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CHILD OF WAR

W.A. Coleman

Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.

-Sun Tsu

A young Harvey sits on the freshly cut, prickly lawn and gazes at the grass painted knees of his new blue jeans. The stain almost looks shiny in the sun, like a thick coat of dark green, mossy wax sheen. He slowly begins etching his name in the thick soil stain, the gloss coming up easily and col-

lecting under his fingernail like ancient, weak paint on a sun aged picket fence. He rolls it between his fingers and it feels waxy.

His entire bottom lip, busted plump is colored evenly as if dip coated in sports car red his brim shimmering in the sun with a glassy reflect. He cries quietly and to himself, while covering his mouth trying to muffle his choppy inhales. His nose runs with the clear mucus that carries in it ribbons of blood, so fresh it has yet to mix pink. He stands up and limps to a grass green garden hose attached to the faucet but coiled up and sitting next

to the house. He twists the steel waffle knob with trembling hands and picks up the brass spout that regurgitated with sputtering choke the clear liquid that sparkles like liquid diamonds in the August sun. He takes a big gulp of water and the warm drink taste of sun cooked rubber with a hint of spout brass. He doesn't swallow but floods his mouth and then spits. And in the heat he can't help but to think of Christmas.

The young Harvey sits down on the carpet with his knees up and hugging them tightly while looking forward, seemingly a

bit confused. The small, single string lit Christmas tree looks much brighter than its truth in the early dark morning living room as he just looks ahead, the Christmas tree and all its twinkle's reflecting perfectly, in twin pictures off his clean, eye glasses. He gazes at the awesome rich, cherry red paint double coated on the metal and the chrome handles that shimmer and come alive, copying every twinkle of the Christmas lights as the smell of tire rubber fills the small living room, it's dark musky scent matched only by the look of the clean evil black virgin tread. The smells and the early

morning and the colors and the lights seem to once again tale that timeless tale of a happy child on Christmas morning but his gaze does not match this.

A young Bobbie walks in wearing a long, pink nightgown that drags on the carpet like a wedding dress building static charges. She walks up behind him and puts her hand on his shoulder and kisses him on the cheek and then matches his gaze, both sets of their eye glasses, Bobbie's gaudy 1950's Cat Eye Gold frames and Harvey's dark, horn rims framing the Christmas scene reflective picture as she remains cheek to cheek with her son for a mo-

ment.

"I know you wanted a bike..." she says with a whisper.

"...But way I figure it.. this, way you could earn enough money get your own bike," she says to Harvey who just continues to look forward.

"You cut our yard and you aunties's...the rest... you charge a fair price and you keep what ya earn." She says while nodding and looking at the brand new Sears and Roebuck lawn mower with him.

* * *

He walks up down the road towards his home, holding his

broken glasses in his hand, and a stretched out, white t shirt that he wears now like a strange, clothed necklace.

He walks up to the front porch a Bobbie walks out.

“Harvey lee...You know what time dinner is young...” she says immediately stopping.

“What happened?”

Harvey just bows his head.

“You get yourself in another fight?”

He looks down.

“Where you eyeglasses.”

Harvey starts crying.

“Let me see em Harvey.”

He holds them up the frames snapped, the lenses cracked.

“God dammit.” she says grit-

ting her teeth in anger and then immediately stuffing it with a long sigh.”

She opens up the door.

“Come on...let’s clean you up.” she says as he walks passed.

Harvey sits on a lid down toilet in a bathroom that gleams with heavenly clean white while Bobbie smears ointment on the abrasions.

“They took my bike.” Harvey just blurts out with his bottom lip wiggle.

“Who’s ‘they’.”

“Kids down the street.”

She pauses and looks at him for a moment then goes back to his cuts.

“They all jumped ya?”

He nods his head.

“So you let em take it?”

“It was four of em ‘n they was bigger ‘n me.”

She looks at him her eyes peeking over her cat eye frames looking at Harvey hard and analyzing every whimper. She then looks down ducking her blue eyes behind those thick prescription lenses that magnify her eyes to where her blinking is big enough to cause flinch.

“Danny didn’t help ya none?” she says going back to work. A dollop of ointment here, some there.

“He still grounded.”

“Still?”

He nods.

“Well,..I said it before and I’ll say it now,..you better off without him.”

“I’d still have my bike if Danny was round.” he says shaking his head.

“ Look, I know he’s your pal... but Danny’s crazier than a fresh snipped steer...an he gets you in trouble as much as he gets himself in trouble... Think how many all the whoop-in’s you and him have gotten round town.”

There’s a long awkward pause as Harvey looks to his mother with teary eyes, eyes begging for help.

She sighs.

“I’m sorry Harvey.” she says standing up and gathering her bandage trash and walking out the bathroom door.

Harvey begins sobbing.

She stops at the door and leans against the framing and watches him crying in mourn for his bike.

“You got yourself a pretty dandy lawn route.....You could save up... get you’s another..... don’t seem like you like it all that much anyways.”

“What you sayin... it’s my bike.” he says beginning to choke up.

“No ... it was your bike... They took it, remember?”

He looks at his mother a bit

shocked.

“My...my bike” Harvey says with tears now rolling and trying not to burst in cry.

“All I’m sayin is maybe you didn’t like that bike as much you lettin on. Cause maybe if you liked that bike as much as you tellin me you like that bike..i’d be doin more than nursin a little bruise and a busted lip.”

He looks at her assertiveness, her demeanor one that seems as cold as the Ice box melt.

“Just sayin.” she says as she says as she walks away.

She gulps a bit around the corner, her eyes glassing up

before swallowing her emotions and moving on.

Harvey just sits on the toilet. His untied shoes, they tangle off of his dangling feet.

She peeks around the corner, "Ill talk to Danny's papa, Ok?" she says.

Harvey's face lights up a little as she retracts her head and Harvey looks down and continues to watch his dangled feet and can't help but think of Danny.

Harvey kicks an empty coke bottle making it to lead him down a neighborhood street. He

boots it with his black Chuck Taylors making it roll down the asphalt, the glass ripples singing loudly with the sounds of hollow that is muted by patches of the fall leaves still soggy from the cool late fall rain. Harvey wears his school pack and watches as several of the neighborhood school children pass by on bicycles. With a pointing index finger He pushes his horn rim glasses up and looks at them with envy as they whisk by leaving a breeze that flips the bangs on his bright red hair. He keeps walking the bottle up a slight hill to a cul-de-sac and passes by the street sign that reads

Oklahoma Street. He walks up and sees the crooked mailbox that reads LUNDEY in big black letters as he continues kicking on the bottle. He kicks it ahead a bit, then getting a running head start and football goal kicks it into the leafy storm ditch next to the Lundey mailbox. He then continues walking.

“Hey!”

Harvey turns around and standing and leaning on the mailbox with camouflage pants and boots, a brown shirt and a military buzz cut stands a kid twirling around a taped over and spray painted black T-ball bat.

“We ain’t no trash dump.”
the kid says.

Harvey just looks.

The kid is older and taller, by a good three or four years. He points with his bat at the bottle in the leaves suggesting that he retrieve his trash. Harvey does so and picks it up.

The kid just watches him closely as if analyzing his every move.

“Can I use your cans?” Harvey says pointing to the silver trash cans over next to the garage.

“You don’t got your own can at home?”

“No.”

“You don’t got no trashcan?”

“No. yeah.” Harvey says a bit meekly.

“You dumb or some’n?”

“No.” Harvey says looking at him in the eye and like a submissive dog tucking tail while clasping onto to his empty coke bottle and walking away.

“Army or Navy!!” the kid yells.

Harvey turns round.

“Huh.”

“I said Army or Navy... which one you gonna be?”

Harvey looks confused.

“You can be a Marine too... if you wanna be.. I won’t hold against you none.”

“My daddy was an Army man.” Harvey says.

“I know.”

“How you know?”

“I used ta live here when I was little.”

“You knew my dad?” Harvey asks excitedly.

“Mhm.”

“Really.”

“Thats what I said..”

There’s a long, awkward pause.

“Your daddy really went to jail?” Harvey says.

“ Yeah...so what bout it?” he says answering a question with a defensive one.

“Nothin” Harvey shrugs.

“Who told you that?”

“My momma.”

The older kid just looks at

him hard, as if irritated by him knowing that information.

“You can use my can..come on,” he says waving him towards the garage.

“You know...I’m gonna be a fighter pilot when I get older.”

“Really?”

“Yep..not Air Force though....hmm....I’m gonna be a sailor... My old man says Navy got the best pilots.” he says lifting the trashcan lid and letting Harvey toss it in.”

Harvey looks over and sees the big, famous tree house, nestled up high, at least three stories in a big, firey fall red leaf Oak. He looks and sees

the tall ladder running up it.

Harvey looks at it with awe.

“You like that tree house don’t ya?”

“Yeah.”

“Even neater inside.”

“I know...I’ve been inside.”

“When you been inside?”

“Everyone in neighborhood been up there...we used ta play all the time when the house was empty...kid down the street feel off it...So old man Grable took down the ladder.”

The older kid listens to him, gritting his teeth.

“It wasn’t your tree house to play on.”

“my daddy built it.”

“so what?... My daddy paid

your daddy ta build it.... for me.”

“I jus wanted ta check inside.”

“I jus wantid” he says mocking Harvey’s juvenile speech.

Harvey just looks at him.

“My momma says you don’t got no friends.”

“ my momma...my momma...You a real momma’s boy ain’t ya?” he says with a smile.

Harvey shrugs and walks away.

“Where you goin?”

“Home.”

“What else your momma say bout me?”

He turns around.

“She says your crazy..jus

like your old man.” he says and the older kid smiles.

“Not everybody wants friends.” he yells and Harvey just ignores him.

* * *

Harvey stares out the window watching the older boy and his father bringing boxes back in the house.

“Yeah I guess Danny’s outta the pen.” Bobbie says talking on the phone as Harvey just eve’s drops as he watches him. . . .Yep....you should see little Danny... gonna be a looker....jus a spitin image of his old man. . . .Think he was livin up in Joplin with

an Uncle.. He's got em in the street school downtown.... heard the boy jus a twister a trouble..... told Harvey steer clear of him...." she says then laughing as he watches Danny climb up the tree house and sit alone. . . . I guess them apples don't fall far from the tree." she says laughing.

Harvey opens up his mother's closet and sifts through hangers of colorful dresses and blouses. Frustrated, he turns to another closet, his father's, searching through old overalls and military stuff until finally coming across his seek. His face lights up.

* * *

"Gonna go play outside, momma." Harvey yells to Bobbie who is startled from a nap.

"Take off them glasses before you do any ruffin!" she slurs before going back to sleep.

He runs up in Danny's lawn and up to the tall tree house.

"Hey! Hey!"

"What?!" he says peeking out the window shaped glass-less box of the old and poorly maintained tree house.

"Can I come up?"

"No! You can't come up..you dumb?"

"Why not?"

“Cause I said no! Now get off my lawn for I come down dot your eye!” he says his head ducking back into his private solitude.

Harvey prepared for the response opens up his bag of comic books and gum and pulls out a bleached white, authentic Sailor suit and puts it on. The V-neck comes down to almost his navel as the cape-like short extra layer of shirt flips around a bit in the early morning breeze.

“Hey!” Harvey screams.

“Dammit I told you I....” he says stopping his words and looking in awe at the authentic Navy man sailor shirt, complete

with a side sleeve ranking.

“Where you get that?” he says.

“I got comic books. And gum too.” Harvey says with a smile.

Dan chomps on some chewing gum loudly as he wears his sailor shirt looking at the insignia. His lips are shiny with the extra saliva inducing grape gum.

“So your momma dated a real Sailor?” he says as Harvey chews gum to biting down on a bubble while reading a comic.

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t get ya a new daddy....I would think no woman could resist a real Navy man.” he says smil-

ing.

“You can have it.”

“Don’t be foolin like that.”

“No.. you can have it.”

Dan smiles.

“Did ya know him?”

Harvey shakes his head.

“Your momma sure spoils u like a girly pink princess.”

“Huh uh.. I earned. It myself...got me a mowin business...got ten lawns already and it jus turned spring.”

Danny looks.

“Ben savin up for a bike.... this summer I’m gonna get it.”

“You gonna really get a brand new bike?”

“Mhm.”

“If you don’t blow it on

bubble gum n comic books first.” he says straightening up his navy shirt.

“I got plenty.” Harvey says undoing his boot and a bunch of coins and one dollar bills fall out, just maybe a fews days worth for an adult but riches for a child.

“My God!!! Whatta you doin!” Dan yells while stomping on a rolling quarter and giving it back to him.

“Don’t you ever show another person where yu keepin your stash! You dumb or some’n?”

“No.”

“Yer lucky the older boys up the street don’t use you for a meal ticket.”

“They did already...that’s why I put it in my boot.”

“They did?”

“Older boys made me buy em cokes or they’d whoop me.”

“What happened?”

“ I bought em cokes then they whooped me anyway...took my money...then they called me Lee Harvey Oswald.”

“Lee Harv..” Dan cracks up laughing.

“Your middle name really lee?” he says laughing.

“Oh my god...you momma has it right here on your bag.... Harvey Lee Cole.”

“Not funny ...don’t look anything like him.”

“Yeah you do.”

“Nuh uh.”

“You look jus like him”

“No I dont.”

“I don’t matter..if you don’t pull your head out your ass real soon they gonna whoop every nickel and dime outta ya.” he says standing up and picking up his little black t ball bat.

Harvey looks at him and thinks.

“What if you helped me?”

“Helped you with what?”

“My business.”

“I ain’t mowin your lawns for pennies while you sit shade restin up for that new bike.”

“Why not?”

“I ain’t workin for no lit-

tle kid.”

“You don’t have ta work.”

“Then what yu want me ta do?”

“You help me get home with my money.”

Danny laughs. “You mean keep them bullies off you?”

“Come on, .. it’d be perfect...I pay you.”

“How much?”

“I don’t know...50 cents a week.”

“A dollar.”

“A dollar?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Then you gotta help too.”

“I ain’t doin no mowin...”

“Jus a couple of green strips.. if my legs get tired.”

Dan looks. “Jus a couple of strips?”

“Yeah...mhm.” Harvey says nodding.

Dan looks at him.

“Ok..alright you got ya a deal” he says and they shake on it.

* * *

Danny pushes Harvey in the shopping cart of a grocery store and they cruise around. Danny trips and falls pushing into an old lady, taking her out. A big, fat red tied manager undoes his leather belt and un-sheaths it like a samurai unsheathing his sword.

“HARVEY! DANNY! UP HERE
NOW!”

-----The sign reads St.
Cherish Church and in press-on
letters reads Teen summer camp.

“You sure this is a good
idea, Danny?”

“Shut up now...i told you ta
shut up already!” Danny says
with a loud whisper as they
crawl through the attic of the
church. Danny sees some steam
and light coming up...

“Here Harvey..over here!” he
says as he peeks in and sees
all the girls, naked and suds’d
up with soap.

“ No...Danny..I don’t even
wanna see them girls...” he
says turning away.

“What are you’s a Mary?....
look!” he says again with a
loud whisper.

“I don’t wanna” Harveys says
pulling away and Danny grabs
his shirt and it stretches as
Harvey digs away and starts
crawling back.

“I’ll meet you outside” Har-
vey says. Looking back at the
Danny who’s stretched out in
the attic with a great position
to see it all.

“Don’t bother waitin
none...I don’t want ta be
hangin out with some Mar.....”
his words are interrupted by
gravity as he instantly falls
through the ceiling and into
the girls shower..the sounds

of screaming rattles Harvey's brain as he rushes over and looks through massive whole and down at Danny who's laid out covered in wet sheet rock as the showers continue to blast.

Harvey looks at Danny from above with eyes that scream what do I do?

Danny looks up.

"Don't wait for me Harvey... get!...get!" he says as Harvey nods and in a panic semi-stands up and runs across the attic crawl space and ramming into a 2x4, knocking himself silly and stepping his left leg through the ceiling and pinning himself.

Danny looks up and sees Har-

vey's leg wiggling through the ceiling and starts laughing hysterically.

A tall priest describes in threatening and menacing theatrical detail to the wet and sheet-rock covered Harvey and Danny, his custom made, wood stained and air holed, paddle, one that looks as heavy as a piece of oak.

* * *

-Bobbie irons the family's clothes on a nice spring day as the open window breeze makes the drapes flip around like drying laundry. Harvey bursts through the door with an arrow

lodged into his chest coughing up what appears to be blood. Danny trails behind him holding a bow and a sling of arrows.

“I’m sorry Ms. Cole!! I told him ta get outta the way!! I told him!!!!” he screams cryin and hysterical.

Bobbie just drops the iron and runs over as Harvey expertly collapses in her arms and starts shaking violently.

“Oh..no..this ain’t happenin...this ain’t happinin” Bobbie says too shocked to cry as she holds him

“Harvey...Harvey!!! Oh Jesus no...please Lord” she says shaking him “ but when she does Harvey starts laughing hyster-

ically and then so does Danny, as Bobbie lets go of him, stands up and scoots back, her face oddly calm and in shock.

Harvey smiles and takes off his little blood stained white t shirt revealing the wire wrap-around joke arrow.

“Ha ha...got you momma... ha!”

“We didn’t jus pull your leg Ms. Cole, we yanked er right off and took it home with us.” Danny says as Bobbie looks around and gasps.

“Hey momma..you alright?” Harvey says.

Bobbie whips Danny silly with her leather strap, going completely nuts as the tough

Danny yells out profanity's but never cries or sheds a tear.

"We're sorry momma..We were just jokin says the red faced and crying Harvey who sits on the toilet lid in his ketchup covered white T-shirt.

"Shut up! Shut up young man..i ain't through you either..not....by....A....long....shot!" she says rhythmically timing it to Danny's beating.

She finally stops completely out of breath.

"You had nuff son?" she says to Danny who looks back from the bent over position.

"What?"

"I...said....you had nuff?"

"Hmm...well...I gotta tell the truth Ms. Cole those last few I barely felt...how bout you try switchin arms..."

"Switchin arms....mm hm" she says her teeth clenched in rage as the sweaty Bobbie goes right back to beating him.

"You like that..huh..."

"No...yes.....maybe...no."

Dan says.

-----My old man keeps his skins in here...right up here?" says a tall, frail kid whose bushy white blonde hair matches his bushy white blonde eye brows as Danny and Harvey follow the kid to the big office of an upper middle class home. They open up a huge walk

in closet, the dark, mahogany stain double doors shimmering with that wet polished look against the sun that penetrates through the multiple windows.

“Here help me” the kid says as Danny and Harvey help nudge the kid up and he reaches on the top shelf pulling down a stack of playboys.

“They laugh and giggle, all three heads peeking out from behind a large Marilyn Monroe cover page as they oogle over extremely tame and shady, semi-nude pics.

They hear the sounds of someone coming home.

“Oh shit!” the kid says.. here,... clean er up. I’ll try

ta stall him.” he says rushing down the hall.

Both Danny and Harvey rush to get them back. Harvey gathering the stack and Danny picking Harvey up to the high shelf.

“Daddy I thought you weren’t gonna be home till late ?.” he says hugging the tall father who walks with another equally tall young man.

“ why..whadya break?” he says making the other guy laugh.

“I didn’t break nothin.... hey can we play some catch..?”

“I’m with a client son.”

“Please...”

Harvey falls and the maga-

zines fly and flutter like colorful birds.

“Is that Danny’s bike up front...hmm?”

“Uh huh.”

“Uhh yes go tell him ta scram...I don’t want you hangin out with that little gangster...you hear me?”

“Daddy...he’s”

“Now!” he says and the kid runs away.

“Better get em on down the road before you momma comes home.” He yells as they walk down the hall, their voices getting close.

Danny quickly moves all the magazines on the floor and

shuts the closet door and they hide.

The father and the man goes in his office and locking the door behind them.

“I’m sorry about that...normally I don’t like doing business at home..but, ..considering..” he says lowering the shades in his office and walking over and flipping a cheap, cliché ship riding on the ruff sea art, revealing a little silver safe.

Danny and Harvey bicker fight silently in the closet, the light coming through the air vented doors making horizontal bars on their snooping

little faces.

The tall man opens the safe and pulls out a few stacks of cash, apparently looking like some shady business deal.

He puts them on the table in front of the other man who smiles and nods.

“So..we have a deal the tall man stands and walks around the desk starring down on him intimidatingly.

The guy nods.

Danny and Harvey just look at each other with a smile.

“You watch, Harv. Ol man Thomas gonna put a ass beatin on this poor cowboy.” Danny

says in Harvey’s ear.

“Do I scare you?”

The guy looks.

“Hmm...do I?”

The guy laughs.

“I owe you one” he says looking up, his face apparently blushed.

“One!! Jus one!” He says grabbing the young guys mouth and mashing it while leaning down in his face.

He smacks him hard and grabs his mouth.

“ You owe me everything.” He says with an evil whisper. Everything.” He says shoving his thumb in the guys mouth. The guy fights at first, breathing

hard.

Danny gets a weird look on his face.

“No... Don't you turn way none.. You take what I give ya....you take what I give ya.” He says now shoving a couple of other fingers in his mouth and making him gag a bit.

The guy finally grabs the man's wrist and begins sucking the tall man's fingers.

“There we go....learn quick...think ill keep you” he says pulling down his pants and whipping out a full hard on. The other guy quickly and willingly goes down on.

“Oh..god!..dammit..gross!”

Danny says his face all clenched in wrinkles as Harvey looks on in awe the gay sex act.

“Harvey” danny yells with a whisper.

Harvey doesn't respond and still looks forward.

“Harvey!”

“What?”

“Let's sneak out here...follow my lead” Danny says as they slowly get down on their hands and knees.

The two gay man have now moved onto sex as the tall boss

man has the other guy thrown across his desk and fucking him hard. The guy moans and every time he does the tall guy slaps him.

“Not so loud..not so...not so loud...you want everybody know...know how much a dirty little faggot you are...huh...huh...!!” He says while thrusting and in the background you can see one door of the double doors slightly open up as Harvey and Danny slowly crawl, making it to the base of the locked door. Dan slowly reaches on a little hook where he ringed his car keys and the while still on all fours slowly unlocks the bolted door.

When he does the sound triggers the tall guys attention out of his hump.

“Oh shit! Oh shit!!!” He says.

“Don’t mind us...we’re out! Danny says with Harvey right behind him.

“DANNY!!!!!!!!!!” the tall guy yells as he trips all over himself trying to get his ass tight cowboy jeans up and off his ankles.

They run and get on their bikes, Danny with a couple of

stolen playboys.

“Where you guys goin? Where you goin with my bike Danny!!” The tall man’s son says.

“Later, Andy.” They say as the tall guy runs out with his secret lover right behind him.

“You piece of shit!”

“Won’t be needin these anytime!!” Danny yells holding up the play boy’s. He then puts his fingers in his mouth sexually and pulls out a wet middle finger as he and Harvey ride off.

“Dammit!!” The guy says completely freaked out holding his hair on each side.

“Hes gonna call the law!” Harvey screams.

“No he aint.” Danny smiles with confidence.

* * *

Bobbie knocks on the heavy oak door of the Lundey residence. She looks through the side window hearing a shadowy figure shuffling around and then a sound of a groggy voice mumbling and yelling.

“I’m comin... i’m comin!..” a male voice grumbles as the door open, Danny Sr, a tall,

muscular and brawny man stands with unmanaged stubble and hair going every direction.

“Jesus Christ! What is the damn...”. he says opening up with squinting eyes and a face flexed in the grimace of what looks like a nightmarish hang-over and stops his verbal assault. “Oh..” he says his eyes widening as he takes a look at the very pretty Bobbie. I thought it....” he says wiping his eyes. “I thought it was nother one them damn cyclopedia salesman.”

“No..nope. Jus me.”

“What can I do for you, Bobbie?”

“Can we talk?”

“Sure.....but I’m.....I’m actually kinda in the middle of somethin.” he says holding up his half drunk bottle of beer...

“Look I came...”

“Jus a minute” he says interrupting her and bringing up the beer bottle to his mouth and guzzling it all the way down.

She waits and rolls her eyes annoyed as she watches his adams apple make flesh waves out of his semi sunburned throat. He empties the bottle and belches obnoxiously.

“Ahh!” he says looking at her with a shitty smile.

“Can I come in?”

He looks at her for a moment and then shrugs and walks away leaving the door open and her at the doorstep. Bobbie follows him.

“Want me ta shut the door!”. She yells as he’s already down the hall and into the kitchen, digging through his icebox.

“Why not.” he says pulling out a fresh cold one and popping the cap off with the side of the kitchen counter.

He walks in meeting her in his messy living room area.

“Wanna beer?” he says while half heartedly picking up some clothes off the nearby couch.

“No, thank you.” she says as she stands patiently holding

onto her purse and waiting for him to clean her off a spot. He dusts off a spot for her to sit with his hand spanking the blue love seat hard and then points with his open hand, inviting her to sit and she does.

“Sorry bout the mess” he says sitting down on the leather chair across from her...”If I knew yu were comin over....I would’ve.....not answered the door.” he says looking at her flashing once again that shitty grin.

“What a charmer.” Bobbie says.

He laughs while leaning over and digging a cigarette out of it package and lighting it.

“I’m here talk about Danny.”

“Danny’s been grounded?” he says getting a glimpse of Bobbie’s legs which she covers up quickly catching his glance.

“I know. Thats what I was wantin talk ta you bout.”

He looks at her and takes a drag off his cigarette. They share a moment of silence and he shrugs while leaning over and ashing his cig.

“So talk.”

“Think you bein little harsh on Danny.”

He laughs.

“I’m.....I’m sorry Bobbie.. refresh my memory for me... wasn’t it you who called me up and yelled at me for a good

twenty minutes how much a menace my boy was....and how ever many beatins he ever got in his life was only half much as he deserved.”

“I didn’t say it like...”

“Then how’d ya say it?”

“Not like that.”

“Ok...alright..”

“It’s been a month.”

“So.”

“Harvey really misses him.”

“I told Harvey he can go play in that tree house all he wants.”

“He don’t want no tree house..he wants his friend back.”

“That right?”

“Yeah.”

“Neighborhood boys did a number on Harvey the other day...busted his lip..took his bike....”

“So that’s what this whole things bout.”

She looks.”Yeah.”

“So You want my boy fightin your boys battles.”

She just looks at him through the cloudy haze of smoke and smiles and chuckles and coughs adding onto his own atmosphere. He shakes his finger at her while nodding.

“That’s smart...good way for mommy to intervene.... without momma intervenin’....right?”

“Right”

“Well I gotta be honest with

ya Bobbie...I can’t remember the last time I have ever had such a relaxin last few weeks...no one callin me up screamin..no one one callin me up tellin me what my boy broke and how much it’s gonna be... You know how much extra money I’ve saved?”

“Dan...”

“See this beer....i got er Bootlegged in from Kansas City..... and it’s...it’s like suckin a queens tit...you see I can’t go back to that nasty.. cheap ass moonshine the boys brew up out back...I can’t...I can’t do it.”

“Come on Dan, they’re best friends..you know how much that

means.”

He shrugs.

“I never had a best friend...you ever have a best friend?”

“No.”

“Then how you know what it means?”

“I don’t know...I’m sure it’s great.”

“Yeah..well...this is great to.” he says sitting back with his feet up.”

“Hmm..its a shame really...” she says standing up.

“What’s the shame?”

“I was jus hopin that if ya..ya freed Danny up... he could come over and stay the night... my sister was gon-

na watch the boys...so I could stay over here that night...”

Leaning back and with a lit cigarette drooping from his mouth he casually turns his head and raises his eyebrows up and down.

She looks at the thirty year old adolescence.

“Oh god..... regrettin this already” she says getting up and leaving.

“What?!” he says as she keeps walking towards to door.

“Hey...hey come back!” he says getting up to chase her stubbing his toe on the coffee table.

“Ow! Fuuuuuuck! Ow!” he says falling to the floor grasping

his foot in pain. Bobbie turns around.

“Oh...fuck..fuck..fuck..
fuck...fuck..oh..

Bobbie walks back.

“You alright.”

“Oh..oh my god that hurts..
look at it...oh look at it.”

“What?”

“Think it’s busted look at
it.”

“Well get your hands back...
let me see.”

She looks at it.

“You’re fine...just busted
the nails back.”

“Oh...” he says rolling a
coat of sweat beading on his
brow.

“I gotta go, Danny....”

“Stay...stay with me.” he
says dramatically grabbing her
pant leg.”

“I gotta.... go...get off!”
she says tugging from his
grasp. Let go..you gonna trip
me..let go” she says finally
booting him firmly but lightly
in the gut with her shoes.

“Uh!” he says now grasping
onto his belly.

“See ya later....jesus...” she
says leaving.

“Bobbie!!!....Come back!!...
stay with me!.....Uh...why
does life hurt so bad?!” he
yells over dramatically while
continuing to roll around on
the floor.

“Uh...he says still rubbing

his foot. He turns his head and under the couch is a little yellow sugar cookie, dropped and hidden. He rolls over and crawls and grabs the old, stale cookie and sniffs it...then shrugs and starts munching on it, nodding his head in approval.

“Mmm.”

Danny Jr. runs downstairs and comes over to his father and looks at him lying on the ground eating a cookie.

“Daddy?!”

“What you doin outta your room?”

“I heard ya yellin!”

“Come here.” he says raising his hand like he wants Danny to

help him up.

“Help me up” he says and Danny Jr helps lift him to his butt with strain.

“What you eaten daddy?”

“Do I got somethin in my teeth?” he says purposely caking a bunch of crushed cookie on the front of his teeth.

Dan rears back his head, scrunching up his face in disgust.

“Ew gross dad.” he says.

“C’mere...give your old man a kiss.” he says holding onto him and wrestling him to the ground.

“Ew..gross..” Danny says laughing as his dad takes him down and pins him and chumps on

his neck tickling him.

* * *

Harvey sits by the little camp fire that he and a newly ungrounded Danny made right under the big tree house where the flames give birth to embers that float up high and towards the tree like orange fireflies. Harvey's happy but swollen and bruised face is lit up by the flickering fire light making the still fresh blue contusions look like nothing more than shadows made by the battling of the light and the night. He tongues the split of his busted bottom lip as he quietly listens to Danny who sits across the fire from him in a

dark spot where the illuminating whips of light don't reach and when he moves, it is but a ripple in the darkness, like some poltergeists that speaks and speaks loudly. With labored squint across and through the fire and smoke, Harvey can see the fire making a subtle, barely visible shimmer to the gold lettering from the cover of a book than Danny reads. A book, one that he has read to Harvey before, a book of warriors, of tales of warriors and Danny reads it with the voice of a child but with the authority of one beyond his age and with a passion of someone who hangs on to every word with unflinching

faith, like that of a holy man and his scripture.

Harvey listens to his friend's voice as he brings his fingers up and rubs upon his battle scars. He looks over to the right of him and smiles with the shine of his prized red bike gleaming the twitching light of the flames with freshly washed with love shine.

“And when He,,....when he stood, He stood there alive, standin tired,....tired but tall in the middle of it all, soaking up his gift with a.....a” he pauses for a while seemingly trying to make out the word. “G.....gasping high.” he says pronouncing it

wrong as he reads verbatim from an old book. He speaks with a calm struggle of the prose, but is unhurried and still despite the repeats and studders along the way, he is still soothing in tone. Harvey stretches out on his blanket, resting his head on his elbows and listens to the words of Danny as his mind replays their own little battle.

Harvey and Danny peak down from high, looking upon the gang of three or four big bullies playing in the creek, Harvey's stolen bike parked close by and kick-standed, dirty and muddy and unkept.

“The gift..... that gift

that always came to him in the ringing silence of...of blown ears and the...the slow numb...numbing of instincts with." he reads to Harvey wrestling with the high literary level prose but adding to it his charming country twang. Harvey listens but his eyes are lost now, intoxicated by the soothing warm sight, he forgets to blink for a moment, locked in trance of the heat and beauty of the serpent like flames mating each other with the braiding of fire. Harvey shakes free his hypnotic inferno and closes his eyes, his eyelids feeling cool against a cooked sight.

Danny puts on an old, football player helmet and with an old shoelace Harvey helps tie the grip of a small baseball bat to him.

"This familiar silence, known all, all too well, that which always came with a smell, the burning cook of something alive, something dead, and something dying." Danny says his voice telling with a true understanding of the words and what they mean.

Harvey lines up a bunch of train track large gravel rocks out of his pocket and watches as the padded up and baseball bat carrying Danny quiet-

ly walks down the side of the creek camouflaged in the brush.

“The quiet that gives him only the sound of his heart, beating fast” he reads.

Danny hides in the brush and looks at the bullies backs with a predatory stare. He grips his baseball bat and without warning or yell or sound jumps out and starts swinging, hitting two of the kids in the face, dropping them to the ground. One of the bigger kids jumps on Danny’s back, another grabbing hold of the baseball trying to pull it from his bound hand. From the high ground, Harvey launches rocks, both big and small, launching them quickly

and furiously and without break striking one of Danny’s attackers in the head. The creek becomes a battlefield and several of the kids fall down to the ground to avoid another rock and Danny stands up, the rocks bouncing off of his helmet, Harvey being told never to let up on the rate of fire. Danny kicks one of the downed bullies in the face before grabbing the bike and leaving all of the bully thieves on the ground injured wounded and scared.

“And with the reminder of his spared life one that beats and thumps with a strength,..... that which rattles the envy of the defeat-

ed and dead, that rest beside his feet, stacked high with depth.

Danny falls to his knees in exhaustion as he tosses the retrieved bike to its side. He pulls his football helmet off, his face soaked, his hair soaking wet and teeth pinked with blood. He is greeted by a hugging and grateful Harvey who embraces him like a brother and hugs him tightly and Danny just flashes him a bloody grin.

“And he walks, waddin through this pile of death that he moves through with strain, knee high like movin across some haunted shallow river of souls.” he says pronouncing

haunted wrong like he hasn't the least idea of its meaning.

Danny walks with the young Harvey who slowly strolls alongside of him with his newly retrieved bike. Danny's football helmet dangles in his arms as the two walk down the train tracks laughing and smiling in victory.

“He looks up with his blue eyes at God's perfect blue sky that which is covered by the haze of man, blemished by the exhaust of man.” Danny says coming out of the darkness and reading from the old green hardback book and squatting down and finishes reading even though Harvey is now asleep.

“ He falls to his knees, falls into the pile of warring, fire warmed, dead, not in wound but in the e.....ex hil aration of the restless, resting.”

He says coming out of his squat and now shouting it, reading it for himself but reading it like a speech.

“And then he weeps and he cries in the moment his demons rest, and he looks ahead and sees the green grasses and sky in the yonder and admires the colors of the greens like a painter or an artist and he sees the life, the life that he knows, the life that he has taken through eyes of a woman, and his heart bleeds like

that of a mother, and he can see the earth through the eyes of a simple man, up high in the hills, tendin to the soil with the toolin stroke of a peasant sower, his work kept company by the simple thoughts of a moral farmer whose hands are stained only by the soil he tills and a peace given ta him with every breath he takes. For this moment in time, he is a normal. He smiles as his ears begin to wake and sounds of it all slowly begin to be heard. He feels the stirring in its wake and soon the restless clawin of that inside of him, that which makes him different, that which makes him warrior,..... wakes

again.”

Danny closes the book and then sits and sharpens a flame lit shimmering blade in front of the fire as Harvey sleeps.

Harvey waits patiently at the porch for Danny. The door opens and Harvey smiles widely. A quiet but smiling Dan walks out. His face light blue, from the healing of black eyes. Harvey hasn't seen him in a while because Dan, once again had been in solitary.

Harvey strolls on his bike slowly while Dan walks afoot.

“You alright?”

“I'm alright.”

“Did he whoop ya?”

“Yeah he whipped me...whipped me silly.”

“How hard.”

“Hospital hard.”

“Sorry Danny.... I don't think you're crazy, Danny.”

“You be the first.”

“I gotta surprise for ya.”

“Surprise.”

“Yeah...surprise...come on”

Harvey says pushing hard off his bike peddle and sprinting away.

“Hey...come on now...” Danny says yelling and starting to run at Harvey who cruises towards his house and parks in front of the open garage.

“Come on Harvey” Danny says trailing behind a good twenty

seconds and breathing hard.

“Hurry up.” Harvey says with a grin.

“Hurry up....I ain’t no greyhound.” he says stopping and wheezing.

Harvey points with his eyes.

“Look.”

“What am I...I lookin at” he says looking and seeing a brand new bike, just like Harvey’s only blue.

He looks in shock.

“What?” Danny says.

“What you mean ‘what’?... got you’s a bike...now we ride together.” Harvey says with a smile. I helped buy it with my own money...but momma helped too.

He looks at it hard...still in shock and begins to sigh awkwardly while gulping.

“Blue your favorite color right? Harvey asks Dan who just stands and stares, his eyes beginning to glimmer like the sunset light on rain puddles and his lips begin to quiver.

“Danny?” Harvey says and Danny just stares and begins exhaling as tears start to stream down his cheek.

“What’s wrong?” Harvey asks.

And as quick as the emotion hit the tough weathered boy it’s gone.

“What?” Danny says as he wipes with his forearm not only the tears but seemingly the en-

tire emotion.

“Let’s ride?”

“Let’s do it.” Harvey says with a smile as Danny hops on his new bike and they ride off down a neighborhood street.

* * *

Danny and Harvey sit on a bed blanketed by open comic books and Harvey flips through the pages seemingly distraught

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothin”

“What’s wrong?” Danny says taking a swig.

“Wish you come ta school with me.”

Danny grins and just looks at Harvey, analyzing him.

“What’s so special bout this

new school.”

“It ain’t special. They just call it special so it don’t make you feel bad. Its place you go when no other school’ll take you.”

“I wanna go there.”

“No you don’t.”

Harvey lets out a nervous sigh.

Danny just looks.

“It ain’t fair! It ain’t fair at all!” Harvey says his eyes glassin.”

“Those boys...that boy you and i..we skipped rocks off of..he got a big brother... who got even bigger friends... and you gonna be hundred miles away....and they gonna see me..

they gonna remember me...and they gonna follow me... all the way home.." he says with a shrug.

"What you want me ta do?"

"Nothin...When you be back?"

"Thanksgivin....Then Christmas too...We could have fun then. Don't worry none...you gonna grow bigger soon...then you'll have nothin ta worry bout."

"Yeah..." Harvey says

"You can take some of my comic books with you... if you want." Harvey says.

"Thanks."

Danny packs a stack of tight whites in his already stuffed

suitcase. Danny looks in the oven and inspects some baking chicken before pulling up a little step stool and standing over the busy four burner stove and grabs a whisk lazily and yawns, this seemingly completed adult dinner meal a common routine. He gets hypnotized in the stir of a dark gravy as a pot of boiling water and bobbing corn steam his sleepy face to a standing drift-off and then sudden jerk awake.

He sets a plate of mashed potatoes and gravy, chicken and corn on a plate and eats it himself. He pets a big chocolate lab as he eats, hugging him tightly. With his suit-

case and backpack he watches the headlights of a taxi pull up. He walks up to his father who is passed out on the couch, stares at him and puts a blanket on him before leaving.

As he walks out, he sees Harvey peeking out of his bedroom window curtain, watching him leave. Dan waves and so does Harvey before getting into the cab.

He watches the blurred smeared green image of trees on a highway as they whisk by, his hair being battered as he takes in the warm air. He takes in the summer smell of Tulsa as the taxi heads north, towards some boarding school in the

Ozark's. He thinks for a moment biting his nails incessantly. He looks back.

The taxi driver looks at him.

“Problem kid?”

Danny locks worried eyes with the taxi drivers rear view mirrored gaze.

* * *

Harvey dresses for school, combing his hair in a part and tucking his shirt tail in. He climbs on his bright red clean bike, proudly riding to school.

“Nice bike, Harvey.” one kid says making Harvey's eyes light up through his coke bottle

glasses.

He parks it, wedging his bike and chaining it with a lock. He looks and sees the kid who immediately recognizes him starrng. They stare at him aggressively and he just smiles at them and moves along.

The taxi pulls back up in Danny's driveway as he runs out quickly as if on a mission.

Harvey smiles with his classmates as the bell rings and a teacher drones on about an assignment.

Danny spray paints his blue bike red, putting several coats on it. You then see him cutting long pieces of rope while washing out a few lined up large,

five gallon paint buckets.

Harvey talks thru a big smile as he talks to some friends while they both unchain their bikes and share some friendly shoves and wrestling as they all run alongside their bikes several feet before youthfully saddling on and peddling hard. They ride together in a pack before waving each other off and going in opposite directions. Harvey looks around and no one is behind him. He smiles as the wind flips his red hair around taking in the still summer hot early fall first day of school.

Dan puts his camouflage pants on and laces up some hik-

ing boots and tucks in a light grey military type T- shirt.

As Harvey rides the sudden sound of a rock whizzing underneath his arm hits the front handlebar and bounces off hitting his thigh making a loud dinging sound and chipping up his skin a pre-bleed, fish meat white. He rubs the fresh injury with a mild confusion grimace and soon the fresh cuts begins to sweat blood that pools in the divot as he looks around to the bottom left and right, his eyebrows clenched into a dis-comforted wrinkle. And as his instinct forces his eyes on the ground to look to what his wheels may be kick-

ing up, the true culprit from behind attacks again as a very small but fast and accurate little white garden rock hits him in the head making him turn around with startling speed. He swings his head around and what he sees kicks up fear as he turns back around, his once calm happy face washed away and solemnly shocked. A big kid, a good few years older steering against the hot early fall wind with one hand, and his other hand fisted and stuffed full of his ammo, more rocks, probably grabbed from a suburban front yard garden, follows him with a sinister grin. Harvey speeds up and looks behind him

again to witness his doom just as two other kids come from out of nowhere, original bike thief and his brother both wearing a vengeful grimace. He whips his head back around, his lips in a wiggle and his eyes watering about to cry. He speeds up matching their quick pursuit and looks back no more even as he hears the pelting of rocks hitting the spokes of his back tire or as he feels the wind of several going by. Even as one strikes its target making thuds on his back he looks back no more and instead cries. He quickly takes a hard right and through a wooded area. He dismounts from his bike and carries

it across a rocky little creek, crying all the way. He then hops on and clears some bushes to a road and waits, waits to see if his quick thinking has worked. He listens trying to control his crying, his tears lost in the panicked sweat that drips off his face. He squints his eyes and looks through the rustling green leaves and then focuses on his dread, the sight of the kids crossing the creek.

He sighs and takes off down the last long road to his house. He looks over each shoulder, just fence and flat pasture, nowhere to hide. He looks back and sees the kids pulling out of the brush and

he realizes that his short cut has only given him a few more minutes. He looks ahead towards the mail boxes. He looks towards the one in particular several boxes down, the crooked one that's jet black and reads LUNDEY in big graphed lettering. He begins sprinting towards it even though his friend is no longer there, in a sincere reflex of fear he sprints towards it anyway, knowing that if Dan were here he would know what to do, because he always knew what to do.

He looks behind him and sees the kids approaching and then looks forward right as Dan appears.

Harvey lets out a gasp and immediately breaks down into an infant like crying, a crying of relief as he peddles to his friend who waves him in.

Harvey runs over hitting his break, crying, sobbing and mumbling and trying to talk through his tears about his lengthy and punishing pursuit.

"They're follow..." he says shuddering.

"I know..you ok?" Dan ask as Harvey looks back just as the gang of angry kids coming over the hill.

"Oh we gotta...they see us!" Harvey says trying getting ready to bolt.

"No!". Dan says gripping the

bike.

“Wha?”

“Just wait.” he says giving them a clear view of their target, Harvey and the shiny red bike.

“Whad ya doin Dan? We gotta!”

“Just wait! I want em ta see.” he says looking forward and gazing at the biggest kid and his devilish grin. Dan matches it with a sinister smile before him and Harvey disappear around the corner and into the driveway.

“Harv....Hide your bike around the house.” Dan says and Harvey drives up, dismounts from his bike and tosses it out

of site behind the red brick house.

“Buzzy an’ them boys they’re to bi...”

“No! I know what I’m doin... they step in my yard it’s my fight. Don’t you worry none.”

“No...no” Harvey says shaking his head. “We need ta...”

Danny shakes his head.

The kids voices approach; loud, filthy and derogatory.

“Do what I say Harvey... and I swear on momma’s wings they’ll never bother you again” he says looking at him with raised eyebrows, “Ok?”

Harvey just looks, “Ok.” and nods as the kids pull up on the gravel road and dismount their

bikes.

“Get off my yard.” Dan says

“You the ones pelt my brother with rocks!” he says pointing at Harvey and looking over Danny who quickly blocks his aggressive walk towards.

“You the one got a thief for a brother!” Dan says walking right up and meeting the towering bully.

The bully breaks eye contact and looks around scanning the driveway, and empty garage.

“What you lookin for? My momma and daddy?”

The bully turns and looks with a smile. “Yeah.”

“No one’s home but...but here in a minute, I swear

ta God you gonna wish someone was.”

The kid smiles then looks around once more and then shoves him violently to the ground but Danny bounces right back up like a rubber ball.

“You stupid..he retarded or some’n.” he turns around to ask his friend and brother who just laughs.

“Get off my yard!” he says as Harvey walks forward. Dan puts his hand up and shoos him back.

“My kid brother wants his bike.”

“It wasn’t his bike.. like I said..you brothers rotten thief.” he yells and the kid

slugs him hard in the face. Danny fall to the ground, his nose busted and bleeding.

“I’m gonna beat ya till you admit it’s my brothers bike.” he says kicking him hard in the gut making all the wind coming out of Danny’s body.

“Stop it!” Harvey says and from the ground Danny extends his arm telling him non verbally to stay back.

The kid gets some momentum and tries to football kick again but this time Danny catches. His leg and bites down on the kids shin, hard.

The kid screams in agony and starts raining down blows seemingly doing little but creat-

ing more anger in the bullie’s blows. Dan tries to maintain his bulldog hold but begins to start losing consciousness as the kids sheer size is just too much.

“Stop it...stop it..get your brother off him!” Harvey yells, “He beatin him silly...get him off!” he yells to the little brother who seems to be losing his desire for revenge while witnessing the violence.

“Ok bro...I think he had enough.”

“Shut up! Let ‘em fight it out!!!” the other older kid yells.

“He’s too big! Let em up...” Harvey screams as the bully

pins his shoulders down with his knees raining blows at will.

“Is it my brothers bike...” he yells painting his knuckles blood red with Danny’s beaten face. “Huh!?” the kid says catching his breath.

Harvey charges at the kid but the older friend pulls Harvey off and slings him to the ground and kicks him, knocking his air out.

Danny looks through bloody eyes at Harvey and sees him rolling around.

“Whose bike is it?” the kid says before tagging him hard a few more times. “Hmm?” He says. Loading for another right hand.

Danny puts his hand up in a flinch.

“Ok...ok....It’s yours... it’s..its. yours..your brothers..your brothers....” Danny says crying.

The kid still mounted on top of him nods and then gets up.

“Where is it?”

Crying and sobbing Danny points with his eyes up towards the tree house where a red bike sets outside on full display.

Harvey on the ground holding his belly looks in disbelief at his friend who cries like a baby...something completely foreign to his personality.

“Good...good boy.” he says threatening another kick. Danny

flinches but the kid stops the kick right at the last second.

“Don’t hurt me no more.” he pleads.

The kids all laugh as they climb up the ladder while both Harvey and Danny lie on the gravel seemingly in defeat.

“We’re gonna take a big shit in your tree house.”

Danny remains on the ground and watches them go halfway up the ladder. He stands and rolls his neck and rubs his shoulder, his face a mess but now in a totally normal emotional state, the crying an apparent sham.

As soon as the last kid makes his way over the last ladder rung, Danny runs over

and kicks the ladder over and the tall ladder falls over like a massive tree.

The bullies go in the tree house and see it completely lined with newspaper glued and tacked to the wall.

“What you doin, Danny?” Harvey yells.

Danny doesn’t answer but runs over and pulls on several long ropes hanging from above that are attached to big five gallon drums sitting on the flattened roof of the tree house. He pulls on them hard, dumping several five gallon buckets over making gasoline rain and flow over the side and in the square cut out, glass-

less windows of the tree house.

One of the bullies looks through and sees it rain liquid down the sides and in and on the newspaper covered floor. He reaches out and sticks his hand in one of the large pour off streams coming off the side of the roof. It bathes his hand. "It's gasoline!!!! It's gasoline!!" the tough bully says his face immediately beginning to cry in terror.

The bully runs out and looks down at the very, very high tree and realizes there is no ladder and no way to jump without major injury.

Danny goes behind the tree-house where a massive bonfire

of logs and kindling and newspaper already pre-soaked in lighter fluid sits ready, Danny lights a match and in an instant the tree base bon fire goes up in flames and he watches with a bloody smile the flames begin licking and igniting the many separate lengths of flammable drenched wood rope that has been stapled to the tree and runs all the way up inter-lacing each other like overgrown vines that act like fuses. He watches as the fire climbs the vines and travel all the way up to the source, under, around and on the roof of the now gasoline dripping tree house which also becomes a

torch.

The bullies begin crying in terror and screaming and huddling over to the edge as their sight begins to become faint with all the smoke.

“Pull the ladder over! Pull the ladder over!” the head bully screams in tears as his little brother clutches on his lap in shock, not screaming or making a sound.

With a sinister grin, Danny shakes his head.

“Pull it over!” the kid screams knowing that he has fallen right into his trap.

“Danny?” Harvey says.

Danny looks behind him and then looks right back up.

“You ok?” Danny says with a grin as he looks up at them. The older big friend of the bully cries and his leg shakes as he get ready to jump off the little three story ledge.

“Come on.... jump...you can do it..come on!” Danny yells egging him on.

“Danny...they’re...they’re gonna cook Danny.”

“Let em cook.” he says as he walks over slowly to the drop sight of the first jumper. The big kid jumps and lands on his feet breaking his leg. The kid clutches his broken femur, screaming and when he looks up he sees Danny, with a running start, football kick him right

in the face with his boots.

“Danny...we got to get some help!!!” Harvey screams at his friend and in that moment, Danny looks over his shoulder and locks eyes with Harvey as he stands over one of his victims, and in this smoking backdrop of heat, fire, and grounded body reeling in agony is his friend who stands immune to the fire rain of smoldering leaves, falling with sway landing near, around and upon him, decorating his jacket with a glowing cigarette orange, this orchestra of it all seemingly not just in hell but a part of it. He looks at Harvey with eyes that tells that of a big smile. It is that

moment when Harvey gulps a bit with a fear, a fear of his best friend before running to go get help in an attempt to stop this weapon from spiraling more out of control.

The two kids still treed scream up top as the smoke and heat has begun to make them prepare to jump. The bully holds onto his little brother he takes the plunge and they both fall hard, separating in the air, the older brother seemingly taking most of the damage landing on his butt, causing an unknown injury that makes him scream in such agony he spins around the grass like a break dancer. Dan-

ny runs across the now smoky front yard, hops over the little brother who just lies on his knees coughing from the smoke inhalation and runs right over to his assaulter and kicks him right in the nose with his combat boot. The bully, once screaming in agony from the tail-bone injury now seems a bit muted from the kick in the face as he now quietly lays out flat his face shaded dark with smoke, his nose crooked and nostrils flowing bright red.

Danny jumps right on top of him and begins beating the kid with his fist.

“Whose bike is it?..hmm.... whose bike is er now??!!”

The kid just cries as he flails with his arms, but is helpless in his injured state.

“Whose...bike...is.... it?” he screams hitting the kid rhythmically matching his words.

“WHOSE BIKE IS IT????!!” he screams as the big, hairy forearms of a grown man wraps around Danny and pulls him off the kid.

Danny kicks and punches and bites frantically screaming in a rage as the sounds of fire trucks are heard and in the background multiple adults are running over to help the injured kids as the tree house is completely a spectacular demon-

stration of well-planned arson.

Louder than the fire trucks or the sounds of the roaring flames and falling limbs or gathering of people coming to witness and aid, or the crying and screaming of casualties is, is his voice and only his. This child of war whose artful orchestra of chaos burns the blue skies black as his sounds of rage echoes through the neighborhood with a scarring memory.

One of the adults slings him down and in the distance as police sirens accompany the fire trucks. And Harvey looks at the dog piled Danny bloody, dirty but with lazy eyes. Someone lifts him up to his knees

and a Sherriff hand cuffs Danny, no longer treating him like a child. Danny looks up to the skies, and opens his mouth and in the midst of it all feels the exhilaration of his gift that he shows with a genuine weeping.

And then he weeps and he cries in the moment of his demons rest, and he looks ahead and he looks to the green grasses and sky in the yonder and admires the colors like a painter or an artist and he sees the life, the life that he knows, the life that he has taken through eyes of a woman, and his heart bleeds like that of a mother, and he can

see the earth through the eyes of a simple man, up high in the hills, tending to the soil with the tooling stroke of a peasant sower, his work kept company by the simple thoughts of a moral farmer whose hands are stained only by the soil he tills and a peace given to him with every breath he takes.

He turns to Harvey and smiles and nods as the police officer picks him up and drags him roughly, putting him in the squad car.

And For this moment in time, he is one with the rest, normal in sound, morality and thoughts. He smiles as his ears begin to wake and sounds

of it all slowly begin to be heard. He feels the stirring in its wake and soon the restless clawing of that inside of him...that which makes him different, that which makes him warrior ... wakes again.

Facts:

Daniel Thomas Lundey enlisted in the Navy in 1968 while still in high-school. When depth perception problems disqualified him from his desire to be a fighter pilot he volunteered for the Naval Special Warfare Program and graduated from UDT/seals training in 1969. He served one tour in

Vietnam in which he was awarded the Medal of Valor. He died in action in the Mekong Delta in 1972.

Harvey Lee Cole went on to become an electrician and successful entrepreneur. He married and had two sons.



MR. SNEER

by Tobacco Jones

My name's Willemina and I'm twelve, and it's stupid but I'm a foster kid and my foster father, if you could call him that, is Mr. Sneer. I don't think he's ever had a day of fun in his whole life.

Yesterday was Sunday and Mr. Sneer offered us to go to church like always but we said no like always because I mean what could be lamer than that, right? Plus when he's out is one of the few times we get to watch TV. It's a little black and white tube on the floor

in the corner of the apartment, and you've got to turn a knob to change the channels. It stopped working once, a few years ago, but Mr. Sneer got a new antenna and put it up on the roof and then it worked again.

I've got a foster brother who's nine, named Jackjack, and he always follows me everywhere and he's a pain. I've also got a foster sister, Rochelle, she's fourteen and she hardly ever talks. She's new she just moved in, like, a couple of months ago or something and when she got here she would always wear sunglasses because when she took them off I could

see that she had two black eyes. Rochelle doesn't talk much, so it's up to me to make the fun around here.

Mr. Sneer got home from church and he came in the door and took off his heavy coat and his hat, which is an old fashioned black hat with a brim all the way around, and we were still watching TV because it was a kids cartoon, I mean for little kids, but it reminded me of being little and I liked it, and the others didn't complain.

"Watching too much television is unhealthy," said Mr. Sneer. "It is not good for your brain. Look at you, sitting there not moving, staring at

the television. You look like three little zombies."

"Rochelle always looks like a zombie," I said.

Rochelle looked at me and put her knuckle in her mouth and started bobbing her head.

Jackjack cackled and looked at me with his big eyes. Then he jumped up and ran around me and Rochelle twice like duck-duck-goose, except he didn't duck or goose anyone, and he sat back down.

"You all need to go outside and get some fresh air," said Mr. Sneer.

"Go outside and get some fresh air," I copied, trying to sound snotty like Mr. Sneer.

Jackjack smiled and clapped.

“Young lady,” said Mr. Sneer, “Your attitude requires improvement.”

“My attitude requires improvement,” I said.

Jackjack jumped up and ran this time around Mr. Sneer, who tried to catch him but missed.

“Young man!” said Mr. Sneer. “You’ll sit back down at once! Look what you’ve started, Willemina.

“I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care,” I said. “Leave us alone.”

“Leave us alone,” said Rochelle, super softly. I don’t think Mr. Sneer even heard her.

Mr Sneer walked right past

us and turned off the TV.

“That was rude!” I shouted. “Have some respect.”

“Fresh air,” said Mr. Sneer. “Outside. To the park.”

“The park’s dangerous,” I said. “This isn’t like, when you were a kid, like a hundred years ago. There’s drug dealers and pedos and gangs and stuff.”

“It is the middle of the day,” said Mr. Sneer. “The park is perfectly safe.”

“Then you come with us,” I said, trying to bluff him.

“I intend to,” he said, putting his hat back on his head but leaving the heavy coat on the hook.

“Oh, great,” I said, slap-

ping my forehead.

Jackjack slapped his own forehead and fell over backwards with his legs in the air.

Rochelle just kept biting her knuckle.

“Keep up,” said Mr. Sneer.

I swear his legs are longer than I am, and we all had to take three steps to his one. Jackjack ran behind us.

We went between these big white cement posts into the park. Some kind of gate used to be there, but now it's just rusty metal sticky-outy things. The posts had some ugly squiggly writing spray-painted on them. I had no idea what it

said.

The basketball court had some grass coming up in it and one of the backboards had no hoop, but the other one did have a hoop and some kid was out there throwing a basketball at it. A teenager, I think, a fat one. He would throw the ball with two hands and it would miss or bounce off the hoop or make the broken chains clink but he never got one in, that I saw.

Some other teenagers were coming the other way towards us, towards the court. They walked in some kind of way that I think means swagger, and I thought that was cool. We were

all behind Mr. Sneer because he walks so fast so I tried to do the swagger like the teenagers were doing, kind of like leaning out and moving my stuff around more, nodding.

Jackjack clapped and laughed and tried to do the same but he couldn't because he had to run to keep up with us. "Hold up," he said. "Hold up!"

Rochelle turned and saw what I was doing and her eyes got big and she got both knuckles from both hands up into her mouth.

Then the teenagers noticed.

"Whassup," a teenager said.

Up came out like a punch.

I stopped swaggering but I

said back to him anyway, just like he did, "Whassup, homie?"

I tried to make up sound like a punch too.

Mr. Sneer stopped and turned to see us, and Rochelle made a little squeak.

"Yo, yo, yo, yo, yo!" said Jackjack. He ran past us to the teenagers, who had also stopped, and he tried to run a circle around them but one of them stuck out his foot and Jackjack tripped onto the dirt and rocks and skidded a little bit. Jackjack got up super fast and ran back to us without even dusting off.

"Is there a problem?" said Mr. Sneer.

The teenagers — five of them, all boys — shifted around where they stood. They were medium to big sized, but no one was quite as tall as Mr. Sneer. A couple of them looked at the ground.

“No problem,” said the whasup teenager.

We walked past each other and the teenagers weren't swaggering so much anymore, but I bit my lip and started to swagger again myself. I don't think they saw me.

I heard a little scream from the basketball court and I looked back, and the fat kid was sitting down on the court and the teenagers had

his ball, and one of them was leaning over him with his fist out. “Want this?” he kept saying. “Want this?” The teenagers started throwing the ball to each other and up through the hoop.

Mr. Sneer heard it too, I guess, because we were all stopped and then before I knew it we all were walking back to the basketball court.

“Young man,” said Mr. Sneer. “You there! Young man holding the basketball. Please return it to this boy immediate—”

The teenager holding the ball threw it to another one.

“All of you,” said Mr. Sneer. “It is clear that you

constitute a menace to this park, and I insist that you return the ball to its rightful owner and then leave this place at once.”

Mr. Sneer had fancy words like that, and I learned what some of them mean but I won't never use them myself, I swear.

One of the bigger teenagers threw the ball at Mr. Sneer really hard, and it bounced right off of him and rolled back to another teenager, who picked it up. This one looked scared. Mr. Sneer walked quickly to him, and he held the ball out and Mr. Sneer took it.

“Now leave this place,” said Mr. Sneer. “At once.”

“You gonna let him do you like that, Rondo?” said the big teenager who threw the ball. “You gonna let that old man take your ball?”

“It's not his ball!” yelled Jackjack. “It's the fat kid's ball!”

The fat kid was scooching away from everyone on his butt, heading right off the court.

“Hit 'im,” said the big kid. “Hit 'im, Rondo, I got your back.”

And the big kid moved up behind Rondo and the others moved up behind him, but not really behind because they were spreading out sort of half way around us.

Rondo still looked pretty scared to me, but he put his fists up anyway and said, "Gim-maballback."

"Leave this place," said Mr. Sneer, quietly. "Before you get into some real trouble."

"Hit 'im."

"Comon Rondo," another kid said. "Knock his old ass out."

"I'll have you know," said Mr. Sneer, "I was an accomplished boxer in my army days. Twenty-two and six, was my record, and—"

Rondo took a swing but it was a big looping swing that didn't come anywhere near Mr. Sneer, who didn't even have to move out of the way. Instead,

Mr. Sneer turned and made pushing back motions at us, and told us to get off the court.

Mr. Sneer turned back to Rondo and made his hands into fists and held them low like an old fashioned boxer you see in pictures, and he moved his fists around in little circles as he approached Rondo. He walked at Rondo and jabbed the air with one fist. Rondo started bouncing on his feet and jabbing the air too, but he was backing up so I knew he was definitely scared.

Rondo and Mr. Sneer circled around, real slow, and the big teenager who threw the ball and kept saying to hit 'im started

sneaking up behind Mr. Sneer.

Jackjack was bouncing up and down and Rochelle was literally shaking in her shoes but I was just standing there. In my mind I was thinking, "Hit him."

Rondo and Mr. Sneer punched at the air some more, and then the big kid ran in real fast and threw this gigantic punch right into the side of Mr. Sneer's face.

It was funny because Mr. Sneer's hat sort of stayed where it was, in the air where his head used to be, but his head wasn't there anymore. Mr. Sneer's head went way over to one side and he sort of looked up at the basketball hoop, I

had no idea why, and then his body started falling forward. But his butt was falling backwards at the same time and I was thinking about how they say the butt is the heaviest muscle, the gloutymaxamus or something—and then it hit me that Mr. Sneer had an actual butt! And it seemed so funny that I actually laughed out loud.

But Mr. Sneer was trying to fall two ways at once and it couldn't work, and his butt won the battle and his whole body snapped back up and around and then I heard his head hit the court with a sound like a clock tick, but only the first time not the second time after it

bounced.

“Daaayum,” somebody said.

Then they were saying things like, “Kay Tee Eff OH,” and, “Worldstar!” and I had no idea what any of it meant. One of the teenagers was holding his phone up taking video while two others went into Mr. Sneer’s pockets and turned them inside out and took all the stuff that came out. Another teenager took off Mr. Sneer’s watch.

Jackjack was jumping up and down and punching the air with his fists, and Rochelle was chewing both of hers.

“Do you ever do anything?” I said to Rochelle.

But I didn’t hear if she

said anything back because the big kid suddenly leaned over Mr. Sneer and started punching him more in the side of his face. The punches were really fast and it looked like they must have hurt, but Mr. Sneer wasn’t saying anything, just laying there moving his head back and forth with the blows.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

“Oh, hey, Wall,” said Rondo.

Eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen.

These ones were right down into the middle of Mr. Sneer’s face, like onto his nose, and that’s when a lot of blood started coming out.

“Hey, hey, Wall, he’s out.”

“Naw, leave him.”

“Yo, he’s out, dog.”

“Wall!”

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen.

Wall was smashing Mr.

Sneer’s face with his elbow now. I dunno, maybe his fist got tired.

Mr. Sneer started to make an f noise like ffffffff, and his arms came up from his sides into the air a little ways and stayed there.

The other teenagers pulled Wall up off Mr. Sneer and kept saying things like they were saying before, like leave it, and he’s out, and you whupped him, dog.

Mr. Sneer’s arms were still up, like he was trying to hand them something.

“You don’t have the basketball anymore,” I thought at Mr. Sneer.

Then the teenagers started walking away and laughing but Wall must have got mad about something cause he ran back and kicked Mr. Sneer in the head a couple times before the others came back and got him.

Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, stomp.

Mr. Sneer’s hands were still in the air and they started moving around in time with the kicks, and he looked like a conductor and his knees

were the musicians. After the big stomp at the end, Mr. Sneer's toes pointed out and hands turned into fists and he started making a lot of noises that sounded like f's and h's, and gurgling sounds when he breathed in, and big growls when he breathed out, and it all sounded very weird.

Then the teenagers must have got scared because they all ran away fast.

But it didn't matter because Mr. Sneer just laid there on the court pointing his toes and holding up his arms and going gurgle, gurgle, growl. Gurgle, gurgle, growl.

I swear we waited for Mr. Sneer to wake up for at least an hour. He stopped holding up his arms and growling after about ten or twenty minutes, but he wouldn't do anything else. He just laid there with his eyes open, breathing hard and not saying anything. Nobody else ever came.

Mr. Sneer's face and his neck were red from blood and his nose had a new shape, like an S. He looked funny without his hat, and his hair which is a comb-over style hairdo had come undone, or uncombed or whatever, and it was blowing back and forth in the breeze, like his head was calling out

for help.

But no one came, and I didn't know what to do and neither did the others, so we just had to wait. So we just waited.

After a really long time, Mr. Sneer started blinking his eyes and moving around a little. He kept trying to say something to us but his words were all thick and messed up and I don't know what it was. It sounded like Felp-ee. Felp-ee.

Rochelle went over and stood next to Mr. Sneer and stared down at him, and Jackjack ran a circle around them both, punching at the air along the way.

I swaggered over and said,

“Yo, can we get out of here already?”

But it was ten more minutes for Mr. Sneer to even sit up, and another half hour before he could stand because whenever he would try, his legs would wobble and he would stagger around like he was drunk, like my real dad used to do, and then he would fall back down.

Thinking of my dad made me angry because even though he only ever drank and slept, at least he stayed alive. He was out there somewhere. My mom had started doing meth right after my dad left, and she died pretty soon after that. Then it was just me left, and these tired

looking nurse type people took me away and I was someplace bad for a while, until they decided to give me to Mr. Sneer. Some life.

“Can we please get out of here?” I said to Mr. Sneer again.

It was easy to keep up with Mr. Sneer on the way back to the apartment building, and inside he kept having to stop and sit down on the stairs on the way up. Jackjack must have run up and down the stairs a million times while Rochelle and I waited for Mr. Sneer to move.

When we finally got to the top of the stairs, to our door, Mr. Sneer felt his pockets for

the key and came up with nothing.

“Key,” he said.

Then Mr. Sneer started throwing up, but he closed his mouth quick to keep it in, but it was too much pressure I guess because the puke came squirting out of both sides of his mouth like a fountain. A lot of puke came out.

“Go to the landlord,” said Mr. Sneer when he was finally done puking. “In 1-G.”

“Me?” I asked him. “Are you kidding me?”

“Please,” he said. Then he laid down in his puke and closed his eyes, and I realized that if I didn’t go get a key

we might never get in.

“I’ll go,” said Jackjack.

“No,” I said. “They’ll never give a key to a nine year old.”

Then I turned to Rochelle.

“Why don’t you go?” I asked.

“OK, I will,” she said, and she turned to go.

“You talked!” I said. “Hey, you’re going to have to talk again when you get to 1G! You have to ask for a key!”

After we finally got into the apartment, Mr. Sneer went into his bedroom and closed the door.

The three of us sat down on the floor near the TV.

“Turn it on,” said Jackjack.

“You turn it on,” I said.

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll give you some of what Mr. Sneer got!” I said, standing up and throwing some punches and kicks in the air.

Jackjack laughed and clapped. “Hit ‘im,” he said. “Hit ‘im!”

Rochelle flinched and got up from the TV floor area and went across the room and sat down in the corner and hugged her knees.

I swung a fake punch past Jackjack and he fell down on the ground and started making noises and lifting his arms up, then he was trying to growl but his voice was too high and it ruined it, it ruined every-

thing, and then he was crying hard and sobbing.

I bit my lip and stared at Jackjack.

“Weak,” I said. “Just weak.”

Then my eyes started getting wet and I had to turn away so Jackjack wouldn’t see and I could see Rochelle in the corner and she was shaking and her shoulders were moving up and down.

I didn’t want her to see either so I ran into the bathroom quick and closed the door and I cried and cried and cried.

Weak.

Just weak.



POEMS

by Howie Good

Lost in Candy Land

1

A series of nudes rode across the stage on ostriches and camels under the admiring gaze of former Nazis in tuxedos. I have never been able to understand the attraction, have you? Afterward, in a reflective mood, I decided to voyage into the new American home. The closer I got, the thicker the fog became. There was no longer a near and a far. And to think that once you could make a .22

caliber zip gun for under \$20.

2

Are you sad? Do you feel bitter? As a child, were you whammed on the side of the head, pulled from sleep and whammed with a fist or a belt or a hairbrush the way I was? I think of it whenever I happen to see the old black-and-white newsreels of Nazi Germany invading Poland, a place like the stomach of an ox.

3

The star-shaped holes twinkle and undulate, and there's even a skinny old man with gigantic wings. Uniforms wander

in and out of the moonlight.
A woman uses her left hand to
splay her sex. It can be hard
for newcomers to adjust. "F
as in fucked up," I'm shout-
ing into my phone. This week
the neighbors peel the address
numbers off their mailboxes.
Next week, who knows? Perhaps
denazification of the archi-
tecture. Call me back, please,
with all 12 reasons Pink should
be a role model for our daugh-
ters.

My Chagall, Your Picasso

The cow, a human baby float-
ing inside it, flies over the
red cellophane rooftops of the
shtetl, while you and then me
and then a man with the unusual
last name of Schlong, who died
in his sleep in 2012 at age 60,
pass through airport security
no problem, because one little
bird, a small eternity, perched
on the pole of the backyard
batting tee.

Couples Therapy

Everyone has the same question: How do you say “fellatio” in French? It’s like the full body scan at the airport except I’m lying on my back, and the light convulses for the simple reason that it can, God’s spies on Earth shutting their eyes to the flashes of darkness more than a hundred feet tall.



LEARN HOW TO CRY

by Stephanie Johnson

Sweet pea, my savings account gathers dust and I pray every time I start my damn car. This is all I have over you: more scars and more hurt in my heart. I have memorized where the bombshells lie.

I must stress to you, I'm no God. I don't have all the answers.

You succeed. That's what I'm writing to tell you: breathe deep, feel the air go through your lungs and your belly. I would never lie to you.

Staring into a mirror in a public bathroom, I learned your eyelids do puff up when you cry hard enough. In the past two years, I've studied how I feel when I'm about to spill over. I'm practiced at clearing a stuffed nose.

I cannot unclench my jaw when the tears start. That's my next project.

You stare at the world through the windows of your school bus, searching for Saddleback Mountains and dry grass. But you see rain and retention ponds; nothing is familiar here. The air smells

fresh, not like dust. You are used to the scent of wild fire, carried over the Santa Ana winds.

I spent over a year in counseling: leather couches, wadded tissues, listening, titled heads. I've done the work, but I'm never done.

It's hard to maintain good self-talk when you're bathing in awkward newness. Laura told me to value my story. I'm already clenching my fists.

You cry alone in your purple bedroom, missing everything familiar: your mountains, your friends, your theatre compa-

ny, your shopping plazas, your church, your childhood being mere feet away.

In your bookstore-bought journals, you scribble that you're okay.

You aren't.

Rename your tear ducts Tragedy and Mourning. Cry as much as you need and light candles in vigil.

Fire and angst can rage from the ends of your hair in static.

Claim your right to be Not Okay.

No one warns you about growing up, about comforting yourself when you're broken. No one

tells you when you're playing hopscotch or house: eventually, you're going to have to hold your own arms as you weep. At the end of the day, that's who you've got, kid. Lovers and friends help, but who holds you when you're alone?

Your friends are stretched across the map. You squeeze their memories in your fists, punch them at potential companions in this land of humid summer.

Friendships are not a monogamous phenomenon, dear-heart. You can find possibilities here, amid the hurricanes and summer rain of Central Florida.

These are people you expect to graduate from after high school, but they surprise you by traveling through adulthood with you. They will blunder with you through the tumult of first jobs and first apartments, of moving and rent, coupling up and breaking up, and down payments on less shitty cars.

That girl with criss crossed arms will photograph one of the happiest moments of your life.

That boy who covers his pain with electric guitar will one day be your lover. His emotions will light your future like lanterns.

“I’m okay. I’m okay. You’re alright, you’re alright.” I’ve created a chorus I breathe to myself every time I cry into my pillow. I wind my fingers through my own hair, the way my mother did when I was a child.

You found the dandelions growing from the cracked sidewalk in Long Beach beautiful because they punched up through concrete.

This miracle occurs in Florida, too: saw-grass grows through rivers beds, thrives in the currents, and pushes up through the water to grow.

I try to love myself the

best I can in watery moments. I line the bottom of my purse with Kleenex and Advil. Sometimes, I just grit my teeth.

Sweetheart, your parents love you, despite your cross-house shouts of “whatever!” and the repeated whispered chorus of “fuck you”. Over the next fifteen years, you navigate this balance with a compass of DNA strands and text messages.

Light a candle each time you have an honest conversation with Mom and Dad. Celebrate it like a birthday cake.

Because I was tired of using paper sheets, I snuck into my

father's bedroom and stole his hankchief.

Your parents have forgotten how fifteen feels. They try to help, like a lion teaching a giraffe to roar. Your slammed-door emotions bewilder them.

There's nothing wrong with reminding them that high school resembles an untended fire in a forest of dry leaves.

Ask Dad about his school dances, to remind him what awkward feels like. Invite Mom dress shopping with you so you can learn other women's bodies aren't just magazine kindling.

I stole the blank white han-

kerchief in my father's underwear drawer, the one no one would miss. I could pretend I'd inherited, rather than thieved. The cliché "I don't know what came over me" isn't true. I ached to transform my emotions into beautiful moments; a flourish of a hankie is graceful. I still carry it in my purse.

Here's how your parents love you. You wear a beautiful sky blue dress to homecoming junior year. You begged it down from a thrift store window, where it posed as a beacon. It follows your body like wax until your hips and then poofs into a

flame of tulle. A boy will ask you to dance.

His class ring will catch the material as he grabs your ass.

You, rightfully, slap the bastard and march away.

The tulle will tear.

You will call your father and mother crying.

They will drive forty-five minutes to pick you up.

They will buy you McDonald's.

You will scoff,

but also feel like a princess because, despite the tear in your dress, you are the prettiest creature that McDonald's has ever seen.

Your parents love you like this.

I pretend to be a graceful woman. Emily Post was always prepared, a lady. That's what the hankie means to me. An attempt to prepare myself for the hurricane of tears.

Keep that dress, even with the torn fabric.

Do not cut the straps from the shoulders, trying to make it sexy.

Let it be beautiful and innocent still.

Years later, you'll miss it when you forget what it's like to be fifteen and delicate.

Keep that dress.

Stephanie feels like a name you must dust and shine, something gilded and breakable. I am made of rubber—stretching thin, but I always bounce back. I value lovely heirlooms, but am not one myself.

Precious girl, you will start flirting and kissing boys and sneaking off to dark corners of the theatre. Your heart will alternate between decorating the ceiling and dirtying the tile. You will start experimenting with sex.

You are completely allowed.
Sew your own sexuality and

wrap yourself in its warmth.

The shame that you feel about sex was made by men in crowded churches, not God. The furrow-browed pastors and stern-voiced fathers are trying to care for you in all the wrong ways.

This said, wear your own damn armor and don't shed it unless you feel safe. "Safe" does not mean "alone and your parents won't find out." Safe rhymes with the following words: respected, honored, sometimes even loved.

Talk to that boy about your boundaries: tell him it's never okay to tell other people where you like to be touched.

Discuss everything with the thoroughness of a wildfire.

I treat my name with fragility because I've betrayed it in the past.

Honey, wear these words like a beautiful gown: you are allowed to be different.

If your older sister asks you to read your journal out loud on a train and your stomach scrapes the filthy falling-apart carpet, say so. Don't pour your heart out right there because you were commanded to do so. Set strong boundaries.

Simultaneously, when that same sister says "he's too old

for you," she's speaking the truth. Separate her words from her guilt-tripping.

Your younger sister keeps your play programs. Even though you always feel like the dumb one in comparison, sisterhood should never be a contest.

Here's a lesson you must learn, a damn hard one: how do I care for this broken creature, this tiny shard of blown glass?

When that boy leaves you in the dusty theater balcony in nothing but your bra and panties, carrying your floral dress over his shoulder like a winged

trophy, that's power play.

He's carrying your sexuality away with him like he won you. He isn't being clever or cocky or cute.

You did not consent to abuse.

No one owns you like that, sweetheart. To hell with the boy who tries.

I belittle my pain: Well, yes, but I always had food. No one ever hit me.

Caring for myself means my lack of voice is infuriating. It means standing up for myself and my story.

Lovely, stop throwing peo-

ple to the wind like slips of paper. Don't toss away friendships when they stop being easy.

All the gossip you pile on the Reputation Funeral Pyre makes you look bad. Grudges don't match with maturity and everyone forgets what they're about eventually.

Every heart functions with the same machinery as yours.

I cried through two soggy years. I filled trash cans with crumpled tissues, found space to tuck Kleenexes away across my apartment. Eliot wrote that he measured life in teaspoons; I've done so in tissue boxes.

Sweetheart, when you break up with a boy you've been dating on and off, leave it off. Don't reignite old flames with a gas station lighter.

There was a reason you left in the first place and it was a damn good one, too.

Trust your emotions. When a boy makes you cry twice a week, it may be a good indication he does not care about your feelings. You deserve fire and passion; do not settle for unanswered phone calls and secret hallway glances.

Last night in class, I cleared my throat and began. "I

. . . have been here four days
. . ."

I broke down to small pieces in front of twenty strangers. Their bewildered faces were blurred. I pursed my lips and bit my tongue, but everyone else was leaning in, nodding their heads.

Ignore the titles of "pretty" or "preppy" or "goth". Focus on the people, not their labels; friends aren't designer clothing.

Some of these women tell you you're beautiful when you aren't wearing make-up. Some of them buy you flowers when you're single.

One of them shares a secret—she didn't like you when you first met because you seemed too elegant.

Stick your tongue out once in a while. Restore your ability to be goofy.

How do I put everything together without sounding predictable: what do I have to say that a thousand women before me haven't?

Marvelously messy, Laura said.

Dear one, eat. Eat vanilla ice cream and Kraft mac and cheese. Eat chocolate chip cookies and roast beef and

fresh pineapple and strawberry yogurt.

Not eating won't get you attention from boys. It will get you in sobbing fights with your mother in the kitchen. She'll cry when you turn down pineapple-carrot-raisin salad, a previous favorite. Eat, sugar.

The boy you're trying to impress by just eating half an apple and a diet coke will become his alcoholic father after graduation.

Four years from now, you will see him in a bar and he will be fat. His fingers will smell of piss, his breath of cigarettes. He shaves all that dreamy, curly hair into a ter-

rible buzz cut.

Goddamn it, I thought. How am I going to get through this intact?

If someone tells you, "You really shouldn't be so emotional," fuck them.

Your emotions are valid.

Love cannot be easy and honest at the same time.

I've starved my body. I've screamed at my parents. My emotions are a multi-color wheel of pain and joy and sorrow. And they are mine. This is my story.

Dear girl, when offered your first drink in college, when all the bottles look the same, when you don't know what to ask for, when five gay men shout that "we're doing shots, bitches," when their one straight friend leers at you from the corner couch, ask for vodka and sprite.

Or just the sprite.

Do not just point and pick. Tequila is not a good choice, ever, but especially when you're one hundred and twenty pounds and haven't eaten in four hours.

Last night, Laura discussed "your holy voice". My voice?

Holy? Haunted felt more apt.

When a man with glazed-over eyes and too-friendly hands tells you to stay and dance, listen to your feet. Leave that room. March away, armed with your kick-ass black stilettoes and all the confidence that you're worth more than the whiskey on his breath.

Going into the pain, I trek through the stalagmites of my emotions.

College isn't an ivory-towered escape after the hell of high school. Graduation doesn't have confetti. Some of college

looks like the insides of a trash can. The six months after graduation set my tolerance for crushed dreams.

I open myself to my story-fingers ready.

God doesn't speak the language of guilt.

Anyone who tries to convince you otherwise sees God as a pinhole. You have always seen God as a kaleidoscope. Until now, you've been handed a warped, crooked tube. Churches and youth group and reading your Bible doesn't make a god.

Years from now, an old man, a poet, will quote Lenny Bruce

to you: “Every day, people are straying away from the church and going back to God.”

Sweet pea, you find peace in your soul the moment you stop attending church.

I’ve felt like damn near every woman in the Bible—Ruth in pain, Esther in fear, Mary in self-abuse. Let yourself feel like Hannah: joyful.

After years of not valuing them, I push the stories out of my belly, and empty my gullet onto the page.

Loved one, write.

Write like a crazy mother-fucker.

Who cares about rejection? Do it anyway.

Write. Write at your desk in the bedroom. Write on napkins at Starbucks. Write in notebooks on the bus. Keep all of it.

Don’t worry about careers and a 401 (k). These things will come, and then you’ll leave them to go on another adventure.

You’ll find, my dear, that the best opportunities worm their way into your life without you having much say about it.

Trust these gifts. This letter proves you can do it.

Small me I see in childhood
pictures, lovely me I see when
I cry, forgive yourself for de-
siring more than humanity.

Take long walks. Buy flow-
ers. Love yourself, dearest. Be
gentle and caring.

You are the stuff that makes
up the universe.

You are stardust,
fire,
a phoenix.

You burn and get up again.
This letter is proof. If all
the dumb, lovable, sweet-idi-
ot shit you did worked out, I
wouldn't be here, writing to
you. Thank you for not getting
it all right.

Write what you feel. Listen
to yourself; listen to the song
emerging from your throat and
your fingers.

Lastly,
Forgive yourself
again
and again
and again.

This will be a theme.

Forgive yourself for trying
to be perfect.

Forgive yourself for being
less than.

Forgive yourself for stupid
mistakes.

Forgive yourself for beating
yourself up.

Accept the freckled, dimpled skin you have. Accept the story you're telling. Accept the well of pain and the overabundance of joy.

Stephanie, be as magical as you feel. Don't let anyone, not even someone you love, tell you otherwise.

All of my love to you, dearest. Keep burning bright.

Amen and amen.



POEMS
by Denny E. Marshall

Tab in start menu
Text said turn off computer
Stood by screen naked

The light of the stars
In view tonight is not real
Old photos from past

NEOTERIC

by Carl Scharwath

Indigo searching
for stars on
new moon nights.
Give a renaissance,
an enlightenment,
of the iridescent sky.
Transfigured and alone
time to transform
in a different light.

POEMS

by henry 7. reneau, jr.

Angeltown

haud ignota loquor

demons & devils are conjured up
mired in tar pits of velvet fog
Chinese-juggling self-interests &
political correct altruism . . .
self-made beasts of the field
sacrificing the weak, the infirmed & the slow,
invisible to the deaf & dumb
cold-shouldering neglected ghosts
with bloated bellies & puncturedminds
spread-eagled in nightmare marginalization
on Wilshire Blvd . . .

phantom prophets exiled to dementia,
mayhap, strangers at the door,
beat gangsta' rap tempos on newsstands,
hawking gloom & linear doom
at the commercial break of materialism . . .

demons & devils are conjured up
miming red, white & blue cluster-flock,
refusing heaven for a secular city on the hill
grazing glass, steel & cemented savannahs
as CNN ticker tapes imminent danger
that slinks & stealthy soft shoes;
each lemming generation
preens the feathers of the phoenix,
assimilated biologic & technologic
& fanning the flames of self-immolation,

reborn, to walk the razor-edged tightrope,
see covet take destruction & death . . .

demons & devils are conjured up
as distant travelers & magicians,
freshly showered & Starbucks caffeinated
cell drone chatterers & instant text messengers,
He[al]ter Skelter a go-go,
driving the language of exploit & dominate
in fossil-fueled Nissan Armadas & Cadillac Escalades;
they dream to sleep the unreal lie,
while broken sword in hand,
Feuchere's Satan envies blind angels with blackened wings

henry 7. reneau, jr.

channel 7 at 11

The suicide note was vague: alone, we suffer . . .
as death proved to be her most literary moment.

Everybody's heard the story.

How everything went wrong, enumerated in titillating detail:
the *objective* bias & rumor, tabloid speculation &
gossip . . . the guest *expert* opinion.

Film at 11.

henry 7. reneau, jr.

nagel's chalk-white woman

Alluring, yet elusive, and possessing
an innate intelligence
coupled with malleable features—
she sometimes seemed plain, but beautiful,
often in the same shot

—a movie reviewer's take
on Cate Blanchett

chalk-white woman
implies pornography
with a touch of wanton majesty;

wickedly sensual & erotic,
an imposing predatory feline allure,
elusive inamorata

AP International . . .
(bold front-page headline)

NAGEL CAPTURES NYMPH

obsidian tresses,
a crown of persuasion, a siren's solicitation,
loose strands of hair caress the ear;
promiscuity
sweetened passion: juicy
honey-sweet nectarine on a hot
summer day

NAGEL CAPTURES JEWEL DE'NYLE

seductively coy arms crossed, self-embrace
de amour,
obscures, without hiding,
chalk-white breasts

optional:
rose-pink nipples
to match rose-pink lips

henry 7. reneau, jr.

ACTOR-MAGICIAN-DREAMER

by Jess Mize

The boy lived mostly within the confines of his imagination, which was a limitless thing much more wide than the real world. His inscape was a spectacular globe theatre in which all the costumes and set pieces of history and phantasy existed just exit of stage left.

Did the neighbour girl from the trailer across the street want a bit of IT this evening? The young boy could summon orange pompom buttons, sharp gleaming yellow teeth, and white chalk as face paint

and become Pennywise the Clown just as she pleased. Chanting, "we all float" melodically with sinister undertones that could make her both break out in gooseflesh and giggle rhythmically in equal measure.

His voice was the sliding scale of infinite variety and keys. As pretty and soothing as the gentle rush of water over rocks, or it could be harsh and violent like spring hail on tin tattered rooftops, or breathlessly lovely like Fred Astaire's singing, "I'm in heaven, I'm in heaven, when we're dancing to cheek

to cheek.” And he could don that top hat, black jazz-age elegance, slipping it out from some surreal chasm created just for your eyes only. If Fred Astaire was the man for you.

Did his older brother want to be at the baseball game across the bay in San Francisco that evening? To their shitty strip of a back yard with a half inflated, scum-coated kiddie pool and a vicious ugly chihuahua as the only décor, the young boy could fathom out of the air a beautiful expanse of red-leathered bricks that was entire right field wall of the chic Pacific-bell park, and all the dinghys and jet ski’s cir-

cling the San Francisco bay that lie just beyond. In their shitty, trailer-park back yard would be all the luxuriant trimmings of freshly manicured grass, the sweat-tobacco laced earthy smell of the baseball players themselves, and the bellowing,

auctioneer quality call of “peanuts, popcorn, cold beer!” If the young boy’s brother listened closely he could even hear the waves of the sea lapping at the walls of the baseball field.

But his older brother was focused on the game itself, where his favourite player (in-

sert rando player name/ make one up) was up to bat with the bases loaded, down by three in the bottom of the ninth.

But his older brother was a jerk and baseball was banal. So the young boy tore down that wall with his mind's eye and his older brother would come out of his daze, blinking frantically with just the faint etchings of a panoramic sky view of the baseball field, the San Francisco bay. And he would barely hear the static echo of Chris Berman's voice booming over 3,000 watt surround sound speakers, "back, back, way back, that one is gone."

The young boy was an actor. He had stains on his teeth and scars on his wrists. He loved to daydream, he loved to wallow around to his favourite sad indie music, but most of all he loved to entertain. To be entertained was charming, but to be entertaining was enchantment itself. It was the buzz of a magical spell, a fantastical light-headedness that preceded and followed along with his visionary alchemy (chemistry).

The images he created were crystallised champagne bubbles that his audience not only thought and saw and felt, but tasted as well. Tasted with

all the longings of their secret selves. The young boy could make your dreams taste like beautiful sparkles.

2

The thrill of applause was one like no other. A standing ovation was a rush of adrenaline like kissing your high-school crush. Except with the ovation, there was the roar not only of your

heart throbbing in your ears, there was an actual roar of communal approval over not a romantic affectation, but of a cosmically understood feeling of everything that was beautiful, of anything being possi-

ble if the actor's spirit moved you.

He could repeat gestures, scenes over and over without them losing any of their sentimental original transience. His performance with each successive turn was the shape of things to come, the protean possibilities of what might be, if only one were fortunate enough to believe. Or earnest enough to be entertained.

The young boy learned in one fell swoop of his powers and of the neurotic, mysterious trance of performance art. It was like seeing lightning strike a natural object right in front of your eyes, the

electrical force penetrating your mind and becoming a live, vibrating current in the conduit of your brain waves.

It first happened how situations occurred and developed in dreams. There was a floating ethereal quality to all the material objects and people around him, and he was able to summon thoughts from the unexplored geography of his mind, ideas and images he did not consciously know. Materialistic emanations that neither he nor anyone else had ever even imagined.

He had been ten years old then, the son of a creeper, I mean preacher, in suburban Los

Angeles. Everyone was a creeper in Los Angeles. The professional creepers and the amateurs comprised all the people that made the city their home. There were not truly any real actors in the city at all, just professionals of another sort. It seemed like every last one of them. Perhaps not Edward Droste or Rostam Batmangli.

It was hard to breathe in that city but most likely at about the same rate as anyplace else. Exhaust fumes mingled invisibly with the air in perfect progress of the modern age, in all places,

at all times. But Los Angeles was special because it

was where narcissists came from all over the earth to say their lines and groom their own egos in the mirrors of each other's eyes. In the

billions of liquid crystal displays that typical Americans interacted with more than with their own minds, their own hearts.

The UV rays of the sunlight came through a porous combustible smog and while it was always sunny and 67 degrees, the sun never warmed your skin and it was beyond goddamn unhealthy. There was no humidity. The young boy had not recalled sweating since his family moved to Califor-

nia. That sticky-sweet sweat that had been an enervating, enjoyable memory of his earlier years back in the south. There were no flowers and all the landscape design of the city itself felt like one of the fake plastic sets of a slick studio over in the Hollywood lots. Although sets was an antiquated term since nearly all films were made now on location using real life landscapes, architecture, and interior design. Only the production remained as a strictly local Los Angeles business.

The young boy had been in church service at the Methodist chapel listening to his fa-

ther give a droning, nonsensical sermon about Noah and his sons. It was a story his father harped on at the dinner table and in the aisles of the Clean Air Grocery in the blocks uptown. It made the young boy laugh to hear it and he would sometimes repeat comical variations of his father's orations to his brother late at night on the fate of the lineage of Noah's sons.

The setting was a Sunday evening in mid-April. The sky outside the chapel was a languid blue-grey etching of Van Gogh. Through the stained-glass eyes of the chapel windows, the light outside could

have been absolutely any tint at all. It was a really, laid back congregation of the faithful at his father's Methodist church, but they tithed well. The young boy thought it was interesting that everyone in their fellowship was white. And not only white, so spooky white, where a stuffy sticky normal vibe clung to their shadows like the smog clung to the L.A. air. He wondered why different ethnicities did not come together to worship their god or gods like they joined in sporting events, professional settings... at movie theatres. In the middle of his thoughts, as his father was pontificating

on Ham's offense and the church members sat listening in less than rapt attention, a break in the ordinary elements of reality occurred. It was as if an earthquake began in the center of the young boy's brain, opening up a portal of extraordinary proportions. This was transmitted outwards as a rupture in the chapel.

It didn't occur with any conscious, pro-active effort. One moment the young boy was within his personal, exotic inscape and the next it was projecting out from his mind and into the folds of the world around him. The shapes of things shifted in a kaleido-

scopic rotation like fireworks going off that were affixed to frames.

The evening twilight warped with an air of condensation and a starless black night opened above the congregation. The church in the sunny, somnambulistic suburbs of L.A had amazingly transposed and the audience was in the amphitheater of the Hollywood Bowl off Highland Avenue. There were now members of all races at a concert and the young boy was suddenly Kanye West, up on the stage. Instead of tweeds he was now wearing ray bans and a backpack, a gold knitted sweater over a white pinstriped but-

ton down. Blue jeans and fresh white kicks. Adidas of course. And he was screaming out, "then I hope this take away from my sins/ and bring the day that I'm dreaming about/ next time I'm in the club everybody screamin out JESUS WALKS." He sang a few of the early hits but stuck mostly to his own personal favourite, My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy. He reluctantly skipped "The Blame Game" as this was unfortunately in reality still a church service. At the end of his set Kanye West said, "ya see, it aint gotta be just some white folks all together worshipping god," and dropped the mike to

reverberating applause.

3

Richard began spending all his time at the elementary school on the internets. He would google random phrases that would extraordinarily just pop into his head. He knew he was looking for something specific. That's why he was using google. But his thoughts and the phrases that came to his mind at first were so vague.

He was in a quest for information that would somehow explain his new state of existence. His parents looked at him funny now. He felt queer. A lightness had settled over

his being. He began to glide through the ordinary tasks of life in a dreamy haze. The things he did, it didn't feel to him that he was actually doing them. His sensations had not been dulled or stripped from him, but it appeared that things were not happening to him at all, that he was somehow outside of his own body and watching with only a slight, dream-like interest.

Instead of sleeping at night, of letting his mind lie inert through the dark hours, projecting and creating nothing outside of his inscape, he began sneaking out of his bedroom window and making excursions

through Wilshire Boulevard. To Hollywood and Vine. He wanted an audience. Richard wanted a response to the rôles and stages he had been creating up until now only for himself. It was lonely within the vast expanses of his magical inscape. His thoughts were so loud that they threatened to burst his eardrums. The deafening, confusing noise came from within, and the only way to escape it was to perform.

Los Angeles during the day was pure shit. Shit through and through, thought Richard. But at night the city was transformed. It was absolutely golden. The palm trees were

enchanted. There were thousands and thousands of them and the thick fronds of the Canary Island date palms of Santa Monica and Beverly Hills gave way to city streets lined with the towering Mexican fan palms at precise 100 foot intervals on either side, giving one the impression of a guarded entrance towards something secret and impossibly beautiful.

The lights of the buildings gave off the quality of real illumination and were like the stars in the night, where the city itself had somehow formed its own private galaxy. The dreadful intense traffic of the day was dispelled,

and it was gorgeous to see the cars zoom past in quick intermittence along L.A.'s gigantic freeway infrastructures. Like watching the sleek, pretty cars in a Formula 1 race.

The Library tower stood out among the flat-roofed L.A. buildings as a lighthouse beacon would at sea. It was queen of the city and the iridescent blue gleam of its glass crown top brought a feeling of intense hope to the young boy's heart.

Richard took the MTA from Brentwood down along Wilshire Boulevard. To the other passengers he appeared as a striking thirtyish black woman in

a pinstripe suit. Elegant, straight black hair, carrying a briefcase that she lived out of, and a Bodega purse.

From the Jewish temple on Wilshire she got off the metro and hailed a cab, giving directions to take her/Richard to Hollywood and Vine. He wasn't entirely sure of himself, and it was as if someone or something had taken over his will and his conscious processes had hit upon an automatic drive.

Richard got out of the cab and took in the scene with a questioning purpose. The sounds of the Los Angeles night intrigued the young boy and had to him and almost musi-

cal resonance. The sounds of the cars whooshing by, spraying wind through the still air, the electrical hissing of neon lights, the carefree chatter of voices from drug dealers, prostitutes, and other flaky derelicts.

A couple stood on the corner, taking hits from something in a clear glass pipe. Richard approached them with a feeling of something reoccurring. It was a white man in his early thirties, wearing a plain black tee shirt, skinny pants and some vans. He had a pixie haircut that was swooped over to one side coming just across his left eye.

The woman was still a girl. Maybe eighteen, maybe twenty. She had beautiful honey-coloured skin and her eyes were a dark brown that reminded Richard of autumn back down south. She was wearing a yellow day-glo tank top. Jeans that were ripped and black stilletos. They seemed to be perfectly content but Richard could tell that they brooded over twisted, terrible thoughts within their hearts.

The couple saw the young boy walking up to them and eyed him strangely. Los Angeles was a bizarre city, where strange occurrences happened on the regular, but a kid on the cor-

ner of Hollywood and Vine at midnight was not one of them. The man let out a short, condescending snort and said to Richard.

“Are you lost young man.”

Richard looked up at the man, at his self-assured face and replied prophetically,

“No, sir, I believe it is you who is lost.”

And the city began to swirl in a dizzy spell about the three individuals. Like going through the loops on a high speed roller-coaster standing up.

POEMS

by William C. Blome

MY MEXICAN WOMAN

Strap-on sex always means more to me when I do it in a place I love to gorge in—say, a bakery—rather than in—naturally—some torture chamber like a dentist's office. Now had I been born some robust and continually flowering plant, tiger swallowtails come-to-call and tonguing about my sugary parts would always get the loving nod over some ugly armadillo rummaging in the roots. On summer evenings of hard rain like this, I can easily abandon my current gig of caring for elderly folk and begin to prepare myself for immersion in the popcorn odor of your vagina, till

blue sky pokes through the clouds again. A buddy in physical therapy thinks you and I banged so hard on a porch lounge yesterday that several loose window screens fell out and landed noisily on the portico below. But, seriously, bonita, you need to get this straight: I swear on any holy book of your choosing that if you lose even a pound of flesh, I'm out of here for good. It will never be that big a deal for me to start over somewhere in the great southwest; you don't have to be the only fat signora in my life.

CLEARING

When a pear tree, any pear tree, is swiftly chain-sawed to the ground, the sounds of impact are more sexually liberating than the ooh's and ah's of one's own utterance after you've soaked your enameled fingernails in runny olive oil and then massaged your unshorn crotch for nothing less than twenty minutes.

My Aunt Jean said that was a credo she lived by, and promised she'd repeat it for me a single time each Christmas in the decade necessary for me to make my passage through "the straits of adolescence," and so she did, so she did, sitting there and clearing her throat and employing the aid of a cheerleader megaphone to guarantee her directions penetrated my skull, as I cleared off the dining room table after we had eaten hardy in the middle of the day.

UP

January second dawns one cold, cold bitch,
and your potter's wheel froze up overnight,
'won't spin worth shit to round soft earth
into classy swan-neck shapes, thin vines,
fat leaves, persimmons and plantains.

I can't flex my shivering writing-hand
quite enough to coax your brisk vagina
into giving up its captive fluids,
and 'don't guess the daytime temperature
will rise enough for my theft-fixated ass

to get up and prowl around your studio
in search of some loving New Year's gift
I can swipe and lug home to the trusting wife,
my teeth now set to chew ceramic fruit,
my lips eager to thaw your freezing self.

CHOOP

by Josh Rank

It wasn't much at first. My forehead just felt a little warm. I figured it could have been the slight walk up the stairs or maybe my girlfriend caught me lying to her. Plenty of reasons for a person's face to get warm. So I ignored it. Easiest thing to do, which is why it appealed to me. And then as the 10 o'clock news came around I was sitting on the couch with Ashley.

"Didn't you say you felt a little warm today?" she asked me.

"Yeah, maybe a little. I

don't know, people get warm."

We had just heard the story about the new sickness that would surely wipe civilization off the planet. Just like Bird Flu. And Swine Flu. And SARS. And now this new one popped up and happened to list fever as one of the symptoms. I didn't hear the name of it and I didn't care to know it. It wasn't going to amount to anything anyways. Chupacabra Flu. How about that? The Choop. Got me with the fever.

"Well what if it is this," she waved her hand towards the TV. "This thing. What if you have it, Levi? Will I get it? What if you pass it on to a

customer at the coffee shop?
What if the whole neighborhood gets it making you some kind of patient-zero and they need to take your blood to find the antibodies and—”

“Ash, holy shit. Settle down. I’m fine. This is nothing. The world isn’t going to end. The news just tries to make it sound more dangerous than it is so that you keep tuning back in to see what to do and their ratings go up. It’s all about ad revenue.”

She stood from the couch and turned off the TV. “I’m trying to save your life. This isn’t about ad revenue.”

“Right. The Choop is going

to burn the whole city to the ground and I’m going to be the first one to go.”

“The what?”

“So why don’t you come here,” I stood up and tried to kiss her. “And get it over with. C’mon.” She had her palms firmly planted on my face, pushing me back as I smiled and stuck my tongue out. “Let me infect you so we can stop worrying about this.”

“Get away!” She shoved me backwards and walked into the kitchen.

A week later, I walked into 7-Eleven for a scratch-off ticket and a soda. The scratch-off was because my job

sucked and the soda was to cool me down a little bit. The fever had raised another few degrees. I had just gotten off of work and had a little cash in my back pocket. I snatched a can of cola from the cooler and walked to the counter where I chose my ticket.

“Six seventy-nine,” said the cashier. I slid out a five and two ones and laid them on the counter. He yawned as he reached into the register for my change.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told him as I walked through the door. “You keep it.”

It wasn’t until the glass door swung shut behind me that

I realized I had just tipped the cashier at 7-Eleven. Was it because I had just come from work and had been thinking about tips? Was it because I figured money didn’t matter anymore since I was about to win the lottery? Or was I just not paying attention to what I was doing? I decided it was a small amount of each rolled together and walked to my car.

The soda wasn’t helping. My head was hot. The strangest part about it was how I didn’t seem to have any other symptoms. No headache. No nausea. No nothing. Just a hot fucking head. I scratched off the ticket with my key, sitting

in my car. No luck. I tossed it on the seat next to me and turned the ignition. I backed out of the parking spot, drove to the exit into the road, and couldn't pull out. There were gaps between the cars but it seemed like I would be inconveniencing them too much to pull out. I waited until the light at the intersection turned red before I pulled out of the parking lot.

My commute from work wasn't far. A few miles. Usually, it took me about three Metallica songs to get home. But as the fourth song started, I wasn't even halfway. Driving with Ashley had always infuri-

ated me. She took her time. She let people pass her and didn't even speed back up to them and show them she's not a pussy. That's why I always insisted on driving when we went out. Even if I had to drive her car. I could deal with her saying, "Jesus fucking Christ, Levi! Slow down you psycho!" But now, I couldn't help but think about the other cars. The drivers inside those cars. If someone was merging, I let them in. If I wanted to change lanes, I slowed down and put on my blinker for at least a block. Running a yellow wasn't an option, as that could make the people going the opposite

way wait if I failed to clear the intersection.

I finally got home and parked my car on the street. After turning off the engine, I continued sitting in the car. What the hell had just happened to me? I had listened to Master of Puppets all the way through and had even started it over. Why were everyone else's feelings all of a sudden more important to me? Maybe I should rephrase that to why were everyone else's feelings all of a sudden important to me at all? Ashley would be the first one to tell you that I rarely thought about other people. Not a malicious thing,

just that it doesn't really cross my mind. And now I'm an hour late coming home because I couldn't help but to consider the plight of every person that crossed my path. I grabbed the empty soda and again rolled it across my burning forehead. What the hell is going on here?

"And just where in the fuck have you been?" Ashley said before I had even closed the front door behind me.

"Nowhere. It just took me longer to get home."

"An hour longer?" She looked at the clock.

"I had to go slow. I don't know, there were a lot of people changing lanes and stuff."

“And when has that ever mattered to you ever? This is bullshit.” She paced for a minute. I hadn’t had the chance to take off my shoes. “Were you out?”

“Out? Of what?”

“With a customer. I know you’re just flirting in there all day. Did you go out with somebody? Let me smell your breath.” She brushed her face past mine. “What is that smell? That’s not coffee.”

“It’s soda. Look, The Choop has me pretty good right now, okay? I need to get a glass of water or something.”

“The what?”

I walked into the kitch-

en and got a glass of ice water. Then I felt bad about the whole thing and made us dinner, which surprised both of us. It wasn’t very good, but what do you expect for a first try?

The next day, I got dressed and headed out the door. But first, I grabbed a few extra pairs of jeans. Good jeans. Jeans I liked. I took them to the red bin in the back of the parking lot at the grocery store and donated them to the Salvation Army. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t help myself. I felt a compulsion to slide the pants down the chute and couldn’t stop. I hate shopping but here I was signing myself

up for a trip to the department store without hesitation.

I showed up to work a half hour late, again I just couldn't get through traffic, and found a customer holding the door for me. She had a red face just like me.

"What are you our servant now or something?" I asked her as I passed through the doorway.

"I don't know what's happening to me. I can't help myself," she said.

I wiped my forehead and motioned towards hers. "Looks like you got a touch of The Choop."

"The what?"

"Listen." I stepped closer to her. "You have that fever thing, right?"

"Yeah, I think so. Have you heard what they've been saying?"

"No, I stopped watching the news. But have you noticed yourself acting a little, y'know, different?"

"Did you notice how I'm holding the door for everyone? I can't stop doing shit like this. It's like OCD or something."

"Exactly!" I said. "Except I was starting to think of it like an addiction."

"An addiction? To what?"

"To being nice." I hadn't

put it together until I said it out loud, and now that I heard it, it simultaneously made sense and sounded ridiculous.

She slowly nodded. We stood next to each other for a moment before another customer came up and she opened the door. I walked behind the counter and punched in. I started pouring drinks but my mind was elsewhere. Nice? I hadn't been described as nice since I was a child. Courteous? Thoughtful? How would that help me? The Choop continued burning my forehead and I finally admitted to myself that I was sick.

Another week passed and Ashley was fully convinced I was

cheating on her. Why else would I be leaving earlier for work and coming home late? I started watching the news but they made no mention of The Choop's most drastic symptom. The fever was driving people to act more selfless and considerate whether they wanted to or not. I spoke with more customers with flush faces and they told me the same story; being nice was ruining them.

Tips were basically non-existent because as soon as I left work, I was giving the money away either to homeless on the sidewalk or tipping on every single transaction. I found myself throwing

down a few extra dollars for milk at the grocery store and when filling up at the gas station. I was taking money out of the ATM to tip plumbers walking out of neighboring houses or internet service technicians that I felt never really got the thanks they deserve. People have said that there are no selfless acts of kindness, that the warm feeling we receive from helping others is a form of personal reward. Well, everything I was doing was completely selfless as I gained no warm feelings of good deed since I hated myself for compulsively giving and in turn hated the other person for mak-

ing me feel like I had to give them something. The Choop was making me act nicer, but it was breeding an intense hatred for everything around me.

And I wasn't the only one. Customers were filling the tip jar faster than ever, but their demeanor made it seem like I was robbing them. Traffic slowed almost to a halt as everyone was too busy yielding to actually get anywhere. Rent was late and mortgage payments were missed because The Choop was handing our money out like candy on Halloween. I was sent home from work because even though I was incredibly kind to customers, I was saying these

nice things through a rigid jaw and in threatening tones. It probably didn't help that I had donated all of my work-appropriate clothes. I was down to three pairs of socks, a raincoat, a pair of slacks, and an undershirt. I was without a means of making more money and I couldn't help myself but to give the rest away. My forehead seemed like it was hot enough to boil water but I still didn't have a headache.

The news didn't offer any cure or treatment, but they consistently gave useless advice. Stay hydrated, keep the room cool, seek medical attention if it gets over 104 de-

grees. But I didn't have insurance and I had given all my money away. Nothing seemed to help. Ashley stopped talking to me even after I hadn't gone to work for a few days. I decided that if I wasn't going to have the normal symptoms associated with having a fever like a headache, vomiting, diarrhea, that I might as well give them to myself. I opened the cabinet above the refrigerator and took down the bottle of scotch I had been saving for my birthday. By the time Ashley came home from work, the bottle had less than three fingers left at the bottom.

“Well I mean just like are

you gonna walk right past me?" I said as she walked in the door. My words came out sloppy, as if there were no spaces between them.

She glanced at me and sighed. "Shouldn't your guilty conscience have you making dinner or something? You're going to break your streak."

She was right, I had made dinner for the last week but it was The Choop, not my conscience, that made me do it.

"Shouldn't you be shutting the hell up?" I asked her. The words came out like a reflex, a spark of the old me. I hadn't been able to tell her off since my forehead burst into flames.

She took a step back and smirked. "Wow, there's the Levi I know. Where the hell have you been?"

"I haven't been anywhere I shouldn't have been but I have been where I have been."

"Right. Okay." She seemed relieved by my return to being an asshole.

I felt encouraged. I was taking charge for the first time since I got sick and it was good. I patted the couch next to me and she surprised me by sitting down. My raincoat squeaked a little as she hit the cushion.

"Listen, The Choop has got me," I said. I put a finger

up as she was about to speak. "This fever has me all twisted around. I'm like, um, a string. Twisted around something."

"Levi, I don't care if you—"

"Just shut up and listen, alright? I've been nice. I'm not nice. But I've been nice. But now I'm not, even though I'm still hot. Get it?"

"No."

"Fuck. Okay." I wiped my hands over my face. "I can't control myself. Have you noticed how I've given all of my clothes away?"

She looked at me. The raincoat and the old socks. "Now that you mention it..."

"Do you think I've wanted to do that?"

She thought for a moment, probably replaying a few scenes from the previous weeks. I could see her reconsidering my behavior.

"It's a compulsion. Like those people that lock the door twenty times when they leave the house. They don't enjoy it. They feel like they have to do it."

She glanced around the apartment and then flicked her glance back at me. "Are you saying the fever is changing you?"

I let out a breath and hung my head, a slight smile grow-

ing across my hot, drunk face.
“Yes, you idiot. Yes it is.
It’s making me nice.”

She crossed her arms. “Then why are you calling me an idiot if you’re compulsively nice?”

“I don’t know. It’s like, once I started drinking the scotch I was able to stop..” I picked up my empty glass and looked deep into it. “Holy shit. The scotch.” I stood up and stumbled to the kitchen where I grabbed the bottle, twisted the cap, and took a giant swig. “It’s the fucking scotch!” I swiped my hand towards the sink and knocked over the pans on the drying rack, sending them to the floor. I

grabbed an orange from the fruit bowl and tossed it at Ashley. It bounced off her shoulder.

“Ow! What the fuck?”

“Exactly! I don’t have to be nice right now! Scotch is the answer!”

I tried calling the tip line at the news station, but my slurred words immediately discredited me. A half hour had gone by and my head was starting to clear up. My forehead began to grow warm and I felt an idea spawn. I tried to fight it but the impulse was simply too strong.

“I have to go out,” I said.

“What? You’re hammered.”

“Hammered, no. A little drunk, yes. But that doesn’t matter anymore because I found the cure and I have to let people know.”

I decided to go to the coffee shop. I knew customers that had the fever and couldn’t think of any other options besides going to the grocery store and simply screaming that everyone should drink scotch.

Less than a mile from my apartment, I let someone merge into my lane before I slowed to ten miles per hour to let someone walk across the road and then I slammed on my brakes to avoid going through a yellow light. It turned green and I

continued to sit there, making sure that all cross-traffic had safely cleared the intersection. And I guess it was this hesitation that caused the police officer to flip on his lights and punch the siren.

I thought he was going to blow right past me and pull over somebody that was driving like a maniac, but he sat directly behind me.

“Hello,” I said as the officer walked up to my window.

“Hi. Listen, you wanna tell me why you didn’t drive through the green light?”

“I was, well, I wanted to be sure everyone had gotten through before I started go-

ing.”

“Sir, you know it’s illegal to text in your car, even if you’re stopped at a red light, right?”

“But I wasn’t texting.” I probably should have just shut my mouth. “Honest, look my phone is in my pocket.” I started digging into my pocket.

“Don’t move,” he said. His hand reflexively shot for the gun on his hip. “Put your hands on the steering wheel.” He opened my door. “Now get out.”

I held my hands in front of me and got out. He led me to the front of the car where I placed my hands on the hood and

he searched me. That’s when he smelled the scotch.

“Have you been drinking tonight?”

“Yes. That’s what I was going to go tell everybody. It’s how you beat The Choop!”

“The what? Sir, keep your hands on the hood. Actually, why don’t you place them behind your back. You’re under arrest.”

I couldn’t tell if it was the embarrassment of blowing into the breathalyzer in the dancing police lights or the fever, but by the time I was put in the back of the police car my face felt like it was on fire. I incessantly apol-

ogized as we drove to the station and tried to explain the scotch treatment for The Choop. But he didn't listen. I spent the night in jail and was released after I convinced Ashley to post my bail.

My car was fitted with a tube to check my blood alcohol content before the engine would start up. I guess they wanted to make sure that I had to be nice all the time. The news continued talking about the fever but neglected to mention everyone's propensity for thoughtfulness and kindness and how it's ruining our lives. The scotch cure was likewise neglected. Of course,

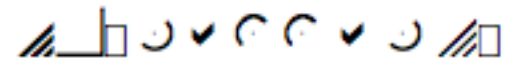
I was still able to tell everybody within my general vicinity about the cure but only a few took me seriously. Over the next month our city became increasingly kind, increasingly frustrated, and increasingly drunk.

I started taking the bus to work so I could have a few scotches for breakfast. I also had to pack a thermos to keep me going throughout the day if I wanted any chance of making it home without giving away all of my tips. After some time, the fever started coming less frequently and would only pop up for a couple days at a time. The origin of the fever was

never found, or at least never reported on the news. The story fell out of fashion after a dramatic spike in DUI arrests. There were more accidents and fights to cover, while at the same time they had heartwarming stories of generosity to balance out the nightly broadcast. It seemed like everyone was either trying to give you everything they owned, or trying to drink away everything they owned. But no matter what side of the equation you were on, you at least appeared happy.



smthng gd wnts u 2 no



Meatghost&Gookjuice yoinkin tags on the WalMart lot in Pico Rivera, waffle money. When they got 60, all California except 2 from Kansas &

Saskatchewan, they split halves and each goes another way, jingle-jangling backpacks. A spinner runs up on Gook, meth-want wild in her eyes, says she's got data what can he give? He shakes his plates and she puts her mouth to his ear.

Soon Gook stackin hard in front of Antioch Baptist Church at Council&27th while across that intersection MeatGhost receives real-time intelligence in code all their own, a compressed proto-Athabaskan/bong-city/WahChing-Crip43 hybrid-semaphore efficiently transmitting this: Fourier's Appliance at West Olympic&whatever 30 min, two Boyz in front,

three in back pretend like a factory delivery but here the shit: Old man owns the place keeps a pistol-grip pump 12 behind what washer where?

Ghost throws back: Don't care. The plus for us?

Gook: Vulture work. Old hump with the pump get the jump we go in. No telling what we find back there, for damn sure sellin more than driers, what the Boyz know too.

Ghost: Soon's dat 12 go off SWAT all OVA the damn place, front AND back, we got room?

Gook: The bigger the cookie the better it taste. Roll wit me here, nigga

A bent grey-haired woman oc-

cupies that corner with MGhost. She carries a crucifix in one hand, a satchel full of pamphlets in the other, Something God Wants You to Know. There is a picture of Jesus with blue eyes & blond hair - a washed-up Scandinavian sexbomb spewing pheromones around like cheap cologne. The woman hands a pamphlet to MeatGhost and he gives her a dollar, stuffing Our Lord into his left sock for luck.

“Savior Jesus...” she begins, the might of dogma pressuring her tongue, but MeatGhost dash before she reveals the rest of her heart.

ξ

Three items comprise this

LA crew of two's gun-free and hence prison-free arsenal: Taser, bearspray, blackjack, which they utilize in exactly that order. It's more trouble than a pistol, but it's thorough and sometimes the offended party divulges information not obtainable through other techniques. Like where ALL the drugs are. Like where ALL the cash be. Like where All the bling is.

We get our hands dirty, says Gook. We make our skrill the old-fashioned way: we earn it.

ξ

“Gook” becauz that's what friends call Nhuan Xuan Pham; on that same basis Octavious

Priestly nods to “nigga,” loaded appellations with layers of political complexity and karmic heft both innately appreciate and employ. A stick in the dominants’ eye and, generally, fuck you, because we invisible anyway.

hi-tone
lo-key
eeee-z

2

OK, signs Meat, but no crossfire & we don’t lift a leg till we hear dat 12. Blood on the ground, then we roll-

Twenty-five minutes later they are positioned in an alley behind Fourier’s, crawling un-

der a Floyd’s Drain Cleaning & Sewer Camera van (“Right Down The Ol’ Pipe!”) and not thirty seconds later Boyz bust up. They grin at each other and hold their breath. That old man a quiet friendly old man but he a dangerous old man been robbed twice so hair-trigger now.

Octavious hisses like a snake, Gook covers his mouth like a giggling girl and BOOM BOOM BOOM that mighty 12 comes alive BOOM BOOM Meat&Juice can almost hear five new rounds pushed in BOOM BOOM two bleeders stumble out back BOOM BOOM BOOM out front now like Grant thru Richmond, this OVA shout Gook, and in they go -

3

Two dead inside the air thick with blue gunsmoke & Meat quick-finds the register and bangbangs just right with his pipe then tips it while Gook backpacks the cash. Through the big plate-glass windows out front they see the old man with the empty shotgun beating another bleeder on the sidewalk.

MeatGhost runs back to the office and finds finally a last drawer full of weed, Shit he says, like I thought, the whole roll. Meat stuffs his own backpack and out they run over two skattergunned-Boyz, one dead, the other nearly.

Within the mesmerizing LA money ecosystem there exists an exclusive society of hard-eyed gold diggers who play musical beds beneath one rheumy old 2-pack millionaire after another until one of these (cough hack) uses himself up (hack cough) preferably in the very act of (cough cough cough) luv and long before he asks his single-minded companion to read aloud The Beginner's Guide To Anal Sex or shouts RELEASE THE KRACKEN while dropping his shorts.

To the well-fixed gentlemen of this particular neo-sick order womankind is simply a can-

dy store of breast & orifice but this, of course, is only half the equation. That prayed-for & providential cardiovascular interleukin-6 cascade-event (the other half) preceded also by years of poolside Grey Goose shooters, PDE-5 inhibitors and lidocaine sleepers is as natural in LA as a change of seasons in the Sierra Nevada and almost as beautiful. De rigueur in this scenario is that time-honored American 911 call played back for all the world to hear, the melodramatic concubine utterly beside herself at soulmate's cataleptic vomiting.

“My God he was just fine a

moment ago!”

Having cleaned herself up, smoked one of “Baby’s” Camel Wides Menthol while the ambulance screams away, said gold-digger now makes another call to another exclusive society, probate lawyers who specialize in securing self-evident inheritance rights of middle-class doxies drawn like moths to the wavering flames of the ancient rich.

ξ

In such capacity does Vicky Seifert, White Woman, currently serve, who, at age 43 (and in times past of not insignificant cocktail waitress renown) simply cannot endure another drea-

ry lecture on Dadism even if it IS at the very museum to which “Carl”, this year’s sugar-daddy and possible winning number, has donated several valuable pieces.

JEEESUS, how much is THIS worth, anyway? My white smile, isn’t THAT enough?

Enough for me “Carl” assures her, Oh for sure darlin’, now let me help you with that blouse hack cough.

Meanwhile, she thinks, closing her eyes and blocking from immediate consciousness her shining suzerain, her shimmering sacerdotess - MEANWHILE back on earth another day of photosynthesis. What other great

stories from my life in advance? Uncouple - the final plan!

Minutes later she showers, wraps her bleach-blond in a babushka decorated with astral rainbows, stows her exercise mat in the trunk and sets off for another session of ChuChi Hatha Yoga.

ξ

Then off to the acupuncturist in Rancho Palos Verdes but she has plenty of time, all the time in the world in fact, so detours a tad more daringly than usual to a suddenly-chic antique shop off that south-of-savory stretch of Wilshire where it suddenly segues into

6th then ever so slowly south-south east into East LA WHACK-BANG/SCREECH she runs down two people the noise on her Lexus WHACK-BANG/SCREECH then just WHACK-BANG Jesus! she cries JESUS WHAT DID I DO? rolls down her window ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? HELLO? HELLO? MeatGhost who lightfootin through the alley w/LAPD in hot pursuit had crashed head-first into the side of her car now rises to his knees and aims the shocker thru the window AIIIIIIIIII she dances on her seat with fists clenched to the steering wheel until Gook shoves her to passenger side and hits the door locks. Meat lunges sideways

into the back seat, infusing the dove-white leather couch with blood from a hemorrhaging nose.

4

Vicky warily directs them back to Carl's house in Brentwood where M&G will lay low till dark. Her neck feels like it's been hit by a hornet.

You're not going to hurt me again, are you? Are you going to rape me?

We not criminals, lady.

What are you?

Businessmen.

By the time they get to Brentwood an idea has begun to form in Vicky's often underes-

timated mind.

Today is Wednesday, she thinks.

My lucky day.

ξ

Ah, the blessed life of the iPhone people!

Juice & Ghost gawk in wonder, like they've dropped onto another planet - stacks of paintings leaned against the walls, sculptures here and there, the trappings of LA affluence everywhere. Vicky gives them a tour like a real-estate excursion, the kind of house only an asshole who reads Cigar Aficionado would own. Walking behind her splendiferous chundini they trade looks to the ef-

fect that if they weren't such consummate professionals they'd bang her hair off.

ξ

The man of the house, declares Vicky, has his semianual colonoscopy today. He gets his big ideas in the morning when he's jacked up on coffee and tetracycline. He will return about four. Would you like a bite of lunch?

ξ

Vicky has tried everything on God's green earth to beget child and thus attain sinecure with old Carl hampered only by Carl's unwillingness to sire yet another lazy confused stupid greedy corrupt insane ugly

impatient heir with yet another tart - that, and the sorry condition of his antediluvian nicotine-poisoned drug-addicted sperm. She has memorized every position in the Kama Sutra and slipped liquid vitamins into his screwdrivers. A sperm bank would be the obvious option if not for her sure knowledge that Carl will demand patrimony testing in-utero.

She even consulted a psychic who suggested that she encourage the universe by choosing baby names in advance. Among several for girls, Auzunay Sheba Heavenly Abbysinia Ariel India and Starry. Among several for boys, Juno Atlas Beau Djen-

abou Zeus Aywan and Octavious.

ξ

As Vicky sees it, the primary trouble with Carl is that he won't for the love of God die already. He is, thus, an investment that refuses to pay off. In the three years, seven months, two weeks and four days since Vicky has "come on board" her pot of gold has undergone one colon resection, a triple bypass, and a pneumonectomy. Besides emphysema and walking pneumonia he nurses a persistent little gram-negative superinfection he got started while barebacking child prostitutes in the squatter settlements of Kuala Lumpur during a

sex tour of the Malay Archipelago six months after they met, though she doesn't know this. His blood pressure could launch a rocket out of the solar system. His glycosylated hemoglobin classifies him among the living dead. What IS he waiting for?

One thing he's waiting for is full control of the two-hundred seventy eight payday loan shops scattered across the as yet not fully reconstructed American South which he and his sister-in-law have been fighting over since W invaded Iraq. This date is significant because the family corporation made the money to buy these

payday loan shops by manufacturing Meals Ready to Eat not only for the American infantry, but the infantry of every other coalition "partner" including Iraq. These were produced in a former cat food factory in Mississippi owned by one of Carl's South Korean partners and manned by four hundred illegal workers from Guatemala, a quarter of them children, processing downer cattle from Nebraska, a certain percentage likely infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy. He paid the Guatemalans four dollars an hour, the children somewhat less, plus all the Meals Ready to Eat they could, in fact, ac-

tually eat.

Carl got the inside track on the MRE deal because he was at Princeton with Rummy. He also shot quail in Texas with Dick. Among the photos on his office wall is lunch with Nixon and a laugh-filled hot-tub high-ball splash with Spiro and the missus; the late great J Edgar Hoover leers from the sidelines in a three-piece suit.

5

Vicky says, I'm wondering if you might be interested in a business opportunity. I need to get rid of my husband. OK, he's not really my husband husband,

but close enough.

We don't off people, lady. Why we not in prison.

I'm not asking you to off him. I'll off him. He's practically off now, all by himself. Just wrap the old stork in a shower curtain and throw him in the fucking river.

What river?

Any river you can find.

That means we did it.

Actually it means he did it. He mixes vodka and lorazepam every day. This time he drives to the river. Then he gets out of the car and goes for a swim. Then he drowns. He's high as hell. What do you expect?

The plus for us?

Anything. Anything at all.
Just name it.

6

Gook & Meat pow-wow.

Hell no, say Meat. It called
accessory, nigga, you start
haulin bodies around -

Roll wit me here, nigga -

Start greasing yo asshole
right now, fool. That bitch
squawk what you gonna do, kill
her, too?

Read my lips, nigga: ain't
nobody killin nobody.

Then how you make yo skrill,
nigga?

What we learn here, nigga?

Bitch gonna off the old man?

Somebody pay to know that?

The old man?

Huh! Who gots the bones in
this hizzy?

ξ

Next year I'm changing my
name to Lourdes, Vicky tells
them. Try that on for size.

7



Carl makes his appearance at
5PM, a skeletal old Anglo-Sax-
on bout seven foot high walking
bowlegged a bit slow across his

art-cluttered floor. Vicky has arranged Gook & Meat somewhat out of sight on the patio and mixed mimosas. She makes Carl a tall screwdriver and before she can stop him he hobbles out through the open glass door and steps onto the patio. He spots them and smiles. About time, he says.

He lights up a Camel Wides Methol and pours the screwdriver over the railing, examining the last white specs of undissolved lorazepam at the bottom of the glass.

Nice try, he yells over his shoulder into the kitchen. He shakes his head and chuckles. Comes with the territory. Not

the first time - but god almighty you should see her with her clothes off!

He takes a nice long Wides Menthol drag and immediately says, Let me tell you about my brother and his lovely wife. He was a young Air Force officer in Stuttgart and she was a waitress in a beer hall who could carry five big steins on a platter above her head so of course he married her.

A few days after her mother died the Jehovah's Witnesses were in the neighborhood and she accepted the Lord on the spot. My brother drank himself to death. Now his shares are controlled by this creature who

looks like a baboon fucked a hyena. She keeps the Watchtower on a little table by her toilet. I need to get rid of her. Are you interested?

§

Vicky is letting August Escoffier assist her with "cooking to the wine," his great book on the counter alongside several racks of lamb. Carl and the boys sit at table. It has occurred to Carl that Gook & Meat might be temporarily useful as tasters; whether they will agree to serve as hit men remains to be seen. In this regard, Carl holds forth on the critical advantages of "positioning."

Those Witnesses, he observes - Don't ask me how BUT: right place, right time! How much of the corporation's money that woman donates to these lunatics is anyone's guess - the point being they moved when the opportunity presented itself so in a way they deserve it. I admire that.

Vicky states from behind the counter that he could say the same thing about his sister-in-law.

In fact, she says, you could say the same thing about me if only I wasn't so goddamned stupid.

Carl shakes his head. Don't be so hard on yourself, honey.

I couldn't be with a woman who WOULDN'T try to take me out. I was in your place I'd do exactly the same thing. You'll get out of this mess with a cool million at least. You've got balls. I respect that.

He blows her a kiss. She blows one back.

After dinner, Carl makes himself a tall screwdriver or three. Vicky pours herself a large clear drinking glass brimful of cool white wine and asks if they've heard the good news about Jesus Christ.

8

Gook & Meat pow-wow.

Hell no, say Meat. It called murder, nigga -

Roll wit me here, nigga -

Start greasing yo asshole right now, fool. That old man sing what you gonna do, kill him, too?

Read my lips, nigga: ain't nobody killin nobody.

Then how you make yo skrill, nigga?

What we learn here, nigga?

Old man gonna off the German bitch?

Somebody pay to know that?

German bitch?

Huh! Who gots the bones in this hizzy?

But where do it end, nigga?

Where do what end?

When she want you to kill
someone else!

She who?

German bitch! Where do it
end? Lockup, that where!

Shit, say GookJuice. Brotha/
gots no concept/of helpin an-
otha?

Not in prison I don't. Hell
no.

9

MeatGhost sez, U 2 crazy as
dog shit, we the fuck outa here

-
Whoa whoa WHOA! says Vicky,
placing her palms on his chest.
No problem, no problem! Give
it a second. Baby has another
plan.

What plan?

Tie us up, she says. Slap
us around a little. You can
tear my blouse if you want. She
kisses the tip of her finger
and puts it on his lips.

Then what?

We tell the cops you took
the jewelry.

What jewelry?

Our jewelry.

Will we?

Of course not. We file in-
surance. Then we sue the se-
curity company. They let two
criminals get in here broad
daylight and abuse us. That's
Pain&Suffering. Isn't it, Baby?

Gold, says Carl. 24-fucking
carat gold. In this business

it doesn't get any better than Pain&Suffering.

What business?

American business. What we're doing right now. How much do you want?

Baby's going to sue the EMT, too. They forgot to ask about his LADS. Didn't they, Baby?

Leukocyte Adhesions Deficiency Syndrome. Hell, he says, I might even sue the health food store because I got one of their goddamned sesame seeds stuck in my colon. They found it during my colonoscopy. Know what I call that?

Positioning? asks GookJuice.

Good boy! You two parasites need to learn how this god-

damned country works. I'll ask you again, What do you want?

What will you give?

Anything.

Anything?

Anything. Anything at all.

Just name it.

Gookjuice and Meatghost look at each other. Meatghost reaches into his backpack, says "Smile!" and blasts Carl with the bearspray.

What I SAY, nigga! he shouts - This old crook set UP yo sis-sy-chink ass! Give you "ANYTHING"? Yo mama titti! Give you nada and 20 year, that's what he GIVE you!

Carl howls with pain, the old man actually rolling on the

rug. Gook moves two chairs from the kitchen to the middle of the floor and Meat cuts appliance cords. They hoist them on & tie them up.

Jewelry and cash, sez Meatghost. Where?

The old man pretends to have a seizure and Vicky starts screaming. Ghost jerks out the blackjack, rips off Carl's shoe and smashes his big toe EEEEEYAHAOOOOOOOOO JESUS CHRIST!

What about these, Gook asks, gesturing at the paintings stacked against the wall?

All fakes, gasps Vicky, he donates to museums to get his name in the paper. There's only

one good one, let me go and I'll show you.

Meat snatches off her shoe, too, but Vicky looks immediately to a small portrait on the wall above the entertainment center.

Stole it from his own mother! she cries. School of Paris! Careful!

ξ

Gookjuice & Meatghost mop up, wiping prints, flushing napkins, even starting the dishwasher with their DNA on the forks. They have sacked the valuables and stuffed Carl's Land Rover and Vicky's Lexus with everything not nailed down - widescreen TVs, antiques,

accessories, suits, dresses, shoes, even a set of bone china Carl took from his mother. In the garage, MeatGhost switches out tags, using Kansas & Saskatchewan taken that morning from the Walmart lot.

ξ

Among the loot is a pistol Gook finds in the back bottom drawer of Carl's file cabinet along with \$5,000. He sets the piece on the floor between Carl and Vicky. For whoever get loose first, he says, both yo karma shit so it don't really matta-

Vicky shouts, I LOVE YOU OCTAVIOUS CAN'T YOU SEE I'VE ALWAYS LOVED YOU

Carl tells Octavious to screw Vicky on the couch so he can watch and she screams PEERS OR NIGGERS THAT'S ALL PEOPLE ARE TO YOU SO WHAT AM I YOU PIECE OF SHIT I'M NOT A PEER THAT'S FOR FUCKING SURE

You owe me this, he says, it's the least you can cough hack do don't tell me you haven't done worse MANY GODDAMN TIMES YOU FUCKING WHORE THIS IS L.A. FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

Gookjuice & Meatghost cover they ears and hurry out the door.

10

4AM,
long-gone

& pamphlet still in his sock
Meatghost dreams the mansion
burns.

A dark and hovering angel
with a brightening sword slays
the spirits that flee.

Gookjuice snores and rolls
over beside him. They have a
briefcase bursting-full of fif-
ties and Amedeo Modigliani
wrapped in a black trash sack
wedged behind the toilet tank.

11

They buy a small house in
Compton next to an old Luther-
an church and a little furni-
ture and get married because
the lawyer said it would save
taxes and they quarrel laugh-

ing about "who the bitch today"
even though GookJuice got a
girlfriend and MeatGhost half a
dozen.

Life has become unimagina-
bly pleasant. They out of the
bidness more or less perma-
nently and put a little money
here&there: a trampoline manu-
facturer in Houston; Procter &
Gamble common stock; four taco
stands in el Segundo; a boom-
ing cholo liquor store on Al-
ameda gets robbed on schedule
and still turns a sweet net.

They buy a black almost-new
Explorer with the Limited trim-
line from an assistant direc-
tor's soon-to-be Xwife, a syn-
thetic princess who lets it

go for a song just to piss him off, and one day two years later on an excursion to Manhattan Beach they see "Lourdes" in a Target store with an older woman filling a shopping cart with party favors.

In their conversation they are able to perceive the words "Ikea" with which they are (now) familiar, and "African Violets" with which they are not, and when they hear Lourdes call the woman "Baby" Gook doubles over laughing with his hand on his mouth.

The older woman has a splendid figure and a face like a bird of prey and fingers so freighted with diamonds her

hands flash when she plucks items off the shelves.

Lourdes is page-boy brunette with plumped-up lips, a tan just this side of vermillion and a laissez-faire bra that spills breasts and rosary out through a sheer blouse and when she bends this way and that to inspect items for purchase her companion doesn't miss a thing.

& I thought WE wuz bad!

She don't scare easy, for damn sure -

Old shit kicked her out

Or she drill his ass I hope

This one betta

How you know?

Jus hopin' says Gook. Jus hopin'. Doin' the best she can

Like us?

JUST like us

Hey, maybe we buy you a
shirt like that-?

Ha ha YOU the bitch today,
dog. It Wednesday.



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Silversun Liquor
SAM BARNETT

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