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Submissions

The *Northridge Review* accepts submissions throughout the year. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the writer's name, address, e-mail, and telephone number as well as the titles of the works submitted. The writer's name should not appear on the manuscript itself. Manuscripts and all other correspondence should be submitted to:

Northridge Review
Department of English
California State University of Northridge
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330-8248

Awards

The Northridge Review Fiction Award

This award is given annually and recognizes excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in the *Northridge Review*. The recipients of this award are James Bezerra for "8 Rules for Ensuring Happiness and Survival in Los Angeles" and René Solivan for "Grace." The honorable mention goes to Loretta McCormick for "A Pharaoh's High Regard."

The Rachel Sherwood Award

This award, in the memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes excellent poetry by a CSUN student published in the *Northridge Review*. The recipient of this award is Nancy Carroll for her poem, "Ariadne." The honorable mention goes to Dania Bennett for "Bravery in the Garden."

The Academy of American Poets

This award is given annually and the winning poem is published in the *Northridge Review*. The recipient of this award is Curtis Luckey for his poem, "The Rise and Fall of Granddaddy's Kitchen." The honorable mention goes to Joseph Lewis for "How to Build a God: Part 1."

About the Judges

The NR Fiction Award judge, Martin Pousson, is an assistant professor of English at California State University, Northridge. His husband is fiction, but he cheats with poetry on the side.

The Rachel Sherwood Award judge, Rod Val Moore, has been actively writing and publishing fiction and poetry since the 1970s. Currently he teaches English and creative writing at Los Angeles Valley College and is working on a novel.

The Academy of American Poets judge, Mary Biddinger, is author of the collection, *Prairie Fever*. She is the editor for The Akron Series in Poetry.

Ediotrs' Note

CAUTION: The literary magazine you are about to enjoy is extremely hot. For your safety and for the safety of others, both innocent and guilty, please use potholders.

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, on a dark and stormy night in a land not very far away—we shall call this land Northridge, or maybe Whatthehell because that is what people often say when they exit Highway 118 too soon and find that they are not in Simi Valley as they were expecting—a group of polite, well-groomed, and otherwise generally inoffensive students baked a cake, or a pudding, or maybe a flan. But it was a very nice cake...or pudding (although we can't speak to its merits as a flan). Eighteen—count them—18, that's 17 and a half plus two two-quarters, not cakes, not puddings, but staff members—the largest staff ever to assemble in one tiny, miniscule cubicle of a room and to reach over one another's shoulders with their grubby little paws and to squabble over every miserable semi-colon coloned and every t crossed and every i i-ed on one lone computer, as I say, the largest unruly bunch of cutthroats in the history of the *Northridge Review* to ever open an oven and come out with something more than half-baked—acted as sous-chefs to the creation of the marvelous publication that you are currently holding in your oven-mitted hands. We used the finest ingredients of CSUN talent available. The cake (or flan—or was it meat loaf?) was sliced and each slab revealed not only the breadth of talent on campus but also the diverse and inverse tastes of our staff. Every slice of this turkey or soufflé is delicious.

—Please do not salivate on the pages or the carpet upon which you are standing, kneeling, or lying.—

Yet even with our most diligentest diligence we admit that it is just possuible that some savory morsels may have fallen through the cracks of our butting abutments of divergent taste buds. still, it is truly amazing how vary the selections is—how 18 voices did not reduce the gazillion and one choices to mere crowd pleasers, but instead, agreed to offer the reader a diverse sampling of, subjects cultures, stiles of composition and, means of expresion that makes up not only this select group of talented writers and artistes, butt also the CSUN student body as a whole and of witch this book are a

and present the reader the collective power, having nitplekngly our best ability free of gram mately proving, howbenefi icate these editon to Professor end ant hours of of devourering und digesting this 39-course meal Bon appétit!

and baste the meat

co-editors *Janie Grefil* and

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Rob

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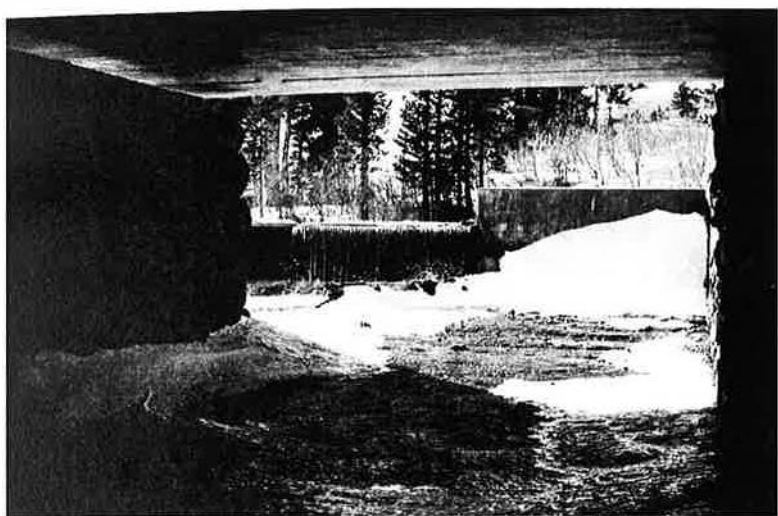


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Nancy Carroll

Moon Beyond Plum Tree

After Ma Yuan's painting, 13th Century

Small wisps

birth branch, stem, silhouette,

the witty strokes that are mountain, rock, stone,

moon

bow as washes fill sacred spaces for scholar,

musician, fisherman,

woman with

egret and her son.

Scrolls are eternal.

Plum trees are not.

Laura Salvetti

How Siamese Twins Die

I know you
and didn't plan on it. In fact,
I wished for something to destroy
this union before I could say this:
I predict you. I have graphed the rise
and fall of your dreams and failures.

10
Where would you like these measured, jagged edges to lead? But the wise know
not to question, in earnest, the answerless man.

So I silence my warnings and let you be
a hole cut out of Bugs Bunny's concert hall floor,
piano falling in D minor. I don't shout
from the audience. Never has an usher
gagged me or escorted me
to the street to finish my cries.

Cry to your horror screen: Don't you see the man with the knife? Don't you sense the
road will split and become two choices?
Not one.

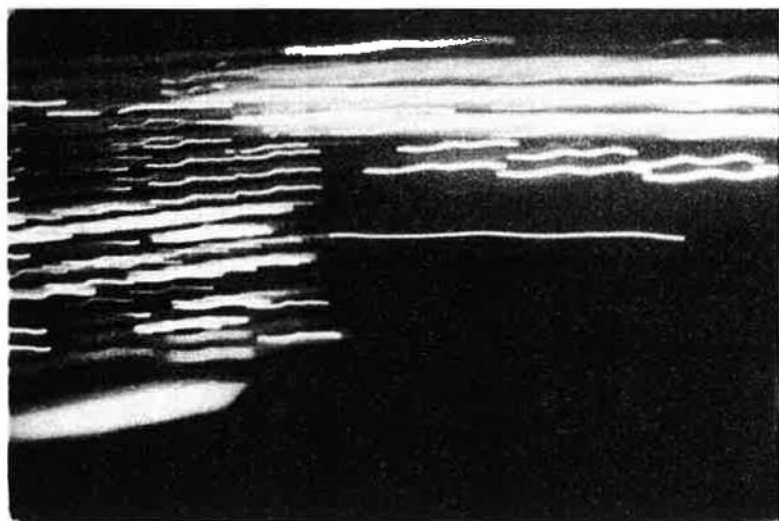
While you lay your hand
to the Sistine Chapel in your chest, paint spilling
to please Pollock but the creation scene all wrong,
I do not tug at your sleeve.

I stare at ornate endeavors
in quiet repose. I am always the void.
You falling through me as I sever my hand from my volume's knob—
you are always much heavier than I expect
when you crash. Gongs, whistles, tin pans, a leaden high note,
I squint and watch as you dust off your thighs,
and head down the long hall once more.

From a shadow's perspective, hushed and veiled,
I can hear your next dream's heartbeat approaching,
tuning itself to the low hum
of a cross-country train. It will sneak up
and you will board.

From the side
I will wave to you,
like a lady in a wool hat from the movies.
I will see you whisper through the window—
something that excites you,
perhaps important.

But before I can tilt my head and give you a puzzled look,
you turn and hand off your ticket to the conductor. And soon
the engine starts again. It will pull you across tracks
without me—without the nuisance of silence,
with all the glory of sound.



RACHAEL JORDAN

REVIVE

This is the only story I know. There is a girl, sitting, in the middle of the floor. This girl has done many things in her life that have led her to this moment of sitting. Her legs cross beneath her and her elbows rest on her knees. She has a cut on her finger from a heavy lock on a bathroom door she tried to open the week before, or it's a scar on her finger from when she picked up a piece of glass in a gutter when she was eight. Either way, the finger taps on her leg where her hand falls. She sits, the hardwood beneath her, not cold like tile, not warm like carpet, just firm and smooth like hardwood. There is only one window in this room; it's not small or big, low or high, but it is behind her. She can feel sun on her lower back, but no breeze because the window is closed. The girl is remembering. She lifts one hand up to touch her neck. It's smooth today, has been smooth for a long time. The moments when it wasn't smooth are her first memory:

"I want you to be my dog," the older one, Elle, said to the girl. So, the hair began to grow on the back of the girl's neck. In little tufts at first, small patches of soft fuzz that dotted from behind her head and down her sides. Soon, the fur was on her arms and legs and even her ears began to twitch a little, like dog ears do.

"You're a good puppy," Elle said, using a jump rope as her leash. Elle tied one end around the girl's furry neck, tucking the handle underneath the rope and pulling the other handle back. The girl could feel the pressure. It was warm.

On all fours, the girl sat, back upturned and waiting for Elle to walk her, to send chills down her spine like shots as Elle tugged on her leash, leading her. The rope, the end of Elle's will, sparked the girl to move.

"Run, puppy, run!" Elle's voice was excited, not hard, not soft, but deep. And that is all she wanted to do. Run for Elle. Feel the wind ruffle her fur, sift through her whiskers, and feel the pressure of Elle's guidance against her neck.

The girl got rug burns on her knees and couldn't play kickball at recess the next day because it hurt to unbend them. But that hurt was just a reminder that sent needle pricks down her back and made the skin underneath her fur rise in excitement. So, at recess she sat on the ground, grazing the nakedness of her collarless neck, tickling the rough edges of skin that marked its spot.

They would lie in the bed after their runs. The girl would wrap herself in Elle's arms as Elle would stroke the fur behind her ears and in between her eyes, leaving soft kisses on the end of her wet nose.

"Sweet, little, puppy," Elle would say, cooing in her ear and petting the spots that the jump rope had rubbed raw.

This is what the girl knows of love.

This and a story her family told. In it, there was the sun over golden leaves that fell over a sidewalk. The leaves caught in bike tires that ran over a sidewalk where a screen door creaked and a front porch swung. Her mother told her this story every night before bed:

Oumpa fell in love with Nana when he was fourteen years old. Everyday, he would ride his bike over to her house.

"I'm going to marry you someday, Suzanne," he told her. She just laughed.

Nana got a ring from someone else—Charlie Ashenfelder. But that didn't last. It ended in a letter. She cried for a day and threw her ring into the grass.

Oumpa still rode his bike by her house.

One day, when leaves were catching in the spokes of the tire and Oumpa and Nana were spending the afternoon together, he walked her to the door.

She went in; he began walking down the steps, but on this day, Nana watched him leave. She noticed the wind shift his hair around his ear.

And on this day, Oumpa turned around. In that moment, Nana knew she loved him.

He walked back up the steps and kissed her lips through the screen door.

The end.

That was all. Simple. But the girl learned that not all love stories are told the same way.

Underneath her fingers now, sitting in the middle of the floor, is softness. Her hand moves from the side of her neck to the back. She pinches an inch of her skin between her fingertips, feels light pressure. This sensation, too, is something remembered. That pinch is the voice of another woman loved, a second memory:

The clothespins were in a bucket by the back door. The wood of the clamps light against the metal of the bucket. They made a tinkling sound when the bucket was lifted, little taps. A mechanical, scattered heartbeat.

“You need to be hung out to dry,” the girl was told.

She had gotten too wet. She dripped, made little puddles in the middle of the kitchen. Outside, it was sunny. Inside, the only sound was a drip drip from the girl’s fingertips and the ends of her hair.

She heard the clink of the clothespins as the bucket was lifted up. A rush of warm air blew into the room as the back door opened. Her shoes squished and her pants were heavy as she followed.

“Take off your clothes,” was commanded as the bucket was set down next to already hung laundry lines.

The girl didn’t move, she just shivered. Water droplets fell silent in the grass.

"Those heavy clothes will break the lines," she was told.

She took off her shoes first, the laces thick with water, the socks brown with soaking. Her toes tingled on the tips of the warm grass. Her pants were next. They stuck to her thighs and calves and she had to tug to get them away from her feet. Then, she peeled her shirt away. It formed a sagging lump by her shoes.

The girl was watched through everything.

"I need you light as air," she was told.

So she peeled her underwear away too. Her skin was naked and under the sun. The sky was too blue that day, when the girl wanted clouds, rain. Water dripped onto her bare shoulders from her head.

A clothespin was taken out of the bucket. The end pinched, it opened and closed, its jaw stretched.

The girl's skin raised in goose bumps, not from the cold of water.

It all started with her neck. Her skin was pulled between two fingers, stretched to give the clothespin meat. A shock ran down her back as the line was pulled toward her body and clamped to her neck with the teeth of the pin. It settled into her skin, held her to the line, with a slight burn that was almost a comfort.

Her feet were still grounded, so the ribbon was pulled out. A long, black ribbon, fifteen clothespins attached. Each one went on, down her side, carried the burning pinch along her body with each clamp. Clamp, skin, ribbon. Clamp, skin, ribbon. Her body rose up on the line, until the last of the ribbon was attached to the skin on her ankle. That one felt as if it would rip right through her.

The ribbon caressed the points in between each pinch, and those points became red with time. There was a slight breeze that swayed her from side to side as she began to dry. Sheets and shirts were hung alongside her. The wind bleached their wet faces.

She was the only one that had the ribbon. The only one that needed more clothespins. The only one who waited with racing heart and shaking limbs for the swoop of fingers to release the

clothespins—the ribbon pulled from one side, yanking the teeth away. A cane of electricity against her skin.

She heard the back door creak and her skin swelled in the heat.

That's what her mother missed in the nighttime story about love. The swelling, the clamping, the raw skin and burning. The girl wishes her mother would have told the Nana and Oumpa story differently. Maybe something like this:

Oumpa fell in love with Nana when he was young, but it was a different kind of love. It was soda pop love—the kind that means you want to ride bikes together, make sandwiches and cut the crust off, and drink apple cider out of paper cups pretending it's champagne. In 1938, when he was fourteen, he told her that he wanted to marry her.

She laughed. Right in his face.

A laugh that made his insides hurt. He rode away, feet heavy on the pedals. His eyes down, he watched the dirt roll onto his tires from the road, and did not feel the jolt of each bump he hit.

Oumpa and his heavy feet still rode to Nana's house every day, even after Nana decided to give her heart to someone else. This someone else told her he wanted to marry her.

She didn't laugh. Instead, she wore the ring.

Every time Oumpa saw the ring, his feet got heavier. But he still walked with those lead weights into her house and had talks with her mother in the kitchen, while she sat on the couch with the other man, wrapped up in his arms, light.

But Nana didn't stay light for long. Her other man left, on a ship with other men in uniforms. She went to a dance with Oumpa as a friend and somehow, across an ocean, the other man found out. With a heavy hand, he scrawled a letter out and she read the angry ink. She went out back and sat in a chair, in the sun, and cried. Her finger, with the burning ring, felt heavy. It wanted to pull her to the ground. Nana, broken, jerked the weighted ring off and heaved it into the grass. She never wanted to cry again.

But with her heavy finger and Oumpa's heavy feet, they started riding bikes together again.

And there was one day, when Oumpa walked down the front steps, feet still heavy, away from Nana. Wind shifted his hair and for the first time, Nana saw him. She saw the back of his neck, the curve of his ear and something in her swelled.

Swelled so much, she made an audible sound—his name.

He heard and clomped back up the steps.

It wasn't soda pop love anymore. This burned. It hurt. The heaviness got heavier, went deeper. It didn't ease, nothing was fixed. Instead, they realized they could be in that heaviness together.

A kiss through the screen door made their lips black with dirt.

This is what the girl wishes she had heard of love. Instead, she has the other story. The other story, the happy, easy story, is the one that holds within her—the one that betrays her every time she tries to tell her own story.

Wind creaks against the window, still closed, and the girl moves her hand away from her head. Down her arms, her fingers trace circles on her own skin. She moves them behind her, sets her fingertips against her lower back. She rests her fingers there, feeling a scar that exists only as the third memory:

"You can hide your secrets in my skin," the girl said. The woman she spoke to was balled up on the floor, like a used piece of tissue, snot streaked down the woman's face, hair matted in clumps. The woman trembled tremors down her body. It was too much for the woman to bear.

"Okay." The word faltered from the woman's lips and fell numb on the floor.

She pulled the woman into her arms, her crumpled woman, and went to the bed.

The secrets within the woman grew tired, shook less. She was able to stand now, but left the girl on the bed.

"We have to do it now," the woman's eyes opened wide, red

lines interrupted the white in collisions.

It was then the woman got the blindfold, ached across the room to the closet to slip it away from its hook. She wrapped it around the girl's eyes and eased the girl onto the bed, face down.

The woman cut lines down the girl's back to peel away the skin and dip into her blood. Each secret was folded into a tendon, down into the muscles. Some were tied around the bones of the girl's spine and the backs of her ribs to make sure she could never cut deep enough to find them. With the blindfold, the girl could not see the secrets. Did not know whether they were pulled from the woman's heart, or the head. Maybe they were from behind the car or below the knee cap. She could only feel where fingers tickled her veins aside, the weighted spot the secrets left within her once placed. The woman purged herself and the girl turned heavy.

The woman finished and rolled the girl's skin back down, smoothed it out. Hands, like a rolling pin, rubbed across her back. A realignment.

Then came the needle and thread to stitch around the lines of the incision. The secrets slept within her, content in their new home as they were sealed into darkness. Her skin pinched with each needle prick, the thread slid through her pores in an even rhythm.

One final tug and the blindfold knot eased; the silk fell from her face. The girl kept her eyes closed.

The woman sighed, "Relief."

The secrets twitched and then settled. The girl's body, heavy with another's burden, sank further into the sheets dotted with drying blood. She always feared the loss of herself to another. She never thought of how it would feel to gain.

Until now. As she sits on the floor, she touches the parts of her body that are still raw with memory. There are other parts, where memory has faded and is a dull sensation when touched, ready to be written over by something new. But the neck, the pinch, the back—the girl needs this moment of remembering.

Always, underneath these memories is the story of Nana and Oumpa. It's a template the girl can't fill, a mold she can't fit into, a story she can't tell. She wants to tell a different story:

There are two people who have found a connection. This connection happens to be with one another. So, they walk on sand together, dig their feet into the grains, but not so much that it hurts. They only push into the grains far enough to know the sand is there, stuck in their shoes as they walk. There are no leaves here, none catch in the bike tires that sit against walls separating sand and concrete. Instead, the sun shines, waves lift and crash, and they walk under a pier. Under the pier there is a net hooked under the wood that catches feathers from the birds that try to sit in between the spikes put in so the birds don't sit there. The net also catches things people drop onto the pier, that slip into the cracks, like bottle caps, pieces of paper, and hook lines from fishermen.

These two are in the stage when holding hands is enough. They don't make sandwiches and cut the crusts off for this beach trip, don't drink apple cider from paper cups, but they aren't heavy either. They are laughing until their faces hurt.

But, then they see a dead turtle being lowered into the water. It is inside a net, the white of its belly faces the sun. Silence fills the spaces of laughter. They hope it's not a sign. One looks at the other and wraps arms around shoulders. Who believes in signs anymore?

Sometimes a dead turtle is just that.

This is the girl's story now as she sits in the middle of the floor. Her story doesn't cover up the nighttime story she used to hear, it doesn't replace it or take it away. And her story will change. The sand will leave her shoes, the net will break, the soft spots she touches now will fade and new buttons for memory will form on her body.

Curtis Luckey

The Rise and Fall of Granddaddy's Kitchen

High yella, straight hair, green eyes,
feet fitted nicely inside her flip-flops,
unafraid of granddaddy's resistance
to the new,
she steps across the divide with a pizza, an invasion
alerting the faded white stove,
its four iron eyes with pupils of years-old grease
bubbling the double-consciousness of neckbones and spaghetti
in cadence, in heat of fiery hot springs
in those stainless steel wells,
the aroma marching
up, and out, to the yellow walls stained
like dogs do each post,
a light charcoal black urine
marking the land, staking their claim,
soldiers at attention. But not her.
She aims her only weapon, the pizza box,
making spaghetti, a naturalized citizen, smile
at the white flag topped with ox tails,
asking for permission to join the rest,
and make an even more
United States.

Kris Huelgas

The Crack Addict You Hit When She Ran into the Intersection

22

The answer is yes and no.
Yes, I did set the sky on fire,
but it was with the bullet you gave me.
It hit the bottom of my gut with so
much nails against chalk boards and
papers-collapsing into boulders that
my belch was venom and my nails,
black enough to rip the air
from throats, sped like vines in
different directions and rooted,
piercing hearts and car doors
and tombstones.

No it wasn't my first, but the lightning in
my cheeks stayed, and on rainy days
I can never open my mouth for fear of
blowing something up. I'm stronger now
and the snakes that you tie me down with,
orange and black like corn, will tear when I flex
and the smoke in my eyes will swim away
from my nose and my mouth and my ears.

I'll stand and when the speakers
open their mouths to pump their verb
poison in the air, they'll find
the rags of my person shoved there,
like a caved-in tunnel. I'll be free
to run between the bright-eyed cats
in the street.

Joseph Mattson

Pour One for Music

For Steve Ruecker, for Ben Chasny

Pour another for the midnight belles and
the liberty-cracked hands of 1974. Pour ye
another for delicate blessings banging rods in
our cold mountain hands, in the engines of our
thousand-mile-an-hour skulls. Pour one for
the hurt hawks, and also for the hale and
hearty hawks hooded in wait.

Pour another for the ghost light of a thousand
burned equinoctial nights—and one for shorter-
distance relationships—pour one yes for the
blues below hell, one for the angel spread and
one for the angel folded tight, tucked in the lonely
lips of time: poured all.

The flagon's running on fumes, no place to
turn but song, so pour one for the ancient
goods we're given, pour one for a gang of
cool memoirs, pour one for ruby-fisted flowers
exploding from our kinked foreheads, pour
one for Townes, for Townes, goddamnit! And
for the Lightnin' and for the slain.

Pour one for music for fuck's sake music
for the love of god
music.



ASHLEY SHANDERA

THE REMAINS OF LAST NIGHT

Last night my boyfriend boasted about the other women he's dated and how beautiful and built and biddable they all were, unlike me. So I hit him in the face with the phone. Wham. Just like that. Except it wasn't just like that because, immediately after the blow, the skin on his cheekbone began to crackle like paint. I thought it was just the effect of blood rushing to the scene of impact and settling into the fine lines beneath his eyes. But then the lines became less fine and deeper, and a whitish, powdery substance clung to the walls of the interstices. Gaping fissures began shooting down and across his startled expression. He just stood there, staring at me like that, frozen and vulnerable. I just stared back, armed with a phone, astounded by the deepening cracks as they quickly made their way across his skull and down his neck, pausing intermittently as if they were contemplating which way to go next. By the time the fault lines reached his chest and arms, his head had turned to plaster and began crumbling. Skull chips tumbled down his statuesque figure onto the floor and exploded into a fine grayish-white powder next to his combat boots. His gypsum clothes sprinkled about soon after. With each subsequent section of his body being fractured, the aftermath of destruction spewed fragments of plastered lips, pecs and abs. All these parts and more met their ultimate demise

in the vast piles of dust that lay before me. His legless boots were all that remained. Those, and his targeted penis. It lay nearby, impressively intact, half sunk in a mound of plaster dust. Never before did it look so magnificent, so regal. Had his eyes not perished, he would have been as proud as Ozymandias at such a sight. Of course, I had to hold it. I skillfully grasped its mightiness with one hand, the other still clenching the phone for protection, but no sooner had I blown off the fallout debris than the penis disintegrated. Poof. Just like that. I immediately pressed the redial button on the phone and boasted to the person on the line about how the man I used to date was fragile and feckless and inferior, unlike me.

Nancy Carroll

Woman at Sink

After "Untitled Film Still #3," 1977 Cindy Sherman

Any collaboration with steam
will dampen sight. A copper-bottomed
saucepan, two Pyrex mixing bowls

fill with water, vegetables, small bits
of splintered pine cone. Her lips fuse
into milk and wine. Vinegar drips

onto her slippers, splashing a finely chiseled pedicure
of suspended accusation and repentance. Aprons pile
on chairs and this delicate masquerade for coupling

concludes. The corned beef hash hurls
past his head, landing in the cat's
litter box. Rising slowly, he strangles her wrist

for silence. She holds a martini for truce.
The pressing between is only wax and moss.
The closing is what the mailman delivers

postage due.

Joseph Lewis

How to Build a God: Part 1

In the following pages I will instruct you on the technique of God-making
This guide is broken into three sections:
Materials, Tools, & Procedure

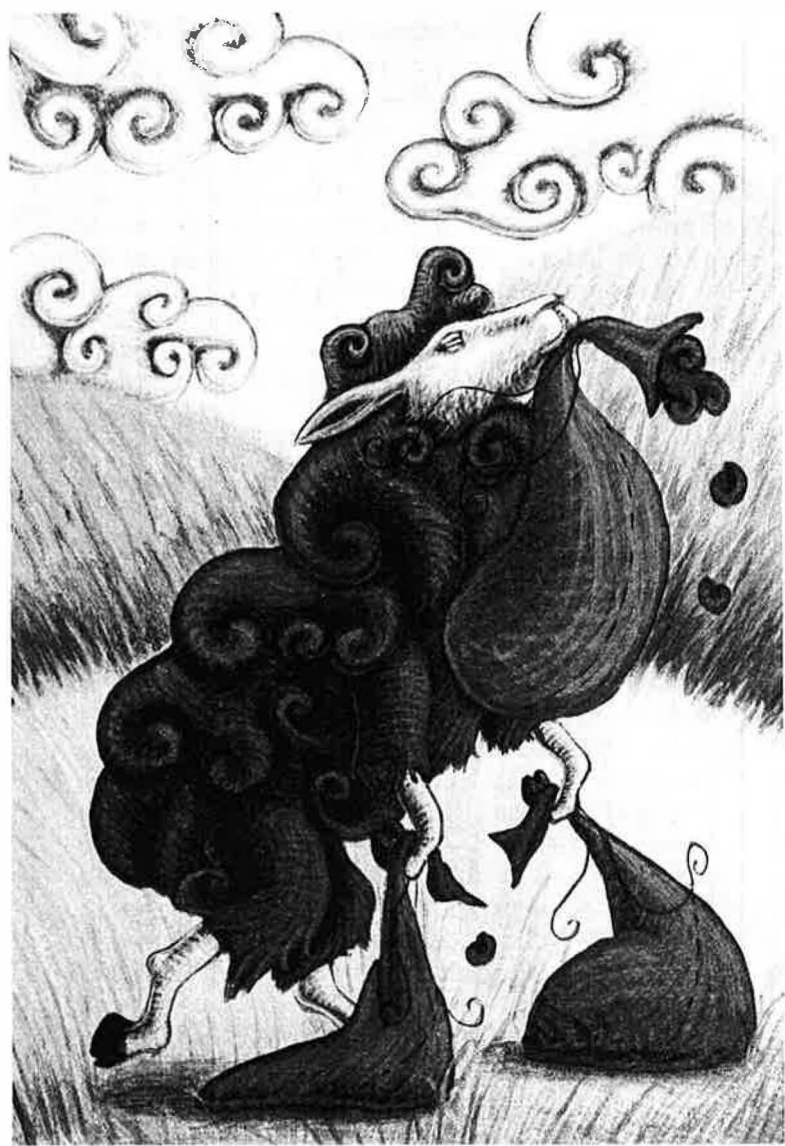
Materials::

- 9" x 12" **Construction paper** — this is a type of coarse colored paper. The texture is slightly rough, and the surface is unfinished. One important characteristic to keep in mind is that the color of most construction paper fades very quickly and will require constant evangelical practice and/or re-application (in this situation, it is often easier to start from scratch). Construction paper is most often used as the primary material of the God (face and arms and body).
- **Tasar Silk** //// [pronounced **Tussah**] this is copper brownish in color and is slightly rough in texture. Though it does not have the sheen of other silks, there is a unique appeal about this variety: It is obtained from the silkworm *Antheraea mylitta* [pronounced phonetically]. Unlike other varieties, these worms are reared entirely indoors, and are known to spend much of their life alone & away from other worms. [rearing this silk will require much care and energy and ~~elf~~ abuse (such as but not limited to: fasting, hail mary's, human torches, and/or celebratory stoning)] \\\ \ \ \ \ Tasar [pronounced **Tassar**] is mainly used for upholstery and interior décor, But *we* will be using it to robe your God.
- **Tooth Zipper** - The teeth on a tooth zipper are equally visible on both sides of the tape. The teeth themselves look more like the teeth in your mouth or that of a lion's. Every tooth is separate. Every tooth is identical. Tooth zippers are excellent for straight applications like bags,

pullovers, jackets, garment bags, or the mouth of your God

- **One 1" Marble and one 5/8" Marble** === Marbles are small balls made of some hard substance[such as marble]which are used in children's games The 5/8" is the most common size used for playing the game of marbles as the target marble The 1" is the size used in most of the world as the shooter These will be the eyes of your God [consider more marbles if you wish to create a God with more omniscient qualities]
- **Three pockets filled with 6.355mm Ball-Bearings** +++ These are used to fill the inside of your God The God will often feel weighty—but this is a normal first reaction—and may require the performance of a miracle and/or sign every couple thousand years to increase the resale value of your God

Materials Disclaimer: Gods are known to fail Especially for static lives, experience has shown that the actual cause of failure is fatigue Analytical methods are available to determine a particular Gods useable life Consult with materials manufacturer to determine typical God performance characteristics Even if materials are properly installed, adequately lubricated, protected from foreign matter, and are not subject to extreme operating conditions, they can ultimately fatigue In most applications, the fatigue life is the maximum useful life of a God, at which point a replacement is recommended Remember: A God is an easy thing to make!



DARRYL WHITE

TOP 10 REASONS WHY GAMERS ARE GODS

10) WE ARE MYSTERIOUS

There, inside our apartment window, is our Olympus. No one knows it's here but us. Outside, the mortals lead their little lives; they leave their homes every morning, in pinstripes, scrubs, and baseball caps. They work all day. They return home to electric bills, laundry, and dishes. We sit in our Ikea chair at our Ikea desk and shoot off emails on our Alienware X58 Benchmark. There's big life inside, not the kind the mortals understand, its dried cocoa in the bottom of coffee cups, dog-eared gaming magazines, and paper plates piled with buffalo wing bones. These are the reflective surfaces of a god, more intimate than pubic hair.

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9) WE HAVE INTERESTING HOBBIES

The problem with gods is that we are sedentary. We will not move if not acted upon by an outside force—usually the void. In our most basic state we are tubs of potential energy—the potential to be anywhere, say anything, do anything. Our Olympus has everything. We hold the remote—our lightning; look at our 63-inch flatscreen consuming the entire wall—another window into mortality. We marvel at umbilicals as they stretch from TV to cable to Xbox 360. We turn from the little lives outside our window to the little lives

inside our flatscreen: Lil' Hood has abandoned her search for Ray J's love. We point our lightning and squeeze; a bolt hurls unseen, strikes, and changes their world. Amanda Tapping and Christopher Judge run through a Stargate. We sit in judgment; we would do better given their little tasks. We run a thumb across our flatscreen and it comes back coated. It's upon us. We want to be running through Stargates, visiting fantastic worlds, and saving the universe. Lightning is judgment. We cancel their existences. We fade them to black. We pick up the Xbox controller—our thunder. We are more interactive. We control the little lives inside our flatscreen. The nimbleness of our thumbs effect mass; they cast the lines of fate. One mistake and the Reapers kill Shepard, showing why it's better to be a soldier than an engineer. The little life doesn't complain at its sacrifice, it doesn't know we are looking over its shoulder. It's easy to be gods when we don't actually have to be present. Then mortals have to take us on faith.

8) WE ARE PERFECT COMMUNICATORS

Talking should be the easiest thing to do. We all have mouths, tongues, pallets, and throats. We all can do glottal stops and touch our alveolar ridges. Vocal cords vibrate air, which, if strong enough, will travel outside our window, but never through the flatscreen. So we use other avatars for that—telephone, text, email, Internet chat. For a god, talking is like fishing; we sit on our isolated shore with a thousand different poles and a thousand different baits. We cast into the ocean for just the right nibble. Most times the line snaps or the bait is lost. Sometimes the fish are sleeping or too small or too psycho. None of that impedes our search for the big catch, the one we can take a photo of—pics or it didn't happen—the one we can mount, perhaps bake or fry.

7) WE ARE FASHIONABLE

Gods should go naked we've decided—after all, we should be comfortable in our skin. The mortals inside our flatscreen enjoy bodies that shame us—chiseled curves that somehow are not in our image. The disparity crowds us and to escape it we must descend to the world outside our window. To be among the mortals we have to hide what we truly are. We must do as the Greeks do. We turn back to our flatscreen, recreate the world with our lightning and watch the commercials. It doesn't really help. We can't tell the difference between a good or bad pair of jeans. We really don't know if they make us look sexy or bloated or if they hide all the wrong bulges. We can, however, recognize name brands.

6) WE ALWAYS MAKE THE FIRST MOVE

We leave Olympus and step into the little lives outside our window. Corporeal shopping is the answer when ordering online has more than a five to ten-day wait. We walk the crowded malls—places of glass and headless, unmoving simulacra, who know what to wear better than we do. We look into Guess for help. We step inside and try to lose ourselves in mortality. They waltz rack to rack, but never occupying the same space, never looking at the same shirt or dress. When one mortal abandons its spot another moves to claim it. They are not alone in the orchestra; little conductors cruise the concerto, speeding some and slowing others. We watch one conductor in particular—she with the bottomless blonde hair. We wait our turn because, though we can talk, we are not sure of the language. So we move out of the waltz and into her line of sight. She does not see us. She speeds someone else. We wait. Or we will leave. Finally, she does see us—up and down her gaze moves.

Moisture needles our armpits. She sees our divinity. She sees we're a god, fresh from Olympus. Her expression . . . annoyed, switches to a falsified smile. She parts her lips and air vibrates, not as muffled as through a window or as loud as on a flatscreen or as silent as a chat room; it makes our nipples hard. We remember the talk inside the flatscreen. Not the right talk, the wrong talk, the phrases we are not supposed to say. We stay silent and point to a pair of jeans. She picks them up, holds them to our waist, and shakes her head before searching for another pair. We stare. We want to ask her out. In that moment, we discover why it's better to be a god. Gods demand. Gods decide. Gods dictate. Gods never ask. Outside our window we lose power in the asking. Not the question, but the moment after the words pass; the void before new words replace or erase or contextualize the old. The void cuts. It divides us and sends us screaming into our veins until our brain catches up. Acceptance. Rejection. Mortals believe that gods don't know the pain of giving birth. We do. It's that moment right after we say, "Please love us back."

5) WE ARE POWERFUL

Who, isn't as hard as it may sound. There are usually a lot of who's. Case in point: She with the bottomless blonde hair, whose appearance is electrocuted into our mind—a grey dress that looks like a long shirt and a waist cinched with a thick black belt. Though probably no more than 5'1", her black and gray heels elevate her to meet our eyes. We never admit what we notice, especially when compelled to travel every inch. She glides poetic about the racks. We are speeding. She asks questions. We nod or we don't. She pulls out a slightly less blue pair of jeans than the last. She shows us to the dressing room and tells us to try them on.

We obey. We exit the dressing room. She has us spin. She judges. Then nods. We go back into the dressing room and change back. We thank her and try to find words to make her stay a little longer, but without our lightning and thunder our thumb twitches are just twitches. There is no pause. No stop. No change. No repeat. Only motion so constant. She is close and we are close, then she starts to walk away and so we follow; we would like to get closer, we want to know how she smells, not in a weird psycho way, but like after a shower, after the gym, after she makes love. If we know then we can dream the way gods dream—full of electric thunderous yearning chased with a little self-doubt. She stops behind the register and presses keys. We are not sure, but we feel her eyes worshipping us. Debit card changes hands. Suddenly, we are standing outside the Guess glass with a bag and we look back. She with the bottomless blonde hair has moved on to another little life. We will never return. We will never wear the jeans she has picked for us. It's a god's destiny to purvey from our mountaintop. Besides, we didn't even ask her name.

4) WE ARE SPONTANEOUS

Life outside the window is unfit for a god, so there is the inevitable ascension, as traffic permits, back to our Olympus. The Guess bag falls into a corner as we move to erase the void from our skin. We enter our shower, an enclosure of glass, and hot water smothers our flesh. Rooted in glass, we are hidden by steam. We would stay, but the water eventually cools. We take up the soap, rub it along our arms, and stoke the foam. Now, fully coated, the water washes it away. We shut off the spigot and towel ourselves dry. After scrubbing the mortality off our skin, we step outside our shower and we sit naked in our Ikea chair and desk. We take up our

lightning and thunder and we don't question the price of our solitary heaven; it's laid out meticulously perfect, a paradise designed for pleasure. We only need thumbs.

3) WE ARE CULTURED

We shower again, but we can't get it off us—the stain of mortality outside our window. The void is with us every day, it's our mystery like why chocolate tastes so good with peanut butter, and we find ourselves slipping from our mountaintop at every opportunity. Gamestop. Best Buy. Burger King. Blockbuster. Starbucks. Baskin-Robbins. Then we find that place outside that resembles our Olympus. In the movie theatre, the flatscreen is larger than us and the darkness hides our divinity. We can be among the mortals. We don't have to speak. We don't have to ask. In fact, silence is preferred. Please turn off all cell phones and pagers. The world inside the larger flatscreen moves more quickly than it does back at our Olympus. Charlize Theron has just thrown Will Smith through a wall.

2) WE KNOW THE VALUE OF A DOLLAR.

We go to a strip club.

1) WE ALWAYS MAKE THE RIGHT DECISIONS.

We say to hell with it. When X58 Benchmarks glitch, we call them broken; when we glitch, we say it's the way we are. Our refusal to abandon our lightning and thunder makes us realize that we lug our Olympus even as we move amongst the little lives. We ponder the philosophy of our universe: why are gods so different from mortals? Deliberation takes weeks, but we have an eternity. Conclusion comes slowly between bouts of lightning and thunder.

The difference between a god and a mortal is choice. Gods are what we are fated to be and we will always act in a prescribed manner. Life outside the window is unpredictable, exotic, and ultimately unknowable. It's a place of possibilities; like today, cars jam both sides of the street. We can hear muffled music a couple doors down. Outside our window, two mortals walk up to the apartment complex; one is wearing blue shorts and a tank top and the other a hot pink skirt and a Linkin Park T-shirt. We hear the buzz and they disappear inside. We walk to our door and look out the peephole, twin diminutive blurs pass by. We hear a door open. The music gets louder. We hear the squeal of a greeting. The door shuts. The music muffles. We go back to our Olympus. We sit at our Ikea chair and desk. We check email, text, chat rooms, we cast invisible lines. We throw lightning at the flatscreen and scan through the lives at our disposal. Most are reruns. We stare across the room, to the Guess bag on the floor, and imagine the jeans on our naked body. We wonder if there is a hidden goddess at our neighbor's party. We wonder if she has stepped out of the waltz and if she has the courage to hail the conductor. We abandon our lightning and take up our thunder. There are wings warming in the oven and Shepard has to save the world from the Reapers. Our thumbs are spry, nimble, perfect.

R

Lilit Manucharyan

Le Temps

I've sensed it in the
icy, even
blinking of the cat

caught it
lurking
in the shadows
slowly moving
with the
sun

heard the prattle
of its footsteps
as it scuttled
towards my bed

seen its cold
relentless fingers
tugging, clawing
at the sheets

felt it gorge
itself on all my
hopeless thoughts
and dreams
of you

then through
weary but
much wiser
eyes
I've watched it
disappear

clutching
another day's
limp body
in its teeth

Clint Campbell

Rest: Cues

In dark it was easier.
We could move through visual quiet,
our precarious slips
down steep rock and clay
to the narrow lap of water
faded to mystery.
We crept from our clothes,
let the reservoir buoy our bodies
against night, the stars
brighter than everything
but our strained, wet eyes.

Dark prompted easy acceptance
of the vulnerable self—
we welcomed: flush of blood,
warmth of water,
the yet uncontrollable shivering
of our own lives pushing
at our own skins. It was easier
to feel there.

Unguarded in the water
in the dark
we felt a rush of world
around us—our tiny skins, together
and still—but vanishing
stars pressed us, cool and lonely
again, to our clothes
on the shore; our thoughts turned
by morning's approach.



MELANIE WUDL

THE NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE

When Sharon's neighbor, Gwen, passed away the house stood vacant for more than a year. She watched while Gwen's lawn turned brown. It drove her crazy when the lime tree died. The next time she saw Charlie, Gwen's aging son who checked in on the place from time to time, she decided she would ask him if she could run the sprinklers once a week. It was a shame to lose a tree.

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She complained about it to Al, her neighbor on the other side. Al was a retired fireman. "He's going to lose more than a tree if he lets that place stand vacant much longer. I bet it's full of vermin," he said. The visual picture of it, rats crawling on the kitchen counters and scurrying around the house at night, troubled her.

She approached the house when she saw the living room windows were open. Through the blackened screen door she said, "Charlie? It's Sharon, from next door."

"Oh, I'm just having a snack, come on in," he said. With an outstretched arm he motioned her to take a seat at the table. A plate of sliced canned luncheon meat surrounded in aspic and an open jar of sweet pickles were set out.

She sat down and he offered her a plate, but she put up her hand and said, "Oh, no, no thank you."

"I went on a bit of a scavenger hunt to wrestle up this lunch," he said.

"Your mother once told me her favorite food was grapes dipped in peanut butter. At the time, I told her it sounded disgusting, but she said it was heavenly."

Charlie laughed.

"You know Charlie, I'm afraid you've lost the lime tree out back. I wouldn't mind watering, though it'd be better if someone were living here. I'm a little worried about the house, it being empty so long."

"I know," he answered.

"Plus, your mom's studio is so jammed full—and some of that stuff, the oil paints and all—it's kind of a fire hazard." She paused, "I might be able to help you. I could get the place cleaned out and rented, if you wa..."

"My son is going to take it," he interrupted.

She was relieved.

"He's looking for a full time job and then he'll probably move in. Yes, I suppose it is a shame to lose a tree. Which one is it?"

"The lime, just outside..." She stopped, noticing his struggle to see though his thick frames, and she recalled another thing from Gwen, that he was legally blind.

"Ugh, whatever vision I've got is mostly for things up close. I wouldn't know what's dead or alive back there," he said, taking his dishes to the sink. She followed, hoping he wouldn't notice her disgust at the squalor of the kitchen. "Frankly, I don't much care about this place. I know we don't know each other very well... you moved next door when, ten years ago?"

She nodded.

"Well, I grew up in this house and I'd just as soon sell. Not

too many good memories here, if you know what I mean. Anyway, my son seems keen on fixing it up." He headed for the living room and began to close the windows. "To you, Gwen was probably the eccentric English lady that lived next door, but you know there's always another version. Did she ever quote her poetry?"

"As a matter of fact..."

"I bet she even teared up, didn't she?"

"I always thought the poems triggered something," Sharon said.

He took a deep breath and held the door open for her. "It's funny. I'm sixty-three years old and every time I set foot in this place I'm the loneliest kid on the block again. I think the only reason Colin wants to move in here is that he has no history with her—she wasn't much of a grandmother; the role didn't interest her."

"I'd, I'd no idea..." she stuttered.

"Oh don't get me started," he said as he locked up the house and put on his hat, a remarkably stylish Australian Outback. She saw it as one of his eccentricities. "And, sure, if you want to water, go ahead."

Oftentimes Al would ask her over for dinner. She would ask what time she should come by and he would say, "Drinks at seven, dinner at seven-thirty." Al was a good cook, left over from his days at the firehouse and the hearty meals he made for the squad.

Drinks varied, but they were always the real thing, nothing fruity. "I've got some good single malt. You want to try?" he asked as he poured a shot over one ice cube and handed it to her. She set a bottle of Chianti down on the kitchen counter, and with glasses in hand, she and Al headed for the back yard.

"So, Charlie is turning the house over to his son," she said.

“Colin? No kidding. Time sure does fly. Seems like yesterday Charlie was the kid living there, now Colin is taking over. I wonder how old he is.”

“He’s out of college, somewhere in his twenties probably. Charlie says he doesn’t want to deal with the house, as if we didn’t know that. I’m so glad it won’t be vacant much longer...gives me the creeps.”

Al laughed. “I think your imagination keeps you pretty busy. But that’s good news,” he said.

Weeks later, while she was hunched over a blueprint covered with a sheet of yellow tracing paper, Colin introduced himself.

“I’m so pleased to meet you. Please, come in,” she said, and he followed her as she led him to the dining room, firing off a barrage of questions, possibly too enthusiastically: “When are you moving in? Do you have plans for the house? What do you do?”

Colin walked over to her desk and studied the blueprint.

“Are you an architect?” he asked.

“I’m a landscape designer,” she said, looking at her sketch. “This project’s for a middle-aged divorcee with a troublesome rubber tree.”

“My grandmother’s place is kind of a mess,” he said.

“She loved her garden, used to sing back there while she pattered. It just needs a good clean-up. So, you graduated from?”

“Cal. History. I’ve got a job as a fact checker at the *Times*. Doesn’t pay much but I like it. The deal with Dad is I get to move in rent-free as long as I keep it going—you know, *look after it, take some pride in it*. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know who I am and that you don’t need to water anymore—that was nice of you, by the way.”

As he made his way to the door, she followed. “I’d be glad to

help you with the yard, if you want. I rarely do any of the physical work these days; it'd be fun."

"Oh, I've got my hands full with just the house right now. Going through someone else's life is weird. I barely knew my grandmother, you know."

"I imagine that studio of hers will reveal a thing or two. It's always intrigued me."

"Did she use it much?"

"The studio? I don't think she'd been in there in years."

She again offered to help with the yard, adding that her motives were selfish because it was the first thing she saw every morning outside her own kitchen window. As she said this she thought, *my god, you're handsome*, and added, "It'd be good for me to get my hands in the dirt again."

When she saw a loading truck was parked in front of the house, she went to check in on Colin. She squeezed her way in between two couches stacked vertically in the entryway. He hollered to the movers from down the hall, "Not that, that stays here."

Sharon nudged her way in and inspected an English teacart. "It's lovely," she said.

"I think it's a real antique, over a hundred years old. Not sure where she got it, or from who—"

"Colin? You in here?" Charlie rasped from the entry.

"Back here, Dad," Colin yelled.

"Ah, the teacart. You letting it go?" he asked.

"We were just talking about it. No, it's a keeper. Where'd it come from?"

"Not sure, I think it was her mother's. It's always been around—could be Irish." He paused. "She loved it—said it was the

one real thing she had.”

“It is lovely,” Sharon repeated for the benefit of Charlie, who seemed to be drifting off as he stared at the piece. And then, as if coming out of a trance, he said, “I don’t really know, but I don’t think there are any nails in it. She either told me that or, well I don’t know why I remember it. She did treasure the thing.”

Sharon raised her eyebrows and glanced towards Colin, who said, “Dad, why don’t you take it?”

“Oh no,” Charlie answered firmly. “I don’t want it. I don’t want a thing from this house. No way. Just looking at it now—” He stopped. “I can hear her call me, ‘Poor lamb,’ that awful nickname, and the way she said it, like I’d never measure up. Nope, cleaning up after Gwen is your project.”

Sharon felt the cramped nineteen-forties hallway shrink.

“Well,” she said, “I’d better get going.” She told Colin she only stopped by to tell him she had a crew lined up to trim her client’s rubber tree and that it would be easy for her to send them over afterwards to clear the weeds and take out the lime tree. He said that he had too much going on around the place already and that the yard would be a junk heap for a while. She argued that was exactly her point, that it would be one more thing that would be done, and it would give the place a little order. She even suggested that the weeds were choking the camellias and that she was not sure what else would die if the beds were not tended. Finally, she said that he would thank her later, this last bit added for a little humor to temper the encounter with Charlie, who, staring back down at the teacart, was now wiping his eyes with a dirty handkerchief retrieved from his back pocket. Colin said he did not have money to pay a crew and Sharon said she would pay, and the matter was settled.

"I'd better get out of here, let you all get back to your work," Charlie said, stuffing the handkerchief back into his pocket.

As he worked his way through the crowded house, Colin said to Sharon, "He's nothing if not dramatic."

Colin worked on the house and transformed it into a small gem, the teacart placed in the entryway. He stacked his books in the kitchen and told her that eventually he wanted to begin work on a book of his own, something on the order of the origins of specific foods, cross-cultural similarities, and spice usage. "A culinary anthropology," he said.

"Actually, I want to turn Gwen's studio into a research room and plant a kitchen garden. I'm nearly ready to take you up on your offer, if it still stands," he said.

"Gardening? Kitchen gardens are delicate," she answered. "You're starting with young plants that can't take much abuse. We'll have to clear the studio first," she said, looking at the backs of Gwen's canvases stacked against the sliding glass door. She had been curious about Gwen's studio for years, and she had an odd compulsion for going through other people's things.

Al's dinners began to include Colin. The inaugural meal started with perfect Manhattans followed by a classic Caesar and a spicy brew of Firehouse Chili. It was good.

After dinner, the two of them took a short evening walk, and she told him about Al and Gwen.

"They were pretty good friends. I always envied them, in fact, the way they had a little sparkle for each other, especially after your grandfather died. He'd go over there, and I'd hear them laughing and bickering. He'd nag her to clean up the yard, or have the house painted. She'd tell him she figured the house would outlive her just as it was. He'd say, *it's not right, Gwen, a cultured woman like*

yourself, you ought to take more pride in your place, and she'd say, oh fiddle, painting is what I intend to do with the time I've got left. They'd go on and on, and he'd hang around and fix something and she'd say, oh, that's marvelous, darling, you are a dear, and he'd always give her a little peck on the cheek."

"That was Dad's complaint, that her art came first," Colin said, at which point they were stopped in front of her house.

"What about your mother? Did she and Charlie get along?" she asked.

"I guess so. You know, she died. Ovarian cancer. I was fourteen."

"I'm sorry, I didn't."

"I think they got along pretty well. There weren't a lot of fun times that I remember: obligatory holiday dinners and the occasional long distance phone call from a relative. What about you?"

"My family? My parents live in a retirement community in Palm Springs. I see them a couple times a year." Changing the subject, she said, "You know, I'd love to help you clear out Gwen's studio. It'd actually mean a lot me."

"Why?"

She told him she had wanted to be an artist, that she went to art school, but did not stay with it. She said she loved painting, but somehow lost her way, or her courage, she wasn't sure which. She admired Gwen's persistence.

"If you talk to my father he'd say it came at a price," he responded.

"Of course it did, but it's not like she had a choice. Art wasn't an option for her, she understood that. I remember when I used to paint, I was a much less conflicted person. All my multiple personalities got along fine."

Colin laughed. "Multiple personalities? Who am I talking to now? Do they have their own names?"

"You're making fun of me."

"Don't you like your work, your gardens?"

"Oh sure, but it's different. And the longer I do it, the more my days are merely prescribed. I want to take risks. It's awfully cliché, but, damn it, I want to *paint!*" and then, backtracking, "Only, I don't know, art is so revealing."

"You got a boyfriend? I think you spend too much time alone."

"You're pretty smart." Sharon crossed her arms, gave herself a hug. "I'd ask you in but it's late, and I'm thirty years older than you are."

"Thirty?"

"I think so."

"Give me a break. Besides, you do all right," he leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

"Okay, maybe twenty. But I've had a bit too much to drink, and you're adorable and you live right next door and..." She leaned in and kissed Colin on the mouth, and then turned to walk up the steps of her house.

He walked down the sidewalk and, approaching the dimness of his porch light, said, "I'm twenty-six years old. I imagine you're somewhere in your forties. I've had three girlfriends I consider important; the rest aren't worth mentioning. I'm interested in getting this place together, maybe writing a food book, and beyond that I'm making it up as I go. The way you kiss..." he said, as they each entered their separate houses. "You've got a nice way."

It was warm the day of Charlie's visit, the day the front door was open to allow for cross ventilation. Colin was washing the dining room windows, and Sharon was clearing out Gwen's studio. Latin music blared.

“What happened to the screen door?” Charlie yelled.

“Dad? What’s up? Everything okay?” Colin said, and the music was lowered.

“Thought I’d stop by and check out your progress. Did you sand the floor? What’d you use on it?”

She could hear them clearly.

“Urethane; came out pretty good, huh?”

“You didn’t use anything to strip the color? I’m surprised it’s so light.

She saw Charlie’s head drop and imagined him stooping two inches from the floor, rubbing his hands against the grain.

“Urethane’s going to turn yellow.”

His head came up to full view again.

“You’ve painted? White?”

“They call it Chinese Lantern,” Colin answered.

“A little sterile, don’t you think? They say white walls are hard on the eyes—the glare.”

“So how are you?”

“Oh, fine. I’m buying a new refrigerator. If you want my old one, I can have it brought over. How’s the kitchen coming along?” he said, and she watched a shadow of his image walk through the dining room and into the kitchen. She turned her back to the kitchen, and resumed her sorting and stacking.

“I’m going to do a little remodeling in here,” Colin said, adding, “Al’s going to help me re-tile.”

“Al? Two-doors-down Al?”

“Yeah, he’s great. Says he’s got a tile saw, and anytime I’m ready, he is.”

“I’m sure he is. That guy was always over here. Your grandfather didn’t like him. It was so obvious he had a thing for your grandmother.”

“He’s a nice guy, Dad. It’ll be fun working with him. Don’t you like him?”

“No, I guess I don’t have much use for Al. Pretty blue collar if you ask me. That must’ve been what your grandmother liked about him: handy Al, ready to fix anything. Not too much upstairs when you get right down to it. I can’t imagine what those two ever found to talk about.”

“I guess they were . . . friends.”

Sharon shook her head and wondered if Charlie ever said anything nice about anybody.

“He couldn’t wait to be indispensable after your grandfather died,” he said, and after a short pause, “Is there someone out there I can’t see, Colin, is there someone . . .”

“It’s Sharon. She’s helping me clean out the studio.”

In a lowered voice that she could still hear he said, “You’re recruiting the whole neighborhood?”

“You have a problem with neighbors, Dad? Jesus, she liked Gwen and wants to see what all her work was about.”

“I like neighbors. I like neighbors that say good morning, good evening, and keep to themselves. You wait and see. You’ll be indebted for one thing or another and then we’ll talk.”

She could not bear her eavesdropping any longer.

“Oh, Jesus, here she comes. She’s coming towards the house, isn’t she? Christ, I don’t want to talk to that woman . . .”

“Charlie! Nice to see you,” she said as she entered the house, wiping her hands on her shirt. “Excuse me, I’m such a mess.”

“I understand you’re helping Colin with the studio,” he said, fidgety.

“Colin is nice enough to indulge me. I’ll be careful, Charlie. I’m sure there are some things you’ll want, paintings that have

special meaning to you . . .”

“There’s nothing in there I want.” He turned to face Colin. “About the refrigerator, do you want it?”

“Sure, thanks.”

“Fine, all right then, the express bus only runs on the hour on Sundays. Nice to see you, Sharon. Keep up the good work.” He headed out the front door, and from the porch, “You going to paint these steps, Colin? Probably make a big difference. What happened to the screen door?” he repeated.

“Is he gone yet?” Colin asked her.

“Gone,” she said, leaning out the kitchen doorway.

“Always been such a cheerful person. Fuck, I think he was here all of fifteen minutes, just long enough to rag on everything and spread a little ill will. And for a blind guy, I don’t think he missed a beat, do you? Paint the steps? Never could figure out his selective vision.” He shook off the visit, and went to the sink for a glass of water. “How’s it going out there?”

She did not tell him she had heard everything. Instead, mesmerized, she watched him drink, and felt a sudden clamminess. “Great, I’m separating things, canvases, drawings, photos—letting my mind wander.” She took off her work shirt, her tee shirt revealing well-defined arms. “It’s hot out there, and the side window is blocked by a book case. Maybe you can help me move it.” She gathered her hair, held it back from her face and up off her neck. “I found some pictures of your grandmother; she was quite the looker in her day.”

“That’s what they’ll say about you,” he said.

She returned his stare, and they moved in towards each other. “This is nuts, I must be nuts,” she said.

“It’s not nuts, Sharon, it’s hot, it’s really, very hot,” he said.

Colin and Al tiled the kitchen, and she sorted through the studio

only to find a lot of murky expressionistic landscapes that were not very good. Colin teased that she was a rummager at heart. Together the two of them bordered off a section of the lawn and built up a garden that began with organic mulch and became a bountiful smorgasbord of things useful in cooking. Their first encounter on the kitchen floor gave way to ever more precarious adventures throughout the house, one such ending up in the hall closet with her head wedged between a rolled up sleeping bag and a box labeled *Camping Gear*.

The affair, of course, would not last. Exactly how it would end neither of them could predict. Over Al's wide noodle pasta with rock shrimp, Colin mimicked Charlie.

"I really couldn't believe it—I've decided you need to start paying some kind of rent on this place. It's in your best interest—time you grew up, recognized what things are worth—your mother would've agreed. Give it some thought and come up with an amount you think is fair and affordable."

"I thought the house was yours," Sharon said. "What were his conditions? *Keep it up, take some pride in it?* Jesus, you've nearly doubled the value!"

"I think it drives him crazy we're all having a good time. He's got to find a way to make it *less happy* around here."

Al got up from the table and returned from the kitchen, opening a second bottle of red wine. He filled their glasses and sat. They sipped.

"You have any money, Colin?" he asked.

"I've saved about twelve grand, and it's earmarked for a new car."

"That's enough to make it plausible," Al said.

"You want to clue us in?" said Sharon.

"You buy the house," he said to Colin. "Charlie isn't too

money savvy, Gwen let me know that much. You offer to buy the house. Ask him if he'll sell the place to you, at what it would've been worth before you put your heart and soul into it."

"How am I going to qualify for a bank loan?"

"This is between us. I'm the bank. You just get him to sell. I'll supply a cashier's check."

Sharon and Colin were puzzled. "Besides the enormous generosity of your offer for which I'm kind of speechless..." Colin began, awkward and formal.

"Who holds the deed?" Sharon interrupted.

"It's got to transfer to Colin, of course; Charlie isn't an idiot. We can work something out, interest only, whatever. You can handle about a thousand a month, right?" he said.

"Yeah, sure. It seems so simple. You'd really do this for me, Al?"

"Your dad's an ass, Colin. The sooner you get him out of your hair, at least as far as the house is concerned, the better. Gwen would want you to have the place, I'm sure of it. Just get him to sell."

After a minute of exchanged glances, the three of them raised their wine glasses. *Clink.*

"He's amazing," Sharon said later. "That's an amazing offer he's made you. But when you think about it, I bet he's got plenty of money stashed away. Investing in you and the house is as good a place for it as any."

"It's awesome," said Colin.

The deal was proposed. Colin told her that Charlie actually seemed impressed with the plan. They were in the bathroom, Colin stepping out of the shower, Sharon handing him a towel,

watching.

"Then came the graduate school thing—he never lets up, it's always one thing or another," he said, and added in the same mimicry, "*You shouldn't let too much time go by. You can't really think that job at The Times is going to add up to anything.*"

"Graduate school isn't a bad idea, Colin." She knew she should not have said it, that it sounded motherly, and she winced into the bathroom mirror.

The next time Charlie came over he and Al crossed paths, Al on the way out, Charlie on the way in. She could hear their perfunctory greeting from Colin's kitchen.

"Al."

"Charlie."

"Doing well?"

"Can't complain."

And then he said to Colin so that Al could still hear, "Still playing house with all the neighbors, I see. How's that woman that's twice your age?"

"Excuse me?" Colin asked.

"Come on, Colin, my eyesight's bad, but I'm not a moron."

"No one said you were a moron," Colin said, and then, under his breath, "Just kind of awful."

"Excuse me?" Charlie said.

"Do you ever stop and think that most of what comes out of your mouth is—" Colin hesitated. "You do nothing but criticize. I think you say things to people to make them miserable so you'll have company. What is it with you?"

Charlie's voice became curt and hard. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothing you'd understand. We're friends. There's no agenda.

It's only you who thinks everyone's got a master plan." She edged her way against the kitchen door enough to see the two of them.

Charlie waved his hand in disregard, turned to leave, but stopped and swung around. "I don't think I'll be back here for awhile. No, as a matter of fact, I'm sure of it. You're an ungrateful, selfish child, Colin, just like your grandmother. Shit," he said, and slammed his fist into the antique teacart. It collapsed into pieces.

Colin rallied, "Make sure you ruin everything. At least your mother had the courage to *live* her life."

"Just like you, screwing the neighbors!" Charlie said as he left.

Colin was sitting in the entryway holding a splintered piece of the cart when she approached.

"I guess in some way I thought transforming this place would transform him," he said, rattled.

"That was a lovely, elegant thing," she said, surveying the damage. "You've done a wonderful job on this house."

"What if I become, you know, in my old age, like him?"

"I don't think there's much chance of that. You're not an unhappy person."

Charlie's visits to the house ceased, but he did sell. From her kitchen window, she watched as the basil bolted and two tomatoes dangled from otherwise barren vines. Later she watched Colin, without her help or suggestion, augment the soil and plant winter crops. He invited Al and Sharon for a late summer feast, and Al suggested the cooking baton be handed off to Colin.

"You've been holding back," said Al.

"I guess so. With the house, well, things settled, I like to cook," he answered.

Sharon reached for his hand across the table, which he gave and locked with hers. She knew he had been struggling, sorting

out what his father meant to him, though she was sure that he was closing the door on Charlie.

"No word from Charlie?" Al asked.

"No," Colin answered. She expected his hand to flinch, but it was steady.

They had become each others' family: Sharon returning to her own house, alone, after dinners cooked by Colin, or Al, or both of them together. She had begun work on a small canvas and found she was generally restless to spend an hour painting each night.

By Thanksgiving Colin and Al were engaged in utter kitchen excess with the complication of each dish rivaling the last. On New Year's Day, hung over from Al's champagne tasting and Colin's bouillabaisse, she nursed a cup of black coffee and surveyed her artwork, a series of uniform abstracts in oil.

The affair had naturally dimmed, though her affection for Colin deepened. She appreciated their mutual understanding of its end without words, certain that any encapsulation of it would have been embarrassing.

He encouraged her painting, told her that she had changed, that she seemed calmer. It was now nearly spring.

"Looking back, I was pretty neurotic, worried about things out of my control. With these paintings, I've got a larger dialogue to engage in, if you know what I mean. I know I'm an amateur, but, well, I think about Gwen often. Her spirit, you know?"

"I think so," he said.

They stood silently for a moment, looking at her paintings, when he said, "I'm going to sell."

She motioned them to her dining table and they sat down.

"The house, it really has appreciated. I think I can pay back Al

and still clear over a hundred grand,” he said. “I’ve thought about it a lot. I’m going to put it on the market and spend a couple of months in Europe—food traveling. Then I’m pretty set on culinary school, but not here. Probably New York,” he said.

The revived house was bought by a single man of mature age who lived in the neighborhood, though neither Al nor Sharon had ever seen him before. The man bought the house for his mother, so that she would be nearby as she entered her very senior years.

Sean Ahern

Wicked

Sow your hymn, that sultry lure, siren
notes on my tongue. Ensnare me on thick tones,
layers of salvation knead my bones
with desire. Take me to your paradise,
on neon-stained streets, haze-choked halls,
a stale, musty room with piss-colored
curtains. The rust-soaked soggy shag, tiers of stagnant
brine: sin, sweat and tears. Those sweet incantations,
voyeur declarations, weave enchantment to my eyes;
the body never lies. Decanting that currency,
the sum of words that crawl between our thighs, your limbs
uprooted to the molten sky, a twisted willow of mangled,
tangled mesh, the alchemy of human flesh. Those moans
you've sung, every bar I chewed, I swallowed hard.

The way Jesus swung between us, a red leather
fluorescent tether around your neck, back and forth,
forgetting north. Those seven shades of midnight
sin, symbols of ink and dye stained on Olive-Ivory skin.
Your mortal embrace delays my decay, charming the marrow
from my bones. Our lips divorce, haunted by heavy chests
of a Siren's stolen breath. Our bitter words chisel and burn.
They churn lust-soaked swollen tongues into emotion distilling
moments, my memory's plunge. Ripping
the tide between my dreams and
veins where bruises remain.

These terminal wounds,
your venom induces,
soak scars into my heart.

Joseph Mattson

Receiving the Calendar

an icy east wind blows
in the stupid, necessary
death December brings

60
it taunts the devoted
pink ember of my
Chesterfield like a
brute child at recess:
too old to laugh, too
young to know why

it rattles the dog-eared sun
and the bleached wooden shutters
that make the sober eyes
of my house.

it speaks of rain, squawks
like a loaded chicken of
salient sheets, this good
foul and dependable exhale
at year's end;

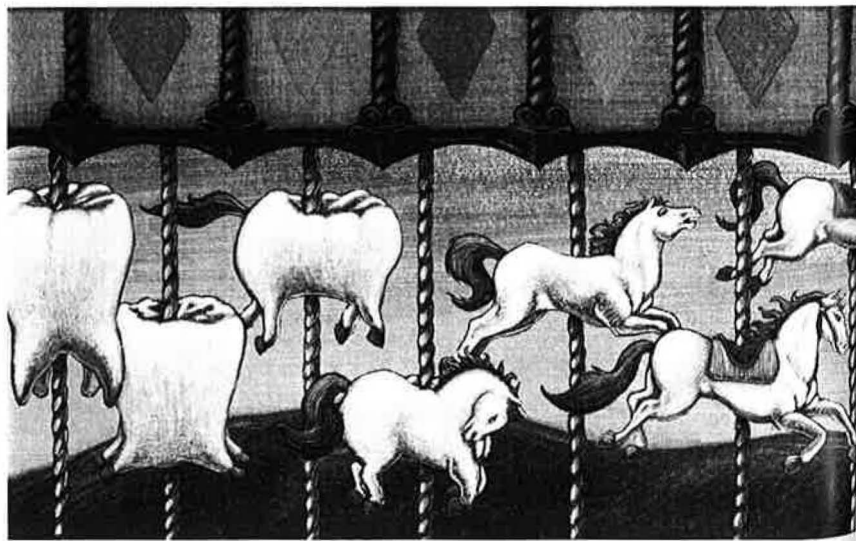
believe me, though the lamp
burns low, the dead of

Winter is a baptism
in Los Angeles

—O how tired and serious
the angels cry—

& with cobwebs coming
between my toes and
a horde of gritty entreaties
under my tongue, the
laving sluice heaving
from bruised miles
scores and scores
deeper than
Santa Ana,

I will eat this cigarette
on New Year's Day.



JOSHUA SHOCKEY

THE SOMETIMES DINER

Mamma and me stay in a motel room with a queen bed. Not just for the night, but always. Mamma works at the motel-ran diner, and we stay here in room 14. Blue curtains and 5 channels on the 13", yellow water and bug-swarmed floors to boot; it is all just for us. The diner's breakfast is good. Morning, noon, and night it is good. It's all the diner does. Doris says people only come for the eggs and dessert. Doris owns the Blue Light Motel and Diner. She is Mamma's boss-lady.

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I like Mamma to sit with me when I eat in the diner, running her fingers through my red hair or playing connect the dots on my arm. She does when she can, but mostly I sit alone at the bar, spinning in my stool as I chew on my peanut butter toast, watching her work. Mamma's blonde curls dance along her shoulders and she always blows her bangs out of her dark green eyes as she takes orders. Sometimes Doris pays me a nickel for every fly I kill in the diner as long as I bring her their dead bodies. Mostly she waddles at me with a waving hand, her fat body rumbling, yelling at me to stay clear of the place and to not bother the customers.

Whenever Doris kicks me out of the diner, I walk around the parking lot, sometimes looking in the windows of people's cars. I got into one, once, and took an old cassette tape that was in the front seat. I don't remember what it was or why—we don't even have a tape player in 14. Mamma nearly tossed me in the fryer when she saw me with it that night. I had to get up real early the next morning and wait by the car, so I could say sorry to the

owner. It was an old lady who told me I could go ahead and keep it, but my hiney was still raw and I didn't need Mamma not believing I tried, so I gave it back anyway.

George, Doris' nephew, comes to eat sometimes. After food, he comes and watches Channel 4 with me in 14. He's older and last time he made me kiss him on the mouth. He thwacked me in the head and said I was doing it wrong. I'm glad he didn't tell Doris I was doing it wrong. I don't want Mamma knowing I'm lousy with boys.

Mamma's real good with men. She sees them most every night. Mostly Doris introduces her. Sometimes they're just men from the other rooms. Mamma usually goes out with them, but once in a while they come up to 14. Mamma gives me quarters to go play video games in the diner when this happens. I pocket the quarters and wander the parking lot, or else stand behind the dumpster, plugging my nose against the rotten eggs and the sweet honey ham, and try to peek in through the curtains flapping in the open window. One time, Mamma hadn't closed the curtains all the way. I watched the man in the blue-gray flannel shirt kissing on her, begging her, giving her money, but she was just smiling and backing away. She backed all the way around the bed, and looked out the window, right at me. She hurried to the window and reached for the curtains, but just before she pulled them shut, she gave me a look. It wasn't an angry or mad look for trying to watch, just a little sad, or embarrassed maybe. The way she gets when a school friend's mom insists on visiting with her in 14. I don't know why. I'm the one who's lousy with boys. She's great with them.

After her men leave, Mamma hollers at me to come back to 14. I like nights when my mamma's men come by. Those are the nights that she always holds me. She holds me close and strokes my hair and sings to me and she's a good mamma. She's the kind of mamma I'm going to be one day.

Marcel Hill

The Coconut Tree

Characters:

BOY

BIRD

ANOTHER MAN

MAN 1

MAN 2

WOMAN

Lights up.

A BOY stands under a coconut tree with a BIRD in a cage. The BIRD sings. ANOTHER MAN stands stage left playing an African drum.

BOY: Sad I stand in the midst of those who have made a decision I would look better swinging from a coconut tree.

(BIRD. Beat.)

BOY *(Cont'd):* Thoughts?

(Beat.)

It's hot.

(Beat. The BOY looks in the cage at the BIRD.)

I love black birds. Black bird, please sing for me.

(BIRD.)

BOY *(Cont'd):* What to do as I

look up at this tree, for I would want but nothing to have a coconut from it.

(Beat.)

Once I'm gone, I probably won't be missed.

(The BOY looks up at the coconut.)

So, one taste of coconut juice is all I want.

(Beat. BIRD.)

BOY *(Cont'd):* Please, one taste of coconut juice is all I want. Sing, caged bird. Please, sing for me. Tell me how I can get coconut juice from this coconut tree.

(The BOY looks up at the coconut tree.)

How? Oh, please tell me how...I can get a coconut down from this tree, I'd like to know how.

(TWO MEN enter. One holds a cigarette in his hand.)

MAN 1: Do you have a lighter?

MAN 2: Of course I have a lighter. You know I have a lighter.

MAN 1: Well?

MAN 2: Well, what?

MAN 1: Can I borrow it?

MAN 2: What? My lighter?

MAN 1: Yes, your lighter.

BOY: Excuse me?

MAN 2: No. It's my lighter.

(Beat.)

Besides, how do you know I don't want to smoke too.

MAN 1: Because I'm the one asking you for a lighter.

MAN 2: Do you have an extra one?

MAN 1: An extra what?

MAN 2: One of those...a cigarette.

MAN 1: If I can use your lighter.

(Beat. MAN 2 thinks.)

MAN 2: Fine.

(He takes out his lighter. He tries to light the cigarette, but the lighter won't catch.)

I don't know what's wrong with it.

BOY: Excuse me.

(Beat.)

MAN 1: What?

MAN 2: He's selling a bird. Tell him we don't want it.

MAN 1: No, I'm not going to tell him we don't want it. You tell him we don't want it. You're standing right here. You're standing closer, tell him we don't want it.

MAN 2: I'm not going to tell him we don't want it. You're the one who wants me to tell him we don't want it. You tell him we don't want it.

(BIRD.)

BOY: It's not for sale.

MAN 1: What's not for sale?

BOY: The bird.

(Beat.)

I need your help getting down a coconut from this tree.

MAN 2: Won't happen. I won't help you kill me by having us help you get a coconut from that

tree.

MAN 1: Are you wearing my sweater?

MAN 2: Am I what?

MAN 1: I said, are you wearing my sweater.

BOY: Excuse me?

MAN 2: No.

MAN 1: Yes. Yes, you are, you're wearing my sweater.

(MAN 1 smells MAN 2's armpit.)

MAN 1 (Cont'd): It smells like me.

MAN 2: No, it doesn't, it smells like me.

MAN 1: No, it doesn't.

BOY: Excuse me?

MAN 1&2: What?

BOY: This bird has been singing for days trying to help me figure out the ways to get up there and get that coconut from that tree. Oh, how unfair it would be if my neck was breaking as I flew from a rope in mid-air without the sweet taste of coconut juice.

(Beat. BIRD.)

BOY (Cont'd): It just wouldn't be fair.

MAN 1&2: We're not helping you get up there.

(MAN 1 grabs the lighter from the other man's hand and lights his cigarette.)

MAN 1: Come on, let's go.

MAN 2: Who, me?

MAN 1: Yes, you. Who else am I talking to?

MAN 2: Give me back my lighter.

(They exit arguing.)

BOY: Please, one taste of coconut juice is all I want. Sing, caged bird. Please sing for me. Tell me how I can get coconut juice from this coconut tree.

(The BOY sees two boxes off to the left.)

Two boxes?

(Beat.)

Two boxes?

(Beat.)

Two boxes. Yes, two boxes.

(BIRD.)

BOY *(Cont'd):* You're right. I'll use two boxes left without care to help me get a coconut down from mid-air.

(The BOY sets the cage down. He walks over to the boxes and picks them up. He stacks the boxes next to the tree. He wipes off his hands.)

BOY *(Cont'd):* That's, that.

(He stands on the boxes and tries to get a coconut. He is unsuccessful. He puts the cage on top of the boxes and tries again. He is unsuccessful again.)

BOY *(Cont'd):* Two boxes.

(Beat.)

A bird cage.

(Beat.)

Me?

(Beat.)

A man. A woman. No...man, moments of a man. A caged bird, two boxes, and me?

(BIRD.)

BOY *(Cont'd):* I like to think my heart will lead to light. Yet, I discern coming dishonor.

(A very large WOMAN enters, a man dressed in women's clothing to be exact. She's reading a poem out loud from a book by Ntozake Shange.¹)

WOMAN: "dark phrases of womanhood of never havin been a girl..."

BOY: Excuse me.

WOMAN: "the melody-less-ness of him turned her ²

(Beat.)

don't tell nobody
don't tell a soul"

BOY: Excuse me?

WOMAN: "this must be the spook house"

(She stops reading.)

BOY: The what?

WOMAN: Spook house—
"another song with no singers

(Beat.)

interrupted solos
unseen performances"

BOY: This is no stage. I stand here ready to swing from this coconut tree today.

WOMAN: "are we ghouls?
children of horror?"

PRISCILLA WILLIAMS

THE FALL OF WINTER MOON

(Love)

No one in her village asked her if she wanted to go. For days, the ancient chiefs in her *otonwanhe* talked in solemn tones and with heavy sighs. At last it was determined, and the little girl was handed over to the missionaries who came across the yellow prairie, their black leather Bibles tucked underneath their arms.

She was a tiny little girl, and her soft black hair floated lightly in the breeze like a butterfly—*kimimila*. Her skin was the warm color of the clay pots that her mother made and set to dry underneath the yellow sun, and her dark charcoal eyes sparkled like agate stones. The missionaries did not notice the girl's dark radiant eyes, or anything else distinctively becoming about the child. To them she was just a savage. No different from all the other heathen children whom they placed in heaps into the old wagon. The girl was stored away in the sharp corner of the wagon wrapped in a multi-colored *tasina* woven by her mother. The girl did not know precisely where she was traveling, or why the women of her *otonwanhe* watered the earth with their tears. The only desire of her small heart was to feel her mother's arms around her.

"You will return to me, my daughter," her *Ina* said to her in Lakota, "after many seasons and winter moons." The girl waved farewell to her *Ina* from the rear of the rugged wagon. Salty tears blazed a trail down the girl's earth-toned cheek and fell softly upon the prairie. "*Tok-sha ake wacin-yuank-tin k-telo*," her mother's trembling lips whispered. "I shall see you again."

(Growth)

One bright November morning a solitary wagon sailed over the billowing prairie laden with travelers. Among the host of travelers was the savage girl. She sat in the furthest corner of the old wagon with several other scholars from school. She—like the other children—was going home. The girl had matured beautifully over the years and, at the age of twelve, possessed the sophisticated air of a delicate young woman. There was no trace in her eyes of that wild child who used to tear holes in her pink pinafores. Her silk black hair was tied up in a bun and her smooth cinnamon hands rested upon her cheek. She sat solemnly in the rear of the wagon wrapped in a lovely pioneer quilt. She was rather proud of her quilt, and remembered with such painstaking exactness stitching the floral patches together in sewing class. An exquisite piece of creativity and precision, her teacher called it. She touched the fabric, and gently ran her hands over the shy pink, honeydew yellow, forget-me-not blue, and baby-breath white.

Her other *tasina*—the one woven by her mother—was gone. Stripped away from her upon her arrival at the Brethren Boarding School for Native Children eight years ago, and tossed into a pile of pagan relics.

“In this school,” the headmistress said sternly, “you will learn to sew quilts after the fashion of our dear ancestors who came across the Atlantic to this blessed continent.” The girl stared at the woman whose tan hands peeking through her lace cuffs betrayed her true blood. She did not understand the headmistress’ words, but she felt a lump as sore as vinegar rise in her throat.

(Strength)

An abrupt halt awoke Esther. The wagon was parked near a store in a wind-swept town.

“We’re a bit lost,” the driver said to the children. “I’ll ask the merchant which road leads to the reservation.” The driver jumped out of the wagon and entered the store. Esther’s eyes followed the driver wearily.

She was in no special hurry to reach the reservation. She had seen in dusty history books images of Indian villages and nude women with tattoos scrawled about their face and arms. She shuddered. Her mind began to play in silent scenes images of the eight years she had spent at school.

Esther saw herself in hazy hues as a tiny child kneeling beside her bed. In the beginning she had tried for her mother's sake to remember to say her Lakota prayers at night, but soon found that verses of Mary's Little Lamb intertwined among the sacred words. Want of practice, she told herself, but what it really meant was that she no longer remembered. Her cartoons of tee-pees soon morphed into stately images of squared homes with gardens, and she could not recall if "Yankee Doodle" had been one of her mother's lullabies. Her teachers smiled at her progress. She smiled too. They called her Esther. Her given name was *Waniyetu Wi*, but this was a pagan relic too.

Esther's attention was soon drawn towards a group of schoolboys. Their rowdy shrieks and devilish ditties rang loudly through the windswept town. Esther watched the boys curiously. The main source of their delight involved hurling arrowheads at an orange kitten. Their amusement in the kitten ceased—quite abruptly—when they saw the Injun children piled in the wagon. The sight of the native children sparked in them an instinctive surge of contempt and malice. The boys surrounded the wagon like a flock of geese and began to squawk:

"Injuns! Injuns! Your feet are all bare. You eat human flesh, and you do not comb your hair!" The boys pantomimed in grotesque contortions a mock native dance. When the driver returned, the boys retreated, whooping and shouting like a band of Indian braves. Esther's face burned bright red. She clinched her teeth and pressed her lips together. She was not an Injun. She was no more Indian than the boys who teased her.

(November, the return of winter moon)

The tiny children of the reservation were the first to spot the wagon coming down the path. They ran out along the muddy road with ashy bare feet and grizzly gray dogs to greet the new arrivals. "Hau! Hau!" the village children shouted. Women with fat babies on their hips rejoiced and shouted, "Ey-hee, Ey-hee! Wakan-heja! Alas, alas! Our children have

returned!” Esther winced at the sight of the children. Their coarse brown clothes were either a size too big or a size too small. Her own pink bonnet and blue dress set off quite a superior contrast between herself and the barefoot children.

She suddenly felt like poor Gulliver waking up in a strange and primitive land, and the feeling made her wrap herself more securely within the folds of her quilt. She noticed a woman with tears in her eyes standing anxiously in the center of the village. The woman wore no shoes. Her long black hair floated in the breeze like a *kimimila*, and a tattered government blanket served as her shawl. Esther sat motionless in the wagon. The woman’s hair and eyes were painfully familiar. The woman raced to the edge of the wagon, but Esther hid her face behind her quilt.

“You do not recognize your *Ina*?” the woman said gently. Her mother’s face shone brightly upon her daughter. “You have become such a young lady,” she said, and touched the soft curls underneath her daughter’s pink bonnet. Esther reluctantly arose and embraced her mother. She smelled strongly of wood smoke and ashes. The smell repulsed Esther. Everything about the village was repulsive: from the unpainted dwarf-like cottages to the way the women bathed their babies in buckets in plain view of their neighbors. Esther’s mother walked with her head held high as she led her daughter into her cottage, but Esther trailed behind. The tiny cottage that her mother led her into made Esther shudder. The floor was damp naked earth, and yellow tattered newspapers served as wallpaper. Esther cringed. She stood wide-eyed and fish-mouthed in the center of the one-room cottage.

The expression on Esther’s face made her mother blush. Her mother said something softly to her in Lakota, but her daughter did not reply. She tried again, but Esther only shook her head. They stared at each other for a moment that seemed like a thousand harvests.

“D-Did you make that quilt at school?” her mother asked by way of breaking the silence. Her mother noticed the pioneer quilt that Esther held tightly in her arms. Esther nodded and carefully unfolded the quilt for her mother.

“Wonderful,” her mother exclaimed and ran her hands over the plush material. A gray streak appeared on the quilt where her mother’s

hands had touched the fabric. Esther and her mother gasped.

"Oh, I forgot," her mother exclaimed, "I cleaned the ashes from the fire and my hands are dirty." Esther snatched her quilt away from her mother's tainted hands, and stared at the ugly gray streak. Her blood boiled hot and her whole body quaked.

"Stupid, stupid savage!" she spat out. Her mother took a step back. Esther looked at her mother's ashy bare feet and long unpinned hair. Her mother was an Injun. No different from the savages that she had seen in history books. The bitterness mingled in her throat like acid and erupted in a venomous spew, "Injun! Injun! Your feet are all bare. You eat human flesh, and you do not comb your hair!" Her mother placed her trembling hands over her heart. Was this the education the missionaries had promised? A dewy mist arose in her eyes. It was too late to go back now. Too late to change her mind.

"*Waniyetu Wi?*" her voice trembled. "It is I...your *Ina*."

"My name is not *Waniyetu Wi!*" the girl shouted. "My name is Esther and you aren't my mother!" The girl tried to fight back her rising emotions by gritting her teeth and pressing her lips together. "*Waniyetu Wi*," her mother said softly.

"No," the girl shouted, and turned her back to her mother. Across the room on the tattered wall hung a broken mirror. Esther was startled to see her reflection staring back at her. Dimly she could see her mother's face reflected in the mirror too. One face was still untouched by time, and the other with Ages' wisdom written in the lines. Esther's charcoal eyes and her mother's charcoal eyes both shined in the mirror. "*Waniyetu Wi*," her mother whispered, "*my Waniyetu Wi*." Esther buried her face within the soiled folds of her quilt and wept.

"Tomorrow," her mother said, stroking her hair, "I will teach you to weave a Lakota *tasina*."

Tamara Grippi

At the Back of the Church

74

So this is where I belong—standing
in the back of the church. I suppose
I'm still following the Mass schedule
from twenty years ago. And here I am,
fifteen minutes late. The priest
can see me now—there is no quick
exit. But as I settle in amongst my fellow
stragglers, I feel more at home.
The other back-standers make me
welcome in their midst—
the spiky-haired woman with her son,
and others managing young ones.
Solitary souls find company here.
I realize my true place
is amidst the unworthy.
It's all out in the open. I'm not
even trying to belong
to the people of God
sitting in the pews.

Kris Huelgas

Ask Me Not

When you ask me where stars are born,
I'll take the bow out of your smile
and fold a boat to traverse your gaze,
and when I start to sink, I'll dip my hand
and pull out the moon and shooting comets
and all the constellations; little white rocks,
hot to the touch and strung together
with little white cords, like celestial
jump ropes.

When you ask me where music comes from,
I'll put my hand to your breast and push
and dig a hole out,
and the shockwaves that bleed out
will push me down,
travel in rings that flow up and down like dancing snakes,
that bloom flowers and knock the leaves out of trees
and make them twirl like yellow saw blades that'll cut
our noses when we inhale,
and our lips when we hum.

When you ask me, "Why are we,"
I'll pull the hills out of your back
so we can stand on top of them
and when you start to doze off,
I'll wake you, so that you can
see where the blue goes
when the sky blazes orange and
the sun sets over your shoulder
and every color goes to sleep;
so that we can watch,
and tell the difference.



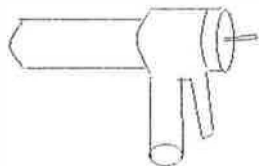
The Final Writings of Dante Rhoden

with so many different moons, I can't recall why I left. There was always something for me and my crew to do or see whenever we had time off from a job, even if that wasn't very often. I'll always remember the train job we pulled on the Lunadar Express. I've done plenty of the opposite, but I never thought I would jump from a moving train onto a horse.

Journal Entry 157

Every time I look out at the sky from the pilot's deck, my feet up on the NAV screen, I feel a sense of insignificance. Like now, I'm staring at a star cluster that resembles my home back on Tetrion the day I left. And looking back, journals 47, 75, 96, 103, 121, 134, and 148 have parts where a planet or a cluster remind me of events in my life. The further I get out into the Black, the more the terrain reminds me of what I'm leaving behind.

A few hours ago the catalyzer for the compression coil was giving me grief. I knew I should have picked up an extra catalyzer



for the port compression coil when I had the chance. I could have easily talked the guy down from the deep price of 650 creds to at least half. But all that is at about a lunar cycle too far now.

Life support and gravitation still functioning. We'll see how long the AGT lasts.

Journal Entry 158

The engine room sparked. It was a small fire, not too much damage. Still spooked the daylights out of me though. I don't like fire. The wiring went haywire and now there's no power. I can't go on the cortex to find out how to re-wire it because there isn't any power, so I'm stuck with basic to try to fix the problem. Plus, I'll have to wait until I pass by this crater that's blocking a star. After that, I can use the solar energy for some portable lights for the engine room. It's times like these that I'm glad I'm keeping a written journal. I don't need to rely on power to keep my travel up to date. The only problem is that I'll soon run out of paper and ink.

A lifetime ago my parents gave me a tattered

notebook for my birthday. Since then, I've gathered a wide arrangement of notebooks, ranging from leather-bound to slightly spoiled. Paper and ink has become harder and harder to locate on the back-water planets. I left my collection and a stack of unused notebooks in my room back on Tetrion.

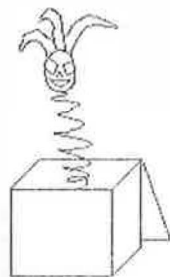
Journal Entry 159

I have wiring jutting out from all corners and mechs in the engine room. It's a blaze ready to blow my boat. I really don't like fire.

Journal Entry 160

I've torn out a few pages at the end of this notebook and cut them into 3x5 inch rectangles. It took a while longer than I thought it would, but I finally have 54 of them. I'm not much of an artist, but even I could draw clubs, spades, diamonds,

JOKER



and hearts onto these make-shift cards. The joker took the longest. But at least now I can play Solitaire, Ace under the Bridge, build a stack or two of houses, and learn magic tricks. This should waste some of the countless hours of my time.

Journal Entry 161

I've noticed a speck on the horizon, a tiny oversight a few sleep cycles ago. It's like nothing I've ever seen in the hundreds of terabytes in the datapack. It reminds me of a black hole, only white. Where a black hole is the lack of all light, something lying beyond the darkness that is so heavy it's able to pull light toward it, this hole seems to be made of only light, but it's not a star because it's not the right shape. It could be the opposite of a black hole, ~~driving~~ repelling objects away from it with enough force that even light is shot away at faster than its usual speed. This could be the reason for its incredible brightness. If that is the case though, then I could launch myself from this point and be able to see things that have already happened.

I would need a pretty powerful telescope though.

I've changed my heading, traveling as far away from the 'white hole' as possible. It'll take me back a few cycles of O_2 , but I want to know what I'm dealing with.

Oxygen is still going strong, but I'm cutting through my rations rather quickly. I think I have another crate in the hold somewhere. Need to check sometime soon.

Journal Entry 162

I filled the container of "food" in the dining hall and now I have an extra crate on my boat. I've already begun to take it apart, and found that one of the pieces is made from a long, thin piece of metal. I've found an old bucket and some string in other crates, and can't wait to put this baby together. I know a few ditties I picked up from Lunadar and Tetrion. I might be able to get it in tune too. One of the songs, "Above the Atmo," is only made up of A, G, D, and E chords. Shouldn't be too hard to pick back up.

Journal Entry 163

I can't sleep. I'm usually on a pretty constant sleep cycle, able to keep in check with Tetrion's 18-hour days, but now I can feel my body ~~powering~~ ~~down~~ giving up and yet unwilling to doze off. I've checked the oxygen levels in the plant room, checked the coolant, the NAV sac, the datapack, cleared the fire hazard from the engine room, and scrubbed every corner of this boat. Twice. Now that I've lost whatever stored energy that has been keeping me going, I feel drugged and ~~dead~~ sluggish, unable to accomplish even the most menial of tasks. I can barely see out of the slits in my eyes, and yet I just can't snooze. It feels almost like I'm in third person, like I can see myself writing in this journal from afar. Like I am a ~~reader~~ narrator that has no control over my actions, the character walks and talks on its own. It's hard to express exactly what I mean in words, but I'm sticking with the third person ~~thing~~ idea. That one seems right. I need some sleep. Or someone to talk to.

Journal Entry 164

I had a dirt nap a bit ago. Would still be asleep if I hadn't splattered my bowl all over the floor of the deck. I'm down to only a couple now. If I keep breaking them, I'm going to have to get make-shift ones out of a watering can or some other ~~thing~~ liquid holding object. I can't even think straight. If and when I head back to the inner planets, I should think about stopping at an outpost to load up on some supplies. You can only stomach gruel for so long. It's starting to taste bland. I don't know how to react to that, whether that's a good sign or not. The 'white hole' has gotten bigger. I need to check out the NAV later to run a diagnostic, see if I'm floating toward the thing, or if it's just larger than it looks from wherever the hell I am.

I also couldn't get my make-shift guitar to work, and I keep losing or ruining so many of the cards that it's just not worth it to keep up with creating new ones.

Journal Entry 165

I haven't been this bored since a cycle I spent on Whitewater with my uncle. I just finished training and didn't know what to do with my life, so I took the first job available to me. Caught a freight from Tetrion. Three days later I was on my uncle's farm, learning how to take care of the land and how to fix a busted generator. I also got some practice at horse riding and learned how to play ~~Fimbets~~ Timbles on the weekends. Timbles is a local card game known for its lack of morals and its stupidity. Then again, it's only as stupid as those who play it, but it's usually only played at dive bars.

Anyway, I was on that rock for almost a solar cycle when I tore a knee. Bedridden for I don't even remember how long. Stuck in an unwashed cot in the middle of nowhere with nothing to entertain myself. I think I ended up letting my nails grow long enough so I could get a few inches worth and use them to literally split my hairs. I moved onto twine and string, but I couldn't get them through rope. I don't have rope this time, but I've been messing

with some of the hardware in the galley. I've almost fixed a busted vitrolade I brought with me. The damn thing won't hum.

Journal Entry 166

I think today is my birthday. Without a set clock though, the use of time is almost non-existent. I know time is passing, because it changes from one moment to the next, and yet how am I to judge such a thing? I've been living on so many worlds that I can't be too sure as to what clock system I'm running on. It's difficult to tell without a star to rotate around. And even if it's not my day, and somehow the remembrance of the time I was not aborted has already happened, who cares if I celebrate it when I want? I'm the only one who's here to remember, so why the hell not?

Journal Entry 167

I lost a couple plants. I don't know how, but I completely forgot to water each of them daily. I was able to save a dozen or so, the cactus and grass were easily managed by saying caring, supportive things, but one of the ferns and a ficus weren't so lucky. The dead plants remind me of my home on Tetrion. I think I'm going to turn the automated watering system back on. Most of the organisms are accounted for, still doing what they're doing, and the O_2 readings are at a normal level. Times like these I'm glad that I helped my uncle on his farm for a spell.

Journal Entry 168

I'm still heading toward the 'white hole'. I've checked the NAVSAC and the guiding system, nothing wrong with either. I'm starting to think that maybe this object is pulling me toward it, but that would totally disprove my backwards black hole theory. I'm going to head back, see if I can get away from this thing before I don't have the choice ~~to~~ for

escape.

I'm still thinking about time, and how meaningless it is out here. I keep wanting to write days or months, but without a clock set to some sort of light-giving object, how can I relate time to a day. There's also nothing in this boat to serve as a measurement. I thought I could use the circular motion of the engine, but it's like a heartbeat, sometimes it flickers, speeds up or stops entirely, depending on the ship. Then again, maybe I don't need time. I have so much of it already, why bother trying to measure it. The only reason I can think of is so that I can waste all this excess time out here before needing to return home. Home. I wonder what's become of it.

Journal Entry 169

I was able to backtrack away from the 'white hole', disputing my previous theory. The thing has become noticeably smaller, and I'm not pumping any extra cell juice to get away from it. I just don't know why I haven't passed by the thing yet. I'm

turning this baby around, heading back toward the thing. From what the datapad is telling me, I've been a little more than a cataran from known space. I've been keeping the datapad up to date, although I haven't mentioned the 'white hole'. I'm also starting to dig the name. Pretty shiny. In a few more sleep cycles, when I get close enough to study it as I pass from half a cataran away, I'll jot down some of the details.

It was the wanting to find something of this sort that got me on this boat. Now that that 'day' (an old saying from First-Earth) has finally come, I don't know what manner of action I can do that will keep my mind from getting over-excited.

Journal Entry 170

I'm passing by an asteroid that looks like Kunis. All the damage done to the face of the asteroid resembles the terrain as you enter through atmo. I remember going to Kunis after the fire on my home world. The thing about Kunis is that no one cares who you are or where you came from. Place is filled with

dive bars and sex. ~~Darkest place to find yourself.~~
It's not as terrible as I'm making it out to be.
There were some good people that got me through
after I left Tetrion. It also had its share of trash.
But this is where I ran into Codie and Astrid after
my first heist, a roll of bread from a street vendor.
I got pinched by the dealer when I tried to run; he
grabbed me by the shirt tail, cursing to whatever god
he believed in, when Codie stepped onto the scene to
bail me out. I don't know where he got the money,
probably from another heist, but he paid the man
and he brought me around an alley. I was so
shocked that a kid my age aided one of his own.
After a few wordless seconds, Astrid appeared carrying
the score to their plan, a bag of apples and three
loaves of bread. I was happy to be a part of their
plan.

After we managed to trust each other, we became
the best crew in that district. But as the crops rotated,
I wanted more and more to find a better rock to
call home. After some speech, they decided to come
with me. You can only rob so many people before

one of them gets a good look at ya. We hopped the first freight to Lunadar as soon as we had the creds.

Journal Entry 171

I had a dream about those final days on Tetrion. In it, the moon above our house began to trickle blood from each crater. The droplets fell towards Tetrion, creating a foundation in red liquid. The fluid came down in larger drops, crashing down on the foundation like sleet. My childhood home began to come into focus. The dark red hue seemed to vibrate, and then the familiar brown tint surfaced. I meandered my way to the front door, passing by ferns my dad had planted with his father. When I reached the door though, I wasn't sure if I should knock or just let myself in. My tiny fist moved to the wood before I realized I was already inside.

I took my time looking around, remembering what I thought were feasts of chicken and potatoes in the kitchen, the stories of my father's younger years in the main room, and my space expeditions in

the closet. I reached my parents bedroom after scaling the stairs, but found them fast asleep in each other's arms. I continued down the hall toward my room.

It was then that I noticed the smell of gas and the glitter of some sort of liquid on the walls of the house. I covered my nose with my hand. The lights went out, power failings were never scarce in my house. I reached for my lighter, flicking it on with a quick stroke. I dropped the lighter, the flame zipping wildly around. I ran to my bedroom, covering my nose from the smoke. My space began to melt, forming puddles on the floor. I could swear they looked red. The blaze licked at me from the bottom of the door. I jumped out from the second story before the structure returned to blood. I woke up massaging the thin trail of scars on my forearms that the glass from my bedroom gave me.

Journal Entry 172

I'm getting closer to the 'white hole'. It's been

many cycles and the thing has not moved from its location. It hasn't even ~~started~~ begun to circle round the ship. This thing cannot possibly be this big. The reading I sent out says that it's less than a cataran away, and it's already the size of a bowl from this distance. I can't believe something like this has been out here for so long. I'm going to give it a few more cycles before I form another theory about this thing.

Journal Entry 173

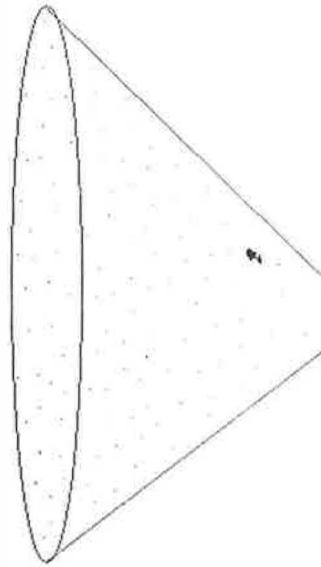
Still hasn't moved. I think I have an idea about this thing. It never leaves the ships peripheral, and it never stops getting any bigger, yet when I move back the way I came, I can see that it gets smaller. There are also fewer stars out this way, like there's not much left out here. I think I may be moving toward it, even though it's not pulling me, and that this is it, the end of the line.

Back on First-Earth, there were stories about how the folk thought that the planet was flat, a bottomless trench at the edge. Maybe the universe

is too. The datapacks say it's limitless, ever expanding, but no one's ever been to the fringes. Maybe the stars and planets keep drifting off into the unknown, but the universe stays intact. Everything goes right into this white hole and out somewhere else. And if this is the case, then I'm sure that there is another one on the other side of the universe, doing the exact same job.

Journal Entry 174

I'm almost there. It's a stone's throw away, maybe two sleep cycles, and I can start to see something moving beyond the 'white hole'. It took a while to get used to the brightness when most everything else is black, but from this vantage there is definitely something beyond the hole. Things that are even larger than the object itself. I first thought that my eyes were playing games with my head, shutting off the light for a



split second, but I've made some video recordings of them and when slowed down, you can just barely make out the blurry objects whiz by the opening. I can't wait to see what lies ~~beyond~~ within this 'white hole'.

Journal Entry 175

I'm approaching the object, and don't know how to explain what it is I'm seeing. It's like all the stuff that makes up a galaxy (stars, planets, white dwarfs, asteroids), when it comes to this place, it seems to mold into a new substance and vanish beyond the hole. The only thing I can relate it to is earwax. It has the same texture anyways, but it's more of a pale white than green. I'm going to keep my distance, in case I somehow turn into the same material.

Journal Entry 176

I've seen it, what lies beyond our universe, and it bests anything that I could have imagined. However insignificant I think I may be, it is nowhere near

how trivial I actually am. I'm like a grain of sand compared to the universe, or a wink next to all of time.

And here I find myself at an impasse. There's nothing really left for me in the central planets but some creds with this new data about the universe. On the other hand, I don't know if I'll turn into wax when I pass through this gateway to this other realm.

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- > Travel through the Universe, stopping at many of the same planets as Gregory Cosmos
- > Be trained like a real white dwarf team member under the command of Capt. Jonathan Williams (certificates included)
- > Capture renegades and rogues as you learn about Corse Anders and his many successful captures aboard the *Octavian*
- > And many more!

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The Dante Rhoden Experience

WHO WAS DANTE RHODEN?



The only known Picture of Dante

The historical writings of Dante Rhoden are legendary. He is a fore-founder of our world, bringing us technology with which we can now travel through space. On this exciting and educating tour, we will show you the planets that he describes in great detail, as well as providing full-scale holo models of his ship, the *Acumen*.

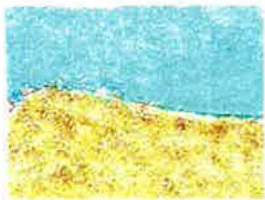
Tour Package Includes:

- ✓ 3-day, 4-night tour aboard the *Behemoth*, complete with full buffet served all cycle and pool table
- ✓ Scale Holo Model of the *Acumen*
- ✓ Blueprints of the *Acumen*
- ✓ Dante's Full Health Records
- ✓ Select excerpts of Dante's Journal
- ✓ Visit the 4 key locations mentioned in his Historic Journal
- ✓ Complementary blank Journal, just like Dante's

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FLY WITH US ON YOUR
THREE-DAY AND FOUR-
NIGHT ADVENTURE TO FAR
OFF PLACES LIKE:



WHITEWATER

*"Three days later I was on my
uncle's farm, learning how to take
care of the land and how to fix a
busted generator..."*

The planet where Dante
worked on his uncle's farm
for those few cycles. Get
down and dirty as you work
side by side with real farmers,
learning the basics of farm
life. Learn great secrets of
the trade so that you too
can plant and grow your
very own vegetation.

KEINIS

*"The thing about Keinis is that no
one cares who you are or where
you came from..."*



Before Renovation

Visit the now renovated world
of sex and debauchery. Bars
and stores that Dante frequented
will be pointed out. Visit the
Twin Tiers Complex, where
Dante slept and picked writing
back up (passages will be
read). Find out where Codie
and Astrid met Dante and
planned their first heist!

*"I couldn't believe everything that I
learned on this tour. The staff was
friendly, the sights were amazing, and
the experience was unforgettable.
Thank you Galaxy Tours!!*

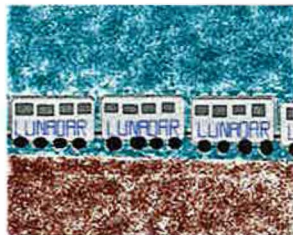
— Joshua Chisholm, Real Customer

*Traveling with Galaxy Tours was
the best thing I ever did for myself.
They took care of all the details,
and I had all the fun! It was an
experience I'll always treasure.*

Thank you Galaxy Tours!!

*— Jenni Keim, Real
Galaxy Tours Customer*

LUNADAR



*"I'll remember the train job we
pulled on the Lunadar Express..."*

Ride the Lunadar Express, the
same freight that Dante
robbed with his companions.
See the office where Dante
took his job to research the
universe. Fill out the paperwork
(will be provided for you) so
that you too can explore
unknown parts of this galaxy.



TETRIION

*"I can't sleep. I'm usually on a
pretty constant sleep cycle, able to
keep in check with Tetricion's 18-hour
days..."*

Dante's home world and
ending planet of your journey.
Visit the rubble of his home
and walk through the concrete
foundation that he grew up
in. Visit the graves of his parents
as we help you theorize if he
really burned down his house.
Travel the streets that he did,
shopping at the same antique
boutiques and even eat
at his favorite restaurant,
The Blue Ratchet.

**CLIMB ABOARD WITH US
TODAY!**

Jeffrey C. Alfier

Train Station, Benson, Arizona, Year Unknown

Behind a smoky and faded window
the stationmaster endures like envy,
surveys rail cars against summer's night sky.
Air's so candent even a kiss could warp.

In that apparitional semi-dark,
he sees a woman straining with luggage—
a traveler's ritual of burden.
Despite the conductor's merciless clock
he makes time to heft her bags to porters.

This woman, whose age you can't quite resolve,
becomes the last person to board your coach.
Unsure if she embarked alone, you watch
as a stranger helps her remove her coat.
Settling in an aisle seat, she smiles her thanks.

Now you see appear what must be her son.
To the stranger, who resumed his silence,
she claims boys easier to raise than girls,
as the boy rifles through a homemade lunch
in what strikes you as unnamed urgency.

Trundling north, the train pauses at stations
where no one gets off, none on the platforms
to even deny that your train is theirs,
no stop empty enough to need your name.

Leo Castaneda

Between
the
Spectrum

100

I followed the happy ghost on the wagon,
over the crimson hill, to the last valley
of Colorado. There were no castles in the air,
no wind for my lonely kite. Just trees
that waited patiently for the secretive sunset.
The shades of fog clung to the Acacias and every
droplet on the floor held its shape
under my soles. There was a tradition
in the violet constellation that held my philosophies.
And the red fox went through the silences
looking for advice. The walnuts on the abandoned yellow lines
echoed the signs of the hills, the hymns,
the hallucinations of the night. No rules. No seconds.
Just the liquid light from the horizon
and a story on the glass.
I left and I never went back.

LORETTA MCCORMICK

A PHARAOH'S HIGH REGARD

“Military body bags are the best,” I remember you telling us in between long, deep drags of Marlboro Reds. “The zippers don’t break, and they don’t leak,” you’d continue through a cloud of curling smoke, the tip of your cigarette growing into a long, cherry-red ember. It’s both repulsive and mesmerizing to watch you pull on your cigarette, reducing it to a charred filter in a few exaggerated breaths, then immediately lighting a new one with the remains of the smoldering butt. I know you smoke in direct defiance of your profession. I do too now.

Lately, my memory invokes your slow, deliberate tone and sardonic, biting humor. Oddly, the sound of your voice in my head—the voice that used to fill me with anxiety—now soothes me and lulls me into a calm. We were always listening, hanging on your every word, at first, because we believed everything you said. It was impossible for *our* father to be wrong. You have a way of appropriating trite colloquialisms with such authority that they become exclusively yours. “Children should be seen and not heard,” you’d intone before we went anywhere as a family. It didn’t upset me. I thought you had invented these sayings and was bitterly disappointed when I finally realized other people knew the same worn expressions.

Even the rigid sense of propriety that was expected from all of us didn't bother me. We weren't allowed to answer the phone with a mere "Hello?" Not your children. Instead, "Murphy residence, Liam speaking, who is this please?" But I was proud, even when girls I liked would prank call again and again, laughing on the other end of the line with their friends. Once, when I bravely pointed out that you didn't answer the phone like us, you warned, "Do as I say, not as I do."

You knew everything and we listened to it all. For a while. But later we listened, in search of the bait that would let loose an argument. Any mundane bit of information or opinion could trigger a feeding frenzy.

The five of us had been up early, watching cartoons on a weekday. Abigail, perched on the edge of the floral love seat, was braiding Bridget's waist-length hair. On the matching sofa next to them, I held the remote control—my birthright as the oldest. Meighan lay across my lap still half asleep and Aidan slurped up a bowl of Cheerios beside us, eyes glued to the animated images on the screen. I could feel your presence before the others realized you were in the next room putting together the final touches of somber and tucking away any lingering remnants of sarcasm before entering the grief of others.

"It's 9 a.m., why aren't my progeny at school?" you questioned in the direction of the living room as we lounged in front of the television.

Bridget's eyes pecked over our sister's bony knee to gauge my reaction but the rest of her remained on the brown shag carpet, enshrouded in Abigail's long arms and legs.

"It's Martin Luther King Day. We don't have school," I answered

without taking my eyes off the TV, fingering the remote control with false indifference.

“Martin Luther Thing was a commie,” you asserted from the dining room. I could see you without looking, huge in our immaculate house, dwarfing the shabby furniture. In my mind, I watched you lift your suit jacket from the back of a scuffed chair and pull it on. You walked into the living room in two long steps and all twenty of our lounging limbs instinctively came to attention. Abigail’s fingers stilled for a moment in Bridget’s hair as the two of them searched my face. Aidan froze mid-slurp, waiting to see if he’d get busted for eating in the living room, and Meighan sat up and squeezed my finger.

“Dad, he was an activist, fighting for human rights. I don’t think many people still argue that, unless they’re in the KKK,” I said and tossed the remote control to Aidan as he tried to set his bowl behind the couch, out of your view.

“He was a communist. I was there, you were not,” you lobbed back without much heat.

“You were where, Dad? Last time I checked, you grew up in Manhattan Beach, not fighting for social justice in the deep south.”

I was ready, completely alert.

“Good one, Liam,” Abigail chimed in. She was the only other one who didn’t mind a tongue-lashing. Bridget and Aidan never wanted to cross you and Meighan was too young.

“You and your limousine liberal sister know everything, right? Good thing I can pay the bills for your lefty education.”

“Stop fighting!” Mom finally shrieked from the kitchen. “I can’t take it anymore!” She came into the living room, all teary-eyed and pleading.

She didn’t get it. She still doesn’t get it. She’s not one of us,

being a Murphy through marriage and not blood. We weren't fighting; we were negotiating.

Twenty-eight months ago, I sat in the passenger seat of your Cadillac while you drove with your usual graceful recklessness, unsure why I had decided to accompany you on your Sunday morning ritual. As you swung into the designated blue handicapped space, rotating the steering wheel casually with one hand, I tried not to laugh. It really wasn't funny. It was embarrassing, pulling up like this to the crowded Sunday morning parking lot of a cheap diner. You didn't give a shit that all the parents with snotty kids, and ancient couples hunched together, impatiently waiting for a seat, could clearly see your total disregard for anyone's rules but your own. So, why did I want to laugh?

"Dad, you cannot park here," I said with heartfelt embarrassment and half-assed conviction. "This is handicapped. Just move the car, Dad. People are going to be pissed. You could get towed."

"I have a wife and five kids, I am handicapped," you boomed as you flicked your cigarette out the window and put the car in park.

You sat in that IHOP blue, pleather booth, looking across the cramped table at me with your familiar wince. "Military intelligence," you scoffed. "Doesn't exist." You delicately plucked a shriveled, twisted, greasy piece of bacon from a heaping plate with your thick fingers and tucked it into your mouth in one fluid movement. Your eyes scanned my face, looking for weakness as your nicotine-stained teeth rhythmically chewed the fatty gristle.

I'll admit, I was beginning to sweat, sitting in the booth at IHOP—my exposed skin uncomfortably sticking to the seat while you still looked cool in your black suit. Taking off your English

Stetson and your dark sunglasses and setting them on the space next to you, you turned your head this way and that to take in the scene and almost snickered.

“Talk about *element*,” you said, looking around the restaurant.

Per your instructions, the dilapidated waitress kept the plates of bacon, glasses of sticky, sweet, canned pineapple juice, and carafes of coffee coming. The little scoop of perfectly shaped butter served in the metal cup was not even close to adequate. Upon registering mild shock underneath her thick layer of makeup, the waitress brought your requested side plate heaping with little perfect scoops of butter balls. You methodically took a pancake, placed three balls of butter down the center and rolled it up like a burrito. I tried not to watch as you dipped your creation into the electric “blueberry” syrup.

“What the hell were you thinking?” you asked without waiting for a reply, but *why did you join* is what you really wanted to ask me.

“You won’t make it through boot camp,” you said, but *I forbid it* is what you really wanted to say.

When I’m trapped by fear or boredom, which is most of the time, I think of that day and realize I should have been laughing. You thought I was going against you. The truth is, I’ve always taken you too much to heart.

I think you should know that growing up in a mortuary is great preparation for the Marine Corps. But even here they ask me what it was like, if it was creepy. These guys, barely able to contain their joy at the thought of killing someone, want to know if it was creepy growing up in a mortuary. Like we all took breakfast in the embalming room and helped you pull fillings from some poor grandma’s head. You’d be pissed, but sometimes I make up stories.

Jarheads like horror stories, not fairy tales, so I let them imagine Vincent Price cackling in the background while organ music plays somewhere in the interior of a dark mausoleum. The cottage-like building with the stone façade and the circular stained-glass window above the entrance is not what they want to imagine. I save it for me. For me, the mortuary was a playground in the sprawling, oatmeal-bland of Orange County.

After Mom went back to work, she would pile us into the station wagon and drive us over to the mortuary. We always came in through the side entrance, through the door that was almost hidden by ivy covering the side of the building all the way to the peaked roof. Quietly, Mom would lead us upstairs until we knew if you were meeting with a family.

The apartment above the mortuary and chapel lacked the plush carpet and luxurious furnishings of the rest of the mortuary. It was spare and utilitarian—small, dorm-like kitchenette, black and white TV in front of an overstuffed orange couch, dingy bathroom with linoleum peeling up at the corners of the floor. But the smell of old carnations, stale cigarette smoke and something vaguely medicinal hung in the air upstairs and downstairs. I'd breathe in deeply until you came up to the little apartment.

If we were alone, we could roam throughout the building. We would tear downstairs, tripping over the plush, pale-blue carpet into the chapel. The rest of the mortuary seemed somewhat untouchable. There were four rooms reserved for bereaved family members making “arrangements” off a long hallway at the bottom of the stairs. A mahogany desk and several comfortable leather chairs filled each space and peaceful oil paintings of country landscapes were hung from the walls in an attempt at a soothing effect. To me, those paintings were the only creepy thing about the mortuary. I'd

lead my siblings, running down the middle of the hall to avoid breaking a vase on a hall table or smudging the walls, and avert my eyes from each room, focusing instead on the double doors of the chapel at the end of the hallway. The five of us spent countless summer afternoons playing hide-and-seek in the chapel, dodging each other and weaving across aisles, between pews, and daring each other into the cavernous echo of the embalming room while you were on the phone with coroners and florists. The broken, weeping faces we glimpsed from around the long hallway stole our playground and forced us into temporary silence. But the chapel left empty for too long created a vague current of fear that ran through our family. We built up our own world among eruptions of grieving to protect ourselves from the isolation.

In the Corps, isolation fuels boredom until shit talk and rumors become conversations. It never really lets up unless someone's trying to shoot your ass off. Somewhere between San Diego, California, and Agaba, Jordan, I lay in my coffin rack trying to find enough privacy to jack off as we cut through the ocean towards the only deep port in the Red Sea. After three weeks, most of us were fixated on our own throbbing tedium.

Some guys wrote letters to wives, girlfriends, moms...dads. Sometimes I thought about what I would say if I could have written you. Maybe I'd have told you about Dances With Cripples, always pacing back and forth across the length of my rack with an exaggerated limp. I'd have told you how he fucked up his ankle right out of School of Infantry training when he fell into a muddy hole as we trudged through the rain. I'd brag about how he taped it up and finished the hump without even limping (cuz we're Marines and we're that tough). In graphic detail, I'd explain how his ankle has

never been the same and how it occasionally flairs up, giving him a pained look of determination. You'd say his name out loud as you read my letter—Dances With Cripples. Long and slow, then the sly laugh. But it's been two years and I've never written you. You're not that kind of father, and I guess I'm not that kind of son. Instead I worked out in the bowels of the ship with the other Devil Dogs, snarling with anticipation all the way to the Fertile Crescent.

Did you know this sandy shit hole is actually a resort town? It's true. It's the Santa Monica of the Middle East, Laguna Beach for Arabs. They have glass-bottom boats that cruise above the coral reefs, snorkeling and scuba diving (I can hear you asking me how a woman can snorkel in a burkha and I almost laugh), beautiful hotels, and grand restaurants. This is what I've heard but I've never seen these things from the port.

Before they sent us to Iraq, we spent most of our time in a stink-filled animal warehouse. Waiting. Camels had been stored there for hundreds of years longer than America has existed. Believe me, you don't get the smell of camel off you for a long time. It's menacing, like everything else here. This brown, gritty place gets into every crevice—the smells burn your membranes, the wind cuts you like sandpaper, the heat bears down on you until the sun goes down. Then you freeze.

I was staring down the grim little dock attached to the warehouse, out past the briny water. From the edge of the dock, a panorama of ocean and desert spread out before me. Israel, Jordan and Egypt stood on the horizon, free from the invisible boundaries marked on maps and enforced on people. Strange that I was here and you weren't, how you always wanted to see the pyramids but were too afraid of some Habib strapping dynamite to his ass and blowing up

your tour bus. I was so caught up, I stopped wondering where they were going to send us. I caught a glimpse of *your land.*

A rare breeze lifted the palm leaves and I looked out past the sea to the birthplace of your profession. The ancient Nile that spawned a society of death worship and the beautiful, gleaming pyramids that attest to the might of those who handle the dead was somewhere out there beyond my vision. I was let down when Dances came up next to me and nudged me back to reality. In the distance, a sheik cut through the water in his high-powered speed boat, its sharp pointed head ripping the blue and turning it to foam. Further off, an oil tanker cruised by, unstoppable. I turned away from the glassy expanse of ocean to face him and told him we were going in.

A few of us gathered at the end of a low, ramshackle dock, stripped down to our regulation skivvies and dove in. An old man with a face wrinkled into a thousand emotions paddled by in a boat that looked like it had survived the Old Testament. He glanced and quickly looked away. The water was unpleasant—warm and almost metallic. Even so, I stayed under for as long as I could, letting the sea seep into my nose and ears, filling up my open mouth.

“See, Liam, they really knew how to honor the dead. Look, come here,” you said wistfully. Not just once or twice, but any time some PBS or history channel show came on about ancient Egypt, you would drag us into the living room and force us to watch the same specials again and again. “Once, we feasted with kings,” you intoned as Abby rolled her eyes and Bridget tried not to laugh. You would tell us how morticians were honored and respected, as you petted that vicious cat. “Only the most prestigious members

of society had cats, right Isis?" you crooned. The cat drew blood and you shoved it off the couch. "Now we're just ghouls." You don't even like cats.

For Christmas one year, we all pitched in and got you that VHS, something about the mummies of Egypt *Discovery* did. We thought you would love it. In your mind, the French anthropologists from the documentary were responsible for desecrating and raping the glorious tombs and artistry of the ancient morticians. I saw the shock and disappointment when you saw footage of people lining up to touch a sarcophagus—its beauty marred by thousands of generations of oily hands touching, slowly destroying the valor it represented. But when you saw that they replaced the eyes of many of the mummies with cornflower glass orbs, you turned off the cassette and threw it out.

"People are always trying to save a fish, or a frog or a fucking flamingo. What about history?" you asked with resigned sadness. I know you don't think so, but even when I was very young, I always understood your longing for a recognition of history. I take mine very seriously and keep it close.

The last time I let an outsider in on our history or showed someone how Murphys play, I was in fourth grade. We were all showing my buddy Manny how to play Funeral on the front yard lawn. Since he was new to the game, I let him be the altar boy, even though that was normally Abigail's role. She was pissed that she had to sit in the imaginary pews with the other mourners—Aidan and Bridget. As we somberly walked down the aisle (walkway to the front door), Abigail eyed the old chandelier that Manny was swinging like a censer. We had Meighan all laid out in her casket (two chairs pushed together). She was always "the deceased"; it

kept her quiet.

When I made it down the aisle, I turned to face my “parishioners” and lifted my arms to the heavens, adjusting the old terrycloth robe.

“Let us pray.”

The paper Burger King crown I was wearing began to slip off my head. Meighan giggled.

“Meg, you’re dead. If you want to play, you have to be serious. Otherwise we’ll do closed casket.”

Everyone began laughing and taunting each other until I yelled, “You guys! Shut up, it’s church,” and made them stand, sit, kneel, stand, sit, kneel to repent for their outburst.

Finally, our eyes closed as we sang out in unison, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowbethyname...” So, it wasn’t until Manny’s mom charged up the walkway and ripped off the old bed sheet acting as Manny’s altar boy clothes that we realized she was there.

“What in God’s name is going on here?”

I wanted to explain that we had permission to cut the hole in the bed sheet. That you had given us the old chandelier to use. That we always moved the lawn furniture back. Mom didn’t care and you thought it was hilarious. But the disgust in her eyes sealed my mouth shut.

“Where are your parents?”

Before I had time to answer, she had dragged Manny to the car. Mom laughed when we told her. But several of the moms who volunteered for yard duty kept their children away from us. After class, I could see them hovering near Manny’s mom, leaning in towards her with looks of morbid curiosity. With eyebrows raised, she would lower her megaphone and forget about the kids she was

supposed to be directing to minivans and station wagons.

“What scum. They’re leeches, making money off the misfortunes of others. And those kids...”

She paused to yell out a second grader’s name on the megaphone and waited until he ran to the sedan waiting to pick him up.

“...all five of them. They’re just weird, creepy children.” She knew we could hear her.

Mom lost her mind when we told her, but you looked so calm and told her that you would be bringing us home from school from now on. Every day for a month, I ran out of class with the other kids and saw you waiting for us in the parking lot, first car in a long line, smoking behind the wheel of the big black hearse, flicking your cigarette in plain view of horrified mothers.

CHRISTOPHER PRUITT

FIRST DATE

I never dated anybody prior to my junior year of high school. I refused. Not that there was any long line of suitors to chase away or anything, it's just that there would have been no point, really. We've all seen those terrible middle school relationships where people who didn't even like each other dated for a week and then broke up. I had no interest in that. I wanted something simple with somebody real, and I felt confident that I'd know the right girl when I saw her.

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I eventually did see her, sitting in the seat second from the right, third from the back in my US History class. She was there in that seat before the rest of the class even got in the door every day without fail. She was constantly staring off into space and rarely spoke; when she did, it was just to answer the instructor's questions in a breathless monotone accurately every time. Her hair was always pulled back behind her head, and she only wore huge outfits that totally obscured her seemingly slender figure. What wasn't hidden about her beauty, though, was her eyes: deep brown things so distant and so wise that they seemed to be taking in the whole universe at once. They never failed to melt me to nothing every time our gazes met.

Every day, this girl (whose name the teacher could never pronounce, so I hadn't learned it myself) ate by herself in the on-campus cafeteria,

at the end of a lonely corner table otherwise populated by misfits. I never saw anybody talking to her, and finally on one occasion I managed to work up the courage to do so myself. As I strode nervously to her position in the cafeteria, all of the advice I had gotten upon asking my friends about dealing with girls came back to me. *Just be yourself*, my parents had said, which seemed simple enough. *Tell her she smells good*, Michael had suggested, which struck me as vaguely creepy. *Be tough, women like men who don't take any crap*, Kevin had said, but as far as I was aware of he had never even spoken to a girl in his life.

I reached the table before I could figure out what to say, so I simply opened with, "Hi! I'm in your history class. Um...is it okay if I sit here?"

She did not look up from her sandwich. "Irrelevant. I cannot stop you," she replied.

So far, so good. "Why are you always sitting here by yourself? I can't imagine somebody as smart and pretty as you doesn't have any friends!"

"I am a highly sophisticated organic combat android temporarily stationed here undercover. Space pirates will be striking your planet any day, and the Galactic Council has a vested interest in keeping your race alive. Making friends is not part of my mission directive."

Talking to girls was turning out to be harder than I had thought. Nervousness mounting, I decided to pull the ace out of my sleeve. "You...smell nice!"

"I was not constructed with sensors capable of detecting odors, so I have no way of processing this data. However, your compliment has been noted." Yet again, she did not look up, but I thought that I noticed the corners of her mouth twitch in a tiny smile. Somewhere inside my head, I took a pen to a bright yellow sticky note and wrote "THANK MICHAEL" on it in bold letters.

After she had finished her lunch, I got up with her and followed

her out the door, attempting to keep the conversation going. "So...how long have you been here?"

She continued to stare straight ahead as we walked. "I was dispatched to this planet during its last summer. I will remain here until my directives are fulfilled."

"Cool," I said. Before I could come up with something else to ask, the dreaded Awkward Silence had time to settle in. Something had to be done fast. With nothing to lose, I whirled around and looked right at her. "Listen...I've noticed you a lot in History and...you have gorgeous eyes! Maybe the prettiest I've ever seen!"

The girl finally turned to face me, and then promptly shoved me to the ground. Up until this moment, I had lived a very ordinary life, dull and never dangerous. But when a girl throws you to the ground to get you out of the way of an incoming laser beam, your life has just gotten way more interesting.

What happened after that is difficult to explain. The girl jumped up into the air, drew an enormous weapon from her now understandably voluminous outfit and began to fire off shot after shot, dropping several grotesque, green-skinned creatures (who had apparently flown in on jetpacks) to the ground. By the time her feet touched the earth again, she had taken them all out of the sky. I thought briefly about what Kevin had said, about taking charge, and was grateful to myself for not taking his advice.

"Are these the space pirates you were talking about?" I asked as I stood back up, then realized I was being impolite. "Oh yeah, and thanks for saving me, uh...hey, I don't even know your name yet!"

The girl again turned to face me. During her acrobatics, the tie for her ponytail had come out. As she turned, each and every strand of her hair seemed to catch the noontime sun, forming a dazzling light show around her head. Then I felt the power of those eyes on me again.

"My name is Arranyah Nik'Tiev Nexxka," she said. "This was just their scouting party. There will be more of them. But I am prepared."

"Hey Array... Arrana... uh, do you think you'd wanna hang out sometime? After school?" I figured it couldn't hurt to ask.

"'Hanging out' is not part of my mission directive, but if you assist me in cleaning up these bodies, my programming obliges me to repay your kindness in some fashion." The corners of her mouth did their cute little twitch again.

"It's a date, then!" I exclaimed, and began to whistle as I hauled a still-smoldering alien body off of the campus premises.

Nobody ever believes me when I tell them this story. And why should they? It's about the most incredible thing that ever happened to me: the smart, pretty girl in my history class saying yes to my first date.

Hollie N. Stewart

A Woman's Objectification Is Never Brief

Two yellow women
in yellow bikinis
laugh toward the camera,
and in the distance of time they laugh at me.

No, they laugh at that black circle
dead as a shark eye.

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I'm old enough to realize
I will never look like that.
And I'm almost glad.
Almost glad he calls me "friend."
Almost glad I've never heard
those three little words
as expansive as the Pacific,
a Pacific covered
with yellow women
in yellow bikinis,

because that means I've never burned gold,
never attacked his eyes
to deaden them from other sights.
That means I can be forgotten.



Nancy Carroll

Self-Portrait

After Romaine Brooks's 1923 oil on canvas

Twilight succumbs to certain women,
their brash moments with oil paint, pencil,
gin. The urge to draw the Chrysler building
next to the Pantheon demands skylines
converge, a spoken word served
as cocktail. Immediate acknowledgment shadows
her outline, like the crystal bowl she fills
with wild oranges or the sketchbooks
her mother once threw in the fireplace.
Canvases dry nicely in Venice.
Skyscrapers search dusk
to bridge the horizon for solitary gray figures
beneath hats, rose lips. She paints them all
like a city hidden on a hill, rows of brilliant dark women reclining
for twilight.



KRISTI KELLOGG

BISHARA, AVI, ALWAYS

“A^{vi}!”

My father’s voice booms through the halls, even though he is downstairs and on the opposite side of the house. I quickly finish tying my sneaker and appear in a flash, like a djinni, at the doorway of his study—

“Yes papa-ji?”

His pen pauses at my favored—and his despised—term of endearment, but he doesn’t actually look up from his desk.

“I am surprising your mother this afternoon and taking her out. So, you need to pick up Kameela from dance.”

“Okay.”

“She gets out at one. Get there at twelve-thirty. I don’t want her waiting outside the studio by herself.”

For this important final instruction concerning my baby sister, who is sixteen and truly sweet, he actually looks up.

“Yes”—I hesitate—“baba.”

Sometimes I just can’t resist.

“Avi, please. Enough of this. If I wanted a baba-this and ji-that ‘wallah’ for a son, I would have never left Bombay. You are American, and I’ve had just about enough of this India kick; the next time you call me anything ending in -ji, you call a landlord”—Ravikiran Yadav does not smile as he says these words.

“Yes, father.”

"Good, good," he murmurs.

At this, I am dismissed, presence no longer required—*alvida*. My father has work to do, obviously. It is Saturday morning, but that doesn't matter. Like every other day, he is buried behind his desk. The only difference on Saturday is the location—home office instead of office downtown. *He is a dedicated law-wallah, isn't he?* I think to myself with a smirk.

My father is America—red, white and blue. Well, maybe not blue; he would balk at any similarity to Krishna. He grew up in Mumbai, but that is all I know of his childhood. It's as if he were actually born at 20 when he stepped onto American soil. Congratulations, Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam, on the birth of a frenetic, six foot, 180-pound, brown-skinned man-child.

I can't recall a day that my father hasn't worked in one way or another. His unrelenting dedication to providing for his family is formidable—and intimidating. How can I, his only son, ever hope to be as great as he is?

"Avi!"

Now it is my mother's voice that is calling, soft and pure, like a song. The only Hindu word I've ever heard my father speak without mockery is "bulblul"—songbird—which is what he often calls my mother.

I turn around and there she is, standing behind me with a coffee mug.

"Good morning."

She stands on tiptoe to kiss my cheek.

"Good morning."

She smiles, but no wrinkles mar her face. She is ageless, as beautiful as she was during my days in primary.

"What will you do today, my son?"

"I'm going to the gym, and then I'm picking up Kameela."

At the mention of Kameela, my mother's smile grows wider, but then confusion clouds her eyes.

“Why are you going to pick up Kamee? I pick her up today,” my mother says, passing by me to take my father his coffee.

I’m surprising your mother—“Oops,” I stammer, “I thought it was my turn.”

“It’s okay, love. Have fun at the gym.”

I park in the back lot at the gym, passing the cars vying for spots in the front. My gym bag feels light on my shoulder as I walk purposefully (though without purpose) toward the glass-walled building, an army of stationary runners moving futilely before me. I pass the outdoor pool, crowded with old men swimming slow laps. I force the vision to blur, choose to see a different scene, be a different man. My mind transforms the chlorinated water into the Ganges, places baskets on the bald heads. I imagine my father at 20, the same age I am now, still in Mumbai, or rather, Bombay. Down what roads did he walk? Who did he see? What in me is what he was then? I know so little about his early paths, and I can’t help but wonder. It’s become an obsession; the past, India, my father—they’ve merged into a three-headed Ganesh that my subconscious can’t escape. How can I know myself if I don’t first know from where I came?

A beautiful, bikini-clad blonde gingerly inserts her foot into the water, and she becomes my scene’s pale Parvati. I whisper the name out loud—“Par-va-ti.”

“Excuse me.”

Like a fool, I’m blocking the entrance, standing in a daze outside the double doors. I smile an apology and hold the door open for the man I stalled, taking one last look at my now-glistening Parvati. This vision, as are all my visions, is magic and smoke and mirrors, dusted with the glitter of Bollywood, underscored by Rushdie, glamorized and exoticized, but I can’t help it; despite my dark hair, dark skin and colorful name, this is all of India I know. My father doesn’t speak of it, and my mother is silent, also, in deference to

him. My blood flows with the water of the Ganges, but I've never set foot in it. I am shackled to the dream of a country, the fantasy of a homeland.

The handles of the elliptical are sweaty, and I suppress a grimace, beginning to jog nowhere. For an hour, I enjoy a delicious run, my gliding feet consuming the minutes. My daily jog affords my mind eight miles of peace, eight miles of open anonymity where there is no one to interrupt my reveries with a derisive, or doting, "Avi."

An hour comes and goes too quickly. My watch reads 12:07—better leave to get Kameela. As I walk by the shining mirrors, I can't help but think of my father once again. I look exactly like him, aside from the hazel eyes that are my mother's.

I have the same nose as Ravikiran, the same crooked smile, the same wide teeth even. It seemed like my body would never be as tall and strong as his, but that, too, has finally caught up to match his. I am the spitting image of my father forty years ago, just as Kameela is of Sathi.

In front of Brentwood Dance Academy, there are several girls loitering about, some younger than Kameela. They look vulnerable, barefoot on the pavement, ballet slippers dangling from their hands, skinny pink legs jutting from black leotards. Male drivers passing by slow down and stare, and something like fury surges inside me. My father's voice echoes in my head: *I don't want her waiting outside the studio by herself.*

The girls nod hello to me as I pass by, and I suppress the urge to tell them to go back inside. It's not my place. Who am I? Kameela's older brother, sure, but not much older than they are. They would laugh were I to make my voice stern and speak of danger.

Inside, the studio is pristine. There is a comfortable waiting area, where my father, mother and I have all spent much time waiting, though my mother has spent the most. I feel out of place sitting there, however, on the delicate couch, in front of the ivory

coffee table with stacks of *En Pointe* magazine, surrounded by photographs of Balanchine and Fosse, listening to the endless chatter of mothers about their daughters. I usually make my way to the back and look in on Kameela's class.

And there she is. Through the glass door to studio B, I see her plié-ing and piqué-ing her heart out. She is the shortest girl in the room, but she stands the tallest. She doesn't notice me watching, intent as she is on her muscles in the mirror, but her teacher notices me and glares so I shuffle off down the hall. I consider resigning myself to the frilly couch and *En Pointe* until I hear foreign notes of music float through the air. The drum pounding, the flute flailing higher and higher, the strains of a sitar—is this my crazy head again, or am I really hearing the music of India?

I move toward the last door, heartbeat quickening. I am prepared to acknowledge that my obsession might be overboard if this music is in my head, but it's not. The tambourine beat gets louder as my feet move closer, and there, through the door, is an apparition that makes my heart spin circles—there, before me, is Sri Lakshmi, Hindu goddess of dance, come to life, her hips spinning—and she is beautiful.

It is Azza, my sister's childhood friend, suddenly become woman. Bangles dance on her dark, dancing wrists, a silk scarf is twisted through her deft fingers and it flies behind her, running the same silver circles as her hips and my heart. My first instinct is to look away from her, writhing with so much uncovered skin, but I can't. She is just too beautiful.

The muscles in her arms move rapidly to the spasms of the drum, and her hands are hummingbirds above her head. Here her eyes are open, there they are shut, palms outstretched, then closed, then outspread again. She faces away from me now, and her hair spills jaguar black down her back. When she turns back around, her kohl-rimmed emerald eyes beckon like fire at night. She is too beautiful.

Rather than embarrassing her, my presence seems to somehow propel this mesmerizing dance, and her hips begin to sway harder and faster, so much so that I find myself out of breath from just watching. There is no shame in her gaze, only defiance; I'm now whispering her name, not Parvati's.

I've never seen this, Tandava—Shiva's dance—in real life, only in documentaries, or in bastardized Bollywood versions, and I am speechless. I'm not even sure if that's what she's doing, but it looks like some form of it, as she drops down into splits and then rolls up the vertebrae in her back, shoulders shimmying left and right. The sheer fabric of her silk skirt flairs around her legs as she rises and falls.

She is India, she is what I have been missing. Here is the Ganges and Ganesh, Kashmir and Krishna; she dances, and the scent of chambeli covers me like a chadar. Here is *my* birth, this woman, this goddess, Sarasvati, Durga, Parvati, Sita, Radha—Devi alive, here in this little nautch girl—

“Azza Azhaar.”

My voice is a rasping whisper.

My imagination has tattooed henna on her hands, sprinkled jewels above her eyes, and I swear I can smell incense.

Her dance is like a spell calling me homeward, but Kameela breaks it—

“Avi!”

I spin around, and there is Kamee, wide-eyed and innocent, a sweet smile on her face.

“Isn't Azza amazing? I wish papa would let me dance like that.”

I manage a blink and grunt, still stumbling out of Azza's trance. Kameela keeps talking, oblivious. And now she is waving, waving at my sanam Azza, and Azza has stopped dancing and is glidingwalkingflying toward us, hips still spinning, only slower, and my heart is swimming in my socks.

The girls embrace. She is so close, and it's hard to swallow,

hard to keep up with my ridiculous thoughts. Is this what Rama felt when he saw Sita for the first time, what my father felt when he saw Sathi? They're speaking, but I can't hear what they're saying, until Kameela tugs on my shirt and asks—

“Can we give her a ride home?”

“Of course. Hello, Azza.”

“Hello, Avi,” she says.

“Let me go change, okay?” Kameela says, thrusting her slippers into my sweaty hands.

Kameela scampers off down the hall and I stand, alone, before the goddess. I have to speak to her, have to know her; I have a harrowing sense that this is one of the moments that will either make or unmake me a man.

“Did you like it?” she says.

“What?”

She moves a little closer—close enough to kiss—and her ruby lips part in a slow smile revealing blindingly white teeth.

“Watching me.”

“Uh-um, yes, miss, I mean, the dance was, was—”

The music still plays in the background, and I can't think, can't stop insipidly staring. She is still dancing in my mind, and I want desperately for her to bring India back to life with her thighs and her hips and her feet again. I cannot be a bumbling fool right now, I must finish—

“—beautiful.”

“I can dance for you again”—mischief is in her eye, and I recall her childhood crush on me; I'm unsure, but still nod yes.

The taal has slowed, and so do her hips, accordingly. The way she is moving now—it is somehow different than before, and I lose my ease. Azza is tracing invisible lines around her navel, and her fingers move upwards, over the tops of her breasts. Now I look away.

“Azza, stop.”

She only smiles. Defiance.

“Azza, stop,” I repeat, voice louder.

“Why?” she purrs.

“Because it is shameful!”—my voice booms, like my father’s, echoes in our ears. The music has stopped, and Azza is now glaring.

“Shameful?” she asks. She laughs, low and guttural, question hanging in the air.

“I,” she continues, “am not ashamed.”

“Think how you represent India!” I beg.

“India?” she asks, with more laughter. “Avi, what do I care about India? It’s just a dance.”

My fast-won heart is slowly breaking.

“Just a dance?” I echo.

“It’s my ‘talent’ for Miss Teen USA. Didn’t Kameela tell you? I won Miss Los Angeles, and I go on to state next month.”

She can’t be saying this. I don’t want to let this dream go; something is coursing through my body that I can’t describe, and I grab her hand.

“Azza, the way you just danced—you brought India to life.”

She bursts out laughing, high and shrill this time, and wrenches her hand away.

“Silly boy, India this, India that—” she can’t finish the sentence she is laughing so hard.

“Don’t you care about where you came from, your history?”

She looks at me blankly, bored, clearly no longer intrigued by her friend’s older brother.

Her cell phone begins to ring and she scurries to answer it, happy at this chance interruption. I watch her and now, close up, notice the light acne underneath her thick makeup and the faint splotchiness on her bare legs, belying the spray that turned her skin darker. She is still beautiful, of course, but she is so young, and she is no goddess, even if she looks like one when she dances.

“Ready?” Kameela chirps.

Azza looks up from her pink phone and mouths to Kameela that her mom is coming after all. Kameela nods okay as I silently mourn my shattered dream—I have just witnessed Sri Lakshmi transform into Kali, and have once again lost sight of India. I'm ready to admit this obsession has gone overboard, turning girls like Azza into maharanis and all water Gangetic.

Kameela sees Azza's silk scarf, devoid of magic as it lies motionless on the hard floor. I can already see what she's thinking, and want to tell her no, let's go, but don't; why not let her play? She bends over, and—ever the dancer—kicks one leg up over her head as she does so, then sprints over to the stereo and flicks the music back on. I inwardly groan as the same sitar strings twang into life, and slouch against the wall, waiting for Kameela to finish.

There is no choreography, of course, and Kameela begins to make up her moves as she goes along, springing to the left and the right, to the right and the left, sporadically. When Azza danced, her eyes spoke of seduction, but when my sister dances, there is only light. I begin to smile in spite of myself, as my sister pours life into the room. Azza, I can see, is not impressed; she still looks bored, listlessly stringing her gum along her fingers.

Azza is clearly not India. I am ashamed of how readily I was deceived, or rather, deceived myself. But I don't want to think about this and turn my attention back to Kameela.

"Avi, come dance!" she calls, leaping across the floor, doing ballet where ballet doesn't belong. But this is my sister, who butters her toast en pointe, who brushes her teeth with one foot resting astride the towel rack, who adds her own strange balletic flourish to everything she does, without apology. Like Azza she is shameless, but unlike Azza she has nothing of which to be ashamed. And Kameela wants me to come run around the room with her and lift her over my head like when we were little, so I will.

"Do I look like Sri Lakshmi?" Kameela laughs.

I am shocked that she knows who Sri Lakshmi is, and raise my

eyebrows incredulously. Kameela wraps the scarf around her head and peeks out at me. Here, now, she looks like India, the Eastern sun beaming behind her eyes. I catch sight of the two of us in the mirror, spiraling out of control, until we fall (her with grace, me without) to the floor, scarf now draped around her neck.

In the reflection, again I see my father, in both Kameela and me. I also see my mother, and of course, I see India. I turn to my tangible sister, here next to me, sprawled out like a cat in the sun.

This is who I am, or at least a part of it. And my mother is another part, and yes, my father is a part, too. Suddenly I feel ashamed, ashamed of my shameless grasping, as I think the day's delusions—maybe not delusions, but rather, dreams.

Of the dreams of India, I am not ashamed, but of my readiness to find identity in something as paper-thin as a watery mirage, or as vain as Azza's dance, while pushing away with both hands all that is actually in front of me.

Is not my father greater than India? Is not Ravikiran, not Sathi, not sweet Kameela, more critical to my essence than my imaginings of the East?

My sister stands up and reaches down to assist me. I pull my gangly self up and bring her hand to my lips; she giggles.

"You," I say, "are a true maharani."

"A what?"

"A princess, Kameela, a princess. You are of more royalty than any Indian queen ever hoped to be."

"Oh, Avi," she says as she waves goodbye to Azza and takes my hand, "such a dreamer, such a dreamer."

Lilit Manucharyan

Marshmallow Teeth

When the smoke
drifted out
of the way,
I caught sight
of the row of her
marshmallow teeth
nestled snug
as a bug
between puckered
red lips;

my hand shaking
I spooned
a delectable
piece of the scene,
stirred it
into my latte
then sipped

and I shivered
while she
slowly slid
off the edge of my throat,
trickled into
my heart
then dissolved
and came twirling
back up

drifted out
through the tip
of the cinnamon stick
in my mouth
and hung thick in the
freezing night air
in a haze
of unexpected
delight.

Theresa Shreffler

Thank You, But I'd Rather Dream ...

Thank you, but I'd rather dream,
for love is such a dreaming thing—
And no heart bears the dreaming crest
as mine, a wan and weightless ring.
I'd rather walk the moonlit paths
and imagine where the road might go,
Than travel the weary, dampened steps
and confront what harsher day might show.
So thank you, but I'd rather sleep
and bury myself in love less common,
Than tread into those meadows deep,
just to find my dreams forgotten.

Jeffrey C. Alfier

The Longshoreman

To taunt her ex, she left him a phone message
to say how Pacific breezes billowed her skirt
as she walked with a new lover on beaches the ex
never enjoyed as he attended her in body only,
always anxious to reach the end of the boardwalk
to drag her to the bars that served him cheap.
His world was lashing-down cargo on container ships,
enough bad shifts to tie him to a life that could fray
like his watch cap and gloves. Jammed ports were plots
that never unfolded—a futile exertion, the way a man
walking dockyards at night might curse the wind.

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JAMES BEZERRA

8 RULES FOR ENSURING HAPPINESS AND SURVIVAL IN LOS ANGELES

First, there is no such place as Los Angeles.

Accepting that, the rules laid down herein will help you live there.

Rule #1: There is No Such Place as Los Angeles.

There are those who would have you believe that such a place exists. They will tell you that more than thirteen million people live in its metro area and that it has an economy roughly equal to that of Australia. They will insist that it occupies a specific physical space of nearly 400 square miles. These people will not tell you that it is an ever-shifting transient space bordered by fire, the Pacific Ocean and endless, rocky desert. They will not tell you that the Los Angeles Basin sinks one quarter of an inch every year. They will insist that Los Angeles is a city like any other. They also say that there is weather. These people are trying to sell you something. Do not believe them.

The population of Los Angeles is always one, but there are more than thirteen million Los Angeleses.

Rule #2: You Are Not a Tourist and Nothing Impresses You.

When you arrive in Los Angeles, it will be by way of frustration. You set out for the city with hopes and dreams, some zest, some zeal. By the time you arrive, your clothes are sweaty from the long

flight/drive/ocean-crossing. You call your Mom/Grandmother/Lover with artificial, plastic happiness in your voice and say that everything is going great. An hour in the city and you are already an actor.

You stand outside the Target at Santa Monica and La Brea with your bags over your shoulder and all your insecurities clogging your throat. The Santa Monica Mountains are burning tonight, and you watch an orange ribbon of fire consume a mountain, leaving it as black as the sky.

You wander north because it feels right and a man who might be a bum—but is maybe just dirty and deranged—follows close behind you, whispering and swearing. At Hollywood and Highland you stand still in a crush of tourists and sneer. They bumble past you without looking at you. They clutch their trinkets tight. Their eyes are wide, all smacked out on dreams.

Tourists, you think, I am better than them, because I live here.

Rule #3: Everybody Is Better Than Everybody.

There seems to be a hierarchy. You get that impression because no one seems to be impressed by you. Perhaps you haven't met the right people. You are renting a studio/room/bed and you realize that if you had just rented somewhere else, everyone would love you by now.

You consider getting a tattoo/changing your sexual orientation/going home.

You start occasionally fucking someone you know you will never love. His/Her name is Drew and you say, "There seems to be a hierarchy. I should get a BMW so that I can fit in."

Drew takes you seriously and considers your idea, because in LA no one ever says an idea is stupid. "Then people would know that you have value as a person and you could be an asshole on the freeway."

"They are such assholes," you say.

"Everybody is such an asshole," Drew says.

Rule #4 You Will Cause Your Own Disillusionment.

You take a job waiting tables/logging tape/doing porno in the Valley because it gives you time to write/go on auditions/work on your music. You move in with Drew for the cheap rent, but secretly you are crushing on Olivia at work. She has tats like a Suicide Girl and sharp, straight scars on her arms from when she was a cutter. She isn't normally your type, but you start dressing like a Melrose Rockstar just to impress her.

Months go by. Drew can tell there is a problem, but you don't care. You go to shows with Olivia and finally make out with her back by the bathrooms where the floor is slippery with piss. You go back to her place, it is filthy, but her three roommates are out. She kisses wet and long and with a lot of tongue and her skin is unlike anything you have ever felt. You run your hands down her calves, over her scars. You have never been this turned on. You go down on her for like an hour. She cums hard and you think you're a god. The fucking is great. You come to understand why damage is so good.

Later, you get caught, because Drew's cousin/life coach/same-sex ex works at Paramount/RCA/MoCA with Olivia's cousin/life coach/same-sex ex. Drew screams/hits you/says you're just like everybody else. You feel worse than you have ever felt before and you realize that you're not the same person you were when you moved here. You are worse, and you don't know why.

Rule #5: Develop a Bitter/Cruel/Cannibalistic Humor

You make it big! At a club/restaurant/The Ivy you meet a producer/agent/director who immediately recognizes your genius. He/She/He-She looks at you like sunlight streams from your eyes. You realize all your dreams.

No you don't. You're being made fun of. This is the sort of bitter/cruel/cannibalistic humor you are developing. You have

developed it like a callus and it is smothering your heart.

Rule #6: Los Angelinos Are Desperate For Love.

You go out with some friends you barely know/like/recognize as human. You go drinking on the 3rd Street Promenade and blow half your rent. You get all drunk and make out with a stranger who then throws up in the bushes around one of the dinosaur fountains. The two of you stumble down to the beach. You have a condom and when you are done screwing, you realize that a couple of bums have been watching you. You barely even care. You tell the stranger—who is Asian, you see now—about home and all the great friends you have there.

When the stranger ditches you, you call Drew on your cell phone and say that you are so sorry.

“Are you fucking drunk?” Drew asks, still angry.

“No no, nonono,” you say.

“Don’t call me again.”

“But I love you,” you say, dropping the neutron bomb of Los Angeles relationships. You have been here long enough to know that love becomes a different element south of the Grapevine and north of Camp Pendleton. The word has a different atomic weight. Its atoms become charged in some frenzied/frantic/desperate way. Electrons sizzle and find new orbits, free radicals find their homes, resonances become stable, and the atoms redistribute to some durable double-bonded happiness.

The word is a bombshell with a grin. It erases history because it so utterly obliterates it. It levels the playing field by destroying it. Love, in Los Angeles, renders truth meaningless.

“Do you mean it?” Drew asks.

“Yes,” you lie.

Rule #7: Learn to Make Believe.

You agree with everyone when they say that it is a cold day.

You do not tell them what a cold day is like back home because everyone has a back home where it is colder.

“This city,” you tell Drew when you get home, “is a fictional construct that we all have agreed to dream about.” You say things like ‘fictional construct’ now because you have gone back to school so that one day you will get promoted/teach/be able to support your new child.

You cradle the baby in your arms as he/she drifts slowly off to sleep and you say, “You are the only person I have ever met who is from here.”

Rule #8: Clichés (Like Broken Dreams) Are Great, and Encouraged.

You have lived here long enough that you think you like Los Angeles. You have shrugged your shoulders and decided that hot asphalt and cracked concrete is all that makes a city. You ignore the sad, desperate stretches of your existence and focus your memories down to the blissful/cinematic/ephemeral moments of completion/validation/happiness. You make yourself think that freeways are supposed to clog like this and that the air is brown everywhere.

You don’t notice as your life/hopes/dreams become as small as work and your apartment. And you don’t notice as Los Angeles shrinks to the size of your life.

You don’t notice anymore that you live in a place where the shattered slivers of glass bottles intermix in the gutters with the splinters of thirteen million broken dreams.

And you barely even notice anymore that Los Angeles doesn’t really exist, because, by now, you don’t either.



Kris Huelgas

The Sound of You

At night I'll imagine you
old and moth-bitten, with children
on your rocking-horse knee and
no sound,
save for the creaking
on the corners of your mouth,
and the hum of what-could've-beens
in your brown eyes
that look so blue. I would say softly,
"We did the best we could
while you were gone."

In the day I remember you
on the voice of my friends, how
"drunk" and "cirrhosis" sound
so sharp, and I won't say anything,
but regret it when I feel
the rip of the hills
against the construction paper sky.

In our time together, I remembered
nothing.
I was so small back then, but I know
the sound of cellophane lifted from
the pages of photo albums, and
the cold touch of polaroids
where you were standing in snow.

I know the buzz of the AM radio
and how your favorite song sounds
like a tired choir or one without
an instructor,
when mom sings it
without you.

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Dania Bennett

Bravery in the Garden

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Strength slithers into you
from calf
or elbow
the curve or your nape,
a river ebbing with each breath
and bending to each blaze.
The softened cheekbone
glittered with light and sweat
stiff and sweet and tender
puffed skin, a bulging peach
full of flies and sticky sap.

It beckons to you, asking for an engine
wheels
life
oil so as to let the gears run smoothly.
What is this engine that guides your heart,
your heart in my palm,
a touch so simple as to not wake a child,
the same one to hold your hand
while you dangle over the icy river
one hundred and three feet below?
It holds your head in it
and cups your tears in it

birthing calves and squeezing ticks.
The touch you know.

This is bravery living through you.
It always asks
what is
the course
here,
who is the midwife
when the dripping ends,
why does the water still fall,
where is the original sin,
how does that feel
when the hand you held
is in that icy river.
The touch you'll always know.



GRACE

I used to be a small woman with charcoal eyes, sad and lifeless, he called them, this man I shared my life with, this husband of twenty-three years. He said my hair reminded him of soil when it's muddy and pungent. That's why I used to wash my hair three times a day, letting it dry on my shoulders, on a body that lived in a faded lavender housedress with daisies, cruelly drawn daisies. My days were spent working on our ten-acre ranch in a town so inconsequential, so dreary that I refused to recall its name; the nothingness of the place tormented me with a fierce anguish like the kind Marlene Dietrich turned into an art form in those old movics that kept me company at night when everyone had gone to bed and the house settled and my heart ached in silence.

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In the mornings, I'd make breakfast. Eggs. And despite there being hundreds of ways to serve eggs, I always scrambled; they *had* to be scrambled for him with corn on the cob on the side, that's right, corn on the cob. For breakfast. We were vegetarians.

We'd sit at the table, the four of us: me, my husband Ben, our son Jeremy and the silence. Silence was such a part of our lives that I often found myself setting a place for it at the table. I didn't know what bothered me more: that I set a place for it or that no one noticed.

Before Ben had arrived at the table that morning, Jeremy had already left the house. He had been doing this for weeks, avoiding his father, not wanting to tell him that he had been accepted into an out-of-state college and was leaving in a few months. We had said goodbye already, Jeremy and I, weeks ago, and had been avoiding each other since then. We hadn't told his father yet. Jeremy knew he wouldn't take it well. Ben expected his son to take over the ranch. Jeremy wanted no part of it. He just wanted out.

So this one morning it was only Ben and I. He was unusually fidgety while I was saying grace. As I thanked God for this and that, Ben kept coughing and adjusting his tie, shifting in his seat in one of his gloomy polyester suits. The man lived in suits, badly tailored, tacky suits; he wore them when he mowed his lawn, he wore them when he cleaned the gutters. Those suits touched his skin more than I ever did.

Ben was gnawing on his corn, wearing that same stoic look the horses wore when I fed them carrots. Then, like always, we began our daily ritual that had developed over the years, our morning scene of subtle accusations that began with a sigh, a look, a gesture over the table, the same wood table where we had made love all those years ago with a fierceness that always left us breathless, weak, hungry for more. I used to look forward to feeling his fingers running along my body, my smooth, taut skin that was now anything but.

Ben finished his corn, grabbed a biscuit and went up to the den to his computer where he will sit for hours staring at photos of naked young women. Whatever. I cleared the table and surrendered to the porch with a cup of coffee and the only two books I read anymore, the Bible and a dictionary. I proceeded to review old stories and learn new words, big words that confused Ben. Silence kept me company and we sat there, like old friends, discussing my

major decisions of the day: laundry or dishes?

When the stranger appeared that morning, I had just stepped out of the backdoor carrying a wicker laundry basket filled with white sheets and resentments. I dropped the basket on the grass next to Ben's rope, a rope he only used after watching TV, cop shows and boxing matches mostly. The rope was spread out like a snake waiting for its next prey. I kicked it aside.

Minutes later, the basket was empty and the white sheets were blowing in the wind like ghosts that had escaped through the cracks in the house and were now entangled in the clotheslines. And that's when I saw it, on the end sheet, a tall silhouette that was still for a few seconds then manifested into a male figure. His arm reached around his back and he began to scratch. Then he strutted away, slowly, like an animal, a lion maybe that had just killed something. And it was at that moment that my heart began to race.

I was moving away from the house when my reflection in the living room window stopped me. There, in the glass, I saw myself: a plain woman with grey hair around her temples and dull features and a fiftieth birthday looming around the corner. My lavender housedress gave me an unflattering square shape. I shook my head at this oversized lavender box with legs. I bent over, picked up Ben's rope, tied it around my waist and smiled at what was looking back at me: an hourglass figure, well, not exactly an hourglass, more of a milk bottle, a giant one. With the faint tapping of Ben's keyboard in the distance, I followed the stranger.

In the center of our ranch there is a spot, not too far from our lake, where I had asked Ben, years ago, to plant daisies. That spring, I went to greet my daisies and found roses instead, dark ruby roses. I thought now about the daisies I had wanted as I stood among the roses, staring openly at the male figure strolling along

our lake. He was an unusually handsome man for our town. Too handsome. And his auburn hair was longer than mine so he *had* to be some traveling stranger, I was convinced, who happened to wander onto our property, mistaking it for some national park as many often do. This young man couldn't have been any more than . . . twenty-one, for sure, I mean, he looked old enough to drink.

I peered through the roses, still as a field mouse, watching him pace along the edge of the lake, back and forth, back and forth. Then he stepped out of his shoes, sandals I think they were, and dipped a toe into the water, sampling the temperature perhaps. A black t-shirt with a white crucifix across the back fitted him snugly, and when it came off, I think I stopped breathing, yes, I definitely stopped breathing. His muscles were defined with carefully etched striations like the ones you'd see on a sculpture. When his torn blue jeans came off, I began to tremble like a schoolgirl, burying my face in my hands. I turned away and lost my balance and suddenly I was falling. My hands reached out, grabbing roses, clinging to them. And when the thorns bit into me, I didn't scream like I wanted to, no, I just bit my lip and it hurt, god, did it hurt. The dark rose water that flowed from my fingers intrigued me until I realized it was blood; it ran along my hands and dripped to the ground, vanishing into the soil.

"Are you all right?" the young man asked as he stood over me among the roses, dripping wet in his red satin boxers with little gold crosses around the waistband. Oh, my. He's beautiful. *Please* let him be from out of town and not from Wanting.

"Hi," he said, "I'm Jesus Christ."

He's from Wanting.

"Grace Killbrook," I said.

The James S. Wanting Health Center.

"Let me help you up, Miss Killbrook."

It's a mental hospital about three miles down the road.

"Grace, please. Call me Grace."

We've had plenty of Wanting escapees stop by over the years.

"Thank you," I said as Jesus led me out of the roses. He took my hands, looked at the blood and kissed them.

"If you bring forth what is within you, it will save you," he said in very familiar words. "If you do not bring forth what is within you, it will destroy you."

The Gospel of Thomas. Oh, he's good.

"Knock and the door will be opened to you, Grace."

Book of Luke? No, *Matthew.*

Jesus walked towards the lake. I followed a few steps behind him in order to stare at his bare backside that was now covered in sweat. He stopped at the edge of the lake and looked out. His body glistened in the afternoon light as we talked and talked about the state of the world and prayer and sins and stuff like that. Every so often he'd drop a quote from the Bible. I felt like I was on some game show where the only category was "Religion." He'd quote something and I tried to guess where it was from. This went on for a while. His voice was soft but articulate and resonant like the ones you hear on the radio. I found myself surrendering to him, to the caress of his scent, feeling it slip through every pore, every crevice in my body that still smelled like roses.

When he saw my wedding ring, he broke into a fragmented speech about marriage made up of quotes from the Old and New Testament. He was really quite good. The best of any of the Wanting escapees I've seen over the years. They had been mostly from the secular world of the famous. Lately, however, the patients had embraced Biblical figures like Noah and Moses and, of course, there was that one pretty red-head who claimed to be Mary Magdalene. Poor thing. She wouldn't leave our property unless we threw rocks at her. She was adamant about it. Jeremy and I refused

but Ben had no problem with throwing the first stone. He got carried away. Mary Magdalene was not so pretty anymore when Wanting guards took her away.

But this Jesus' commitment to his role was impressive. During his lecture, I nodded and occasionally interjected, using big words from my dictionary. He seemed impressed with me and I acted convinced by his act, I did, but inside I felt like little Natalie Wood in *Miracle on 34th Street*, brewing about with her scathing looks of disbelief reserved for Edmund Gwenn's claims that he *was* Santa Claus. But I kept little Natalie locked up along with my disappointment when Jesus got dressed and pushed the last metal button through the hole in the top of his jeans. Then he gave me a smile, a smile so brilliant that it penetrated my heart with a jolt that shook something loose in me, and suddenly, I began to tell him things, things that I had done over the years, things that weren't very nice, things I had never told anyone.

A while later, he said goodbye, this Jesus man, and began to walk north. My heart sank.

"Where are you going?" I said. The Wanting Hospital is north. He should be going south.

"To find a place for the night, Grace, and then move on."

"Why don't you stay here for the night?" I said, trying not to sound desperate.

"I don't think your husband would like that."

"My husband is Catholic and there's nothing he'd love more than to have dinner with—

"Jesus Christ?" Ben said.

"Sssh! He'll hear you," I said, twirling a lock of my dry hair around a finger.

We were watching Jesus through the living room window pacing in our backyard near Ben's rope where I had returned it on

the way into the house. When Jesus picked up the rope and began to jump, I smiled. Ben did not.

“Did you call Wanting?” Ben asked.

“Not yet.”

“Grace!”

“He looked hungry.”

“Jesus!”

Ben headed toward the telephone.

“Did you call me?” Jesus asked, standing at the doorway.

“No,” I said to him. “We were just...praying. Jesus, be a doll and go out there and take those sheets down for me. Just throw them in the basket.”

Jesus nodded and did the sign of the cross. I did the same. He went out the door, moved to the clothesline and began to take down the sheets. Ben calmly picked up the phone and began to dial.

“Ben, I wish you wouldn’t.”

“It’s busy.”

“Jeremy is staying at Ted’s all weekend. Remember?”

“How can they be busy? I could be going nuts—”

“Ben!”

“What is it, Grace?”

“Jeremy is gone all weekend.”

“So?”

“So you have to do the chores.”

“Must you remind me?”

“But you don’t have to.”

“Why not?”

“‘Cause we got Jesus.”

“Just make sure you keep your hands away from the blades,” Ben explained to Jesus over the lawnmower. “It’s not rocket science.”

Go ahead. Just do like I showed you.”

Jesus turned on the lawnmower and handled it like a pro, like he’d been mowing grass all his life. Ben moved towards me.

“When he’s done painting the garage tomorrow,” Ben whispered, “I’m calling Wanting.”

Ben picked up his lemonade and went into the house. I moved to the porch, sipped on my lemonade and watched Jesus mow the grass. I sat there with the Bible on one side, the dictionary on the other, looking for new words, bigger words that would annoy Ben. Then I began praying, hoping—begging!—that his clothes would somehow get tangled in the blades and rip off his body. And I watched this Jesus man for two days do every chore in the house and then some. On his last night, we sat at the table for dinner. After grace, silence took over the conversation until I interrupted.

“I wish you could stay another day, Jesus,” I said. “I so wanted you to meet our son Jeremy.”

Ben threw me a heavy look.

“I have to be on my way,” Jesus said. “Lots of work to do out there.”

Ben rolled his eyes and I nodded and waited for the next quote like one of those smart housewives that manage to get on *Jeopardy*. Here it was, the final night, the final round; the category, once again, “Religion.” But there was no quote. For the first time in two days Jesus was speechless. Silence stood up, jumped on the table and carried on louder than I had ever remembered. Silverware moved, gravy poured, but we were in a silent movie now: all movement, no sound. At the end of dinner, Jesus cleared the table.

“Call in the morning,” Ben said, standing over me.

“Hmm?” I looked at Jesus placing dishes in the sink.

Ben leaned into my ear and whispered, “Wanting.”

This man stirred in his sleep next to me, this husband of

twenty-three years. My eyes traced the old cracks in the ceiling that had grown as restless as I had. I thought about tomorrow, about calling Wanting, about watching Jesus being taken away, about Jeremy leaving to college soon, about how I will wander the rest of my life on a ranch in a town so inconsequential, so dreary that I refused to recall its name.

I got out of bed and went to the living room. I stood by a window, in the moonlight, and watched Jesus sleep on the sofa. I stared at him and listened to the house settle as my heart ached. Then I woke him up.

I fidgeted with the broken radio of my blue Honda as I drove in the dark.

"You aren't swayed by men," Jesus said, pulling on his seatbelt next to me.

You aren't swayed by men...

"Because you pay no attention to who they are," he continued. *The Gospel According to Mark.*

"Grace?"

"Yes?"

"Where are we going?" Jesus asked.

"Far. Somewhere very far from here."

Jesus smiled and put his hand on mine. I felt something moist.

"There's tissue in the glove box," I said.

"Hmm..."

"Your hand is wet."

I turned on the interior light and stopped the car. I pulled off the road and looked at him. His lap was covered in blood. He held out his hands to me. There, in his palms, were holes and blood was pouring from them. I said something, I was sure of it, a whisper.

"It's okay, Grace," he said in a casual tone.

Then I said something else, another whisper, and he said: "It

doesn't hurt, Grace. The blood will stop. It always does—How about Canada? I've always wanted to go to Canada."

Jesus pressed his hands against his kneecaps. He looked out the window and began to whistle softly, a hymn. We sat there until he sang three, maybe four hymns. Then I started the car and began to drive with Jesus by my side. I had no idea where we were going. But I didn't care. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw them, my charcoal eyes, and they weren't sad or lifeless. They were alive. And beautiful.

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R

RENÉ SOLIVAN

Jung Hwan Chang

Resolution

Wise old men sift
listless. These owls, who
want repayment for the use of their wide eyes, eagerly
await worms feeding from carcasses yet unspoiled.

Gluttonous night prowlers—

caution our minds to uphold the old rhymes
as suns die flaring and shedding,
the mural smeared of grime and glory
with a softened starlight glaze.
How they bask in silent self
dedication. Daylight wonders slumbered through,
questioning into the night.

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Who desires the memory of cutting
flesh masonry to expose raw
flushed prayers under the awning of another
dawn approaching?

Who rides to keep the horizon in
clear sight sliding endlessly, swinging over
branches of the unknown, a silly fruitless journey?

Who can drink and stomach the dew of the senseless
brewed passion, a practicality, a youthful exuberance,
pedantic in comparison to flavorful sedentary wisdom?

Who savors cones through pursed beaks,
pines of longing, sawdust boxed mites
neatly dressed and ribboned,
delivered in trucks driven solely by faith?

Richard Boada

At Dawn

Shivering and pulsing under bold
constellations that fall into the ocean,
pink starfish lie on the beach at low tide.
Hundreds escape and bide their shore
to observe morning. Flexing limbs,
they stretch ruddy arms and disks
by millimeters, lounge in new mud dug
by crabs. The waves, cradling a dead
seagull wrapped in kelp, lift the rays
of each starfish from the mud back to open
waters before the sun turns them to stone.

Clint Campbell

Flush

It's a lyric, imbued with a love: mud weighted to shoes; the magnified image of dust mites pulled by breath closer to the brain; and a pine cone stripped of armor and meat, showing a fresh-carved skeleton. A song of love like spawning fish nabbed midair by the jaws of a bear.

The love in this song springs up naturally in wide gold and green fields; it pours too easily from bones, bent and soft with disease. The love should elicit feelings of dizziness, nausea—passion and terror may interchange with vomit.

There's surgery or pilgrimage in the song: these depict worms squirming under the skin on their way to the lungs, the heart; they show the worms like speed bumps drawn lengthwise along arms and legs; they depict tiny incisions and the long slow draw of the worm's extraction.

(If a person in the song receives a love that transforms their skin to bark, moss, or dust, that person becomes alienated and most likely dies.)

If there are no worms, go back to the bear—the triumphant one with the fish in its jaws. Let fortune shine as easily as the sun, or fall with the immensity of a thunderstorm. The song tells the bear to swallow the fish whole as water crashes past. The song tells the fish about love.



JAMES BEZERRA

FLAMINGO

This is not part of **The Story**.

The terror in the theater was very real that night because The Amazing Vanderklein had—in as many months—lost three volunteers somewhere inside of his Magical Box of Disappearances. It was true that the box had become the centerpiece of Vanderklein's otherwise lackluster act, but even though he spent much time with it both on and off stage, he would never become comfortable with it. He had purchased the box at a cut rate from the Great Mandiconi who had become disillusioned, not with his work or with magic, but with the disposition of his audiences. "All they want is horror and gore and terror," he told Vanderklien—whose name was Bill—over drinks, as they agreed on a price for the box. "They aren't amazed anymore with just being amazed. It isn't good enough that we do something that they can't understand. Now it has to be something that they can't understand *and* something potentially awful. I tell you, there was a time when I could pull a rabbit out of my hat and their eyes would get big with child-like wonderment, I tell you! Not anymore."

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When the transaction was finalized, Vanderklein handed over the money and Mandiconi hopped up—drunkenly unsteady—and threw a black powder amulet on the floor, but it failed to shatter

and there was—quite sadly—no puff, bang, or smoke.

“Fuck,” Mandiconi shook his head and shuffled out of the bar, into the night. He was never seen again.¹

The Amazing Vanderklein would quickly discover that there were no instructions for the box. He inspected the box very closely, but found none of the trap doors, hinges, or secret compartments that made other similar boxes function. One night he asked Orlav the house manager to turn on all of the house and stage lights, thus bathing the box in light at the center of the stage. He climbed inside—hoping that the combination of darkness inside the box and high wattage light outside might reveal some seam or hidden latch that he had missed. “Will only be a moment!” he called up to Orlav in the booth. Then he climbed inside—it was a snug fit, as Vanderklein was a large man—and closed the door.

He was immediately overcome by a strange sensation of openness; no longer were the walls of the box pressing in against him. In fact, there were no walls at all. What there was, was but a dim glow, like a cloudy dusk, coming from nowhere, and everywhere, at once. There was nothing but endless, interstitial distance. Surprised, terrified, and utterly mind-blown, Vanderklein staggered, with no particular intention of going anywhere, but as he stepped, the silence was broken by a soft crunching. Startled, his mouth agape, he realized he was screaming. He looked down and saw that he was standing on a black web of... words? He recognized an *e*. He bent down and touched it. It was cool to the touch. As he stood back up, he looked around him and realized that he was standing on just one line, which spread out to the horizon. He tried to read the line on which he was standing. It took a moment for his brain to adjust to

¹ This is a lie. He was totally seen again.

the size of the sentence. It seemed to say: **It took a moment for his brain to adjust to the size of the sentence...**

Vanderklein turned and looked behind him. It was harder to read the lines upside down, but it looked like the next line said:

But he didn't get to finish reading because suddenly there was a tug on his arm and Vanderklein was pulled backward. He yelped and almost fell over as Orlav pulled him out of the box.

"I heard you screaming. I looked inside and you weren't there!" Orlav said, crazed and confused.

Vanderklein couldn't think of anything to say, so he just nodded. Then—a professional showman, after all—he said, "Never tell anyone about this."

That night he began to design a new act, one that did not hinge on the simple and rudimentary magical act of making an audience member disappear—people had been disappearing into and out of boxes for as long as there had been magicians—but rather on the utter terror engendered in the disappeared.

The first of these re-engineered performances came with virtually no fanfare. The audience was only standard in size and enthusiasm. Vanderklein selected an Army officer from the audience. He was a lieutenant, on leave and in his nice uniform, a blonde bombshell on his arm. The man was big and strapping and handsome and perfect. Vanderklein opened the door of the box, "Just a box! Just like any other!" he boomed, "But it is full of endless terror!" The audience chuckled. "Unending terror! And if you do not believe me, perhaps you will believe the Lieutenant!" Vanderklein ushered the big man inside the box, closed the door gently, and mouthed a desperate prayer.

"And now!" he boomed, "We wait! And we listen!"

Then Orlav turned the houselights down to just a funereal glow. At first the audience grumbled, bored, un-entertained, but after moments passed in the quiet and dark theater, the audience became aware of the small, quiet, and distant screams of the Lieutenant.

At first there were chuckles, *Big man is scared of the dark*. But as the screams grew in volume and desperation, the audience began to grumble, *Okay. Enough*.

But it went on. Vanderklein allowed the audience to stew in its horror. *Bring him back! Let him out!*

Then the audience became a roar that drowned out the sound of the Lieutenant's screams, *Let him out already!*

When Vanderklein opened the door, the audience saw that there was no Lieutenant. Then the magician secured himself with a heavy leather belt on a rope. He hopped inside the box and disappeared as well.

The audience didn't breathe. Eons passed.

Finally, Vanderklein reappeared, dragging the terrified and screaming Lieutenant.

The audience exhaled and cheered and cried.

Vanderklein stroked his beard and guided the Lieutenant to a microphone. "Tell us," he said, "of the terror!"

It was the sheer and real fear in the face of the Lieutenant that most horrified and petrified the audience. His recounting of the complete total feeling of being *lost* made them all quiver.

After the show, Orlav said to Vanderklein, "I pissed myself."

The Lieutenant may have been broken—he would never again return to his unit, they say that his hands shook—but Vanderklein was a sensation and night after night, the house was packed. And each time a new soul was destroyed by the awful godlessness inside the box, Vanderklein's reputation grew.

And then, he lost the first one.

His search inside the box went on for hours. People in the audience fainted from the tension. Finally, Vanderklein crawled out of the box, exhausted, and said, "He is gone." Then he passed out from exhaustion.

The show was closed for an entire week while the authorities tried to determine if a crime had been committed. Smartly—and partly as a publicity stunt—Vanderklein had been having members of the audience sign waivers when they bought their tickets. The authorities shook their heads, but left him alone.

The show reopened and for weeks on end every seat was filled every performance, every night.

So, the terror in the theater was very real that night because The Amazing Vanderklein had—in as many months—lost three volunteers somewhere inside of his Magical Box of Disappearances. That was the night when a man called Bellanova was in the audience.

The Story is born here.

The Author had been reading quite a lot about Berlin. Specifically about the days when the Wall first went up. Before it became a symbol. When it was just barbed wire or concrete bricks, or even stacked bales of hay, as it was sometimes in those early days. The Author was interested in the story of Heiko Burkhardt, an accounting clerk who worked late on the night of August 12th, 1961, who walked along Zimmerstrasse, past a couple of East German trucks loaded down with construction materials, who had a small dinner with his mistress Bertel, went to bed with her, and woke up on August 13th, put the same suit back on, walked back up Zimmerstrasse

man billed as The Amazing Vanderklein, who had terrified audiences with something he called his “Magical Box of Disappearances.” The Author decided that this was where Burkhardt would take Bertel and how the metaphor of love = magic would find itself into the story.

The Author sat down and began to type away on his keyboard. The theatre and cavernous and dark and the flickering of the electric lights created ghouls and ghosts at the edges of Bertel’s perception and she snuggled close to Burkhardt’s arm. The magician wore a cape and a top hat. His assistant wore very little at all. She wheeled the box out onto stage. The terror in the theater was very real that night because The Amazing Vanderklein had—in as many months—lost three volunteers somewhere inside of his Magical Box of Disappearances.

The Author stopped and called Olivia over, “Hey, how does this read?”

She pushed a ringlet of hair behind her ear, did a thing with her face that made it seem like her lips were shrugging and said, “Maybe you’re overselling it with the ghosts and ghouls. And does the assistant have to be dressed like that?”

“It is historically accurate!”

“It reads like bondage gear.”

“The Germans have always straddled a fine line like that,” The Author justified, though secretly he had just been googling for ‘sexy magician’s assistant costumes’ before Olivia had walked into the room. Should it ever come up, The Author even had an excuse prepared as to why he spent so much of his time trolling the Internet



looking at women's lingerie. "I like to know," he would say, "everything about my characters, even what kind of underwear they are wearing. And I don't know much about women's underwear, so I had to do some research." The Author felt that this would be an ironclad excuse. And he did, in fact, know exactly what sort of underwear Bertel wore under her dress that night: a nylon slip with an empire waist with ribbon-tie straps, a cotton bra with hook-and-eye closures, and cotton bloomers.

"I think," Olivia said, "that you had better get to some sort of plot sometime soon, or the audience will get bored."

"Why can't you ever just be supportive?" The Author asked.

"I'm being supportive by being honest. Do you want a glass of wine? I think I'm going to open some wine."

"Sure," The Author said with a huff and turned back to write some more, but he was too perturbed. He wrote some frivolous description that served no particular purpose:

Burkhardt looked around the theater and admired all of the people, dressed so nicely and formally, men in their warm suits, women in their elegant dresses...but for one fellow in back who wore his overcoat buttoned closed, with a hat pulled down, obscuring his face. Why, wondered Burkhardt, is that fellow wearing his hat indoors?

The Author shrugged. He got up and went into the kitchen, where Olivia uncorked a bottle with a satisfying POP.

The Author did not know it yet and neither did Burkhardt—who was left to stare impolitely—but that fellow in the back, that's Bellanova.

This is not part of **The Story**.

That fictional Berlin called Trizonia was home to more than three million people, all of whom had been in some way affected

by the sudden erection of the wall. Bellanova was no different. In fact, he had been more affected than most because on August 12th—the day before the wall went up—he had fallen in love.

This is also not part of **The Story**.

Legend has it that after the Great Mandiconi sold his Magical Box of Disappearances to The Amazing Vanderklein, he disappeared from the world. Some say that he rowed a boat to the edge of the world and then right on over. Others say that he boarded a train going east, that he built a little shack on stilts in a Siberian swamp and lived as a mystic and soothsayer. Still some suspected that he threw himself inside the box itself and that he is still wandering around inside there somewhere, howling mad and feasting on Vanderklein's lost audience members. However, the truth was less colorful. The Great Mandiconi had previously been called Ramon Gerardo Antonio Panza and he bore upon his back a terrible family secret. Mandiconi's great- great- great- great- great- great- great- great- great- great- great- great- great- great- great-grandfather had been a Spanish squire by the name of Sancho Panza, the loyal and illiterate servant of a man named Don Quixote. During his famous adventures with Quixote, that elder Panza came to realize (in Book Two²) that he was, in fact, a fictional character, being written by an unseen and omnipotent author. Sancho Panza realized the importance of this revelation and he passed it on to his children, who calmly, stoically, secretly, passed it along to their children. And so it was for twelve generations that the Panza clan had known that they existed in a world of fiction. Many of them

² In the second book of Cervantes' masterpiece, Quixote and Panza debate the accuracy of the first book and also burn down the print house where an apocryphal version of their story is being composed.

had taken advantage of this knowledge to (in bad times) leap across the interstitial void into other (better, easier, more fun) works of fiction. Over the centuries they had even created a magical doorway that made this leap easier. They had taken advantage of the fact that in a world of fiction, nothing was impossible. But The Great Mandiconi had grown tired of living a life that, even at its best, would never be real. Having spent most of his adult life performing for audiences (both real and fictional), his disillusionment had become complete. He sold the family's magical doorway to Vanderklein and wandered down to the Sapphire Bar at #31 Botzowstr, where he met a young man with a sharp, attractive face and a friendly manner. His German was mysteriously accented, but he didn't seem political, which suited Mandiconi just fine. They got to talking and they got to drinking schwarzgebrannter³ and soon the fictional Mandiconi was leaning close to Bellanova, whispering, all of his family's secrets transferring on the hot, spicy breath of the old magician. Mandiconi even told the young man about the Magical Box of Disappearances.

The night wore on and they both became thoroughly besotted. The older man drank the younger one under the table and then, as the sun was coming up, crookedly donned his cape and what he thought was his hat but what was actually a cloth napkin, bid, "Auf Wiedersehen, mother-fuckers!" to his fellow patrons, and disappeared into a gray Trizonia morning, never to be seen again.⁴

³ Cheap, locally-made German moonshine.

⁴ This is not entirely true. Through a transmutation still not entirely understood, the Great Mandiconi would reappear—though it is unknown how he got there—as the prickly and bitter Severus Snape in the wildly successful Harry Potter series of children's books. He would be portrayed in film by the inimitable Alan Rickman.

The Story goes all to hell.

“Olivia! Come and look at whatever the fuck is going on right now!”

“What?”

“I have no fucking idea!”

“Why are you yelling?”

“Because something fucking weird is happening!”

“What?”

“It is writing itself!”

“What?”

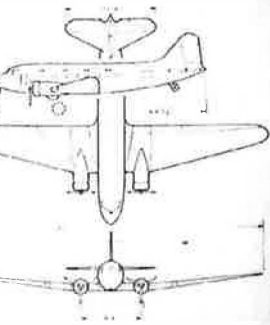
“The computer is freaking out or something! The story is writing itself! Who the fuck is Bellanova?”

“Who is what?”

“I have no fucking clue!”

This is also not part of **The Story**.

As a boy, he taught himself how to fly an American McDonnell Douglas DC-3 Dakota just by reading the flight manual, which had somehow ended up in his local library. Though he had never had the opportunity to actually pilot one, he was confident that he would be able to, should the opportunity ever present itself.



As a teenager, he designed a fully functional Pyrotomic Disintegrator Pistol, just for fun. He mailed the sketches to his

American uncle Grover C. Schaible, who patented the design, which was immediately classified by the US Department of Defense. After a protracted court battle, Schaible regained access to a portion of the design and a mold of the pistol would later be used

as the basis for the most popular ray-gun toy of the 1950s.

As an engineering student at University, he invented the escalator.

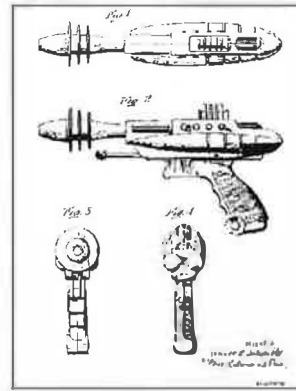
In his spare time, he grew flowers inside of discarded light bulbs and kept lists of palindromes that impressed him (*Koortsmeetsysteemstrook* was his favorite, actually a Dutch term: *Koorts Meetsysteem Strook*; it is a fever-measuring-system strip).

And on the night of August 12th he attended a show at an art gallery—actually a converted ball-bearing plant—and fell in love.

The art show was just the contents of a house arranged in the center of the plant (chairs, a table, and entire kitchen, etc.). But no one was allowed to walk through it, people were only allowed to walk around it in trenches or above it on a criss-crossing network of catwalks. The artist said that she was attempting to "...realign perception along the vertical axis." The truth was that Bellanova was there because he wanted desperately to bed the artist, a tall, willowy blonde named Clara. She was beautiful in every way, with long legs and trim ankles, and she was wearing a red dress. As he pursued her along the catwalks, he noticed that in orbit opposite him was a small girl, pretty in her own way, with a full body and full lips. She was wearing slacks. As the night went on, they both circled in tightly around Clara. They both made witty banter at her, until—Bellanova realized—this girl in slacks was trying to bed Clara, too.

Eventually the girl in slacks broke off from Clara to get more schwarzgebrannt. He followed her.

"So what is your plan?" he asked her.



"What do you mean?" she replied, pretending that she had not noticed him before.

"Well, yours must be an ambush, a flanking motion." She smiled and he found her smile just the most darling thing ever. "Because," Bellanova went on, "a frontal assault would be devastating for you, I imagine."

"How so?"

"These are conservative times," he said with a little shrug.

"They always seem to be, don't they?" She turned, as if done with him.

Bellanova shifted strategies by the seat of his pants. "Are you, I wonder, a lesbian, or just an opportunist?"

She turned back to him, curious now. "I can't be both?"

Bellanova was a coy shrug. He stuck his hands in his pockets and pretended to sheepishly kick an imaginary pebble.

The girl in slacks looked at him, really looked at him. Then she grinned again. "I am of a sexual nature."

"Me too."

She drank her drink and shook her head. "Who *are* you exactly?"

"My name is Bellanova."

"What an awful name."

"I know it. And you're . . . Heidi?"

She glared a little, "Lisette."

"No, I heard someone call you Heidi."

"My name is Lisette. And no you didn't."

"I thought I did. I wonder who they were talking to."

"*Heidi* perhaps?"

"That must be it. Look, I'm here tonight because I am of a sexual nature. I have my eye on our artist."

"So do I."

"I don't think she's your type."

Lisette laughed. "I question your impartiality."

Bellanova conceded. "Good point." He drank his drink.

They looked at each other while she waited for him to say something that she would like. Then he said, "I will make you a deal, a bet, as it were."

Lisette shrugged, anticipatorily.

"If I get her, then I win. If you get her, then you win."

"But..."

"But if neither of us get her..." He let it trail off.

Then Lisette laughed loudly. "Who *are* you?"

Bellanova shrugged, "What would be the point in wasting all of this *tension*."

Then Lisette sized him up and down, lingering on him in certain places, considering. "Fine. You have a deal."

They clinked cups.

"Bellanova," she said, "it will be a pleasure to beat you."

"Statistically," he said as she walked away, "I have better than a sixty percent chance of having a good night."

Lisette glanced back over her shoulder at him as she walked away.

Bellanova knew right then that he was done for. For good.

The rest of the night became a boozy blur. Laughing, drinks, flirting. Much flirting. Clara had never received so much attention, and she was accustomed to attention. As they sparred, played, taunted, teased, Bellanova realized that he and Lisette were too quick and too obtuse for poor Clara, who was clearly beginning to feel left behind. She seemed a little flustered about it.

Poor Clara, she went home alone.

And Lisette let him kiss her on the walk home. And she kissed

him back, hard. They kissed quite a lot and fumbled with each other's clothes in the doorway of his building. She unbuckled his pants on the stairs. They barely made it into his small flat. They pulled at clothes, they shed them like skin. They kissed and touched and teased and bit. They fucked and, later, slowly, they made love. As Bellanova drifted off to sleep, he heard Lisette saying something in French. He didn't recognize the word, *flamant* perhaps?

When Bellanova woke up, she was gone.

Any other day that would have been okay, but today was August 13th, 1961, in Trizonia.

Bellanova smelled the sheets, happy that her scent was still there. On his mirror she had scrawled her address in lipstick.

He made himself a cup of coffee, drank it, and then went out into the world. He lived at the corner of Zimmerstrasse and Markgrafenstrasse and running through the intersection that morning there was—quite suddenly—a wall. And while Bellanova was not a political man, he knew that others were, he knew that the world was teetering on the edge of something awful, and so when he looked at that wall, he knew what it meant.

The Story has been put on hold.

The Author was unsure what to do. He was worried about Burkhardt and Bertel and Vanderklein. He didn't know what kind of men these were, this Bellanova and this Konnor with the gun.

"Won't be but a minute," Konnor said to the captive audience. "My friend just needed to tend to something. You will thank us later."

The story inside.

Bellanova had been preparing himself for days. He had been

thinking back on all of the things that The Great Mandiconi had told him that night in the bar. All those things about what the box was like inside. And he had heard the rumors of how horrifying it was. He had heard about the Lieutenant whose hands shook, and about the lost volunteers. But he was ready.

Inside there was the silent, endless expanse, dim, lonely, and so wide it made him almost cease to exist. And that, he thought, was probably what terrified people the most. But not Bellanova.

He steeled himself and forced himself to remember the plan.

He bent down and felt the words, cool and heavy, just like Mandiconi had described them. He surveyed the sentence on which he was standing. It seemed to read:

He surveyed the sentence on which he was standing.

He had brought with him a small crowbar and he jammed it under the **t** in **standing** and began to pry with all the force in his body until it came loose. It was harder than he thought, but he got it free and dragged it up on top of the other letters.

For days he had been constructing the perfect sentence in his mind.

It was nearly forty-five minutes later when Konnor felt a tug on the fishing line and started to pull it in. "Help me! Help me!" Konnor shouted at Vanderklein, who began to tentatively reel Bellanova in.

When he finally reappeared, the audience burst into spontaneous applause. Bellanova was covered in a fine black layer, like a film of ink.

"Sorry about all this," he said to Vanderklein, "but it will all become clear."

"Everybody up!" Konnor shouted. "Let's go outside."

The audience—Burkhardt and Bertel among them—were

more confused now than afraid, and they all filed out into the street, but only a few of them thought to run off. Bellanova and Konnor started up the street, Vanderklein and his assistant followed and the audience fell in behind them.

As they approached the intersection at Zimmerstrasse and Markgrafenstrasse, it all became clear; there was nothing left but a gray ribbon of rubble.

The Story seems silly now.

“Well,” Olivia said, “I guess that kinda puts the kibosh on the rest of your story.”

“Yeah,” The Author said, still in a state of disbelief, “but I did so much *planning*.”

“What are Burkhardt and Bertel going to do now?” she asked.

“I don’t know. This wasn’t my plan at all. They were going to get killed by the Stasi.”

“Oh,” Olivia said, “well I guess that Bellanova guy kinda saved their asses then.”

“Yeah.”

The story within **The Story**.

Bellanova hugged his Konnor, “I will never be able to repay you.” And then he was off, he leapt over the rubble and hit the pavement at a dead run. By now he had Lisette’s address memorized.

The story within the story within **The Story**.

If anyone were ever tempted to go back inside the Magical Box of Disappearances, they would find a pile of letters setting atop the otherwise infinite flatness of that terrain. The letters—haphazardly and hastily organized into a sentence—read:

thE Wall
fell down
anD CouLd never be rebuilt.

The last part of **The Story**.

Olivia asked The Author, "Why is it called 'Flamingo'?"

"Oh, I had this scene planned where they go to the zoo and see a flamingo and it becomes kind of like a metaphor, because if it is in the zoo then it is a flightless bird."

"Hmm. That would have been cute, I guess."

The very last part of **The Story**.

The flamingo is actually a symbol for how sometimes the story isn't about what it is about.⁵

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JAMES BEZERRA

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⁵The End.

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