



# THE LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF LOS ANGELES

NUMBER 12



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TAKEN IN  
COMFEST, 2016  
DOCKING  
BILLY LUCK  
MIDNIGHT ANGEL  
THE OVERSEER  
THY ROD AND THY STAFF  
DEAD STARS STILL SHINE  
THOSE THINGS WHICH BURN

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COVER BY ROBIN WYATT DUNN

# Legerdemain

KEVIN RABAS

I joke that I lost my inheritance  
in a card game, played a bad hand  
while on Grandma Ruth's team.  
And Ruth never forgets.

Took up magic  
to even the odds.  
Could palm, force  
a card.

Chung and I used to  
run card parties. Chung could  
card count. I could palm. We'd take  
the table. Swindle the kids'  
carhop tips.

# My dear Aleph Institute advisors

GERARD SARNAT

My dear Aleph Institute advisors,

After a rough day, I just got off a disturbing call from my husband.

Jacob said he'd been "talked to" by two Alpha Unit counselors  
-- I've used quotes because there really was no conversation.

He mentioned to them that his wife's application for visitation rights  
had been denied three times.

To which they very nastily replied, None your business.

Jake felt the men were goading him to pick a fight,  
but survival instincts he's cultivated led to a polite, *Okay*.

My little *Jackele*'s trying hard to follow the 45-page instruction manual.  
*Don't look at anyone. Constantly be on guard*  
*not to do anything to antagonize or provoke anyone.*  
*No sarcasm. Don't even make jokes. And above all no romance.*

That notification letter listed 6 reasons for rejection

with none checked to indicate why,  
so it's a guessing game (My comments are in parentheses):

1. Too many visitors on the list, 15 allowed (We submitted nine.)
2. Form authorizing a background investigation unsigned (I signed each time.)
3. Not an original signature, no photocopies accepted (I signed black print form in blue.)
4. No meaningful relationship established before incarceration (I guess 27 years of marriage doesn't cut it.)
5. Security concerns came up in the investigation of your background (Their written review concluded, *She falls in the lowest risk level.*)
6. No written authorization for me to travel (Here's a copy of the authorization signed/ submitted three times.)

Before the phone went dead, Jakey broke down  
to tell me how difficult it was there,  
how he has tried not to reveal too much,  
*just the tip of the iceberg*, so we wouldn't worry.

And poor Jacob, he knows only the half of it.

The guy who invests the few assets we have left --  
he used to be a personal friend -- sent us a certified letter  
stating the demand to transfer our holdings elsewhere  
in 30 days or his firm'd mail us a check with no tax consideration.  
Jake handled all those things; I don't know what to do.

Then today Social Security notified me  
I had been required to inform them of my situation,  
which was news to me, plus I owed the government \$8000.

And since they won't allow me to wire cash to Jake from my bank,  
and am too sick to drive the car which broke down anyway,  
I need to take a bus  
with three transfers to get to one of those ghetto Moneygram scams.

We appreciate your suggestion of getting our attorney reinvolved  
but I'm flat broke.

And another women who's been in my position  
says the idea of appealing directly to the top  
will be interpreted as an end-around that could backfire big-time.

I've left three voicemails and sent you three texts  
and an email which weren't answered,

so hopefully this letter will reach you.  
Had to unload on someone  
so I can go back to help Bennie study for his last final.

Rabbi, thanks for being so patient.  
Please please get back to me before this weekend's visiting hours  
with your blessing to travel on *Shabbes*.  
Hopefully everything will work out, including a ride up from LA.

Ultimately how will I get through this ruination  
of a plea agreement,  
on probation as a convicted felon and co-conspirator  
after a *bupkis* white collar silly mistake  
everybody could make -- G-d or at least Lompoc's warden willing?

From your not-happy Rachel.



# Hell Fire

DANE COBAIN

It's so quiet down here  
you can hear them calling –  
the old folk  
who lived and died before us  
so we could study history,  
generation  
after dead generation  
hollowing out hillsides,  
trying to find a little privacy.

Yeah you could join clubs  
and secret societies;  
you could deliver light to everyone  
or pour poison into chalices;  
you could be a salad,  
or the best damn broccoli  
this side of Beaconsfield.

You could cross the River Styx  
and hang your wits out to dry  
on a washing line;  
you could mine Bluejohn  
somewhere in the Peak District,  
or climb down some stairs  
beneath the mausoleum.

This place is lit  
by torchlight;  
you can smell  
the fire in her eyes.

You can see  
Paul Whitefield's ghost,  
or the woman in white  
who frightened Derek Acorah –  
he's easy to frighten,



especially with natural fluctuations  
in temperature.

Throw yourself  
into the fire;  
be reborn  
from the gaping maw,  
or sail down the river  
into infinity.



# Hale

MATTHEW BARTLETT

splash me with your aspergillum  
drips  
    and I will fall to you in lustrous hydrolics of  
aesthesia  
    soterial soft sighs  
    soughs and  
    tracings stirred by love as space through  
Earth  
  
that never shushes  
or clasps the heaving skias stopping air  
    Spectrals of white lightings bent  
in clatterings then  
    wisped as touch soon fades  
as incomprehensible as penetrating your own depths

A snycopate-  
these segmented whirs sussuring  
like  ondulas, or crisp resounding glides  
your glass disrobings skies delight  
    under cool

Radio silences  
I breathe and yet I cannot disregard the contemplation  
Of No Mind  
The screaming rhythm of

cyaneous skies  
    scraping  
    the universe with brushes of many colored glass  
Argus' eyes are falling  
    Amphibole and Hematite  
phantom wet dipole  
    masterpieces of art

    The telling you I love you now and when  
a revenant of bloostered wayfared memory...  
or the arsy--varsy of it  
is as two men pulling at an arm of Emelye  
Curved to shade, you gasp for me  
but I'll know  
your eyes will be the same great bulbs as an opposition                      surge



and my eyes will love them for it.  
And your Scorpio-  
were you to break in waves and let love come  
my way no softer sound could be heard  
then you would dream and I partake in it

and your love is like a bird...

# Apparition

MATTHEW BARTLETT

## Apparition

A door to the limitless,  
No exodus, no genesis,  
Filled with corners jagged,  
Frenzied heads cruentous,  
Sounds muffled by a coffin,  
Tomorrow you will have no tefillin,  
Gravitation,  
Or crystal-glimmered shades,  
But a prelude of your drifting brain.  
I will wear your false pretense  
In a dress,  
And in your death black lovely shoes.

Do you remember when Heaven and Hell  
Were children?  
They could not yet make a madman  
Quiver in  
Delusions of seaweed spun



Around the snakes of sleep  
And spun again,  
Stranded sea-light tousled on  
The rows of sketched apparitions  
Like rows of Holocaust dead.  
Maenad swoon by Shaman drum,  
Cloned by film instead.

The wind preceeding the windmills,  
I gnashed the choppy elemental  
Ripples swallowing whales  
Like snow that hides the trails.  
I felt dismantled,  
I was young with little dignity,  
Shapeless as an orphan and disemboweled,  
My gurgling jowl was handled as a pun,  
A clown in a dismal jungle, garbled pallor  
Dirties the spine and spit,  
The trembling soul that sinks  
in machine-gun ice,  
The van that shatters air,  
Hot arrows cereing soft flesh,  
A segue of spikes piercing  
Dark midnight, has seen  
What he calls visions,  
Rather than call them dreams.

I don't know who I am anymore.



# From the Porch

RICHARD C. RUTHERFORD

Old lady in the stocking hat  
Has a hang-bellied white cat  
She takes it for walks  
Her husband inside losing weight

From the porch  
You could skip a rock off the moon  
Hit Orion in the stomach

From the porch  
You could see red cap and white cat  
Slow walk in evening heat





Downtown Honey Comb  
WILLIAM C. CRAWFORD

Urban Palette  
WILLIAM C. CRAWFORD







## A Golden Nugget

WILLIAM C. CRAWFORD



# Everyone Should Have a Hobby

JOHN GREY

He's been a body snatcher all his life.  
His home is a museum of cadavers.

It's the only pleasure he has,  
this toiling at midnight in graveyards,  
shovel breaching fresh-dug earth,  
undoing the ceremony, the sobbing,  
the lowering of the coffin.  
His dead receive a belter eternity  
than those poor souls mulching in the earth.  
They're labeled, catalogued.  
No worm banquet for them.

They rot in chairs.  
They decompose on couches.  
He promises the heads that fit into the freezer  
that they can even keep their smiles.  
Sadly, not one has yet to take him up on it.

# Sweet Substitute

JAMES R. KINCAID

The teenager seems to have replaced the Communist as the appropriate target for public controversy and foreboding.

Edgar Friedenberg

“Miss Jackson?”

“My name’s McKennon.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. You’re next on the list.”

“What list? You know what time it is?”

“As it happens, I do. But you’ll have time to make it.”

“I’m going back to sleep.”

“Please don’t. I know it’s tenth grade, but they’re good kids, mostly---  
so I’ve been told. Anyhow. . . .”

Light was starting to dawn. Only metaphorically, as it was still dark as--  
--what was that quote. Nothing fancy. “Dark as fear”---Swinburne. That  
fit. Only it didn’t. What she felt was not fear but---wait for it---wrath.  
The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction, said Blake.  
Yes, they are, but for the time being I am a horse of instruction, so-----



back in harness: “OK. What school? When?”

“Oh, thank you, Ms. McKennon. I won’t get your name wrong again.”

“That makes everything lovely. What school and when.”

“Let’s see. Locking Senior High School. You’ll love it. 7:20, or thereabouts.”

“Any special subject I’m teaching?”

“They’ll have notes and instructions there for you----front office. Good kids, like I said. Not inner-city or anything.”

“I live in the inner-city and I am 100% Negro, you’ll be dismayed to hear. And you’re sending me to a suburban school, set up just to escape that inner-city blight and the kids who are causing it.”

“Oh, please understand. . . .”

I hung up, understanding perfectly.

“Dark as fear”---couldn’t get that out of my mind.

No time for that now, as I had about half an hour to dress, drive,

arrive, and study the notes and instructions. I knew by experience those notes and instructions would tell me nothing, less than nothing. You see, I’d substituted before, oh so many times (thrice) and knew what I was getting into. I hoped.

Made it on time and found the office, thanks to some friendly students, who actually steered me straight, privileged little shits that they were. Maybe they were learning to respect authority or patronize darkies, both important skills for youth trying to make their way in this modern world of toady, a phrase I am plagiarizing from an essay I received at my last subbing gig, lasting two weeks and allowing me to read ever so many charming and illuminating student papers, written on the subject (my invention): “It Sucks So Bad to Be Young Today.”

I guess I’m nervous, which I hope explains my defensive and cynical tone, which you probably find tiresome, if not offensive, as you should. Truth is I like the youth trying to make their way in this modern world of

today and detest the automatic and poisonous mockery spewed on them by adults, who sense their own inferiority and have no better weapons than venomous nostalgia: we lived in real times, outdoors and tough and connected, not like these young robots always glued to their phones, never leaving their padded cells.

Me, I like their fancy phones and wish I knew how to use them better. I'll bet the eager-to-please students here at Locking Senior High will show me.

Back to the immediate scene and a more ingratiating tone---witty but not brittle.

So, I arrive at the front office, where a friendly staff woman greets me, hands me a cup of coffee (strong), and conducts me at once into the office of the principal, also a woman and, get this, not even completely white.

I'm not used to finding anything more than a sheet scrawled with room

number, class roster, and perfunctory instructions, so this is sweet. I feel very important, which, turns out, I am, not only important but vital. Yes.

“Oh am I glad to meet you, Ms. McKennon! And I hope you won't be sorry you ever met me.”

She is actually on my side of the desk, somehow, halfway hugging me. I don't hug back, starting to smell a rat, thinking something smelled fishy, sniffing some deception somewhere, something stinking to high heaven. You understand my plight.

“You are wondering why we are so desperate. I don't mean that we turned to you out of desperation. You were our first choice.”

She must have read the scornful disbelief in my face.

“You were the one we wanted all along.”

No better.

“You're here.”

Now we're on the same page. I nod, being careful not to smile.



“Here’s the thing,” she says, looking at me now like Bugs Bunny in the cartoon looking down Elmer Fudd’s rifle barrel. “We have three teachers out today, three! All three let us know within a ten-minute period, phoned in around 3 a.m., left messages, the lousy bastards. Thank Jesus, Clarissa came in early and heard them. And that’s why, you see, you are here.”

“You’re tripling up the classes? We’re meeting in the gym?”

She laughed, almost. “Not far from it. Clarissa and I have been scrambling to shuffle the kids into other sections, near as we can, so you would have a normal schedule, normal in a sense, and there’d be seats for all, pretty much. You’ll just do the six periods, you know, with no more students than usual, not too many more.”

“You know,” I say, in my most ingratiating tone, “I seem unable to determine what subject I’m teaching, and unless someone tells me within the next twenty seconds I’m going to find out where your three malingerers are and join their three-way.”

“Yes, well, that’s the very thing,” she says, no longer chipper.

“I figured it was. Out with it.”

“The only way we could manage it was to give you more than the one subject, not that we have any doubt you’ll. . . .”

“How many subjects?”

“Six.”

“That’ll fill the day. What are they?”

“Starting with period one, you know, and going straight through:

Social Studies

History

Wood Shop

English

Sexual Education

Gym

Before you say anything, I should have added that you have a lunch



period, shortened only a little, between Shop and English, as well as a ten-minute coffee break after Sexual Education.”

“Piece of cake,” I said

-----

And it has been. I am now in Sexual Education, only one more to go, having done brilliant work in Social Studies (I got them talking about domestic violence), History (the Native American genocide), Wood Shop (bookends), and English (write your own limericks).

By the way, though I am aware this interrupts the flow of my narrative--no need to point that out---I inspired several limericks quite fine (which I hung out to dry on the line---ha ha). Here are two:

A bather whose clothing was strewn  
By winds that left her quite nude  
Saw a man come along  
And unless I am wrong  
You expected this line to be lewd.

There once was a young lady named Bright  
Whose speed was much faster than light  
She set out one day  
In a relative way  
And returned on the previous night.

You’re thinking they are plagiarized. Quite likely, but gifted teachers care nothing for that.

Sexual education was where I met Colby and Tessa. But that’s getting ahead of myself, just a little. Colby and Tessa belong to the night; we are still in the afternoon, late afternoon, in class, studying safe sexual practices, public health issues, and g-spots. Teaching kids about sex is like instructing a fish on how to swim, somebody said. Somebody was right. I enjoy the class, though, and learned a lot.

There’s where I met Colby and Tessa, who, as it happens were also in gym class, idiotically scheduled for the end of the day, when I was dog tired and the students ready to get away and start really learning things.

Like the finest teachers, I rely on sudden inspiration, and my sudden inspiration for gym class was this: “Sit on your ass and talk to the people around you.” Refreshing and muscle-toning, too.

So, Colby and Tessa. Came up after sex ed and started a conversation which turned into them inviting me to drop by that evening, Tessa’s house (Colby would also be there, you see) and just hang out. Around eleven.

I knew better than to ask why so late and where parents would be and whether all this was legal. I wasn’t born yesterday.

So, I got there a little past eleven, eager to hang out. You probably guessed it by now, but I wasn’t sure what “hanging out” involved. Nobody had ever asked me to do that before. That’s just the way things have gone. Nobody had asked me to do anything, not really. I could ask others, you’ll be saying. You’re right. I have done that, just as you’re recommending. I have done it so often I am getting scared. Dark as fear.

Tessa greeted me and there was Colby, too.

I went in and sat. They right away included me in their talk, and in their plans.

“You know why we invited you, Ms. McKennon?”

I wasn’t expecting that, so I just said, “No.”

“Here we got you---indecent hour of the night, two minors, forcing us to drink illegal beverages, shoot up, have sex with each other while you tape us, have sex with you which isn’t taped, eat unhealthy junk food.”

“I see. Then you’ll extract from me money, cool clothes, and promises for future encounters. I’ll have no choice.”

“That’s it.”

“I like it, like the cut of your jibs.”

“OK, Ms. M, but we gotta teach you to talk cool.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“We like you a lot, Ms. M.”

And if you believe what I’ve just told you, why. . . .



On the other hand, maybe you should. It's not up to you.



# America

GAYANE M. HAROUTYUNYAN

America, I've given you all and now I am nothing.

America, I need a bottle of red wine, rare steak, a friend, and a crucifix – in that order.

America, I need to explain.

America, drink with me, forget the steak, let the Christ pray.

America, the future against the past, I cross the ocean on foot with calluses on my back, singing.

America, what did you do with my hands? what did you do with my face? where did my feet go?

America, did you eat my wisdom?

America, what is the skin of my color? Is it the color of my skin?

America until the rainbow turns red, orange, and blue\*.

America, God blesses you, exclusively.

America, you are like love that is always late to a meeting.

America, I admire you like a wise whore, not like oranges, Black Sea, and Yesenin.

America, you say I must cease to communist but I am hungry and sad, and fuck your freedom!

America, your humor is my death sentence and my death sentence is your W-4

America, if I go up in flames will I set your skyscrapers on fire and light your way back to simplicity?

America, with you I stand alone in the dark without stars,

studying a language to not speak,

writing poetry for a blond,

quietly screaming

in your voluptuous ear.

America, I want to jump over to the other side and fall in light.

\* Red, orange, and blue are the colors of the Armenian flag.



# No Place to Go

NIDHI SINGH

The hot sun beats down from a pale cloudless sky on the dusty scrapheap where derelict automobiles arranged in haphazard rows, stacked on top of one another await further cannibalizing, or decimation into fist-sized chunks by the baling press and the hammer mill.

An unkempt man, tucked into an old army Blanket BD Serge, lies in the backseat of a rusty V6 Chevy Camaro. Nearby, in the backseat of a crumbly 1957 Ford Thunderbird Convertible is a salt and pepper haired woman, unaffected by the heat, also shrouded in a worn red shawl, humming to herself.

They look old and crinkly, but a closer scrutiny will reveal they are only middle-aged, and have worn badly.

“I can’t see,” he says, in a loud whine that carries over to her.

“Try opening your eyes,” she replies; her eyes twinkle for an instant,

and she twirls her thumbs.

The man pries his eyelids open one by one, squints, stares, rubs his eyes, and stares again till his eyeballs are bulging in their sockets. “I can see again! It’s a miracle! God above watches over us!”

“Com’on. You were seeing fine just 10 minutes ago,” she replies.

“Was it 10 minutes...or more? How would you know?”

There is a long pause, and then she says, “It could be five...or less. It could even be days for all I care.”

They fall silent as a couple of vehicles whoosh past on the state highway. A truck stops close by and voices of men are heard. Then a door slams shut and the truck slides noisily into gear and drives off.

“Have they g-g-gone, are they d-d-done,” he asks after a while, quaking.

“Who?”

“The v-voices... from the peak and from the plain... that awful lonely vein.”

“Of men of law?”

“The whispers, carrying in the wind.”

“Of men with knives?”

“The whimpers, lingering in the darkening shadows.”

“Of children? Should I take a look?”

“No, no! Stay here. Wait till they are gone.”

A loud clatter, thrashing of metal against metal, ripping of fabric, and shattering of glass ensues. A car tumbles down and smashes to the ground. Someone curses loudly; there is a shuffle of feet that recedes into the far distance.

“Halt! Who goes there,” she says in a murmur that barely lifts above the whistling wind.

“No halting, you silly, what if they come here!”

“Oh,” she whispers. And then a little louder: “ Proceed then, go on going.”

“Hide,” he says, and pulls the blanket tightly over his eyes. She tries the same but her pale, bare ankles peep out from under the small shawl. She shrinks herself into a ball in a desperate scuffle to hide.

They lie still for a long time; till that ever-murmuring race, with a trill that quivers through its piercing notes, the Katydid, pesky little chauvinists, spread their wings and burst into song. Bats click and pop their way through the darkness, while cicadas tickle their tymbals and seek fellowship.

“Is it music, or is it noise?” he complains, briefly peering over the backseat. “I can’t see again.”

“It’s nighttime,” she explains.

“Already? How long since this has been going on?”

“The day slipping into darkness, the night breaking unto the light: since



forever it seems.”

“Should we wait out until daybreak?”

“Will it be better?”

“Can’t say.”

“But then there is hope.”

“Daren’t utter.”

“There is always prayer. It might be less worse off.”

“My lips are sealed.”

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat. She rubs her toes that have become numb. “Do you think we should stretch ourselves a bit?”

“Like traction?”

“I need some exercise.”

“Some motion.”

“It’s exhausting just to think of it. I need some fresh air.”

“New ideas. A change of scene.”

“Come on out; my back will kill me if I stay cramped like this another day.” She steps out of the car, raises her arms aloft, bends down and tries to touch her feet but can’t. The effort is too much for her; she sways slightly, clutches the sides of the Ford, and then leans against it, out of breath. The man has come out as well; he bends sideways, loses his balance and nearly falls.

“You are still in good shape,” he says enviously.

“You don’t look so bad yourself.”

“Pretty in an odd sort of way.”

“If you shaved they might still not throw you behind bars.”

“I might even hug you if you didn’t smell.”

A police siren wails in the distance and grows louder as it approaches. Moments later a cruiser drives into the lot. They stand transfixed like hares caught in the glare of headlights. They cower as one of the cops walks out and approaches them. The other cop leans against the vehicle and lights

up nonchalantly.

“What’s your names,” the officer calls out.

“We don’t have any, we gave them up,” the man says. “We don’t remember any.”

“Still...”

“Oh, you mean what we go by?” she wonders aloud.

“Ah that,” the man says, waxing eloquent: “Home Koala...Douche Americanos...Assholatosis...Shitacane... My personal favorite is Burden of Earth.”

“Okay, I get it, I get it,” the cop raises his hands, his palms outward. In a more gentle tone, he continues, “Do you have any IDs?”

“Sure, I have a birthmark here,” she says; lowering her pajamas, she shows him the tattoo of a pink and green butterfly on her buttocks. The man is frantically tugging at the cords of his pajamas but they won’t untangle.

“That’s all right,” the cop says, to the man. “I’ve seen enough. Does this place belong to you?”

“Who knows,” he says, shrugging, “who owns it.”

“Who leases it,” she adds.

“Who claims it,” he says.

“Who craves it,” she says.

The cop looks from man to woman and then toward the building set at the back of the lot. It’s in a poor state of repair with most of the windowpanes missing and doors smashed in. A part of it has been set on fire and it seems to have been a prey to arson at one time. “Someone reported a man prowling in this heap. We caught him trying to sell a car stereo. You wouldn’t know anything about it would you? I guess not. Hey, you folks should be in a home or something – any kids?”

“Not that we know of,” she replies, her trembling fingers tugging at her lapel.



“Not that we remember any,” says the man, shuffling his feet, kicking up dust. “Not that anyone calls.”

“Is there anything at all that you remember about yourselves?”

“Born 1961 to Estha and Paul Hepbrom of Great Barrington, MA, weighed 140 pounds once, believed billions of mindless drones can’t be wrong is all bull, is ugly because got hit by an ugly stick. Life is going in a different direction and the body is in a state of permanent outplacement; my sixth-grade elementary schoolteacher was ancient when I was in her class and presumably hasn’t gotten any younger since I left. He would always get a Forsythia branch as the device of cruel and curious punishment; the green forest behind his house was taken out by nature; in the darkest hour we must search for the voices that allow us to remain human – humans are natural born killers; people are often difficult, unsound, and self-centered – excuse them anyway; pogue mo thoin; before gramps died, he told me to stay a child forever...it’s worth it, he

said...” The man’s voice trails as he runs out of breath.

“Hell, what? Do you need some food – cigarettes?” The cop pats his breast pocket and withdraws a pack and takes a step toward the man who shrinks back and scuttles to the rear of the car, his eyes big and round with fear. “It’s okay.” The cop stops and tosses over the pack. It hits the man’s chest and drops to the ground and stays there. “Can I help you in any way?”

“No one knows what help looks like as no one has ever seen it,” she says. “But we ask you to leave us alone.”

“We ask that you never return,” he says.

The cop tips his hat, shakes his head, and muttering to himself, returns to his car and drives off with his companion.

“Do you miss the kids,” he asks in the fading lights.

“The offspring?” she says.

“The mistakes.”

“Before they grew up, or after?”

“The regrets.”

“Aren’t they all the same?”

“Not different.”

“Quite alike.”

\*\*\*

By early next morning grey clouds have spread their ash-like cloak across the somber sky and soon tiny pebbles of rain plop on the shimmering car roofs, and with every gust dead leaves fall. The man rubs his palms vigorously; his pigeon chest wheezes as he tries deep-breathing exercises.

“I am wet,” he says, in a petulant tone.

“Try rolling up the car window,” she tells him; her lips quiver into a mischievous smile momentarily before curling back into the permanent crease of a scowl. “On second thoughts, come let’s stand under the porch

roof. We can watch the rain.”

“Let’s,” he says, unmoving.

“Follow me,” she says, and shifts uncomfortably to find a dry spot on the damp upholstery.

After a short silence the man calls out from under his blanket: “are you still there?”

“Where?”

“From where you be speaking now.”

“I’m here, wherever that might be.”

“You said something about standing under a roof.”

“You really want to?”

“If you insist.”

“I guess we’ve run out of choices,” she says, as the rain begins to drip inside and a little pool gathers on her frayed shawl.

“We are our choices.”



“Then we’ve run out of ourselves.” With a supreme effort she raises herself out of the seat and wades through the slush; her arms spread out like a tightrope walker’s, she totters left and right as if the earth was heaving under her and manages to reach the porch of the office building where she hangs on to a wooden column for dear life. The man watches her with rapt attention and then follows, parrying the falling rain as if it were blows to his body. As they stand clinging to the balustrade, another car comes in through the driveway. A man in a priest’s habit steps out; covering his head with a bible, he sloshes through the mud toward them.

“Holy Christ! Watch out! A priest,” the man says, frantically looking about for an escape route.

“Stop it! You are not a boy anymore,” she says, restraining him by the sleeve.

“Good morning,” the priest says pleasantly, tapping the rain off the good book. “Officer Proust called in and suggested I visit here.”

The two stare at him blankly. “We cannot help you,” he says finally.

“You must turn elsewhere for mercy and find the grace to deliver you,” she says.

The priest’s jaw drops but he quickly recovers the mellowed mien.

“We see you’ve brought the paperwork,” he says, gesturing toward the Holy Book.

“You’ve already got everyone’s burdens,” she says, “and there are thousands of things you can’t tell anyone about.”

“Why a priest,” he asks. “A priest outdrank me in a fair once, though.”

“Do you question God?” The priest says.

“No, we answer to him. Alone,” she replies. “Why did The Cloth arise in a faith that began without it and opposed it?”

“Are you Catholics,” the priest asks with infinite patience.

“If you’re not one you’re going to hell no matter what,” he says. “We are more of dogs-persons – right now we have neither dogs nor cats. But

we used to be alcoholics once.”

“Brother, would you like to say a small prayer with me,” the priest asks.

“Sure,” he says. “Prayer is to do nothing and still think you’re helping.”

“A placebo,” she says.

“A way of saying you are so important God will change his plans for you.”

“To ask that laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a lone unworthy petitioner.”

“When you talk to God, it’s prayer. When God talks to you, you’re mad.”

The priest, exasperated, crosses everyone and utters a short prayer before leaving: “May the grace of Christ, our Savior, and the Father’s boundless love, with the Holy Spirit’s favor, bless us from above.

Amen.”

“He’s saved,” he says.

“He’s on his way to glory,” she says, holding out her hand and letting the rain wet it.

\*\*\*

By nightfall the rain has stopped and shimmering stars swarm the watery yard. The man, who has managed to find a dry seat to snuggle in, laments, “The prayer left me strangely drained.”

The woman, also in a warm and wilted car nearby, says, “ You’re in touch with your spiritual side.”

“Hungry.”

“You’ve just encountered your inner divinity.”

“Thirsty.”

“You want me to get to the highway pub and find some food? They have nice waiters there – someone on a smoking break in the back always finds a bite for me.”

“Alright. But carry some money with you.”



“Whatever for? I don’t need any. Food is free.”

“It’s for when you get waylaid. They always get pretty nasty when they find you aren’t carrying any money on you.”

“So you want me to carry money on me so I can get robbed?”

“Yeah, as always. Do you have any left?”

“Yeah, some.” She shakes her pocket for the jingle of change but there’s nothing left.

“Be careful.”

“I will.” She wraps her shawl close and steps out into the night for food for him.

\*\*\*

The man tosses and turns restlessly on the seat while in wait. He rises frequently to stare out into the dark at the entrance to the lot. He curses often and thinks of the verbal lashing he’s going to give her for making him worry and fret thus. A thought crosses his mind to go after her, but

fear grips his head in a bony vise of knees.

Then, the unhinged Iron Gate lurches violently as someone leans on it. Groans and cries rend the air and pierce his eardrums like flamed skewers.

“Is that you, are you hurt, did you get robbed, did you give them the money,” he asks, his head swimming in mad affright.

“They got me...” she groans and manages to reach her car and collapses. Her animal cries continue; like a wild creature being lowered on the tip of a spear.

“I wish I couldn’t hear.” The man presses his hands on his ears and sobs. After a while he removes his hands and cocks his head to listen. She is still crying but barely.

“Have they chopped you down yet? Have they finished you,” he asks.

“I guess... nearly.”

“Is it over?”

“Almost...John.” She pants; words escape her in a soft hiss.



“Please don’t leave me alone Jenny... I cannot bear it... Jenny...  
Jenny?”

\*\*\*

“Well, that’s done then. Poor folks.” Officer Proust removes his gloves and lights up a cigarette. “Let’s file a report,” he tells his buddy.

“Any family,” the Lieutenant asks.

“Yes Sir, two kids...doing pretty well for themselves too. We’ve informed them. They never had time to check on their parents, though.”

“What happened to the husband?”

“I guess after the wife was stabbed and passed away in this car here, he just never stirred – he starved to death.”

“Does this lot belong to them?”

“Yes sir. It’s a secluded lot on the highway. They got robbed and beat so many times, I guess they just lost their mind and began to hide in the cars out here. The kids wouldn’t have them, so they had no place to go, I

figure.”

“Yeah, no place to go,” says the Lieutenant, and spits a thin jet of red tobacco juice on the ground.





# Reminiscence of a Teenage Ne'er-do-well

DANI DYMOND

We spray painted our bucket list  
onto the side of the high school's east wall,  
standing atop an oxidized convertible  
abandoned long before our birth years.

There were footprints in the dried tar there,  
bookmarking prior troublemakers' stances.  
They might have also shared smokes,  
strawberry tobacco staining baby teeth  
pink. Do-it-yourself piercings, exclusive  
to our imbecility, still stung when prompted  
by a headphone's blare – what was it  
that we listened to? The Kooks, featuring  
loud licorice whips to the sides of young heads.

Your rabbit's foot key chain, dyed blue,  
hung like a wish from a torn jean pocket  
as if to say your fortunes were promising, that  
our list, still scarring campus property,  
was meant to transcend concrete, embedding  
itself in our very veins to tag along for the ride:  
hold tight, buckle up, we're going to fly.

# Lighthouses

DANI DYMOND

A bowl of lit wood and *LA Times* articles  
popped below us on the sands of Long Beach.  
Those pits illuminated like roaming dots  
across the seaside, furious – floating – lanterns.

The bonfire clung to my hair, its ashes  
peppering the strands. It gave you a glimpse  
of our lives in later years, my youth  
momentarily masked by the soot.

Your smile was a beacon in that night air,  
the promise I needed, knowing that I'd be  
sharing front porch rockers someday  
with the man who grinned at me over flames.

# sleepwalk

SAFIYYAH MOTAIB

nightmares while I daydream  
twisting and turning  
tangled in white bed sheets  
worn by yesterday's ghost  
wanting to frighten me.  
It synchronizes its float  
with my shadow's footsteps;  
when the sun sets,  
my shadow fades,  
but my ghost  
has me memorized,  
my mind,  
mesmerized,  
dazed during the day,  
footprints in circles  
tracking the choo choo  
of my thoughts,  
express train;  
no stops today,  
not until the rain clouds go away

# barely

SAFIYYAH MOTAIB

asleep in a tornado  
eye of the storm,  
not so calm anymore;  
houses in the distance,  
stamped from a board game  
barely getting rained on  
between skies painted with winds  
crying to be free;  
how strange



# drifting colour

SAFIYYAH MOTAIB

somberness,  
isn't always born that way

i've seen colour taken away,  
drained from life itself,

the shine in your eyes,  
shifted from one side,

i've seen storms bring life,

but steady drizzles just  
erode you away in little pieces,

mellowness gone first,  
in yellows

# Plastic

DEBARUN SARKAR

The faces melt outside of the camera. Make-up remover. Flossing. The hair spills out like pubic hair in the night, out of the wigs, the laciest underpants.



# Ballad of the Searched Airline Passenger

COLIN DODDS

I was hiding in the faces  
of the morning mass  
Minding my business  
and covering my ass

I got the search  
on the business I feigned  
All through the church  
of the airplane

Now I'm staring at your ass  
through the bulletproof glass  
I got a migraine from forgiveness  
Now I need to trespass

And I feel the future  
riding up my spine  
I been wound up like this  
since I was nine

I'm 22A, you're 22B  
I say we're bonded  
So what do you say?  
I've already been wanded

I'm so safe  
It's started to chafe

# The Ambassador's Last Day

COLIN DODDS

They may have closed the embassy  
But they never closed the bar  
Now I sit here, drinking Hennessey  
Wondering how things ever got so far

I saw her on the runway  
She was buying arms  
I could see she'd found a new way  
For me to come to harm

And I don't know what to do  
With these medals from the Czar  
I dreamed of something new  
In my armored car

I told her "I'm not as dead  
As I sometimes appear"  
"Don't worry," she said  
"We're all spies here"

On the tarmac, she was with a child  
And I was smuggling diamonds  
I asked when she got so mild  
She smiled "I always liked your timing"

I said "I heard you went soft,  
that you got out of the biz"  
She said "Your intel is off—  
You have no idea who this child is."



# Virgen

THOM YOUNG

it's human nature  
to kill  
everything  
the dog barking  
next door, the rusted lovers of yesterday,  
the concrete skulls bouncing along the Los Angeles  
freeway, the horses running before a crowd  
that roots for the loser, the silence of the statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe,  
and the car, button, cloth.  
Evan played guitar as the traffic sped up King Street  
and I fell in love for the very last time.

# She Rocketed Out

WILLIAM C. BLOME

I no sooner had her bra unhooked and then away from her body (and its fabric cups astride my palm) than I heard her internal jets start to rumble softly. After a significant shudder, she rocketed out of the pantry and the house. As I rushed after her through the open screen door, I could have bent down and smelled where her chest had just seconds earlier aromatized the dented mesh, and it didn't take my being an Einstein or a Planck to realize she was headed for my timid-cellist-neighbor's shipping container home (the one he'd had made a short time back from a Liberian freighter's cargo inventory), and I reckoned forthwith that today, I was the one who had done the cellist's heavy lifting for him, that very soon my woman would be fanatically shoving those tits into his back, tracing her ovals and lozenges on his mohair sweater, and starting to get him hard up front.

But I also knew that in order for her to plunk down next to him and initiate more comprehensive physical contact, she would have to completely remove (or make wide accommodation for) several genuine and surrealistic obstacles: I remember there was a large and motionless powder-blue sea turtle on the carpet and centered just inside the container's front door; lurking about the turtle was a restless, gray male lion crafted entirely of drifting pipe smoke. This particular day, the jumbo-fiddle player might well have featured three belching little girls in birthday-party garb as his respected guests (all primly seated and tied together by one loose hawser); and undeniably, if anyone in my neighbor's home looked up, there were many, many witnessing sumac leaves, all illuminatedly bright green and pressing flat against one sizeable skylight.





KATE MACDONALD



# Deep Six - Wasteland of the Apocalypse - So Hit It!

SAIRA VIOLA

Thanks for gobble gobble bang bang on Kimmies titties  
and the peachy cunt cream  
that froths up the 'news' stream  
Thanks for the white hooded power of the KKK  
and their torch lit stars and stripes parade

Thanks for the Muslim bumper stickers  
which say 'Go Home',  
Death by lethal injection -  
Disney blow jobs in the parking lot  
And pawn shop- pay day loans

Thanks for legalizing reefer  
Little kids still having seizures,  
Cos they can't get no cheeba  
As the men in suits don't believe us  
And thanks for the malls of insanity,  
your revolving doors of profanity  
For invading over fifty countries  
To spread that thing they call 'democracy,'

Thanks for Vietnam war vets,  
And Standing Rock protests  
For racial profiling,  
And bastard Pinochet -  
The systemic murder of young black men  
And the cock shot horror of Timothy McVeigh

Thanks for near asphyxia by plastic bag  
From the Chicago Police  
And sodomy with a plunger  
by the NYC PD  
How many lives does it cost  
Just to breathe?

Thanks for setting the price  
And the banana , the hot fudge and the nuts  
Thanks for the triple A rating  
And stealing grandma's house



Thanks for genetically modified crops  
And Taylor Swift's A list celeb girl squad  
For plastic perfection  
and widowed botox

Thanks for Miracle whip  
And lab tested turkey  
Toxic sweet diabetes  
Death dealin' bitchin'  
And birthing a 'nigger bashing,' 'Jew baiting,'  
'Muslim hating,' society

Thanks for crowning Amazon King  
And kneeling at the alter of e bay  
For drive thru cocaine  
And that 'machete jungle,' called LA

Thanks for day time soap operas  
And the naked voyeurism of reality tv  
For making every nobody famous  
When they defecate and sleep

Thanks for those Washington bombs  
And the sacrifice of the young  
For lip smackin' onion Funyons  
And radioactive lungs

Thanks for food stamps trailer homes  
Rat meat and killer drones  
Thanks for three strikes  
And Gitmo ,  
Trump power and  
The Cosby show

Thanks for human bondage,  
And camions of dead refugees  
For presidential weapons of mass destruction  
And pulling the plug on humanity

Thanks for making us all 'Winston Smith,'  
And for unleashing a sick green syphilis on  
'The Great American Dream,' a never never land  
A fabled stinking tale of Hollywood make believe.

# The Contest

MARK A. HOWARD

We gathered around as the first act began,  
Might as well kick back,  
Since this will go anywhere but well,

Contestant number one,  
Well, she only joined to be a star,  
Her audition was eye-opening,  
Her best friends lost their heads,  
And control of the wheel,  
Grand prize was the overdose,  
And, at that point,  
Hell, depression seemed only common sense,  
You seem bitter,  
And you writhe,  
As if you wanted it so bad,  
On your knees,

Following act,  
Check this kid out,  
He told himself that he had an appetite,  
Promised himself a feast,  
Found a brave, young whore,  
When it was all said and done,  
At least he was satisfied,  
Only she spread,  
Rotting away,  
Beats the alternative some days,

Closer center stage,  
This one is for me,  
Little white lies,  
A ghastly scene,  
All the monsters came to play,  
In some drowning of hope,  
Hanging from the ceiling,  
Poor guardian angel,



Why help the helpless,  
Let them be seduced,  
As we drug you,  
With greed,  
Rob you of your dreams,  
To live a composed life,  
Instead of this game show,  
That all endure,

After all...  
It's just one big goddamn contest.



# Swept Away! Jimmy Pro Washes Out In Terlingua Creek

WILLIAM C. CRAWFORD

A wash-off in the Big Bend Country of Texas may closely resemble an arroyo in neighboring New Mexico. Both are ephemeral streams carrying big water only during winter storms and monsoon season.

The terms are often used interchangeably in the American Southwest. As water wears away geoforms, a deep gully forms from the fast moving current. Some of these irregular fissures are elevated with proper names. Terlingua Creek in Brewster County, Texas falls into this category. But hey! I am getting ahead of myself.

Jimmy Pro runs a mythical tourist agency dubbed OzQuest. I and a couple of other friends are his only real clients. Jimmy huddles at his fading computer in Sydney and churns out resos and itineraries. When I least expect it, an email pops up alerting me to an impending photo shoot at a venue where I really didn't expect to go.

We have been friends for 50 years now since our Army days as journalists. In some ways, we may have peaked in 1970 as young writers at Fort Hood for the *Armored Sentinel*. I was arrested for consorting with antiwar protestor, actress Jane Fonda. Jimmy Pro blew the lid off improper command influence as the Green Machine prosecuted My Lai perpetrator, Sgt. David Mitchell. On weekends we shot laconic monochrome photos of derelict CenTex railroad depots.







Somehow, decades later, this crazy journey evolved into something of substance. Jimmy coughed up OzQuest and we started rambling about on offbeat photoshoots to El Paso, Death Valley, the Nevada mining country, and even Gotham City.

Late one afternoon a few years ago as we stared into cold cans of Tecate in a dated Motel 6, we conjured up a name for our tediously obsessive, throwback photography. Forensic Foraging was born, and we attempted to stave off the mounting modern wave of techno driven, digital photography.

We rediscovered New York photographer, Stephen Shore, who decades before had helped to popularize color photography. We venerated his minimalist approach. He too was a wanderer who found Texas. His famous Amarillo Postcards fit snugly into our favored West Texas motif.

We recently landed up in Study Butte, Texas late one January afternoon. Just say Stooody Butte! We hoped to shoot the wild border country of the Big Bend, along the Rio Grande. OzQuest had booked us into the Chisos Mining Company, a funky 1950's décor lodge which intersected perfectly with Jimmy's spartan travel tastes.

Study Butte is the home of the Terlingua ghost town set in heavily mountainous desert. It features remote getaways and famous chili cook-offs. The most prominent feature is a played out mercury mine which left the earth in perpetual upheaval with arresting, gaping pock holes ringed by dark brown, grooved piles of tailings.

Will Study was once mine superintendent here. Today, snowbirds, in near million dollar RV's, populate local campgrounds in search of the warm winter sun. Their license plates indicate they hail from snow country - Iowa,



Minnesota and Nebraska.

Brewster County is the largest county in Texas. Big enough to swallow up Connecticut with room to spare. Ronny Dodson is the smooth drawling sheriff here. He charms local voters over breakfast at a packed buzzing beehive diner. But his larger than life, Big Bend credo often clashes with intrusive, outside values. A big court case brought by pesky liberals forced removal of tiny crosses from his sheriff's cruisers.

Ronny often blasts the preachy Texas media by saying "there is no border security problem in the Big Bend." That's because traffic back and forth over the border runs unfettered by the law on a daily basis. Jimmy Pro is mesmerized by the Sheriff whom he knows a bit from his previous sojourns here. They have a history of swilling very early morning coffee and solving complex problems.

One afternoon we decided to forage Terlingua Creek which bisects the lunar mercury mine site. The water was low and the well-polished creek stones provided a dry foothold. Jimmy led the way upstream in brilliant winter sunshine. Soon 100 foot, craggy bluffs soared overhead. The creek bent slightly northwest and Jimmy cooed excitedly as we grabbed some imposing images in the magnificent winter light.

Off on the creek bank framed horizon, some unexpected black clouds flirted with 7,000 foot peaks. Far above us, but out of sight, squatters' dogs yapped happily in the ghost town. Squealing children attested to the families who were living rent free in long abandoned, stone miners' cabins. An incongruous audio track squeezed into the mix. Barely audible across many miles, we almost failed to hear faint thunder even as we shot the sun bathed





bluffs above us.

Jimmy Pro squinted through his camera viewfinder. He was isolating curious formations etched in the cliffs. The walls laced with traces of mercury, saltpeter, and even a bit of silver, were popping out in front of his lens. He suddenly lowered his camera and said matter-of-factly, “The damn water is coming up!” And it was, now four inches instead of two. My feet were suddenly getting wet inside my low cut hiking boots.

Now Jimmy Pro is a seasoned trekker in Australia’s quixotic outback. A light bulb suddenly exploded deep in his brain. “Crawdaddy! Big water is coming down through here from that mountain storm!” he screeched. But 100 foot bluffs blocked our lateral escape. A faint gurgling rumble cascaded south into our little canyon.

Things then turned into shit in a hurry when we tried to quickly retrace our steps to the bridge where we left our rental car. Terlingua Creek was suddenly a berserk washing machine tumbling us end over end. I caught a glimpse of Jimmy for only an instant as his backpack bobbed into view as I spun momentarily to the surface. A silly thought crossed my racing mind. Forensic Foraging can be dangerous.

We bobbed quickly down to the bridge more than a mile away. Jimmy tried to plaster his drenched body against the concrete abutment to arrest his journey. I was still midstream in the full grip of the now raging current. I flashed straight under the bridge and looked back to see bubbling brown water scrape Jimmy off his concrete finger hold.

My feet no longer touched bottom! We were in a severe desert flash flood. The sun still shone brightly and I saw patches of blue sky overhead

flood. The sun still shone brightly and I saw patches of blue sky overhead as I tumbled toward the distant Rio Grande. Somehow the current swept Jimmy past me, and the steep terrain began to flatten out. The creek banks were now only three feet high with scrub shrubs projecting out over the raging torrent.

I traded upside down for right side up. In what I could imagine was only a terrified apparition, I observed a solitary figure hanging out from a stout shrub on the bank. Then I noticed a white cowboy hat above an outstretched arm. Jimmy grabbed the proffered hand under the white hat. I knew this might be my last chance. I mustered a little strength and swam straight for Jimmy.

My body inverted and corrected at least twice! Suddenly, I slammed into Jimmy dead on. I bear hugged for dear life. A familiar rich baritone voice out of a Marlboro commercial calmly intoned. “I think you boys should stop right here.” Even in my panic, I instantly recognized Sheriff Ronny Dodson under his trademark white hat. He had one big hand on Jimmy Pro and his other was squeezing that stout shrub. A big, brown uniformed deputy was back up on the bank reaching to grab his boss.

Now remember, Jimmy and Ronny had history. On Jimmy’s previous forays to Brewster County they sipped steaming coffee and unraveled world problems at the now defunct barbecue truck operated by Cosmic Cathy, a local icon.

As the sheriff wrapped our shivering bodies into some of his handy space blankets, the deputy helped us toward the nearby cruiser. As I slid shakily along the back fender, I noticed a small cross now faintly painted



over because of an unwelcomed lawsuit. I placed my index finger lightly on the cross and gave silent thanks. Screw the ACLU! When you are in deep shit down in the wild Big Bend, then Sheriff Ronny Dodson dispatched by God is probably the only help coming.

### AFTER

A few days later we returned to the safety of El Paso. As we often do, we were snorting afternoon Tecates in The Tap, voted the best local dive bar for nine years in a row. Lingered mud and grit still infested every orifice of our aging bodies. I allowed as how my chronic hemorrhoids probably soaked up a toxic dose of mercury poisoning during our downstream ride. “Well Crawdaddy,” opined Jimmy Pro dryly, “might just be that they will be falling off, that is, if you live.”

Some 30 days after our washout, Sheriff Ronny Dodson opened a large, flat FedEx package. The sender’s address said Jimmy Pro. A framed 36x18 photo of a blood red sunrise over Study Butte appeared. Just a thank you from a serious shooter who respects law and order down on the Big Bend. Sheriff Dodson immediately began clearing wall space behind his desk.





# Susan's Black Eye

JONATHAN RENTLER

Phlox Phlox Phlox!  
Lilly of the Valley,  
Wattle up that freesia way  
The Daisies are in chains.  
Pansies pocketing bachelor buttons,  
Comb out your candy tufts.  
Taste no more with that painted tongue.

Honeysuckle,  
You're a wax flower.  
A false bird of paradise.  
Raise your sword fern,  
I hear your throatwort,  
and Myrtle's seen your scabiosa.

Once Summer's darlin'  
Knapweed now, buy a ticket  
to Monkshood or Schinus.

Be gladiola  
Spider Mum found you first,  
Snapdragons pack goldenrods.

# the rainbow bridge's toll

JONATHAN RENTLER

nah, I don't wanna see  
who's lurking behind the curtain

no saint up a tree

it's just me and this pool  
prettier boys have drowned for much less  
bend and snap a selfie

human, human on the ground  
there's no paradise to be found



# Taken In

ANDERS CARLSON-WEE

The fear of growing older less than the feeling  
of failing to do so. Before first light you grope  
down dark hallways in someone else's home,  
fingers raking walls for switches. You turn  
a valve, strike a match, hover above a burner  
and wait for ignition. Whoever owns this kitchen  
showed you how to do this, but for a moment  
you can't remember where you are, who took  
you in. You look around the rooms for clues.  
Roughhew of rifles. Couches. Crisco containers.  
The tolling black hole of a Peter Pan clock.  
A watercolor of Jesus stumbling from his tomb.  
You strike another match to eye the faces  
on the fridge: not you, not you, not you, not you.

“Taken In” originally appeared in *32 Poems*

# Comfest, 2016

JAMES CROAL JACKSON

tie-dye shirts swirl a kind of communal  
color believing in community we cup

our hands for cheap beer the sun  
and burn to leave us wanting

more meaningful single bonding sitting  
on the grass dark dog licking my ear beside

your glint a shard of music your violin  
a long wild note a waterfall it won't rain

until later the ground a foam mattress we sink  
shallow the deepness of balloon string in hand



# Docking

M. A. ISTVAN JR.

Mark peels open and pulls back the tan prepuce  
that bewitched Dodi from their first school shower.

Against the chiseled peach-cleft underbelly  
of the now-exposed glossy rose-madder glans  
Dodi plants the topside of his buff-hide own.

Dodi's meatus smooching flared ruff of flesh,  
Mark hoods that neck-frill full over Dodi's crown.

The two boys have formed one retractable rod  
whose union Mark's hand-clutch at the seam secures,  
permitting strong but slight back and forth shafting.

# Billy Luck

DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

Billy Luck's bones rearranged themselves on the bus headed out of Gibsonton for the Tampa train station. He looked out the window, away from his trailer, all rusted, awnin torn, bricks holdin down tarp over a portion of the roof, lookin like other junkyard leftovers from his carnival days.

The bus passed an old train car that jailed tigers, vines growin through it, a giant planter. Gibsonton was a has-been like him, still some carnies left but most dead, or dyin, or just plain up and left, like his good friend Daisy, the most beautiful woman his eyes ever seen, a midget, but perfect, no matter.

Now Billy's friends all had bodies from the shoulders up: Judge Judy, and that good-lookin gal on The People's Court. He always took to smart, in-

your-face broads—don't take no shit type—like Daisy, who called, askin him to come see her in Miami, cause she was dyin.

What a foul mouthed little mother she been, tough, had to be, no taller than three feet, perfect proportion, and a great pick-pocket, long as people was sittin down. She been with the Gerling since nineteen fifty, five years after Billy started workin the carnival, a legend, Daisy was.

He figured since she git religion, and was close to dyin, that she wanted to talk bout that night sixty-five years gone, somethin they never spoke bout, but it was there, danglin, an untouchable. So's Billy wondered if she got that on her mind, bein religious and all.

The bus turned the corner and he saw the corpse of a high-striker. The black numbers erodin, the bell tarnished and hangin on by a bolt. He



chuckled to himself at how the marks showed off for their ladies when they took the hammer and slammed it on the lever—suckers, all of em, not knowin that life in the midway was rigged.

Billy's memories weathered inside his head like peelin wallpaper. The old days with freaks and geeks and nights where it was so damn excitin, pickin up, settin down, movin on and on until the midway was in sight and stakes hammered, where people in scanty towns ran out to watch, hopin to catch sight of the merry-go-round or the Ferris wheel settin up, maybe glimpse a hoochie-coochie babe runnin between trailers. Billy resented the fake imitation of amusement parks nowadays, though he was glad few had animals. In his day, he'd done seen too much bad done to the beasts, Billy done seen too much cruelty, period.

Drivin along the Hillsborough River, Billy pictured Daisy as she was when he first seen her. What separated her from other midgets wasn't just her womanly child looks but her husky voice, almost like a norm and

she could sing, too. That's what saved her when she got caught stealin at Ringlings and had to work peepshows in the basements of tenements on the lower east side. Bein a midget wasn't freak enough she was told by the boss, "What talents do ya got?" The curtain would open and Daisy would sing, struttin her little body on the platform while doin a striptease. Her singin saved her from fuckin God-knows-what, which she wasn't above doin. Daisy'd do whatever to survive. She come across all innocent same as one of them dolls in the window at Woolworth's, but if you looked long enough, you'd see lots a smarts and a cellar-full a hurts.

It was her husband, Jack, who told Billy this, who saw her in the slums and brought her to Gerling's Traveling Carnival of Fun.

Billy's clean flowered shirt stuck to the back of the vinyl seat like loose skin bout to pare off. He used to love the humid muggy days, but now it made him tired, like standin in line for hell. Most of the time he resisted goin down the road of the pity-pot. It reminded him of liquor. It went

down real good in the moment but the more you drink the more blurred your vision for any good comin your way. He knew that from his daddy, the meanest son-of-a-bitch to walk the earth.

The bus traveled up the I-75, crossed the river and stopped in Progress Village pickin up several black men who looked as parched and worn as Billy now felt, then the bus sped north, where there was as many as four lanes. Billy sat up. He liked the breeze stealin in through the window, how it reminded him of that time his daddy got a job drivin a bread truck and took Billy along, that was the year before his brother died from havin his innards cut from the saw. They tried to stuff em back in, but Jimmy passed. Only time he ever seen his daddy cry, why, for a moment it ripped him apart, his Daddy's sadness, so like his own.

He blamed Billy, though he was nowheres near the sawmill. Jimmy just plum forgit to put on the safety belt.

Thinkin bout his older brother always brought on the blues, how Billy

missed him. The way Jimmy throwed himself on top of him and his mama when his daddy felt like beatin em.

The night Jimmy passed, his daddy got wasted and told Billy he'd a wished it was him that died instead. He was drunk, but Billy knowed he was tellin the truth.

At fifteen, he packed a bag and hitched a ride from Montgomery to Birmingham, decided to change his last name from Lock to Luck, cause God knows he needed some and joinin the carnival seemed a good pick. He carried his hurt deep, like Daisy's, guess that was one reason he took to her so.

He peered through the grimy pane as the bus pulled into the station. His hand reached for the back of the seat in front of him, his heart pumpin, an adventure, no matter, and Daisy lay waitin, just for him.

Everyone but Billy stood. The driver left the bus, and Billy watched as he opened the side panel and took out the suitcases.



When the last person left, he ambled down the aisle. The driver waited for him and offered a hand.

“I ain’t that old, I can git down myself.”

“Don’t want you to fall and sue us, young fella.”

Billy laughed. His dentures dropped. He pushed them up with his tongue, remindin him that his kisser was as fake as his hip and stepped off the bus.

“I’ve never seen a suitcase this old,” the man said, handin Billy the luggage.

“Had it since the sixties, before you was born, I bet.” Billy took the leather handle and felt the moist exchange of sweat.

“You have a good day, sir.”

“Goin to Miami, I am. On a way to see a friend.”

The man already climbed up the steps of the bus, leavin Billy talkin to himself.

He shuffled toward the train station, with the closeness of the Hillsborough Bay; Billy caught a breeze, rufflin his straggly white hairs under the straw hat. His sense of smell worked just fine as he breathed in the sharp crude from the cargo rigs mixed with the bay.

A woman held the door for him as he headed toward her.

“Thank you, ma’am. Fine day, ain’t it?” He pointed his index finger to the brim of his hat and winked. She smiled and hurried on.

Air conditionin stung the sweat on his body. Billy shivered. “My God,” he whispered as he gazed around. The place was beautiful with long wooden benches, ferns growin in large pots at the end of each row. The last time he’d been here the place was fallin apart. But now, wrought-iron gates, wall lanterns, the floor so shiny looked like you could take a dip in it, so much light from all the glass windows it seemed the sun had eyes just for the station.

He shuffled cross the depot and out the door to the number 235 train.

Climbin aboard the Amtrak, Billy strained as he stretched for the handrail and tightened his grip round the metal. The steps were damn far apart for a man his age, but he made it. Course it knocked the air clean outta him.

It was stupid to act like he was younger than his years, he couldn't hide the hearin-aid behind his ear, the bum leg with the dummy hip, the missin lower teeth his tongue liked to suck, or the skinny ropes of white hair once blond and thick as a Fuller Brush mop. But he ain't gonna turn into a mark where's he trusted someone else to tell him what was up, no, Billy thought as he put on his glasses and matched his ticket with the seat number. All he wanted right now was to be able to walk on his own and see his friend without fallin down.

He found his seat by the window, four chairs two on either side with a table between em. Not sure if he could lift his suitcase to the luggage rack without seemin lame, besides, someone might steal it, so's Billy set it next

to him on the empty chair.

He took off his hat and put it on the table. He'd never get use to people rollin their suitcases. His been a friend for years, made of wood and leather, like him gouged with character, the handle worn from his grasp of luggin it from midway to midway.

A man put his bag on the rack above where Billy sat.

“Want me to put your suitcase up?” he asked.

Billy marked him as a businessman; suit, tie, bag strapped cross his shoulder, late thirties, nothin stand-out bout him cept for the flashy watch, gold and turquoise ring, and a ruby stud in his ear that made him look ridiculous. Somethin bout him seemed familiar.

“Naw, thanks though.”

He sat cross from Billy, next to the window. Another guy stood lookin down at him from the aisle.

“You're going to have to move your suitcase. This is my seat,” a man



said, holdin up his ticket. “I’ll get it.” The guy grabbed Billy’s case, lifted the luggage and shoved it onto the rack.

The fella was closer to Billy’s age than the guy with the ruby and this side of obese. When he took his seat, Billy smelled Bengay. He pulled down the armrest so’s the guy’s fat would stay on his own side.

The train began to rock. The conductor welcomed the people aboard the Amtrak then Billy experienced the thrill of movin. The wheels forward motion caused him to lurch toward the table. He stared out the window as the air-conditionin blasted through the vents, just like old times, like watchin a movie, it was, lots of overgrown shrubs and cast-offs as rusted and troubled as his own trailer. Metal stuff with graffiti sprayed on it. Crap didn’t make no sense. Billy wasn’t great at spellin, he’d made it no farther than the fifth grade, but what he saw out the window was nothin but young man’s rage who don’t care whether it make sense or not, just wanna leave somethin of themselves, like a dog pissin on tires.

As the train picked up speed the cool air faded, cheap-trick, made the customer think they git their money’s worth, then slight them, like he used to do out on the bally. Can’t dupe a con, Billy thought smilin to himself.

He felt like talkin so’s he took out a quarter from his shirt pocket and rolled it cross his knobby knuckles. Not with the skill like in the old days but a conversation piece, no matter.

Sure enough, the young man cross from him raised his eyebrows and smiled.

“Where did you learn that?”

“Worked the carnival for over half a century.”

“What did you do?”

“A talker, mostly.”

The guy frowned. “A barker?”

“People don’t know nothin call us that. That’s some watch ya got there,”

Billy said.

“My husband bought it for me.”

Billy grinned, it never took him long to git used to the freaks, like Jamie, the half man, half woman, and Angelo, with his twin’s arms and legs comin outta his gut, but it would take some time for him to git accustomed to a man callin his partner, a husband. “Oh,” Billy said. “Guy’s got good taste. You look familiar.”

The man unzipped his bag and took out his computer. “I’m a reporter for WSFL. Maybe you’ve seen me on TV.”

“That’s where,” Billy said. “Boy, do I got stories to tell you.” But Billy read people like a canvas banner hangin in front of a sideshow. This guy was through talkin.

He put his coin away. He woulda enjoyed answerin questions. He often played the interview game, pretendin someone like Lesley Stahl asked him questions on 60 Minutes and him talkin bout his life. He imagined microphones, and lights spread all around as he sat center stage for the

world to hear his story.

He woulda even enjoyed a conversation with Ben Gay, but he was too busy gawkin at his phone.

People ignorin him did have its advantages, like stealin butter and Hershey bars in the grocery store, snatchin things in the bank, like pens and paper tablets, sometimes right under the nose of the tellers, just to show em. So what if they caught him.

Billy sunk in his seat thinkin that the reporter cross from him woulda jumped through dog-hoops to interview him if he knowed what Billy had done out past the midway on that sweltering August night back in nineteen fifty.

That night, he remembered the marks had all left. But somethin nagged at him, call it sixth sense, or maybe it was that new guy who strutted into town, and took a job with the carnival, sold popcorn, cleaned up the tiger and monkey cages and the johns, jobs he did when he first joined. Billy



didn't like him from the git-go.

One day he caught him stickin his cigarette into Tuffi. Tuffi reared on her hind legs, her trunk swingin wild. He knocked the new fella to the ground, told him if he ever caught him doin that again he'd make him real sorry. Well, bout two weeks later, he saw him kickin the freak, Stumpy. Billy done did what he promised. He slugged the guy so hard he doubled and rolled on the ground, moanin. Billy thought that'd be it until the guy git up and come after him swingin and givin him a black eye. Mason was his name, mean, as cruel as Billy's daddy.

That night, Billy went from tent to tent lookin inside, makin sure no one was there. He recalled checkin under the stage where the kids used to hide so's they could look up the costumes of the hoochie-coochie girls and how the sawdust would have to be scattered real nice like in the mornin, he could smell it now, how it always reminded him of his brother.

The trailers had their lights on. He heard laughter, people talking; ice

cubes clinkin into glasses, fiddle music comin out of a radio, like any other, cept it was hotter than most, sultry, the kinda night Billy wished he had a woman to keep him company.

He was down at the end of the midway, near the draped cage where the monkeys was cooped. The sun been gone for a couple of hours, and it was like openin night for the stars, millions of em. He recalled takin in the wonder of it, magic, real magic, where the night was brushed by the stroke of a master.

Billy began to hike. In those days, he had so much sex surgin through his twenty-year-old body, some nights he just had to walk it off. Till the day he died he'd remember the moon, wide and plump, near full, the crickets loud as he headed north toward an empty field and beyond that the woods, tree branches rustlin, spiky against a dark blue sky.

Billy breathed in the air, thick with the long leaf pine. He was thinkin bout his ma, feelin blue bout leavin her behind with the devil. Billy kept

walkin. His shirt drenched in sweat. He wished he had a smoke, but he kept goin, crossin the brink of the woods.

He was gonna jack-off when somethin sounded. He stopped. An animal? Yeah. A moan cut off. No. Not an animal. Somethin muffled. A cry. Human.

Billy led with his toes feelin for twigs and dried leaves, like huntin with his daddy. He moved toward the moan. The hairs on his body sprung up. From the light of the moon, he saw somethin white swipe back and forth cross the ground. The hunched form of a man. The cries. Billy crept forward. Listenin. Strainin his eyes so's to make sure.

Mason held Daisy's face to the dirt, rapin her from behind. Her tiny fists battered the ground. Her little body struggled under his.

He sneaked up on Mason as he pumped away, groanin like a pig, loud enough so's to make it easy for Billy to come up behind him and wrap his strong young fingers round his neck and squeeze. Mason grabbed at his

hands. Billy felt his nails gouge his skin. Blood spewed wet and sticky, but Billy put all six-foot, two-hundred pounds into stranglin him.

Sweat ran down his chin and fell on Mason's head, Billy felt it roll off the backs of his fingers, but so tight was his hold it never got the chance to threaten his grip. With the wrong this man done to Daisy, Billy's hands made sure Mason never do it again. He held on, even when he felt life surrender. Then, Billy rolled him on his side with Mason's little pecker exposed. "Let me!" He remembered Daisy demandin. Pullin down her dress she done give him a kick to the nuts and then one to the face and spat on him. She looked up at Billy, hair all tangled, nose bleedin and said, "You ever say a word about this, I'll kill you myself." From that day on, as long as they traveled together, no one would hurt her.

Billy stared out the window, passin the North bound Silver Star, long fences of hedges, warehouses. He nodded. The conductor garbled somethin bout Winter Haven. The forward movement, the click-clackin



over the rails, relivin that night with Daisy and him bein eighty-five years old—Billy slipped into darkness.

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He stood with his suitcase gazin at the green home with yellow shutters, and window boxes crammed with geraniums. Its wide porch with four pillars featured a swing where as many as three people could dangle their old swollen legs. House looked to be well over a hundred years old.

Daisy and Jack invested well. Freaks always made more money than norms, at least till the sixties before it become incorrect, but midgets and dwarfs worked on, cause they wasn't too scary lookin.

The home with a rail leadin up to the veranda reminded him of all the times he passed by in trucks and trains thankful he never had to settle down in one place, made life hard for the wives, cept for Alice, who divorced him cause he was still married to Betty. And kids? Well, he ain't

sure how many he done fathered. None never showed up on his doorstep, course he never had a doorstep, till '05, the year they made him retire.

He trudged up the walkway. It'd be three years since he last seen his girl. He come down for Jack's funeral and what a spectacle it turned into, musta been more ex-carnies and circus folk there than in Gibtown; fire-eaters, sword swallowers, even a Wallenda showed up, tights an all. But Jack was no ordinary midget. He was a magician, an entertainer, a munchkin in the Wizard of Oz, so charmin he could con a con and how he loved shootin craps. Billy chuckled, just thinkin bout his friend Jack.

Sure enough, Billy's pants sagged in the butt and his shirt forced its way out of his belt. If only he could turn back into that tall blond stud with light blue eyes that drove women loco. Ah shit, least he was alive and not in some sick home like Daisy. He held onto the railin and shuffled up the porch steps.

Billy tucked in his shirttails, he unstuck his hat from his sweaty head and

steered a comb over his damp scanty hairs.

He rang the bell.

A black woman opened the door dressed in white pants and a lime-green jacket. “Why, you must be Mr. Luck.”

“That’s me, Billy.”

“I’m Geneva.”

“How’s Daisy?”

“Well, Miss Daisy is having a rough day, but seeing you will lift her spirits.”

Billy wondered. She was a tightfisted little mother, always lecturin him on savin his dough. Comin down for her funeral woulda been enough money spent. But callin him before and spendin more bucks to come down after she died? Musta had somethin to do with that night, and gotten religion an all.

“Leave your suitcase and hat here in the lobby. Ruben will take it up.”

Billy stepped into a foyer with a tall potted palm tree next to a narrow table. There was a stairway in front of him and on either side the ground floor fanned out to where he couldn’t see no more, just the fronds of palm trees wavin from the air-conditionin. The place seem all spick-and-span.

“We have your room ready for you. It’s on the third floor.”

“Hope I don’t have to walk up no steps.”

“Lord have mercy! You wouldn’t find me walking up three flights of stairs. No, Mr. Luck, we had an elevator put in years ago.”

“I’d like to see Daisy, right soon. An call me, Billy.”

“Sure, Mr. Billy.”

He smiled at Geneva callin him Mr. Billy.

“We’re going to have dinner in couple of hours. Would you like to join us in the dining room?”

“That sounds right nice, ma’am.”



“Let’s go see Miss Daisy.”

Billy followed Geneva past the stairway. The house seemed bigger on the inside.

He passed a room where people watched TV with a piano off to the side, and several white-haired ladies sat on a couch. Three old geezers played cards at a table, lookin like waxworks they did, till one of em eyed Billy—the scrape of emptiness passin between em.

“How sick is she?” Billy asked.

“She’s had hospice this morning. She ate some and that’s a good sign.”

“How long she gonna live?”

“Months, maybe weeks.”

“Can ya fix her with chemo?”

“Mr. Billy,” Geneva said, pausing at the doorway, “Miss Daisy refuses to have any more chemo.”

“She got tubes and needles in her?”

“No. We’re keeping her as comfortable as we can. She’s a spirited soul.”

“She always been stubborn. Her sickness got anythin to do with her bein little?”

“Not that I know of. But she’s eighty, that’s a long life.”

“Don’t seem long enough even when you’s ancient like me,” Billy mumbled.

He followed Geneva though a courtyard with hangin ferns the size of bushes and flower beds, all kinds, roses, pansies, other plants and colors he didn’t know the names of, all of em shootin toward the sky.

A fountain splashed down into a small pool. Billy wiped his upper lip with his handkerchief. “My that water looks invitin,” he said.

“We have a pool. Guest are allowed to swim. If you’d like.”

“Oh I don’t look so good in trunks.” Billy chuckled. “Used to,” he added.

“Well, if you change your mind we have bathing suits for our guests.”

“Don’t think so,” he said.

Billy tried to keep up so’s not to look feeble.

Geneva stopped at a door, knocked and inched it open. “Miss Daisy, Mr. Luck is here.” Geneva pushed the door open for Billy to enter.

A sweet sickly smell like hamburger goin bad greeted him as he took a step inside. He’d been so eager to see her but sometimes emotions made him feel lost, runnin blind into nowhere.

Through the cracked door he saw a child’s dresser with pictures on it, a kid’s table and a small chair.

“You okay, Mr. Billy?”

“Oh, I git all sorts of tummy problems.”

He went into the room. There on a child’s bed he saw his old friend, tiny, scrunched and shriveled, her white-blond hair thin and dull. She looked at him.

Not movin no further, he stood in the middle of the room wonderin

what to say, what to do, how to bring cheer to his friend who was dyin.

He turned to Geneva. “I wanna be alone with her.”

Geneva nodded and closed the door.

Billy swallowed containin his sorrow. He felt that sudden grab that never left him alone when in Daisy’s presence, it wedded him to her like no other woman ever done. But he never seen her lookin so bad. She always wore make-up, fixed her hair, a real looker, presentin herself like a lady.

“You look swell, Daisy.” Course bullshit was like breathin for Billy.

“Liar,” she rasped.

“Ah, you gonna be okay. Bet you just layin there sick-like cause you want me to feel sorry for ya.” His jokin fell flat. “Everyone treatin you good?”

Geneva looks to be a right nice colored gal.”

“African American,” Daisy said.

“I forgit. Use black most of the time. Miss talkin on the phone but git your letters. You git my postcards?”



She nodded toward the dresser.

“I keep yours too,” he said glancin round the room that was good size even for a norm.

The window with open curtains let in light, and she had a small patio with a little chair and table right outside her room.

Everythin was make-do for her. The bathroom door was half closed and he wondered if that too was re-done.

“There’s something,” the effort to talk took her breath.

“Oh, I know you git religion and all,” Billy said, raisin his palms up. “You gonna preach, well I ain’t interested.”

Daisy scowled.

“Well, can’t be just a good-bye. You too practical for that. So’s if you lookin for me to ask forgiveness for what I done to Mason or somethin, I ain’t gonna do it.”

Daisy rolled her eyes. “Stupid, old goat.”

Billy turned his right ear toward her. “Whatchu say?”

She shook her head. He’d seen that same scorn in her eyes when she thought he or Jack said somethin dumb.

“I heard ya.”

He felt his cheeks burn. He done read her wrong, bet she never give that night another thought. Daisy moved on, while it tailed him the rest of his life. Billy blew troubled air through his mouth. He was angry at himself, lettin Daisy know that night lived with him right up to now.

“Took a portion of my social security check to come down to see ya, so’s whatchu want?”

She struggled to sit up. Billy come over to help but she shooshed him away.

“Open the top dresser drawer,” she said in a weak voice. “There’s an envelope—for you, under the garments.”

“You want me to poke around in your girlie things?”

“Go on.”

Billy shuffled over to the dresser and crouched down first on one knee then the other. He saw pictures of Jack as a young man, another of Daisy lookin gorgeous in a black dress. He picked up one of the three of them together taken back in the seventies. “Look at us then,” he said, turnin to Daisy. “That was taken the day Abner’s magic trick backfired and the dove done flown out of his fly.” Haha, haha. Billy laughed hard bringin his butt down on the heels of his tennis shoes. He glanced over at Daisy, who smiled back at him. “We seen some funny things in our time, huh, girl?”

She nodded. “The drawer,” she said in breathy voice.

Billy jiggled it open. He saw her nighties, the sheer see-through fabric. Didn’t seem right him goin through her personals, he never so much as touched Daisy, she bein special and all. He put his hand under her clothes feelin the feminine softness till he reached the envelope. He pulled it out and shut the drawer.

Billy labored as he pushed off from the dresser to git to his feet. Once standin, he spread his legs apart to balance himself, he took his glasses from his pocket, put them on and opened the envelope. He found a paper. It looked all serious with a picture of a funeral home and a payment made for \$8,500. He never liked showin how ignorant he was, and that defect git him into trouble sometimes, so’s he picked up symbols to help him along. He studied the words and pictures he knew, three plots, one taken. He looked at Daisy. She done wanted him buried with her and Jack. It touched him, she wantin him near her.

“I coulda used the money it took to buy this.”

“You would have wasted it on whores.”

“Hell, nowadays thinkin bout a roof that don’t leak turns me on more than a long legged hooker.”

Billy took off his glasses. “So’s that why you called for me to come?”

“I want you buried with Jack and me.”



“That’s mighty nice, girl,” he said. “Just thought the county would come take my ole body and cremate me or somethin. Didn’t give it no thought.” He stuck the paper in his back pocket. “Never did git use to livin in one place even after ten years. Guess when we die, we don’t have much choice. Glad I’ll be with friends, least my ole bones an all.”

He went to the chair by her bed and sat down. “I hate bein old. Live in my memories I do, cause that’s where I feel safe.” He stared down at his hands, hands that once could do anythin. He kept his eyes lowered, feelin blue, sad for the way life turned on Daisy. “Least you git religion,” he said, lookin up.

Her eyes roamed his face.

“Daisy? You okay?”

“I always believed,” she whispered. “I just never talked about it.”

“Well, you full of surprises. I never knowed that. Never heard you say peep bout God till you git sick.” Billy chuckled. “You didn’t live like no

Christian, stealin and all.”

“God forgave me.”

Billy figured if God was in the business of judgin he wasn’t worth glorifyin.

“The bathroom. Cabinet.” Daisy sighed. “There’s a brown bottle. Bring it to me.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Medicine.”

“Want me to git Geneva?”

“No.”

“What kinda medicine?”

“Morphine.”

“Geneva give you the right dose.”

“Not the dose I want.”

He crossed his arms and tilted his head back squintin at her. “Whatchu

askin me is a big deal.”

“If I could get it I would.” She winced.

He hobbled to the slidin door where he looked out on the lawn with the plastic pink flamingoes and alligator steppin stones. He gazed past the hedges, where he could see through the leaves to the pool beyond. He looked back at her. “I ain’t takin your life.”

“I’m not asking you to.” She slumped further into the pillows.

“What your maker think bout this?”

“God doesn’t want me to suffer.”

“We don’t know nothin till we die,” Billy said.

She stared at the bathroom, her lower lip juttin, gave him the silent treatment, she did.

He looked out the window thinkin bout what Daisy wanted. He saw dashes of white and printed bathing suits, people goin for a swim. He raised his hand to the curtain and pulled it all the way back as if some

kinda wisdom was out there waitin, just for him.

Billy scratched his arm. He raked his neck. His whole body crawled with sadness. “Oh girl, I know you feelin bad.” He shuffled to the side of the bed. He bent so close to Daisy he smelled the rot comin off her. “You been my family. My little sister.” Billy sniffed. “Think I’m gitten a cold from all the air condition.”

“It’s a brown bottle,” she said. “Bring it.”

“Geneva gonna know I git it for you.”

“She won’t. It’s time, Billy.” Her voice sounded tinny, like comin through a pipe, it did.

Through the years he denied her nothin, the only woman who could make him walk through fire and feel privileged to do it.

He felt Daisy watchin as he crossed to the bathroom. He went inside. It was a place for norms, even the john. Billy opened the cabinet door and saw several brown bottles, two, with paper round the neck. He took the



open one and went back to Daisy.

“You done planned this all along, you little con.” But Billy couldn’t be mad, just mystified at the way he was fated to this woman.

“Give me the bottle,” she whispered. “And hand me my juice.”

Billy saw the glass on her nightstand and give it to her.

She poured the medicine. She swished the morphine round and drank.

“Put it back.”

Billy set the glass on the stand, returned to the bathroom and did as Daisy said. He shut the cabinet door and glimpsed his reflection, turnin away so’s not to remember the moment. Grabbin the doorknob to steady himself, he took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. He limped back to the chair. He moved it as close to the bed with him still able to sit.

“Thank you, Billy.”

Seemed his whole life got stuck in his throat. He cleared it. Coughed.

“Ah girl,” he said. “I didn’t do me no favor. Who do I got now?” He

reached for her tiny hand. Her frail fingers slid through his. Like a bird, she was, flying over the carnival with the merry-go-round music blarin, the Ferris wheel turnin, the people all happy cause they feelin free, in one hand they eatin cotton candy, the other holdin the hand of a sweetheart.

He let go of Daisy.

Billy done feel like his life folded, where his heart was ground into sawdust and just blowed away leavin him alone on the midway.

# Midnight Angel

BO LANIER

Oh Midnight Angel higher than a kite  
throw your clothes and a few things together  
and drive your new car like a bird in flight  
back across the Georgia state line whatever  
the weather never you mind you know  
every time could be your last time...take a deep  
breath now and swallow your pride 'cuz you  
know they know you better than you know  
yourself well it tears you up on the inside  
living in the shadows and pretending to be  
somebody else...you call him the one and  
the one you think you can hide behind and  
of course he'd do anything for you but it  
goes without saying you're just taking advantage  
of him like you do all the time well will you  
ever see the light Midnight Angel lost in flight  
come in out of the darkness for the love of  
your life...Midnight Angel!



# The Overseer

MICHAEL SMITH

When the man arrived at Valley High School to pick up his daughter from drama recital, she was not at the designated meeting point out front. He took it on faith she had not been kidnapped and murdered. This type of thinking was paranoid, he knew, but in his youth his babysitter Mindy Beers had, after all, been abducted and killed by Ted Bundy, after a high school musical at this same building. The man parked his Mercedes-Benz at the east end of the parking lot where his daughter would easily see it when she exited the school through the front doors, as planned. Although the man was unaware of the coincidence, the parking stall where he stationed his Mercedes was the very parking stall where police believed Ted Bundy had, decades ago, overpowered and kidnapped Mindy Beers. The Mercedes was a restored beige 300D with a beige leather interior.

According to newspaper articles the man had read, in November of

1974, Ted Bundy found a pamphlet advertising that Valley High School was putting on the musical Oklahoma! Bundy believed the musical would be a good place to find a pretty teenage girl to rape and murder. On the evening of November 8, Bundy drove to the high school, parked his white Volkswagen Beetle on the far east side of the front parking lot, and waited. A high school senior named Mindy Beers was inside watching the musical with her family. She wore a blue cable knit cardigan sweater. The sweater had been hand sewn by Mindy's mother. Mindy left the musical a few minutes early to pick her brother up from work, telling her family she'd see them soon at home. No one had seen Mindy since. And every night and day since Mindy's disappearance, Mindy's parents had kept the outside porch light on at their home waiting for Mindy to come home. Always, that light was on, and everyone knew why.

The man's day had been busy with meetings at work and he was content to wait and relax in his car. The Mercedes was comfortable, like a leather sofa on wheels. He kept it immaculate and in good repair. He liked to tell people that the engine purred like a fat cat that had just eaten a bowl full of tuna. There was so much in the world beyond his control, it was comforting to keep this part of his life in perfect order. He leaned forward and turned on the radio. He opened the window to let in some air and closed his eyes. When he awoke, he felt refreshed. Too refreshed, he thought. He had intended to close his eyes for only a moment. His phone showed that twenty-five minutes had passed. It was also possible, but not likely, he thought, that no time had passed and the phone had malfunctioned. The man checked for any messages. Nothing. True, his daughter was not punctual, but this was outrageous. She'll turn up, he thought, she always does.

Mindy Beers was the man's babysitter in 1974, when he was seven

years old. In 1989, Ted Bundy confessed to kidnapping and murdering Mindy, dismembering her, and burying her body parts in the hills. Shortly thereafter, the State of Florida executed Bundy by electric chair. The man could not remember much about Mindy except the general sense of her presence. Around Mindy, he had felt important and handsome. In his memory, Mindy looked like Snow White. Just last night, the man had been curious and had found photographs of Mindy on the Internet. In the photographs, Mindy had a pleasant smile, bright eyes, and long black hair.

The man messaged his daughter in a secret code he had devised for their communications: TVWELF, meaning here. If anyone were to steal his daughter's phone, such a message would be meaningless to the thief. At Lawrence Construction, the large company where the man worked as Director of Risk Management, they used similar confidential codes, also developed by him, when sending text messages. The man and his Mercedes-Benz were now alone in the parking lot. Sailing, by Christopher



Cross, played on the radio. This song had been popular when the man was in high school.

Sailing takes me away to where I've always heard it could be  
Just a dream and the wind to carry me  
And soon I will be free

The words and melody made the man feel like he was peering backwards through a cloudy veil at something that had been lost. He wondered when exactly he had crossed through that veil. What was clear was that he was on one side of the veil, and all that had passed before was on the other side, and there was no way for him to return.

The man pictured Mindy's body going limp there somewhere in the parking lot, after a gruesome and tortuous saga. Meanwhile, Mindy's parents were two hundred yards away in the school theater, clapping as Oklahoma! came to an end. He looked at his phone. Thirty minutes had passed; he needed go inside and find his daughter. He turned off the

ignition, got out of his car, and locked the door with the key.

The 1950s-era pink brick building had light green enamel panels and aluminum-framed windows. It was more or less the same as it had been decades ago when he himself had attended high school here. The school had been cut into a hill. Beyond the parking lots, undulating grass sloped down from east to west. To the west, the land flattened out into the football field and baseball diamond. The man couldn't see the north side of the school but he knew there were three standalone overflow classrooms in the rear parking lot. The drama room and theater—where his daughter most likely was still tied up in recital—were also on the north side of the school.

The man entered the school's front doors. Although he was not moving quickly, he felt less anxious now that he was at least in pursuit of his daughter, not simply waiting in the car. Just inside the school to the left was a colossal, clean, bright aquarium. A lion fish, two clown fish, an eel,

and other creatures whose names he did not know fluttered about. The man studied the aquarium. How long do fish live? He decided it was not possible that any of these creatures had been alive when he had attended school here, let alone during Mindy's time in high school.

To the man's right, two boys in matching gold track suits who appeared to be brothers goofed around with a basketball. The basketball was imprinted with the letters VHS.

"Have you seen Val?" the man asked the shorter of the two boys.

The boy didn't respond and continued talking to the taller boy in what sounded like a made-up language. They were passing the basketball to each other about ten feet apart. Their bodies were perfectly square. They giggled a bit.

The man stepped in between them and snatched the ball, his gold pocket watch coming free and swinging there on its chain. The taller boy stared at him but said nothing.

"Val Taggart?" the man asked.

"She a senior?" the taller boy countered.

The man nodded.

"We're in tenth."

The man rolled the ball back to the boy who had responded to his question. The man looked at his phone. It had been thirty-five minutes since he had arrived at the school. Mindy Beers had been missing for ninety minutes when her parents had called the police.

The man walked deliberately in the direction of the theater. He soon arrived at the art room, which was open to his left, with lights on. Inside, a boy in a wheelchair was painting. The boy had his back to the door and did not turn. The boy wore a white shirt that was splotted with color from his work. The tile floor of the room was a collage of spilled paints. The man quietly examined the floor. He recalled Mindy's mother having been quoted in the newspaper in connection with Bundy's execution



about how Mindy, in addition to drama club, enjoyed painting. The man came to a splotch of faded gold paint on the floor. The paint seemed to be worn and old. He knelt down before it and extended his right index finger to touch it. A pain stabbed his finger. Without warning his mind opened to a vision of a classroom of art students. He was in the back of the classroom and no one seemed to notice him. In his vision, Mindy Beers sat close to him on a tall metal stool, painting with oils on canvas. She painted an image of a cottage at night. The cottage was made of stone and protected by trees and shrubs. In the man's vision, Mindy used white and yellow paint to create a warm light that glowed from the front window of the cottage. Inside the front window, staring outwards, stood a balding gentleman and a brunette woman with her hair in a beehive. The man saw that these were Mindy's parents. Mindy stood up now and walked to another art table. Mindy was wearing a blue sweater and a tan skirt. The sweater was buttoned with six large brown buttons. Mindy's calves and

ankles were bare. She collected a tube of gold oil paint from a neighbor and turned to return to her seat. Suddenly, the tube of gold oil paint, still open, fell to the floor, and bright paint splattered on the tile. Mindy went to the back corner of the room, grabbed some paper towels, returned, and blotted up the spill, but it did not come completely clean.

“Mindy,” the man said, trying to get her attention. She did not respond.

“Mindy,” the man said louder, but she could not seem to hear him. The man now remembered that her name was spelled Mindi, with an i instead of a y. Perhaps if he called her name a third time, with the correct spelling in mind, she would hear him.

“Mindi!” the man hollered desperately. “Be careful!” He kept yelling until his voice was hoarse. Still no response. The vision closed and the man found himself kneeling before the gold paint stain on the floor. His right index finger was bleeding. He removed a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around the finger. The white handkerchief turned

bright red in a circle the size of a dime.

He stood up, dusted off the knees of his brown suit pants, and left the art room. The man wandered further down the hallway. He heard music playing and descended some stairs. He arrived at the doors to the school gymnasium. He pushed open the door and the sound increased. Three cheerleaders in black and gold uniforms were dancing to a song playing on a boom box. They were all barefoot and had their backs to him. Their skirts seemed a little high to him. He recalled half a dozen cases at Lawrence Construction involving partial foot amputations related to improper footwear. One of the cheerleaders had blonde hair, one red, and one black. Their hair danced in every direction to the beat. He walked over and shut off the boom box in mid-song. The three cheerleaders froze. When they finally turned towards him one at a time, he asked about his daughter.

“She said she was going home,” the blonde one offered.

“With whom?” he pressed. “She doesn’t have a car.”

“Dunno,” the blonde one said.

“Is anyone in there?” he asked, motioning to the girls’ locker room.

“It’s just us,” the raven one said.

“So no one’s in there?” the man asked, again pointing to the girls’ locker room.

The cheerleaders all shook their heads no.

He looked at them for a minute. Then he stepped into the locker room.

The air was dank. The lights were off and all was quiet.

He cupped his hands together and bellowed, “Anybody there?” Just an echo.

If he were a murderer in search of a young female victim, he thought, the locker room would be a good place to start. The man walked the length of the locker room. In one of the lockers a wet green towel hung over a hook. Water dripped down from one corner of the towel. He rung



out the towel over a drain, mopped up the excess water, rung out the towel again, and hung it over a bench to dry. He took his phone out of his suit pocket and messaged his daughter again: MGAGM—meaning call me immediately. His daughter was certainly in trouble now for failing to respond to his messages. After two minutes the man called his daughter’s phone. No answer. He left a voicemail. “MGAGM,” he said, and hung up.

When he emerged from the locker room the three cheerleaders were gone. He could smell their perfume. He found a basketball in the bleacher seats. He dribbled it on the wood floor a few times. The sound echoed loudly in the empty gymnasium. The man’s phone buzzed and he let out a sigh of relief. He let the basketball roll away. He looked at his phone but it was just his work. What his work wanted could wait. He stood there for a moment, unsure what to do next. He counted four separate doors in the gym in addition to the two locker room entrances. He suddenly felt tired. His gut told him to exit the gym to the outside.

Outside the air was still warm. To his left the property sloped downwards towards the football field and baseball diamond and he could not see anybody in that direction—although if someone were down under the aluminum bleacher seats he would not necessarily be able to see them. The man now turned slightly to his right. His views were blocked by the three standalone classroom buildings in the parking lot. A multitude of voices came from that direction.

He walked over and peered around the first outbuilding. Nine boys formed a circle and they were all yelling and gasping.

“Come on Shiloh!” a boy yelled.

“Hit him!” another boy hollered.

In the middle of the circle two boys were fighting. One boy wore a plaid shirt, blue jeans, and cowboy boots; the other boy wore a white t-shirt and a black leather jacket. The boy in the plaid shirt had a bloody nose and the other boy’s t-shirt was ripped at the collar. The circle urged

them on and they lunged at each other.

The man's daughter was not in this group but the man continued watching the fight from his hidden vantage point. With a howl, the boy in the leather jacket and white t-shirt tackled the boy in plaid to the asphalt. The boy in plaid fell on his shoulder and yelled out. The man suspected a possible dislocation. At the same time, the other boy's hand seemed to be jammed awkwardly in the melee and he yelled out too. Probably a simple wrist sprain. The two boys lay there on the ground writhing about and cursing.

The fight apparently over, the group of observers gathered their backpacks and jackets. Out of nowhere the man's daughter appeared. The man exhaled with relief. She must have been watching the fight, too. She reached into her backpack and looked at her phone and, he imagined, saw his messages for the first time. She hurriedly organized her things and ran off towards the building's northeast entrance by the theater.

The man emerged from his hiding spot and yelled his daughter's name. She didn't turn around. He followed her into the building, down the hallway, and out the front door.

When he finally caught up to his daughter at his Mercedes, a sense of rage came over him. Now that she was safe, he realized how scared he had been. She should acknowledge that she had me worried, he thought.

"Get in back," he suddenly said to her.

She looked bewildered. He opened the rear driver's side door.

"Just get in," he roared. "Now." His voice was angry.

She sat down in the rear of the car behind the driver's seat.

"Stupid!" he yelled. "Never get in a stranger's car! You'll be raped. You'll be murdered!"

She tried to get out of the car.

"You stay put," he said, "you need to think about this." He stood in her way. He closed her door, opened the driver-side door, and got in. He



started the car and drove off.

“You’re not a stranger!” his daughter screamed from the backseat.

He said nothing.

“You’re my Dad!” she screamed louder.

“Val,” he said, “if a man comes up to you and asks for help with his car, don’t go with him.”

“What’s this about?”

“Even if that man is Jesus Christ!”

Their home was a five-minute drive from the high school. They lived in a neighborhood four blocks south of where the Beers family still lived.

His home had a horizontal feel that he liked. It seemed to him that the home was crouching, making itself less visible. The man pulled the car into the garage and parked. The man and his daughter got out of the Mercedes. His daughter ran into the house. He closed the garage, and went out back to prune the fruit trees while there was still light. Spring

was around the corner.

Later that night, when his daughter was asleep, he crept into her bedroom. He opened the curtains slowly and the exterior streetlight lit up part of her face. He stood there watching over her. Her chest rose and fell. He held his palm an inch from her mouth and felt the warm air escaping. He looked at her thin neck. He remembered how Bundy always kept nylon stockings in his Volkswagen. He wondered if Bundy had strangled Mindi Beers with the nylon pantyhose, and if so, what Mindi’s face had looked like while it was happening. The man checked the window. It was locked securely. He closed the curtains and returned to his bed.

In bed, the man tosses and turns. He dreams of Mindi in a blue sweater in a parking lot. Ted Bundy approaches Mindi and asks for help with his broken-down Volkswagen. Bundy has an excited glimmer in his eye. Mindi somehow knows everything. She kneels down and pretends to adjust her shoelaces. Without Bundy noticing, she removes a boxcutter



from her shoe. She stands up now with her arms folded. Bundy reaches both arms around to grab Mindi and force her into the Volkswagen. Mindi's arms are pinned at her sides. But she is holding the boxcutter, with blade open, in her right hand. She brings her right wrist upwards and thrusts the boxcutter forward, into the right side of Bundy's neck. Mindi inches her right hand down, slashing the razor blade diagonally inwards across Bundy's jugular vein and carotid artery. Blood pours from Bundy's neck. Mindi now turns around and looks straight at the man as he is dreaming. She puckers her lips. Mindi is not wearing anything under the blue cardigan sweater, which is unbuttoned. Her breasts are white and plump.

The man wakes up in bed, short of breath. He has an erection. He gets out of bed, grabs his car keys, and runs to the garage in his pajamas. He opens the garage door, gets in the Mercedes 300D, and turns on the ignition. The engine purrs. He backs out of the driveway and closes the

garage door by remote. He pushes in the clutch and revs the engine. The engine responds. Now he puts the Mercedes in first gear and races off down the street. It will take only a minute to drive the few blocks to the Beers home. He knows his chances are slim, but he prays that once he arrives there, the porch light will be off. If so, he will park his beige Mercedes, knock on the front door, and wait for his babysitter Mindi to answer.





# Thy Rod and Thy Staff

ALEXANDER JONES

A couple of days after we lost our baby I saw it struggling to get free from between the wicker strands of the hamper in our hallway.

I watched it land on the hardwood floor and start moving towards the far wall.

An inchworm? I got closer, until I stood over it.

No. Not an inchworm. A maggot.

I stepped on it.

I was still too numb to feel either disgust or triumph.

Dimly, everything had been dim since we got home that night, I noticed there was no crunching of a crushed exoskeleton, no smearing of innards. I looked; I'd flattened it into a gray spot, like old, dead bubblegum. The wavy pattern from my sneaker tread covered it.

Then it pulled back into its wormy shape and continued across the floor.

My forehead wrinkled with curiosity for the first time I could remember; finally I felt something besides dread and despair switching back and forth like sinewaves in an increasing frequency.

I stepped on it again, giving my foot an extra little twisting action at the end, and again it reformed itself and kept going.

I looked at the hamper and suddenly remembered the gory, nightmarish clothes I'd dumped in there after stripping them off me and my wife. I'd put her in the shower and washed her the way I would have bathed the little kid we didn't get to have, and then I'd joined her, scrubbing myself raw, craving the purification that warm water and

scented soap couldn't hope to bring even as our baby's blood ran down the drain.

But somehow, left alone in the dark, that mass of bloody failed afterbirth snot had somehow congealed and twisted together and fused and sparked until, no longer than an inch, it emerged. Into our hallway.

I hurried to the kitchen. My wife was zoned out in front of a game show she wasn't watching, her bathrobe unbelted, her hair messed up. The hospital shrink's business card was on the table near her, and I'd scattered several other copies throughout the house like Easter Eggs, but neither of us could budge to make the call.

I opened a cabinet and got one of those saucers for tea with the raised ring in the center that mates up with the bottom of the matching cup. I grabbed a butter knife from the drawer, returned to the hallway outside our bedroom and used the blade to scoop it up and smear it into the center of the saucer. I set the saucer on the kitchen counter and sat

beside my wife. I put my arm around her and after a while she snuggled against me and we both fell asleep like that, peaceful and together.

I checked on it later that day. It had migrated out of the center of the saucer, inching its way around the edge of the plate.

"What's that?" my wife asked. Her voice was hoarse and scratchy.

"I don't know."

She got off the couch, came over and peered down at it. "Is it a worm?"

"Or something."

"Something," she repeated, and then she became the first of the two of us to touch it barehanded when she poked it gently with her index finger, her nail leaving a small, crescent shaped indentation. "It's dry, though. Where'd it come from?"

"It was in the hallway."

She touched it again, longer this time, and it responded to her



touch, wrapping itself around her finger. She rubbed it against her thumb, rolling it into a ball she returned to the center of the saucer. It straightened out again.

I returned to work for the first time the next week, accepting condolences and the murmured ‘sorries’ with the best half smile I could manage, and I ate lunch in my cubicle. I had a picture of us at our wedding that I tried to avoid looking at, but couldn’t. I couldn’t resist the urge to slip back to that moment of wide open future, in happy contrast to friends and coworkers who’d characterized marriage as a loss of opportunity or options.

By then it was bigger and thicker, slowly grown from the size of a piece of chewed gum to maybe a little finger.

That afternoon I finally touched it.

Its cool surface yielded and formed around my fingertip like clay or

dough. I pushed it around a little, smiling as it moved along, keeping up with my finger as I reversed direction a couple times. The end of my finger felt dry and rougher. My wife was watching, intently.

“What do you think?”

“About what?”

“About it.”

“I don’t know. It’s fine.” What should I say?

So I touched it again with another finger, rubbing it a little. It moved up my finger, across the hump of my knuckle and then to the back of my hand before I gently picked it off and returned it the saucer, smiling at it. My wife was smiling at me. For the first time in a while, she kissed me.

When I got home the next day, it was a little bigger again, and she’d moved it to a larger plate from the same set of dishware.

It didn’t eat. It didn’t even drink water, but it grew from touching us, sucking the moisture or oil out of our bodies, from our skin. Handling it

would leave my hands rough and dry; my wife's got a little scaly and she gave me a dark look when I said something.

She moved it again to a larger dinner plate, and then to a soup terrine which it didn't seem to like because of the sloped, rounded sides, so eventually she made its home in a flat metal casserole dish.

I'd come home and set my things down and it would move to the end of the dish, sticking its end out, like it was peeking at me, though it had no eyes or face. It didn't inch itself forward, and it didn't have legs or even muscles. It simply flowed through itself, somehow, so that when it wanted to move it would simply bubble and flow in that direction. As it went, the back end of it would suck itself in and flow toward the front, and the front would advance, like a portable, semisolid whirlpool.

With summer finally approaching the air conditioning in my car fritzed out and died, so by the time I'd return home, there'd be a sheen to my forehead. I'd wipe my hand across my face and then touch it, in its

casserole dish. I picked it up and it twisted itself around my hands, pulling gently at the hairs there.

A couple of days later it tentatively extended a doughy tentacle that spread out across my forehead like a rag, up to my hairline and down to my eyebrows, paper thin as its edges reached my ears.

"See, you're feeding it, too," my wife said, coming into the kitchen.

"Like it's a baby?" I asked her, peeling it off my face, wadding it up into a squirming ball in my hands and then putting it back in the casserole dish.

Her expression darkened again as she sat on the couch, refusing to look at me when I tried apologizing.

I got the air conditioning in my car fixed. I had to; barbecuing in traffic, smelling either the stagnant exhaust fumes coming in through my open window or smelling the funk of fast food cooking oil that I couldn't shake no matter how quickly I threw away the wrappers from my meals,



eaten in place of what my wife would have cooked if she'd still been up to cooking, won out over making it happy to touch my sweaty face when I got home.

But I felt a twinge of regret, knowing that when I got home it would only touch my face a little bit, or maybe not even at all, now that I had restored the climate control to my vehicle. Truth was, I liked feeding it. I liked the way it responded to me, when I lifted it from its casserole dish or, more and more, my wife's lap and stroked it a little, raising it to peer into its doughy mass, wondering about it without worrying about it, then letting it caress the sweat off my brow.

When it grew to the size of a rolled up newspaper my wife transferred it again, this time to a laundry basket. She cut a hole in the side of the basket with a pair of heavy scissors, lining the hole with duct tape to cover up any sharp edges it could snag itself on.

It kept her company while I was away at work. She'd been doing graphic design and illustration work from home; the plan was that she'd cut down when the baby came and then taper back up when she was ready, but there was no baby and she spent all day long on the couch in the living room with it curled in her lap, watching game shows and talk shows followed by reality tv reruns; anything, really, watching but not watching, fielding phone calls from sympathetic people who'd first called to offer awkward sympathy, unsure of how to express their condolences and who were now calling once in a while to check up on her. Our mothers and sisters and sisters in laws and friends and a few other random people we knew.

She didn't tell anyone else about it, though. They'd all think she, or we, had crossed the line from grief and some kind of anticlimactic misplaced post-partum depression into florid schizophrenic hallucination. We'd sound ready for a rubber room and tinfoil hats. So I'd come home,

knowing that she'd be parked in front of the television with it, knowing that she'd been that way all day long and that I couldn't comfort her or talk to her. She would stiffen and then go limp if I touched her.

One day I started talking about how I felt, ignoring her vacant look as I blathered on about our family and our emptiness and how lonely and angry and stifled I felt. When my eyes welled up and tears started flowing down my face she put her hand on my knee.

It rose off her lap like a cobra.

Startled, I fell off the couch and landed hard, dazed.

It spread across my face, forming little suckers like an octopus that reached right to my orbital sockets.

I grabbed it and tossed it back onto the couch, scooting backward.

“Careful!”

I stood up slowly, dramatically stretching my arms as I tested my achy

back.

She wasn't looking at me, though. She was stroking it with her fingers.

It was nearly the size of a Dachshund.

“I'm okay. Thanks for asking.”

She didn't respond.

“You teach it that?”

“Teach it what?”

“The tears. It was attracted to them. You teach it that?”

Nothing.

“There are no tissues here,” I noticed. We had gone through tissues by the box after we got home from the hospital, the symptoms of grief remarkably like having the flu, and for a while used tissues piled up around us anywhere we went.

“So, what?”

“So, you've stopped crying? Or is it catching your tears, and that's why



it knows it likes tears?”

“What difference does it make?”

“Because we don’t know what it is, and... and...”

“And what?”

“And maybe crying all day long with... it isn’t the... healthiest thing for you... For us.”

“Maybe we should get rid of it, so I can go back to cooking and cleaning for you, is that it?”

“Did I say that? Did I say anything even like that? I know how bad you feel, and-”

“You don’t know anything.”

She hurt. I hurt. Did she hurt worse than I hurt? Was she starting to hate me for it, and was I maybe starting to feel like I was dog paddling away from a sinking ship in the middle of the ocean?

“That’s not true.” My tears had touched off this argument in the first

place; she hadn’t been there a day or two ago when I’d started sobbing at work over a toy store promotional in the newspaper. I’d crawled under my desk and pretended to straighten out my computer cables in case anyone saw me.

“It isn’t a baby.”

Her expression darkened again, like last time. Only this time she snarled “I don’t care. I don’t care what it is.”

“I care.” I reached for it, and she pulled it away from me, and I reached further and she pulled it away further.

“Look,” I said. “Look at what we’re doing now. To each other. Because of it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. All I know is that it’s helping me, and that’s enough.”

“Why can’t I help you?” I asked, seizing it. I yanked, and she yanked, and the thing stretched out between us like a giant rubber band, squirming

and twisting as we both pulled on it in a tug of war. I held on tight, kneading it like dough, and finally overpowered her, ripping it free from her hands.

Stretched out like a towel somehow frozen in mid snap, it grew hard and dense, congealing around my hand, stiffening to rock; when I slung it back to the couch, away from my wife, it was like heaving a shot putt. It ripped the couch cushion where it struck.

“Did you know it could do that?” I squeaked, my heart pounding in my throat.

She didn’t react. It melted back to its normal, doughy, softened self, and she picked it up, cradling it to her chest and I caught my breath, leaning against our table. “Did you know it could do that?”

“Don’t talk to me.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. I did. I cared enough about it to pay it some real attention.”

And she hugged it, puckered her chapped lips and kissed it. A ball of saliva at the end of her tongue quivered before descending her chin, only to be met by a doughy finger it formed.

“I’m sorry.”

“To me? Or to it?”

“To you both, I guess.” I approached, and the both of them froze for a moment and then relented. I sat down on the couch beside my wife, and the thing, which had tensed up a little, softened again. I extended a finger toward it, and it met mine with a tentacle and we touched, almost like shaking hands.

“I love you,” I said to her, and she smiled a little and let me kiss her, and it caressed the back of my hand when I set it on her lap as we embraced.

“I love you both,” she whispered to me.

But it doesn’t love you back. It’s just hungry. And getting bigger every



day.

I started spending more and more time at work after that. I didn't really notice at first, but gradually I'd be the only one left, straggling so I could organize old files or clean up my desk, using the communal feather duster until everything shined. No one said anything, if anyone else noticed. Things weren't the same, but I couldn't blame the rest of them, engaged in the groupthink consensus that I should be left alone for a while to heal on my own or something. I'd go to the watercooler and people would quiet down; they'd be more accommodating with my lunch preferences. I appreciated all of that.

We completed a project, on time and under budget, according to our manager, and celebrated with a feast of donuts and coffee, at company expense. I lined up and ate a couple donuts like everyone else until the color and consistency of the crème filling inside one of them reminded

me of it flowing around its casserole dish or its laundry basket. I tossed away that donut, half eaten.

“Where's the milk?” a guy called out, holding up a cup of steaming coffee.

“Next to the copy machine,” a woman answered.

“No, that's half and half. Where's the milk?”

Someone else murmured.

“Where's the milk?”

A third person answered, but by then I was already leaving the conference room, hurrying back to my cubicle. I grabbed my coat, feeling for my car keys even though I knew they were there, and turned off my computer without bothering to log out.

On the way out the door, forcing myself not to run to the parking lot I passed my manager, on his way back inside from a cigarette break. I breathed to him that I wasn't feeling well and had to leave, and he just

nodded, patting me on the shoulder.

Where's the milk? I stood on the accelerator turning out of the lot, leaving a rubber streak on the pavement. Where's the milk? I ran a red light on my way home.

By the time I got home I'd calmed down enough to formulate a plan, so I parked my car a few houses down the street from my house and walked up the driveway, looking through the windows. The television in the kitchen wasn't on. Usually I'd barge in and give a hearty 'Hello' even if I knew the house was empty; this time I walked around the garage, trying not to hunch my shoulders and skulk as I crossed my own lawn.

I took a full ten seconds to open the side door there, wincing first at the grating as my key turned in the lock, and then at the scraping of the door sweep across the concrete floor of the garage. Once inside I closed the door at the same agonizing pace, keeping the doorknob turned so the

lock wouldn't click.

I tiptoed around my wife's dusty car. She hadn't been out. At all. Kneeling, squinting, I saw that the deadbolt to the inside door wasn't engaged, so I laid my hand on the doorknob, enjoying the cool metal against my sweaty palm as I opened the door.

Before crossing the threshold, I looked down at my feet and slipped off both shoes, frowning at the dust that adhered to my socks.

I didn't bother closing the door to the garage behind me. My inseam whispered as I walked through the foyer so I tugged my pant legs tight to my thighs.

I crept into the kitchen, exposing only my head as if I was going to draw enemy fire, but the kitchen was empty. My reflection in the oven door was wavy and distorted. The spot on the couch where my wife spent much of her time had her body's imprint. The laundry basket where it made its home, a few feet away, was empty as well.



I tiptoed into the living room, but she wasn't in there, either. I listened, closing my eyes for a moment, holding my breath, trying to sense something from the stillness in the room. She had to be home. Her car was here still. Otherwise it would have been in the laundry basket, patiently flowing and whirlpooling its way around and around, maybe peeking out the hole she'd fashioned for it. Certainly, there was nowhere she could take it. It wasn't a baby, after all. No one to show it off to, with a pretty pink ribbon wrapped around its doughy body.

Something creaked. Not me; I hadn't moved.

The noise repeated, louder, coming from the bedroom. I shuffled my feet in my socks, gliding through the hallway, past the hamper where I'd first found it, and into the bedroom.

My wife lay spread eagle on our bed.

I got closer.

Her eyes were closed, her forehead scrunched up, front teeth slightly

exposed as she bit her lower lip, head nodding a little.

It lay on top of her in a Y shape like a massive, flesh bikini. Giant suction cups suckled and kneaded her breasts, met over her belly and flowed between her legs, pulsating inside of her with a rhythmic chugging action.

My face twisted and my gorge rose but I still had time to be jealous, recognizing her blissed out expression, wondering when was the last time I'd gotten her looking like that.

It reacted to me; the thick doughy arms sucking at her breasts reared up, the bulk of it wadding into a ball on her stomach.

It didn't stop driving between her thighs.

She leaned forward, getting her elbows beneath her. A drop of milk trickled out of her blue, bruised left nipple and down her breast. It extended a skinny, ropy shoot, the end of it curved like a spoon and it caught the breast milk before the drop could be lost to the bedspread.

The milk soaked right into its doughy flesh and it caressed her breast, hungry, eager for more no matter how much it had already consumed.

“I’m home. Early,” was all I could say; lots of clever half witty lines from movies I’d seen over the years piled up in my mind and died before they could come out of my mouth.

She nodded, distractedly.

I put my hand on her bare shoulder. She was warm, flushed red, agitated.

“I... I... Come to me.”

It’s shoot thickened, lengthened, growing from the diameter of a straw to a garden hose to an arm, and then it whipped through the air and wrapped itself around my neck before I could get my hands up.

I staggered, grabbing at it, pawing, getting between it and my throat, and every time I did it flowed right between my fingers like pancake batter and got tighter, a stretchy rubber noose, choking me, pulling me forward.

I dug in my heels and tried throwing myself backward, but it stretched out to keep me, dragging me towards my wife on the bed.

The carpet below me slid and bunched up against the bedframe and I flopped to my knees in front of it, in front of my wife, gurgling, gasping for air as it strangled and throttled me, relentlessly reeling me in, pulling my body to the bed.

The room spun and swam, black spots clouding and spreading across my vision as I choked. Another branch bubbled and split off from the mass around my neck and forced its way into my mouth.

Cold, dry, chewy, it rammed its way down my throat; at the same time, the tentacle around my neck spread out, pouring over my head, flowing into my ears and down my forehead, swallowing me.

It flowed down my back and down my front, ripping open my shirt, into the waistband of my pants, grasping, spreading, probing, still hauling me closer.



My wife's breasts grew larger in perspective as I was brought towards them, and the last thing I saw before it engulfed me was her flesh wrapping around me, pressing against me.



# Dead Stars Still Shine

AUSTIN BROOKNER

I didn't really feel like it but the money basically had a sign on it saying, "Take me."

The barkeep was slowly and confusingly counting, then recounting a large stack of bills, then shaking his head and starting all over again, unable to keep it all straight. There were some twenties, some ones, at first glance maybe five or six hundred bucks, but perhaps over a thousand. The barkeep put his hand on his head and made an expression of genuine frustration. But it wasn't long before his frustration dissolved, as he was either too tired or too stoned for the feeling to stick.

There were only two other customers in the joint - a young gentleman, eating a burger and gazing out over his beer, and a young woman rapt with her phone. Occasionally the woman would lift her head away, only to ponder what to type into it next. When she reached for her martini

glass her eyes never drifted from the screen.

My burger arrived and I greedily went after it. I'd been walking around the east side in circles when I found myself in the annoying part of town where the streets and the avenues aren't numbered. Eldridge, Allen, Orchard, Ludlow...I was born in this city thirty years ago and I still can't keep it all straight. But I remembered that Piano's on Ludlow had a happy hour lunch special. A burger and a salad for five bucks - can't beat it.

The young gentleman was now reading a paper. The young woman was reaching into her pocketbook to pay her bill. She was prepping herself as though she had important things to go do. It occurred to me that people were getting younger. Then it occurred to me that maybe I was getting older.

Before finishing my meal I went outside and sat on the bench for a



smoke. A man came out from a bar next-door and said aloud to no one:

“Awww, they split.”

He sat down next to me.

“Hey man, what’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I replied.

“How you doin?” he asks.

“Fine. Hangin.”

“I’m fucked up, man.”

“That’s good. Nothing wrong with that.”

He looks around, lets out an “Accgh”, and like a man possessed goes back into the bar he just came out of.

An older looking man walks past me, scratching off a lottery ticket. A young buck comes up the street with a dragon puff of hookah around his entire head, holding a light saber butt in his hand. I don’t understand

these vape cigarettes, or e-cigarettes, whatever they’re called. Who knows what chemicals they put into them? They have to be just as harmful, and likely worse for you than a regular cigarette, and don’t have the added benefit of looking cool. Cuz nothing says tough, rugged, and manly like the scent of synthetic peach. But then again, I don’t wear my hair in a top-knot either.

When I returned inside I looked around for cameras and could find none.

I leisurely lifted my legs onto the bar counter, then swiftly propped myself over. Approaching the bartender with my right hand in the air getting his attention, I hit him with a hard left that knocked him backwards and out. I grabbed the bread from his hand, the rest of the stack that was on the counter, and everything that was in the register. I leered in at the woman who was scared stiff. I gulped her drink down. Then I lit a cigarette, took a drag, and put it out in the man’s beer. I hopped over the bar and walked

out.

I wonder if the manager would make the barkeep pay the money back ? I wonder if he even had enough to do so? The manager would be a real prick if he made the barkeep pay it back. But he'd just be covering his own ass from the owner. And it'd be the stupid barkeep that gets screwed. The one who can't afford it. Oh well. Fuck the lot of 'em.

It was not as cold on the walk home as it was on the way over earlier. Maybe the wind was blowing in the opposite direction, at my tail, or perhaps it had simply settled down from earlier.

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“I was having another nervous breakdown,” he said. “They’re almost seasonal for me. Some people get allergies; I get nervous breakdowns. Or what is it they call them now – episodes. You’d think with all the practice I get, I’d’ve some way to deal with it by now. Fact is, I always manage to get through em without havin’ da go to da looney bin, but don’t ask me

how. I still got no clue what to do about em when they come on. Each time I think I’m gonna die.

“Then I remember. Shit, I haven’t slept in about a week. Could be I’m going outta mind cause a that. So I look around to see what I got. Just booze. And that’s the shit that’s been keeping me up in the first place. So I go down the street and get a bottle of Advil PM. That should do the trick, right? Wrong. They say take two, so I take three. And fucking nothing! You believe it? Still can’t sleep. Now I’m really going fuckin’ nuts.

“Next thing I know I’m in the hospital getting my stomach pumped on account of the booze and the dozen or so nighties I took. Got some old black bitch in the bed next to me groanin’ on about I dunno what. I can’t understand what the fuck she’s sayin’ and I don’t want to understand, ya know? She looks about half dead already. And this is the only person I have to talk to? Well there’s the fuckin’ nurses and doctors, but what’re



they gonna tell you? Blah, blah, blah. Nurses are better than doctors. They spend a little more time witha. Doctors see ya, go ‘fuck you, you ain’t making me any more money, go die somewhere else, I wanna go home.’ Nurses are better.”

“Anyway, this black bitch next to me, just having her croakin’ ass yapping is already getting me thinking like I’m gonna die right along with her. And that’s when it hits me. To them, to the doctors and the nurses and everybody on the other side there, I am right along side this black bitch. I’m the same as her. I’m the druggie and the low life, and they’re not. It’s like I’m in this bubble, and they’re in that one. And ya know what? That was okay. I mean, like, it didn’t bother me. I didn’t want to be on that side.

That side was square, and in my opinion, more fucked up than the fuckups. This black bitch dying next to me, trying to talk to me, there was more humanity in that than there was in any of those fuckin’ croakers.

This was the side that I was on. And I was cool with that. It comes with its price, but what doesn’t?

“One time I had to see one of them croakers on account of a pot brownie, believe it or not.”

“You’re fuckin’ kidding,” I said.

“I wish,” he said. “This thing was, I mean, I shoulda known. The guy who gave it to me had some name like Bionic Bob or something. Don’t ask me why. He had one of those eyes that juts out to side, all cross eyed and shit. Bob or Bill or whatever his name was, he’s a real old timer. Been smoking pot and doing whatever else since Nixon. Me, I smoke pot only once in a while. I’ve done a brownie one other time. And it fucked me up that time. I remember going into my room, closing the door shut, and not bein able to leave or talk to anybody for hours. Thats how bad it fucked me up. My friends came into my room and were laughing at me. Not laughing out loud, but you know how people do, they look at you like

you're the entertainment for the night, because you went more overboard than they did.

“So why I thought this time would be any different than the first?

Well, it was. It was worse. Oh shit – it wasn't no brownie. It was a fuckin' muffin. Bionic Bob made a muffin. Yeah, the muffin man. I couldn't breathe, my arms and legs were shaking.

That's how much a dumb ass I am. Gotta be the only motherfucker who calls an ambulance on a pot brownie -- a muffin. Not even a brownie. A muffin.”

“Coulda been laced with something - PCP,” I said.

“That how they can do it?” he asked. “I thought you gotta smoke PCP.”

“I don't know,” I said. “Maybe you're right.”

Every Thursday morning Tommy and I met on the bench outside the bar, across from where he lived. He wore a shit-eating grin and looked to

be in good spirits today.

“That happened to Rudy once,” I said.

“Oh yea?” Tommy said.

“Yeah, Patrick left some out and Rudy ate like two or three, not knowing what they were. He was convinced he was having a heart attack. Also, my landlord's nephew made brownies that were half mushroom, half pot, wrapped it in tin foil, left it on the kitchen counter. His tiny dog, weighs eight pounds, ate the damn thing, had to go to the hospital.”

“What happened to him?” Tommy asked.

“It was a she,” I said, “and she got really high.”

“Did it die?” Tommy asked.

“I don't know,” I said.

“Well what's new with you,” Tommy said.

“I'm smoking again,” I said.

“I can see that,” Tommy said. “I don't know how you can do it.



Smoke sometimes, then not smoke. I envy you.”

“It’s gettin’ harder and harder,” I said.

“You gettin’ any?” Tommy asked.

“Nah,” I said.

“When’s the last time you had some?” Tommy asked.

“I dunno, few months I think,” I said.

“Whatever happened to that girl you met at your high school reunion?”

Tommy asked.

“Who - Kelly? I told her to go fuck herself,” I said.

“You’re relentless,” Tommy said over a wheezy maniacal cackle that came from years of smoking and a demented brain. “You say you’ve been in love with this girl all your life.”

“My mama told me to shop around,” I said. “Whadda ‘bout you? How the ladies treating you?”

“I’ve been fucking this chick, she’s smokin’,” Tommy said. “I mean,

she’s really fuckin’ hot. But she’s crazy. She does this weird shit, like the sex is hot and everything, but she does this weird shit where she talks while she’s goin’ down on me. I’m like, what the fuck are you doin’?

That’s not how blowjobs are supposed to work. But what she’s sayin’, she’s sayin’ the weirdest stuff. She says ‘I want you, I’m here for you, I want you to know, that I’m here because of you’. I’m like, ‘no shit honey, I figured as much’.

“And then she starts making these weird groaning noises like she’s gettin off, which I know she ain’t, cause she’s giving me head, only she’s not at this point, and her ass and pussy are facing me but I’m not doin’ anything to em. I don’t do that shit. You know what it is? She’s an alkey. She’s gets drunk and all this outer body stuff comes outta her.”

“Hey, I’ll take any piece of ass I can get at this point,” I said. “Don’t matter to me. Makes me miss having a girlfriend. I throw em outta my life, I know I had my reasons, but I can’t remember what they were. It’s

just nice sometimes. It's nice to have someone else there. Not having to be alone all the time. Other times, though, all I want is to be alone.

“This one girl I had – this is gonna sound gross, but, okay, so there's this zit on my back I can't get to. It's right in between my shoulders blades. It's impossible for me to clean in the shower, and impossible for me get at enough to pop. And it's always there. You'll pop it, and a few months later, it's back again. I don't know; it's some weird thing I got. A perpetual pimple. So this girl of mine, she notices it one day, and she starts goin' after it. I mean, I never even knew I had this thing until she spotted it. It must have been building up, well building up my whole life to that point. So you can imagine. And this thing keeps going and going. Shes at it for like ten minutes, and more puss is still coming out. It's like a volcano. And she's enjoying it. Well, at least she don't mind doing it. It gives you like a feeling of accomplishment to see so much puss coming out. She showed me some of the white stuff on her fingernail, I couldn't

believe how much was coming out. Her finger, it had a warm smell of dead skin and white puss, it was really something. She was giving me shit, too, like it was my fault for having this zit, but I think she kinda got a kick outta doin' it. So now, I gotta nobody to pop this zit for me anymore. I can't reach it myself. Maybe you can go to a dermatologist and they'll pop it for you. Go like every three months or six months or whatever and havem do it. But that's a pain in the ass. Sitting around waiting, paying the copay. If I find another girl, I gotta make sure she'll do that shit for me like the other one. Otherwise, she's got to have some other special talent.”

“That's a heartbreaker Corey, really is,” Tommy said.

“Shit.”

“I guess you heard what happened to our friend of no more,” I said.

“Yeah, I heard,” said Tommy. “Fentanyl. That's what did her. That's what they use to boost the smack. Dangerous shit.”



“It wasn’t just that,” I said. “It was us. We all turned our back on her. What kills junkies is when they think that nobody around them cares about them anymore.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” Tommy said. “There was nothing any of us could’ve done. She was impossible to deal with – you know that.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s just that some people are worth redeeming, and some people ain’t. And she was one of the ones that was worth it.”

“But you can’t do much for someone who won’t do it themselves,” Tommy said.

“All I’m saying is that none of us even tried,” I said.

“Did you go to the service?” Tommy asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I can’t go to those things,” Tommy said. “Way I look at it, we honored each other in life. What more needs to be said?”

I nodded in tacit understanding.

“Ya know Tommy, they aren’t guys like us anymore,” I said.

“What do you mean?” asked Tommy. “I mean, I know that, but what in particular are you thinking of?”

“Look at us,” I said. “We’re the only guys I know, that neither one of us has a gizmo. We could be charged right now with conspiracy, just by sitting here, smokin’ and talkin’. They have no electromagnetic device. They were being suspicious. It’s never gonna go back, and it’s only gonna get worse. Every day I feel more and more alienated from my own species. If I wasn’t such a pussy and afraid of dying like everyone else, I think I’d kill myself. But then I get tripped up on how to do it.”

“Bullet to the head,” Tommy said. “Painless, quick, pretty reliable.”

“You ever try gettin’ a gun in this state?” I asked. “You think the DMV is bad. Nah, I’ve thought about all of it. You say jump off a bridge, right? Well how do you get far enough on one of these bridges to jump. You must have to climb a bunch of beams to

get to the edge. I don't want to go through all that. And doin' it like that comes off as so melodramatic. Plus, the way my brain works I think it wouldn't work and I'll somehow survive and become a crippled invalid. You take hanging yourself, but then what are you gonna hang from? The shower curtain rod? I got nothing in my apartment that would hold me. Overdose seems like the easiest, but even that's not failproof."

"How bout seppuku or self-immolation?" Tommy said. "Those crazy chinks!"

"It's all fucked," I said. "I guess my listlessness is the only thing keeping me alive. I just don't get it. It's not like I'm trying to hurt anybody. I'm not one of those Hasidic real estate moguls who renovate only the outside of old buildings so that they look new and fancy, and leaves the interior foundation untouched, then charges millions of dollars to rich morons who don't know the difference, and meanwhile the building starts to fall apart in a few years, or maybe the windows don't

keep the wind out and the winter chills make the apartment uninhabitable, and the rich person who bought the thing wants his money back but will never get a dime because he has no legal course of action, and it's his own damn fault anyway for buying the piece of shit in the first place, or maybe the whole building crashes down completely one day.

"No, I'm not like one of those assholes. Even if I wanted to be, it seems like it involves a lot of paperwork. A lot of contractual, lawyerly stuff. What a pain in the ass.

And then you're stuck with the goddamn thing, this big building, and it's your responsibility, and when the heat doesn't work it's your problem, or the super's. So now you gotta hire a super, or a building manager. The whole thing just seems like such a headache."

"You a get a lawyer and an accountant and let them do all the work," Tommy said. "All you gotta do is buy the damn thing, and then put the others in charge and watch as the money flows in."



“All I ever wanted was some kind of regular work that I didn’t mind doing, that didn’t make me feel like a slave having my life taken away from me without getting anything back in return,” I said. “It’s not like I need a lot of attention. Just something regular. Something I wanted to be doing. And make enough money to live comfortably. Maybe afford a few nice things here and there. A vacation once a year. Just enough money to be able to pay my bills, and have a little left over at the end of each month to treat myself, or maybe put some away.”

“That doesn’t exist,” Tommy said. “That’s why they call it the Job. Whether you’re doing something or doing nothing it’s a dull existence. Then after fifty years of your life they give you a free coffee mug.”

“Yeah,” I said. “What kind of cigarettes are those?”

“Marlboro 27s, same as you,” Tommy said.

“They smell good,” I said. “Better than mine.”

“You want one?” Tommy asked.

“No, I got,” I said. “I’m just sayin’.”

“I’m gonna mosey along here,” Tommy said. “This weather. I can’t stay out in it too long. It’s great to see you, pal.”

“Great to see you,” I said.

We hugged and slapped one another on the back. Tommy was older than I, and his reference points for certain things were different than mine, but I felt that we had come off the same block. Simply put, I loved the guy.

I walked back to the village. I couldn’t remember what I came for. My eyes flickered from one spot to another. I searched around in a frantic instant for my keys only to catch my breathe upon realizing they were in my pocket. I was first in line. Oh yeah, my prescription. But what if there was a problem? What if they didn’t have it? No – I called them yesterday and they assured me that it would be ready. First thing in the morning. But you can’t trust people. They’ll tell you anything without

really knowing.

I got to the counter. What?! I couldn't believe it. 'We can't fill this?!' How could this be? You told me yesterday you could! Ask someone else dammit. Two of them now, huddled, looking down at the piece of paper and conversing. Okay. So they do have it, but they didn't fill it yet. I'll have to wait. Typical. It was my luck. Maybe I'll go next door and get a coffee.

I was lucky to get the script. It is so hard nowadays to get a simple painkiller. Of course there were no refills. The hydrocodone I was getting was no safer than pure heroin, in fact it was more dangerous. Except you couldn't get pure heroin. Used to be you could walk into a pharmacy, tell 'em what you wanted, and they'd give it to you. Used to be all this stuff was legal. Bayer had a heroin warehouse on Harrison Street.

Enough time had eventually passed and my order was filled. I walked the short couple blocks back home and took a pill with my coffee. It

took thirty minutes or so for the pill to take effect. When it did, it felt like it does when you try to swim past a wave in the ocean but get knocked further backwards. It took everything significantly down a notch, with a big, enveloping whoosh. I went to bed and drifted into purgative sleep.

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I'm just as much a slave to this techno shit as anyone, albeit not as bad as some, I thought to myself as I went to my computer and checked my email - an addiction that is more deleterious to my overall health, I figure, than smoking. I do it every morning, every evening, every in between spare moment, awaiting with dread and hope, the bold type of a new message in my Gmail.

I see a bold subject line at the top that reads "Hey Corey!!!" and an email name that I don't recognize. It is just a bunch of random numbers and punctuation marks and it gives off the impression that it comes from



a deranged person. At first glance I think it could be spam, but I soon realize it isn't, because for one, junk mail goes directly into my spam folder, and secondly, spam doesn't usually have a bunch of numbers as the email name, but rather some generic nondescript name like "Laura Matthews" wants to swallow your cock. I open the email and amazed that it is her, I continue to read, and smile.

She left her phone number in the email suggesting that I call. I search in my wallet for something small to write on, and I find a small white piece of paper with the words "girl from bar" on it and seven strange numbers written below, and I remember she who wouldn't tell me her name and who wouldn't sleep with me either. I flip the small white piece of paper over, and copy the number from my computer screen onto the blank side. I look at the ten numbers I had just written on the paper, recognizing them from what felt like another lifetime.

It wasn't until now that I knew if she was still alive or not. I definitely

didn't expect her to be in the city. Years ago I ran into a guy whom I met one night when I was out with her. I asked over her and he said: "Oh, yeah. Young girl, right? Kinda wild? No, I haven't seen her in a long time." After that, I hadn't really thought about her. Though on occasion I would secretly hope for some kind of note like this from her. I actually hoped for something like this from other people more so than from her, but it was more fitting that it should come from her. What she wrote was kind, simple, and thoughtful, and for a moment it warmed my heart. That is until I figured she was only writing to me because she was in trouble. She was having problems with whomever she was living with. Problems with her boyfriend. Strung out. Needed money.

Still, it was nice to be thought of. I recalled her cushy athletic ass from the first time we met, when she couldn't have been more than nineteen years old and she dressed like Jimi Hendrix. The muscles in my groin began to tighten and I reached for my cock. I imagined fingering her

cute pussy and watching her face tighten with pleasure. Then I pictured reaching in close to kiss her neck with my tongue, and then I thought of her skin and her smell, and the zits on her cheek and on her forehead, and how she never wore nice smelling perfume and how her breath probably smelled like corn, and I became repulsed by the very thought of her company.

The last time I saw Lola we had spent the whole day together. We met somewhere in the lower east side in the afternoon with plans for lunch that never happened. She told me about a fight she had just had with her boss, whom she was also living with, and what a fucking creep he was. I asked her what her job was, and she told me she was a wizard's apprentice. The wizard had kicked the apprentice out of his apartment. Over what? She didn't do anything. She was just coming back to get her stuff. He didn't have to be such an asshole. Wouldn't let her inside to get her own damn stuff. She got him good though. Punched him right in the face.

Saw blood coming out of his nose. Didn't think a girl could hit that hard. But her tooth was chipped and she couldn't bite down to enjoy an apple. Probably never again for the rest of her life. She could sue him for that. He's rich. She could sue him for a million dollars.

She managed to get us kicked out of four different joints that day. First, we snuck inside a building below Delancey street behind a deliveryman, and we went on top to the roof and smoked a spliff and stared at the skyscrapers of lower Manhattan that appear to look right at you when you're at that height. Then we climbed down the fire escape and went through a window into her "friend's" apartment. When the friend came into his own apartment and saw the two of us getting cozy on his couch, it turned out she and him weren't as chummy as she led me to believe, and he insisted that we both get out as he was "kind of having a hard time dealing" with the situation of us somehow being inside his locked apartment, in near copulation. The guy wore a yarmulke, had a



long graying beard, and looked higher than anybody I'd ever seen look.

Next, we walked to an art show on the lower east side of another one of her friends. She took out a red crayon and starting doodling on the art piece that was in the show for sale. The friend whose show it was saw this, and pushed her out onto the street. I personally saw artistic merit to her additions, but I could see his side as well.

Lola said she had to stop by the bank and cash a check. While we were waiting in line, I noticed that the check was made out to someone else. "Does this look fake?" she asked me, in regards to the signature of the other person's name on the back of the check that she had just forged. "Yes", I told her. When she got to the bank counter, the teller asked her how she would like her bills. "In an envelope" she responded.

Next thing I remembered we stopped in the Bowery Hotel to each take a piss. While there, Lola grabbed a glass of wine off a waiter's tray and chugged it. That got us escorted out of there. And then sometime later

there was a party where someone found her inside a refrigerator gnawing on an apple, and proceeded to carry her out onto the stoop like an animal or a child. That was the end of the night for me. And the last time I decided I would see her.

I ran into her once again on the street. We went back to her apartment, at least I thought it was hers. I remember we were sitting on her couch and she was blabbering on about prescription meds: dilladin...vicadin.... percocet... methadone...as though that was at all interesting? I didn't know what many of the things were that she mentioned (I would learn them later on). She was taking all these painkillers and pills, but somehow because she was off heroin, that meant she was off drugs.

"We should fuck," I remembered telling her.

She just looked at me and didn't say anything. I felt comfortable saying that to her because if she said 'No' I wouldn't really care, and I knew she wouldn't. The thought of fucking her was as spur of the moment as the

way I said it. I remember taking precisely three cigarettes from her pack that time on the way out of her apartment. Funny the shit you remember. Stupid, really.

I don't know why I wasted my money on her. I guess I was young. I know I was lonely. I feel nostalgic for those days. There was a beauty is that youth-induced madness. Looking back on it now, I was probably crazy. I probably still am. But I found magic in that crazy state, which made it worth it at the time. There was no magic left anymore. Not here.

I sat in my room with the small white piece of paper in one hand and my phone in the other. I really did not want Lola back in my life, yet the curiosity of hearing her voice and talking to her for the first time in many years was too strong. And it just so happened that Sheila was out of town for the week visiting her parents, so Lola was calling at a good time.

I picked up the phone and dialed the familiar number. She picked up after what felt like a short amount of rings.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Lola?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, it's Corey.”

“Corey! It's so good to hear from you!”

“You too. I got your email. It was really nice to hear from you. It was really nice what you wrote. I was glad to get it.”

“I was thinking about you. How are you? I miss you.”

Girls always say that. They always say they miss you. How do you respond to that? You have to tell them that you miss them also, even though you almost never do.

“Yeah, I miss you too. Are you in the city?”

“Yeah, but I had to get out. It was driving me nuts. I'm at my Moms in Vermont this week. It's so boring.”

“Oh yeah, what's going on there?”



“Nothing. I drove nonstop yesterday. I’m actually sitting down to eat right now. Can I call you back?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Ok. I’ll call you back in like a couple of hours. Corey, it’s really good to talk to you.”

“You too, Lola. Ok, talk to you later.”

“Ok, bye.”

I waited for several hours until it was ten ‘o’ clock. I was nervous the whole time thinking she was going to call. The next time I checked my phone it was eleven-thirty. At midnight I realized she wasn’t calling and I turned off my phone and placed the small white piece of paper back in my wallet and got ready for bed. It relieved me to know that her patterns hadn’t changed. I wasn’t going to hear from her.

I decided to wear my good clothes.

First, I put on my navy blue, open-fly under-britches, made of

Egyptian lisle cotton. Then, I my ribbed under-shirt made of 100% certified Sea Island cotton, my black mid-calf chiffon socks, also made from 100% certified Sea Island cotton, my custom made white mother of pearl buttoned shirt, made from Swiss Alumo fabric, and made by the best and only real tailors left in Manhattan, my black wool trousers, my 100% cashmere sweater from Scotland, my orthopedic leather loafers, my blue Italian made silk jacket that was my absolute favorite color in the whole world, my leather coat with an inside fur lining and a fur collar, a hat, a glove, a scarf, and I was dressed.

I put the cargo in a black plastic bag, already annoyed at myself for committing to lug this thing along. It’ll be worth it, I said to myself, hoping that the act of it saying it aloud would make it so.

I walked to the Mexican joint on the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Watts Street and placed a five spot on the bar for a coffee to go. I turned the corner on Watts and stopped by the cigar bar and bought a pack of red

Dunhills. Can't even buy tobacco products from the Dunhill store in New York. I walked east with the black plastic bag still in my hand, lighting a smoke.

I don't roll my own cigarettes, never had the phalangeal dexterity for it, but I sometimes fantasize about taking a pinch of loose tobacco and laying it across a white paper, rolling the paper back and forth a few times to get a nice cylindrical shape, then rolling it all up in one motion, licking the top, giving it a twist and turn, and putting the cigarette to my mouth. And there isn't too much tobacco on the end of the cigarette in my mouth - just a little to give the taste of tobacco, but rolled tightly enough so that no tobacco got caught in my teeth. And as I smoke a huge cloud went deep into my lungs and into the sky in front of my face. And it satisfies me entirely.

I had gone about two months once without a cigarette. That's not bad. Pretty fucking good, actually, now that I think about it. After the

first three days, the challenge is really more mental than physical, anyway. That's because I know how to wean myself off now. Not like that first time, when I was a cocky asshole and thought I could stop cold turkey. My hands would shake, I was jumpy, I would get chills; anything that anybody said would pierce my eardrums, and I wanted to kill someone. The key is to wean oneself down to one or two smokes a day over time, then you can get through those first three quit days with as little difficulty as possible. After that, you're usually in the clear.

I think back to my first cigarette. I was a young teenager walking back from the park with a friend of mine from the neighborhood. We saw a pack of green cigarettes on the ground that was less than half full. The package was green, so they were probably Kools or Newports. This was our chance. We went back to my friend's house because his parents weren't home and mine were. We went into the back yard and smoked our first cigarettes.



That first drag was like a coalmine explosion to the chest. We coughed liked hell and felt sick, dizzy, lightheaded, nauseous, and paranoid that his parents would come home and smell the smoke and somehow know what we had done and we'd get in trouble. We took the cigarette butts and buried them someplace in the dirt. I remembered feeling like I had done something wrong. And feeling that way felt good.

There might be something to that psychology mumbo jumbo where one tries to re-experience their first high with each subsequent drug experience. Not ever being able to do so, you keep taking the drug in hopes of finding it. Maybe you know that it's impossible, but subconsciously you're not ready to accept that you've already had your first shot and it's over. All you can get now is actually being a smoker. So you move on to new and different drugs that you haven't tried before. But eventually nothing feels that special anymore, it just becomes slight variations on the larger theme of being fucked up.

I was going to the nexus of the universe - 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and East 1<sup>st</sup> street - towards the last place I remembered her living at in New York. I had the idea that I would make some kind of gesture. At a certain point along the way, I realized how pathetic it was. I was trying to do something symbolic, and it was just so stupid. I second guessed myself and thought about not doing it at all. Then, as I got closer, I figured what the hell. I had come this far already. Might as well go through with it.

I turned left on East 1<sup>st</sup> street towards where my memory told me her building was. I wasn't sure if it would still be there. Things change over so quickly around here. But there it was. I recognized the outer part of the building. Address number 68. I didn't remember what the exact building number was, but 68 sounded about right. I was near certain that it was her building.

I reached into the black plastic bag with the cargo in it that I was carrying, and took out my worn black jeans with the big rip in the crotch

and placed them on the ground in front of the building's entrance. Not feeling that I had placed them in a prominent enough position, I picked the jeans back up and laid them down with as much length as they could take up, so that the jeans expanded across the entire foot of the door. Looking down at it, it looked as meaningless as it was. Some ugly pair of ripped jeans on an equally ugly tan and black dotted concrete sidewalk. It was depressing.

Was this all that I could offer her memory? Was this supposed to celebrate her life, and our friendship? Some shitty looking pair of jeans strewn out like trash on a stoop? Why was it that every time I tried to appreciate her, I failed? And she appreciated me to such an extent that it was embarrassing, even though deep down I felt that I deserved it.

I remembered the first time we had met. Why hadn't I remembered that for the eulogy or the memorial service afterwards? Whatever I chose to write and say on those occasions must have been awfully contrived. I

walked into a room I hadn't been in before, with people inside whom I didn't know. Billy Idol's "White Wedding" was playing and across the room, like in a movie, this person came into focus and went right up to me and gave me a giant hug and screamed like she had known me all my life. And that was it. We hugged before we knew each other's names. You can't re-create that. It's a once in a lifetime.

I didn't stay in front of the building for long. As I left, I felt not as overtaken with her loss as when I first set out. Part of me was sad that the grief appeared to have left. Whenever a strong emotion blew through me I was sad when it left, whether it was a good one or a bad one didn't make a difference, because most of time there was nothing there at all. It seems that you spend the vast majority of your life not feeling the strongest emotions you have. It's mostly filled with nothing. Feeling bored or indifferent, or slightly annoyed, which is just the same, really; it's not a real emotion. I couldn't even cry yet over her death – but I knew as



suddenly as the tears would eventually come, they would leave.

The weight in my hand was lighter as I no longer carried the bag with jeans, and so were my spirits. I couldn't account for it. Maybe it was just getting rid of old clothes that made me feel lighter in spirit. I could go for that. It certainly made more sense than thinking that my gesture had given me some peace of mind.

When I got home I turned my cell phone on and saw the white blinking light that indicated a message. It was Lola. Something about getting a chance to finish our conversation. There was another missed call from her some twenty minutes afterwards, but no message. I went to my wallet and took out the small white piece of paper just to make sure it was still there. I saw the words "girl from bar" and I remembered she who wouldn't tell me her name and who wouldn't sleep with me either. And on the other side of the paper, a number from a past life. I put the paper back into my wallet and I turned my phone off.

I reached for a smoke from my pack. But I told Sheila that I'd stopped smoking. So whenever I needed one I had to go outside. And it was winter and was cold out now. And whenever I came home smelling of smoke I had to make up some excuse about being out with the boys who were smoking. I wasn't sure if she was naïve enough to believe me. I think she wanted to believe me, which was why she didn't give me too much trouble.

But if I want a damn cigarette I'll just have one! Shit – if my whole goddamn mind and body is telling him to have a smoke, why can't I! How bad could it be? Why should I torture myself? Cuz you can't stand the smell of smoke! Cuz you get nauseous from it! Well how the hell is that my fault? And why should I have to hear about it every damn time I walk in the door! Have to make such a grand gesture of how you can't breathe. Have to open a window. Have to bust my balls over it! Huh? Yeah, I know I said I was gonna quit this time. I want to quit. But for christsakes,

what am I superhuman?

I looked out into the dark scene of lights that I'd seen plenty of in my life. Oh God. Here. Again. Why? How much longer can this go on for? How much longer can I live like this? With such never ending pain - the kind of pain that makes my head scramble around in circles going nowhere except back into my own throbbing skull.

My problem was that I was very good hustler at the things I sucked at, and a terrible one at the things I was somewhat capable at. That was because the stuff I sucked at, I couldn't care less about, and so I would barrel forth without any shame or self-consciousness, thus bettering my odds of success. But I sucked at them so it would never amount to much anyway. The stuff I was somewhat good at, I had the terrible trait of caring about, and that sentiment blinded me from the cold objectivity that you need to be a good, tough hustler.

And I always landed up focusing on the things that I was not very good

at, that should not have been a priority, but were easier to do, and ignoring the things that I was better at, and should have been doing, because the business side of them was tougher for me to navigate.

I remember my college president's speech at graduation, advising us to beware of taking the easy path. Little did I know how hard that would be. And what does that even mean anyway? What easy path? Where is it? I've been searching for the easy path all this time. Nothing's easy. The easy path is hard. The hard path is impossible. It's Mt. Everest.

No matter what I did, or where I went, I'd always land up with the same tormented twisted pain in my head and my chest. Sure, sometimes I could put it off for a stretch of a month or two, or maybe longer. But it was inevitable that before long I'd be right back to it and it was as though it had never left.

I'd been sick before. Had physical illness. And that was tough. But this pain was somehow worse, because at least when I was sick, my body



would automatically rally itself to fight, and if it couldn't win, I'd die. It was straightforward. Fight it off and live, or the sickness wins and you're done for. But this pain was not that simple. I didn't know where it came from, why it was there, or what it was trying to tell me?

Those goddamn voices in my head, telling me over and over again the same story of catastrophe – it's too much to bear! So repetitive and boring and unhelpful. I'd ask them, what do you want me to do then? If you're so intent on not shutting up, just tell me then what to do, and I'll do it. Or just leave me the hell alone why don't you? But of course they never say anything other than the same vague circles of mindless chatter designed to drive me crazy. It makes me want to write the catastrophe myself just so that I wouldn't have to listen to it anymore!

Cuz it all seemed like a waste. Working, doing nothing, what's the fucking difference? It's still going to end the exact same way, for everybody. I admire those people who are optimistic, I truly do, and I

despise them, because I don't understand it for myself. What would be any reason for believing that things will get better? Oh, God has a plan does he? You have a personal relationship with God? Well, good. Next time you see him, tell him I personally said he can go fuck himself.

I struck a match and lit a cigarette. Sheila wouldn't be back from her parents until Monday, and it was Saturday, so the smell should be gone by then. If it's not, I can simply lie and say I was at the bar with the guys. And anyways, fuck that bitch.

# Those things which burn

ROBIN WYATT DUNN

Those things which burn  
Near everything  
Hold over the grace  
of your hand

for our torch

I feel you want it

The conflagration





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