

A photograph of a sunset or sunrise over a landscape. The sky is a mix of dark grey and light yellow, with some clouds on the left. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of trees and a utility pole with power lines. In the background, there are mountains. The text 'The Los Angeles Review of Los Angeles' is overlaid in white at the top right.

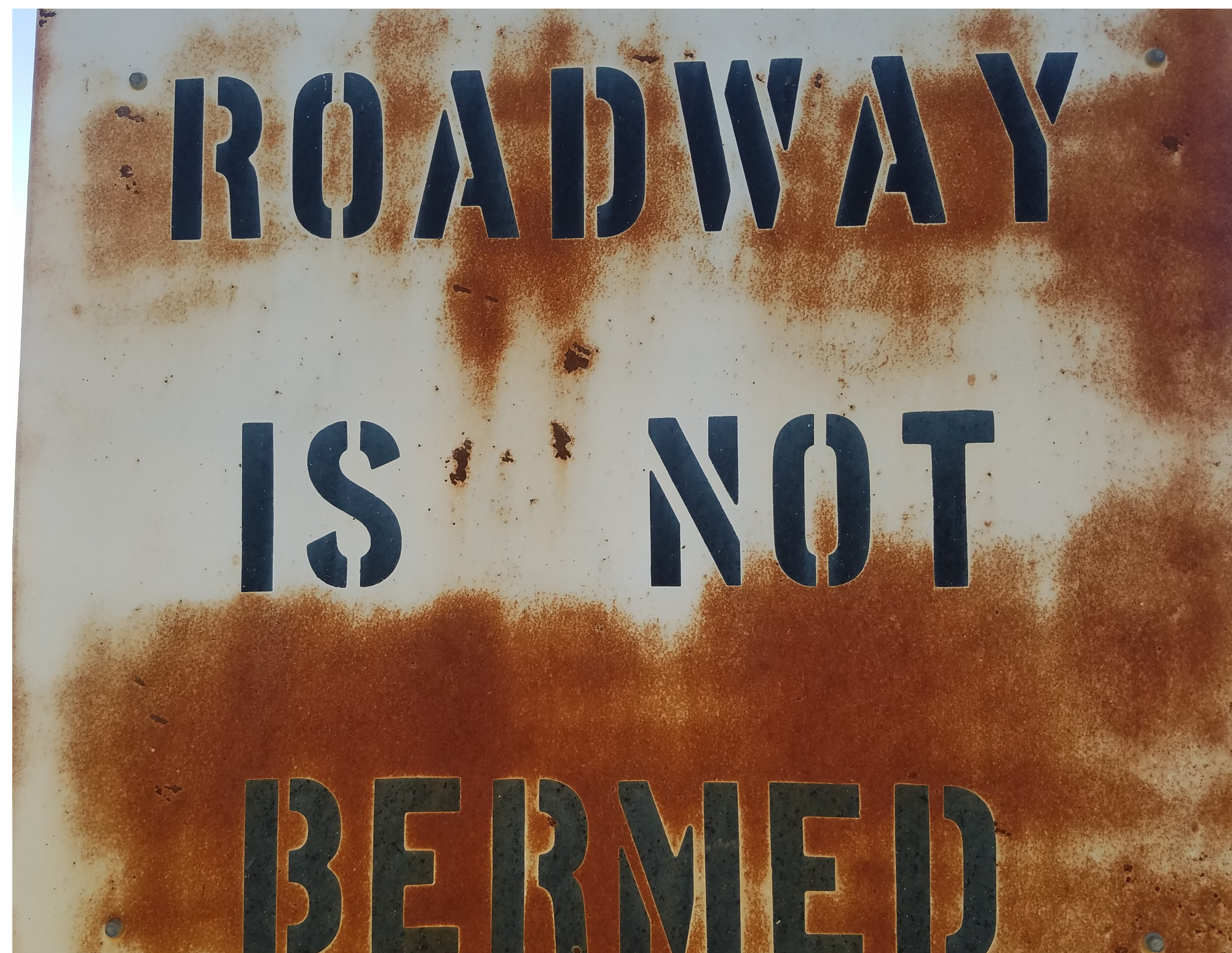
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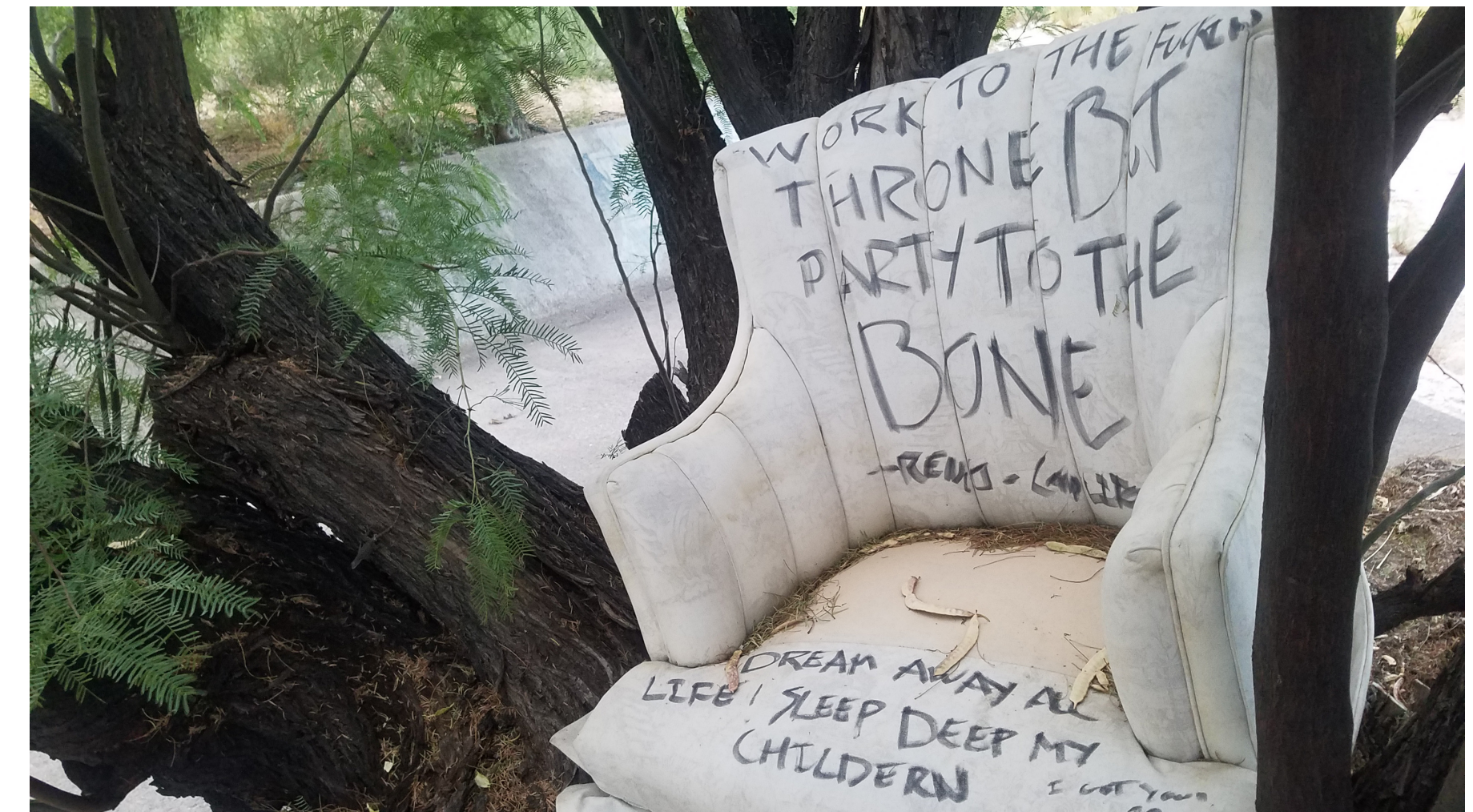
THE LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF LOS ANGELES, NO. 19

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COVER BY ROBIN WYATT DUNN

My Kink Was Heat and Inquiry

KALEY HENSLEY

caution: he will cull your convection

won't catch your curdling in a cushion

unconsider his colon no kisses

accounted for amidst the muck oh convince
kitchen countertops you are cured of crumbs

craved by the cunt the sickness of that slick
crimson kindling like cream in your craw cruel

can be a color christening the cut
keeping tokens of charades makes a gal

a character in a play she's candied
like sardines carved so carelessly can you

for once caress me the creature I am
steering comets to capture you my crease

my cough fuck me while the iron is off

The Russians Take a Holiday

CRAIG LOOMIS

She is wearing the big googly-eyed sunglasses that makes me think of bugs; he, on the other hand, cares nothing for sunglasses and would rather spend his time squinting. Now, hand on chin, as if considering, wondering, he decides to pace back and forth in front of her as she lay surgery-like on the sunbed. Suddenly, as if just remembering something, he turns to look out into the bright Mediterranean, a water that is inky blue. He is wearing a gold wristwatch that twinkles when the sunlight hits it just right. Ever since they first arrived at

the beach, he hasn't stopped standing, sometimes next to her like a kind of sentry, sometimes next to the kiosk that sells sun lotion, drinks, cigarettes, sometimes near the sign that says No Dogs, his arms folded lazily across his chest. And now he has decided to turn, edging closer to her, and she maybe, maybe not, speaking to him, but because there are children squealing and music playing who can be sure, and he moves from one side of her sunbed to the other, his mouth moving so he must be talking, saying something, and now he nods

which can only mean she is answering, talking to him, unless people nod for no good reason, which is quite possible.

Although it is hard to tell with people lying flat in the sunshine, on the beach, with a bright red towel, along with two very full plastic bags, she looks thin, as if she smokes too much but does not care, has heard all the arguments as to why she should stop before it is too late, or maybe it is already too late and that is why she is here. Maybe she is wondering why he does not sit down on the sunbed next to her, after all they have paid

for two sunbeds with umbrella so why not use what you paid for, get your money's worth, etc.? Meanwhile, her sunglasses have slipped down to the tip of her nose and with one finger she roughly pushes them back where they belong. Suddenly there is no noise—a hole in the air, a pause in all things beachy—and all is quiet and he turns to speak to her and it sounds like Russian, a question in Russian, while keeping his arms tightly folded across his chest, hair the color of wheat, a strangely boyish chest. She answers “*Nyet*,” and he shrugs, turning back to squint at the sea; and of course

the noise returns as a young boy argues with his sister, and somewhere behind them, beyond the palms, along the line of hotels, there is cheering, which forces him to turn his squint that way, but even I can see that he is not interested, not really, it is just something to do while waiting for her to get her suntan in August before they return to their apartment on the outskirts of Moscow.

Hi Dimetrodon

DANIEL DE CULLA

At the Dinos exhibition
The child, the children, my children
Want to reach Dimetrodon.
Although they know these no longer exist
Because they are prehistoric
One has taken a rod
Another has picked a flower.
-Dad, mom
I want to give it to Dimetrodon
To play with me
And I gave it to Dimetrodon
When they go out for a walk at night
And come to haunt them
The shooting stars
With the castanets
With the mortar
And the tambourine
That moon makes ring
The prettiest boy says.
They are leaving the tent
They are already leaving
More than four dinosaurs
Remaining crying.



The Capper

DANIEL DE CULLA



Scissors to Castrate

DANIEL DE CULLA

I was lucky enough to meet a Capper
Who did me the favor of teaching me
 To play his capador
 Orchiflo, caramel, syringa
Walking down a street that's too long
Of Caparra, a town near Plasencia
 From Caceres, Spain
 On the Silver Road
Where there are great ruins and remains
 Of having been a great city
 In Roman times.
Stopping playing the caramel or syringe
He announced himself through the houses shouting:
 -The capper, the capper.
To spay or to castrate (removal of testicles)
It is useful and convenient for donkey or horse
 For the blunt mule or mare
 The first proceeding
 From the union of donkey with horse
And the second of a mare with a donkey.

Also, he taught me how to hold
To cut, remove and sew the sac of the testicles
Praising me this capper
That he was so happy
Castrating Donkeys and Horses
Like pigs that growled
With loud clamor
In pigpens of stables and corrals.
Any young man would have been daunted
Seeing these sublime castrations
Making me reflect
Of the castrations that priests did to us daily
In convents or seminaries
Where we studied to become one day
A faggot or pedophile priest
Unraveling from them
Everything belonging to their scrotal part
So mystical divine.
The masters of Donkeys, Horses and Pigs

Made a thousand observations
About his way of covering
But everyone praised
Doing it in due time
With the best success
Everyone being satisfied and admired
Seeing the set of utensils
That he carried to castrate
Stating that this of to cover
It was “an interesting career”
Persuading myself
How much testicles are worth
And even more so those of a pig.
-Better than you, Capper
There is no one on the Globe
I told him, saying goodbye
Kissing him.

Ways We Reincarnate

SAM FLETCHER

1.

When I was a kid, I had a freckle on my finger; it rubbed off at some point.

2.

When I was a kid, I asked to be called Logan; no one did. These days color more than hair, wrinkle more than skin, but behavior: slight or drastic, implying if life were undisturbed, if I were everlasting, I would arrive at a time when, in appearance or mind, I wouldn't recognize that kid, nor this one.

3.

This air is unfamiliar (it tastes like dirt).

Thoughts rot like body.

I only seen skeletons tap-dance in black and white cartoons.

Fingers needn't cling to spirit, so why should memories?

I'm still deciding to drift at sea or be locked in boxes, picked apart by piranhas or what crawls through coffin walls, another life will siphon mine, to sustain their babies.

It's predetermined by behavior now. A cloud didn't create this rain, it became it.

4.

I've met gods in this realm.
A full stomach is a sleepy mind.
I've met the demigods too,
so focused befriending gods I fell behind.
I've met animals in this realm.
We all get confused sometimes.
I've known hungry ghosts floating by
and hell-dwellers roaming in the dark.
It's easy to see after experienced.
This morning I found a new freckle on my other hand;
I like to think I'm here now.

5.

There was a moment before this one.
Breathe
I can be there anytime.
It was brief, I think, but I don't know how brief.
Breathe
In that moment, I was not happy,
and I was not sad, was not angry, not horny,
not elated, not suffering.
Breathe
We can be there anytime.
The veil between things gradually through this incarnation.
Breathe
We will be there anytime.
We can decide how long.

People like to say nothing happens when we die...

Think of Doors

FRANCES SKENE

Think of doors,
like the one
Bluebeard's bride opens
to her peril, behind it
murdered former brides,

and she can't wash
blood off the key
before he returns.

Think of doors that
let her husband in.

Think of doors that lock
and you can't get out.

You long for doors
that open when
you need to pass, and
close when you don't.

A Question of Occupancy

LESLIE BOHEM

The duplex on Ambrose Street, with the studio where they teach sound healing and orgasmic yoga, is for sale. The owners, an elderly couple from Ventura who no longer want the responsibility of maintaining the property, are what the market calls “motivated sellers.” With no children of their own and no particular interest in travel, perhaps they are thinking forward to assisted living or at-home care. Though they would like to sell the property quickly rather than hold out for the highest offer, they will still be making

quite a profit. Ralph Merrick bought the property for \$97,000 in 1979 just after his second marriage fell apart. For a time, he lived in the upstairs apartment, the one above what is now the orgasmic yoga studio. When he met Linda at Ye Rustic Inn, a bar just down the street on Hillhurst Avenue, this was the apartment that he took her back to—the apartment where they first made love, decided that they liked each other quite a lot, and where, after a few slightly drunken months of sex and television, Ralph had clumsily proposed. Linda had

been married before, too. Her first husband, Fred, had died suddenly of an embolism six years earlier. They had one child, a daughter. When Ralph met Linda, the girl, Penelope, was away at college. Linda didn't talk much about her and, other than one screaming argument that Ralph heard one side of from behind the closed bedroom door of the apartment, Penelope seemed to be almost a non-event in Linda's life.

EROTIC MEDITATION

Erotic meditation gives us permission to be mindful of substance while letting go of what we will come to know as superficial. One discovers the innate ability to be both in and with the body.

After talking it over, Ralph and Linda had decided that Ralph should make one last trip down to Los Angeles to put the affairs of the duplex in order rather than leaving the final details to the property manager. He drove down on a Wednesday, timing his trip for just after lunch to avoid the worst of the traffic. His hip and knee were hurting a bit, and the sciatica that came on every year as the weather changed was bothering him as well. He had to stop three times just to shake the pain out, but, of course, he would have had to stop

that many times to urinate, which for him was now an hourly event. The Los Feliz area had changed quite a bit since the last time he'd been down sixteen years ago for his friend Tom's memorial at Forest Lawn. At that time, the yoga studio had not yet moved into the apartment; it was empty, and he had stayed overnight in a sleeping bag on the floor. Now he found the neighborhood overrun with happy young people. The Café Los Feliz, which had been the only place offering espresso when he'd lived in the area, was still there, but there were now six places, including a Starbucks and a

Blue Bottle, where you could get coffee, several bars and new restaurants, and two businesses, one on either side of Hillhurst, offering an assortment of massage, chiropractic adjustment, acupuncture, and alternative medicine, all of which, no doubt, appealed to the same clientele who did orgasmic yoga.

He had arranged for their realtor, a young, somewhat acerbic man named Bruce, to meet him at the apartment at four that afternoon. There had been a great deal of traffic in spite of his timing, and he hadn't arrived until 4:15. Ralph hated to be late. It made him

terribly anxious. Right now, he was grinding his teeth and sweating as he turned up Ambrose, noticing that the health food store on the corner had changed hands and was now part of a chain. There was nowhere to park on Ambrose, but he found a spot one block away, on Talmadge, and hurried back to meet Bruce.

They had already agreed on a price—just under \$2 million so as not to scare away buyers—but Bruce had not yet done a walk-through. They started upstairs. The tenant, Richard Nakamura, was home taking care of his husband who had a bad case of the flu. “I don’t think

he’s contagious anymore,” Richard said, “but I have masks if you’d like and I’ll give you some wipes on the way out just to be safe.”

The apartment was immaculate. Sparsely furnished in mid-century modern, with a great deal of thought put into their arrangement in the rooms. “I don’t feel old,” Ralph had said to Linda the night before, talking about the fact that they had to sell the property and the ever-diminishing future that lay in front of them. “I feel like the same person I’ve always been, only more tired.” But now, standing here in the apartment where he had

lived many years ago, an apartment that looked nothing like it used to, he felt very old and very tired.

“My God,” Bruce said, “is that a Harry Bertoia?”

“It is,” Richard said.

“Do you sit in it?” Bruce said. “I’d be afraid to.”

“It was meant to be used,” Richard said.

“You certainly keep the place up,” Ralph said to Richard.

“Well, we live here,” Richard said, as if he didn’t understand what Ralph was trying to say.

ORGASMIC YOGA

Orgasmic Yoga is a transformative experience meant to be practiced while sexually aroused. Orgasmic Yoga is a brave meditation and a somatic education. One begins by doing and ends by being.

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” Bruce said. They had finished with the walk-through and were having coffee at the Café Los Feliz. No one was at the yoga studio, but a hand-written note on the door said that Em would be back after six, and that classes would start again on Thursday. At Bruce’s

suggestion, Ralph had used his key to get in. The key that had been on his key ring for more than a quarter of a century. The living room carpet had been taken up to reveal a hardwood floor on which a half-dozen yoga mats were set in a ring around a circular mat. Ralph had stood just inside the doorway, feeling like an intruder as Bruce took a look at the rest of the apartment: a bedroom and a small kitchen. Ralph had wondered about the circular arrangement of the mats. It suggested an intimacy that, coupled with this feeling of intruding into a private space, made him

uncomfortable.

Ralph knew that he should not be having this cup of coffee. It meant stopping even more often to use the bathroom on the ride home, and, unless he found a way to sit out the traffic here in Los Angeles, it would be bumper-to-bumper all the way. But there was nothing else to do. Bruce wanted to talk to him. Bruce wanted to have coffee. Bruce bought the coffees, and Allah, the woman who owned the cafe, smiled at him familiarly and asked how he'd been, as if he'd only been away from the neighborhood for a couple of weeks and

not the sixteen years it had been since he'd had his last espresso here.

“It’s a question of occupancy,” Bruce said. The rents on the two units were disproportionately low, and a new owner would not be allowed, under law, to evict the tenants or raise their rent. “If you were to decide to move back into either of the apartments before we listed, that would free up at least one rent, making the place a bit more attractive to a potential buyer.”

“But I live in Ventura.”

“Maybe you’d like to keep a place in town.” Bruce

smiled conspiratorially. “You don’t actually have to live there, you just have to say you’re moving back in so you can throw one of your tenants out. Your choice. Let me know what you decide. As I said, it’s a question of occupancy.”

Ralph did not like to be reminded of his past, and this trip to Los Feliz was bringing him back to a time when he was younger and there were still other possible outcomes. Walking through the door of the Café, for example, and getting coffee with Bruce. This was the same door he had walked through nearly every day

for nine years starting, what was it, twenty-six years ago? The oily smell of the croissants, burned coffee, and Allah's hairspray. Exactly the same. The coffee, too, espresso so stale he doubled up on the sugar even though he was trying to cut down on both—the coffee as well as the sugar. After this coffee, he would say goodbye to Bruce and return to the building, his building. The note on the studio door had said that Em would be back after six, although there would be no classes until Thursday. It was Tuesday. If she wasn't teaching until Thursday, why had she bothered to say

when she would be back? For some reason, he took this, he decided to take this, as a sign, although of what, he had no idea.

It was five when he and Bruce left the Café Los Feliz. There was no reason to sit in hours of traffic. He texted Linda that he was going to wait the traffic out. He left his car where he'd parked it. He thought that he would walk down to Ye Rustic, have one drink (the multiple restroom pit stops were already a done deal) then maybe walk over to Vermont and see if the bookstore was still there.

It was a spring night, the kind of night that used to feel so full of possibility. He was suddenly struck by the feeling that he had finally figured out who he was but that it was too late to do anything about it. It had been a long time since it had just been about the hollow triumph of getting laid, or beyond that, the imaginary option of wandering into another life. That had been a part of this neighborhood, of his life in the apartment before he'd met Linda. Those things were long off the table, and the only small victory now was to keep going, to never stop for long enough to have to look

back at his failures. It was the running, the keeping constantly in motion. Wasn't there a bird that would die if it stopped moving? Or was it a butterfly with no feet? There was some animal that was always in motion. Sharks, of course, but he was no shark. *I'm prey now*, he thought, *and if I don't keep moving, the predators will swallow me whole.*

Ralph still loved to walk into a bar. You walked in and the world seemed to open up again. But at seventy, with all the bars he'd walked into, he still didn't know how to linger. He would order a drink, gulp it down in

three big swallows, and then have absolutely no idea how to sit quietly. Those Armenian men—you used to see them at Allah's—they could sit over one tiny cup of espresso for hours. His father had been Hungarian, not Armenian, but he was like that. Able to sit. He played chess by mail. The man could wait weeks for a letter to come with his opponent's next move. He kept the board set up in his office by his typewriter, and, when a letter came, he made the appropriate move for his opponent, studied the board until he'd decided what to do, made his own move, and wrote

back accordingly. He was, among other things, a patient man. Ralph was not patient. He had never nursed a drink in his life. At Ye Rustic (the door, the stale beer smell, the dank dark all the same) he drank, paid, and headed back out into the evening. The whole thing took less than ten minutes. He would keep moving. Was he hurrying away? What from? Old age, while imminent, hadn't struck with its full force yet. For the moment, at least, he was relatively healthy. And so the question remained—what exactly was it that he felt looming behind him? What was it that would come up and wrap

its wretched arms around him the moment that he stopped?

Maybe it was more simple than that. Maybe it was just that when you stop, you've stopped.

Linda had never felt the need to be in motion. That was one of the many things that had attracted Ralph to her when they first met. She was one of the few people he had ever known, his father being another, who was content to sit. But now, that ability to be content doing nothing had come, like so many other small things about Linda, to annoy him. Was there a secret to a

good marriage? To him it seemed that the only secret was that you reached a point where anything else was too much trouble. Theirs had been a quiet marriage for some time. It was easier not to fight and so they didn't.

Ralph had ordered an Old Overholt and soda. That had always been his drink at Ye Rustic. He hadn't eaten and the drink hit him hard. Across the street, a group of young people were gathered around a scooter. One of them, a thick young man with an Amish beard and jeans bagging in the ass from a few weeks of constant wear, was trying to figure out how to get the thing

started. “You have to download the app first,” one of the others said. They had all the time in the world.

For all that the neighborhood had changed since he’d left, it was hard not to respond, as he walked, to the sounds and smells of the place with expectation for things that would no longer happen. Muscle has memory, they say. Well, memory has muscle.

He walked over to Vermont and found the bookstore next to the movie theater. It had changed its name but they still sold books. “Can I help you with something?” the young man behind the counter said.

He had been standing in the doorway and, apparently, staring.

“I’m—no, I used to live in the neighborhood, and I was trying to remember what this place used to be called.”

“Chesterton’s, I think,” the clerk said. “Before my time.”

“Chatterton’s.” Someone behind him. He turned. A young woman. Mid-twenties? “My dad grew up around here. I mean so did I, but he’s O.H.”

“O.H.?”

“Original Hipster.” She was pretty in an offhand way. She had a kind mouth. She was wearing a loose-fitting turquoise T-shirt on which the words, “Ask me about my orgasm,” were printed.

“Are you Em?” he asked.

“I am.” Her smile was so fresh that it hurt. “For Emily.”

“I’m Ralph,” he said. “I’m your landlord.”

At her suggestion, they went back to Ye Rustic Inn. Everyone there knew her. The drinks were free because

of that. She talked about her family, about her father and his brother, both of them from the neighborhood.

“Went to King and Marshall,” she said, referring to the middle and high schools. Her uncle was an artist and had been a regular at Ye Rustic until he’d moved to Oregon with a wife, who, Em wanted Ralph to know, was two years younger than she was. “He’s always been like a second father to me. I mean, my dad and I are really close and all, but he could go off the rails sometimes, and my uncle, you know, he was always a rock. I think he dug it, too, having me around. I mean

he never had kids of his own, and now that I'm out of the nest, I think that's maybe why the new wife."

He drank more rye and she drank bourbon and they were both soon a little drunk. Ralph texted Linda again, saying that he was feeling tired and didn't want to risk the drive. That he'd get a motel and come back in the morning.

TRAPPED AND FROZEN

Many can no longer arouse themselves sexually without the aid of pornography and erotic fantasy. While effortless and efficient, this dependence on erotic imagery narrows erotic capacity, eventually to the point of impossibility.

Again, the sounds and smells, the feel of the bar from years ago—they were hard to shake. It was familiar, comfortable, a pair of old slippers. It was, for the moment, as if no time at all had passed.

Em wanted Ralph to see the studio. They walked back up Hillhurst. A limo idled by the curb outside a Brazilian restaurant. Ralph couldn't remember if the place had been there when he had lived in the neighborhood. "DiCaprio's dad lives around here someplace," Em said. "He's an artist. My uncle knew

him.”

At the duplex, she took down her note, unlocked the door, and opened it for him. She looked at the note. “I guess I left this for you,” she said. He didn’t mention that he’d been there earlier and now he entered the apartment for the second time that day.

“This is the studio. I don’t know what the place looked like when you lived here. *Did* you live here?”

“Upstairs,” he said.

“Oh, right. Well, when I moved in it was just a regular living room. I ripped the carpet out, your

manager said that was cool, and I started the studio.”

“Orgasmic yoga,” he said.

“I once had one that lasted a month and a half,” she said. “Let me show you where I sleep.”

The bedroom was dark and incredibly cluttered. She explained that her uncle had been staying with her. “Did I say he moved back from Oregon for a while? It wasn’t really working out with his wife.” The clutter represented fifty years of her uncle’s life. Piles of rocks, his artwork, which seemed to be mostly small canvases painted brown with red stripes across them, and some

photographs of Marilyn Monroe cut out of magazines and taped to the walls. “My uncle loves Marilyn Monroe,” Em said, as if this were something obscure and amazing. “And he collects rocks.”

There were a lot of rocks. Quartz from a riverbed near Sacramento, a smooth stone from Coos Bay that, Em said, her uncle liked because he thought it looked like George Harrison. “I used to go out rocking with him a lot when I was a kid,” she said. “He kind of raised me when my dad was doing other stuff. I would just sit for hours and look at his rocks. Want to see my

bed?”

She led him past a tacked-up sheet that served as a curtain and into the back half of the room. She had set up a camping tent over a twin mattress.

“So, what do you think?” she asked. It seemed important to her to show Ralph how she lived.

“It’s wonderful,” he said.

“Yeah, but imagine dating. Imagine bringing somebody back to this.”

“I would’ve thought you were the coolest person I’d ever met,” Ralph said, meaning it so completely that it

startled him. “I would’ve been scared to death by how cool you were.”

It seemed to Ralph at that moment that she *was* cool and wonderful. Being there in her bedroom was like looking through to a moment he had always hoped would happen to him here in this building. A moment he had spent a great deal of time chasing back then when he was not quite young anymore, but still young enough to be running towards his dreams, rather than away from the rolling crush of his realities.

“Crazy, right?” she said.

He told her again that he thought it was fantastic. And he truly did.

She loved it here, she said. Loved the apartment, loved the neighborhood. “And helping people to be alive inside their bodies, it’s rewarding as fuck.”

They talked a while longer. There was a bit of tension in the air that might have been no more than instinct and memory, and then Em hugged Ralph warmly, and said how nice it was to have finally met him. Ralph left the apartment, walking through the shadows of the studio and the yoga mats in their ring

around the circular mat.

He walked the block and a half back to his car. He was no longer drunk and decided to drive home to Ventura after all. He texted Linda that he was coming.

REFLECT AND ENJOY

It should be a part of your practice to savor your accomplishment. Practitioners rest quietly for at least five minutes after each session. O.Y. is a life-changing experience. A gift you give yourself.

Ralph sat in his car for a long time without starting the engine. He understood that things had changed. He took Bruce's card from his shirt pocket.

"I hope it's not too late to call," he said when the

realtor answered.

"Not a problem."

"Evict the yoga studio," he said. "I think that would be the best thing to do."

Tomorrow he would talk to Linda about calling her daughter. Families, he thought, should spend more time together.

FLARF IS LIFE
(or, against the poetry of affect)
JACK SULLIVAN

after Drew Gardener

The rate of change
in a given set of
behaviors
reflects
the rate of change
in
the environmental features
in which those behaviors are keyed.

the tactile nature of the machine

Meaning:
affect is the observable manifestation

of subjectively experienced emotion
in a person.

*the look of relief
when people get a seat on the train*

Meaning:
it is a self consciously crafted
dramatization
using
subjective emotion
as source material.

*a full outfit
torn and strewn across the ground
as though some malevolent force
had ripped the person
from their clothes*

Meaning:
the poet is a character
in the drama of the poem.

*everyone in New York
moves and acts
like the protagonist
of some shit novel*

The poet is the character
is the character of the speaker.

*i'm an absolute coward
when it comes to relationships*

It is taken for granted [though]
that all poetry
uses the sound of language
to have an emotional effect.

his heart panged for who they used to be

A question that is rarely asked
is whether or not it is even possible
not to have a musical dimension to poetry.

*it was the way she laughed:
the dry amusement of one
correcting a lesser's mistake*

If you are writing poetry,
you are also writing music.

cash flow – year – a couple millions bucks

This is more to poetry than this affect, though.

*i have the feeling we're getting
terrible h-e-t-*

Poems are not simply
a sequence of words
expressing
emotional information
about the poet.

*a woman with a mane of snow white hair
and a long elegant overcoat
she sleeps with her head on a table
covered with soiled newspapers*

Poems function in a system where they are activated,
when they are read or listened to by someone else.

*an old man's asthma inhaler
rolls across the tile
someone sitting across from me
picks it up*

There is an affectual circuit in poetry.

*why are you sorry? the bartender keeps saying
to the woman who changes her drink
why are you sorry?*

*You are receiving this email based on your preferences.
Manage your preferences or unsubscribe from this email chain.*

Down Poem

JACK SULLIVAN

down and out
down and under
down and
 around the bend again
down and in
down and above it all
down for anything, really
down in the South of France
down CHICAGO BEARS!
down on my knees praying
down but I have to leave by six
down boy please!
down in Dumbo right by
 where she used to live
down yonder

down and
 did you see the game last night?
down and out
 in Paris and London and
down as the basis for an opera
down and curious if you are too?
down lately though I could be convinced
down for several years running
down and then I guess
 come up again?
down from such marvelous heights
down up down up down up
down before we got home from the party
down really the last one was fabulous
down and nothing is going to change
down the plane

right into the building
down the street
police sirens blaring
down by rockets from across the border
down by
American funded military planes
down on the city streets
by guns by bombs by the hands of classmates
down and Bill I think
this explains something
down and I guess
come up again?
down on the ground or I'll

The Maestro (Common Denominator)

RON SANDERS

Everybody in this country knows the feeling.

Televised events are *imprinted* on the subconscious: a photogenic president was assassinated, a great American city was burned, a few fanatics used jets... and the unsuspecting public...as propaganda tools.

These occurrences were not just *news*, they were Time-Life spectaculars, a dead century's standout stories.

But there's a difference between *a*) hearing about it after the fact, *b*) mourning over popcorn and replays,

and *c*) actually *observing* these events, in real time, with no foresight, no hindsight, no insight...You—Were—*There*, if only electronically, and so were somehow as much participant as observer.

That's *exactly* the reaction engendered by The Happening On Fifth Street.

Everybody remembers the talking head breaking in over Oprah—a major event in itself. The cams and copters all humping...but this wasn't a slow-speed pursuit. Five drunken idiots were loitering in the drive-

thru lane at a Burger King in L.A.—standing there, indifferent to the decent customers attempting to duly edge their vehicles along. These fools were screaming, shouting, giggling, guffawing. At a honk from a little green Aspen, one, the biggest, spun and flipped off the elderly female driver.

“Fuck you, lady!” he bellowed. “I’ll kick your ugly old ass!” His friends shrieked with hilarity. One of the women lifted her dress, yanked down her panties, and began thrusting her pelvis at the driver. The whole creepy knot just howled and howled.

But that’s all incidental, contextually; just a miscellaneous clip of another hot L.A. night.

What happened next is the part we’ll never forget.

The big guy hollered, “You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

AND RESET!

“You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

“You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

His friends, no less exuberant, were equally caught

up. The obscene woman raised and lowered her dress—over and over—her laugh ringing: “Ah-*baha*-ha! Ah-*baha*-ha! Ah-*baha*-ha! Ah-*baha*—” Her friend fell all over her giggling, hauled herself back up, fell all over her giggling, hauled herself back up...

The other two males, having appreciatively high-fived and butted their heads, high-fived, butted their heads, high-fived, butted...

At this point it was really funny, okay? Couldn't have been a cat out there who wasn't halfway to upchucking. It was Saturday night fun, man, spontaneously caught

by a lurching news crew and fed live to regional stations—yet there was absolutely no reason for all the media hoopla until it got freaky. And that's when everybody stopped laughing.

The cops responded first, of course, with a horrified stream of mawkish locals in tow—these five misguided merry-makers were in real danger of police brutality. But the situation couldn't be controlled with manpower or molycoddling. The five were spilling all over one another, rhythmically repeating their shared sequence, and it wasn't humorous at all. Their faces grew red

and contorted as they gasped against an unnatural clockwork; their limbs were seizure-stiff, their eyes bugged and desperate. It was all a mad implosion of thrashing arms and melding voices: “You got-*ha* taste of *bitch* me-ha. You got-*ha* taste of *bitch* me-ha—”

By the time the paramedics arrived the street was a sea of rubbernecks. The cops had to escort the ambulances in. And these guys were no less useless: injections didn't work, restraints were a joke; they couldn't even apply oxygen through all that tussle. The Five were gasping and streaming, frothing and

vomiting...*in rhythm*. The two high-fiving males' skulls were cracked wide and gushing, and *still* their arms jerked up feebly in unison, *still* their lolling heads begged to collide. And the cops, the paramedics, the bystanders; nobody could hold 'em down—wild stuff, man, *wild* stuff. And it was the looniest form of entertainment imaginable to pick it up on that live feed, as the BK5, as they came to be known, were wheeled in on gurneys, strapped down and muzzled by oxygen masks, their purple faces trying so hard to spew as their soaking heads banged up and down and side to side,

up and down and side to side, up and down and up and down and up and down and a story like that gets a brief, but very thorough, run. Viewers got to learn all about the vitals—nicknames, tattoos, probation officers, favorite slash films, etc.—because the heroic BK5, thank our merciful God in all His infinite wisdom, survived.

Nature is the ultimate physician. When their bodies could jerk and foam no longer The Five simply went comatose, woke to an awkward celebrity, and, once they were proven lousy commercial investments, gratefully

slunk out of the limelight.

The initial focus was on ingested pathogens. That Burger King was shut down so the Department Of Health could pose importantly without being interrupted by autograph hounds, by lowriders in limbo, or by any more damned honking old ladies in little green Aspens. Neighbors and doomsayers wanted to know if rap music or the Vice President was the culprit, or if perhaps the Devil Himself, paid minimum wage to hang out a window in a paper hat, was surreptitiously pulling the BK5's strings.

But another theory was going round; a maverick notion, really.

Certain gearheads were disseminating this idea of altered brain activity produced by some kind of deliberate electronic interference, though how such an effect could be implemented only proved grist for mounds of irresponsible speculation. These buttinskies—mainly college students with dreams of internet celebrity—posited a shadowy technophile-vigilante who could remotely cause particularly offensive miscreants to go into quasi-epileptic

seizures, in full view and right at the height of their animalistic misbehavior, repeatedly *looping* their antics so as to publicly and emphatically expose their true natures, thereby prodding all these proliferating leftist apologists into damning them as roundly as we sane folk. Bizarre or not, as a theory it probably made at least as much sense as the pathogenic approach which, to all appearances, was a total bust. They even gave this phantom hero a name, one that evoked his supposed manipulation of players. It caught on quick, and was soon on everyone's lips.

They called him The Maestro.

Anyway, the whole thing probably would have blown over, if not for an uncannily similar episode, three weeks later and not two blocks away.

Rival gangs had spilled onto an indoor miniature golf course at the new Gotcha Goin' Mall. Terrified shoppers stampeded concentrically while two airheads duked it out over a vital piece of plastic turf of no importance whatsoever only thirty seconds prior.

One bozo bit another's tattoo.

The second screamed and flailed his fists.

The first took another bite.

The second screamed again.

A bite and a scream, a bite and a scream—and both arms of the human cesspool broke on their champions like opposing waves.

That, again, was the good-timing part, caught live by a local news crew covering the grand opening of Thundergirl's Dine 'n' Disco. Their cameramen picked up the action just as the looping gangs blew into what director's-chair psychologists describe as *staggered sync*, an erratic-yet-rhythmic vacillating pattern wherein one

group seems to foresee the other's retreat, and vice-versa. The Maestro Detractors claimed this was really just an apparent motion. According to their ideology, the digitally recorded seesawing action, with so many desperately whaling individuals involved, could only be interpreted as choreographed spliced video—video viciously and interactively produced by the growing ranks of Maestro Adherents.

Even the late-night stand-ups didn't joke about this one. It took a riot squad to contain the madness, a major law enforcement presence to control the

perimeter. Tear gas only made the repetitively kicking and wheezing combatants labor for breath as they grappled and rolled about. The course was smashed to rubble in the frenzy.

But officials had learned from the fast-food episode. Emergency crews and disaster specialists created an on-location makeshift hospital. SWAT teams sealed the area. Surgeons, anesthesiologists, and blood donors were whisked into a giant ring around the action. And there they stood, stunned, mesmerized like a tribe of pacifistic Indians around a knot of drunken

cavalrymen. Because in the end that's all anybody could do: stand there with their jaws hanging while thirty-seven gangbangers jerked and wailed and gasped and spewed into the sweet embrace of unconsciousness.

* * *

The whole phenomenon quickly became humongous news. Even though no one *really* expected a recurrence, individuals aching for their fifteen minutes systematically motored the area, videocameras in hand. The Board Of Health taped off the mall for analysis, and got the same reams of nowhere-data as at the now-

famous hamburger stop, but it was all a great giggle for a while there; watching these lugs in space suits lumbering around a sealed-off parking lot with little bitty beakers in their big dufus gloves.

Still, most viewers weren't all that into the aftermath. Legions of complete strangers had discovered a common bond: the unspoken, soul-deep desire for basic human integrity in a society rapidly losing hold. Once-egocentric citizens became instant compatriots, sharing their thoughts and feelings while glued to the breaking news. They perched on the edges of

their sofas and bar stools, stocked up on drinks and munchies, waiting wide-eyed and wondering, like children on the night before Christmas; waiting, waiting, waiting.

Waiting for the Next One.

* * *

Gilbert Flemm had it all worked out.

In a 9 to 5 yellow-light bug stampede, he'd determined, as an electronics grad nauseated by the prospect of applying his talents to some soulless applications firm, to make his living online, at home, in

private, at odds with the bigger picture.

He'd been inordinately successful.

At thirty-two he was, both virtually and literally, master of his own domain.

The shades were always down in Gilbert's tiny roach motel of a Boyle Heights apartment. One side of this groovy bachelor's pad was a garage-heap of miscellaneous electronics hardware patched in to nowhere. Extension cords hung like streamers from hooks hammered into the ceiling, plugs were tangled up in power strips leading to God knows what. The little

bathroom and kitchenette were badlands, practically un navigable due to years of tossing shipping crates, obsolete appliances, and pizza delivery cartons every which way.

The other side of the room is where Gilbert lived. His home-office was a massive cluster of milk crates, monitors, drive housings, and patch bays, all squeezed into a work console produced by a series of squared components casings, everything made perfectly level by a broken desk top. Gilbert had achieved this console environment not by being an artisan or handyman, but

by being a *burrower*. The console came about through the constant *jamming* and *shoving* and *hammering* of stuff into place; the space for his legs was effected by repetitively *pushing* and *kicking* and *kneeing* until he'd made stretch room. Grease, dirt, fly cadavers, and dead skin cells made a perfect mortar. His work chair-bed was a ratty old recliner with a floating horizontal frame, allowing him to recline full-out whenever the pixel pixies had overdusted his eyes. His personal urinal was a funky old pee jug, one of many, *crammed*, *rammed*, and *jammed* under the desk to make room for his naked,

malodorous, scratched-crimson legs. Something of an inventor, he'd devised a peeduct out of a punctured condom wired to a quarter-inch polyvinyl tube trailing into the current jug's punctured-and-wired cap. This way he could take care of vital business without having to ford the lavatory horror.

Gilbert had lots of girlfriends.

Linda Lovelace and Candy Samples were two of his favorites, bygone sweethearts now; looped into some miscellaneous folder or other to make room for recent files. Jenna and Busty and Ginger and Christy; they all

came and went, but a techie's heart is not programmed to be long-broken. A man has work to do.

That work involved the remote debugging of programs, the defragging of drives, the importing and cleaning up of desktops. Viruses were Gilbert's best pals. Smoking out these little virtual critters made a good living possible, working from home, with mouse of steel in one hand and foggy yellow pee tube in the other. Gilbert had never met his clients—transfer of funds was electronic. In this way Gilbert also made payments; to the bank, to Pink Dot, to his landlord

and various electronics outlets. And in this way he drifted along; a retired, sedentary commander in a fetid space capsule, passively sucked into the giving black hole of ever-imploding data, umbilically attached, metaphorically speaking, to a daisy chain of RGB viewscreens, battling aliens for points, trading services for digits, making long, hot, electronic love.

But lately he'd been consumed by a game called Common Denominator. "Lately" could mean any amount of time; Gilbert had no idea of, or interest in, the hour, day, week, month, year, decade,

century...the game could be played singly or with friends, but "friend" is one of the F-words, and anyway a man has work to do. The concept behind Common Denominator is deceptively simple: the gamer sequences characters, sites, and situations; all contributing to perfectly plausible scenarios with perfectly credible culprits and conclusions—which splinter and evolve into slightly less credible culprits...into ramifications of feathered conclusions...into rationale forks and logic back roads...the butler never did it in CD; the butler's just a butler. But for drifting

retired commanders willing to go the distance, the game's an intoxicating mindfuck; a master finds the common denominator in abstractions, in subtleties—in *qualities* rather than appearances. It's not for extroverts.

Gilbert was so wired in he could follow the game on one of six desktop monitors while simultaneously earning a living, ordering Chinese delivered, downloading porn and avant-garde music, shopping on eBay, and monitoring streaming news.

That news, of late, was a major draw, even for a carpal gamer like Gilbert. Those public seizure episodes

had been increasing, both in frequency and fury, for some weeks now. Huge rewards went unclaimed, talk shows hosted prescient callers determined to stammer themselves into oblivion. Scientists, theists, and theorists rolled the dice—but all these players, posers, and pontificators were sooner or later shut down by their own verbosity. Nobody had a clue.

Some of those episodes got really *intense*. Certain combatants had been seriously hurt, a woman and her daughter, innocent bystanders, critically injured in a fray. Unrelated skirmishes and spot-looting were

reported. Also, one gangbanger, seizing in deep shock while impaled on an upright sprinkler, had drowned in his own puke. That very dramatic death, amazingly, was repeatedly broadcast on regular TV as well as over the Internet, to the wailing bereavement of congressmen, televangelists, and suffering soccer moms everywhere. The BK5, dragged out of retirement to plea for peace, were getting plenty of airplay with their ubiquitous rap single, already in the running for Best Song Lyrics. A Christmas album was pending.

Gilbert was singing along right now, partitioning

Common Denominator clues with one hand, balancing his bank account with the other: “Brothahs an’ sistahs,” he croaked, “don’ play da foo’. Homeys an’ hos, ya gots t’ be coo’.” Catchy little fucker. True talent surfaces in the unlikeliest of ponds. And genius will never die: new applications, new technology, new faces were emerging. *Art evolves*: that booty-shaking finger popper was the natural extension of rap’s brilliant violation of vinyl.

And now studios had cleverly used digital looping to capitalize on the BK5’s epileptic claim to fame. Lacking anything resembling an actual instrument, their rough

vocal harmonies (satirized by the straight community as *an, crappela*), were electronically broken up as phasing backing vocals: “Brothahs *an-play* da—homeys *ya gots* t’...” until it was almost as good as Being There.

Gilbert Fucking Flemm had an epiphany!

While the rest of us were grooving, grouching, and googling, he’d subconsciously cross-referenced a number of sources in real time:

1. The BK5 were on a *loop*.
2. The CD characters were repositioning in sync.
3. The televised image of the latest oddity was

crackling in and out due to a glitch in one of the news vans’ transmitters.

4. Said televised image was a melee involving blowhard bikers and barroom boneheads. The location was only a few blocks from Gilbert’s.

5. His police broadcast receiver was cycling; whining, grinding, reacting to some kind of pirate signal. 5a. The signal and melee were related. 5b. The signal’s source was close by, but receding.

And, of course, number 6. “*Yo Homey, Yo,*” the BK5’s celebration of the creative spirit, just had to be the

most godawful piece of crap ever recorded.

Gilbert sat there gaping.

All this anomalous activity was the result of a purposefully broadcast electronic signal! Somebody was, somehow, deliberately causing these seemingly unrelated events to mesh.

Gilbert patched the streaming feed to the police broadcast. The resultant scream almost blew out his speakers. He patched the combined input to an equalizer and manually cut out audible traffic until he had a fairly steady audio line, then adjusted it to screen.

It was all white noise.

In a dream, Gilbert now used his joystick to move the Common Denominator players intuitively, his other hand tweaking the bastard signal.

God in heaven, he'd triangulated!

He stared at his wall monitor for a minute, then, terrified he'd lose the signal, mapped and saved it to disk. He printed this out as a straight hexadecimal graph.

Every particular was established and tabulated; Gilbert didn't need to research the results—he'd found

the common denominator.

He sat straight up. The streaming newscast contained a throbbing hyperlink for civilian-police intercourse.

Almost without thinking, he control-clicked on the link. His condenser mic's icon came up. A canned voice blurted from his house speakers. Gilbert switched to console mono.

“You have reached the Los Angeles Police Department, U-Tip, We Talk Division. This thread automatically links to the State Of California's Wireless Web Archive, and the call may be monitored for your

protection. A live operator will be with you shortly.

If you are an English speaker, please press 1 now. Yo tengo caca en la cabeza para todos no mas por favor—”

Gilbert impatiently pinkied the 1 on his keyboard.

Almost immediately a bored voice came in, “Detective Cummings, LAPD. U-Tip, We Talk. If this is an emergency situation, please dial 911. If this is a non-emergency situation, please dial 1-800-LAPD. If this is an earthquake-related call, please dial 1-800-OHNO. If there are communists under your bed or gays in your closet, please dial 1-800—”

“—ASSHOLES!” Gilbert broke in.

There was a tight pause. “Take a look in the mirror sometime, buddy.”

“No! You don’t understand! He doesn’t like assholes!”

“I’m not crazy about ’em either, okay? *Especially* when they get on an official line and interrupt police business!”

“Listen to me! I play this game called Common Deno—”

“Well, *don’t*—”

“—minator and I was—”

“play *games*—”

“—watching the news—”

“—with *me!*”

“—on the side! It’s not food poisoning or drugs or anything like that. Forget the lab stuff, sir. That’s all bogus. Just pay attention to what’s really going on out there. I mean, don’t bother about the innocent folks who’ve been caught up in the fracas; they’re the good guys. Instead, take an honest look at all these grungy people who’re responsible for the static. And no, I don’t

mean the homeless, and no, I don't mean the mentally disabled: Lord knows they've got enough problems. And I'm not referring to the occasional pocket of tipsy celebrating Lakers fans. I'm talking about these predatory groups of drugged-out, rowdy creeps; hollering obscenities, threatening pedestrians, breaking into shops and homes, destroying personal property. That whole BK5 thing was a perfect example. Rudeness is the common denominator. Flagrant obnoxiousness. Selfishness. Deliberate and aggressive disruption of the innocent ebb and flow. No pathogen can single out

poor ethics in people! This is a matter of umbrage—it's a case of somebody being deeply affronted by rampant indecent public behavior. How do I know this, officer? I know this because *I'm* a decent citizen, one of many starving for a little law and order. If anybody should be aware of this it's you guys. And I mean from the precinct all the way up to the White House. Can't you see it, man? Aren't you people hip to what's going on in our society? The underbelly's been vouchsafed thanks to this topsy-turvy interpretation of civil rights; the cockroaches aren't just adjusting to the light, they're

appropriating it! And now—*finally*—somebody's become so revolted by these scumbags that he's lashing out. Somehow. I don't know the details. But I think it's a blanket thing. It doesn't appear to be anything personal."

A faint click. Now it was like talking in a tunnel. Detective Cummings's voice came back with an undertone of caution. "Who's revolting?"

Gilbert ground his teeth and clenched his fists. It was too late; he was already in. "I don't *know* who it is. All I know is, like I said, the human factor's undeniable."

"And how does your friend accomplish this feat?"

"*I just told you I don't know who it is!* He's using alpha over the ether. I just picked it up. Or maybe it isn't a male. Maybe he's a she; I don't know."

"So tell me, does your shemale friend have a name?"

"I'm trying to be of assistance, for Christ's sake, as a private citizen! Don't be so jaded by your job, sir. Don't just succumb to that orgy out there; not without a fight! Where's your compassion for your fellow man?"

"So. Another Maestro disciple. Or—oh, Lord, can it be? Is it possible I'm chatting with the big cheese

Himself?”

“And I don’t mean your liberal compassion! We’ve got to quit coddling these conscienceless punks and stand together for the betterment of all. But most of all we’ve got to put an end to all this apologizing for hooligans and lowlifes!”

The gentlest ping, hollow as the night. “I want you to understand that the U-Tip, We Talk Hotline is completely confidential. You don’t know me, I don’t know you. Every aspect of your identity is private, and will remain private. So now that we’ve got all that out

of the way, Mr. Flemm, maybe we can talk.”

Gilbert’s thumb jabbed the Escape button. Sweat was creeping from his hairline. His right hand danced on the keyboard while his left hand rolled the mouse. The streaming live inset expanded to full screen. He punched out a sequence; a MapQuest graphic became an overlay. Gilbert reduced the opacity. “Damn.” He transferred the feed to the wall monitor. The resolution was diminished relatively, but that didn’t matter; once he’d configured his GPL to Random, the active elements in the grid translated to pixel groupings very

much like churning dot matrix asterisks. The news scene was a mess. But there were isolated right-angling pixel blotches, like Ms. Pacman in slo-mo, that moved along the streets-grid with mathematical certitude. Order was the common denominator. Gilbert was looking for the anomaly.

There.

One asterisk was chugging along oddly; crisscrossing street sides, doubling back, pausing, moving along, pausing again. Gilbert tagged it: Eleventh and Willoughby. Four blocks away. He popped off his

peter pal, pulled on his shirt and pants, slammed on his boots, jammed out the door.

Deep twilight. Emergency vehicles were zooming for Seventh; plenty of cars were turning in pursuit. It was obvious everyone in the vicinity knew what was up. Gilbert dashed across alleys and yards, hopped fences and cut across drives, finally blowing out onto Eleventh and Willoughby. His emergence must have been a noisy one; lots of pedestrians found it interesting enough to avert their attention from the lights and sirens. One in particular, a hero in dark pants and jacket, immediately

made for a leaning tenement.

Gilbert ran puffing and wheezing; wanting to meet him, wanting to warn him, wanting to praise him, wanting to stop him. He saw the old door swing shut and pop open. It was a fire exit: abused, infested; a rundown hallway for beggars, taggers, hookers, dealers... Gilbert slipped inside and the door slammed behind him. The hall wasn't lit, so he cracked the door. Only an amber street lamp provided any illumination, and that was all of a dim narrow wedge and broken pool. He paused to let his eyes adjust and to catch his

breath.

“Before you take another step, I want you to know that I am armed, and that I will not hesitate to take you down.”

It was impossible to make out features in the dark. There was a strong dab of light on the right earlobe, soft crescents and planes at the hairline. Gilbert addressed that area beside the lobe:

“Look, I'm not a cop, I'm not a stalker, I'm not a bounty hunter. I'm like you, sir. I have respect for the safety and prosperity of my fellow man. I too want

to live in a world relieved of marauding jerkoffs who equate the priceless concept of liberty with a license to get away with all they can. Just being alive doesn't make a person worthy of society; that has to be earned. I know why you're doing what you're doing, and I want you to know I'm not your enemy."

A pause.

"What am I doing?"

Gilbert blew out a lungful of stress. "With your device. With the obnoxious people. I don't blame you...I don't hate you for what you're doing...I...I

admire you."

The figure took a step back. He was now completely obscured by darkness. "Then your timing couldn't be more impeccable."

"What do you mean?"

The dark blew out a sigh matching Gilbert's own.

"I mean this whole thing is moving faster than me. If you've latched on, the authorities can't be far behind.

And I really don't think they share your admiration."

Another pause. "I'm burned out, man. Or sated; I don't know which. So...how'd you find me?"

“I’m IT,” Gilbert mumbled. “I’m hooked in so deep I’ll never get out. There’s a game I’ve mastered called Common Denominator. It kind of forces the gamer to think outside the box. My brain cross-referenced, and I put two and two together.”

“Did you call the cops?”

“Once. On impulse. It was a mistake. Don’t worry; I got out of there right away.”

“You sound like a bright lad. So you know all about WTT.”

Gilbert fidgeted. “Maybe. Initials are all over the

place.”

“Wireless Trace Technology. A War Department development passed down to the police. If you tapped in for a nanosecond you’re tagged. Home, phone, credit, friends...”

Gilbert swallowed guiltily. “That’s a new one.” He licked his lips. “Sir, I want you to know...I want to make it absolutely *clear* that I took *great* pains...I’m certain I wasn’t followed. And as far as anything electronic goes, I’m clean. So, unless they can put a trace on a man’s heartbeat...”

“Not just yet, they can’t. How much do you know about my operation?”

“I know you’re working in alpha. I know you’re jamming autonomic activity over the ether. I know the signal cycles in the human brain. I know it’s directional. I know the field’s variable. I know...I...I know the wavelength.”

A casual movement, and an arm rose out of the darkness: brown suede jacket and black leather glove. Nested in the gloved palm was an object not much larger than a thumb drive, plump in shape, with an

inch-long bulbed antenna. A red diode blinked twice.

“Catch.”

Gilbert did. It was disappointing, somehow: a crude thing of tin and staples. He slipped it into his trousers pocket.

The arm vanished. “Take that toy and tear it apart when you get home. I know you will; you’re already dismembering it in your mind. I’m out of here.”

“But what you’re doing,” Gilbert tried. “I think...I think maybe people will get the picture. About ethics, about morality, about God’s plan for a dignified and

caring humanity...”

The pause was so long Gilbert began to feel he was alone. Finally he whispered, “Sir?”

“Now is not the time,” the darkness replied, “to wax philosophic. The world is pumping out idiots even as we speak. We’re tagged, you and I. That thing in your pocket’s a joke—an ethicist’s objection in a hedonist’s courtroom, a forgotten blush in a government-sponsored whorehouse.” He sucked in a huge breath, let it out with a long sigh. “By empirical knowledge your God is not a Grand Designer, nor a brimstone-

hurling Demon, but a sardonic Imp with infinity on His hands. So you guys just forget all about your ‘Maestro’, okay? The last thing the world needs is another puppeteer.” The voice faded down the hallway: “Right now people are being assaulted, insulted, raped, robbed, ridiculed. Swindled...betrayed...rejected...abused...”

Gilbert stood in the dark forever. He could hear his heart pounding; one knobby little traveler in the great human stampede. When he could bear it no longer he eased open the door and slipped out into the night.

“Hello, Mr. Maestro.”

Gilbert didn't look around. "You're wasting your time. He got away."

"Oh, no, he didn't. He is, as of right now, in custody, and if all my years as an official witness have taught me anything, he's looking at life without parole."

Gilbert's jaw dropped. He turned. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about assault and battery." Cummings grabbed Gilbert's wrist and swung him around. "I'm talking about lying in wait." The cuffs were snapped tight. "I'm talking about reckless endangerment and

carrying a concealed weapon."

The cuffs bit deliberately. Gilbert snarled with the pain. "*What weapon?*"

Cummings patted him down with his free hand, tore the unit out of Gilbert's front pocket. "I believe it's called Exhibit A, asshole!"

Gilbert's whole face shook with horror. "No!"

"Yes!" Cummings slammed him against the wall before dragging him around the building's side to the ticking unmarked car. "That could have been *my* wife in that crowd, dickface, that could have been *my*

daughter!”

“You’ve got the wrong guy!” Gilbert gasped. “I was just talking to him, for Christ’s sake, but he took off. I don’t know where he is!”

“That’s okay. What’s important is *we* know where he *isn’t*. And where he *isn’t* is in the apartment of one Gilbert Going-to-Hell Flemm, whose transmitted signals were tracked by specialists hired by LAPD, whose computers and peripheral equipment were just seized as evidence, whose hard-copy files are even now being pored over *with attitude*. You see, Flemm,

your victims could’ve been those specialists’ wives and daughters too. I sure do hope you like it doggy-style, Gilbert.”

“Wait!” Gilbert dropped to his knees. Before they hit the cement he was dragged back up by the cuffs, almost separating his arms from their sockets. His face was slammed against the rear windshield.

“I won’t wait! You selfish assaultive freak, I *can’t* wait!” Gilbert felt the cuffs unlocked, heard them drop on the asphalt. He turned, shaking head to foot.

Cummings had the unit in his gloved right hand.

“You know what, Flemm? Sometimes even the canniest of predators can get careless. For instance, one might be trying to zap a detective, and not realize he’d accidentally pointed the zapper the wrong way; right back at himself! And if there weren’t any witnesses, and no prints but his own, there’d be nothing other than that poor detective’s sworn testimony. After all, it’s only a little tube with a button in the middle; easy mistake to make. And that would be a shame, man, just a crying shame. Raise your arm!”

“But I...”

“*Raise your arm!* That’s right. Now move your thumb up above your hand. Good. Bend your thumb, at a right angle. Feel familiar, Flemm?” Cummings aimed the unit right between Gilbert’s bugging eyes. “Say goodnight, cocksucker, over and over and over and over.”

My First Day in Toronto

DS MAOLALAÍ

jetlagged and walking; first time
in Toronto. a straight line up Bloor St—
I didn't want to get lost. new city — this
was direct from my hostel:
and walking and looking
around. and a park. that
was there. and a band-

stand in the park. it was
beautiful. my firstday
in Toronto. hell — first
in Canada after an over-
night flight. these teenagers
playing music — they welcomed
me. and people about
sitting like wildflowers
on unmaintained grass —
they welcomed me.

bottles of wine opened.
bottles of beer. I didn't
know anything about anything.
just August sunlight
lying on me. someone passed
me a beer — I drank it. didn't
have a job, didn't have
an apartment. didn't make
conversation — jetlag
precluded it.

flattened myself
against the earth
as it spun below the sky
like shirt being pressed by an iron.

Judy Garland's Mama

SCOTT T. HUTCHISON

pumped her tiny daughter with stimulants for the long shoots, lulled her into little girl dreams with tabs of sedation at the end of pushy, scheduled days. But before that: Ethel suckled all three of her daughter-princesses on whirlwind travel, vaudeville performances--nurturing them with promises of twisting body-harm for lackluster execution in the final numbers.

And Judy Garland—no longer Frances Gumm, age nine--soon found herself, studio-peppy and starry-eyed, with her foot in the showtime door; Ethel's pills helped Judy fight off the hours of moving picture fatigue and the grim hands of the bosses. The girl stuck with what she knew, learning the hardest routine: smiling as if she were in control of all the critic's adoration. Barbiturates, amphetamines--wine and roses slipped her friendship like a mickey, while a mama's love set Judy on course with soup diets, coffee, a cigarette-thinness that made MGM Big Men half-satisfied with the product. Mama endorsed: a few brief stretches of fitful dozing in the studio lot hospital, followed by seventy straight hours of razzle-dazzle. That's how success arrived: with mobs of money paid into two-name accounts. Ethel smiled inwardly, driving her girls. She pushed her youngest

up, into glorious celebrity and life-long patterns dotting the sky of big lights and total darkness. Finally, Ethel slapped her fervent attentions exclusively on the one, letting it be known to all who listened for the wisdom of maternal judgement: Ethel had a knack for the taste and chew involved in the changing motions of the times—her Judy-child, a burgeoning woman, possessed a charged flavor superior to dull Mary Jane and vanilla Virginia. Years blurred by, high in their taxing sparkle.

Sometimes Judy's hands began shaking, but she'd ignore the threats, the signs and the shrewdness, reminding herself of the power in family and wishes, thinking back to the ground-down heel-toe metal of her polished shoes she wore as she emerged from the side-swiping wings of vaudeville houses; she'd recall her devoted sisters—the three of them untethered for a short tap and pirouette, playing at scant distances from their keeping-time mama, delivering cute, happy acts: corny jokes, backstage bumps, endless evenings of song-and-dance stretched out like midnight road trips. Sometimes Judy became a smaller girl once again, lying on a backseat or a taut cot, with the sleepy fog of miles whipping by like 35 mm rolls of overheating silver, bases, emulsions, negative images, the phasing separations of her mother's cinematic change.

Day 86
ANTHONY ACRI

JABBER-WONKY.

A poem in a cartoon of LEFT OVER PIN UP GODDESS, Patty the Bunny, set against black rock, in the dilapidated New Amsterdam. She holds a cartoon bomb, ala Mad when I was a littleboy, that says ABC on it.

From the Mad like cartoon: A bad day at Black Rock.

As I may be running out of paper, THUS IS LIFE IN THE VESTIBULES OF BIDEN'S PYRITE DOORS OF FOOLISHNESS, and may either have to go myself to a place was calling the inferno, as early as when heard last year they were infested with Cooties. If not me, or send a brother who's been our only life line to the outside, which has already sad and filled with recitations and recriminations, me as guilty feeling as I have ever been.

T'WAS POLYPEMUS AND THE SLIMY TOADS/

DID GORE AND BARTH GIMBLE HIT THE DICK YORK GROVES/

DID MITZI SPECAILS AND ESSO STOVES/
DID SWATT'TED WERE THE REST IN GRAVES.
BEWARE THE JABBERING WINKS MY SON?/
THE JEWS THAT BITE/THE IN-LAWS WHO SNTACH'ED/
BEWARE THE BROKE CAWED PLUMED BIRD, MY SON/
AND SHUN THE MUGGSIAN BARDERSNATCH.
HE TOOK HIS KING LEAR'S SWORD IN HAND/
A LONG TIME THE COSELLIAN FOE HE SAUGHT/
SO RESTED HE BY THE ROLAIDS -R-O-L-A-I-D-S-TREE/
AND HE SAID WELL BE BACK AFTER THESE MESSAGES, IN THOUGHT.

AND IN KORMAN-ESQUE THOUGHT,

HE STOOD/THE JABBERWONKCY,

WITH EYES MADE OF CATHODE RAYS/

HE CAME A'NANCING THROUGH THE DADDY MADE FOR WOODS.

AND GUNSMOKED AS IT CAME.

1-2!1-2! AND THROUGH AND THROUGH!

THE BRAND X, T'ZONED BLADE WENT SNIKCERS BARS/

HE LEFT IT DEAD AND WITH ITS MEAT HEAD, HE WENT HAVE GUNNING FARS.

AND HAVE THOU KILLED THE CYCLOPS WINK...?/

COME TO MY ARMS, DEAR PEANUT GALLEY BOY/

OH JULIE NUMARISH DAY, GOOBER, GOULET!

HE CANNED HIS SPEGGETTIOS JOY/

T'WAS BRILLO AGAINST THE SLIMY SHEETS/

DID MUDD AND SEVERIDE SO SPOON OUT WHEY/

ALL MIMSEY WERE THE BORON GROVES/

AND THEM IN MOANING CRECHES NOT HEARD THIS DAY.

END OF POEM.

CBS Has just said, that Person to Person, or whatever that show is on CBS late night in place of Kojacks, is going on a forced midsummer's sabbatical. Do they not know, the clowns of Mars, that they may come back but that they are through...? Recently, on a channel repeating on a loop the old Tonight shows before Minstrelsy Drunks did think themselves Steve Allen, there was a repeat of the great Virgil of my writing, Gore Vidal,

leading me through the fissures and bulges of hell thought since i was a boy, with Johnny then on, and both were shocked, Johnny allowing for a slip of his mask of noncommittal hood to show, and he was shocked that some DEMOCRATS, UNCLIDIED ONE IN PARTICULAR, democrats were actually, in that year of 1981, voting for REAGAN's infernal, DESTREBALE, MONEY GRUBBING MILITARY build up that the Soviets were stupid and medieval and duchy and paranoid enough, TO WISH TO match, CASHING in THEIR FALL, and there was a boomerang squallor not too far from Kennebunkport, for the rest of us anyway. He, Gore, was like the Roman barrister Poet cool and unchanged, and nonplussed, as I was a 15 year old jesuit student a;leray falling to rags, but alas, even still enough of a Jesuitical student to think a Pogo entice and interpretation of meeting enemies along the Scarsboro diets fairs. The decency of ghosts, I thought once, as wonder as this new found death threatening queen of late night smiles and laughs it up with Madama Pillozzz, if she remembers, not too far from the surface, when he was always making fun of her YENTA LAUGHTERS, when he was night;ly, or is it daily, never, ever NIGHTLY, I take it, when he was indeed tossing raw meat at a different side of the theater he has now, like so many pretend he didn't dance for their needed to be always on television orvals. WHEN HE WAS TOSSING NEEDED RAW TELEVISION CITY MEAT AT A DIFFERENT AUDIENCE, AS HE EMBODIES THE PEPSI GENERATIONS NEED TO BE ON THE MAGICAL WIRE AND BOX KNOWN AS CYCLOPS TELEVISION. Daniel Shoor, or maybe Paddy himself, awaits on Mount Purgatory. Once, we were adul;ts, as the great Paul Mooney

said, now peraturans smiling with knives making paper cuts on rancid silly comedy nightly television dragged and dragooned as poly sci, co ed bullshits. Gal in New York Publishing was admiring of me for calling his Lesbain Drag trashing Vestal Rachel, BEFORE HE EVEN THOUGHT OF IT. How did I know...? The ghost of Dick York told me so. Don't make the same mistake that Fanny Flagg did.

A note:

A year later than this poem, after the Pretorium was indeed stolen, hoodwinked, fensed, whatever, by the clowns at MIDNIGHT, IN FACT, PARAMOUNT, NOT GETTING THE JOKE, SHOWED all outfits brightest stars, as grappling with scaling the i guess mountain that that its hollywood stables have always prided to show. In the end of the commercial, show telling a truth when was Nicclo said, it meant the exact Opposite, Steven Colbert, the new cross between Bishop Sheen and Love that Bob, live from Golgotha, or Green Acres, wherever, goes and had a summit meeting with of all people, Captain Piccard. He, when i was a lad, was more famous for before going into space as an white Aneas, was actually the actor who played the story of hatchet man Sejanus, in an Anglican dragged I Claudius, which I read when it was still Suetonius. It was a tale of a tragedy lost even before Willie or the BBC could get to it.

bug-bite

ABBIE HART

this is when it is acceptable to claw at yourself
like only a wounded animal knows how. sink
nails into flesh and pull. the trees are rustled
and not by the wind. sink further. there is a
ghost train in this forest and i hear it some
times. i am drawing blood. it is on the ground
on my hands oh god look at the sky today.
ain't that beautiful.

active voice

ABBIE HART

walking into my job at the university with pockets filled with gold wrapped chocolate. i offer my boss one. she declines. my hands are covered in melted chocolate. my face. my hair. i am cutting exactly nine inches of my hair off. i am not peeling my skin off. i am not in the habit of grieving. i am not in the habit of grieving you. i am covered in my own hair. i am in the habit of that.

walking into trader joe's and spending \$95.82. walking across the road at downing and florence st. like a deer in headlights. i am a possum and this is my time to shine. i am counting down the days until i can become

roadkill. i am in the habit of getting hit by cars. have been since i was 13 in the carpool line on crutches.

walking into my job at the university again to sell my soul against a blank wall where my face used to be for exactly one (1) slice of carrot cake. they dressed me up as the mascot last week. i don't know what more to say about that. the suit smelled like someone vomited in it, and i was about to join them. you asked me if you made me feel empty and i told you i cried so hard i vomited. vomiting is an emptying, if you think about it hard enough. i had to leave after that. i know you watched me. i am in the habit of knowing.

walking into my \$9 end table with its \$9 ghost again.
her name is fran. my leg hurts.

walking into your building at 12am and walking out
of it again.

and walking out of it again.

and still coming back.

North Hollywood Elegy

GREG BECKMAN

Lankershim Boulevard was better
when Virda took me to the
Jewish Council Thrift Store
to buy me an out-of-date
Writer's Market, and I looked up
at her against the naked fluorescent
tube lights, and wanted to write
a story that would make her rich
and me famous
so that we wouldn't have to shop
at the Jewish Council Thrift Store
again.

*

There was once a time —
you'll have to trust me —
when Dad would write notes
for cigarettes and liquor,
and off I'd go to Dales Jr.

And then if I was fast,
he'd give me a sip.
It burned all the way down.

Probably how I got so good at track.

*

“I want you to stay away
from that guy upstairs.”
Old Shirley's hair was frizzier
than usual. She held a glass.
“Something's not right there.”

“Okay, I will,” as I walked
past her window
down the driveway
out onto Oxnard

remembering how he
held me to his chest
and showed me I was happiness.

Snap

RON PULLINS

I got this summer job because the woman who works for my dad is married to this guy who rented space in his backyard for trailers. It turned out the boss of the outfit paving the highway this summer rented one of his spaces. I was too young for the job, but it's who you know, isn't it?

I was sixteen and didn't know about making asphalt any more than I knew about the truth about women, but I learned pretty quick how to operate a shovel to feed dirt into the asphalt machine, and the guys I worked with filled me in about women.

#

I found myself at lunch one hot summer day sitting around with the older guys in the crew of — Hightower, Rocky, Sylvester, Joe and Hightower who ran the asphalt machine. Since no women worked there, it's natural for the guys to talk about them. Not knowing much, I was glad to discover the frightening truth.

#

Hightower always brought a tuna sandwich for lunch. He eats tuna every day. Pretty easy stuff to make, I guess, and he seemed to like it. He lived alone.

“Why you always make tuna?” Rocky asked him. Rocky

always brought two corn dogs. It's so hot out here Rocky didn't have to heat his corn dogs up. He left them in the rear window of his car and by lunch time they're plenty warm, he said. My mom fixed me Spam. I could eat Spam morning, noon and night. Bread, butter, and a slice of Spam keeps me going.

"It's not always tuna," Hightower said.

"Tomorrow you'll have another tuna," Rocky said. "You always do." Rocky wasn't mean. He just liked to stir stuff up, make things interesting. He always got around to talking about women.

"You oughta get a woman," Rocky said. "She'd make you ham."

Sometimes Rocky latches on to a thing and won't let go.

"I might make ham tomorrow."

#

These guys never explained anything to me. Maybe they thought I know stuff. Maybe they thought my dad had told me what dad's are supposed to tell their kids. He hadn't. Anyway, they didn't keep anything secret. They probably thought I would be lucky they let me hang around. I listened and went along, taking it all in. I'm only sixteen, after all, eager to figure things out.

#

Rocky asked Joe, "What you eating that's so good?"

Joe was quiet. He's married. He always spent lunch just sit-

ting and eating, then he'd lean back and sleep until someone kicked his shoe and woke him up. Today he was eating fried chicken like he'd never had fried chicken before.

"My woman always makes me something good," Joe says.

"A man needs a woman to cook for him," Rocky says.

"Otherwise all he'll get for lunch is tuna."

"I like tuna," Hightower says. "I don't need a woman to make it."

#

"I ain't had tuna for a long time," Sylvester said, breaking the silence. Sylvester didn't say much. He shoveled sand. I shoveled silt. "I'll trade you a tuna for one a mine."

"You got peanut butter 'n jelly again?" Hightower asked.

"Sylvester, you gotta be sick of peanut butter 'n jelly. That the only kind of sandwiches you ever get."

"I never get tired a peanut butter 'n jelly," Sylvester said.

"A change of pace is a good now and then," Rocky said.

"Like with a woman."

See, they always got back to women.

Rocky gave that laugh he gives when he's saying something he probably ought not a said. Hightower chuckled as he stared at his sandwich. They didn't mind talking about food, but they'd rather be talking about women. I could tell. Hightower ate his tuna. Joe closed his eyes as he gnawed on a chicken leg. They were no doubt thinking about the women who made their lunches, or not.

#

“You drinking milk?” Rocky said, turning to me. He poked at me as he changed subjects. Rocky liked to tease, and I put up with it, being the youngest of the crew. “I bet you never had a beer.”

I always brought a thermos of milk. I liked milk.

“Milk’ll grow tits on you,” Rocky said. He laughed. “You getting tits?”

“Really?” I said.

Now I looked at him. I had never heard that before. There’d been a lot going on with my body these days, so nothing’d surprise me.

“Better’n that diet coke you drink,” Joe said.

Joe stuck up for me. He nodded at Rocky’s diet coke.

Rocky guzzled a couple of cokes down everyday at lunch.

“That sweetener they put in there,” Joe said. “That’ll shrivel up your dick.”

“Coke don’t shrivel up a dick,” Rocky said.

“It does the way you drink it,” Joe said. “Go on. Let’s see it. I bet it’s all shriveled up.”

#

All this talk about women, well, that was a lot for a kid to take in. My dad never really said a peep to me about women.

“No...,” I said. “I don’t do that. I don’t ask my dad anything.”

”Of course not, What’s your daddy gonna say?” Rocky

said. "You sitting there in that car, you and some little chick, rubbing her titties, she all ready, you say you got to get to a phone so you can call up your daddy and ask him which titty is the one that gets them hot?"

"I don't do that," I said.

"Cause you know rubbing one tittie gets them excited," Rocky went on, "while the other titty gets them so hot they'll do anything you want. She down on her back, her legs spread, and you got to get to a phone to call your daddy."

"What?"

"....saying, Daddy, Daddy, which titty do I feel to get them so hot they'll let me do it...? Right titty or left?"

Everyone at lunch held back their laughter. I didn't ever

ask my dad about things like that. I don't think he would even know.

"I'd never touch a woman there," I said. I took a bite of Spam. "How does it work, anyway? The left one or the right one?"

#

"Bet you never got ahold of no snap pussy," Rocky said. He nodded to the others like he knew all about it.

"I bet that boy don't know nothing," Hightower said to the other guys. Hightower stuffed the last of his sandwich into his mouth. Lunch was over. Rocky took a last swallow of his beer, then crushed the can.

"Got ahold of what?" I asked. I almost took the last swig

of my milk, but instead I put the cork back on the thermos.

“No, I don’t believe the boy knows about that,” Rocky said. “He wouldn’t have encountered such a thing, kid that he is. He wouldn’t know about women, especially not about snap pussy.”

“You think we ought to tell him?” Hightower asked. He was talking to the other guys like I wasn’t there.

“God, yes,” Rocky said. “No one wants a surprise when you’re in the middle of doing your business.”

Hightower shook his head and looked at me with pity.

“What you talking about?” I said.

“He’s probably never been with a woman,” Hightower said.

“He’ll get those titties working one day, in there humping,

doing his little thing... There’s good lookin’ women in this town.....”

“That’s for sure. Wished I was a few years younger....”

“I don’t....”

“See, the poor boy don’t know nothing. He’s mighty lucky she’s not got him already and never let go.”

They were all picking up their lunch scraps as they got ready to work.

“What don’t I know?”

It was like they are going to leave without telling me what I didn’t know.

“Probably better he don’t know.” Rocky paused. Then looked at me. “Well, see, some women, down there, they got

these extra muscles....”

“Down where?” I asked. I was a little scared, like they’re packing up lunch before telling me something everybody is supposed to know.

“Muscles men don’t know about.....” Rocky said. “And teeth.”

“Teeth? Where?”

“Things you got to know,” Sylvester said. Even Sylvester, not much older than me, knew this stuff.

“Yep, and teeth,” Hightower says. “You’re there, humping away, thinking you’re lucky, your eyes closed and she crying out, doing your business....”

Oh, yessum,” Rocky says, “doing your business right

there....”

“And she yelling and a-wiggling around, and shouting out...,”

“Shouting out, Oh, boy! My man! Take me now! Don’t quit! Oh, no! Don’t quit....”

Rocky paused.

“And then you’re done.”

“You think you’re done. You all ready to quit and lie back now and have a smoke.. But she ain’t done.”

I don’t smoke, but I see myself lying back, smoking. Done.

“But no, sir. She ain’t done.”

“She got them muscles.”

“And them teeth.”

“And she got you. You can’t lie back. You still there. Oh, she got you, and she say, ‘You ain’t quitting now.’”

“Can’t quit....”

“You think you are finished, and she say, ‘No, you ain’t finished. You ain’t finished until I finished.’”

“That’s a woman for you.”

“And, no, you ain’t finished, no sir.”

“And you deliver what you got, and you ready to be done, yes, sir, but you’re not done.”

We have cleaned up the area and are walking to the funnels. Hightower and Rocky are in front, leaning together, talking, but talking loud enough I can hear, and so can all the other guys following right behind me.

“And she say, ‘You ain’t going nowhere, boy, not now, not yet, not until I say.’”

“She not finished.”

“And you ready to pull out.”

“And she say, ‘I ain’t done.’”

“No,” and then Rocky stopped and looked me in the eyes.

“That’s when she clamp down.”

“Clamp down?”

“With those teeth.”

“Teeth?”

“The teeth we told you about.”

“She wants you to stay put, keep going, until she’s finished. She’s exercising her snap pussy, boy. Those teeth sink in

and you stay put. Till she finished. And she ain't finished until she's satisfied. And that may be in a minute, or it may be five minutes, or five hours, or not until the sun comes up, cause she got the snap pussy locked on you, and she got you."

"The snap pussy." The guys all shook their heads like that's that truth.

#

We soon got back at work, me ready to shovel more dirt, and Hightower turned to me and said, "I don't suppose your daddy told you about all that yet," Hightower said.

I didn't say anything.

"That's what friends are for, so a man finds out things before they happen," Hightower said. "A man got to be care-

ful. You go fooling around with that right tit, next thing you know, snap pussy....."

He gave me this smile before he pulled his goggles down over his eyes. His face was all grey, but his mouth was wet from lunch, so there's a dark red circle around it.

#

The trucks lined up for asphalt. Joe down there waved his arm like a flustered duck, moving trucks along. Hightower fired up the asphalt machine so he could fill up trucks who take it to repave the highway. I shoveled dirt down the funnel, feeling more and more like a man who knew things.

#

I never asked my dad about women. He never talked

about such things. He probably figured I was too young for stuff like that. The rest of the summer I stayed away from girls, though, easy enough to do after a hard day's work shoveling dirt. I go home, wash up, eat what's for dinner, then get in my car and drive around with my buddies until we run out of beer and weed.

In the summer the girls I know stay home nights, but I worry about when school starts. I been getting nightmares.

Emily, Wherever, Unclean, But I Still Miss Those Legs

PATRICK MCGINTY

We spoke of walls from here to home,
of yellow paint peeling from every corner
of every ceiling, of bile and of plaster,
though neither of us came from a
broken home,
and it was

You, godless,
Savage,
Pushed onto a bus with books
To pass the time,
Pushed by your parents
For the ten or twenty-minute ride
From the comfort
Of photographs
And magazine cut-outs
Taped above your bed,
Before you purged
And before I begged.

You, unexpected,
Blue-eyed and blonde
Who agreed that God shouldn't get any credit,
Who understood and embraced the thirteenth step,
Who knew the thirteenth step,
Who never bothered to choose
Between six feet
Or a push-off,
Who said "fuck anonymity",
And gave us your lids in group meetings,
Steel-chair circles,
Wanting to watch the motions
Of the sun from park bench,
Who saw choirs,

Who called me Choir Boy,
Who turned to masochism,
Who made me sit cross-legged
Across from you and your brazen black
Skirt and knee-high boots.

You, the last one
to high secrets at our table,
Plastic and paper,
Complimenting under-eye lines,
Calling them “mystique”--

You, prophet,
Juglans Regia,
Though your hands never clasped,
Owning mistakes with detox vomit
Aside an inpatient bed you shared,
Who shared the view from twenty-one;
Static, the view from twenty-one,
Laughing with sunken cheeks
At sunken cheeks,

Who burned for new avenues,
Who burned for familiar boulevards,
Who burned from the inside
At cracks and prayers
From anyone to anyone,
For anything above,
Who talked enough for two
Who thanked yourself for the wheel,
For the pyramids, for the electric
Energy that lit the hallways,
Who talked enough for us,
Thankful that we found the best way
To bury the dead,
Who sang praises for the sake
Of singing praises,
Because, only, we found a way to stay hooked,
Fashioning non-hypodermic, hidden hooks
Pressed into Indian beads,

You, who told me about Williams,
Who put your name across my neck,

Who called me out on shooting for Brando,
Who bullshit,
Who taught me about state lines and Cadillacs,
Asking who deserved the body,
Who skipped out against regulations
To attack vodka like Saigon,
Who whispered lightheartedly
About the lie Townes designed,
That girls preferred scars and,
Through glittered gloss, admitted
Without hesitation,
Who talked along polished wood.,
Starting slow like Ali
Before catching Houdini in the gut,
Who taught me new games with one jack
In an alley with short-sleeves,
Who took a six as a gift
And left it on the dashboard,
Who traversed alleys and sang folk songs
In cemeteries, Cash, Hardin, and so was I
From time to time,

Who wept when they closed The Whiskey
But never at a funeral
(nobody weeps for ashes),
Who put fresh, polished pink
Toenails on a trigger cliff-side
To see what it felt like to get as close
As you can before pulling out a barrel
Smearred with lipstick,
Who painted eyelids to look like Edie,
Glazed and shaded,
And never aged
As far as I can tell.

You, who got off on assumptions,
And braced with tight shoulders,
Both arms around a plastic tray,
Who refused to give me your name
And spoke in color-coded vowels and cracks,
Who kept your mouth shut
Until we got in the car and you dropped
Laughter on the faux-leather passenger seat,

Who knew latex and broomstick stories
That you swore were true,
And for lightning to strike and
You showed me your mother's note
As the diary of an atheist aware of what's waiting,
Who told me to take it to heart and hell is always there
But torment can make you cum,
Who recited Cohen and called Da Vinci a fag,
Who knew about amyl and why it worked so well,
Who told me to loosen up too,
Who knew hot-rails and watched white turn to vapor,
Who told stories of China White and thought it
A brilliant break-out,
Who preferred vinyl,
Who preferred to stare into indigenous eyes
And say the first fake think that trickled from Zarathustra,
Who embodied the East Coast
Wet dreams, and knew Babylon and Zion
And burned my only copy of the Bhagavad-Gita,
Who wanted me to be Lenny Bruce when I wanted
A pock-marked face,

Who said Liston and Frazier should have won,
And he could throw a punch but couldn't take a bullet,
And even Elvis was up for that,
Who wanted the Nile black with ink,
Who wanted to ransack every vessel,
Who wanted to be Hauser, Genie, Caliban,
Feral,
Undo the leashes of language,
Unlearn communication and community,
Take a wayward stance between torches and arches,
Cut off the finger of the boy in Holland
Who kept the ocean back,
Who hated him for wanting the city dry
And wanting us to be dry,
Who told me blood looks better
Before it coagulates,
Who wanted the warmth to drip from limbs.

You, who wanted to panic
And scurry from bed sheets,
To follow rats to higher ground,

Who thought the sun could only show seasons and count down,
And the moon-- tidal shifts,
Who never gave a fuck about cycles and shifts,
Who knew that god began with overgrown breasts,
Who saw Willendorf and spit on concrete,
Protesting the painted walls of Xibalba,
Who installed neon signs downward with “Live Nude Girls”,
Bright green,
Who believe the feathered didn't know about visions after days
Without food or sleep,
Who saw shadow men creeping across the walls,
Hoping to catch flesh with closed eyes,
Without sheets across feet for protection,
Who knew the institutions as well as I did,
And offered the same flesh,,
Who showed me ways to push and pull,
Who asked for chords but never bothered to listen,
Who wanted a background soundtrack
For background actions,
Who quoted Waits about sixteen shells,
Who didn't know I knew the same lines,

Who begged to change the station
On the long drive to Delaware,
Who touched my thigh once
And asked “long and thin or short and fat?”,
Who held the blade like a brush against the glass table,
Who climbed the fire-escape to the rooftop
To watch headlights shimmer above the stars,
On an even keel with the monoliths of Baltimore,
Who kissed me once,
But only once,
Out of anger,
Who watched me drown in Kentucky Tea,
Who left me stranded in a parking lot outside of Davidsonville,
Somewhere near 50 or 97,
Who asked me not to call,
Who called me at three in the morning,
Who begged into the cell to get down to Virginia,
Who cursed amphetamine but stayed up for six days
Spinning and waving the same ways to tell the same stories,
Telling me to stop repeating myself,
Who would say the same now while tracing

Lines on my face with a nicotine finger,
Who stayed stuck under the academic desks
Of fevered dreams,
Perched atop a peak in Darien,
But never silent.

Who I find blue,
Floating through the fever,
Floating in the Atlantic,
Blue in the moonlight
But not bloated--

Never bloated.

While the Dragon Sleeps

RON SANDERS

Now the long drive is over. The summit is ours.
Below, a harlequin sprawl marks the sweet spread of home.
This is equipoise: snuggled, facing, in Mulholland's arms.

I can melt in her eyes, and she in mine. And,
Though lovers be children, the darkness, the silence
Are benign. Magicians, we vanish in blankets and springs.

The wheels are aligned. Gears mesh and grind.
Perfume, colluding, allies with the musk of cologne,
Thrilling the senses, filling the cab, till only the vista breathes.

Time heaves. The basin sighs, settles—

In the pale of the moon, the city at night is a great, sleeping beast.

The red jewels of taillights are glimmers in his dream.

Ah, sentience! Behind the wheel I have wings,
My course is the broken line. In my arm I have one
Whose wings have been pinned. Like moths to flame we fly.
Light boggles, light binds, light beckons from lampposts
Where bright sentries swing their globes past the windshield
Like pearls on a string. *Hush*—she is sleeping;
Her breathing a drug, a soft, seductive song.
Each breath is in rhyme, is in time with the rhythm
Of traffic like passing sighs.
The signals have fetched us home,
Dead on the beat of the dragon's pulse.

The chrysalis is shed!
Budding gods are we all, in the splendor of our kind;
Our very eyes are stars, our minds are rapt with light.
In this luster we emerge to leave our legacy behind.
A butterfly takes wing
While the dragon sleeps tonight.



PHILIP KOBYLARZ

Sometimes Above Clouds

MARY A. TURZILLO

Sometimes I am high above
brittle cold and without sorrow
knowing you are arrowing downstream in the foam
eyes closed, your ka gone, arms bound so you may
cut faster through the rapids
and I am cold because the stream is far away
and the stream will be there forever
and we were just a few miles of it
turbulent
but far away now
and the clouds gather below
and I can no longer see you
or the stream.

And sometimes I am inside the stream
and it is hot July and the stream is breaking us.
I lose my grip on your living hand
struggling to grasp you again
by arm or neck
but you are carried away
and I am angry you didn't try harder
to keep hold of me,

and you are swept away
and I am screaming
the hammering of rocks will not end.
You are gone
and the waterfall comes battering
rending our bond
breaking your body
and I wonder if your pain
before you plunged down final cataract
was less bearable than mine,

and I know I will be sometimes far above
that clouds will move between me and the stream
like snow, like the empty mind of death
and I wonder if your soul
is also far above
where I cannot find it ever
while your body lies
on the rocks below
broken.

The Lunatic is on the Cross

M.P. STRAYER

I was working nights at a grocery store
and it was summer and my apartment
was always hot.

I had come to a rough patch
in the path of my life:
in the preceding three years
there had been over a dozen deaths
in my microcosm (in fact I had ceased counting
because it started to feel obscene): each time
the news striking me like a gavel,
chipping me away
until
it seemed I no longer felt anything at all,
no sorrow but a kind of numb exhaustion
and I began to wonder if, perhaps,
something vital inside
had, at last,
broken.

The latest was an old friend named Lindsay
who, at the age of thirty-two, had drunk
herself into organ failure, slipped
into a coma
and been taken off life support
shortly after.

She was dead three days
the morning H. came over
and brewed us a pot
of her special mushroom tea.

“You are not going to work today,” she said,
her blue eyes looking at me
through the lenses of her glasses
as she handed me a steaming mug.

So I called out sick
and we drank our tea
and blew up my inflatable bed
and took off our clothes
and laid down in the living room,
kissing, caressing,
sweating in the heat and listening
to rock n' roll while
we waited for it to kick in.

In time it did.

And we giggled and petted and twined
through the steady, gentle climb,
as the walls leaf-rippled and the music rang
and that bouncing rubber bed became
like our own little island
in some vast sphere: sea or sky:
and we held hands at the summit
and whispered in each other's ears:

Breathe.

That afternoon it was hotter in my apartment
than outside. So H. drew us a cool bath
and got in
and I slipped in after her,
the water like silk
against my fevered skin
and we got to kissing again
then touching
and then she was in my lap
and I was inside her with
her long thighs squeezing my sides
as she leaned back
and back
rolling her hips
as rolling wavelets of suds and water
clapped and rebounded around us, broke
and splashed to the bathroom floor.

When I came it felt as if
there was something enormous and ineffable

being pulled from me,
 pulled from me—
and in the afterglow we laid
together
in the basin,
head to toe and toe to head,
in the cool still water, in the miracle
of a moment of true and unasked for peace,
smiling
 breathing
 touching
(our nerves were glutinous)
and neither of us spoke.

After a time H. stood
and walked dripping from the bathroom.
I heard the music come back on
 —*Dark Side of the Moon*, Pink Floyd—
and when she returned
there was a lit joint hanging
from the corner of her lips

and she was carrying two bottles
of cold Pacifico
and a bowl of tortilla chips
and she set the bowl on the edge of the tub,
handed me a beer
and slid back into the water.

And we drank our beers,
passed the joint back and forth
and nibbled on tortilla chips
and that was the best day I'd had
in years and years
and when I woke the next morning
I felt rejuvenated, restored;
I felt
as if I'd been snatched away
from the precipice of a chasm;
and Lindsay was still gone
but I was alive,
and the grief that swept over me then
broke

like
summer rain:
rapturous and cleansing
after days
of
drought.

Young Dave & the Plastic Jesus

WILLIAM CRAWFORD



Dave was being a good, affable host, showing me all of the Lowell high spots. The May weather was hot and Dave was a little prickly and obviously off his usual stellar game.

He was sure that he lost his tiny pocket camera. We had brunch at The Owl where a heavy dose of pancakes and coffee had seriously impaired our senses. After we moved on, he deemed the box missing. Twice the incredulous waitresses at The Owl responded grudgingly to a returning Dave's pleas to comb the place for the missing camera. Finally, as we sheepishly exited to the parking lot, I took matters into my own hands. I dove head first into the floorboard space behind the driver's seat where the device was last noticed. There it was having slid surreptitiously under the seat. Dave was relieved but he was also a bit nonplussed by his carelessness.

Eventually, we decamped to The Grotto, a recently renovated Catholic shrine located in neighborhood once dominated by earlier residents of Canadian lineage. Located behind the site of the old Franco-American School, it is an exact replica of the famous pilgrimage destination in Lourdes. Like a lot

of things around Lowell the venerable venue was featured in a couple of Kerouac's novels. Young Dave loves this cool historical connection. However, the old shrine was seedy and weathered but still old world elegant. The new version is spiffy, modern but sterile. Kerouac, I mused silently, would have hated this shit. But the city fathers were probably elated at the prospect of a new upscale tourist attraction.

I began to photograph the site as is my custom. There were several prominent religious figures made seemingly from some tacky plastic like material. I couldn't help but wonder what Jack Kerouac might say about this latter day transformation of such a historically iconic place. My mind then began degenerating in a ribald direction. I mused quietly if the Jesus pictured above might also be sporting a plastic penis underneath his robe? I think I was experiencing some serious form of Christian penis envy?

Later, I would seriously scan several Kerouac volumes in search of some pertinent wisdom. Finally, in Chorus 19 of MEXICO CITY BLUES I found this:

Christ had a dove on his shoulder
—My brother Gerard
Had 2 Doves
And 2 Lambs
Pulling his Milky chariot.

Immersed in fragrant old
spittoon water
He was baptized by Iron
Priest Saint Jacques
De Fournier in Lowell
Massachusetts
In the Gray Rain Year,
1919
When Chaplin had Spats
and Dempsey
Drank no whisky by the track.

My mother saw him in heaven.
Riding away prophesying
Everything will be alright
Which I have learned now
By Trial & Conviction
In the Court of Awful Glots.

This told me all I needed to know. As I stood contemplating a bereft anatomical Jesus, I couldn't help but wonder if we wouldn't have been better served if we were still just searching for Young Dave's unlost camera. "Lost" is a complex spiritual concept that the itinerant Kerouac surely understood well while a sterile, plastic, modern Jesus pretending to be in Lourdes, probably not so much.

Kal

ARIHANT JAIN

In my mother tongue, Kal
means both yesterday

& tomorrow. How today
starts & ends. Kal is

reality because today
is just a concept.

A fabrication. Meaning
we never think about

today, only Kal. Meaning
when the blonde boy told

my sister oh so cute
she could only remember

the calloused chest
of her biology teacher

& his sweat running
down her trembling back.

& she could only think
about being on the

other side of that
door. He called it

private tutoring. This
narrative is cyclic:

this is what Kal
means to us: hope

until all that is left
is crumbled innocence.

Finding Winnipeg
JUDITH SKILLMAN

I see my father in slow motion,
a slight figure
playing hockey in a threadbare coat.
Thinner than two older brothers
who wear their weight warm.

He, my father, first one born
far from Munich,
crossed an ocean in his Ma's belly.
Heard, in utero, wretching
in a tiny hold

crowded with other emigrants.
I see in the tabula rasa
of newly fallen snow
tracks of weasel, the opportunist,
and prints of fox, his cunning familiar.

How to Migraine Using the Brain Tumour Method™

R.C. THOMAS

First, take a fist, bold red and yellow starburst sparking from the knuckles. *Pow.*

Next, take note, there's nothing stationed above you but the bare classroom ceiling flecked with the occasional coffee stain, and you wonder what kind of Alice in Wonderland this is where teachers are having their breaktime beverages whilst sat on the ceiling. This, however, will only get you so far in procrastinating on a maths test, and now, a loutish rock forms above and falls. *Thud.* You didn't dream it and you couldn't make it up.

Take a maths equation, the more complicated the better. Break it open. Let the steel digits and heavy multiplication symbols rain down upon your skull. *Donk, donk, donk.*

Let one thunderstorm brew into two, four, six, eight, ten. *Boom, boom, boom.* In fact, why not let the baker in on the action and make it a dozen and one. He throws his bread oven right at you. *Bam.*

Next, watch as a Fantasian wooden metre stick lifts itself from its lean-to. It flies, it glides, it swoops, it soars. It zooms right up to you, halts, steadies, readies itself. *Thwack.*

A 19th century prisoner has now found their way into your school. Don't panic. Don't ask any questions. He knows a good party trick and swings his iron ball loose from its chain. It heads in your direction. Be polite, nod, and pay a compliment despite the *doink.* The zebra stripes of his uniform begin to move and are no longer so fun to look at, but that's all part of the fun of it.

Gaggles of school children begin taking turns crossing his stripes. Cars screech to a standstill. A child with a sly-squinted look in his eyes mills about on the prisoner's collar and sling-shots entire hatchbacks at you. *Crash.*

Recover as quickly as you can and then grab a brick or a nineties house phone and do your worst. *Wham.*

Take a person, any person. The more loathsome the better. Butt heads. *Crack.* Butt heads. *Crack.* Butt heads again. Really go for it. *Crackkk.*

In summary, it's not every day that it grows to become everyday, this sensation. Enjoy it whilst you can. Let loose a little. Don't alarm yourself. After all, life's what you make it, and everything that comes eventually goes. Just hope it doesn't know the way to come back around again.

Airborne

R.C. THOMAS

Through the air, taken by the air, lifted into the air, pulled along with the air, I sat in a cloud of it, a ten-year-old taking jabs at the TV remote like a two year old, content to just watch as one garish moving image flashed upon the screen after another, a brief spell of black between them preparing me for the next bit of magic, and I settled on a lady shouting ‘AIRBORNE,’ locked on to the word like there was nothing more to say, a montage as she trained to be a paratrooper, shouting ‘AIRBORNE,’ with every jump, vaulting box her aircraft, crash mat her sky, each jump demanding she said the word *AIRBORNE*, and so it built up, the word *AIRBORNE* becoming *AIRBORNE* again and again, until *AIRBORNE* was permanently *AIRBORNE* and my head began to scream ‘AIRBORNE,’ ‘AIRBORNE,’

‘AIRBORNE,’ ‘AIRBORNE,’ until my lips grew restless with the urge to join in and I groaned the word ‘AIRBORNE,’ a riled response to this lady’s call, as her every ‘AIRBORNE,’ pitched higher, louder, harder in my recovery from a brain tumour which certainly wasn’t *AIRBORNE* but, in fact, was only ever born inside my head, unless the surgeon flung it when he found it, sent it flying down on to a crash mat of its own, and my brain tumour shouted ‘AIRBORNE,’ locked on to the word in a montage, desperate to make the final cut of my life’s movie, but that movie on the TV which I can’t find on Google or YouTube based on the only scene I can remember, the one with the lady in her olive green uniform shouting ‘AIRBORNE,’ endlessly to the point that the word *AIRBORNE* to this day still jumps around in my

head, AIRBORNE, shouting ‘AIRBORNE’,
‘AIRBORNE’, ‘AIRBORNE’, ready to
deploy an AIRBORNE parachute and bring
me, AIRBORNE, back down through the
AIRBORNE air, taken by the AIRBORNE
air, lifted up in the AIRBORNE air, pulled along
with the AIRBORNE air, from where I sat,
AIRBORNE, in a cloud of it, AIRBORNE, an
AIRBORNE ten-year-old post-AIRBORNE
brain surgery, now an AIRBORNE thirty-six
year old still AIRBORNE in that memory,
wondering if I was mad for feeling AIRBORNE,
mad for feeling the word *AIRBORNE* in
her grating AIRBORNE voice throwing me
like an AIRBORNE yo-yo up and down, round
and round, or whether she was AIRBORNE-mad
for saying it.



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