehouse. A nonfiction piece led to appearances in a social justice related, high-profile, documentary limited series broadcast domestically and internationally. Jim and his wife—parents of two health professionals and grandparents of five preschoolers—split their time between city and mountains.

After earning an English lit PhD from Duke and teaching English and creative writing at colleges and independent schools along the Eastern U.S. seaboard, **William Slayton** recently relocated to the Rockies. At this altitude he's finished a novel, *Under the Banyan Tree*, and published short fiction in Fudoki and Flash Fiction Magazine.

Jessamyn Smyth's poetry and prose have appeared in Crab Orchard Review, Taos Review, Red Rock Review, American Letters and Commentary, Nth Position, Life & Legends, Wingbeats: Exercises and Practices in Poetry, and many other journals and anthologies. Her books *The Inugami Mochi* (interconnected short stories, 2016) and *Gilgamesh/Wilderness* (hybrid, 2021) are from Saddle Road Press. *Kitsune* (poems, 2013) is available in the New Women's Voices Series at Finishing Line. *Koan Garden* (fiction, 2006) and *Skaha* (memoir, 2021) are available on her website: jessamynsmyth.net. Jessamyn was the founding Editor in Chief of Tupelo Quarterly, and Founder/Director of the Quest Writer's Conference.

After some successes as an undergraduate and graduate poet nearly sixty years ago, **Peter Tacy** spent his working years not writing, but as an independent-school English teacher, Headmaster, and regional administrator. When he retired, he deliberately returned to writing, and published two nonfiction books. More recently he's been writing poems. This latter development has been very much encouraged by his new wife Jane Yolen, whose own poetic output (a poem a day) has never abated since the 1950's, when they first knew each other. They live in Hatfield, Ma., Mystic CT, and St. Andrews, Scotland. His father grew up in South Hadley, and his mother's family first arrived centuries ago in Hadlyme, CT.

Nicola Thomis is obsessed with both fragrances and stories, combining both in her blog, *The Sniff*. She lives in Yorkshire in the UK with her dog, Winifred, who likes sniffing things almost as much as Nicola does.

Michael Washburn is a Brooklyn-based writer and journalist and the author of *The Uprooted and Other Stories* (2018), *When We're Grownups* (2019), and *Stranger, Stranger* (2020).

Bill Wolak has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as Phoebe, Harbinger Asylum, Baldhip Magazine, Barfly Poetry Magazine, Ragazine, Cardinal Sins, Pithead Chapel, and *The Wire's Dream*. His collages and photographs have appeared recently in the 2020 Seattle Erotic Art Festival, the 2020 Dirty Show in Detroit, the 2020 Rochester Erotic Arts Festival, the 2018 Montreal Erotic Art Festival, and *Naked in New Hope* 2018.

Hanna Marie Dean Wright is a self taught artist residing in Keavy, Kentucky. She uses her experiences from growing up in rural South-Eastern Kentucky, teaching special education classes, and living with obsessive compulsive disorder to inspire her unique works of art. Hanna Wright uses bold lines and bright colors to create abstract figures with relatable and at times deeply emotional expressions. Hanna was born in Barbourville, Kentucky on April 15th, 1993. Hanna graduated from the University of the Cumberland in 2015 with degrees in Special Education Behavioral Disabilities and Elementary Education. Hanna Wright's mamaw, Geraldine Scalf, has had a great impact on Hanna's art career and works as fellow folk artist residing in Barbourville, Kentucky. Hanna was adopted at the age of 4 and moved from Barbourville to Keavy, Kentucky. She now teaches special education in the Laurel County School District and spends most of her free time creating unique works of art on paper, canvas, wood, and reclaimed scrap materials. Hanna most enjoys drawing her expressive "Starmen" and painting abstract figures and faces on reclaimed wooden panels. Hanna's collection of art contains over 2000 works of art on paper and over 400 paintings of all sizes. Hanna's artwork has been gaining popularity on the internet since 2015 and her artwork has been sought after by art galleries on a global scale. Hanna has had opportunities to display her artwork in galleries from Australia to New Mexico.

Cynthia Yatchman is a Seattle based artist and art instructor. A former ceramicist, she received her B.F.A. in painting (UW). She switched from 3D to 2D and has remained there ever since. She works primarily on paintings, prints and collages. Her art is housed in numerous public and private collections. She has exhibited on both coasts, extensively in the Northwest, including shows at Seattle University, SPU, Shoreline Community College, the Tacoma and Seattle Convention Centers and the PaciNic Science Center. She is an affiliate member of Gallery I 10, a member of the Seattle Print Art Association and COCA.

Stanton Yeakley is an attorney who lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and writes between cases. He has been previously published in *Bandit Fiction*, *District Lit*, *Epilogue Magazine*, and *Poydras Review*.

Gerald Yelle's books include *The Holyoke Diaries'* and *Mark My Word and the New World Order*. He has an e-chapbook at Yavaneka Press: *Industries Built on Words* and a chapbook *No Place I Would Rather Be* from Finishing Line Press. FutureCycle Press will publish his book of poems *Dreaming Alone and with Others* in 2023. He is a member of the Florence, MA Poets Society where he co-edits their journal *Silkworm*.

Last year **Jane Yolen** won the Massachusetts Book Award in the Young Adult category for a Holocaust novel, *Mapping the Bones*. One of the two main characters is a fourteen year old Jewish poet, so she got to write his poems for him. Or with him, as it often seemed. She is set to release her 400th book in 2021.

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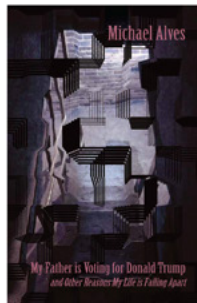
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