

# THE FICTION ISSUE 2012

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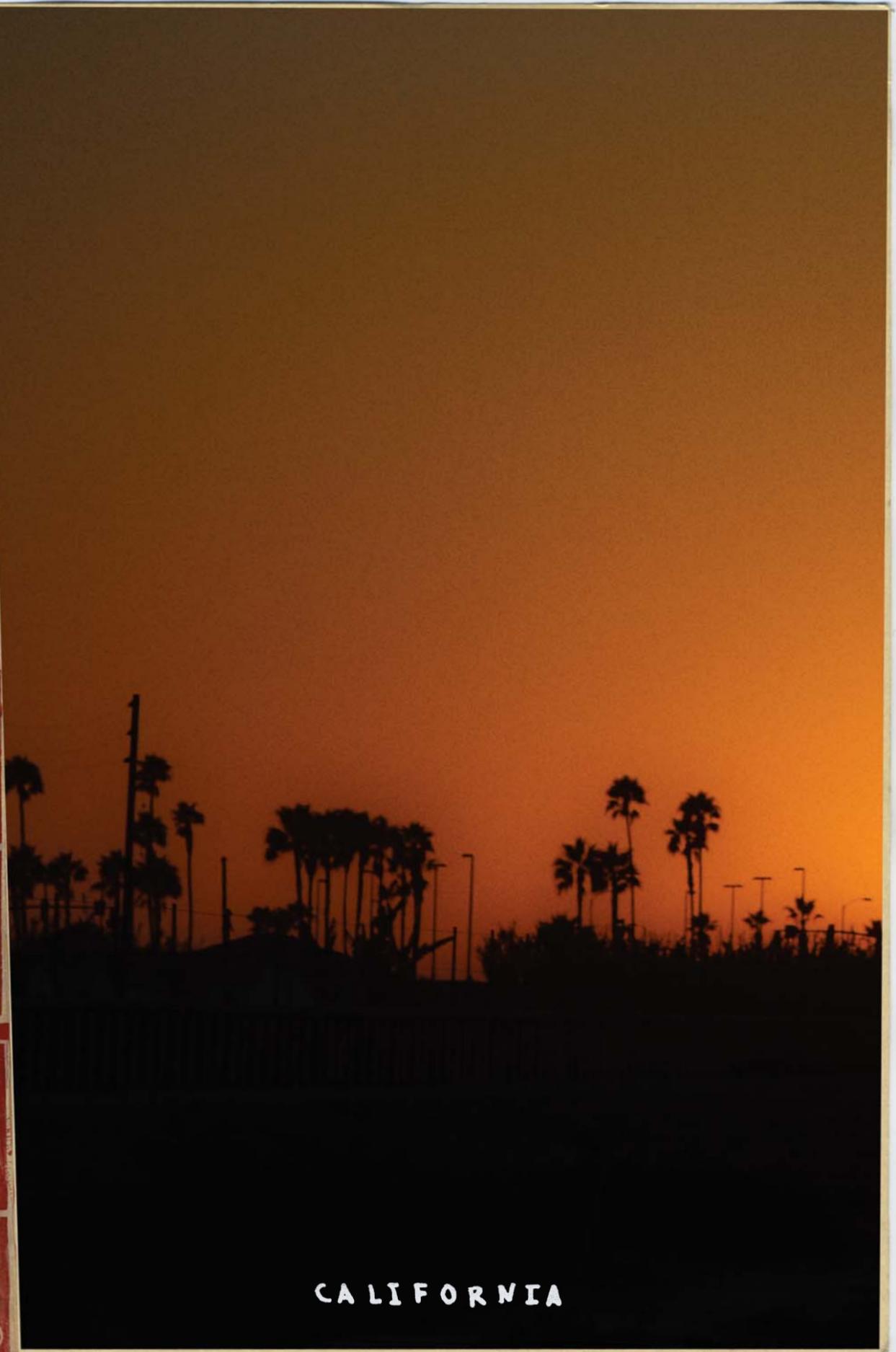
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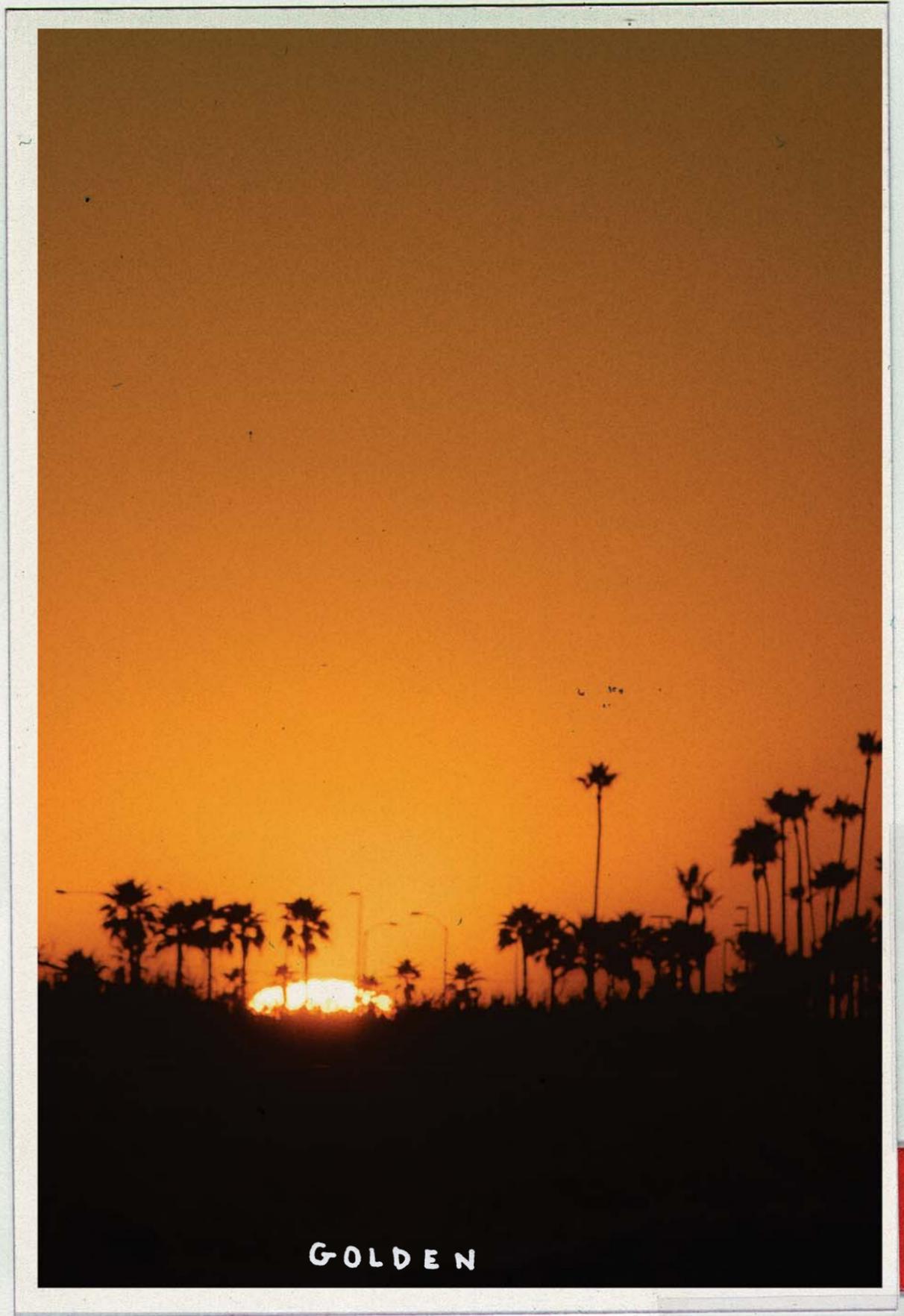
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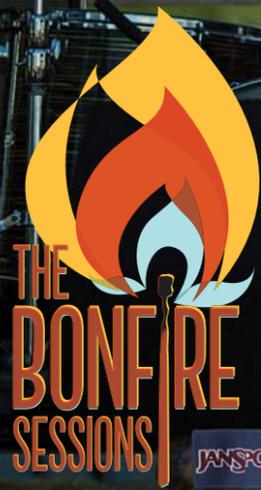
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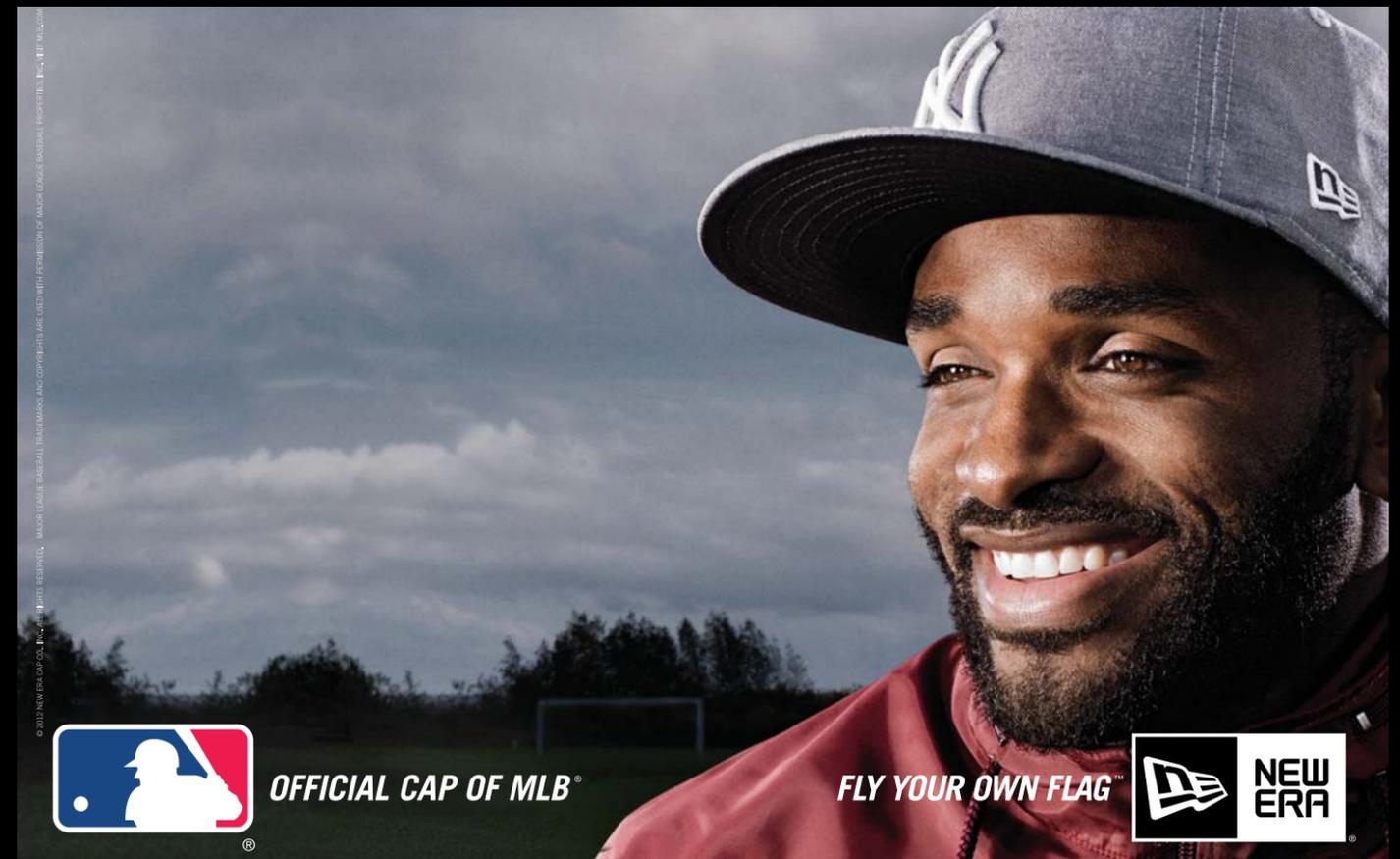
PHOTO: BRYAN DERBALLA

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DARREN BENT, INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALLER  
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# Employees of the Month

## AMIE BARRODALE

Amie Barrodale used to work for us, but then she moved to India and after that to Seattle. Now she's getting published all over the place and winning awards and having her stories read aloud by James Franco because she's a goddamn brilliant fiction writer.

See THE NUMBER, page 90

## MALIN BERGSTRÖM

Malin Bergström is a Swedish illustrator whose colorful, meticulous drawings and collages we very much dig. She's currently based in Stockholm, where she freelances for a few magazines, including this one.

See THE NUMBER, page 90

## STEIN BRIANHOFF

Inside this issue you will find Stein Brianhoff's first illustration for a publication, and he tells us he has no formal art education, which is surprising because we think he illustrated a story about puke quite nicely, and that can be a very hard thing to do.

See ON THE ILLNESS, page 78

## TONY BURGESS

Canadian author Tony Burgess is responsible for *The Hellmouths of Bewdley*, *Pontypool Changes Everything*, and *Caesarea*, three books you should read in the immediate future. In 2010, he was nominated for a Genie Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for *Pontypool*, adapted, as you might have guessed, from *Pontypool Changes Everything*.

See GAUDIFINGERS, page 94

## CF

Providence-based artist and musician CF is one of the busiest guys we know. His books include *Pour Mastrs* volumes 1 through 3, as well as *Core of Caligula* and *City Hunter*. He performs as Mark Lord and, every so often, Kites.

See THREE GANGSTER FABLES, page 64

## VIKKI CHU

Vikki Chu is an illustrator and artist who depicts things in dreamy, semi-realistic ways, using colors that seem mighty fine, at least to our ol' eyeballs.

See THREE KINDS OF PEOPLE ON THE CROSSTOWN BUS, page 84

## KRISTINA COLLANTES

Kristina Collantes is a talented and erudite illustrator and artist from the Philippines who currently resides in San Diego. Besides VICE, her work has appeared in the *New Yorker* and *GQ*.

See GAUDIFINGERS, page 94

## JOE DENARDO

Joe grew up in various midwestern suburbs and of course primarily rooted for the Cubs and Bears. He started and continues to play in the band GROWING, one of our favorites. He enjoys working in collage, photography, film, and sound because he is an awesome person.

See MY FATHER AT THE END, page 60

## AMY ELKINS

Amy Elkins is a photographer from Venice Beach, California. She's best known for *Black Is the Day*, *Black Is the Night*, a series in which her portraits of prison inmates have various degrees of pixelation and blurriness, depending on their age and how long they've been incarcerated.

See OVERSOUL, page 70

## NICK GAZIN

You probably already know Nick Gazin because he's done a ton of stuff for VICE forever—illustrations, comic-book reviews, articles about nerds and nerd stuff, blah blah blah—but do you know how he smells? We do, but we're not telling.

See JAWBREAKER'S MAJOR-LABEL ALBUM, page 80

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## AMELIA GRAY

Amelia Gray's latest novel, *THREATS*, is our book of the month. So there. We also excerpted it a while back, so you have no excuse for playing dumb.

See ON THE ILLNESS, page 78

## SAMMY HARKHAM

Sammy Harkham curates the best comics anthology out there, *Kramers Ergot*, makes many awesome comics himself, helps run the best book store in LA (Family), and occasionally illustrates sleeves for Bonnie "Prince" Billy albums.

See THE POET, page 106

## MITCHELL S. JACKSON

Mitchell S. Jackson is a native of Portland, Oregon, and currently resides in Brooklyn. His collection of stories and essays, *Oversoul*, will be out on e-book by the time this goes to print. It's fucking great.

See OVERSOUL, page 70

## MICHAEL KIMBALL

Michael Kimball is the author of four books, including *Dear Everybody* and, most recently, *Us*. His new novel, *Big Ray*, will be published by Bloomsbury in September, and we're very proud to be publishing an excerpt.

See MY FATHER AT THE END, page 60

## TAO LIN

Tao Lin is not a real person. Suckers!

See JAWBREAKER'S MAJOR-LABEL ALBUM, page 80

## ROBERT LOPEZ

Author of two novels that are virtually impossible not to read in one sitting, *Part of the World* and *Kamby Bolongo Mean River*, and a collection of short fiction, *Asunder*, Robert Lopez lives in Brooklyn and is an all-around excellent human being.

See THREE KINDS OF PEOPLE ON THE CROSSTOWN BUS, page 84

## PAUL MALISZEWSKI

Paul Maliszewski hails from DC and wrote a fiction collection called *Prayer and Parable*. He has a wife and son (or did at the time this was printed).

See THE POET, page 106

## BENJAMIN MARRA

Benjamin Marra is the notorious, controversial, and influential creator of the comic books *Night Business*, *Gangsta Rap Posse*, *Benjamin Marra's the Incredibly Fantastic Adventures of Maureen Dowd* and *Lincoln Washington: Free Man!* He is also one of the kindest souls we've ever met.

See WHORES I HAVE LOVED, page 98

## CLANCY MARTIN

A teacher of philosophy, father of three, and ex-husband twice over, Clancy is a recovering alcoholic and jewelry salesman who still manages to write amazing novels, stories, and essays. We ain't got a fucking clue how he manages to do it all.

See WHORES I HAVE LOVED, page 98

## JAMES PURDY

Born in 1914, James Purdy was a legendary and controversial American novelist, poet, and playwright who died in 2009 after authoring almost 20 novels and hundreds of poems, short stories, brief plays, and sketches. Despite being considered one of the True Greats by the literati, his work remains largely undiscovered, which is a real, real shame. We were lucky enough to acquire one of his unpublished plays, which you can read in this very issue.

See THE ROOM ALL TO ITSELF, page 120

## MATTHEW THURBER

Matthew Thurber has a blog called *Pudding Is Lard Again* ([puddingislard.blogspot.com](http://puddingislard.blogspot.com)), which is real funny. He's also an illustrator of many things and you can read his webcomics at [1800mice.com](http://1800mice.com).

See THE MAGICIANS, page 58

## DEB OLIN UNFERTH

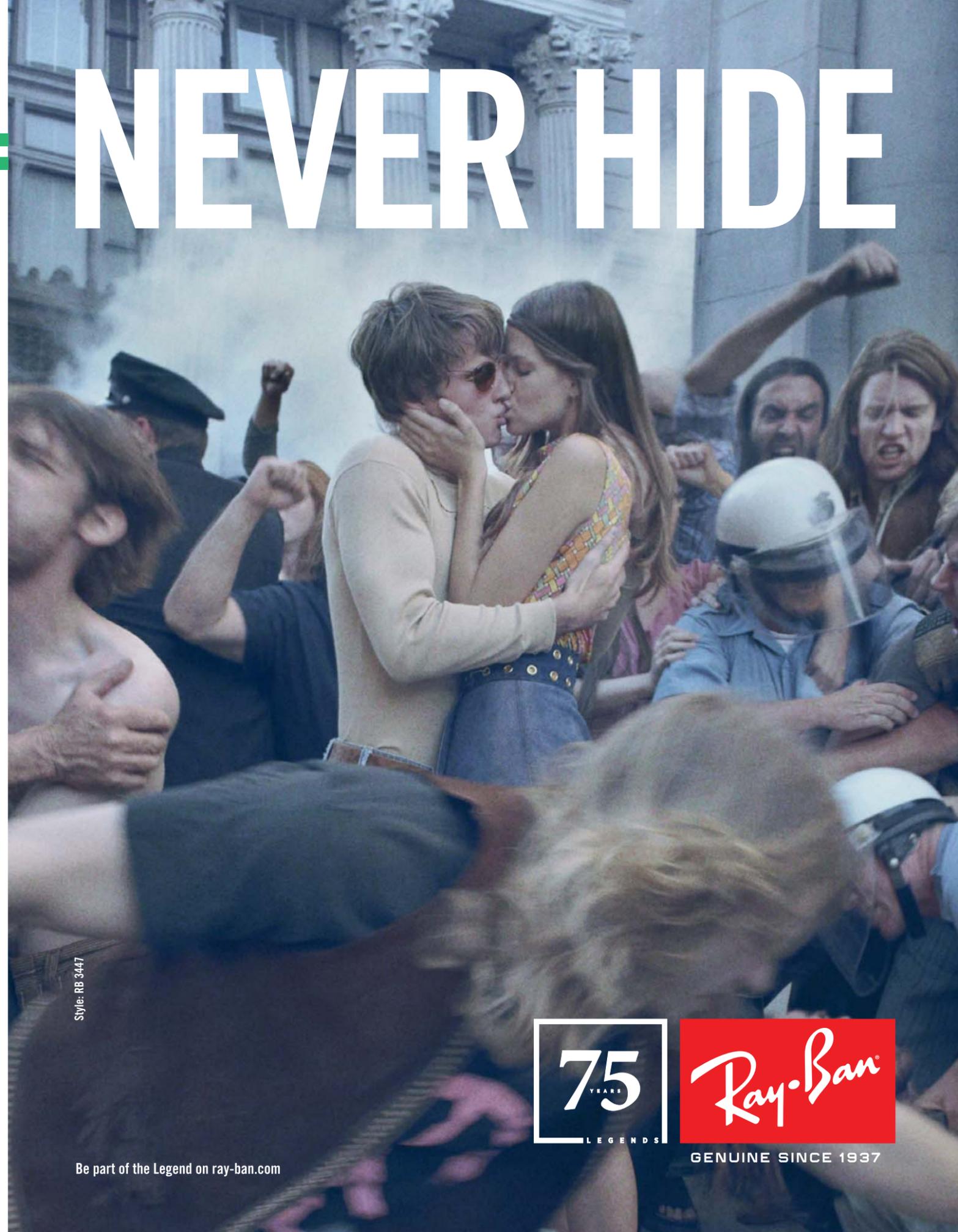
Li'l Debby—we call her that because we're crushed out and are awkward about it—is the author of the novel *Vacation*, the award-winning memoir *Revolution*, and the collection of stories *Minor Robberies*.

See THE MAGICIANS, page 58

## BARRY YOURGRAU

Performer of various things and writer Barry Yourgrau is wholly responsible for *Wearing Dad's Head* and *A Man Jumps Out of an Airplane*, which are both considered "classics of short fiction" by their author. As a performer he starred in the film adaptation of his book *The Sadness of Sex*. He also wrote the highly unusual children's book *NASTYbook*.

See THREE GANGSTER FABLES, page 64



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## I'LL GIVE YOU SOME THREATS

*This past summer, I was in a weird situation in New Orleans—a place that makes sure you're drunk and acting out regrettably most of the time, so the geography gives this story some context. What happened was, to put an end to an unbelievably annoying all-night-long situation, and out of my own thoughtlessness and cruelty, I texted some pretty mean shit from someone else's phone to Amelia Gray (author of Threats, published by FSG, and "On the Illness," which you can find on page 78 of this very issue). Telling the whole story would take too long, and I might lose some friends by exposing too many of the details, but I wouldn't have any business writing this if I didn't include the text itself: "You are not hot AT ALL. And I will never love you or your writing."*



TEXT AND PHOTO BY  
GIANCARLO DITRAPANO



Fucked up, I know. Again, without getting into details, I'll just say that the intentions of sending the text were fulfilled. The issue was now dead, and we went on with our night. The next morning I felt truly terrible about what I'd done. But I never did anything to rectify the situation, so it continued unchecked.

A couple weeks ago, on a rainy evening Peter Pan bus ride from Amherst, Massachusetts, to Springfield, I was looking out the window at the traffic lights through the rain on the glass and turned to the person sitting next to me. It was Amelia Gray. She said, "Can I ask you a question, Gian?" I told her that I knew what her question was and that the answer was yes, I wrote that text and that I had meant to clear things up but just never got around to it. "Can I punch you in the face, Gian?" she asked.

It was strange, but a punch in the face was suddenly the only thing I wanted in the world. I felt it would forge a notable and perhaps fitting ending to my weekend. I felt I owed it to her, too. I immediately agreed: "Please, go ahead. Seriously. You deserve it. Here." I lifted my chin and turned my face to her. She punched me, but it didn't really land. I was unsatisfied, and I could tell that she felt the same.

"Look," I said and took her hand, shaped it into a fist, and showed her how to really put your body into a punch. I turned my cheek toward her yet again and she swung, fully connecting this time. Truly solid landing. Ear buzzing, head vibration, sensation of face inflating; all the symptoms of getting clocked were present.

I asked her if she felt better. She said she did. "Good," I said, and maybe we even hugged. To be honest, I never felt any bad feelings toward her. I don't think Amelia's "not hot," and I've never even read her writing. So my text was, in essence, total bullshit. Before leaving, she told me that her boyfriend, seated a few rows up, was more pissed about the situation than she was, but that she'd keep him cool.

As Amelia walked back to her seat, I pressed my throbbing cheek against the cold glass and said something like "Fucking bring it, dude" under my breath.

## Fan Fiction Is for Fuckfaces



BY MITCHELL SUNDERLAND  
Illustration by Melanie Chernock

If you're very sad, chances are you're familiar with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a 500-page BDSM porno "novel" that began as Twilight fan fiction. The total piece of shit squeezed out by E.L. James (aka "Snowqueen's Icedragon") warmed the cobwebbed loins of middle-aged women so much so that a real publisher, Vintage, reprinted it in April. James also made *Time's* "100 Most Influential People in the World" list.

It's only a matter of time before publishers start trawling fanfiction.net, where *Fifty Shades* first appeared, in search of the next breakout depressing smut star. Below is a sampling of my favorite top-ranked stories, which your aunt will soon be secretly masturbating to.

### A DAY WITH DISNEY

AUTHOR: Haddad Hatter

SOURCE MATERIAL: *Annie the Musical*, *The Godfather*, Mickey Mouse cartoons  
SUMMARY: Walt Disney visits Little Orphan Annie to give a speech about following your dreams. He compares his dreams and winning an Oscar to drug flashbacks. Out of nowhere, Mario Puzo walks in to shoot photos of Annie. Disney encourages Puzo to write *The Godfather*.

BEST LINES: "I had already received an Academy Award in the year 1932. The year was 1951, and one of my best years. I knocked myself in the head to get rid of my flashbacks."

### FIFTY SHADES OF FLANNEL

AUTHOR: Nancy O'Toole

SOURCE MATERIAL: *50 Shades of Grey* (Yes, it's fanfic based on fanfic.)  
SUMMARY: Nancy's own description: "What happens when a billionaire former crack baby meets a mature woman who stumbles into his office? If you believe in romance, stilted conversations, curious legal documents, and the power of flannel, you'll submit to this tale."

BEST LINES: "What other woman secrets does he understand and yet tantalizingly keep just beyond my grasp? Bioré Pore Strips in my ears? Waxing my big toe? Pinot Grigio and Fritos whilst watching *Real Housewives*?"

### IT TOOK THEM TIME

AUTHOR: Loopyloonylupin96

SOURCE MATERIAL: The Harry Potter series

SUMMARY: A teenage Remus Lupin fantasizes about barebacking Sirius Black during class. Later, Sirius walks in on Lupin masturbating and helps the young werewolf come. Lupin, feeling guilty that he might have sexually assaulted Sirius, hides under an invisible cloak. But Sirius finds him and removes Lupin's wet boxers, and... You can take it from there.

BEST LINES: "Remus had known, ever since he first saw Sirius Black, that he was gay... His friends had accepted it. I mean, when you're a werewolf, what's a little bit of varied gender preference on top of that?"



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## READERS DIGESTING

Back in April, the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia, hosted its annual Edible Book Festival to celebrate Edible Book Day. This raised a bunch of questions, such as, “They fucking did what with how for who now?”



BY WENDY SYFRET  
Photo by Ben Thomson



Apparently, Edible Book Day commemorates the life of French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, who wrote a lighthearted account about food entitled *Physiologie du Goût, ou Méditations de Gastronomie Transcendante; ouvrage théorique, historique et à l'ordre du jour, dédié aux Gastronomes parisiens, par un Professeur, membre de plusieurs sociétés littéraires et savantes*. Or, as it's more commonly and deliciously known, *The Physiology of Taste*. On Edible Book Day, universities all over the world hosted events in Brillat-Savarin's honor, celebrating a love of books, food, and the offensive amount of free time college students and professors have.

Sydney's Edible Book Festival had a number of activities on its menu, including an event where readers recreated meals and treats from their most beloved works. The highlight of the festivities was the edible-book show, during which literary fans constructed large, digestible versions of their favorite titles because they have given up on having sexual intercourse with anyone ever.

Most of these really awesome people attempted to physically replicate their favorite books with consumable materials, while more adventurous gourmards constructed conceptual food dioramas

by recreating scenes or evoking a particular story's themes. Some were so intricate they took up to 30 hours to create, and all entries competed for prizes in categories that included Most Creative, Least Edible, and Best Overall.

We at VICE Australia love books—and lots and lots of cake—so we decided to make a book cake of our own as a test run for next year's contest. Following a friendly argument, we settled on turning the Aussie coming-of-age nightmare classic *Puberty Blues* into a delicious treat. Translating so much angst, emotion, hymen busting, and abortion into something we'd want to eat proved to be a true challenge, and in hindsight our subject matter may not have been Best Overall material. But we felt pretty confident that we could win Least Edible hands down. The strata breakdown is below, and it is thoroughly disgusting. Eat up, bookworms.

### CAKE LAYERS

- Tomato sauce, mustard
- Salt (saltwater)
- Clearasil
- Beer
- Vaseline
- Cigarettes
- Banana Paddle Pop



## DICEY DECISIONS

 BY KARA-LIS COVERDALE

We wish that 1971's *The Dice Man* was an autobiography by a 14-year-old Andrew Dice Clay, but it's actually a novel about a psychiatrist named Luke Rhinehart (who is also its supposed author) who begins to make all of his decisions by rolling dice. Soon he's raping, murdering, and forming a cult. As bizarre as it sounds, the book is based on a true story. George Cockcroft, the novel's actual author, has used dice rolling to make decisions for years, and some people have cultishly followed his lead and relinquished their lives to small cubes with painted dots. After reading the book, I asked George for an interview. The roll must have been a good one, because he said yes.

**VICE: How did you begin living by the dice?**

**George Cockcroft:**

I was a great procrastinator as a teenager. I would make lists of things I was supposed to be doing and roll a die, and I found that it somehow got me off my ass. Then I began to experiment with things I should be doing, things I might do, and things I had never done before.



**Some people think you've started some kind of dice cult or religion.**

Well, I wouldn't call it a religion because that involves beliefs, and the whole point of dicing is to relinquish most of your beliefs. Some people call *The Dice Man* a “cult book,” but a cult book cannot have followers if the people who are “following” it can wake up at any day, roll a six, and decide they're not going to follow it anymore!

**If you had to guess, how many people rely on dice to make decisions?**

There must be tens if not hundreds of thousands. Several people contacted me to say that they used dice to make decisions for years before ever hearing of my book.

**Have you ever seen any dicers go crazy the way Luke does in the book?**

I've never had anyone report anything violent or crazy in the way that Luke experiments in the book. I did have one fellow who was so unstable that I had to tell him, “You really need to stop dicing because it's not doing you any good.”

## Holy Unicorns!



BY TIM SCOTT  
Illustration by Ben Montero



As if you needed any more proof that the most-read tome in history is completely, unequivocally a work of fiction, let's explore the fact that the word “unicorn” appears no fewer than nine times in the King James version of the Old Testament. And unless you're an 11-year-old girl—or aspire to be one—you are well aware that if it's got unicorns in it, it's a fairy tale.

The most significant mention of unicorns occurs in the Book of Job, when God pulls his favorite whipping boy aside and enumerates the characteristics of a variety of impressive animals He alone created, reiterating His infallible superiority over men. Among these creatures was the magnificent unicorn, which isn't all that impressive when you consider it's basically just a white horse with a horn. (God didn't even make them cute; Lisa Frank did.)

Biblical apologists claim that all this unicorn business is just a translation glitch carried over from ancient texts and not proof that dumb Jews and Christians believe in them. Dr. Geoff Treloar, director of coursework at the Australian College of Theology, said, “The salient word in the Deuteronomy text literally means ‘single-horned’, so ‘unicorn’ will have seemed a natural translation to the mind of the Middle Ages.” He went on to add that modern translations use the term “oxen” and dismissed the King James interpretation as “a bit of a stretch.” If we're lucky, someday soon theologians will be saying the same about organized religion in general, and their sacred texts will be relocated to the fantasy section, right next to the Twilight saga, because, seriously, this crap is for teens.

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## LITERARY TITANS ARE SUPER FREAKS

Before the rise of tabloids and fame-obsessed publications devoted to documenting the semen-soaked exploits of cretinous reality TV "stars," celebrated authors were the undisputed sexual deviants of their day. Many were literary geniuses who helped shape culture in positive and challenging ways, and unlike Jesse James or Kim Kardashian or whoever, these writers could and did get away scot-free with dipping their wicks into every and any kind of hole. Of course, little has changed (for instance, did you know Michael Chabon gave his wife HPV?). In the interest of reminding and encouraging contemporary readers and authors that one can fuck anyone, anywhere, at any time, as long as it inspires a work of fiction, I have taken the liberty of rounding up the dirtiest exploits of some of the most revered (and perverted) authors in the Western canon.



BY BEN MAKUCH

Illustration by Bilyana Ilievska

### JAMES JOYCE

When *Ulysses* was published, it was banned for obscenity, but Jimmy was saving the true sleaze for letters to his wife, Nora. In missives that read like flowery prose versions of horny teens sexting, he told her how he loved the "odour of [her] cunt," and also expounded on how much he was into farting: "It is wonderful to fuck a farting woman when every fuck drives one out of her." I concur.

### FRANZ KAFKA

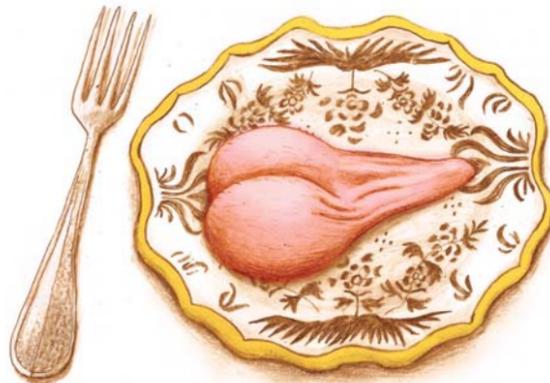
A few years back, Kafka scholar James Hawes drew attention to one of the founders of modernism's porn preferences and weirded everyone out. Not surprisingly, the author of "In the Penal Colony" and "The Metamorphosis" was storing some nonstandard stuff in his wank bank. For instance, he subscribed to *Der Amethyst*, an underground publication that featured images of hedgehog-like creatures blowing dudes, golems ripping women's boobs off with their claws and then eating them, and babies being birthed from sliced-open legs.

### LEWIS CARROLL

The author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was a childless Anglican clergyman. He also really liked young girls and spent a lot of time persuading parents in his congregation to allow him to photograph their tween daughters in the nude. It's also rumored that Carroll proposed marriage to Alice—the girl who inspired the name of his most famous novel—when she was 11.

### LORD BYRON

The famous poet literally spent his life traveling the world with a menagerie of exotic animals and fucking every damp living hole he could find. Among his conquests were his half sister Augusta Leigh, his cousin Margaret Parker, and his protégé John Edleston. He even reportedly anally raped Augusta two days after she gave birth. Obviously, the libido needed to produce classic verse knows no bounds.



## Hunger Pangs on Paper

BY JORGE de CASCANTE  
Illustration by Roope Eronen

Everyone knows (especially your dad) that if you aspire to be a writer, you're going to go through life hungry. All day long your ass widens in a chair while you sit in a position that cuts off circulation to your legs. Sometimes you might think, "I think I might be hungry now," but those thoughts are quickly pushed aside lest you interrupt the creative process or, God forbid, eat something out of sheer boredom and lack of ideas. This has led to numerous famous passages that are probably the result of nothing more high-minded than an author slowly starving himself at his or her desk—think Proust's madeleine obsession or Portnoy of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* getting carnal with that piece of liver. Point is, when you combine boundary-pushing literature with hunger, you get some pretty weird results. And there are examples aplenty. Here are some of my favorites.

### LA CUISINE CANNIBALE BY ROLAND TOPOR

Topor wrote and illustrated this tongue-in-cheek recipe book in 1970, and it's full of crazed morsels, such as "Executives who tend to get foodstains on their ties make fantastic pâtés." A highlight is his advice for what to do with a half-eaten little person: "Place your dwarf leftovers in a pot of boiling water. Salt and leave over a low heat for three hours. If your dwarf is too small, you can always add in some potatoes." I say: fucking yummy.

### AGAINST THE GRAIN BY JORIS-KARL HUYSMANS

This is Huysmans's chronicle of one man's eccentric consumption experiments, culminating in the protagonist deciding it would be a bright idea to shove food up his bum. He likes it a lot: "What economy of time, what a pronounced deliverance from the aversion which food gives those who lack appetite! What a complete riddance from the disgust induced by food forcibly eaten!" Just imagine if he knew about ecstasy.

### STORY OF THE EYE BY GEORGES BATAILLE

This 1928 tale of a pair of perverted teenagers stretches to the outer realms of nourishment. Case in point: "Simone then asked Sir Edmond for the balls of the first bull. But she had a condition—she wanted them raw. 'But,' said Sir Edmond, 'will you eat them raw? What are you going to do with raw balls?' 'I want them, in front of me, on a plate,' she said." Moments later, in one of those rare passages that makes you hungry and horny, Simone shoves one bull testicle into her mouth and the other into her vagina. It's truly a Tupperware/microwave combo for the ages.

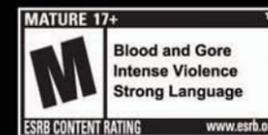
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# AND HERE IS MY GOOD BIG CENTIPEDE

An Unpublished Excerpt from an Interview with William S. Burroughs

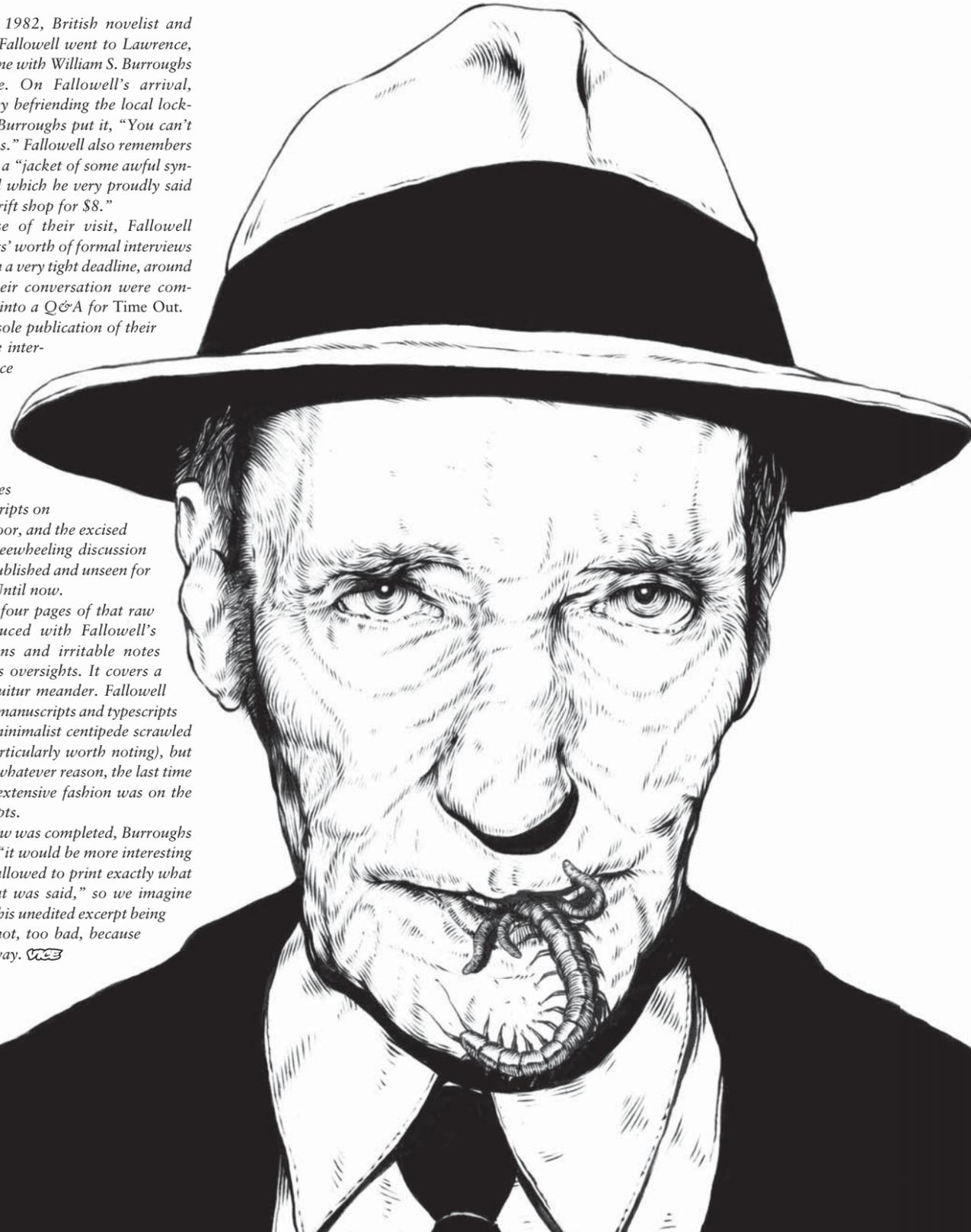
BY DUNCAN FALLOWELL  
ILLUSTRATION BY MARCO KLEFISCH

In the summer of 1982, British novelist and journalist Duncan Fallowell went to Lawrence, Kansas, to spend time with William S. Burroughs at his new house. On Fallowell's arrival, Burroughs was busy befriending the local locksmith, because, as Burroughs put it, "You can't have too many locks." Fallowell also remembers Burroughs wearing a "jacket of some awful synthetic blue material which he very proudly said he bought at the thrift shop for \$8."

Over the course of their visit, Fallowell recorded three hours' worth of formal interviews with Burroughs. On a very tight deadline, around 2,000 words of their conversation were compressed and edited into a Q&A for Time Out. This remained the sole publication of their discussion until the interview popped up once again in 1994's Penguin Book of Interviews. The frenzied editing process, however, left pages and pages of annotated transcripts on the cutting-room floor, and the excised portions of their free-wheeling discussion have remained unpublished and unseen for the past 30 years. Until now.

What follows is four pages of that raw transcript, reproduced with Fallowell's original annotations and irritable notes on the transcriber's oversights. It covers a somewhat non sequitur meander. Fallowell often decorated his manuscripts and typescripts with doodles (the minimalist centipede scrawled in the margin is particularly worth noting), but he told us that, for whatever reason, the last time he did this in any extensive fashion was on the Burroughs typescripts.

After the interview was completed, Burroughs told Fallowell that "it would be more interesting if journalists were allowed to print exactly what happened and what was said," so we imagine he'd be in favor of this unedited excerpt being published. And if not, too bad, because we're doing it anyway. *WCB*



WB I haven't had a nightmare in years, but I have had nightmares, recurring ones.

D *Such a...*

WB Occasionally I have this ~~sanity~~ <sup>centipede</sup> dream, where I'm attacked by ~~this~~ <sup>the</sup> centipede, I hate centipedes. Then I wake up ~~taking~~ <sup>kick</sup> the bedclothes off.

D Have you worked out the origin of this phobia?

WB It isn't a phobia, lots of people have it. I can't think of anybody who would have a good word to say for centipedes, it isn't a phobia, my reaction just seeing a centipede ~~is~~ is to look around for something to kill it with. When I was living out in the country I...

D How big are they?



WB Well, it depends.

D Because to me a centipede is something minute, like this.

WB There's the kind of centipede you find here and even in New York and they ~~are~~ are about that long, little brown centipede.

D Ginger colour. *Such long.*

WB That's probably too much, that's an inch too long. So I instituted a programme of genocide in the ~~house~~ <sup>already</sup> house I had out in the country - I used to kill them. I think I got most of them. I haven't seen any here.

D But you used to have nightmares about them, I read one Bockris book about this thing was fastened to your leg and you woke up, a centipede, a terrible centipede nightmare.

m.f.

WB The typical centipede nightmare is that the centipede or sometimes a cross <sup>between</sup> with a centipede and a scorpion suddenly rushes at me and I often wake up ~~kik~~ kicking at it, Just that I hate centipedes.

D Have you ever met...You refered to Carlos Castenanda. Have you ever met anybody who has ever met him?

Don't mention

Never met him, no.

DELETE REF?

WB Oh yes, I was ~~x~~ talking to somebody who had met him, yeah it's not difficult to meet him, I almost ~~x~~ met him the ~~last~~ last time I was in LA, he wasn't there.

D I thought it was impossible to meet him? [My Timothy Leary story in here?]

WB No.

D He did this as a deliberate attempt to up the mystery of Carlos Castenada.

WB I don't think he is very accessible.

D But he doesn't hide particularly;

WB No. I don't think so.

D Do you fall in love very easily. Have you fallen in love many times in your life?

WB No. I think it's one of those meaningless words. Not meaningless completely because we see people very much affected by ~~love~~ <sup>a lot of love</sup>, but part of that is conditioning, they think that is ~~what~~ <sup>smelly</sup> people should do, a lot of it is conditioned by Hollywood, so it is an area where there is almost unlimited scope for self deception and also for false emotions. ~~Some that are~~ <sup>Sentimental</sup> easily slopp~~ed~~ over into sentimentality.

D I mean whether it's an advantage or a disadvantage for a writer, I mean is it a distraction?



STRINDBERG!

WB: Oh well, that depends on the writer and his experiences, it can be an inspiration obviously or it can be very much to the contrary. Or his sex life may be so bad that it is an inspiration-like Strinburg, I don't think there are any sort of ~~generalities~~, general statements you could make.

D Do you think that writing is in a sense, can be a substitute for ~~real~~ <sup>actual</sup> experience, the compensation ~~not~~ taken to its highest degree, or not?

WB: You've made an either/or statement there, it's a part of experience that is writing and reading is an integral part of one's experience.

D But you find some creative personalities, they have this conflict in them between, if you like, the man of art and the ~~x~~ man of action, the man who participates (Hemminway) the man who stands out of line. HEMINGWAY!!! Who's typing this bloody thing? an idiot?!!!

WB I think this is an artificial dichotomy, but I feel that Hemminway's determination to act out ~~as you said~~ <sup>shall we say</sup> the least interesting facets of his own character, to do well what all his characters do, ~~and pose~~ very serious limitations on his writing.

D Why do you think he committed suicide. Because he actually realised this at the end?

WB ~~Well~~ <sup>Or</sup>, he was out of his head, I was convinced that he suffered organic brain damage when he had that crash and butted his way out of ~~it~~ <sup>the plane</sup>, and so he went into a terrible depression, but my God, look what he did. The best thing he ever wrote ~~Smells~~ <sup>the snow & k !!</sup> of Joel and John, a story about death which he had a particular feeling about, he could smell it on others, he's talked about going out in the front lines with some general or other <sup>be was one of these real general ones</sup> worse than being a cop, <sup>low</sup> and <sup>they met this</sup> the major who was in charge, <sup>of some advance post</sup> said I'll have to relieve that man, and Hemmingway said you won't have to relieve him he stinks of death. And by the time they'd got back to <sup>the</sup> regimental <sup>man</sup> <sup>Commit</sup> post, they got word that the major had just been killed.



d Really?

WB So he has this feeling about death, <sup>This is a story about death (S/N) He lets</sup> he works on and Hollywood tack a happy ending on it and the <sup>film comes in with permission</sup> part that comes in was kinda silly, well, if there's ever a sell out, if anyone ever sold his soul to Hollywood for a fucking safari, <sup>he could</sup> so you go out and drop a wilder beast neat and clean with your weatherbate, <sup>at 300 yards with his Weatherby</sup> Hemfingway did it, WEATHERBY

D Have you ever wanted to commit suicide?

WB Never

D Consciously?

WB <sup>I can't see that it's bettering your position at all</sup> Never, never, never. The only circumstances under which I would commit suicide would be to avoid ~~xxxx~~ something much worse.

D What would that sort of thing be - torture?

WB Yes. Torture.

D Well if you said suicide --- you must believe in some kind of life after death?

WB Certainly.

D Can you be more explicit about what you believe then?

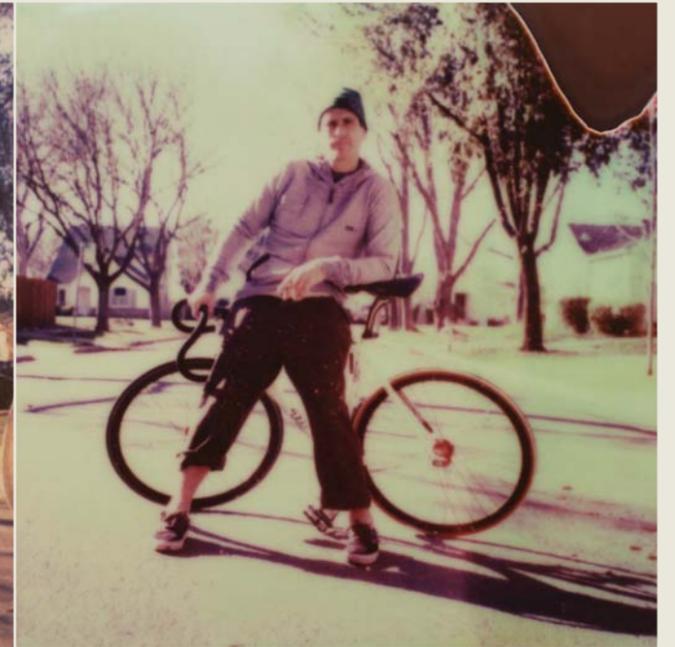
WB I never doubted the possibility of an after life, never. Nor the existence of gods.

D The after life <sup>the!</sup> ~~then~~ is not,,,

WB <sup>Hold on -</sup> ~~Now~~ wait a minute, I'm quoting from my new book, can man really doubt it, the possibility of an afterlife, the existence of gods, he thought that immortality was the only goal worth striving for, and he knew it was not something just automatically get from believing some rubbish or other, like Christianity or Islam, something you have to work and fight for like everything in this life or another.

m.f.

*Jungle  
The Prong  
Rat 1971  
page - 100  
dead spontaneous when confronted by a situation it can't get out of.*



YONE  
JIMMY FONTAINE  
VINCENT SKOGLUND  
KEVIN ZACHER  
ANDY WRIGHT

BRANDON LONG  
ALESSANDRO SIMONETTI  
ANGELA BOATWRIGHT  
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The above image is part of a work in progress by Mexican photographer Eunice Adorno. It's part of a series tentatively called *No Hay Tal Lugar* (*There Is No Such Place*) that's partially inspired by the fictional city of Santa Teresa, Sonora, which is loosely based on Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and serves as the main setting for Bolaño's 2666. Eunice's goal is to create a portrait of a nonexistent city made up of multiple locations ravaged by the country's war on drugs.

## A BIRD OF HEAT IN KINO BAY

*The Search for the Infrarealist Holy Grail and the Essence of Roberto Bolaño in the North of Mexico*

BY DIEGO ENRIQUE OSORNO

PHOTOS BY EUNICE ADORNO

There is a night checkpoint right at the entrance of Kino Bay in the state of Sonora, Mexico. Passing through, two cops stopped us, pointing their flashlights at us in the dark. One of them walked slowly between the headlights of our Expedition, keeping us within the sights of his 9mm pistol; the other one stopped less than two feet away from the driver.

"Where to?" the cop asked.

"To Kino," our driver answered.

"Do you know what week it is?"

"The *unholy* week."

"OK. Watch out."

"Goodbye."

Our new friend had a gold tooth, or at least it was gold-plated. He smiled as if he had just killed someone. Our driver, a man experienced in such matters, estimated that he had killed a couple, at the very least. Perhaps the

officer's last victim was a Seri Indian lying on the ground, among cacti, bleeding from a gunshot wound to his back. Or maybe a junkie from Arizona looking for thrills in the small towns of Sonora, and instead getting one right between the eyes courtesy of this murderer with a badge.

Kino Bay was calm on our arrival. Six fat couples in bathing suits were playing volleyball; some kids were drinking Tecate Light and listening to reggaeton next to a bonfire. It was almost serene. Then we noticed the row of bulletproof pickup trucks with blacked-out windows. They were filled with tough guys whose favorite activity is driving down the only avenue in town, listening to *norteño* music at a worrisome and suspense-inducing low volume.

Smack in the middle of the avenue, which is to say, right in the middle of the town, was another Sonora state-police checkpoint: five cop cars with their lights flashing, piercing the darkness of the night. Inside were ten very annoyed Sonora police officers who looked like they had just been released from a military mental asylum.

For some reason unbeknownst to me, just before arriving at this second checkpoint our driver stopped the music. We had been listening to a CD by Los Cade-tes de Linares, a band that's from the Mexican north-east—near the Texan border—and not the northwest.

He slid in another CD, this time a bootleg, and scanned forward to track 7. It was a Chalino Sánchez tune based on Manuel Acuña's poem "Nocturno a Rosario," and its alexandrine verses came belting out of the speakers in a screeching wail. Chalino was a hitman before he became a professional singer. He quickly turned into a star but could not escape his past and, eventually, was shot dead at the age of 31.

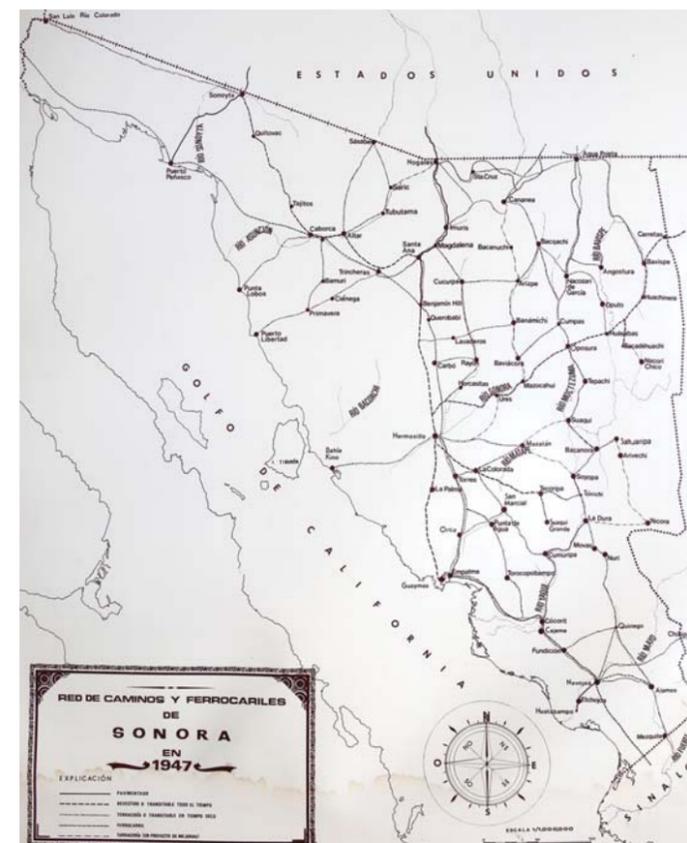
This time there was minimal dialogue at the checkpoint; there wasn't even an attempt at interrogation, and the journey continued. Our final destination, which we hoped to reach by evening, was Lorenzo Pinelli's hostel. He had surprised us by announcing he had a copy of *Pájaro de Calor* (Bird of Heat), the legendary 1976 infrarealist<sup>1</sup> anthology that is so rare it may as well not be real. It is a key artifact of the literary movement, and arguably one of the many aesthetic cornerstones of Roberto Bolaño, perhaps the most celebrated contemporary author to write extensively about Mexico, even if he was from Chile.

We arrived at the hostel and met Lorenzo Pinelli, a pleasant Dostoyevskian character exiled in this Siberia of sand: all muscles, thick mustache, and kind eyes, like those of a giant marine insect.

Oddly, Roberto Bolaño never went to Sonora during his lifetime. But Sonora was to Bolaño what Macondo was to Gabriel García Márquez, or Yoknapatawpha to William Faulkner. Bolaño only knew Sonora through maps made by Julio César Montané, a scholarly Chilean who had been exiled in the state since the 1970s. (To put this in context, a Chilean in Sonora is as strange and extravagant as a Finn in Oaxaca.) Montané, a literature professor, historian, and geographer, served as the basis for the character of Amalfitano in Bolaño's magnum opus, 2666. In the novel there is a long passage in which Amalfitano speaks about a subject that, in Mexico, is as delicate as that of the *narcotraficantes*.

It's an old story, the relationship of Mexican intellectuals with power. I'm not saying they're all the same. There are some notable exceptions. Nor am I saying that those who surrender do so in bad faith. Or even that they surrender completely. You could say it's just a job. But they're working for the state. In Europe, intellectuals work for publishing houses or for the papers or their wives support them or their parents are well-off and give them a monthly allowance or they're laborers or criminals and they make an honest living from their jobs. In Mexico, and this might be true across Latin America, except in Argentina, intellectuals work for the state. It was like that under the PRI and it'll be the same under the PAN. The intellectual himself may be a passionate defender of the state or a critic of the state. The state doesn't care. The state feeds him and watches over him in silence... They only hear the sounds that come from deep in the mine. And they translate or reinterpret or recreate them. Their work, it

<sup>1</sup> *Infrarealism*, or *infrarealismo*, was a literary movement founded in 1974 by a group of poetry students who had been expelled from Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) over disagreements with their professors. They were inspired by the Beats, the Dadaists, and Rimbaud, among others, and sought to revolt against the hidebound Mexican literary establishment and the "official culture." Bolaño's first infrarealist manifesto, "Leave Everything Behind, Again," was inspired by and named after an André Breton poem.

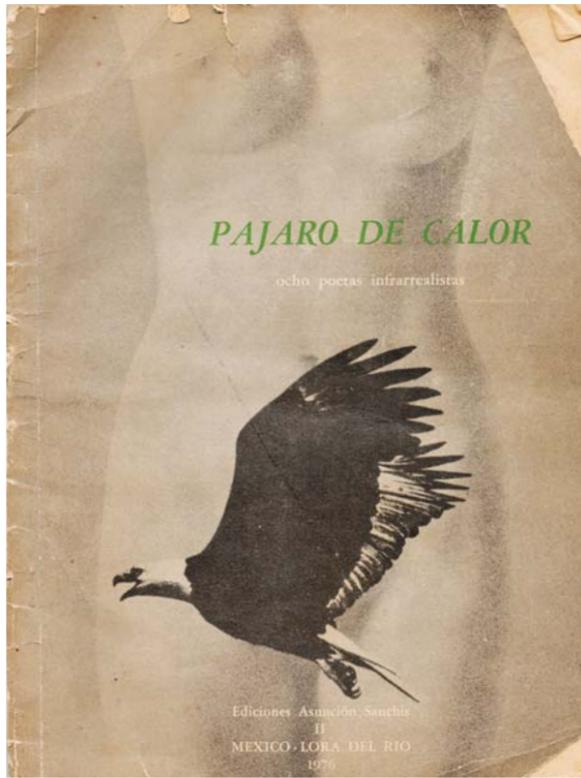


goes without saying, is of a very low standard. They employ rhetoric where they sense a hurricane, they try to be eloquent where they sense fury unleashed, they strive to maintain the discipline of meter where there's only a deafening and hopeless silence. They say cheep cheep, bowwow, meow meow, because they're incapable of imagining an animal of colossal proportions, or the absence of such an animal.

Despite Bolaño's unofficial but indisputable status as the laureate of northern Mexico, the northernmost point he ever reached was Gómez Palacio, in the state of Durango, where he spent a few days teaching a short-story workshop. Yet anyone who's read his works knows that he was obsessed with the arid region that's been a stronghold of the cartels for years.

"The Deserts of Sonora" is the title of the vertiginous third and final section of *The Savage Detectives*, Bolaño's 1998 novel about a decades-long quest for an elusive Visceral Realist poet among many, many other tangents and scenarios revolving around both Mexico's literary elite and the country's most contemptuous individuals. In the book, Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, Bolaño and Mario Santiago Papasquiaro's alter egos, travel through Sonora, looking for the disappeared poet Cesárea Tinajero, knowing only that she had produced the Visceral Realist anthology *Caborca*, which is named after a border town near Arizona. To get there, the Savage Detectives travel the federal highway from Mexico City all the way

A 1947 map by Julio Montané from a gargantuan atlas of Sonora that was discovered at a bookstore a few blocks away from the VICE office in Mexico City. While we can never be sure, it is likely that Bolaño used this very same edition to inform the backdrop of *The Savage Detectives* and 2666.



to Santa Ana, Sonora, before taking a detour west, passing through Pueblo Nuevo and Altar. When they finally arrive in Caborca, they search for Cesárea but can't find her, so they carry on with her journey.

Many other towns in Sonora appear in Bolaño's work. The main setting of *2666* is the town of Santa Teresa, Sonora, a place inspired by Ciudad Juárez, located in the neighboring state of Chihuahua. Bolaño wrote much of his work inside apartments in Barcelona and Blanes, armed with maps of Sonora that were scattered about the floor and sometimes taped to the walls. These maps supplied him with the phonetics and names that became essential to his work. These names, which may seem spontaneous to readers, were more calculated than any of the murders in *Woes of the True Policeman*, Bolaño's final (at least for now) posthumous novel. The violence of the region is another one of Bolaño's themes: One of the last things he wrote, before his death at the age of 50, was "El Policía de Ratas" ("Police Rat"), a short story that describes a shocking murder in an idyllic community of rodents. (It also shares multiple parallels with "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk," Kafka's last short story.)

Kino Bay doesn't appear in any of Bolaño's books. But it was here, on this particular evening, that we paid the author tribute in the form of a spontaneous reading of his poetry. The critics consider the poems bad, especially when compared with the Chilean's narrative work, and Bolaño himself admitted as much in an interview: "I wrote poems that can't stand the passage of time. My trip to Europe made me look at my own poetry differently." Some of his verses, however, gain more poetic sense when one is familiar with Sonora, especially if one is currently standing within its borders.

At the reading, some of the poems were recited with the accompaniment of norteño music in the background. The night's readers included Alejandro Almazán, an author who had just completed a novel about the world's most-wanted narco-trafficker, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera; Carlos Sánchez, who runs a literary workshop at the Hermosillo jail for women accused of murder; Felipe de Jesús Larios, the best journalist in Sonora, who always describes his lovers as *sicarios* (hired assassins) and never as girlfriends; and José Luis Valencia, author of the truly infrarealist short story "La Poeta Gorda" ("The Fat Poet"), dedicated to a poet whose naked body adorns the covers of her books. Lorenzo Pinelli, our host, also read a few poems not far from the Sonora cops. A splendid night.

In addition to Bolaño's poetry, the night included conversations about proctologists from the town of Agua Prieta and fishing boats full of cocaine en route to Los Angeles, and stories told by an old man who looked like a shadow. When he talked, he did so with sand in his eyes and at the edges of his mouth. He told us his name was Pedro Carrillo and that he was born in Navolato, Sinaloa. It's also the hometown of Carrillo Fuentes, the *capo* of Ciudad Juárez, but he assured us that they were not his relatives, but with that last name and gloomy face, no one believed him.

As the night wound on there was also a conversation about a fearsome gang known as Los Ponis, and about Uncle Celerrino, that sinister character from the countryside who told his stories to one of his nephews, the celebrated Mexican author and photographer Juan Rulfo.

Later, there were the tales about two strippers from Mexico City. One of them was born in Mérida, Venezuela,



and the other in Ciudad Obregón, Sonora. The Venezuelan was short, and the Sonoran was tall—she fled because her sister was murdered and, on top of that, strip clubs had been banned in her state. Her sister was killed for dating a narco, and the narco was shot 12 times in the street, but he survived and relocated to the US under a new identity. But the stripper's sister was shot seven times, though she was dead after the first bullet pierced her temple, a perfect shot. Someone recalled talking to the tall stripper one night, while she was leaving work in the ritzy Mexico City neighborhood of Polanco, and she expounded at length on the ABC Daycare fire in Hermosillo, Sonora, which killed 49 children. She was outraged that the governor had banned strip clubs in Sonora but was OK with daycares operated by his corrupt political friends, even when that led to the deaths of half a hundred kids.

All of a sudden, at dawn, Lorenzo Pinelli slowly recounted an encounter with Roberto Bolaño. Of course, everyone was dubious, even if Lorenzo was the right age and was surrounded by enough mystery for such a meeting to have taken place.

As he realized we thought he might be full of it, Lorenzo stopped talking and walked to a backroom where he poked through a mess of Pink Floyd tapes, weed, Bukowski books, and keys to locks he had never tried to open. Finally he returned to the party, a little yellowish book in his hand, the ink a bit faded but still readable.

The cover read:

*Pájaro de Calor* (Bird of Heat)  
*Ocho Poetas Infrarealistas* (Eight Infrarealist Poets)  
 Mexico—Lora Del Rio  
 1976

Here it was, the endangered infrarealist specimen—the locus of it all. The first collection from the infrarealists, the movement that Bolaño helped found, with an introduction by Juan Cervera that reads as follows:

**INFREAREALIST POETS:**

*Before reading these young poets, gathered under the curious banner of what they called infrarealism, one gets tangled up in questions. Ask yourselves: What is this movement about? And it turns out that once we read what they express, the definitions are unnecessary. These eight poets, infrarealists or however they call themselves, are nothing more than eight wills and eight feelings that talk to us with faith and enthusiasm of life with a beautiful load of liberated sensuality.*

It made me wonder whether Lorenzo really was friendly with Bolaño, and whether perhaps the author himself bequeathed this fabled anthology to him. It was too good of a story to question, so I didn't ask. *WCB*

**ABOVE:** Another photo from Eunice Adorno's Santa Teresa-inspired series.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Scans of the cover and interior pages of the elusive *Pájaro de Calor* (Bird of Heat). It was published in 1976 and is perhaps the earliest compendium of infrarealist literature.



Lorin Stein and Sadie Stein are the editor and deputy editor of the *Paris Review*, one of the most august, respected, and actually readable institutions in American letters. This month's DOs & DON'Ts are an informal colloquium on contemporary street fashion, with **Lorin's critiques in blue ink** and **Sadie's ripostes in red**.



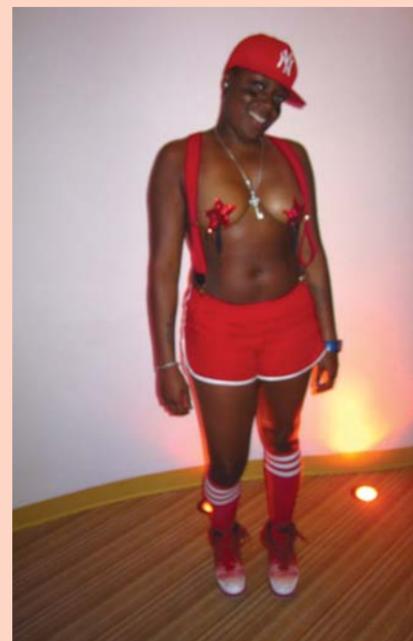
I like that I can't make a single assumption about her life based on this. She's doing for shut-ins what drag queens did for women.



Like Proust said, let us leave beautiful women to men with no imagination.



There's something I like about this. The slackened suspender. She has a sort of Dora Maar quality. The shoes ruin it. It shows a lack of commitment to total glamour.



Now THIS is glamour. There's not a part of this that hasn't been cogitated—Curated, really. 100% charm. She just seems like somebody who really knows how to control her image. It's also amazing she managed to match all those reds. It's not easy.



It says a lot about his outfit that I just noticed his dick. He's wearing hiking shoes!



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## DON'Ts



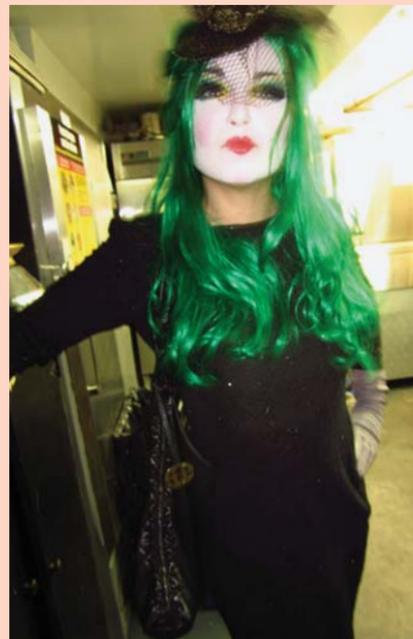
This generation is going to make the worst old people ever. Remember that guy who came by last week to give you his steampunk novel? Wasn't he wearing a cape? Don't worry about it.



If you're going to do Xanadu Weimar Chauffeur— Don't fuck up the clutch.



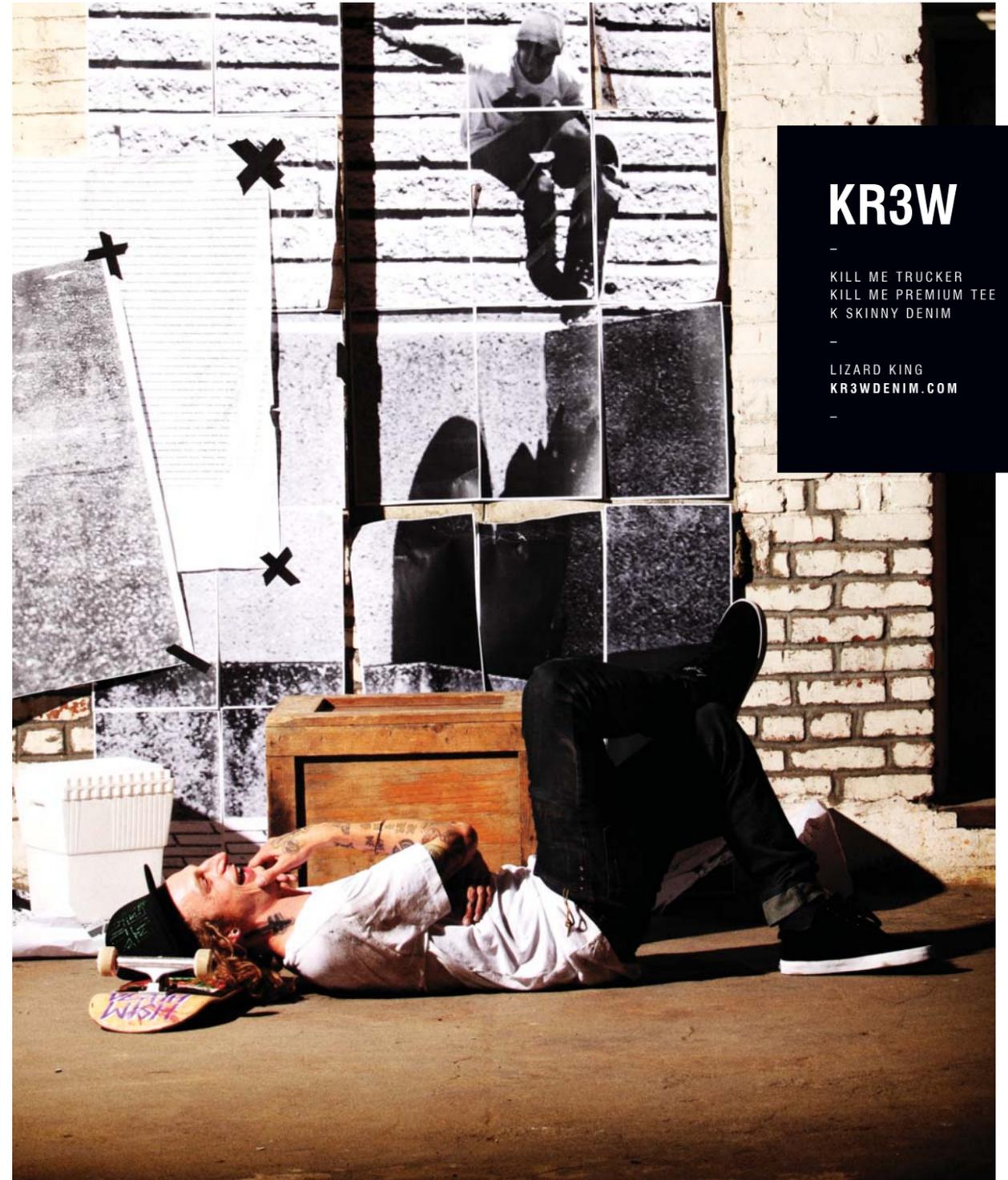
You know how Diana Vreeland said "A little bad taste is like a sprinkling of paprika"? This is like a full goulash with a tiny dollop of sour cream.



I hate how Johnny Depp won't just come out and admit that he's not a character actor. He makes his handsomeness into a curse, and yet he coasts on it. I don't like it. That's not Johnny Depp. Oh, I know.



You know, the other night my boyfriend said, "You'd think aliens of all people would know by this time if you probe an anus you're not going to find anything." Of all people.



ERIK ELLINGTON / LIZARD KING / TERRY KENNEDY / TOM PENNY / WINDSOR JAMES  
SPENCER HAMILTON / BOO JOHNSON / KEVIN ROMAR / DANE VAUGHN





Kids think being a grown-up is really fun, which it is.



Some eight-year-old girl is crying her eyes out right now—and it's worth it. I would have killed for that. My hennin was really crummy. My aunt made it.



These are the only women in the world who can make stone-washed denim look unironically good. The unirony is... wow, she's so pretty. [silence]



"Here's the young street and you're just a little boy / Your mother dresses you exclusively in sailor suits." That's Apollinaire.



She seems to have a tattoo of her own face on her clavicle. I think there's something admirable about that. Counterintuitive, but as Jane would say, "Do this Don't."



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DON'Ts



What do you think he's requesting?  
To be put back in his jack-in-the-box.  
It's comforting in the box.



Is that a Phrygian bonnet?  
You see Phrygian bonnets everywhere. That,  
my friend, is a hot dog.



Last time I was at the opera there was a little  
boy dressed like this, and his mother was  
saying, "He just adores Mozart."



Say you'd been kept in one of those Austrian  
bunkers your entire girlhood and didn't  
know that cats were supposed to be cute?  
This would be terrifying.

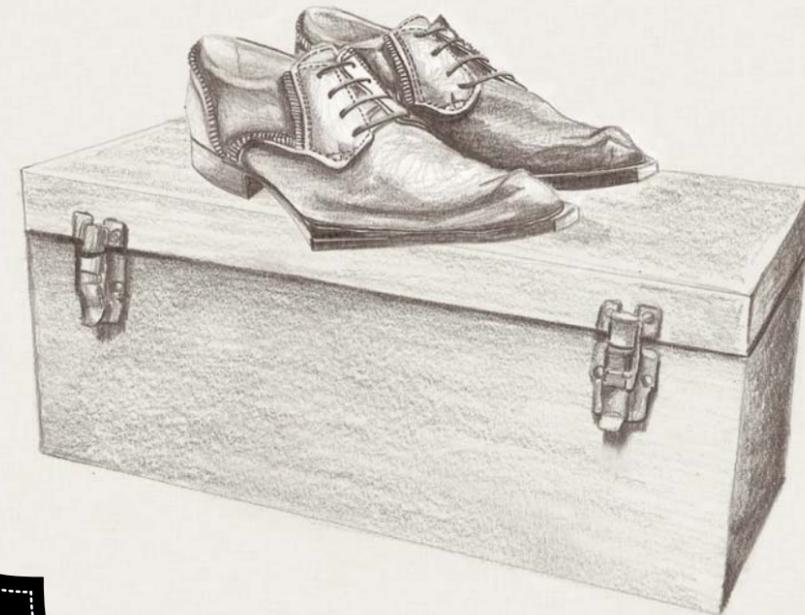


I'm always suspicious of women who call  
them "panties."



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# PHONIES

PHOTOS BY BEN RITTER  
STYLIST: ANNETTE LAMOTHE-RAMOS



Photo assistant: Jason MacDonald  
Hair: Darine Sengseevong  
Makeup: Terese Bennett  
Models: Deema Aitken, Jay Amari,  
Branco at Fusion, Eamon Fahey,  
Peter Kilcommons, Spencer Koral  
at Fusion, Tori Maisey at Mc2,  
Tzarina Merrin, Jeff Sauber, Robin  
Strasds, Kelsey Tuttle at Major  
Shot at Greystone Court  
Special Thanks to ModCloth.com  
Casting by Impossible Casting  
and The Agency Online

HOLDEN CAULFIELD

Original Penguin jacket, Benetton shirt, Woisey tie, Shades of Grey by Micah Cohen pants, Calvin Klein underwear, Aldo belt and shoes, Huf hat, Louis Vuitton trunk



Clown suit, shoes, and wig from Halloween Adventure, American Apparel socks

PENNYWISE THE DANCING CLOWN



ESTHER GREENWOOD

*Eva Franco dress, American Apparel socks, Fluevog shoes*



*Brixton shirt, Wolsey scarf, vintage hat*

IGNATIUS J. REILLY



LADY MacBETH

*ModCloth dress, Fluevog shoes, Terese Bennett headpiece, vintage ring*



MICHAEL PEMULIS

*K-Swiss shirt, shorts, and shoes, Huf socks, hat from Halloween Adventure*



**DOLORES "LOLITA" HAZE AND HUMBERT HUMBERT**

*Ryu jacket, Esther Williams swimsuit, Cult Gaia headband, Woisey jacket, Fred Perry shirt, vintage watch*



**HUCKLEBERRY FINN**

*C.P. Company shirt, Edun pants, Diesel belt, Brixton hat, Benetton shoes*



JAY GATSBY

Paul Smith suit, socks, and tie, Original Penguin shirt, Wolverine boots



agnès b. pants, Fluevog shoes, jacket, cape, and hat from Halloween Adventure

CAPTAIN AHAB



## THE MAGICIANS

BY DEB OLIN UNFERTH  
ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW THURBER

I hated the magicians. There were two of them, and I hated them with everything in me. When I first sat down across from them, I didn't know who they were. But then they said, "We're the magicians," and I remembered them.

"Oh, I saw you guys last time," I said. "But you're not really magicians."

"Yes, we are," they insisted.

"No, I saw you," I said. "I saw the whole thing. I read it in the program and I was excited about it, and then I watched and you guys aren't magicians. You don't do magic."

"Yes we do," they said.

"Not real magic."

"It is," they said, nodding solemnly, "real magic."

"My brother was a magician," I said.

Suddenly they looked uncomfortable.

"Yeah," I went on, "he was a magician, so I know what a magician is. That's why I said you guys aren't magicians."

"Was?" they said. "Is he not anymore?"

I said, "My brother is dead."

"Dead?" they said. They looked more uncomfortable. "What was his name?"

I said his name.

I shouldn't have said his name because he didn't have a magician's name like they obviously thought he should—I could tell by the looks they gave each other—and I hated them even more.

"Where did he do magic?"

Now I looked uncomfortable. The truth was, when he was alive, he didn't perform all that much. "He worked in a magic shop," I said. "He did shows on weekends." True, sort of true, or not true, at least not that I knew

of. We weren't that close. He may or may not have done magic on weekends.

But anyway I knew what magic was, and these guys were not it.

Then they put their hands on the table and said, "We're meta-magicians, and plus we're magicians."

"All magicians are meta," I said. "You're not even meta." "Magicians are ridiculous," they said.

"You're ridiculous," I said. "You're a couple of bozos, a couple of clowns."

I hoped I had made them very uncomfortable. A while later they did their little act, which consisted of them dressing up like clowns and calling themselves magicians and running around on the stage and finally doing one single trick, a sloppy, uninteresting, obvious one.

And that's pretty much how it went. Until they talked about the elephant room. This was later, at the party, when everyone was listening.

"There was a room that Houdini made for himself," they said, and they had a picture of it to show. "Houdini called it the elephant room, though no elephant could have fit in it because it was a very small room, unless it was a truly tiny elephant, a baby, perhaps. But really, the door was so small there was no way to get an elephant into that room, not even a baby elephant, and no way to get it out."

So Houdini had made the room and called it something that it couldn't be, but him merely calling it that, its sheer name, made me believe it, made me imagine the elephant in the room, made me see it standing there and also wonder why it wasn't there. So in a way it was the elephant room. It became the elephant room by magic. The magicians made me see it, so, yes, they were doing magic. But it still didn't make them magicians. *UCB*



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# MY FATHER AT THE END

BY MICHAEL KIMBALL  
ILLUSTRATION BY JOE DENARDO

Before he died, my father moved from Las Vegas back to Michigan. My sister found him a one-bedroom apartment he could pay for on his Social Security. He bought a new bed, a new couch, and a new television with some of the money he had left, and my sister gave him back the things she had stored for him in her basement while he was in Las Vegas. She helped him with the new apartment—unpacking everything, setting up the telephone and utilities, etc. Our father couldn't do a lot of these things for himself anymore, and my sister took on most of this burden.

Toward the end of his life, my father had difficulty walking. This was partly because of his weight and partly because he had developed bone spurs on his feet (which were partly caused by his weight). The bone spurs were his feet's response to being asked to carry so much weight. His feet started making extra bone to support the extra pounds. They were the only things trying to do something about my father's weight.

My father had different canes and walkers to help him get around, but his difficulty walking meant there were times when my father didn't leave his apartment for days or for weeks. During these times, my father made a list of things he needed—mostly groceries—and my sister bought them, brought them back to his apartment, and put them away for him.

Right after my father moved back to Michigan, he started calling me every day, and for a while, I talked with him every day. Without the casino, he didn't have much else to do inside his apartment besides eat and watch television.

Back in Michigan, something changed inside my father and he became really mean again. Usually, the meanness took the form of simple insults and cuts, trying to correct or undercut nearly anything I said, the kind of thing I heard and felt when I was growing up. This time around, though, my father seemed pathetic in a way that allowed me to ignore the fact that the things he said were directed at me. He mostly seemed lonely, and answering the telephone was an easy enough way to keep him company.

During these telephone calls, my father would sometimes fall asleep. It didn't matter who was talking. Sometimes, my father would just trail off into a mutter and then I would hear him start snoring. Other

times, it would seem like he was interrupting me, but then I would hear him start snoring. The funniest times were when I just heard the receiver hit the floor and then nothing but background noise.

The first few times this happened, I yelled my father's name until he woke up. After a while, I just started hanging up on him. He usually didn't call me back until the next day.

My father also started getting confused or maybe hallucinating during some of these telephone conversations. Sometimes, he called me his dead brother's name, *Kenny*. Other times, he called me his living brother's name, *Walter*. Every once in a while, it was one of my cousin's names, *Butch*. It always made me think he wanted a different son.

Once, out of nowhere, my father started talking about chili dogs and shotguns. Another time, he started ordering take-out Chinese from me before I interrupted him.

Another time, my father started yelling, *It's a bear. It's a bear.* I tried to talk to him, but there wasn't any response. It sounded like he set the telephone down, and then I heard a loud bang in the background. When my father got back on the line, I asked him what had happened. He said he'd made the bear disappear.

Eventually, the telephone calls with my father became so frustrating and difficult I stopped answering. I felt guilty about doing this, and I felt silly about a simple realization: I wasn't required to talk to my father even if he was my father.

The more I didn't answer my father's calls, the more he called. Sometimes, he called dozens of times and I would eventually answer just so he would stop calling. Unfortunately, that only lasted for the rest of the day—and sometimes he would even forget we had talked in the afternoon and call me again in the evening, telling me the same things he had said earlier in the day. I can't remember ending any one of these telephone calls with my father and feeling good about it.

I did not talk to my father for most of the last year he was alive. I should have stopped talking to him years before, though—it was such a huge relief. I was so much happier not talking with him than I was talking with him. It was a form of self-preservation.

## MY FATHER AT THE END by Michael Kimball

I stopped talking to my father, but my father did not stop calling me every day and leaving messages. At first, I listened to them, but they were almost always the same: *Danny, this is your father. Call me back.* It was almost always a statement and a command. He was still trying to tell me what to do.

I kept not answering his telephone calls. I started erasing the messages without listening to them.

At one point, my wife and I considered changing our telephone number. Ironically, that seemed like too mean of a thing to do.

Almost a year passed without talking to my father. I felt lighter and I began to feel like I could answer his telephone calls again. Around Christmas in 2004, I picked up the receiver and my father was on the other end of the line. He was surprised when I answered. He sounded excited that he caught me. He asked me what I had been up to and I told him I'd been really busy. We never said anything else about it.

In one of our last telephone calls, my father told me he had just been to the doctor's office and that he had gained a lot of weight. He hadn't used a home scale for years because he couldn't see over his belly to read the numbers between his feet and, even if he could have, they didn't go high enough to measure his weight. For years, my father could only find out how much he weighed at the doctor's office. This last time, though, my father didn't know the exact number. He had maxed out the doctor's 500-pound scale. He was heavier than that.

Really fat people move in different ways than people who are not really fat. For instance, my father had to stand up in stages. Since he didn't really fit into most chairs or on most couches, he often sat on the floor. To get up, he needed to hold on to something he could push or pull—a door, a chair, or another piece of furniture. Then he would roll over onto his side and up onto his knees while pushing or pulling his upper body up. From his knees, he would get one foot flat on the ground and then the other foot. Then he would straighten his legs up. Once his legs were under him, he could raise his upper body until he was standing upright. Once he was standing, he didn't move for a while. He had to rest and catch his breath.

When my father pushed himself up, he didn't do it with an open hand. He did it with a fist. The last time he used an open hand, he dislocated two fingers on his right hand. Nobody's fingers are strong enough to hold up that much weight.

My father's arms were always bigger than my legs.

My father's legs were really strong just from standing up and walking. Each step he took had to carry his 500-plus pounds.

The legs of super-obese people usually rub together, so they start to throw them out to the side when they walk. Also, their arms get pushed out to the side by their expanding torsos. Their proportions start to resemble those of a baby—except the head is a really small part of the body when a person is super-obese.

Almost every obese person is hunched over. My father looked a little deformed with all that weight pushing down on him. He must have wanted to pull himself out of that body.

Also, the arms of any obese person seem to be too short. Sometimes, I watched my father reach out for objects and then seem a little baffled when his hands didn't get there. It must have seemed like an optical illusion, those objects moving farther away from him.

As my father got older, his hair started to turn gray, but it just made him look more and more blond. Plus, his face never seemed to get any wrinkles. As he got bigger and fatter, his skin got taut, which made my father look younger than he was.

After we started talking again, my father began calling me every day again. The last telephone call I received from my father, he left his usual message. I didn't call him back because I knew he would call again later or call again the next day.

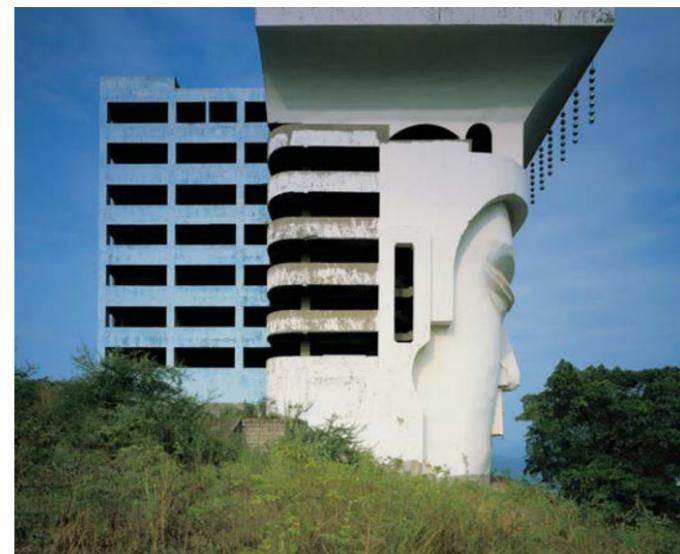
My father didn't call the next day and I remember wondering about it that night. I thought there might be something wrong with him, but then I forgot about it for a couple of days.

My father didn't call me on my birthday either and I thought there might be something wrong with him, but it was my birthday and I didn't want to deal with it right then. It was a relief when my father didn't call for a while.

I don't feel guilty for not talking to my father for that year, but I do feel guilty about not calling him back that one time. There were so many times I thought my father was going to die soon, but he didn't die any of those times. I started to think he was just going to get bigger and bigger and keep living, and all that size was somehow going to protect him from death.

I want to talk to my father again now that he is dead.

Once, I dialed my father's old telephone number just to see if he really was dead. Somehow, it seemed possible he might answer. There was a recording saying the number had been disconnected. 



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# THREE GANGSTER FABLES

BY BARRY YOURGRAU  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY CF

## RISKY COMEDY



A nightclub comedian is having a bad night. Through the hazy glare of the spotlight he notices a fat older guy staring up at him with particularly doltish indifference. He goes over to the edge of the stage and makes a wisecrack at this dimwit's expense, something about his girth, like, "Couldn't at least one of you two in that chair laugh?" There's a minor smattering of titters at this. The fat man blinks. He colors. He starts to get ponderously to his feet. The comedian keeps going and tells him not to worry, they're finding a forklift to help him. This brings forth a few more weak laughs. The fat man sinks back down, staring stone-faced.

"Christ, what a load of corpses, I shoulda done a funeral service," the comedian mutters, coming offstage at last. The club owner grabs him by the arm. He looks ashen. "Do you know who you just made a monkey of?" he rasps in a strained voice. To his shock, the comedian discovers he was taunting an organized-crime bigshot.

A meeting takes place in the club owner's office, where the fat mobster is waiting. The sweating comedian apologizes cravenly, after his groveling introduction by the club owner. He tells a couple of brutal jokes on himself. (He's good at that.) To the owner's alarm he even starts to undress, in another wayward comic inspiration—to bare himself for the flogging, as it were, he deserves. The fat man interrupts this performance humorlessly. "Knock it off," he says. "You can make up for it. I'm having a party tomorrow night. We need more entertainment. But good stuff this time, not crap," he adds. "Sure, sure," the comedian assents, hastily getting back into his shirt.

The party is a loud, tedious affair at the mobster's grimly ostentatious estate. The comedian gets up on the bandstand and tells jokes for 20 minutes while the middle-aged band takes a break. Most of the guests ignore him. Afterward he's brought over to the host to accept his thanks. "Now we're all square," says the fat man, and he gives the comedian a thump on the arm that's half playful, half not. The comedian cackles manically. "Now go enjoy yourself," the fat man mutters, turning away.

The comedian wanders through the dowdy crowd, nodding at a few thumbs-ups he receives. Then he just stands to the side, grinning morosely, gulping his drink. He trains a furtive eye about for any kind of attractive presence, but sees none. The booze and the state of his nerves conspire in him to ignite another flame of deviant inspiration. All at once he starts to babble doubletalk, loudly, and when enough heads turn, he goes hopping about, peeling off his clothes, yelling, "Last one in the pool is a rotten stoolie!!" (There is a pool, of course, a big one, but his challenge is rhetorical.) Inside him,

a smaller, clearer-headed version of his uproarious self looks on, thinking, "What am I doing, am I out of my mind?" A pair of two burly figures hurry through the gaping guests and bring a quick end to the performance.

The comedian is back in front of the mobster, in a private room. "I'm just *craaaaazy*, baby!" the comedian yelps with a sickened waggish grin, trying desperately for comedy's jiu-jitsu reversal of mood and expectation. He has to hold up his trousers, having thrown away his belt during his fit of insanity. "This is my home, these are my guests," the fat man declares, breathing heavily, one eyelid twitching. "You insulted them—you insulted me."

This is not a word anyone wants to hear from a very heavysset gangster in late middle age wearing an expensive, outdated version of fancy dress: "insulted." And certainly not in the plural. "Please—I'll make it up to you—" sputters the comedian. "You gotta be joking," the mobster replies, without irony. He flaps his hand in contempt. "Take care of him," he says to the others in the room, turning away.

The comedian gapes left and right as hands seize his arms. He flails chaotically, somehow breaks loose, wriggles somehow to the door as the others stumble over the upended furniture. He rushes out into the corridor.

Clutching his trousers, he runs along, glancing wildly over his shoulder, like a frantic adulterer in a cheesy farce. He skids around a corner and crashes over a caterer's cart and goes sprawling. He struggles up and flounders off as the waiter he knocked over curses him from the shambles.

Footsteps pound closer behind. He gapes back in despair. His pursuers heave into view around the corner. And then ahead—another bunch are massed now. He stops, turns this way and that. The two groups close on him and then halt. The comedian cowers in open-mouthed terror. Very slowly, the tough guys all begin to laugh. Their laughter grows wild. They start whooping and pulling off their clothes, flinging garments into the air as they prance about. The fat man is among them suddenly, his tuxedo piled on his head like a turban. The comedian sinks to the floor, gibbering, his echoing laughter a thin cracked cackle.

He jerks awake. He thrashes up wildly. He's in his own bed, in his own shabby apartment. He drops back onto the pillow, gasping, moaning in shock. "What a dream... what a dream..." he keeps mumbling, about to cry, throwing an arm over his face.

A sharp pain at the wrist hobbles his movement. He yelps. His eyes spring open.

And his brief invention of deliverance is over.



He's not in his bed. He's on a dingy cot. Naked. His wrists are tied to the legs of a table behind his head and his ankles are strapped down. His skull aches.

"You really like to take off your clothes," says the fat man, standing over him in his tacky tuxedo. "You think it's funny."

"What—happened?" the comedian gulps, disoriented. "In the hall—didn't they—and you—" His voice trails off.

"Hub?" sneers the fat man. "Oh," he says. "Feeling that punch in the head."

An hour later they load him, bound and naked on his cot, into a van and drive out to the desert, and carry him into a fetid, still scorching remote cave. He shrieks when they start to leave. One of the men thinks he's fine like that. But the other one raises the slight possibility of the noise attracting attention. So they go back in and tape his screwy mouth shut.

## PINK DREAM

A young pickpocket makes an easy snatch. On a crowded bus, his ghostly fingers lift a girlish pink wallet from a girlish pink patent-leather purse that protrudes like a wad of discarded bubblegum from a faceless cram of bodies. On a park bench he inspects his catch. Besides a few dollars there's a folded temporary driver's license, just text, no photo, and a snapshot taken in one of those quickie photo booths. The snapshot shows a girl laughing. She is thin and dusky, Asian of some kind. The pickpocket stares at her. A twinge trembles through his tough, thieving young heart. Love at first sight, this twinge is called. The pickpocket curses to himself. He looks up suddenly, left and right. He's alone. He stares back at the photo. He reads the name on the license, but it's entirely foreign to him. He pronounces it softly, clumsily. He flushes and curses again. Then he jumps to his feet. His impetuous young heart churns.

An hour or so later he stands across the street from the address on the driver's license: a drab little house on a drab street in an immigrant neighborhood. He watches. An hour goes by. No one leaves or enters. Then a slender figure passes quickly behind a curtained window: a girl's figure?

The pickpocket grins. He spits out the bubblegum he's been chewing. It lands pink on the grimy sidewalk. He runs a comb through his crudely greased hair. What he's about to do is reckless: First, it violates the cardinal rule of his trade, never to allow any public association between yourself and the purloined article. Second, who knows the circumstances of this girl, supposing she's in fact inside? Perhaps she has an aggressive and jealous boyfriend. Or a violent older husband. Hostile brothers. A father whose concealed lust finds outlet in hair-trigger "virtue"-obsessed rages. But the pickpocket is young and in the grip of love at first sight, meaning the gross grip of fantasy; and though he's sly, he's pretty stupid also. With his ghostly fingers he slips out the photo from the wallet (which he'll be returning as a goodhearted citizen) for a valedictory gaze. Then, heart pulsing, he grins. He saunters into the street. Halfway across he jerks about; with a squawking curse he flounders back sprawling.

A car roars up out of nowhere; squeals to a halt. Two objects arc lazily from its houseward side and

smash voluptuously against the house's front. The car screeches away. The front of the house explodes. The shockwave knocks the pickpocket from where he is on all fours back to the ground. The pink wallet lies shiny where it already flew from his grip.

Struggling again to his knees, the pickpocket gapes at the flames leaping from the blasted front door, from the smashed window. He hears screams. Figures suddenly come pouring out of the house—a horde of people in flames. Dusky men, women, and children swarm shrieking into the street, ablaze, as if visited by the fiery judgment of hell. The pickpocket lurches among them, scanning in frantic shock for the girl in the photo. He sees her; she veers away from him toward the side of the house, her arms chaotic in the pyre of herself. The pickpocket gapes in horror, then runs shouting after her. He throws himself onto her, knocking her down, rolling with her on the ground to smother her flames as she writhes, blackening, under him. He screams, his precious hands searing in her oozing flames.

Fire engines come shrieking to this scene of devastation. Hard rubberized hands wrench the pickpocket away from the charred remnant he tried to rescue, and smother him in a blanket and batter him as the smoke rises. (The wallet lies crushed under a fire-engine tire.)

He survives. Of the 40 or so desperate people crammed illegally in the little house, a few survive too. Most, including the girl, don't. The instigators of this appalling horror, a rival gang of people smugglers, are never brought to justice.

The pickpocket recovers, more or less; but not really. His scorched hands are too damaged for his erstwhile trade, and his burned face and head, too easily remembered. He falls to doing errands for some nickel-and-dime small-time operations—the crime world's form of charity, administered with a glance of lowly contempt. He suffers it with the blank demeanor of the hopeless. He rides the bus, aimlessly, endlessly. When it's crowded, he just stares ahead, lost in the grip of an old dream, swaying in the press of jammed bodies around him, his damaged jaw slowly working a piece of pink, lifeless bubblegum.

## UNDERCOVER



A crime reporter goes undercover and recklessly infiltrates a drug gang deep in a violent country of volcanoes. His dyed hair and augmented tan pass well enough at first. But then suspicions flare because of his limited capacity with the local language. He is able to keep things at bay, at least temporarily, by confessing to a shameful cultural disloyalty during years living up north. A disloyalty he now bitterly yearns to make amends for, he assures his new companions.

His confession is greeted with cautious grunts and then silence. He is assigned a task, to prove his desire for atonement. There is someone who has started making trouble for the drug gang's gun-barrel jurisdiction in a certain town. This mischief must end. "It's customary to bring back the head as proof," the dissembler is told. "But the eyes, or ears, will do."

With this bloodthirsty charge, the undercover crime reporter heads off to the town on its muggy, woe-be-gone riverbank, point of entry for much of the gang's shipments—and the venue where this troublemaker has been operating.

The reporter is now in far over his head, but he dare not bolt at this point. He's surely being monitored. But he fears a trap is being set. Even so, he will have to bide his time until the right exit way slides briefly open. He prays it will not be a blood-soaked, harrowing path to that opening.

Once in the river town he has little problem finessing a meeting with the troublemaker, in the double undercover deception of being a third party interested, he'll explain, in joining forces against the gang. The target-interloper meets him in the lobby of a drab hotel away from the main square, or *zocalo*, as they call it. He turns out to be a graduate student from the north (so he claims), naive and earnest (it appears), here on an ethnographic research project. His pokings around with limited, purely academic skill in the language have been misinterpreted by the gang—so it appears. Taking a chance, the reporter tells him of the danger he's in. Seeing the alarm growing monstrous in the grad student's wide, bespectacled eyes, he confides the whole situation.

"Oh my God," gulps the grad student. He handles the information badly, that is, he insists they go straightaway to the police or the embassy. The reporter grabs hold of his arm and forces him back in his seat. In a low, heated voice, he wises up the academic apprentice to the realities of corruption and violent evil they've blundered into the middle of.

The only solution, announces the crime reporter, calculating starkly, is this: to send along the set of bloody ears, as minimally required, and in the brief lull while the gang's concentration shifts toward verification (how exactly this verification will be accomplished or undertaken is unclear) they will seize their chance to flee upriver to the coast on a stolen motorboat. (Hiring or bribing someone for this is too risky.)

"My ears?" sputters the grad student. "Why mine? Why not somebody else's—why not *yours*?"

The two inadequate lingo speakers fall into hushed, intense, grisly dispute. Finally the crime reporter, snarling, pulls out a coin. The grad student bleats his call: "Heads." He stares. The reporter catches the coin and slaps it on his wrist and, murmuring a prayer, uncovers it. He grunts. "Gee, sorry," says the grad student. He doesn't even bother to conceal his happy grin of relief.

The grim business is set for later that night, in the grad student's room in a rooming house, or *posada*, as it's called, around the corner. The reporter goes off to buy a suitable knife and supplies. This errand will keep up the false front of his mission to any watchful eyes. The stunned reporter feels like he's caught in a terrible perverse dream, a living distortion of fear and paranoia and primal egregious acts.

The hour of the rendezvous approaches. The crime reporter's resentment at his coin-flip fate burns sharper and sharper. Why shouldn't the grad student suffer the injury, as initially proposed, since his neck is only being saved thanks to the reporter? Who cares if the grad student is blameless in his predicament?—although his naïveté and linguistic insufficiency certainly bear responsibility of some sort.

The reporter announces this to his frightened host, who is waiting in his room with a pile of towels and a bottle of local firewater. The grad student frantically protests, insisting that a deal is a deal. Eventually it's negotiated that they'll each give up an ear. The sacrificed flesh will be too bloodied to be distinguished as different. They guzzle from the bottle. The grad student, who is quivering in distress, insists he be allowed to cut first. The knife blade (for boning fish) wobbles so much in his hand the reporter suddenly grabs at it, to keep it away from his eyes.

Just like that the two would-be escapees are locked in mortal struggle. A steam whistle shrills somewhere out on the muddy river. The grad student loses possession of the knife and flails up clumsily with his bony knee. The reporter barks and slashes at him. The other squeals and stumbles back and sprawls over onto the floor, losing his glasses. Blood pours through his fingers clutching his face. The reporter gasps and then leaps forward savagely and slashes down, left and right, on the grad student's head, blood and shrieks gushing. He grabs up the gory tokens where they fall and lurches backward. The grad student howls and thrashes like a tortured animal. The reporter flings down the knife and lunges to the door, heaves it open, and rushes out.

They catch him by the waterfront, in a chaotic daze, trying to rewrap the ears more compactly in a sodden page of newspaper. They leave the package beside his body, scoffing with idioms he'd never have grasped, when they head back toward the muggy lights of the town. *Q.E.D.*

# OVERSOUL

BY MITCHELL S. JACKSON  
PHOTOS BY AMY ELKINS

1.

Evening call and we skip the pig iron and pool tables in favor of strolling the track and circuit a few laps appraising the yard. Since it's one of those dreary summer days we get here where the rain ain't an *if* but a *when*, it's looking mighty scarce. Only the diehards out on the pile, laying a soundtrack of grunting and yelling, while meantime a couple of dudes who wished to God they owned a decent jumper play four-on-four on the gravelly asphalt they call a court.

"Good fortune," he says.

"So that," I say, "is what it's called?"

"No, that," he says, "is what it is."

"But to you and who else?" I say.

"To me, me, and me," he says. "Who ain't never had none. Who else you need?"

My celly's a lifer on the wrong side of half his life and, most days, especially the ones he's juiced off his world-famous Pruno, you can't tell him—it's just my luck I'm always linked with a bootleg philosopher—he ain't Nietzsche, Heidegger, Harold Bloom. But best you mind the venom; the man is also built like a steroid robot with fists big as demolition balls and a teardrop (one he earned back when I was a wee bit) inked under an eye, which means when he speaks, fools—including me—listen.

"All bullshit aside, young'in, only a few finished, but the ones that did, ain't been seen back behind the walls. Now, I don't profess knowin' what he do," he says, "rumored a whole lot of talkin' and scribblin' and what-not, but whatever it is, it seem to work. So if I was you..."

He stops short when a flabby guard moseys over and stands Gestapo-ish nearby.

"I don't mind the company, but if these folks gon' let you fast-track, you best get on it. Believe me when I tell you, you ain't built for no long stretch."

My robot-built celly proceeds to turn what should be a friendly shoulder tap into a fucking hematoma. Throbs later, when they sound the horn for the end of yard, the iron pumpers make a fracas of reracking the weights.

2.

Cap lopes in and the room freezes in moon-shaped rows of metal fold-ups, a handful of us—me included—with eyes wide as bottle caps and lips damn-near sutured. He takes his seat by the portable board, empties a duffel of books and notes, and sifts through them a moment without a word or an eye for any of us. Then he lurches to his feet, shifts what must be fossilized bones, clears his slack gullet, glances from face to face to face, and waits what must be a Julian light-year before he says this: "My friends, the world ain't set up for guys like us to win, but that's all the more reason to win." His voice is deep, metallic, severe—a baritone so

coarse there must be spikes in his throat. "And if you aren't about winning," Cap says, "then you should leave now. This program is not the place for chickenshits."

It's worth mentioning that nobody leaves, that don't nobody utter a word.

Here might be why: On top of nursing our oh-so-coveted good time, some of us are here because we heard the legend, and the legend is, spectacles on or not, this man can see right through your diaphanous-ass curtain to your guarded lockbox, see what's in that lockbox, then tell you not only that he spied it but, minus any hype whatsoever, how it might produce whatever you need, which, for the bulk of us, at least the ones with an inkling of sense, is an outbound ticket that lasts for all time.

With all the grand stories I heard, a nigger was half-expecting a real live in-the-flesh giant, but no sir, the truth is the man ain't all that physically big. Matterfact, he's intimidating about none, and probably wasn't an ounce more imposing when they began calling him Captain, or Cap—way back when he beat the biggest case the state had ever seen, those salad days of his when, as the myth has it, he was worth more scrilla than a blue-chip stock; no—I'm thinking he couldn't have been but average-size at best for the span of years a few decades back that he managed over and over the abracadabra-alakazam. And peep, this millennium Cap's a welterweight, stooped to what's likely an inch or so shy of his apex, with paper-white longish hair raked backward and a face etched in intricate grooves.

But check it, though, the man's weathered mug is one thing, but his digs are a whole other situation: a pressed cream shirt buttoned to his throat, a pair of army-green cargo pants that look half as old as anybody I know, and boots tied tight enough to make the average motherfucker's foot fall right off. He inches along the rows jacking arms and querying names, and it don't take no 3-D glasses to see the deference they pay, respect from nefarious dudes with tattoos on their necks and knuckles, with gully-wide gashes on their cheeks, from the muscle-bound old head who runs the Commissary Mafia, all of us forfeiting afternoon yard.

Anybody's guess why, when he finally reaches me, the name I give him is the one that no one, and I mean nobody, hears out my mouth unless I'm under oath. Not only that, but the hope is that the man feels my strength, faith, resolve, feels the pledge lodged close by my padlocked lockbox, and the man must have a handshake message in mind himself, 'cause there ain't sign the first of him letting me loose. "You! You!" he says. "You serious or wasting my time? I'm gonna die. And you're gonna die. And tell me who has a moment to waste?" He says this and hovers stock-still, not that big in life but bigger than life—exponential. He peers into me with eyes that

Portrait of a man having thus far served 13 years, where the ratio of years spent in prison to years alive determined the level of image loss.

could douse my greatest fear or immolate my fondest dreams, which is why right this second there's a rock band rehearsing in my chest, a flood in my pits, and for reasons unbeknownst to me, I'm overcome with the urge to confess my life. To admit how it's one thing to be an ex-con, but another thing entire to feel convicted. How every stint feels less of time away and more of time at home. How most days all I ever see are emblems of what I could've been.

Plus, here's the stone-cold ignore-it-and-that's-your-sweet-ass truth: Either I've had all I can stand or I'll never, not this year, not this decade, not this eon, get enough.

But me, I don't mention any of this. And why? What are you, a priest? Why my nuts! It's nobody's business why.

The room is swathed in jaundiced light and reeks of disinfectant that could knock you dead. For a time, every tiny breath, shift, murmur, creak, cough, sniff, could measure on Richter. Then it all softens to ambient noise, and Cap glides amid the pseudoquiet to a post in the center of it all. He grabs a branch of chalk and scrawls the word NARRATIVE on the board in leviathan script. "My friends, everyone has a sob story," he says. "But guess what, no one gives a goddamn about your sob stories. What the world attends, if it attends at all, is who you are now, and what you do with the moment at hand."

You don't have to be no psychic to know the most jaded of us will, no matter the prodding, refuse to treat this man with the utmost gravitas—aka a silly mistake that most days I'd be content to sit and watch be pursued. But for only God-might-know why, I'm struck with the urge to warn this handful of screw-face ne'er-do-wells how we can never, ever be sure when we've laid eyes on the shepherd of our last—not penultimate or semifinal, but last, as in absolute—chance of saving our oversoul.

## 3.

The chapel ain't exactly packed but ain't exactly empty either. Us graduates occupy the rows nearest the rickety lectern and sitting behind the lectern in velvet-padded wooden chairs, the superintendent and his masculine-faced female assistant, the scowling lieutenant, the chaplain, and Cap. Cap lets his anthracite eyes go the distance, maybe to the handful of family members (females mostly, but my girl ain't one of them) or the reporter, the only one present, stooped over his notes, or maybe further to where a duo of squat guards police the exits like them joints are the golden gates of third heaven.

Wouldn't nobody I know consider the ceremony's setup anywhere near lavish, and you'd think the meagerness alone would mean I'm cooler than cool, that my pulse is ticking off at a steady pace, but no such luck; my eyes are caught in twitching fits, and this heart of mine may as well be a twittering bird. No lie, it's on the fritz to the point where, if I was another type of dude, I'd nudge the super-size blockhead who's been locked near a decade for arson and ask if he too feels as though he's swallowed

stars. But as I said, that's if I was another type of dude, and let me be the first to tell you, program or not, places like this seldom let us be who we could.

You just don't know what I'd give to have a sense of time whiling away instead of this clock doing a number on my insides right up until the time the chaplain leads us in a prayer so moving even the born-again Muslim among us strikes a supplicant pose.

The superintendent bops up afterward, flashing a smile—homeboy's teeth are damn-near citrine—that's 9/10 fake, and taps the mic, and recites the most tarnished speech you ever heard about opportunity and life change and second chances, some drag don't nobody believe, if anybody believes, but him. When he's done, he gives Cap a cursory intro, relishes a few camera flashes, and struts back to his seat.

Cap, never afraid of the limelight, matterfact, always in lust of the limelight, makes a production of getting upright and shambling into view. He stops beside the lectern and peers at the crowd and glances from face to face to face to face to my face and clears his throat into a gnarled, wrinkled fist.

"All around us the noise," Cap says, in a pitch that might be magic. "There's the babble of today's news, the clatter of all acts prior, the clamor of expectations. The extent to which one finds oneself in accommodations such as these is equal to the extent one is unable to sever oneself from the roar. Over the past months, these men have discovered they were once ignorant former subjects of the world's boom, boom, boom, boom; have determined that, as it is for us all, the only way to be free is to position one's self as discrete from the din of phenomena." Cap raises a hand, whoops up what must be a chunk of lung, recomposes. "It is only then can one forge a life governed not by what's prior, but what's at hand. Only then can one truly live anew." The man of the moment edges from one side of the altar to the other and casts those stone-colored eyes into the gray distance. "This life I speak of, the life for which these men are now destined, exists as a form of quiet," he says, and gimps off the altar and onto floor.

He comes to a stop a centimeter from our pew.

"I want each of you to know that when you leave these walls, you will not be abandoned," he says. "That I will never desert you," he says, and ebbs along our row, pausing across from each of us for what feels like the better part of the rest of my life. "My friends, I say this to you with the full measure of what life to me is left: Outside, if ever you need, come find me," he says. "In Cap you can trust. In Cap you can surely trust."

He shambles back to the pulpit and stands, lucid as ever, not that big in life but grander than life—colossal. "Friends, family, chaplain, superintendent, when these men you see before you have left the confines of these walls, they will do so not as graduates of a program, but as philosophers of a new way of being."

When it's over, Cap banters with the superintendent, and my word, you never seen so many smiles and taps

and nods, never seen a handshake that could end a world war. As I said, nobody from my fam is here, and since, ceremony or not, I ain't at all in the mood for bantering with these dudes' significant others, I don't budge. Instead, I peep Cap dickering among the crowd, watch him hobble over and sit beside me and sift through pocket scraps and turn so we're face-to-face. "It's tough out there," he says, and lets the silence linger too long. "But tough is what you want. Easy is for half-asses and dimwits, of which you, my friend, are neither."

The room verges on a hush. The guards round us up well ahead of when they should.

4.

**Y**ou can lose yourself in increments: this many and that many month-stretches at a time. One morning you slug out of a tiny bunk in some building bordered by razor wire, and your 20s, where the fuck are they? A few sets later, half your 30s—vamoosed, left your sorry self in a nasty communal bathroom plucking stubborn gray hairs out your chin while mourning the immutable fact your once superior hairline has begun a full-fledged recession.

What's worse is you lost all of this, and what's left of what's left to covet is reaching a few days till last wake-up.

Here's how it goes when you touch down. There's the festivities and visits from the people you ain't seen since the last time you were home or maybe a time or two for a distracted weekend visit during the first few months—try and get somebody to see you after that—of your set. How it goes if you come home to a short stash is, if you're lucky, you get kicks from a female or fam or homeboys, the ones that not only say they want to see you back on your feet but confirm they're beyond fat-mouthing by tossing your pecunious ass a few bucks. Those first days, weeks, back in the free world, you see all of mankind's progress in the blink of an eye. When you left we'd just invented the wheel, but now, now we're flying space-ships. Unless you're a sucker<sup>2</sup>, home sweet home equals an abundance of has-beens ready to pay homage to your new (but, let's keep it real, most times temporary) swell biceps with a shot of refurbished pussy. But sooner or later, after you inhale those early, emancipated breaths, inevitably sooner rather than later, you end up gaping into the maw of the real, live, wide, apathetic, show-me-what-you-gonna-do-this-time cosmos—a position that clarifies options for even the most imbecilic of niggers.

Be who you were.

Be who you thought you could be.

Be somebody brand-new altogether.

5.

**W**ELCOME BACK is what the sign says, and you'd think this brand-new me was popping the fam's just-came-home cherry with today's turnout:

My mama, my sis and baby bro, my twins (walking now), my fine-fine woman, all convened on the porch cheering and carrying on while I lug my luggage, a state-issued trash bag, up our rickety front steps. A trillion pats on shoulders built from a consistent season on the pile, plus yet another faithful push- and pull-up regime, so many encouraging words all I can hear is a hellaloud drone.

Uncle Sip is in the backyard stooped over a billowing grill, wielding a long spatula, a semi-empty brew sitting on a side table with the meat. Somebody—no doubt one of my young geek nephews—has rigged our giant home speakers so they reach the patchy, hillocked lawn. There's an old soulful voice wailing across them, so you know one of the grown folks has gangstered DJing duties. My oldest Unc two-steps and nods his unkempt salt-and-pepper natural and keeps right on warbling along to the chorus till he sees me eyeing him from the porch. "What it is, Nephew?" he says. "What it is, what it ain't, and what it shall be?"

"Unc," I say. "You know."

My response I mean literally. Unc's the only one in the whole fam who's logged more time in the system than me. One of those old heads who—when you're facing new charges—can quote your prospective sentence under the new and old guidelines, who's probably spent most of his adult years (probation, parole, house arrest, judge-ordered community service, mandatory outpatient drug programming, city-funded intervention: Clean Slate, Fresh Start, Second Chance...) on some form of paper. But Unc's illustrious law-breaking/rehab history's another story. Shit, I got more than enough trouble keeping up with my own.

The rest of the stage: See fold-up tables scattered around the yard, see the bushes trimmed to neat shapes, see here and there adults (and a few sneaky youngsters) circumventing potholes with Styrofoam cups in hand. See a dominoes game at a shaded corner table where one of my oil-tongued cousins harangues some dudes who don't at all look familiar except they resemble in dress and bearing the old heads who parley in the neighborhood, preaching advice they didn't have the brains to follow themselves.

While I preside over the scene, my woman taps my arm and motions me to follow.

My word, from the front and back my baby girl is a cham-P-ion! But the cool part is, her physicality ain't even the half. Yeah, ask any old old head and he'll warn against bestowing an abundance of faith in a woman, any woman, while you're gone, which is sage advice for sure, but maybe once in a millennium you have a shot at finding an extraspecial one, the kind who'll stay down an entire set, by which I mean will keep a few bucks on your books, pay you consistent visits, and send enough naked flicks to keep your balls from swelling to the size of melons. And if it's true there's something rare about a female who can do that once, imagine how sublime one is who manages any more than that.

And you, you, you, fair-minded listeners, will you please, and I mean pleeeeeeaaase, hold up on the hasty judgments. Yes, it's true, while I was gone, she might've gave away the goods, but it's also equally if not more true that my heart couldn't stand an investigation.

With the hope that the light of my life is luring me upstairs for a shot of level-10 cranium, plus a skinny-dip in her nexus—the welcome home combo of my star-spent dreams—I hustle behind her.

My woman don't so much as flash a tooth when I tell her how much I missed her, when I ask where she was my last weeks down.

"There's no easy way to say this..." she says, and lets the next moment open up and suck me down.

And peoples, peoples, listen: To hell with what you, them, anyone says. There are times when it pays to be tough as steel. There are times when, no matter, we can't fake an armored heart.

As if things couldn't get worse, my PO pays a pop-up visit. My PO's an Indian, excuse me, Native American, from some tribe in northern Washington whose name I can't remember for nothing. You'd think with how bad his people have had it, he'd commiserate or at least show an atom of empathy, but hell nah, homeboy treats me like a direct descendent of Lewis and Clark. Look at this raggedy sucker squeezed in my pop's (RIP) favorite reclining chair, with his feet kicked up and a notebook in his lap. "Thought I'd drop by," he says, and flashes that supercilious I-own-your-discount-life smirk.

"Drop by on my first day home?" I say, as a question and complaint all in one. "Want to make sure you get off on the right foot," he says. "Despite what you may think, I'm a good guy, have even cut a few loose early. And let me tell you, I'd love to see you finally off my load."

"That's the plan," I say.

"Well, make sure this time your plan includes a job," he says, and scribbles notes.

"Sure thing," I say.

"Great," he says. "How about we see you in my office with pay stubs soon." My trillion-pound PO—no lie, the fool must've swallowed a tribe of Apaches—waddles for the door, his long ponytail swooshing across the mountain-size sweat patch printed in the back of his shirt, his shoe soles worn to the shape of an avalanche.

Chief Loves to Violate turns to me, his thick neck first, then the rest of him. "Looks like you're having quite the party," he says. "But if I were you, I'd steer far clear of any intoxicants. You of all people should know how those piss tests can just pop up."

6.

**A** few days after the festivities, I hit the mall with my kick-start funds—scrilla the old me might've used to cop a sack—stuffed in a pocket and buy a white shirt and a blue shirt and a pair of khakis and a pair of polyester-blend slacks and a new tie and some hard-soled shoes, and the next day I scour the city in search of HELP WANTED

signs and, with worry I hope is at least semi-veiled, enter corner stores and grocery stores and liquor stores and car lots and car washes and pawnshops and restaurants and blood banks and gas stations and warehouses and dry cleaners to fill out application after application, hoping somebody with some authority or compassion or both will hazard a call to the number I listed, which, TRUTHBETOLD, is my mama's home phone—a line she guards the way a Rottweiler or Doberman protects its owner—praying at least one fucking living human being will ring me for an interview, but since they don't, I'm left a whole morning gawking at a contraption (a prehistoric rotary joint) I've tried more than once to coax alive by ESP; unsuccessful as shit till near noon when I dress and, since a nigger's license is suspended till the day after judgment, slug out to catch the light rail or the bus or, if I'm lucky, to bum a ride or, if I'm less fortunate, to trek infinite blocks on foot to a whole new set of places taunting my soon-to-be-destitute self with virtually unavailable options, conceding my poor chances but filling out apps against the odds—every time wishing like crazy I had a whole other history to list—before trudging home to pick at leftovers, count my steady-dwindling funds, stab at sleep, and do it all over again, repeating the same script for so many mornings it takes on the feeling of a life sentence, repeating the same script so many mornings that one morning I backtrack to the mall where I copped my as-yet-unworn interview clothes, to ask security, stock boys, salesmen, managers, anybody with a name tag or a black or white button-down shirt for an opening, any opening at all, though there ain't no signs asking for HELP in view, questions that harvest a steady succession of noes, and since a nigger can only stand but so many public setbacks, for the next who knows how long I spend hours upon hours at the employment office searching listings that appear so far outside my realm of possibility as to be excerpts of science fiction, reading the fantasy paragraphs till I'm good and debased, then trudging home to eat, watch another eon of depressing news, count the last of my last few bucks, and, on the bleakest nights, lie on the flattened twin mattress in the room above my mama's head with the tepid hope my eyes stay the fuck closed forever, but since my wishes materialize about never, early the next AM an anonymous force tugs me out of bed and sends me slugging downstairs to post by a phone that, if it rings at all, is a creditor or telemarketer, but since it sometimes requires more heart to give up than it does to go on, with a gloom I pray is camouflaged, I shamble out of the house and into the jagged teeth of another day.

7.

**B**ut eventually... outfitted in my brand-new interview threads, I trek to an address on Swan Island, where I approach this guard in a small wooden booth who directs me to a huge building at the far end of the lot. Inside, I'm all but overcome by the horde of eager faces vying for a job that, to be true, a man with any standing

in the world wouldn't use to wipe his ass. So many of us competing for this minimum earner, only a certified fool would admit to anything that'd make him even infinitesimally less attractive. But since, as I said, I'm working on a new me, when I get to the question about a felony, I write "Will discuss in interview" in my neatest script.

A guy dressed in a faded denim shirt and wrinkled Dockers stomps out and calls my name and, for reasons I wouldn't admit to another man, my legs are brittle twigs, sticks barely strong enough to carry me to a sparse office: a desk and a couple of chairs against unadorned walls. The guy—one of those suckers who's probably settled for an innominate, redundant, riskless life—tells me to pull up a seat and proceeds to stand on the other side of a wide desk and stare a black hole through my skull.

"Well," he says, "I have to be honest, your work history's a bit spotty."

"It's been a rough couple," I say. "But I'm hoping for things to take a turn."

"That right?" he says, scanning the sheet. "So, what's this you need to discuss?"

8.

The next morning, after picking over food that I ain't spent—as my mama confirms more and more—a dollar on, my attitude is fuck-staring-at-the-phone, so I rummage through my lockbox for names and numbers and make call after call after call till someone produces what might be Cap's home line, but with my luck, might not.

"Well, well, my friend," Cap says. "This is quite the surprise."

He tells me that he can't chat long, but gives me a few seconds to vent before breaking it off. He recites his address and tells me the best time to stop by tomorrow. In this moment, to be sure, my relief couldn't translate to words.

Cap's huge Victorian is in a neighborhood me and my boys used to burglarize like crazy, which is why it don't take much to find his address, to locate a porch stacked with books, logs, and metal junk. I climb the steps without the first clue of what to say and ring a bell that makes the sound of a gong.

You can hear the sound of multiple bolts unbolting and hinges long overdue for lube. "Well, don't just stand there," Cap says, and leads me into a shabby front room where he points to an upholstered couch before reminding me he has to leave soon.

"What's the trouble?" he says.

"It's all bad," I say. "Between that and worse."

"So I see," he says. "Well, here's the word: nookie."

"What?" I say.

"Nookie," he says. "You getting some?"

"Are you serious?" I say. "You can't be serious."

"My friend, let me tell you. The right woman's a salve for almost any harm," he says, and fastens a shirt button and cuffs his sleeves. "You've got the felled look of a man

who's getting less than he should. Or less than none. Go out and score and have a look."

"Huh?" I say. "See what?"

"C'mon," he says.

"That's it!" I say.

"And if not," he says. He strains to his feet and motions me to follow. "Well, I'd love to keep chatting," he says. "But as I said..."

"Wait," I say. "What about what you told us inside? The narratives. The noise."

"My friend," he says. "You didn't really fall for that? Don't tell me you really bought all that crap. Jesus, can't a man make a God-for-living living."

"No," I say. "No."

The man pushes the door wide, stands awash in the brightest light I've ever seen. "Listen, pal, don't be chickenshit. We're all up to our eyes in it. Not just you. There's no big secret. Just decide."

"Decide what?" I say.

"The choice of most consequence," he says. "Whether we save our soul or save ourselves."

9.

My Uncle Sip is in a Northeastern tavern, posted by the bar, a half-guzzled brew beside him, yapping to some dude who, by the face, could've been an apostle. When I tap his shoulder, Unc swivels hella, hella slow. Judging by his glassy, rose-tinted sclera and the fact he smells as if he's bathed in his drink of choice, he's faded beyond his average percentile. "Nephew," he slurs. "What is it, a blizzard?"

"Try a motherfuckin' snowstorm," I say.

"Well, pull up a seat and let me get you somethin' to set your mind right," he says. "Hold up, is you still on that paper? When they got you reportin' next?"

The most I can manage is tossing my head side to side. "Well, I'll be goddamned, Nephew, maybe you should go virgin. Can't play it too safe these days."

"Right now," I say. "Man oh man, Unc, about right now!"

Unc warns against going any such route "just yet," and claims, as luck would have it, he's got an old patna that might could help us hustle up a couple coins.

The bartender shuffles over, and Unc orders a pair of stiff ones. A bulb dies, and the jukebox begins to moan.

What I say to Unc is, this bet not be no drag, that I hope to God it ain't no drag.

"Aw naw, Nephew," he says. "This here's legit, a real live one. You know old Unc know one of those on sight."

The drinks arrive, and they're iceless and clear and filled to the lip. Unc pinky-stirs his double shot, pats his pruned ultra-sheened Fro, flaunts a grand gold-capped smile, lifts his lowball to the heights, and suggests we toast, as he says, "to the future." But me, I look beyond old dude, down my drink in a gulp, bang the glass on the counter, and, with the ass end of my kick-start funds, order another round. 

# ON THE ILLNESS

BY AMELIA GRAY  
ILLUSTRATION BY STEIN BRIANHOFF



William was a puker. His expulsions—the color, consistency, and volume of a baby’s—occurred after every sentence he spoke. This unfortunate fact of life began, innocently enough, during his infant coos and babbles, but by the time he was barfing onto his coloring books, the doctors were stumped. He had to carry a paper cup throughout middle school. By high school he didn’t have to worry about direct ridicule, because he had no friends. And then everyone in his peer group graduated and left town, and he was blessedly, blissfully alone.

After William was done with school he took a job at the local post office, where customers tended to be enfeebled or insane and everyone had larger problems. He would spit up into an empty soda bottle. His coworkers assumed he chewed tobacco and gave him tins of it on his birthday.

Each day at work, he stood at the counter and observed a large map of North America, which hung over the desk where folks filled out their change-of-address forms. Time passed, and William began taking a daily visual interest in the Northwest Territories of Canada, at the highest point on the map. He imagined it as a pleasantly desolate place. On smoke breaks, he washed his soda bottle out in the backroom sink.

One day, a woman approached his desk. She had a wind-chapped face, and her right arm was wrapped in a sterile bandage. She clutched a cat carrier to her chest and ticked at its plastic shell with her fingernails. “What’s the lark,” she said.

“Beg pardon?” William said, raising the can to his lips.

She horked up a little something of her own. Her cheeks seemed to be covered in a thin paste. “What’s the lark, what is the lark,” she said.

“The lark?”

“The lark, the lark,” she said, inserting a fingernail under the wrapped bandage and scratching.

“First-class stamps cost 41 cents apiece,” William said. He was halfway through the sentence before he was overcome, and had to grip the countertop to complete it as the bile rose. “We have some with birds on them, but I’m not sure the skylark is featured.”

The woman hefted the cat carrier onto the counter. Inside, an orange tabby let out a low warning growl. William couldn’t quite see inside, but it appeared as if the animal was missing all four of its legs.

“The *loork*, the lark lark the lark lake lurk lark,” said the woman. She spoke with a reasonable cadence, as if she were asking about shipping rates to the Northwest Territories. William wondered briefly if perhaps she was indeed asking about shipping rates to the Northwest Territories—that his brain had deciphered the true meaning of her words and relayed it to him as only a

distant possibility, but that, in truth, he had finally lost his mind at last and would only hear garbled sentences until the merciful end.

The cat rolled onto its back in its carrier, moaning.

“Shipping rates really depend on what you’re sending,” he said. He spit into the can and pulled a white kerchief from his pocket to wipe away a pearly line of drool. “If you’re considering dispatching your cat there, you should know that only queen honeybees can be shipped by air transportation via the USPS, and that’s quite an expense indeed, particularly internationally.”

He had never spoken so many words in an uninterrupted spurt. A coworker looked up from behind a stack of packages. For one wild moment, William was unaffected, but before he could sigh with relief, he felt it welling. He gripped the counter for support, reaching blindly for the trash bin. His hand found an open box, and he brought it to his face before the torrent unleashed. Customers stopped their conversation to watch. Another coworker covered her mouth with both hands. The material soaked the box and splashed back on his shirtfront. In it, he detected the odor of his own mother’s warm breast milk, her colostrum. The lark woman balanced her cat carrier on the metered scale and howled with laughter.

William experienced the same absence of thought he always felt during the act. But because this episode lasted so long, he found he could go further within the blankness than ever. He realized the blankness had its own topography, a mountain range under an ocean, which revealed itself in moments of alternating anxiety and calm, which themselves were muted by the blankness and a part of it. This time there was none of the clenched jaw and turning away that typically accompanied the end of his episodes. At that moment, William realized his true freedom. He witnessed it.

He looked down and saw that his unwitting target had been a box of bulk postage. At that moment he was holding hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars’ worth of ruined stamps. They were stuck to the cardboard, where they would most likely stay forever. The box grew heavy and warm along with his guilt at the destruction of federal property.

The lark woman’s laugh calmed to a few odd snorts. She swayed from one foot to the other, smiling. Others in the room remained shocked beyond movement. William and the lark woman leaned toward one another like an old couple over a kitchen table.

“Have you ever been to Canada?” he asked.

She nodded her head vigorously. When she saw he was about to be sick again, she reached out for him. He had a vision of her hair matted by a corona of dark ice as he opened his mouth to fill her cupped hand.

HE IMAGINED HIMSELF WALKING  
FORCEFULLY INTO THE GLASS



## JAWBREAKER'S MAJOR-LABEL ALBUM

BY TAO LIN  
ILLUSTRATION BY NICK GAZIN

Ryan looked through glass at tomato sauce on spaghetti on a plate with three to five chicken wings or legs that seemed to be barbecued also on it and thought, "What is that?" and "Ryan thought, 'What is that?' while looking at spaghetti and chicken wings." He walked to the end of the block, turned around, passed an extremely tall Asian man, entered an Old Navy, walked aimlessly toward the back of the store. An employee seemed to be running toward Ryan, who slowed a little, then turned so that he was moving in the same direction as the employee, who maneuvered past Ryan, who sat on a bench next to an elderly Hispanic woman. Ryan looked at his email on his iPhone. Cassie, his girlfriend, had emailed the story he wanted to reread. Cassie's romantic interest in the story was named Bryant, the same name Ryan used for the character of himself in his recent, autobiographical fiction. Ryan remembered a few nights ago when Cassie asked why he used the name Bryant in his stories. He had felt a little confused why she asked that. He sometimes looked at what time it was while reading her story. He sensed the story was ending soon, then remembered that there were entirely different parts—that it spanned a much longer time than he'd been sensing—and felt pleasure from anticipating reading the later parts.

Ryan exited Old Navy at 1:33 PM and walked toward Sbarro and stood on the sidewalk with his back against a wall and continued reading Cassie's story. An energetic-seeming woman with white hair asked him something, and he said, "Yes, Baltimore." He went into Sbarro and stared at a woman wearing sunglasses who was standing by a door outside a bathroom. Ryan averted his sight, went to the utensils, picked up a fork, held it, walked toward the exit. He imagined walking extremely forcefully into the glass. He opened the door and stood on the sidewalk and stared at an attractive, Mediterranean-seeming woman asking him what bus he was waiting for and, as he began to answer, the woman with white hair said, "He's for Baltimore." Ryan heard a BoltBus employee say things like "1:30" and "Standby only" while leading people across the street. People began saying things about how the street was blocked and that all the buses were on a different street.

Ryan crossed the street and said, "Is this for 1:45 to Baltimore?" to the back of a woman's head, and a different woman said, "Apparently this line is for more than one time" and something about "1:15" and three more sentences, each containing the word "apparently." Ryan sat on the sidewalk, the last person in line, and finished reading Cassie's story. He thought about how in the story Cassie seemed to maintain interest in Bryant long after Bryant lost interest, or mostly lost interest, in her and about how it ended with a description of her sit-

ting in a car after a final-seeming encounter with Bryant, imagining the car as a living thing and its noises as an expression—toward her, in her view—of anger or frustration. Ryan thought about how in one part of the story Cassie had woken to Bryant "tracing" her hipbones. He walked to a different line and asked a young man wearing large sunglasses if the line was for the 1:45 PM bus to Baltimore and the person said he didn't know and began talking about other things, and Ryan grinned nervously and looked down at his iPhone's screen, then back at the young man, who was talking about how he "practically sprinted like 30 or more blocks here." Ryan walked away with a feeling of having disappointed the young man in their social interaction. Ryan thought he would live through the BoltBus delay. He asked a woman his age if she knew anything about where the 1:45 PM bus to Baltimore was, and she said, "No." Ryan tweeted that he asked a person a question and the person said, "No."

After a few minutes, he saw the same woman walking toward him and she said, "They're saying it's the one right there, behind you." She continued walking past, toward the bus, as Ryan murmured, "Really?" He turned and followed the woman, who was, as she continued approaching the bus, telling different groups of people what she told Ryan. She saw Ryan and said, "They told me it's this one," and Ryan said, "Really?" and the person said, "They told me to stand by 831, but where is everyone?" and Ryan said, "Across the street," and the woman walked away. Ryan sat on the sidewalk and tweeted something about how people seemed to be happier due to the delay, that it maybe inspired feelings of camaraderie. He heard someone say, "There's a blind woman," as something hit his forehead—a walking stick, held by an elderly woman, who was blind, apparently.

"Sorry," said Ryan.

"Excuse me," said the blind woman, smiling. Ryan tweeted about this and began sweating a little from being fully in the sunlight for some time now. He began to feel a sensation of well-being that, except when he was on drugs, he hadn't felt in months. People from across the street began coming over. They formed a small line in front of the bus—831. Ryan stood in the line and became entranced by the face of a woman, probably a "standby" passenger, at the bus's entrance. He showed his ticket to a BoltBus employee and got on the bus.

An Asian man who behaved and looked like Jackie Chan was slowly moving from the back to the front of the bus while staring with a disgusted, perplexed, yet ultimately somehow friendly expression at each seated person. Ryan sat and emailed Cassie that he was on the bus and was going to see if the internet was working. He emailed from his phone that the internet wasn't working and that he read

her story while waiting for the bus and “felt pleasure from the amount of attention it garnered from him continuously” and that he was going to try to write things now and would email if there were more delays.

He opened Microsoft Word and thought about where to begin. He thought about beginning with when he was having problems sleeping last night and this morning. He thought about beginning with the quietness of that and continuing with how he felt physically uncomfortable on the way to the bus, then began, for some reason—maybe simply from being in the sunlight 20 or 30 minutes while sitting on the sidewalk—to feel a sensation of well-being he hadn't felt in months. He thought about beginning with how he had decided this morning to sleep two more hours instead of doing laundry. He thought about beginning with when he stared through glass into Sbarro at a plate of spaghetti and continuing with how he went in Old Navy and read Cassie's story. He could include an extremely detailed description of Cassie's story—longer and more detailed than the story itself, her story. He began typing an explanation about why he was standing outside Sbarro. He thought that he didn't need to explain why he was there and deleted the explanation and typed a description of all the things—four or five plates, four or five cups, piles of used napkins, unopened packets of salt and pepper—that were on the table he'd stared at for what seemed to be at least 30 seconds. He went to the bathroom at the back of the bus. He imagined tracing a sleeping Cassie's hipbone and stopping, after 30 or 40 minutes, while she was still asleep. He imagined tracing her hipbone for a few minutes, then tracing it increasingly harder until she woke, then instantly reverting to a gentle, nearly imperceptible kind of tracing. He returned to his seat.

At 3:54 PM, about an hour later, after typing 710 words (mostly about the music he was listening to with earphones via iTunes: Everclear, Jets to Brazil, Jawbreaker), including—

Bryant remembered listening to Everclear while on a bus in middle school, seated next to Peter, on a fieldtrip, looking at cows outside his window. He thought about Jawbreaker's major-label album—specifically its longer songs, “Jet Black” and “Accident Prone” and “Basilica”—and how it seemed like Jawbreaker worked hard on that album. He thought about how he once felt like Jawbreaker was trying to write a “generation-defining” song with the album's first song, “Save Your Generation,” which begins:

I have a present: It is the present.  
You have to learn to find it within you.  
If you can learn to love it,  
You just might like it.

It also had something about saving one's generation by “sleeping in.” Bryant tried and failed to remember the album's second song. He thought about the song on that

album that was around two minutes and had lyrics about life being like an oyster. He thought about eating something called “green mussels” with his parents in Florida at a sushi restaurant. He couldn't remember the restaurant's name. After thinking “Sushi House” and “Sushi Home” and “Sushi Zone,” he felt further from being able to remember the actual name than when he first tried to remember Cassie asleep, ten or 20 seconds ago.

—he reread all he'd typed and inserted: “He went to the bathroom at the back of the bus. He imagined tracing a sleeping Cassie's hipbone and stopping, after 30 or 40 minutes, while she was still asleep.” He deleted about half of it, including descriptions of the sunlight reflecting off the sidewalk and the attractive, Mediterranean-seeming woman's bare shoulder.

It's 4:24 PM as he types this sentence and he feels like there's a certain disconnect between experience and language-based expression that he wants to express or describe or, maybe, by continuing to sort of live-narrate his BoltBus experience, try to transcend or gain some insight into. He thinks about minimizing Microsoft Word to look at the internet, which is working now—he looked at it before rereading what he had typed—and thinks about how he'll have thoughts between minimizing Microsoft Word and, after looking at the internet, maximizing Microsoft Word that he'd want to record but would probably have forgotten.

He feels slightly confused as he tries to think about what he feels, if anything, about the sentence he just typed: “He thinks about minimizing Microsoft Word to look at the internet, which is working now—he looked at it before rereading what he had typed—and thinks about how he'll have thoughts between minimizing Microsoft Word and, after looking at the internet, maximizing Microsoft Word that he'd want to record but would probably have forgotten.” He thinks about going back in the narrative to insert a sentence about the second time he went to the bathroom, which is currently missing, but he isn't sure where to insert it, or if he wants to insert it. He vaguely thinks about how to insert his thoughts about being unsure if he wants to insert the second bathroom visit or not—and also what he's currently thinking—into the narrative. He thinks something about the theorem involving a thing halving itself repeatedly and never disappearing. He thinks about how the second time he was in the bathroom he thought about the woman whose face he felt entranced by and how whenever he saw a pretty face he felt like the person, if his or her body wasn't as attractive to him as the face, wasn't fulfilling its potential. He imagines seeing Cassie's face as a stranger and thinks that he would probably feel intrigued.

“The bus is going over a bridge,” he thinks while staring out his window at a river, which seems foamy, and loud,” he thinks while staring with slightly unfocused eyes through glass at a river and an area of fields or hills that are green and some of the cloudless sky. *TL*

EASY,  
STEEZY,  
JAPANEZY.



THE KYOTO: INSPIRED BY JAPAN.



THEY'RE NOT SHOES  
(THEY'RE SANDALS)



# THREE KINDS OF PEOPLE ON THE CROSTOWN BUS

BY ROBERT LOPEZ  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY VIKKI CHU

Sometimes I don't make it out of the house. When I tell people this in the way of conversation, in the way human people can sometimes spill onto each other in broad daylight, they try hard to change the subject.

When I am in the house I watch television. I almost never do anything but watch television in the house. I do sleep, of course, and shower. I have a great shower in my house and if I'm not watching the television then that's where you'll find me. Sometimes I eat, yes, usually twice a day, something that stands for breakfast around noontime, perhaps boiled eggs and toast, and then again in the evening, which is usually catch as catch can. Maybe I open some soup or I order takeout and have it delivered. It never gets in the way of the television, though. I scan the channels from 2 to 80 and back again, whether I'm eating or not. I spend five or so seconds on each station. What's on television isn't important to me. That I am looking for something else is what matters. I am a seeker.

I seek.

What I have never sought is a job watching television. I've also never sought fame or fortune, acceptable living conditions or Trina, but I'm not ready to think about Trina right now. Trina has her place, and it isn't right here and now.

Trina says she only recently got a television herself, that for years she went without one. I have no idea how she spent time or what her life was like.

This is one reason I'm not ready to think about her.

Sometimes I am forced to leave the house, and it's always a tragedy when this happens. Sometimes I am compelled to show up at a certain place at a certain time and perform certain tasks for several hours at a time, and after such I take the most direct route back to the house and television.

I have to take a bus to get to the certain place at the certain time. What happens is I rouse myself with great difficulty, shower, shave, eat something regrettable, dress, and vacate the house. I do all of this in 15 minutes. I know other people need an hour or so to do this, which is something I've never understood.

The buses in this city make a horrible noise when they stop. Sometimes my head comes off my shoulders when I hear it. I have to cover my ears with both hands to keep this from happening, and people look at me when I do this. I can't tell what they might think.

The people at the bus stop are almost always wrong. You never see these kinds of people on television, though as I think this I realize it's wrong. You do see these kinds of people on television, but I always choose not to watch them. These people are none of

my business. One shouldn't associate with these people, and one most often doesn't.

Mostly it's no-accounts and old ladies that ride the bus in this city. Most are fat and they are usually nice people, these fat ones, though that is not always the case, either. Sometimes when I start a thought I'll think it correct only to realize halfway through that it isn't. So, ultimately, I can't be sure of something until I've thought it through for a while. The trouble is one doesn't always have the time to think things through. This is what happened with Trina as a case in point.

Some of them, yes, the fat ones, they are nice people, except for the ones who aren't, but who cares in the end, really. I'm not saying the fat ones on the bus are important to me, but one cannot pretend the fat ones aren't there. They take up too much space for that. Some of them are colleagues, I think, so there's that as well. I can't say for sure as I don't ever speak to my colleagues, except for Trina, starting with the time I said *after you* at the coffee pot. But I do know that most of the colleagues are overweight like this. I see them waddling around the office, eating food and discussing their responsibilities.

On the bus most wear their Sunday best and they fan themselves with church programs. These no-accounts sweat a lot on account of the bus not having air conditioning and also because the fat sweat too much all the time regardless.

The fat in the office also sweat too much. I see them mopping brows, replenishing fluids, and passing out.

Trina is likewise fat and I suppose now is the time to mention her.

At the coffee pot she uses a lot of cream and almost always takes a doughnut back to her cubicle. I never see her eating the doughnut, though one assumes that's what she does with them.

Trina doesn't mind being fat, I don't think. Sometimes you can tell that sort of thing about people, by the way they walk around the world, how they carry themselves, what they wear, how they feed, covering their mouth as they chew, as if saying I don't normally do this, but I can't help it, I'm sorry.

Trina walks around like everyone else, carries herself erect and properly, with a certain elegance, wears clothes that befit her architecture, and all the rest.

What happened was, at the end of the day, hours after I'd said *after you*, she came up to my cubicle and asked me what I was doing after work. I'd been working for this same firm for seven years and no one had asked me what I was doing afterward. It felt like I was being interrogated, that I was suspected of some criminal misdoing. I asked her what she meant.

At this point I was hoping the fire alarm would ring. Sometimes the fire alarm rings and everyone has to evacuate the building.

This is when she said I am taking you to dinner. Apparently, I didn't have a choice. I could've said I'd already eaten, which wasn't true, but she was in no position to know otherwise. This is how I found myself collecting my things and walking out the door with Trina, on our way to dinner.

I've forgotten what was for dinner or if it was enjoyable. I rarely enjoy eating at a restaurant, there are always too many people about and something always goes wrong and then you are left to pay for others' mistakes. Also, I was too busy trying to think of things to say, questions I should ask. Trina seemed functional enough, she laughed some, smiled some, asked me questions about work, about home, about what I like to do, about how I grew up. I think I answered most of the questions honestly, except for the ones that were none of her business. She didn't need to know about the aunt and uncle who raised me, what they did for a living, how they made me sell to the kids at school, used me as a lookout on certain errands. I don't think I've told anyone about growing up because it wasn't as bad as it sounds. People always hope that things are as bad as they sound and this Trina was no different.

I told her I like to watch television and I like to take showers. Long showers. She said she preferred baths. I told her I only had a stall in my house, but that it was a good one. I told her about the water pressure and the tile and this is when she beckoned the waiter for more wine.

We didn't have dessert because sometimes fat people don't like to have dessert when other people are around.

After dinner she took me home. I settled into the left corner of the sofa as she moved about the ground floor. I didn't know what she was doing but I was happy to be left alone. I was hoping to collect my thoughts, consider what had taken place and what was likely to happen next. I was hoping to find a way out and back home to the television. I could still watch for an hour or two before bed. I can't fall asleep unless I watch an hour or two of television beforehand and I need to sleep every night for at least ten hours.

The truth is I had no idea what Trina wanted with me, if anything. I hadn't been in a house other than my own in a long time and wasn't sure of the protocol. She'd said I should make myself comfortable before she disappeared into the kitchen. I didn't know what this should entail, if this meant I should remove my jacket or the rest of my clothing. So what I did was I loosened my tie and if pressed about it I would've said this is how I get comfortable. I would've told her that I am so rarely comfortable that it isn't usually worth the bother.

What happened next was I think we had sexual intercourse. There was a time there, while watching a horror

movie and without fair warning, that she climbed atop me and removed her undergarments. Before that we were side by side on the sofa. There was no contact while we were side by side, though she did remove the throw-pillow barrier I'd constructed. I think she said something like we won't need this. I think I said something like *whatever you say*. She'd brought two glasses of wine in from the kitchen earlier and set them down on the coffee table in front of the sofa. This is where she placed the pillow, next to the wine on the coffee table. On screen there was all kinds of carnage, a lunatic mutilating young women indiscriminately.

I couldn't concentrate on the movie because of what Trina was doing.

After she'd made herself comfortable on my lap, she reached for my belt buckle and undid it. Then she fished me out of my shorts and began manipulating. I tried looking around her to the screen, but it was difficult. She was especially wide on my lap like this. I think the lunatic was hiding in a basement at this point, unbeknownst to the homeowners. I think he was about to lay waste to an entire family.

I didn't want to look down. I could feel what she was doing, but I didn't want to see it. I think she said *very nice* while she was handling me and I said *thank you*.

This is when she took a breath. I didn't know what was expected, if I should say something. I had my hands flat against the sofa and my feet firm against the floor. I waited for something to happen, for the fire alarm to go off, for one of us to die of a heart attack. I'd seen it on television, people dying of heart attacks in the middle like this. I figured if it was me Trina could be charged with the crime, but they couldn't possibly hold me responsible for Trina, given my position relative to hers.

Trina's eyes were closed and it seemed like she was about to pass out.

I said to her, *are you OK?*

She said, *don't talk*.

I sat still.

She began to move, rocking back and forth, as if I were a hobbyhorse. The sensation was not unpleasant, though at one point my thighs began to burn. I had my hands around her waist or what I thought was her waist. There was no way to determine if she actually had a waist. Regardless, I figured she needed support and I didn't want her to fall off. I thought if she were to fall off both of us would be sorry. She kept her head down the whole time, like she was trying to keep track of something. The rocking went on for quite some time. I wanted to look at my watch but I didn't want to take my hand off her side. The movie was over and another had started. I don't know what happened to the lunatic or the family he was about to slaughter.

I knew we were finished when she stopped the rocking, slapped me across the face, and started convulsing. This went on for about a minute and then she

calmed herself and her breathing became regular. She hung her head and for a second or two I thought she had died, that I was going to have to explain myself to the authorities after all, tell them that we were coworkers, tell them about the coffee pot, the dinner, the pillow barrier I'd constructed. This is when she looked up at. She looked broken, done in.

I said, *are you OK?*

She said, *we're going to have to do that again*.

I said, *are you sure?*

She said, *I am*.



There is a neighbor who is always outside the building and always unavoidable when I am on my way to the certain place, in the godless morning.

I don't know what he does or how he lives. He wears the appropriate clothes for the weather, but there is something wrong with him. He calls me Boss.

I never introduced myself as Boss and he has never expressed a desire to be my subordinate. What I call him is Hey There. Hey There doesn't resemble anyone at the certain place so he's probably not confusing me with a superior. I am no one's superior. At the certain place my responsibilities are menial. There is no one beneath me there.

I am always beneath Trina because this is how she likes it.

Trina has never met Hey There and when I referenced him once in conversation she had no idea who I was talking about. What this means is I don't think Hey There is a colleague.

This morning Hey There was outside the building and said something like *some weather we're having*, and I said something like *tell me about it*.

Trina is the same way. The first thing she'll say in the morning concerns the weather and it's my job to agree with her. People always need confirmation, assurance. In truth, I don't know what people take or what they need.

Trina takes me out of my pants whenever she pleases but I doubt she actually needs to do so. I don't think anyone's life depends on it.

The weather is always like the weather here and everyone knows it.

Still, people are like this with each other. They are *is it cold outside or is it me? Is it cold enough for you or is it me?*

I never ask people questions because I don't expect them to have answers. It was the same way with my aunt and uncle. I never asked them how I was supposed to sell to the kids at school, but I think I remember them telling me how to do it, so I'm not sure if this proves anything. I think my uncle sat me down once and told me what to do and where to do it, and what not to do, what to say if any of the teachers or principals caught me. I was instructed to say nothing and hope for leniency.

I think my saying *after you* was mistaken for gallantry and this is why what's happening with Trina is happening. The truth is I don't like to have anyone watch me pour coffee into a mug as I can never do it properly. I am almost always spilling.

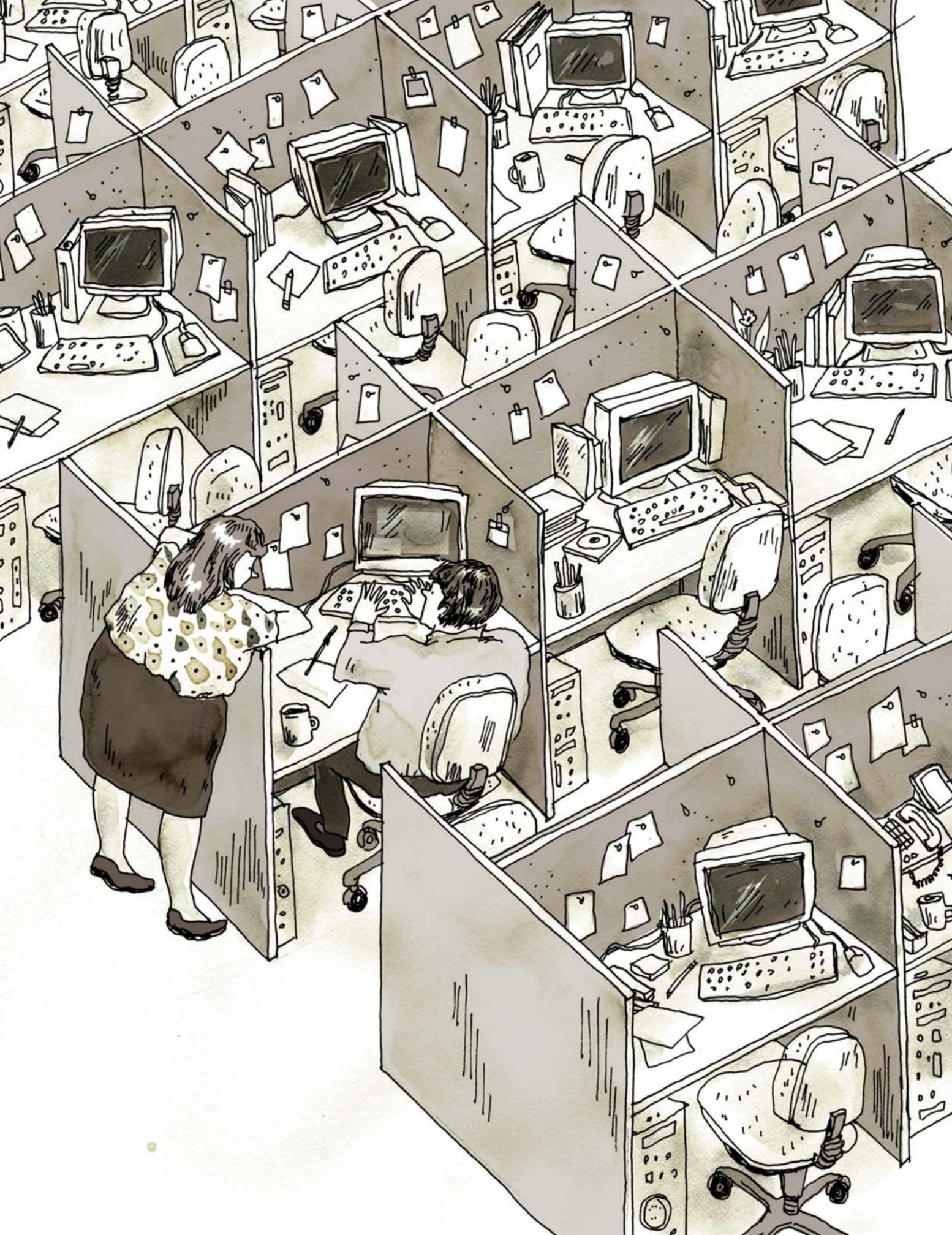
When I am alone and in the house and haven't left it for days and during a particular revolution up and down the channels I can count 20 women fatter than Trina, I tell myself to leave. There is no reason for this to be a reason to leave the house, but sometimes I do anyway. Sometimes, when I am in the house for a few days, Trina will call on the phone to check on me. She wants to know if I am still alive, if I'm sick, what's wrong. I made the mistake of answering once. I told her, yes, I was still alive and that I was indeed sick. I told her I had the bronchitis and that it was contagious. I told her it felt like I was choking to death and that my chest hurt. I coughed into the phone and then apologized for doing so and then said I had to go lie down. This is when she asked me if I needed anything, maybe chicken soup or orange juice. I told her no, but thank you. I told her I would be in next week, that I'd see her then.

Now I let the phone ring when I know it's going to be her.

I only have to go to the workplace twice a week and sometimes even then I call in and tell them I can't make it. Whenever I call in I tell them I have the bronchitis. I tell them it's chronic. When I am out like this Trina says *I miss your face* when I make the mistake of picking up the phone. I'd never heard this expression before, missing someone's face, either in real life or on television. I don't think it's a real expression and I don't think she's telling the truth about it, either. There's nothing about my face anyone can miss.

If I can count the 20 women I go outside but then once out of the house I realize I've no business being outside like this, subject to people and bitter weather.

It's the same way on the bus. I try to find a seat against a window, preferably a single, but it's almost always hopeless. The no-accounts always take up the



### THREE KINDS OF PEOPLE ON THE CROSTOWN BUS *by Robert Lopez*

best seats. These no-accounts are like the ones on the television, except when you are next to them on the bus you can smell the perfume and sweat.

Sometimes it's plain folks who ride the cross city bus back and forth. They are too fat to get around another way so you can't blame them. Most of these plain folks wear faded blue jeans held up by brown leather belts looped through all the loops of their faded blue jeans. The good thing about Trina is she never wears jeans. Fat women have no business wearing jeans and Trina understands this. The ones on the bus who don't wear belts wear suspenders and they are even fatter it seems. I am almost certain some of these people are colleagues.

I almost never talk to the old no-accounts or fat plain folks on the bus. Instead I listen to them talk to each other. I spend about five seconds on each before I start listening to the next person. Here I'm a seeker, too.

When I arrive at work I go straight to my cubicle. Sometimes I try to see if Trina is in her cubicle. Some people go straight for the coffee pot when they arrive so I look over there, too. I only go to the coffee pot when no one's occupying that space, so I never do it first thing in the morning. I can see them milling about from my cubicle and I can hear them talking sometimes. It's the same talk I hear on the bus. No one is required to mill about or drink coffee, I don't think. They do have certain rules in the office, but I don't think this is one of them.

They have a cubicle for me here and I sit inside of it. They have a desk for me and on top of the desk is a computer. My task is to read things on the computer and make sense of it. I type up reports and send them to certain people. These are the superiors. Once in a while one of them comes by to ask a question. Sometimes I have the answer. When I don't have the answer I say I will have to get back to them on that.

I almost had to get back to them about what happened on the bus once. A no-account slid in next to me and started right away with what he's afraid of. He didn't say hello, didn't introduce himself. He started listing his fears, one after another. He mentioned how he's afraid of pigeons, afraid of waking up too late, afraid of alarm clocks, spaghetti, and so forth. He talked about his mother, how she was the one who taught him how to be afraid like this. Said she was afraid of sour milk, dried leaves, houseplants, pancake batter, postcards, nail clippers, file cabinets. His mother was dead now, said she died five years ago and now it's her ghost he's afraid of.

I didn't recognize this no-account, but he was one of them, one who rides the bus back and forth all the time. He wore no-account clothes and had a no-account smell. Every time we approached a stop I was hoping he'd get off at it, but he didn't. He kept going on and on about what scared him, about toy poodles and wilted spinach. It was after he mentioned helicopters that he looked over at me and squinted. So I told him about

my aunt and uncle, how they had me sell to the kids at school for them, had me go on errands. I told him how I would do it, in the boys' room, at recess behind the baseball field, after school at the gas station. I told him I never got caught by any of the teachers or the cops and then I told him how my aunt and uncle got killed by a rival one Sunday morning, but that part wasn't true. I figured he needed to hear something like that, something that might make him feel better, make him count blessings, make him go away.

This no-account, though, he didn't care about my aunt and uncle. Instead of asking me questions he talked about the weather, how he was afraid of the bitter cold and sunstroke and tornadoes. I told him he was right, that I was afraid of these things, too. I told him sometimes I don't make it out of the house. I told him sometimes there's no reason to, that everything I need is there, that I have the television and the shower, after all. I don't think he heard me, though, because he was going on about tidal waves and undertows. This is when I got off the bus. I was already one stop past where I normally get off and would have to walk all the way back.

That was the only conversation I've had with someone on the bus. I started to tell Trina about it once, but she was about to change the rhythm of her motion so I decided not to. She doesn't like it when I talk in the middle like that. She says let me do my business and we can talk later. But we never do, we never talk about anything, which is probably best.

So I never tell her about every other kind of people who ride the crosstown bus back and forth here. There are skinnies, too, who don't look like either the no-accounts or the plain folks. I never tell Trina about the skinnies because she doesn't want to hear about them.

I do know that none of the skinnies are colleagues. I don't know how much longer this business will go on with Trina, but I think it's out of my hands.

Unless I don't make it out of the house, which is what I'm considering. I haven't been out of the house in two weeks, I think. My superiors at work haven't been by my cubicle to ask questions, I haven't run into Hey There on the way to the bus, I haven't heard it screeching, taking my head off. Hey There might be dead for all I know. I suppose I could go look out the window to find him, to see if he's out there in the weather, but it wouldn't matter.

The first thing I do in the morning is go over to the television and turn it on. Later I hear the phone ring and I know it's her. I imagine she wants to know when I will be back at work, when she can take me to dinner, when she can fish me out of my pants again. This is the worst, when it happens this way, when I am in the middle of a program like this.

Otherwise, she calls when I'm in the shower. This I don't mind. I can't hear the phone ring over the shower spray and the blare from the television. I make sure to turn the volume up loud so I can hear it from the stall. It's perfect. 



# THE NUMBER

BY AMIE BARRODALE  
ILLUSTRATION BY MALIN BERGSTRÖM

In the morning they went walking through the lobby, toward the arcade that ran under the hotel. Daniel was rereading the last texts he wrote *The Number*. They were stupid. He switched off his phone. They got onto an escalator going down, and Daniel's father said, "I had a dream last night.

"There was a court case. A Chinese man was accused, and his defense team kept messing up. His lawyer showed up at a deposition wearing a sweatshirt."

Daniel said, "That French place looks OK," and pointed.

"I had the Chinese guy's email address, so I was writing him in jail. You emailed him too, but then we realized we didn't have his real email address, we'd just been making guesses."

They had gone into a café. It was one like you'd find in America, and Daniel was looking at rows of salads in an open refrigerator case.

"What are you going to eat?" he asked.

"I am going to eat..." his father tried to guess what would be right.

"What about salad?" Daniel said. "I think I'll have that."

"I am going to have... bread! And chai."

Soon they would be at the monastery, and Daniel knew he should enjoy any available luxuries while he could. The last time he had texted *The Number*, she had asked him, "What will you do in India?" "I don't know," he said.

They had two rooms at a monastery in a small village in the north. They took a car there. The driver was handsome and contained. They set out after dark. Just as they reached the edges of the city, Daniel's father turned and said, "I'm going to be sick." They drove all night, into the morning, stopping at small places for Daniel's father to shit and barf. When the sun rose, the driver had a different face. He looked like an animal. Later he stopped the car abruptly on a winding freeway and said, "Eagle." It stood in the road with its wings folded. Its claws on the asphalt looked strange.

They were lost. The driver stopped the car again and said, "If you get out, you can get a cab." Daniel's father got out of the car and went back to get their suitcases from the trunk. Daniel said, "Get in the car, Dad." Daniel's father closed the trunk and got back in the car. The cab driver gave Daniel a dirty look. They started again. A terrifying dog ran after the car,

leaped up, and nearly bit his father in the arm. "This place is dangerous," he said.

At last they arrived, and now Daniel was in bed. It was close to lunch. He was listening to a song about love and looking out his window at the temple, with its gold roof, the Himalayas behind it, and enormous birds circling. A gong rang, and he took off the bandana he had tied around his neck and let himself out of his room. He met his father on the walkway, and they went downstairs.

People were eating outdoors under an expensive-looking tarp.

"Do we sit with these people?" Daniel's father said.

"We can do whatever we want."

They sat across from a couple in their 60s. Nobody introduced themselves. The table filled up. One of the old ladies took an interest in Daniel's father. She had short gray hair and wore a blue Patagonia vest. She had extremely bad table manners, and it was unpleasant to watch her eat. She ate like a little rat.

"What brings you to India?" she asked.

"Surgery," Daniel's father said. "I'm here to get my teeth done."

The woman was eating greasy chopped cauliflower with both hands.

"I was going to get implants in the US, but it costs \$65,000." Daniel knew what was coming next. His father liked to describe intimate details of their financial distress to strangers. "I have that money in a trust that will go to Daniel. One of the stipulations of the trust is that it can be spent on health care or education for myself. I picked the teeth because they turned me down at Berkeley." He waited for the woman to laugh. Her hands were now in her lentils. "Daniel encouraged me to go ahead and get the surgery in the US, but doing it in India costs \$55,000 less." Daniel's father continued with the details of the surgery and its costs: "Plus, I get the free trip."

There was a long silence. The old woman cleared her throat, stuck her fingers in her water glass, and wiped her face. "What is the nature of the procedure?" she said.

Daniel said, "Dad, don't."

His father said, "They cut open my gums, and then they implant a spiked pole."

He lifted his upper lip with his fingers.

"See that? They sew that back up. I wait for the flap of my gum to heal around the bar. I wait six months.

When the scar tissue heals, they snip tiny holes in the gums and screw the implants onto the poles.”

“They screw them?”

“Or maybe they poke them. I’m not sure.”

A woman sat across from Daniel, beside his father. She was in her 50s and skinny, with cheekbones and shoulder-length gray hair. She had it ironed flat, so it made those lines like a 70s movie star.

The old lady turned to Daniel and said, “Did you meet Chris?”

“No.”

“We met,” Chris gave Daniel a shy look. She held his eyes a very long time until he looked away, and Daniel said, “If we did meet, I wasn’t paying attention.”

“He wasn’t paying attention.”

She looked at Daniel’s father.

“When did we meet?” Daniel asked.

“Earlier. We waved. I was on the opposite balcony. I liked your bandana.”

She had on one of those shirts, the silk kind, with a loose collar. It closed just over her breastbone, which was freckled. Below her collarbone was a tiny-linked golden chain, so light it got caught on her chest in different swirly shapes.

Daniel’s father said, “Do you live at the monastery year-round?”

“Yes,” she said. “Actually, I’m taking a house next week.”

She talked about how it’s tricky to get a house in India, due to whatever laws, but Daniel wasn’t listening. When she stopped talking, he said, “I saw you. You were watering your flowers. But I thought you thought I was staring. And I thought it was weird that I already knew your name.”

“Oh no, I didn’t think anything like that. I shouldn’t be out there half-naked anyway. And I already know about you.”

“What did they tell you?” Daniel asked as though he had a lot to hide, but she did not understand the joke, or if she did, she ignored it. She said, “I heard that you’re a journalist, and that you had a visa problem, but there’s probably a lot more to learn about you.”

Daniel said, “I do have a visa problem.”

“They only gave him a three-month visa,” his father said.

Daniel’s father took over the conversation. He began an elaborate self-portrait, painting himself as a longtime student of Buddhism, one of unusually high status back in America. He mentioned that he’d run the dharma study group in Houston. “Of course all this was 30 years ago. That’s when I was attending His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He gave me this amulet.” He pulled a *gao* from beneath his shirt. It was the one Daniel had given him in December.

Chris waited until Daniel’s father had finished his story. Then she told them about a factory down the

hill where you could buy meditation cushions. She started to describe where it was, and then said, “I’ll tell you what, I’ll just walk you down there.”

“Please.” Daniel’s dad was giddy, and Daniel was sorry about that, because he already understood. He had even understood it waving to her on the ledge. He told Chris and his father to leave their dishes, he’d wash them. When he had done that, he walked back to the lower landing of the monastery and sat on the steps.

A few hours later, his father came up the path and gave him a half-moon cushion.

“What’s this?” Daniel asked.

“Chris picked it for you.”

“What?”

“Well, I say that. Maybe it was just...” he shook his head.

“Just what?”

“Maybe she was just telling me to...” he shook his head, then sat and lowered it into his palms.

“What?”

“I’m sorry,” he turned and faced Daniel. “While we were at the factory, I was looking at the cushion. Chris said, ‘That’d be a good one for your son, because he has a small ass.’ I didn’t want to hurt your feelings, but that’s what she said.”

His father shook his head. They sat a while. Chris came out of the office toward them. She had to pass between them to go up the stairs, and she took a loud breath like she’d been hit by something. She said, “Are you thinking about sex?”

“Always,” Daniel’s father barked. He elbowed Daniel in the ribs.

She walked between them, up the stairs, and to her room. His father leaned back on his hands and tilted his face to the sun. Daniel bent over his cushion. In the habit of telling The Number his thoughts, he had already begun to narrate for her his feelings about the woman, Chris.

The email began, “I’m in Bir.”

The following morning, Daniel and his father checked their email accounts. The Number had sent Daniel two new promotional photographs of herself, in which she wore new glasses and had sweatbands on her wrists. She asked him for his opinion.

“Sweatbands,” he muttered.

“What’s that?” his dad asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just this home bullshit. Nothing.”

His father grunted and went back to reading about a stereo shop in Mumbai. “This shop here I found. You won’t believe the prices on these subwoofers. If we imported them we’d make a killing. These are some high-quality subwoofers.” On the radio, a man was singing a romantic song in Hindi, set to synthesized drums playing like complicated beats.

“I like this music,” Daniel’s father said. “Is this syncoated?”

“The thing is,” Daniel blurted out, “why is she wearing sweatbands?”

“What?”

“Do you like my new glasses?” Daniel reread the line. “Do you like my new glasses?” What is this shit, Daniel wondered. And then he typed, “Yes.”

At lunch, a tanned Californian woman in a newly purchased Tibetan *chupa* and several flashy *malas* around her neck spoke about her private audience with the Sakyong.

“He had us take a vow. One person in the audience stood up and said, ‘I really love wine. Do I have to give that up?’ And he said, ‘Can you only have one glass?’ and the man said he could, and the Sakyong said, ‘Just don’t get drunk.’”

The woman beamed. The others at the table told stories of meetings with gurus that suggested alternate views on wine. Then Chris joined them.

Daniel watched her. He noticed the stretch of skin from her elbow to her wrist. It was covered in violent eczema. Chris took the forearm in her hand and said, “This comes out when I’m worried.”

“Why are you worried?”

She met Daniel’s eyes.

“I was afraid.” She let the words hang. “I’d come here before, but never for good. This time, it’s for good, and that generated a lot of hopes and fears.”

She shrugged.

Daniel leaned back in his chair and called up the photographs of The Number in her sweatbands. Then his father began to explain about slicing open his gums and the spiked bar.

“What’s wrong?” Chris said.

“What? Oh. It’s these—I got these emails. It’s just some drama. Some home drama.”

And he didn’t know why, but Chris laughed.

Chris had the door open, and Daniel began without any strategy. He walked in and said, “I’m very upset.”

She looked up from her bed, “Daniel.”

“Can I sit down?”

He sat on her bed. She said, “Oh dear.”

She stood and closed the door to her room.

Then Daniel told Chris about the past three years of his life, and how he had fallen in love with a woman, and now he kept this phone with him, that he had left his job and he was confused and, “What it is, is that I want to have sex with you. I think it would be really good for me to have sex with you. Because, I never had—I never end up actually having sex with people—and I think—obviously, I’m not a virgin. I have sex. I have sex, you know, with women I meet at bars. I mean, I’m not going to marry you, or I’m not an asshole. I think if you were my age, I’d end up thinking like that.”

Chris handed him a tissue. He wiped his eyes and talked. He said too much, and he turned to look at her.

“How am I supposed to respond to that?” she asked. “I really don’t know.”

Out the window a dog barked on the lawn. She started to make a comment about the dog, but stopped. She said, “Well, I’m attracted to you. For sure.”

Daniel smiled.

“It’s not like I haven’t thought about it.”

She explained her situation. Her husband had died one year before and she had been celibate since. She said, “While I’ve thought of how pleasurable it might be to have sex with you, my first good thought is of you, and whether or not it would be in your best interest. I’m considerably older than you. I am also a bit crazy right now, even though you don’t know it.”

“It’s in my interest,” Daniel said.

The following afternoon, Daniel was sitting in the courtyard with his father. His father was trying to blow the thighbone trumpet he had borrowed from the Californian woman, the one with the *chupa*. Chris came out of the smaller temple. Under one arm she carried a comb-bound *sadhana*. Daniel caught up with her on the steps.

She said, “Have you thought anymore about our discussion?”

“I’m not the one who has to think.”

“I thought you were very brave to talk about your feelings.”

“Mm.”

“I did,” she said.

“Well, what do you want to do?”

“I need some more time to determine if it’s in your best interest.”

“If that’s the only problem, then there is no problem. But if you are afraid, I can understand it, because I am, too.”

She appeared to swoon. Her eyes rolled back, and she rocked onto her heels.

“Well, OK, goodnight,” she said.

He watched her walk away. Then he heard his father coming up behind him. He was out of breath.

“What do you think about that Chris woman?”

“Ah, she’s great. She’s beautiful.”

“That’s what I’m thinking, too. That’s a fine piece of ass. Notice how she keeps circling around us? That’s no coincidence, Son. I think I’ll ask her to circumambulate the *stupa* tonight. If you know what I mean.”

Chris called Daniel the next day at noon and asked him to come to her room. When Daniel looked at her, he could see she had made up her mind. The answer was no.

She said, “I don’t want a love affair, Daniel.”

Then he saw it was the other way. Four minutes later, he had taken her clothes off, and they recalled the simple truth of it. 



# GAUDIFINGERS

BY TONY BURGESS  
ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTINA COLLANTES

**I**t was 1946 and the beaches looked like leather. The shells were chairs and the shells were parasols. Everything that started blue became pink. Dads and moms posed to hide the white cubes of exposed winter thighs. This was the thing I was in. A picture like that. Towels and tufts of singing scrub. Pointy-titted ladies with wide crispy eggs for hats. Beefcakes. And the wind that is only invented ten feet from shore but it's a bawling baby shredding the pages of magazines and raising lipstick bubbles on the backs of children. And I am bent in a corner of sky in the sand reading a comic. I deny that I am here. I am turned away. Turned inside. My sister is somewhere pretending to swim in four inches of water. My brothers are building bowls out of the droppings of seabirds. It is a joyful place, I suppose, but in my ten-year-old mind it is the bright sunshine of depression. The gold water and rose warmth of permanent intractable despair. I can't say why it is, but I feel it. Like I'm living in a deep knot.

The sand on my knees covers scudded wounds and each grain is a cutting diamond. Earlier this week I

teased a black kid at school. Not for being black, but for having the last name White. On Friday, yesterday, he tackled me on the sidewalk and brought me down under him. There was nothing for me to do but go home and lie. Maybe it's that. The lying. Maybe that's why I want to die today.

"Why don't you go in?" My mom points out to the sea. She wears sunglasses as big as wheelbarrows. My God, this is an awful place. I bring my knees up under me and look at the back page.

"OK. Well, we're going to walk down to the pier and see the fishermen."

She pauses, adjusts the mad white ribs in her suit. She wants me to think. And yes, I really, really want to see the fishermen, but I'm suicidal today. She doesn't sense this at all and pivots on her heels.

The back page. Sea Monkeys. X-Ray Specs. A six-dollar submarine that can submerge to great depths. If I had about 12 dollars to spare I could watch naked ladies in the cabana. If they caught me I could escape out to sea and drown. I would let my monkeys free to swing in the coral.

## GAUDIFINGERS by Tony Burgess

I despise this kind of thing. It is such obvious fantasy. The truth is I would be caught. I'd be standing by the cabana peering in through the side of a curtain. An old woman would scream and slap her hands to her bum. Everyone would hear her and everyone would see me. I can feel my knees blush, knowing that one day this will happen. I am changing, though, as the day goes on.

It was wanting to be dead. To be burned alive. Now it's different. After seeing myself at the cabana and being taken that way, I have decided I will be alive. I will kill the old woman in her nakedness. I will pull parasols up like weeds and drive down them into sockets and mouths and bums. The whole beach will be crying and dirty and ashamed. Blood will be pumped into hollow poles and plumes of it will rise and spatter us all. This is where I get to at four in the afternoon. X-Ray Specs. Monkey submarines. Flies leaving the assholes of dogs and wiping their feet on the corner of my mouth.

I close the comic book. On the back is a picture I've never seen before. It's a public warning. BEWARE GAUDIFINGERS! There is a drawing of a young boy and overlapping that an older boy. Then a man. And after that an old man. Then a dead man and then a skeleton. It's not a very good drawing and the lines are wobbly and broken. Beneath the drawing is an important public announcement.

"This is a public warning that needs to be heeded by all. The Gaudifingers contagion is no longer contained. Be advised that contact with Gaudifingers results in rapid aging and painful terrifying death within minutes. In many cases the horror of this rapid transformation kills the victim seconds before their final physical deterioration. Gaudifingers then takes the form of the victim and moves on. The only way to know who Gaudifingers is is to witness this transformation. The authorities are asking the public for assistance in tracking and eliminating this demon once and for all. If you witness the sudden aging of someone please call the police immediately. There is no one above suspicion. Anyone you know could at any time be Gaudifingers."

I scan down the page looking for what they are trying to sell. Is this an ad for a new comic?

A movie? There is nothing on the page to suggest it's anything other than a very serious public warning. I stare at the drawing. The lines are wobbly on purpose. This is what happens: Your skin wobbles and your lines break. It must be so bad. The Gaudifingers touches you and you feel your skin shatter and your heart age 100 years in minutes. I feel that this is something not everyone knows. The news is just getting out now. The threat of Gaudifingers. I picture Rexdale for some reason. Maybe because it's an ugly place. Yellow factories and stubby strip malls. If Gaudifingers was working its way through there, no one would know. Or maybe some do. A

woman closes her dry-cleaning shop early and hides in a rack of film-covered gowns. The man at the Sunoco wipes his hands on his pants and runs across the street and down an alley. Oh my God! A baby, just born, is suddenly tumbling in fat and loose sacks of skin, then long yellow teeth punch up through its nose and eyes and cheeks. There is no way to age a baby that fast. The process is confusing. Gray hair clogs its throat. Its arms hunch like crooked backs and skin tags pop across its feet. A momentary monster. Its eyes have heart attacks. Who can say what it is? I have to help somehow.

But how? If I tell people they'll think I'm crazy. I'll just get in trouble. If I show them the page they'll say, "That's interesting. Not now." I know exactly how the world works. How things don't get passed on. How messages die. People get used to bad news. They have things that they say when they hear it, but they don't really hear it, do they? It's as if everyone's under a spell and they can only think about getting home, cleaning up, going to bed. And that's exactly how Gaudifingers survives. It may be why Gaudifingers exists.

"Hey you! They caught a baby hammerhead! Come on! You gotta see this!"

I jump to my feet and brush my knees.

"Like a shark? How big?"

I am running backward ahead of my mom. She is excited.

"Well, it's only a baby. But yeah, it's pretty big."

I can't believe I'm going to see a hammerhead shark in just a few seconds.

"Wow, Mom. C'mon! Let's run!"

I run ahead toward the pier. If you think that nearby there is a baby hammerhead shark it's all you can think about. They live for millions of years and now, as a baby, they bounce at our feet and they are seconds away.

I stand at the base of the pier. It is very wide and long. All afternoon there have only been three things: sky then sea then sand. Now as I step up onto the planks I feel as if I'm entering a room that's been hiding in folds. I don't run because I can't gauge the room I have. There is more salt in the air here. I run.

You can always tell when it'll take you. I say that because it may be true and if it is then we are in an amazing world. There is no hammerhead. There are no fishermen. I turn to my mother and one of her arms is 40 feet long and is in the sea. She has thrown a leg, just as long, around and ahead of me. She is screaming; teeth spring through her lips and cut her face. This is one of my final moments. She says it, "Gaudifingers," to scare me more. Her forehead makes a sudden oblong fob against the sun. The fingers come at me. She wails again, "Gaudifingers!" The fact that she's trying to scare me is so hard to understand. The fingers telescope in sloppy curls. I can feel my heart ask to stop beating. 



[www.IFLADIES.com](http://www.IFLADIES.com)

# WHORES I HAVE LOVED

BY CLANCY MARTIN  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY BENJAMIN MARRA

“Being a Mexican hooker wasn’t the plan I had in mind,” she said from above me, her hair enveloping us both like mosquito netting or a dark silk blanket we had drawn over our heads. Her breath smelled like beer, cocaine, and copper. “But I’ve been working in Mexico for about three years. I was hitchhiking back from Argentina. I guess you could say I was dancing up the coast.” She laughed.

She was from Georgia, and her accent alone made you want to fuck her. A shame, it was lost on her Mexican clientele. We were 50 miles east of Puerto Vallarta in a town that consisted wholly of the whorehouse, three bars, and a nearby maquiladora that made high-end furniture. There were “contemporary Scandinavian” tables and chairs in the bars, and the main dancing hall of the whorehouse, where the women performed their striptease before taking a client, looked like an IKEA but with unmortared white stone walls, dim lighting in red, blue, and green, and five low-hanging disco balls. It was nearly as large as an IKEA, too, and there must have been 300 drunken men in there: a Saturday night. I did not see any other Americans or Europeans. I’d had to tip two bouncers \$100 each to acquire this woman before the crowd of clients waving bills in the air and waiting for her after her brief dance onstage. She was one of their best sellers.

“You never say anything,” she said. She liked to talk while having sex, which is unusual in a prostitute. “You just ask questions.”

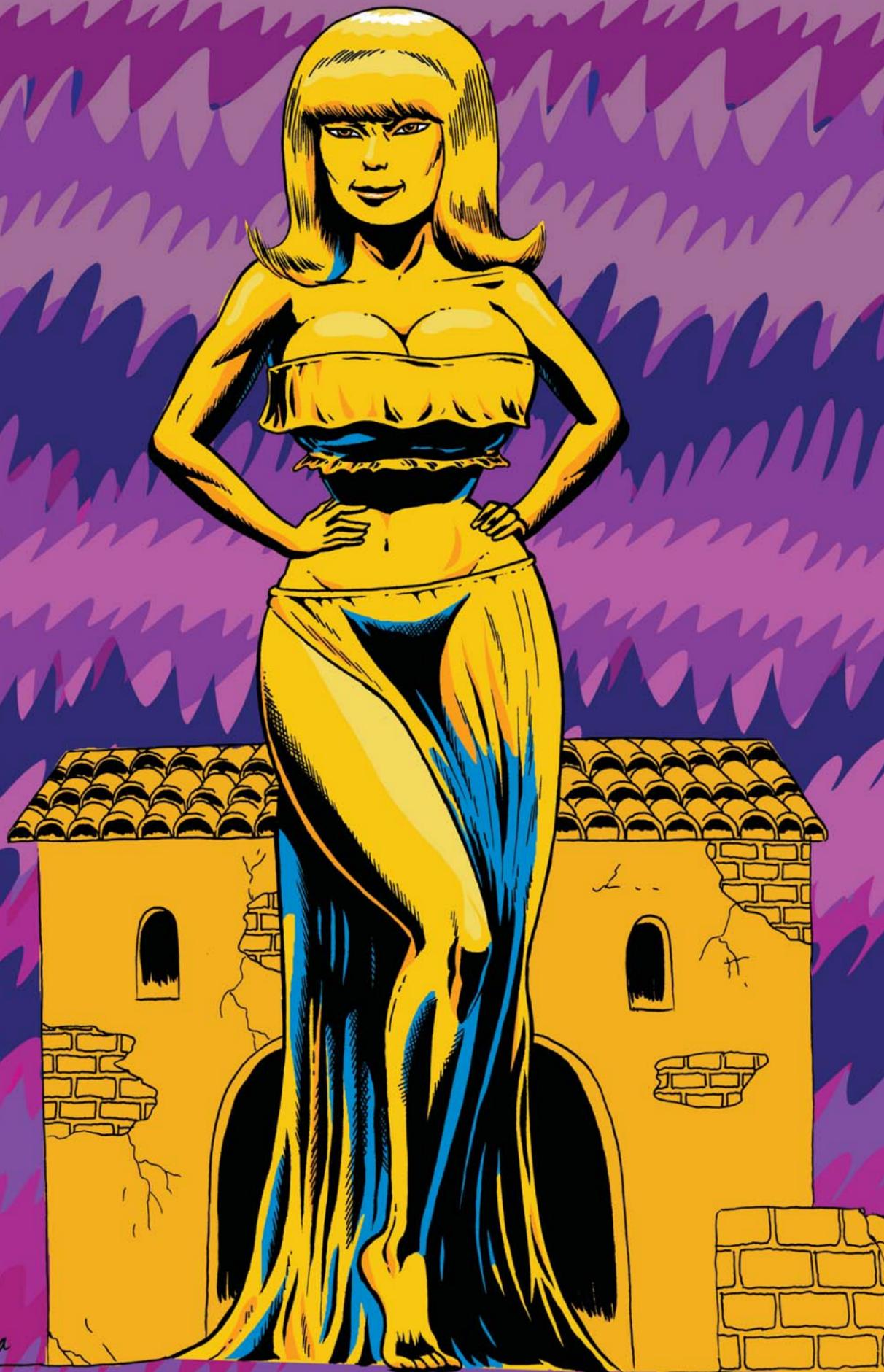
There are prostitutes who like to joke during sex, which is a bad thing: You haven’t known each another long enough for that.

I came back to see her six nights in a row, and every night I stayed the whole night, which was \$300, at the time: cheap by American standards but outrageous in a Mexican brothel that was not for tourists. With beers and blow I left almost \$2,500 at that whorehouse. After the second night I didn’t have to tip the bouncers. She asked me to come late, so that she could turn some regular business before I arrived, but I arrived early and I watched her. I had never before—and have never since—observed a woman I am going to sleep with take men—multiple men—to have sex

with her before me. It doesn’t have the erotic sparkle you might imagine. Though I am a jealous lover, it did not provoke jealousy. But I did want to kill the sleepy-eyed men as they returned from upstairs and crept or sauntered out the front door or returned to their friends at the table. All but three women in my life have had sex with other men before they had sex with me: Why should it matter that it took place before my eyes, and all in one night? Their friends would laugh, but these men did not join in the laughter like men returning from other women. I understood their tranquillity and satiety; I knew, as their friends did not, that they did not want to be touched by anyone else—not even a happy, drunken slap on the back—for an hour or two. I could not comprehend how the men who left went back to their wives for the night. It wasn’t that you felt soiled. I once listened to a friend scrub himself in a blistering shower for 15 minutes after visiting Peppermint in Bangkok: His red hide as he emerged in his white towel from the steaming bathroom, like Meryl Streep’s back after they scrub her with steel brushes in *Silkwood*, still makes me rub my eyebrows. The sex was very good, as you would expect, but conventional. It wasn’t the sex, or her body: though her breasts did not quite fit in your hands, and her areolae were more than two inches in diameter, pink as tulips, and her nipples were dimpled. She was widely curved and slender and liked you to hold her ass from beneath with both of your hands. She was not shaven. It surprised me that she didn’t enjoy, and wouldn’t permit, anything rough. She had the curvaceous body of an American peasant.

When I confessed several of my sins to her, lying in bed together, talking and watching the big spiders hunting or hiding in the corners and interstices between the stones, she told me: “The last perfect man I heard of died hangin’ on a cross.”

At this time in my life I was between two wives, out of work, living on the remnants of a business I had driven into bankruptcy, and I visited many houses of prostitution around the world. My favorites were in Latin America, because they are so often in old stone forts built by the Spanish. But the whorehouses in Belize are in tumbledown two-story wooden





## WHORES I HAVE LOVED *by Clancy Martin*

houses built by the English, like the whorehouses in the Caribbean. I once saw a man in Alligator Pond, Jamaica—a man I knew very, very well, who has since died—get a blowjob in the street from a seven-months-pregnant toothless 20-something crack addict. She charged him five American dollars, and he gave her a 20; I think it was the smallest bill he had. The second-most beautiful woman I've ever slept with was a Cuban prostitute who came to my hotel room in NY. She offered to take me for scrambled eggs the next morning, but I was exhausted, hungover, and ashamed, and I said no. I could see I had hurt her feelings. I had made some big promises in the night. Another time, lost in London, near Piccadilly Circus, past four in the morning, I met a short blonde woman, and we walked a ways, and when we turned onto a narrow side street she dropped to her knees and unzipped my pants. After five lonely minutes I took her head away, apologetically: For reasons that relate to my childhood, it's nearly impossible for me to orgasm in a woman's mouth. Then she asked me if I could loan her £30. I pretended all I had was a tenner. I am normally a generous person and don't know why I humiliated us both in this way. I'm certain she was not a professional, but it seemed as though she had been in similar scenarios before.

Don Juan, Giacomo Casanova, Warren Beatty with his unlikely thousands, Fidel Castro enjoying two women a day, every day: What could these renowned lovers understand that is not better known by the average Mexican hooker, now in her 30s, who opened her practice at age 14?

"My daddy's a doctor," she told me, as she rose and fell on me, her breasts swaying gently now after she'd moved my hands. "You don't move at all," she said. "We're going to be right here for a long time. He wanted me to be a doctor, too. Would you believe I got my degree in biology at Emory before driving my pickup the whole way down to Buenos Aires? I was supposed to take the—what is that damn test called?" she asked me. Without pausing she reached to the nightstand, took a Pacifico from the tin bucket with her thumb and two fingers, and poured beer into my mouth—it spilled down my face and chest—and then took several long swallows herself, while I watched her slender, brown, gazelle-like neck, stretched back, her chin lifted and that hollow triangle beneath, pumping. She placed the bottle back in the ice. The only light shone through a sun-faded purple lampshade on a faux-Arco floor lamp. We were both sweating. It was summer, and even at night, with the noisy bent-bladed ceiling fan and the open windows on three walls, it was 100 degrees. I liked to see our sweat pooling and mingling on my belly. Was it a fort or a church or a monastery, I wondered. From the entrance you could not tell, and there was a high stone fence around the property. Cars and trucks and taxis parked in the dirt and sand.

"The em-cat," I said.

"That's it, the em-cat. I was supposed to take that exam, and then I thought, you know what? Screw this. I want to actually live a real life. Everybody else can do what they're told and just fake it, if that's good enough for them. I don't tell anybody else how to be a fool." She had been a debutante, and was one of those young southern women whom everyone expected would marry her high school sweetheart—he went to Georgia State, was from a family of lawyers and politicians, they'd started dating in 11th grade, he was a ranked amateur tennis player. She didn't know what had happened to him since. She hadn't even sent him a postcard. "That wasn't very nice, I know, I must have broke that boy's heart. So me and a girlfriend of mine got in my blue Toyota—it had been my brother's before me, he's a doctor now too, an anesthesiologist, if you call that nonsense a doctor, he's a mess—and we took the I-10 across and headed south when we got to Houston. And after that we didn't turn around. Not until we hit the end of the continent." The Che Guevara, but backward. She told me they read Gabriel García Márquez to each other while taking turns driving. Neither one of them spoke a word of Spanish. They were lucky to make it through Central America, I thought. "She caught some nasty bug in Peru—her name's Ginny, she's married to a two-timing banker now, she's got the most beautiful twin girls you ever saw, they're barely three years old—and so she flew home and I kept on driving. By then I'd met a nice long-lashed Brazilian boy." Black Byronic locks down to his shoulders, she said. It was then I felt like she should be mine, and not his, and I felt lonely to know the insides of her heart.

During the course of the night, always while we were making love, I asked her to marry me—six times I asked her to marry me—and every night she laughed.

"I'm never going back," she said. "I think about all those fat white faces smiling at me, and it's too much. I know I can't do this forever. I'd wager I have five, maybe seven more years of real earning, and even with that I'll have to move around a bit. I've been here at the Leopard"—the whorehouse was called El Leopardo, I never found out why, but it has given the whorehouse a luster in my memory, because of the rocks and the hills and the dry, hot wind, of di Lampedusa, Sicily, the faded glory of old families and lost love—"for nine months now and it's already starting to slow down, you have to be new to bring in the best money. It sure is nice to speak English for a change. But I'll be glad when you go back to the States. You don't need to be pining after a whore in the middle of the Mexican desert. You've got a six-year-old daughter. You're not a boy anymore. You're supposed to be a man now. That's something they understand here in Mexico. The men down here cheat on their wives even more than the men back in Georgia, I know it. Or near as much. But they take care of their families.

Good Catholics. They might chase tail, but they don't follow it very far." She laughed again.

"You're a sweet boy," she said, and brushed my wet hair back off my forehead with her whole hand. "In another life, maybe."

She was 27 and I was 33.

"You've got a good heart. Don't forget that."

Seasoned, happy prostitutes speak with cataleptic authority about love.

On the seventh night we drove halfway there before I told my driver to turn around. He was a chubby, eager 17-year-old with a buzz cut named Raphael and he never did the coke I offered him or smoked a cigar, though sometimes he'd take a swig of tequila if I'd brought a pint with me, and when I found him asleep in his car in the mornings, curled in the backseat outside the stone wall, he would often smoke a joint before we got on the road.

"No Leopard tonight, señor?" he said, pulling off the road and back on again, heading back west. "You want to try a new place? I know a little place. It's just like someone's house, but they have pretty girls. Very pretty. I know one of them from school. Everybody is in love with this girl. They do not know that she is, well, you know. Only I know because of my brother and because I drive the car."

"I don't think so, Rapahel," I said. We were speaking in English. I've spent months in Central America over the years, but my Spanish is still rotten. "I think it's time to go home."

"OK. I understand. You are tired. It's too much, every night. A man needs a rest," he said. He was very serious. He watched the gravel road in the headlights carefully. There were no cacti: It was just scrub-brush, dirt, and the sand and stones of the desert. Raphael drove, gripping the steering wheel with determination.

The next day I flew on a little Mexican 40-seater to Houston, and a few days after that I took a bus to Austin, Texas, where I was starting graduate school (my second try) in just over a month.

In Valparaiso, Chile, a university and government town that tumbles down enormous hills into the Pacific, you ride funiculars up into the neighborhoods after a night of drinking cheap Chilean red in pint-size tumblers by the port. At four in the morning the *chorrillana* restaurants are full of students, and the dance clubs are loud all throughout downtown, but as you rise above the sea on the small, quaint leather-and-polished-wood funiculars the music begins to drift, and if you listen you can hear, you almost feel, the ceaseless waves on the rocks, and you understand why Neruda built his rambling, curious, low-ceilinged house in these hills and never left. I have not counted how long it's been since I've slept with a prostitute.

She was obviously a hooker. She was an amateur: There's a traffic circle in Valparaiso, in front of one

of the great stone halls of government, where the streetwalkers stand and wait for men to come by in their cars and on motorcycles and mopeds. I'd seen a hooker ride off with a man on the handlebars of his bicycle. It was considered rude to approach them on foot: Perhaps because the police tacitly ignored the traffic, but only if it was impractical to make a bust. If you're on foot a policeman really has no defensible reason not to arrest you in a strictly Catholic country. This young woman—I guessed she was 19 or 20, she still had her teen pimples—had come from the roundabout, and now it was just the two of us, our knees almost touching—she was wearing sheer black thigh-highs and a yellow miniskirt—rumbling up one side of the tracks as the empty cable car on the other side, our counterweight, rumbled down. I reached forward and kissed her, surprising myself, and she opened her mouth: She was a terrible kisser, her tongue frantically searched around mine like a frightened bat. She stuck her hands between my legs, and despite the kiss, she had me. We kissed getting off the funicular, and the sleepy guard gave me a contemptuous look, so I handed him 1,000 pesos, about two bucks. We had nowhere to go. I was in a tiny hotel on a cliffside owned by a stern woman who was angry when I came in late at night all alone (she did not give you a key to enter the house after dark: You had to knock and wake her). There were honeymooners in the room next to mine, and we shared a balcony, and I knew it would upset them to hear us: They had not been having much sex. I asked her in my bad Spanish if she had a bed, and she explained something about her mother. We were kissing standing up on a corner against a wall, and beyond the wall I could see the whole city spread in its half-moon beneath us, and beyond it the black water. She had one leg up around my waist and unzipped my jeans. "*El condon?*" I asked her, and she said, "*No, no,*" and we pushed together. She put her hands up beneath my shirt and her nails hurt and she shrieked—I could not tell how theatrical she was being, she was young—and I looked over my shoulder but there was no one in the street, just two brown dogs staring at us amiably, almost shoulder to shoulder, wagging their tails. I tried to hurry because she was so loud, but we were standing. At last I came and I tried to pull out, but again she said, "*No, no,*" and tugged at my ass so that I was deep within her, and I remember briefly floating up out of my body and looking down on us, as she bit my jaw—in the morning you could see the teeth marks—and I felt as extended as the sky, for a moment I thought I was dying. I saw the dogs wagging and the two of us inextricably tangled and the sea and the lights of the city and my landlady asleep in her bed beneath a quilt she had sewn herself and the young couple on their backs on either side of the narrow bed and the teenagers still dancing in the clubs below and the policemen smoking marijuana on the docks and the train that takes

you north to Vina del Mar, sitting in the station by the sea, and the sailors asleep in their bunks and the bartender mopping his floor with the stools upside down on the bar where I had sat earlier that night listening to the conversations of the old men. She kept thrusting against me, she was not letting me go, and I gasped and she held my face and looked at me seriously. "It was a good one?" she said in English, and I could only nod. Then she walked around the wall, holding me by my hand, and I followed her, though my legs and my shoulders were trembling, and she crouched to pee and wipe herself with a little pink towel she had in her bag, and she quickly changed clothes in front of me, and she was wearing jeans, red canvas Keds, and a faded, long-sleeved Billy Idol black-and-white cotton t-shirt. I gave her five 10,000-peso notes. I was shy.

"*No, es mucho,*" she said, and gave me back three of them. I handed one back to her and she kept it.

"*Mañana?*" she asked me, still serious. "Where are you staying?" she asked.

I tried to explain my situation to her, but I couldn't make myself clear. So I lied and said I was staying with friends.

"But I will see you tomorrow night," she said, and gave me another long, unfortunate kiss, with the whole length of her body and her small breasts pressed tightly against me.

The next night, lying awake in my bed in the hotel, I felt like a man who goes to sleep every night watching his phone, waiting for the woman who's left him to call. I didn't dare go back to find her.

Solemn-eyed Rory was a stripper who turned tricks on the side.

"You don't know the things I've done," she told me. "You wouldn't even like me if you knew. You sure wouldn't want me to be your girlfriend."

I was her temporary boyfriend until her true love was released from prison. He was a heroin addict, but I never learned why he'd been sent for nine years, at the student's age of 24, to a federal maximum-security facility in Beaumont, Texas. I had uncanny associations with Beaumont because I once dated a woman—she was one of my saleswomen, when I was in the jewelry business—who had been born and raised in that grim, flame-lit oil town. This saleswoman was shot to flatline after an auction near my jewelry store. Violating company policy, she wore our jewelry back to a man's apartment, and a busboy who was staying temporarily at this fellow's place—he was the manager of a Chili's, and he'd taken a liking to the busboy, who was down on his luck—saw her diamond tennis bracelet, her emerald necklace, and her Rolex President and went back to his borrowed bedroom, fetched his .32, and shot them both. He was caught a few miles away. Meanwhile, my saleswoman's mother was called as her brainwaves slowed to a standstill and the doctor tired to argue her mother

into cutting her up for her organs. Her mom, an old-fashioned Baptist, was refusing, and seconds and then minutes of flatlining whined urgently by, while the discussion escalated, when suddenly my saleswoman sat up and said—wires trailing from her skull—"What happened?" She later went on to become a modestly famous star in a series of gangbang movies, though she never completely recovered all of her speech or coordination. When we were lovers, before the shooting, she insisted on sex in dangerous places: over the edge of the top of a parking garage, on the railing of the balcony of a hotel, on train tracks, on a small plastic kayak in the Gulf of Mexico at night, in moving cars on the highway, in a taxi in downtown Dallas traffic. I wondered, later, if her sexual predilections were due to some supernatural preknowledge of her quasi-tragic gunned-down-for-porn future. Another bad thing about Beaumont for me was that an investor I had accidentally cheated owned a pit-bull business there, and I suspected in those worried days I might wake and find a man-eating bull-necked dog unleashed and patrolling my front porch, or perhaps even leaping into my convertible. I usually kept the convertible closed at that time. But not when I was having sex with this saleswoman, who demanded, "Screw me, screw me with the top down," in just about any place you can drive a car. Like many beautiful women I have known, she had an exhibitionist streak.

"I want some shoes. Will you buy me some shoes?"

We were in Las Vegas, and I was regretting Rory because the prostitutes walking the street were much prettier than the one I'd brought with me, and if the streetwalkers look like that, I thought, imagine what you get when you call a respectable service, or take a limo out to the Chicken Ranch (which, fair warning to the reader, is not what it once was). I took her to Manolo Blahnik, to Louboutin, to Gucci, to Marc Jacobs—although I don't like his women's footwear myself, and felt certain that she would settle on something garish from him—to Prada, to Barney's. She played Julia Roberts—she was only 23—but I was not in the mood to shop. I left her with my card in this store and that store and went to find a drink, which are never more than a dozen yards away in Vegas, unless you are in a shopping mall with your hooker girlfriend. I knew if I left her alone too long she would disappear with a man. She had done it to me often before, in pool halls and bars, once even in a pizza restaurant in downtown Austin. Another time, in Chicago, we were staying at the Four Seasons in a romantic room with a glorious view and her cell phone rang and it turned out she had a date. She wanted to know if I would meet him: He was at a bar about three miles away waiting for her. A regular, whom she'd known for years, a South African chef, who happened also to have a PhD in philosophy. I did not know if he was white or



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black. How did he know she was in Chicago? “He’s pudgy,” she said. “He’s cute. You’ll like him. He makes his own music. It’s a jazz bar. It will be fun.” I took a bath and then took a taxi to the airport, after telling the front desk that Mrs. Martin would be checking out in the morning, and that they shouldn’t approve incidentals over \$500.

In the end, she found a pair of Miu Miu snake-skin flats. The only charming shoe I ever saw on her foot. In a daily way she wore those oversize plastic heavy wedges they sell backstage to strippers, or tennis shoes, which I preferred. She wore a size nine: That’s the kind of girl Rory was. Large appetites. Big ass. Shoulder-blade-long dirty-blond hair that she liked you to pull on with both fists. Preferred it from behind. She asked me to speak German to her while I fucked her: This was because she had spent a year in a brothel in Frankfurt, which she described as the best year of her life.

I would pick her up at her apartment and drive her in the little orange Porsche I had at that time (it belonged to a former customer who owed me, and still owes me, \$55,000, though I sold the Porsche shortly before I stopped seeing Rory) to the strip club where she worked, while she sung and danced in the seat to loud heavy metal or the Notorious B.I.G. on my CD player. “I have to gear myself up for work,” she said. “Or it’s too depressing.” Charles Bukowski was her favorite writer, and I told her how he admired Céline, so that summer she lay in bed reading or claiming to read *Journey to the End of the Night*. She preferred prostitution to stripping, but moved around too much to build a safe regular clientele. I’d pick her up again after her shift—or sometimes I’d sit and drink at the bar for her whole shift, I was in love with both Rory and another woman who worked with her at the Yellow Rose, a tall black-haired graduate student in anthropology, but the problem was they were good friends—and then we would go eat Reubens and french fries at an all-night deli I liked, or drive through Taco Bueno.

At 16 she had been Miss Vermont. A rapist climbed into her room at night and told her that unless she came with him he would murder her whole family, including her younger brother and sister. He showed her the enormous hunting knife he had brought to do the job. They walked right out the front door of her home together, and he kept her in his basement for two weeks before she escaped. It was a major news story, but her father, an Anglican minister, kept it from going national. It was not surprising that many of her sexual fantasies were rapes. She liked to be cut with a knife on her ass, her legs, and her back—this was a tricky thing to learn to do properly, and I did not enjoy it—and she insisted on savage spankings, and she liked to be smothered with one hand. One time she bit three of my fingers nearly to the bone: They had to be stitched.

When I told her it was over—I had started to see a 21-year-old philosophy major, who would later become my second wife—she had the most violent reaction. First, she attacked me. A night of unusually savage sex calmed her. But she pursued us for weeks. I’d look up in a restaurant and she’d be there at the bar, staring at us balefully and drinking her scotch. I knew to get my date out of the restaurant before she’d had time for more than three. The new girl I was dating thought I was simply in a hurry to get her home and into bed. Rory with more than three scotches was scary. I’d seen her stick a pool cue up a man’s nose. She loved to play pool, and we did that many nights and afternoons the summer we were together. She liked to place large bets on our games, and if she lost she’d wink at me with the tacky false eyelashes she affected and say, “You can take it out in trade.”

I had fallen asleep on the small iron bed and she woke me by stroking my neck. It was black as the bottom of the sea in the room, but outside the open window—there was no glass, not even a curtain—I could see the unfamiliar southern constellations in the moonless sky, and I could hear the waves far below us, and I thought I could still be dreaming, if it weren’t that the air was so cold in the room and her body was so warm as she slipped beneath the sheet and coiled around me. I wanted to ask her name, and I wanted to apologize for my unshaven face, which would hurt her when she kissed me, but I did not speak Mandarin and she did not speak English.

We made love for three, four hours, without saying a word. Because we were not talking we were shy, and even our breathing and our whimpers were quiet, as though our parents were listening downstairs. I would come, and she would come, and we would hold each other, and she would wait, without ever being completely still, and kiss me, and touch places in my body with her fingers that were forbidden to other women. But in this way she kept me from drowsing or dreaming, and she aroused me over and again. I had not been excited like this since I was a teenager. And I had not been satiated like this, I thought, when at last she allowed me to sleep, since a night with three Thai women many years before at the Mona Lisa. It was a night I let the madam choose the women for me, which is just what you should do, if you have the opportunity and it is a very good house of prostitution.

When I woke the next morning she was still in bed next to me. That is the kindest present a prostitute can give you, and they understand that. This was a truly gentle woman. She was close to my own age. When I turned her sleeping face to kiss her in the newly risen slanting morning sunlight she very slowly opened her eyes and blinked, sleepily, smiling, reaching for me, perhaps half-dreaming, and I saw she was blind. *Clancy*



## THE POET

BY PAUL MALISZEWSKI  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY SAMMY HARKHAM

The poet and his wife were young, and they were just married.

They had an apartment near a grocery store and a post office. The poet walked most everywhere. The first floor of their building was brown-painted wood. The second floor was like imitation stucco. Rent on a second-floor apartment was \$100 more per month on account of it being less noisy.

You know, the woman from the rental office told them, nobody living above you and that sort of thing.

They took a place on the first floor. They didn't have much money then.

The poet was, at the time, a promising writer. Several established poets had told him his work displayed a certain promise. He had entered his poems in a national contest, and while he didn't win one of the prizes, the judges included his name on a list of poets to watch. He had also published a poem in a literary magazine, and an editor at another magazine read and passed on six of his new poems, but wrote a note at the bottom of his form rejection: pls try again. The poet's wife had a good job, in a nice office that paid health-insurance benefits for their entire family. The poet had a job too, besides the poetry, stocking shelves at an office-supply outlet. It was fairly menial and mindless and didn't pay well and offered no benefits save a slight discount on office supplies.

When the baby came, the poet stayed at home with him. Daycare for the baby, when they looked into it, proved too expensive, many multiples more than what the poet earned from his job and his poetry. The choice was plain.

Raising the baby was hard work. The poet told friends of theirs it was the hardest job he'd ever held, but also the best, far and away the best. That was his pat answer. When anybody asked how it was going, staying at home, he'd just deliver his sound bite. He didn't even need to think.

But like so many of the things he repeated, it

seemed less true the more he said it. The poet had a friend with a young child and, like him, she stayed at home, caring for the boy. The poet's friend lived far away, but they wrote back and forth when time permitted and sometimes talked on the phone. The poet felt close to her, though he hadn't seen her for years. The poet simply could be more honest with her, especially if he took the time. Her child was older than his by a couple of years, so he listened keenly to her stories. She came from his future. She brought back detailed reports of life there. So when the poet's friend asked him how it was going, being at home, he didn't give her the usual sound bite. He would never. The poet's answer, when it came, was halting, however, and confused. It's weird, how time feels now, he told his friend. The baby affects everything. I mean, even my sense of time. Whole days can fly by, he said, but in another, maybe bigger scheme, everything seems longer somehow. Does that make sense? The poet knew it didn't make any sense. He only ever asked if he was making sense when he knew full well he wasn't. I'm afraid I can't explain it, he said.

A few days later, or maybe it was a few weeks, who could tell anymore, the poet talked to his friend again. His baby was napping, or was supposed to be, anyway. Her child was at preschool. I've been thinking, the poet said, about what I was saying before, about time. His friend said she remembered. Sometimes, the poet said, I don't know what I do with a day or a week. I can't tell you what I did yesterday. And if I tell my wife a story about something the baby did, I often try to say, This was yesterday or whatever, but I often can't remember what day it was. I'll say I don't remember and apologize, but I'll also say it doesn't matter. Because when I think back to how much time has passed, the poet told his friend, it feels like a great deal of time. He paused, listening back over what he has just said. I'm not sure that's any clearer, he told her.

The poet's friend understood, though. I have a friend, she said. She once perfectly captured what you are trying to say. She had asked me how I was doing at home, as I asked you. Like you, I sort of stuttered out a response, not really making my point. Anyway, my friend nodded her head and said, The days are long, but the months are short.

The poet thought about that for a few seconds. It was like trying on a new shirt. You had to look at yourself in the mirror first, maybe turn a bit. The poet decided he liked it, he liked it quite a lot. What his friend's friend said was true. It was, in fact, perfect. The poet repeated it to himself, listening to the words. That's it exactly, he told his friend. The days are long. And the months are so short. The poet was impressed by people who could boil something down with no appreciable loss of complexity. There was real beauty in it. Epigrams—the poet thought that was the right word, though he often confused it with epigraphs—could be like sculptures. He wanted to walk around them, admiring them from every conceivable angle.

The baby was a wonder. At birth, his arms annoyed him more than anything else, equally liable to knock himself in the head or scratch his cheek. It was as if his hands were worked by someone else's mind. Once, the poet was holding the baby. He was leaning against the wall with the baby riding high on his shoulder, when the baby started pawing almost blindly at a light switch. A few weeks later, the baby brought one steady finger to bear on the same switch and then simply flicked it on. It was something else how that could happen, this change, his control. The baby was so pleased by such small things, like seeing a beetle crawl across a window screen or holding his bottle in one hand without dropping or fumbling it. His willpower astounded the poet, his determination, say, to move and then, later, to pull himself up an entire set of stairs as the poet followed behind, there if the baby should slip.

It was easy for him to get lost in the baby's antics. They crawled together and played. The baby crawled around chairs and then ducked to peer underneath, to look back at the poet. The poet waved to the baby and called out his name. When the poet crawled toward the baby, he took off, laughing as he went. The baby had the laugh of an evil genius.

The poet liked seeing things from the floor, things like the underside of tables and the long, bobbing shadows cast onto the ceiling from the street. While lying on the floor, the poet said, even a door appeared great.

He told himself he'd get writing done, but of course he didn't, really. He worked erratically, in spurts punctuated by long, restive periods of inaction. During one spurt, though, he managed to produce a long poem about Dubai. He had never

been, but he caught part of a documentary on television one night and was quite taken by the look of the place, especially the hundreds of manmade islands off the coast which, from the air, resembled a map of the world. At a shopping mall, people skied on indoor slopes and a store sold Ferraris. Not Ferrari t-shirts or key chains or toys, the poet said to his wife. The actual cars. Dubai was, as he imagined it, like some giant playpen. The rich were shaping Disney Worlds from the desert sand. The poet reached for comparisons, anything, but could think only of movies about a coming time when men and women are ruled by robots. That's what Dubai looked like: a place made for robots. The skyline was a work in progress, jagged, futuristic. Most buildings were under construction still, with cranes pivoting from the rooftops and crews of workers laboring through the day and the night. Thousands of mercury-vapor lamps illuminated the sites at night. The chilly white light of another artificial day.

The poet's poem was long but had come to him easily, with little revision required. It was as if a spaceship landed on my desk, he told friends. He pressed the finished work on his wife and a few others, people who loved him and whose opinion he trusted. He told them, You know Kafka wrote the novel called *Amerika* without ever visiting. Not, he added, that I would compare myself to Kafka, but I do like that whole idea of writing about someplace without seeing it.

His readers liked the poem, or at least they said they did, but weeks and then months passed without the poet producing any new writing. The Dubai poem soon felt old, the work of a former self, someone who reminded the poet of a person he knew. What's more, no editor seemed keen to publish the stupid thing. It was too long, it turned out, for most magazines even to consider.

The poet told himself he'd review books instead, to keep abreast or whatever, but he didn't do much of that either. He did manage, however, to interest an editor in his proposal to write a review essay about an old satirical magazine, a publication that had begun with little fanfare in 1957 only to promptly, and sadly, fold, as most satires are wont, just 11 issues later, in 1958. The old satirical magazine had been long forgotten but was set to be reprinted in a stately two-volume boxed set. The poet wanted to review it, or at least use it as a launching pad for an argument he'd been thinking about off and on, for, he supposed, at least ten years. He had not known of the old magazine, but he thought of satire as one of a very few subjects that he knew better than almost anybody. Satire was one of his things. He loved when a satire masqueraded as something else. *Report from Iron Mountain* was, to his mind, the gold standard, just the way it pretended to be the leaked proceedings from some secret quasi-government study group, with

hardly a wink or a nudge to the ribs, just that mask, a perfectly fitting mask.

The poet's essay, as he imagined it, would suggest that what we typically call satire is not really satire at all, but just humor tossed out to audiences already primed to laugh. *The Onion* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, as funny as that publication and those television programs sometimes are, attract audiences that know exactly what they're getting. And never mind that the audience is seldom, if ever, the object of any of the jokes. The audience gets off easy, too easy, in favor of other targets—politicians, say, or celebrities, professional athletes, and so on. The old satirical magazine was no different. If anything, it was a kind of model for what would come to pass. The ur-*Onion*, the poet called it. The writers and artists for the old satirical magazine took snide swipes at pop culture—movies, books, television shows, even other magazines—but let slide by without comment the consumers of all that junk, the people who made the crap so popular to start with. All of us, in other words.

Real satire was rare stuff. It unsettles and riles. It also makes people exceedingly uncomfortable. Satire is not some balm or some half-hour-long respite from a crazy, mixed-up world. Genuine satire does not amuse or alleviate stress. It should, in fact, disturb and interrogate, all under the guise—and this is the hardest trick of all, the poet thought—of humor.

A professor the poet had once likened satire to being cut by a sword so sharp and wielded so artfully that a person doesn't even realize he's been cut in two. The more the poet thought about satire, it seemed less a species of comedy than a strategy of rhetorical attack—withering, exact, unsparing, even violent. All this brutal language, this talk of target and attack—it was military language, really—was no accident. One scholar describes how generals of ancient armies placed the rhetorically gifted on their front lines, employing them to hurl curses and insults ahead as they charged the enemy.

So went the poet's idea anyway. The editor gave him a generous deadline and a lot of room to flesh out his argument—4,000 words. It was the most anyone had ever asked him to write. The poet got to reading back issues of the old satirical magazine. He read slowly, when he found time and had enough energy. Sometimes weeks went by, though, whole weeks in which he read no pages. His hopes and plans, such as they were, exceeded his time, or maybe it was just his energy. It didn't matter which it was, really. He did finish reading the back issues, eventually, but by then, his deadline was looming, and he'd written hardly a word. He contacted his editor and apologized, asking for more time. His editor said all was well. He wanted the essay done right, not hastily.

The poet began reading interviews with the founders of the old satirical magazine. He also located critical articles about the publication. As before, he

read slowly, when time allowed. He began looking at other work by the founders, so that he could understand the old satirical magazine in the context of their various oeuvres. The poet was nothing if not thorough. He approached the project as if it were his dissertation and filled the margins of his research with arrows and his ragged handwriting. He posed questions to himself and underlined bits that would, if he followed up on them, open whole new avenues for further research. He took pages of notes.

The poet's wife gave her husband every opportunity to work on the essay. She was just so glad he was writing again. It made him happy, having something in the works. On her days off, she took the baby out of the apartment, to run errands and whatnot, so that he could have a quiet space in which to think.

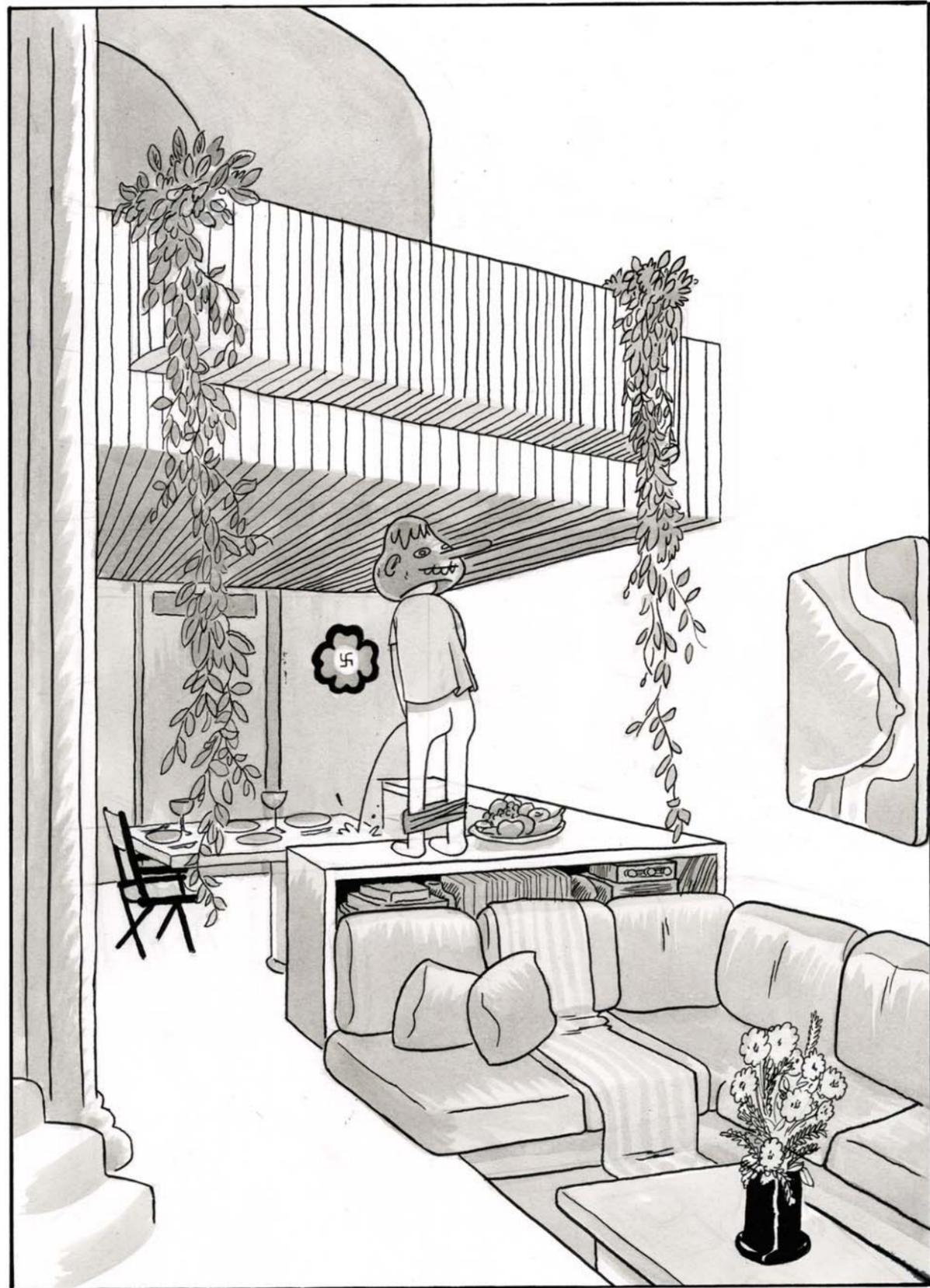
A couple of months later, the poet completed his study of all the secondary material. He could have gathered more, he knew, but he had to tell himself, finally, to stop already. By then, though, his memory of the primary sources—the actual issues of the old satirical magazine—had faded, so he went back through all his notes and typed them into his computer. The work was tedious and even repetitive, but not without occasional rewards. He came upon particularly perceptive notes and was pleased to see how clear-sighted he had been, back when he had only just started to work on the project. In addition, he found a few meaty notes and was able to expand them into complete sentences or even, in one or two instances, a paragraph, text he figured he would return to and incorporate directly into the finished essay. By the time the poet was done, he had 42 pages of notes, double-spaced. The essay was already there, in his notes, sort of. It was a mess, still, but he could see it starting to take shape.

His second deadline loomed, however, and so the poet had to ask the editor for just a little more time. He apologized for being so slow. I'm making good progress, he said. I want to finish this for you. The editor was kind, unfailingly, but he was also firm. He needed the essay no later than two months from that date. The poet thanked him and then apologized once more and said he would not let him down.

It had seemed like enough time, but the two months passed quickly and with little actual progress. The poet's wife asked him how the essay was coming along. He was sitting at his desk, and she was standing behind him, to the side. Her hand rested on his shoulder, and then she let it fall to his chair. She tried to be gentle and tried not to push. She didn't want to make him feel bad or pressure him in any way.

The poet told her he needed more time. It's not enough, he said. You leave the apartment for two hours here or an hour and half there. What am I supposed to do with these little snatches of time?

I can't keep the baby out all day, his wife said. He needs to nap.



S.H. 2011

## THE POET by Paul Maliszewski

I think I know about naps, the poet said. Thank you, though.

The poet's wife started to walk out of the room, but got only as far as the doorway before she turned around to face him again. I stay out for as long as the baby can stand it, she said. But we do need, at some point, to come home, you know?

I'm not talking about naps, the poet said. My god.

The poet's wife was silent. She would let the poet do the talking. It was the only thing to do, really. Just let him go and go until he tired of it. Or else leave. Not that anything changed anything.

You see the trouble, the poet said. Don't you?

She didn't, but she didn't say.

I never know when I'm going to get any time, the poet said. That's what makes this so hard for me. Maybe I'll get an hour tomorrow. Or maybe not. Maybe I'll get a little time next weekend. But maybe not. How can I work like this? the poet asked.

The poet's wife just listened.

The answer is I can't, the poet said. I can't work like this. It's just no way to work.

The poet's wife suggested some new way they might eke out a little more time for him, both during and in between the naps, at least on the days when she was home. She would do anything for him. She wanted to make that plain. And she wanted her husband to write this essay. It was important. That's what she told him. I want us to find a way, she said. I want to make this work.

It doesn't matter, the poet said. It's not going to work. Nothing will work. Even when you two leave, I have to do so much to get you ready to go that by the time you actually clear out of the apartment, I feel too tired to do much work. What the poet said was and was not true. He tended toward melodramatic overstatement, especially when trying to be persuasive. He didn't have to do that much, not really. He did feel tired, though, but then he always felt at least somewhat tired.

In the end, the poet failed to turn in his essay. He failed even to start the thing. That was the sad truth. After all those months—how many exactly he didn't want to count—and he had not written a single word. All the time his wife gave him, her support, her patience, her forgiving him his moods and his impossible brooding, plus all the editor's understanding, and the poet still had nothing. He had spent so much time reading and note-taking, never mind the time he then spent organizing his notes. It was absurd. Maybe he had just been stalling all along. The poet had to wonder. Did he need the notes? Did he need them typed? He had wasted so much time. Maybe he just got bored. Or maybe the idea grew old and, in his mind, started to seem like something he'd already written.

Sometimes still he burned with the idea. A little fire that rose and fell. He could feel it. He considered

making one last push, a final attempt to get the thing done, but after dragging all his books and research out and sorting them into neat stacks on the kitchen table, he decided he didn't have it in him, he just didn't.

The poet wrote the editor, telling him the bad news, and a few days later, the editor responded. Very sorry to hear this, he said. Why don't you send me what you have, though? Maybe we can figure something out...

The poet stared at the ellipsis at the end of the editor's message, trying to divine what those dots might entail, what he could do and what the editor would then say and so forth. He thought he might tell the editor the truth, or something close to it. Instead he told him that his writing, what he had, was just too bad to show. It's really, really rough, he said, in its current state. I'm sorry, but I'd rather just pull the plug on the thing and be done with it.

A few more days passed, and the editor wrote back. Plug pulled, he said. Be well.

The poet imagined then that he might start to write in short forms, the epigram, say, or maybe the couplet, but that never worked out either. He could never say anything much in a line. He did, however, start one new poem. He had only a couple of lines in his head, yet they seemed to hold some promise. For several days, he thought of the words, repeating them to himself, listening to the sound they made. He wanted to give them a chance to build, to grow, to become something, but when nothing seemed to be happening, he opened a new document on his computer and just typed the words in already. The man was tired, he wrote. Too tired even to sleep. That was it. It wasn't complete, but that was all he had. Over the next two weeks, he went back and looked at what he had done, tweaking what was there, bending the lines first one way and then another, breaking them into even smaller pieces only to put them back together again, exactly as they had been before. He elaborated and embellished plenty, but then ended up deleting his efforts until he was back with just those original two lines. Nothing new ever lasted long. As he worked on the poem, he thought chiefly of himself. Once, while staring at his nine words on the screen, he thought of those small lead weights used for fishing, sinker weights. He imagined them secured to a thin line and then hooked into his face, right beneath his eyes and at the corners of his mouth. The weights stretched his skin, tugging at his features, pulling them down. That was how he felt, he thought. He just didn't know how best to put it. The more he read the poem, though, and the more he worked those two lines over, the more self-pitying he found the entire undertaking. Everybody is tired, he thought. Everybody is always tired. Eventually, he just quit the thing. It was stupid, he told himself.

For the first time since he was a teenager, the poet started to keep a notebook, just a place to jot down

ideas for lines or overheard dialogue and occasional thoughts, but after filling a few pages with writing that seemed, on reading it over, slack and meandering, if not self-indulgent and pitiable, he let the notebook get buried underneath other papers.

The less he wrote, the more books he bought. The poet purchased new collections of poetry, dense works of literary criticism and poetics, a study of Melville's poems, and a biography of Mallarmé.

When he got a new book, he always took in a few pages, just to sample it, getting a flavor for the thing, but he only rarely found the energy to read more. The poet bought the books he wanted eventually to read as well as books by authors he wanted to support.

He was building a library for the person he wished he was. Or so he told himself.

Once, the poet found a passing reference to an out-of-print monograph that argued Emily Dickinson's style, her telegraphic lines and those bold dashes, was the result of her being blind. The dashes were there, the author posited, so that she could find her way on the page, by feeling the deep marks with her fingertips. It was an intriguing if impossible-to-prove thesis, and the poet spent weeks of what free time he had trying to track down a copy. When at last the book came in the mail, he left the package unopened on his desk. One day, he thought, I'll read about blind Emily Dickinson.

Under the circumstances, it was all too easy for the poet to begin to resent his wife. Not that she deserved it. Not in the slightest. She worked hard for them, and they owed everything to her. The apartment. The food. Their lives and their stability. She made milk for the baby and brought it home for him, several bottles each day. And anyway, the poet couldn't do her job. Nothing he could do paid well enough for a family of three. Believe him, he'd looked.

Nevertheless, the hours began to wear on him and turn him sharp. Also to confuse him. One night, he rolled over in his sleep and grabbed his wife by the arm, convinced the baby was in bed with them and that it was his little arm he held in his hand. Never mind that they never slept with the baby. In his half-sleep, the baby was there and in danger of being crushed and smothered. It felt so real.

He comforted his son, which was really his wife, stroking his arm and telling him it was OK, it was OK now, Daddy's going to be put you to bed now, OK?

He whispered to his wife. Love, he said, trying to wake her. Love.

What is it? she said. Shouldn't we put the baby back in the crib? he asked.

The poet's wife was silent, thinking. The baby's not here, she said. Go back to sleep.

He mumbled an apology and rolled onto his back, trying to understand his mistake and compose some semi-coherent explanation.

On the next night—and for several nights following it—the poet had this same dream.

In the mornings, the baby awoke at seven, which is also when the poet's wife started to get ready for work. So for the next ten or 11 or sometimes 12 hours then, the poet took care of the baby. He tended to fill their day with talk. He liked to tell the baby what he was doing and what was going on, like a narrator would. We need to change your diaper, OK? Or, Daddy needs to make lunch now. That sort of thing. But often when the poet spoke, he made mistakes. Just stupid errors. He mangled his verbs, for instance, and sometimes he searched for a word only to come up with the wrong one. Once he asked his wife if she'd seen the baby's coffee. Milk, he added. I meant milk.

The poet's wife looked in the refrigerator and, after a few seconds of hunting, found the milk pushed way to the back. It was behind the orange juice, she said. Hiding. She handed the bottle to the poet, and he handed it straight to the baby, who had been reaching for it as soon as it appeared, reaching and calling out, Meh, meh, meh, his word, they figured, for milk.

The poet and his wife watched their baby consume the milk. He's draining that thing, the poet's wife said. Look at him.

It was impressive, the poet had to agree. Guess we shouldn't starve him so much, he said.

We could feed him more coffee, his wife said. As an alternative.

The poet smiled. It was a kind of comfort, his wife knowing just what he had meant. They were well versed in each other's nonsense. But still. He couldn't shake the errors, and he couldn't forgive himself for making them. It was embarrassing. His grasp of grammar was deteriorating. He felt retarded, almost. He hefted his baby into the air and said, Let's get into the table now, when what he meant, of course, was Let's get into your high chair. He did that sort of thing all the time. He said things like Daddy eat strawberry, or Daddy go to kitchen. He sounded like a caveman in some bad movie.

It was when things got tough, when the baby was being especially fussy, refusing to eat, swatting away food he normally loved, or crying for no identifiable reason, that the poet thought, This isn't fair. It's not fair what I've given up. It's not fair what I have to do. I can't even manage to finish reading a book, he thought. A goddamn book. What he wanted to know was when he was going to start getting something back around here. That's all. Because he'd really like to know when it's going to be his turn for a change.

Not that the poet could imagine another way they might get by. He had no plan in mind, nothing reasonable, really.

At the end of the day, before the poet's wife came home, he often ended up on the floor, lying there

spent, his eyes shut, the baby across his chest, trying to clamber over him. If the baby crawled away, he let him go, not because he didn't care, but so he could steal, with his eyes closed, a few seconds of rest. The poet had to tell himself, order himself really, Get up now. Go after your child. He was his own sergeant and slack soldier both.

Sometimes the poet's wife came home and found them on the floor. Sometimes when she came home, the poet could hardly manage a hello, a how are you, and how was your day. When she bent in for a kiss, he gave her his cheek.

It got so bad that the poet had to remind himself to be patient with his wife. He put a note on his bedside table, so he saw it every morning and every night.

The poet had a fear. He worried that one day somebody would arrive and just take the baby from him. Somebody official, from the city maybe, or the county, however it worked. Sometimes the poet worried his parents would try to take the baby.

What, his father might ask, can you even do for this baby, as a poet? How can you take care of him? This is my grandson we're talking about.

The poet could hear the conversation in his mind, the reel of tape turning and rewinding and then playing again. He knew well how his father pronounced poet, as if the word itself had gone sour.

The poet had no idea what he had done wrong—or not done right—that would merit having the baby removed from his custody, but he felt sure there was something. There was always something.

One night, after the baby was asleep, the poet was lying in bed, resting, just staring at the ceiling, at their ceiling fan. He had his arms thrown over his head, and he thought, not for the first time, I don't want to move. I want to stay like this forever. The fan shook and rattled, as it did when set on any speed but slow and ineffectual.

His wife was about to leave the room, when he called out to her. Love? he said.

She turned, already in the doorway, half standing in shadow.

Am I doing the right things at the right time? he asked her. In general, I mean.

She said he was being silly. Of course, he was. It was all fine.

At some level, though, the poet couldn't accept that it all really was fine. Time and again the poet asked his wife, What's wrong? Is anything wrong? Because he was so sure something was wrong. Something was always wrong. Behind her assurances, the words were there, he just knew it. The complaints, the differences, impossible wishes for how things might be instead, they just hadn't yet been spoken aloud.

Around this time, the poet began to notice a man lurking about the apartment complex, a black guy, middle-aged, who wore Hawaiian shirts and kept a

pair of reading glasses and a laminated ID around his neck. The poet saw him knocking on doors in the middle of the day. Sometimes when the poet walked by with his baby, the man was presenting his ID to whoever was at the door. The man tried to be real casual. Once, the poet heard him say, But if now's not cool with you, I can just swing by later on.

He had a kindly voice. Soft-spoken, nonthreatening. You could train a person to talk like that. It wasn't hard.

The poet assumed the man was from some social-services welfare-type office, and that he was checking up on his cases, checking on children. He carried a clipboard and had friendship bracelets, an easy couple dozen of the things, tied around one wrist. Often, when the poet saw the social worker, he was standing before some door, looking at it, listening. Was nobody home or was nobody answering? Were there noises inside? Was that a television? The poet didn't have a lot to go on, but what more did he need, really?

The poet was happiest on the weekends, when they were all together. Raising the baby was a job for two people with almost nothing else to do except care for the child. By himself, when it was just he and the baby, the apartment came apart, sliding gradually into disorder and chaos. What was clean became dirty, until everything was dirty. With both the poet and his wife at home, however, they stayed ahead of the chores, the laundry, the dishes.

They did things together, too, as a family. They went places. Nothing big, but still. When the poet needed new shoes, they went to the mall, to a department store. The poet had thought shopping for shoes sounded like a hassle, but his old pair was looking—in his wife's words—a bit rough. The toes had holes in them, holes large enough to see through, and the soles were worn down past the rubber in places. Still, the poet didn't care about the condition of his shoes. He knew they looked rough. No one would argue that point. He just didn't want to spend any money he didn't have to. The poet always resisted spending, particularly on himself. It just seemed like the least he could do, since he didn't make any money of his own, per se. He was always trying to save, too, turning out the lights when nobody was using them, that sort of thing. He also filled out those forms for mail-in rebates, a task to which he brought a religious devotion. The amounts he got back were nominal, and he often felt ridiculous trudging to the bank with some check for a dollar and change or whatever it was, but it didn't matter, money was money. Wasn't it? He did feel bad if a line of people was queued up behind him, guys in gray suits, women in their work clothes and their tennis shoes, and there he was holding these busy people up in order to deposit sums like \$4.50 or \$6.85 or, one time, 75 cents.



S. H. M. 2011

## THE POET by Paul Maliszewski

When it came to the shoes, however, his wife had insisted. Shoes are not a luxury, she told him.

The poet stood in front of the store displays and assessed his options, trying to find something he might wear. Each shoe glowed, lit up like a movie star by a small spot lamp. While the poet browsed, his wife watched the baby. She carried him around, showing him shoes, talking to him sweetly, telling him what Daddy was up to. The baby started to fuss a bit, and the poet heard, but he didn't turn to see what was wrong. The baby was his wife's problem for now.

The poet found a couple of shoes that he thought might work, and then he flagged down a salesman and said he'd like to see them in a 12, if they had it. The baby, by then, was really going at it, his cries louder and more pained. That was, it seemed, the way of their child: He was either fine or else he was bearing witness to the end of the world. By then, the poet's family was on the other side of the department, but he could hear them still, quite clearly. The baby yelled and screamed, and his wife tried to calm him and soothe him and let him know that everything was going to be all right. It was as if they carried one of the poet's ears wherever they went and, no matter how far they wandered, he heard them and knew what was happening. The poet glanced in their direction. There was his baby, red-faced and grimacing. The poet's wife struggled to hold him in her arms, he was wriggling and writhing so. The boy was getting too heavy for her, the poet thought. He started toward them, but then he thought, It's fine, it'll be fine. He took a seat and just waited for his shoes.

From his chair, the poet continued to survey the selection on the wall. Was there perhaps one he missed? He looked at each shelf and then he fixed his attention on an odd pair of dress shoes—dress boots, really—made of red, white, and blue leather. Were they part of some promotion, for display purposes only? Was anyone seriously expected to buy them? The poet didn't know. He liked sitting there, that much he knew. He liked the feeling of not having a thing to do. He even liked having a guy go fetch shoes for him. Because who would not, honestly? The poet took his old shoes off and tucked them under his chair, turning them so that the toes would face away from the salesman when he returned. Then he straightened his socks and relaxed back into the chair.

The poet's wife came over to where he was waiting. She sat down beside him and sighed. The baby scrambled over the arms of the chairs to reach the poet. Dada, the baby said. Dada.

Come here, the poet said. He hefted the baby up to his shoulder. What a big lug you are, he said. In the time that his wife and boy were away, he had forgotten how heavy he had grown. It had been only minutes, if that, but the weight in his hands felt new somehow. He could appreciate it.

The salesman emerged from the storeroom,

carrying seven or eight shoeboxes balanced in two stacks. The poet's wife scooped the baby up and said they'd be around. She kissed the poet on the cheek and told him to pick out something nice.

The salesman explained that he had taken the liberty of selecting some other shoes he believed the poet was certain to like. He spoke about these shoes, the ones he had picked, as if they were finely made cigars or an exceptional vintage of some wine.

There's a big sales event coming up, the salesman said. Had anyone mentioned this to the poet?

The poet shook his head. Was somebody supposed to? In the background, over his left shoulder, he thought he heard his baby cry.

We don't have many sales, the salesman said, but the sales we do have are quite good.

The poet nodded and took in all the shoeboxes the salesman had arrayed around them. He was surrounded. From the top box, the salesman removed one shiny black dress shoe. He laced it up quickly, efficiently, and then, holding it in both hands, pronounced it a very fine shoe. He handed it to the poet to admire. Classic design, the salesman said. Perfect for the office.

The poet turned the shoe over in his hands. It seemed slightly strange to him, like an artifact in some museum exhibition about a tribe of people he had only ever read about in school.

It's a really nice shoe, the poet said.

The salesman told him how much the shoes would be, on sale, and how much they were originally.

I unfortunately don't have much need for dress shoes these days, the poet said. He handed the shoe back to the salesman. I'm sorry, he added.

Mind if I ask what you do for a living? the salesman said.

Right now? the poet asked. He spoke it like a question, as if the salesman were inquiring about his rich history of work. I stay at home right now, the poet said. I take care of our baby. He gestured vaguely behind him, toward where he had last heard the baby crying.

Well, that's a good job to do, the salesman said. He packed up the shoe and then moved aside all the other pairs that he had planned to show the poet.

The poet watched him work. It sounds like a real good sale, he said. I'm just sorry I don't need any dress shoes.

The salesman said there was no problem at all.

They are nice shoes, the poet said.

The salesman said he should keep them in mind, for future reference. He then found the shoes the poet had asked for and removed them from the boxes. The poet tried them on and, after deliberating a bit and looking at his feet reflected in a mirror, he settled at last on a pair of running shoes, mostly brown with a touch of lime green that ordinarily would have been enough to frighten him off.

I'll take them, the poet said. Thank you.  
The salesman asked the poet how he would like to pay for his shoes today, and the poet handed him a card. Credit, he said.

The salesman then went through some intricately choreographed motions involving the cash register, the poet's credit card, a pen, and a small sticker he affixed to the side of the shoebox. He was like a machine. No movement was wasted, no energy expended senselessly.

Are these shoes by any chance going to be part of that sale? the poet asked.

The salesman looked up, his trance broken. He had to think for a second, to focus on the question. They're not, he said. Sorry. And then he went right back to work.

In the car, on the way home, the poet told his wife about his exchange with the salesman. I mean, did you catch how many shoes he brought me? he asked her.

I'm sure they train them all to do that, she said.  
I know, the poet said, but I just felt so embarrassed.

He must have thought you looked like someone who works in an office, the poet's wife said. That's not an insult, you know.

The poet said he felt—he wasn't sure how he felt, exactly. He searched around for some word. I felt this deep shame, he told his wife. I wish I hadn't, believe me, but there it is.

His wife told him it was all right. The guy was just trying to sell some shoes, she said. He probably brings out extras for everybody who walks in there.

The poet said in a weird way he sort of wished he was the man the salesman figured him for.

From the backseat, the baby cried. Out, he said. Out.

God, he hates that car seat, the poet's wife said.  
Out, out, the baby said.

The poet twisted in his seat and craned his neck to check on the baby. Mommy and Daddy can't let you out right now, he said. We're going straight home, though, OK? And then we'll let you out, all right?

Out, the baby said.  
The poet turned back around in his seat. That went well, he said.

On Saturday and Sunday, when the baby went down for his morning nap, the poet and his wife took a shower together, and they talked and they kissed and hugged under the water. Sometimes they made plans while they showered, mapping out the day to come, but often they talked about whatever. One time, the poet's wife said, I wish there was a new food, something I've never eaten before. Her comment came out of nowhere. She had, she said, just been thinking. The poet loved such nonsense, the light stuff barely more substantial than air, stuff that didn't try too hard. It meant everything to him. There was an ease to it, a comfort. He could, he knew,

exchange such nonsense with her for the remainder of his life.

Don't you ever wish you had a new food? the poet's wife asked him.

He wasn't sure. I never really have cravings, he said. Not for food, anyway.

In the shower, talking like this, with no real aim, the poet could start to feel he was getting away with something, but he was only relaxing. At some point, relaxing had started to feel wrong, gnawed away at by the many things that needed doing instead.

It was during one of their showers that the poet's wife asked him what he was thinking, and he told her nothing, really. It's embarrassing, he said.

That's OK, she told him.

He had been thinking, he said, taking a breath then, about how once he had supposedly been a promising poet and how that meant something, even though he told himself at the time it was meaningless and ridiculous and then swore he would go on writing regardless.

Sorry, he added, I'm just in a mood, I guess.  
Once, the poet's wife said. You say it like you're talking about ancient history.

I'm serious, the poet said. I mean, how long, realistically, can one remain quote-unquote promising? At what point does the promise become something never kept?

The poet's wife tilted her head into the water and rinsed the shampoo from her hair. She pulled her hair back and wrung it and then opened her eyes. You worry too much, she said. She leaned in for a hug and wrapped her arms around the poet so hard that he gasped.

Anyway, she said, you're the promise. You can't just break that.

The poet said he supposed so, but he wasn't sure. It sounds sort of corny, he added. Doesn't it? A little?

The poet's wife shrugged her shoulders. She didn't care about corny. The poet wondered sometimes if the entirety of his education, all the books and all the classes, the seminars and presentations, taught him little except how to detect trace amounts of corniness, just a few noxious parts per million, and then he wondered what the point of that was, finally, to be so sensitive to what was just a little bit corny.

Friends who came over to see the baby often asked when the poet and his wife were going to get started on the next baby. Friends said, That baby's going to need a brother, right? Or perhaps a younger sister, someone to look out for?

Usually it seemed like a joke, so the poet just laughed it off.

They weren't ready, he and his wife. He wasn't sure when they would be ready either, or if they would ever be. They were barely managing as it was.

The poet's wife told friends, Just show me where we're going to put another baby.

They didn't have enough room or enough money. They didn't have enough anything. It wouldn't work. It just wouldn't. Neither the poet nor his wife could imagine another child.

A month and a half later, one Saturday morning, they were taking a shower when the poet's wife told him that she thought she was pregnant.

You think? he said. Or you're sure?  
I'm pretty sure, she said.

He didn't know what to say. He lowered his head and closed his eyes and, for a few seconds, just let the water beat on the back of his neck. Well, congratulations to us, he said. Now what are we going to do?

What do you mean? his wife said.

I mean, he said, and then he said nothing. He didn't know what he meant. But wasn't it obvious, what they had to do? He for one thought it was. There just was no acceptable way to hint around. What was he supposed to do, raise two children while she worked? Had she not said, very recently, that they couldn't swing it? He just felt it wasn't fair. He was back to that again, to the unfairness of it all, which he understood to mean the immense unfairness to him.

What do you want to do? the poet asked.  
His wife shrugged. I know it's not what we wanted, she said.

But, he thought.  
But whatever happens, she said, we'll figure it out together, right?

Of course, the poet said. He hugged her to him and felt her back, slick and clean. Of course, he said again.

That weekend the poet found a time—there was no good time—to tell his wife that he had been thinking and wondered if maybe they shouldn't perhaps terminate the pregnancy, or at least discuss all the options. He hated these words—terminate, options, discuss. He hated to hear himself speak them aloud, but he could find no substitutes.

When his wife asked him why, he said, Because I thought that's what we had decided. I thought we were in agreement here.

The poet's wife said she knew. And she understood, she did. She really did. But that was in the abstract, she said. This was different now.

In the abstract. What a phrase. Nothing's ever really in the abstract, he said. I mean, am I going to look after two kids—two babies, let's be clear—in the abstract?

She was turning away. He looked at the side of her face, and then her brow and her nose. What is it? he asked.

He always asked the same question when he knew he'd done some wrong. He just wanted her to talk, to say something, so he asked his stupid question. It was as if he just walked into the room, as if he had no knowledge, as if he hadn't been sitting there, beside

her, the whole time, as if he hadn't said what he said, as if he never hurt her.

She was looking toward the kitchen, maybe at nothing. He was going about this all wrong. He knew he was, but he dug in anyway and kept fighting, he didn't know why. Am I going to raise two children in the fucking abstract? he said.

She looked at him. Do you hear yourself? she asked. Because you make almost no sense when you're angry.

Later, for several weeks after the procedure, the poet's wife was visited by terrible dreams in which their baby was put in peril and she had somehow to rescue him. The dreams were vivid, in both their detail and the many predicaments her mind devised. A deep sleeper ordinarily, she woke up from these dreams feeling addled, unsure where she was and what was real. She woke her husband, too, no matter the time, because he insisted and because he got mad if, the next morning, she told him she'd had another bad dream.

The poet was sweet to his wife after the procedure, inordinately and impossibly sweet. He held her from behind and spoke quietly into her ear, asking about her latest dream, telling her she was OK now, that it was all right, that the awful dreams would go away with time and everything would be all right again.

One night, they were lying together, and she had her head next to his head, so that their foreheads were touching, and they were whispering when he felt tears roll down his cheek, and he had to ask himself, Am I crying? He really wasn't sure. He felt sad, a little, but he didn't think he was crying. And then he realized, they were his wife's tears. They were her tears rolling down his cheek.

Sometimes the poet asked what he had been doing in her dream, what part he played in the drama. But he wasn't in any of the baby dreams. Not ever. Not even his absence was explained. He simply wasn't there. The poet's wife always made something up, though, giving him some essential task and telling him exactly how he saw it through. The poet listened to his wife. How he liked to hear her talk. Her voice.

In the middle of the night, with his wife in his arms, the poet made certain promises. He spoke about their future and said they could always try again, when they were ready. We'll do it right this time, he said. With a plan. It won't be a surprise.

The poet's wife thought he was being absurd, talking of a plan. A plan for what? For life?

But she also took some comfort from what he said, to hear him describe a future in which they were together in spite of everything—their arguments no matter—and living in the country somewhere, in a house with many rooms, a library, even, for all his books, and outside, fenced in with rabbit wire, her little vegetable garden. She wasn't sure he would ever think they were truly ready again, but she still took some comfort in his promises, she couldn't help it, she guessed. 

# GENIUS IN EXILE

Reclaiming American Author James Purdy

BY CORY MACLAUHLIN

**A** boxer, muscular, his stance wide, his shoulders broad, leans back as he holds his bare fists in front of his face, ready to spar with an unseen opponent. The soft tones of his skin and the pastoral background belie the brutality he is capable of. All around him are other pugilists, somewhere around 20 of them—all of them just as fierce and foreboding. For more than 50 years they occupied a one-room apartment in Brooklyn, leaning against the walls, a series of prints that were collected by the author James Purdy. This was appropriate considering much of his work felt like a punch to the face, dividing critics and shocking the public.

From 1956 until his death in 2009, Purdy published nearly 20 novels, a volume of poetry, dozens of short stories, and several plays. Writers like Langston Hughes, Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams praised his work. Gore Vidal proclaimed him an “authentic American genius.” And in 1998, the *New York Times* called him a “singular American visionary.” Yet America has never properly embraced him as one of its own. While many Europeans consider him to hold a firm place in the American literary canon, in his homeland his legacy remains obscured by the controversies of his novels, which contain subject matter that people are still uncomfortable discussing in 2012. But whatever critics say about him and whatever readers think about his writing, Purdy’s rise to the margins of the literary mainstream is the tale of an artist fighting to express his vision of the dark American psyche. “I was brought up in a troubled atmosphere,” Purdy once admitted, which pretty much explains it all.

Purdy was born in 1914 in Hicksville, Ohio, and his parents separated early, their marriage ending in divorce after his father’s investments went belly-up. Purdy bounced between his mother, father, and grandmother, and writing stories and plays became an early refuge for him. Sometimes he would send anonymous hate letters to his mother’s landlord. “My mother,” he recalled in 2005, “was both horrified and amused that I would write these terrible things about real people.”

He left Ohio as soon as he could and moved to Chicago in 1935. While studying for his master’s in English at the University of Chicago, he found a new family in Gertrude Abercrombie, “the queen of the bohemian artists,” and her circle of painters, poets, and jazz musicians, which included Dizzie Gillespie and Charlie Parker. He was acquainted with the artist lifestyle through Abercrombie’s underground salons, styled after Gertrude Stein’s gatherings in Paris. After graduating in 1937, he served in the army, studied in Mexico, traveled to Spain, taught English in Cuba, and taught Spanish for nearly a decade in Wisconsin. Throughout this time he continued writing, developing a style that blended midwestern speech patterns with allusions to the Bible and ancient Greek literature. Nothing like it had been done before. He submitted his stories to New York magazines, and they were “returned with angry, peevish, indignant rejections.” Sometimes even his sanity was questioned. “All editors were insistent that I would never be a published writer.”

Determined to have his work known, he left the comforts of academia in the 50s and moved back to Chicago, where he got his big break. A small printing of his short stories landed in the hands of Dame Edith Sitwell, who identified him as “one of the greatest living writers of fiction in our language.” She

brought Purdy to wider publication in London, which then opened the back door into the US market.

*Color of Darkness*, a collection of short stories and one novella, was released in 1957. Readers were introduced to his world of affairs and broken marriages, obsessions and violence, prophets and corrupted souls. His characters search for love but are too self-interested to actually achieve it. They are symbolic, surreal, and sobering in their dark comedy. And they have a way of staying with you. Weeks after reading “Why Can’t They Tell You Why?” I kept hearing in my head that animalistic hiss from Paul—a grieving child, defending the pictures of his dead father from the hands of his abusive mother. Here one sees Purdy’s trajectory away from redemption, boring deeper into the human condition, asking why we are born in shackles. It is disturbing, marvelous, and powerful.

His first novel, *Malcolm*, followed in 1959. It’s the story of a naive teenage boy, ruined by a group of eccentrics, each wanting to keep his company for their own ends. It was widely praised in the US and in Europe, becoming an immediate classic of sorts, and for years was included on college English syllabi. Readers were eager to see what Purdy would do next. Critics finally began recognizing Purdy as an original voice in literature.

Just a few years later, however, his hard-won and honored status in American letters began to unravel. In 1964, he published *Cabot Wright Begins*, a novel that follows the escapades of a recently released rapist stalking through Brooklyn. Reviewers struggled to determine whether he was ironic or sincere, comic or tragic, brilliant or adolescent. How does one write humorously about rape—“an everywhere sport”—as Purdy did? In the *New York Times*, Orville Prescott, who had praised Purdy’s “mastery of words” in *Malcolm*, called *Cabot Wright* an “unfortunate fictional mistake.” Six days later, also in the *Times*, Susan Sontag called it a “fantastic and ironic tale.”

Had Purdy placated his harshest critics, had he restrained himself more, he may have retrieved some of that early glory. But ultimately he wasn’t interested in earning praise. Like any masterly author, he had stories to tell that had to be told his way. And his fourth novel, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, was by far his best-selling book, but it also marginalized him for the rest of his career. The story follows acolytes of a poet who writes verse in charcoal over the pages of the *Chicago Tribune*. It portrays a destructive love affair between two men, a gruesome abortion, and a finale of shocking sadomasochism, all set to the backdrop of the Great Depression. It outraged critics. Nelson Algren in the *Chicago Tribune* dismissed it as a “fifth-grade novel.” Purdy explained years later, “The gist of the review was that since it was about faggots it could have no meaning for any normal person because faggots aren’t human.” Wilfred Sheed in the *New York Times* also claimed the book was markedly “homosexual fiction,” which apparently by some unclear measure is distinguishable from “heterosexual fiction.” Purdy understood he was “being burned at the stake.”

After *Eustace Chisholm*, the label “gay writer” stuck to Purdy for the rest of his career. In fact, when this “most revolutionary novel” was rereleased in 2005, earning the Clifton Fadiman Medal and immense praise by Jonathan Franzen, Purdy was called a “literary cult hero of major proportion” and the book a “gay classic.” Therein lay the rub. As Gore



Archival photo courtesy of John Uecker

Vidal observed in an essay about Purdy, “‘Gay’ literature... is a large cemetery where unlike writers, except for their supposed sexual desires, are thrown together in a lot well off the beaten track of family values.”

Homosexuality is prevalent in Purdy’s work, but he neither depicts nor debunks gay stereotypes. You won’t find the tropes of gay-bar hookups or *Will & Grace*-style banter, nor will you find an agenda to “normalize” any expression of sexuality. Normal really has no place in Purdy’s work, except at most as a thin veneer to be peeled away.

Some people wanted to keep such material out of books (or confine it to a subgenre), but no one was going to stop Purdy from writing. No subject was taboo for him: sex, violence, race, disease, religion. And he never lost the fire of his youth. His later works address the controversies of the late 20th century. In 1989, he grappled with the AIDS epidemic in *Garments the Living Wear*. And his final short story, “Adeline,” written at age 92, explores transgendered acceptance. But since these works were largely ignored by critics, his legacy was cast further into the margins.

In some ways this is not surprising. America did the same thing to Edgar Allan Poe. The Europeans adored him,

while stateside, his peers mocked him and critics cast him as a minor writer. Yet to this day schoolchildren memorize poems like “The Raven” and “Annabel Lee.” Clearly, the initial critical reception of a work does not determine its lasting influence. “My work,” Purdy once said, “has been compared to an underground river which is flowing often undetected through the American landscape.” While this river is dark and at times terrifying, it deserves to be waded in, especially in troubled times like ours.

And there is much to gain from reading an iconoclast like Purdy. By disregarding what he deemed “the anesthetic, hypocritical, preppy, stagnant New York literary establishment,” Purdy was free to evolve and experiment, always striving to convey his vision, never repeating himself, never yielding to critics. “Writing is like a battle,” he once said. “You’re often so into it you don’t have any high ideals. You’re just doing it. I have all these boxing prints on my walls. I always feel that’s what I am, a boxer. I get my brains knocked out every so often.”

*The complete short stories of James Purdy will be printed in 2013. The exact date and publisher are to be determined. Cory MacLauchlin’s book Butterfly in the Typewriter is out now from Da Capo Press.*



# THE ROOM ALL TO ITSELF

WORDS AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES PURDY

*The Room All to Itself is one of James Purdy's last unpublished manuscripts. Written in 1978, the short play is every bit as uncompromising and brutal as his fiction. And, like his other work, it's primarily concerned with outsiders—characters outside convention, the law, and perhaps even love. We've appropriately paired the piece with illustrations by Purdy himself.*

**T**he rear of a cheap discotheque in San Francisco. Hurd, a retired pugilist, is seated at a large table at which 12 people could easily be seated. There is music of varying volumes coming from the dance floor. He is playing solitaire and chews tobacco. He slams each card down as if with that gesture he was cutting down an enemy. The door opens and Keith Ruthweg and his friend Beau enter. They wait to be recognized.

RUTHWEG: I know what you're going to say, Hurd, so save your breath. Just take him off my hands for tonight, will you. You liked him once. Like him again.

HURD: You snots with the pot-ring still on your ass... Am I sick to death of you... Is there anybody today but spoiled snots like you? That's a statistic I keep looking for in the papers. Is there anybody in the country but spoiled snots?

RUTHWEG: I'd keep him myself, Hurd, but the police are already watching me.

HURD: I know they are watching you, Ruthie. You are on the streets too often for them to do anything else.

RUTHWEG: Take him, for God's sake, take him... Don't let them get him. As soon as his money comes from home I'll put him on a bus back to Chicago.

HURD: Why not Singapore, or Nepal. Why wish him back on Chicago.

*(Beau, a young man, sits down on a kitchen chair. He, in the words of his keeper, Ruthweg, "does not have all his marbles," for which Ruthweg is secretly grateful.)*

Get your ass right up off that chair. You're not hidin' out here. Do you hear what I say?

RUTHWEG: Let him stay the night, Hurd. I'll come first thing in the morning.

HURD: If he stays the night he might as well stay the year... The cops probably already know he's here.

RUTHWEG: No, they don't Hurd. I can swear to that.

HURD: What am I going to get out of it this time, Ruth?

RUTHWEG: Anything your little heart desires.

HURD: *(to Beau)* Hear him. And he says you have softening of the brain!  
*(to Ruthweg)* Are you serious, Ruth?

RUTHWEG: *(frightened)* I'm a keeper... of my word... Only don't make me have to kill you when I find out what you want out of me.

HURD: I used to want you, Ruth. Bad... But I'm over that now.

RUTHWEG: Well, you can have me in the bargain.

HURD: *(stares at him)* No, I don't want you no more.

RUTHWEG: *(desperate)* You'll keep Beau then until I can raise money for his bus fare.

HURD: Oh, so it will be more than one night, huh.

RUTHWEG: No, I'll have him out of here by tomorrow at sunrise.

HURD: And when do you pay up, may I ask?

RUTHWEG: *(hoarse, shamed)* I'd rather you not discuss this in front of Beau.

HURD: Ha, so you're still soft on each other, are you.

RUTHWEG: *(with painful earnestness)* We are as close... as... ever.

HURD: *(brutally)* Or if closer you'd be Siamese twins, I know.

RUTHWEG: *(controlling his anger)* What do you want... as your reward.

HURD: Reward, hell. My just due. There's a difference.

RUTHWEG: Name it then, why don't you. Let's hear it!

THE ROOM ALL TO ITSELF by James Purdy

BEAU: (*standing up*) Let me go, Ruth... I don't want you to give him anything for me... Let them arrest me.

RUTHWEG: If they arrest you, Beau, you know we'll both get it! So sit down and dry up.

BEAU: Don't ask him to give it to you, Hurd! Have a heart.

HURD: You little sneak-thief, why don't you have a heart with the people you rob all the time. Huh? Besides, you don't know what I'm going to ask him.

BEAU: I can imagine.

HURD: You can't think let alone imagine.

RUTHWEG: You lay off him.

HURD: Don't forget who you're talking to, Ruthie, the man you want a favor out of, dig? And don't forget where you are, blue eyes: in that same guy's legal residence, which is something neither of you ever had.

BEAU: (*to Ruthweg*): Let's get out of here, Ruthie... It's better to have the cops... find us...

RUTHWEG: Wait a minute... go on tell me what you want. Go on... spill it.

HURD: I want the ring Billy sent you just before he died in Vietnam.

(*Ruthweg stares at him with first disbelief and then insane rage.*)

Did you hear me, or have all the beatings the cops been giving you busted your eardrums.

RUTHWEG: Why don't you ask me to dig up my mother in the cemetery and fetch you her wedding ring from her finger.

HURD: 'Cause you got Billy's ring on your finger right there, and you don't need to dig up nobody from the cemetery. I want that ring.

RUTHWEG: Look, you can have anything else, anything, me, what I own, I'll be your nigger (*pleading*). I'll dig for you! Don't ask his ring.

HURD: (*as if to himself, maniacal, raging*) I was the whole world to Billy until you come between us. As a matter of fact that was my ring, and I loaned it to

him just before he went across... He said, "*let me have it for good luck.*"

RUTHWEG: You lie. I gave him this ring... If you give him one, he must'a lost it or discarded it or whatever... This ring I gave him with my own hands, and kissed him when he took it... (*takes off ring*) Look here inside the band is my name and the date of its purchase.

HURD: (*examines ring*) I want it just the same, (*jerking his head in the direction of Beau*) or I won't take him.

BEAU: (*worried*) Don't give him the ring, Ruthie. We'll get by somehow without him.

HURD: Who else would take either of you in, but me... There's nobody that desperate in all Kingdom Come... You come to the right place to get rid of that little jailbait there.

RUTHWEG: (*in a kind of trance*) I think if I give away this ring, there would be no end to my bad luck.

HURD: Your whole life has been bad luck... Givin' away a ring couldn't bring down more shit on your head and you know it.

RUTHWEG: (*again as if to himself*) Next to Beau, I loved Billy the most. I tell you his death nearly finished me off... I couldn't do my work for a year for thinking of it... He was just about to come home too for the war had all but ended... We were going into business together!

HURD: I'd like to hear the name of that business some time when I got nothing better to do.

RUTHWEG: (*taking off the ring*) If this is all that will satisfy you, then take it, and be damned... I'd as soon cut off my hand for you... But I can't let this baby get in any deeper, eh, Beau. (*He takes Beau in his arms and kisses him, while Hurd examines, with contemptuous pleasure, his acquisition of the ring.*)

(*to Hurd*) You'll take extra good care of him now, won't you, if I leave now.

HURD: If you don't think he's safe with me, don't leave him... (*angered*) When didn't I keep my part of a bargain! You know the spot is safe here, for not one cop in a million would want to be seen in here, and you know it...

THE ROOM ALL TO ITSELF by James Purdy

RUTHWEG: All right, all right. (*goes over to Beau again, and takes his two hands in his*) You'll be all right for tonight, and tomorrow we'll go to Chicago... They'll be looking for us in our old rooming house still by tomorrow... They won't think of Chicago either...

BEAU: (*desperate*) I have to stay here, Ruthie...?

RUTHWEG: Just for tonight... Here (*giving him a small tube of something*) take these after a while... They'll quiet you down, Beau.

BEAU: (*tearful*) They will? (*As Ruthweg goes toward door Beau rushes after him, detaining him.*)

BEAU: Don't leave me, Ruthie... Please... I'm so afraid... I ain't been alone without you for such a long stretch of time.

RUTHWEG: (*regretful*) Goodbye, Beau... take a pill. (*Ruthweg leaves; Beau returns to the back of the room. He looks out the window.*)

HURD: My luck ought to return now. (*stares at ring*) Will return... I know it. I know it.

BEAU: What's below this window.

HURD: Nothin'. Absolutely nothin'...

BEAU: It looks like a room all to itself down there.

HURD: (*mimicking him*) "A room all to itself!" Well, it's a alley that the police sealed up a few days ago. Why I'll never know... But for an idiot you're right for once... It does look like a room all to itself. Nobody can get in or out, and it's the last place anybody ever looks for anything. Why I don't know... Ask the police... (*quotes again savagely*) "A room all to itself." (*laughs*)

BEAU: (*coming forward*) What are you going to do with his ring, Hurd.

HURD: What business is it of yours!

BEAU: Because I can't believe you want it... just for a keepsake.

HURD: You know for somebody everybody says don't have all his marbles I think you are bright. Maybe too bright.

BEAU: Only one person ever said that about me not havin' my marbles... But he said it out of love.

HURD: Love! Ruthie couldn't love a dog and you know it. (*shifting*) I'll tell you something since you seem to have got back some of your lost wits all of a sudden... This ring the police have been looking for... It's a clue which will connect somebody with a crime...

BEAU: Connect who?

HURD: Who but your lord and master, Ruth the one you say loves you so much.

BEAU: But how could a ring connect anybody with a crime...

HURD: This ring, despite its having Ruthie's name engraved on it, belonged to Guy Preston, who come between Ruth and Billy, and Ruth killed him out of jealousy and stole the ring, had his name carved on it, and sent it to Billy, knowing Billy would know his lover was dead...

BEAU: I don't believe it...

HURD: Because you can still read part of the name Guy Preston a bit under the name Keith N. Ruthweg... Billy was the kind would have been pleased with it all too, that somebody loved him enough to kill for him.

BEAU: I don't believe it! I don't believe Ruthie would kill anybody.

HURD: He'd do anything for love.

BEAU: You give me back that ring...

HURD: Well, see, what have we got here!

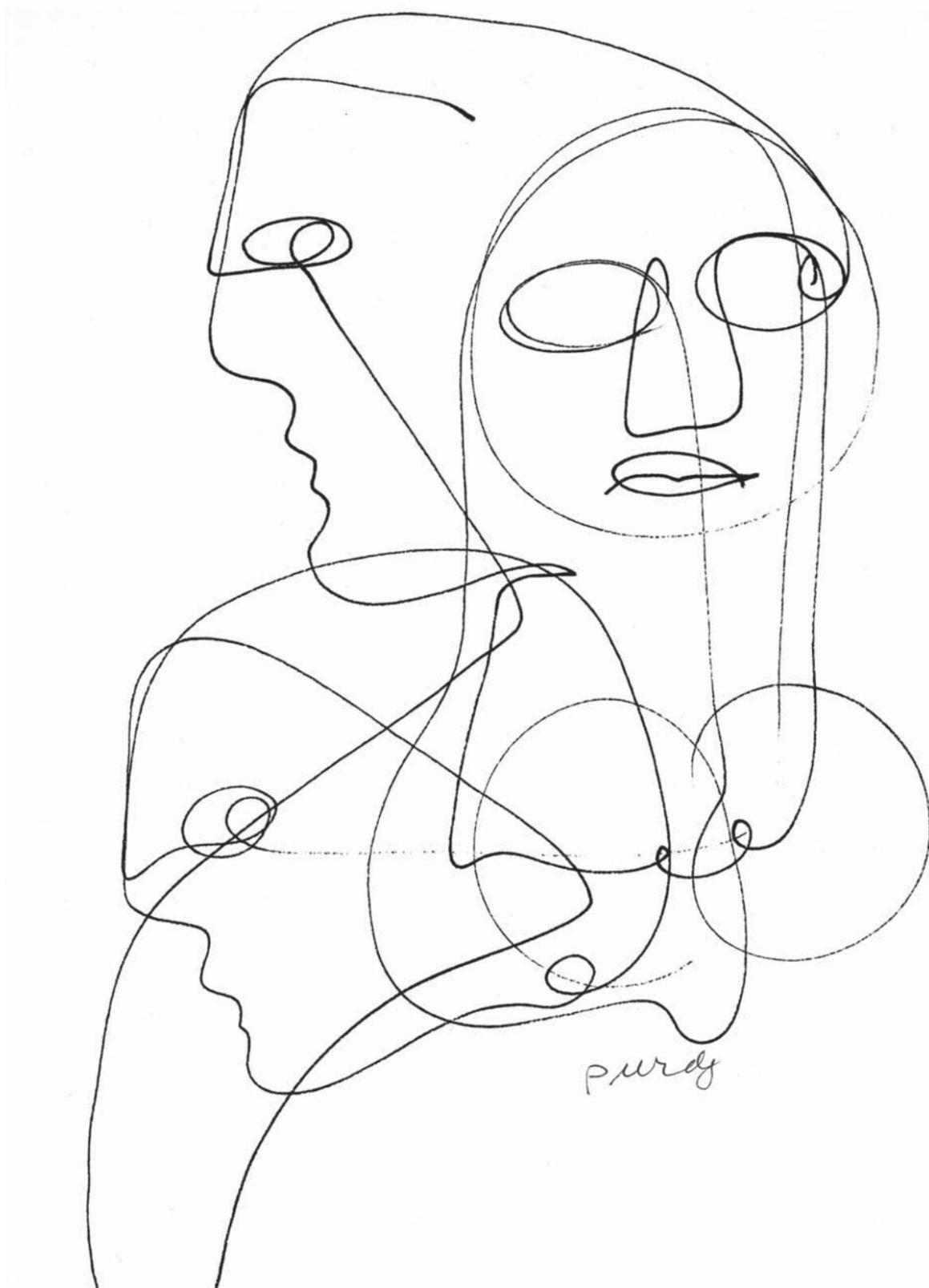
BEAU: (*pulling a knife*) You give me that ring...

HURD: Why you sneaky little—

(*Hurd attempts to disarm the boy but he is too quick for him and after a brief struggle he knifes Hurd who falls to the floor. In rage, Beau stabs him again and again as he lies dying.*)

BEAU: Now we'll take that ring. (*rises and begins to study the ring*) It's all aswim with blood. (*goes over to the sink and washes the ring, gazes at it*) Yes, it does say ever so faintly Guy Preston.

(*looks at the dead man now*) He can't stay here like that... (*looks over at the window*) "A room all to itself." (*He goes over to the body, lifts it up, and*



THE ROOM ALL TO ITSELF by James Purdy

*with not too much effort takes it to the window and throws it down.)*

*(sits down)* Now all I have to do is wait till tomorrow morning, and tomorrow morning won't take forever, I guess. *(Lights begin to fade.)*

*(Lights up. The night has passed. Beau stirs in the chair, moves about, shakes his head, goes over to the window and looks down.)*

Yes, he's down there all right, but who'd know it, it's so dark below. It's lighter at the bottom of the ocean... But I dread Ruthie's coming somehow... Maybe I'd better make a run for it. The longer I stay here, the worse off we'll both be...

*(Steps are heard, he goes to the door and then puts his back against it as if holding it against the force of many men.)*

RUTHWEG: *(calling)* It's me, Ruthie... Hurd! Hurd...

BEAU: Hurd can't hear you... He's left.

RUTHWEG: Is that you, Beau... Beau! You sound so far away and different.

BEAU: *(unlocks the door)* Come in, Ruthie... The door's unlocked.

RUTHWEG: *(comes in and tries to take Beau in his arms, who moves away)* Beau! What is it, what's the matter. *(looking around)* Where's Hurd.

BEAU: He's... away.

RUTHWEG: Away? Away where? Beau, look at me... Look here.

BEAU: He said he had to go away on serious business.

RUTHWEG: *(frightened)* Were police here.

BEAU: No... nobody was here.

RUTHWEG: Beau, look at me... Why wouldn't you let me kiss you just now.

BEAU: *(frozen with fear)* Oh, didn't I... Well, you can kiss me all you want to... go ahead.

RUTHWEG: *(kissing once, then holding his face back and away for scrutiny)* What is it, Beau? What has happened? I've never seen you like this.

BEAU: Here is your ring.

RUTHWEG: Good Christ! How did you persuade him to give that back... Beau, you didn't let him have you, did you?

BEAU: Are you crazy? He never touched me...

RUTHWEG: Then why did he give back the ring.

BEAU: He said... He was afraid of it.

RUTHWEG: Afraid of it?

BEAU: He said it was... the property of a man who had been murdered.

RUTHWEG: Why do you look like that?

BEAU: Did you love Billy more than you did me.

RUTHWEG: It was a different kind of love, and when I knew Billy, I had not set eyes on you, Beau...

BEAU: But did you love him more.

RUTHWEG: I loved him different.

BEAU: But that isn't an answer.

RUTHWEG: If it makes you happy, I love you more.

BEAU: If it makes me happy! I've never been happy since the day I set eyes on you.

RUTHWEG: Beau! What are you saying.

BEAU: I'm telling you... From the moment I set eyes on you...

RUTHWEG: All right... Don't say it again... *(after a long pause)* How have I failed you.

BEAU: How have you failed me? Since I'm the one doesn't have all his marbles, why don't you explain it to me.

RUTHWEG: Who told you that? Beau!

BEAU: He told me, the dead man, that you said that behind my back.

RUTHWEG: I never said that or if I did I didn't mean it the way it sounds... But who is the dead man, Beau?

BEAU: What do you mean by the way it sounds...

THE ROOM ALL TO ITSELF by James Purdy

If someone don't have all his marbles, what else can that mean but he's a simpleton, an idiot. A body nobody can love.

RUTHWEG: Do you think if you were that then I could love you?

BEAU: Why not. If I were everything or anything, why couldn't you love me. That is if you do love me.

RUTHWEG: Beau, I do love you. I thought I had proved that to you.

BEAU: How have you proved it.

RUTHWEG: By just being with you constantly... By protecting you... By... wanting you so passionately like just now.

BEAU: Don't touch me. I never want you to touch me again.

RUTHWEG: What has come over you... Look, where has Hurd gone.

BEAU: Do you want an answer to that question... All right I'll tell you. Hurd is on the blackest river to hell.

RUTHWEG: You know something. What is it?

BEAU: I don't know something. I did something. Go over to that window, and look down.

RUTHWEG: Why should I look down some window when you're here to tell me what I must know. Beau! Why can't you believe I love you. I love you at this very moment intensely.

BEAU: Without my marbles.

HURD: I love all of you... I never loved anybody else more. What more can I say.

BEAU: I don't believe you.

RUTHWEG: Beau!

BEAU: Go over to that window and look down.

RUTHWEG: Who's down there you want me to look at so bad.

BEAU: I don't want you to do nothing bad no more... Look or don't. Suit yourself.

*(Ruth goes over to the window and looks down.)*

RUTHWEG: It looks like a big bundle of rags down there.

BEAU: That's about the size of it. *(takes out his knife)* In a room that's all to itself. *(Ruthweg turns back and faces Beau and the knife.)* I killed him of course.

RUTHWEG: *Of course.* Look, Beau, if you want to kill me too, go ahead.

BEAU: You don't mean that 'cause your voice trembles when you say that. *(advancing toward him menacingly)*

RUTHWEG: My voice trembles because I have nothing to live for if you are against me.

BEAU: Oh! Oh...

RUTHWEG: What do you mean *Oh... oh.*

BEAU: Take off your shirt.

RUTHWEG: Why Beau?

BEAU: I can see where to aim better.

RUTHWEG: *(taking off his shirt slowly)* If that pleases you too, all right.

*(Ruthweg throws back his arms as if to allow himself to be knifed. But at the first wounding he suddenly grabs the knife, and in the struggle stabs Beau, who falls to the ground.)*

*(bending over him)* Beau, you're not hurt bad, I can tell Beau... Quit playacting, playing possum, fuck you. Fuck you, quit playacting... *(He picks him up and brings him over to a chair.)* Open your eyes... Why did you want to kill anybody who's been as good to you as me, huh...

*(knocking at the door)*  
Will you answer that one for me Beau? Who is it?  
*(knocking continues)*

The door's unlocked, come in.  
*(raising his voice)* I said the door was unlocked, so come in. Come in and take a look at something you have to pay to see at the movies... Beau, you listen to me... Beau...  
Beau... *(His head falls over the body of his friend.)*

*(A policeman enters, walks slowly over to Ruthweg, takes out his handcuffs, slowly handcuffs him. Ruthweg walks over to a corner, the policeman kneels over the prostrate Beau.)* The End 



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## A MISBEGOTTEN TRAIPSING

The "Lost" Sherlock Holmes Story

BY BOB ODENKIRK, ILLUSTRATIONS BY JMF CASEY



It was a clear and brightly mooned night, yet somehow Holmes seemed bothered and bewildered, as if by phantoms themselves. The Great Deducer was not himself, indeed, and as he paced nervously forth and back on the Persian rug of his sitting room, I enquired if his famous migraines had reclaimed their perch atop his esteemed noggin.

"No, Watson," Holmes said, "I've no headache, kind sir, but truly these whispers and shadows I see flitting and flashing about me are making me tetchy and concerned! I've an idea to consult yet again the medication you proscribed to me not but yesterday!"

As Sherlock's private physician I had taken it upon myself to proscribe a new round of ethers and powders to soothe his consternated visage, most notably a full month's supply of the precious cucaine, and this from a particularly pure batch as promised by my supplier, the esteemed Marks and Worthler's Apothecary of 2—London Ln. As Holmes's shaking hands revealed the stash from beneath his bookcase, I was gape-jawed by what I perceived.

"Holmes, you've been robbed!" I exclaimed.

Holmes, gripped by a suddenly agitated state, snapped back: "What is robbed of me, Watson?! Quick, sir, what is bereft? For I see nothing amiss and I am a master of perception!!"

"The cucaine!" I stammered, "'Tis less than a day since 'twas proscribed and more than a week's proscription is already missing!"

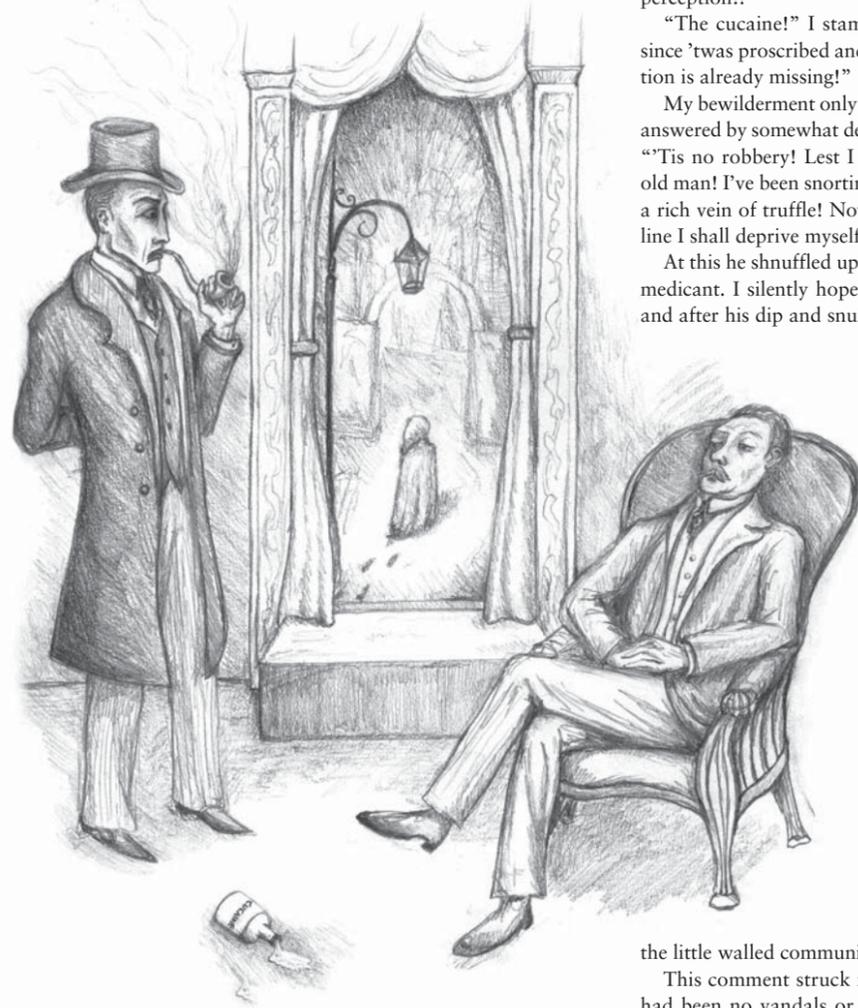
My bewilderment only grew, for my commentary was answered by somewhat deranged laughter from Holmes. "'Tis no robbery! Lest I have robbed myself, Watson, old man! I've been snorting away like a crazed hog after a rich vein of truffle! Now, if you'll chill a bit, another line I shall deprive myself of forthwith!"

At this he snuffled up a round and hearty line of the medicant. I silently hoped it would becalm his nerves, and after his dip and snuff he grew suddenly silent, but

his frame quivered and his eyes flashed open and—it seemed to me—locked as such unnaturally, seemingly unable to blink, wink, or rest. Holmes took up a position by the window, staring upon his small courtyard, perched such that he could view his garden, shared on three sides by friendly neighbours. My own eyelids were wavering, for I had had a full day of consultations and cucaine proscribing.

Noticing my weary state, Holmes proposed, "Rest thyself, Watson. I'll stand watch here, to make sure no stranger intrudes to upset your slumber or practice vandalism upon the little walled community of this neighbour-hoode."

This comment struck me as a trifle lunatic, as there had been no vandals or traipsers of any kind heretofore, and if there had been—perhaps a stray fellow using the courtyard as a short-path to get home from a



A MYSTERIOUS, HOODED, HARMLESS FIGURE TRAIPISED BY

nightly jaunt—well, it hadn't ever made much bother. Holmes, however, was the wiser of us. I was sure of that. And recently he had apposted himself "Captain" of a self-initiated "neighbour-hoode watche," so I happily nodded and hence drifted into a fast slumber which ended abruptly and with a start at the sound of Sherlock's welping call-to-arms—

"Watson! Awaken, slumbering cat! A traipser! In our midst! We must ascertain his identity forthwith!"

Holmes seemed jittery as he continued in this vein. My glance told me the cucaine bag had been deprived of a noticeable amount of granules since his last snort, and yet it was only a few short hours later!

"But Holmes, what of it? A traipser in your garden? What cause of alarm is this?!" I enquired.

"I tell you I saw him!" Holmes continued. "A mysterious, hooded, harmless figure traipsed by! Right there, through our gated arena, trespassing he was! We must find him and deal with this egregious affront! Grab your coat, old man!"

I was coated and at the door in seconds, despite my confusion, but I hesitated when I saw Holmes tarrying to retrieve and load his Winchester rifle from off the wall.

"What's THAT for?" I pecked at him.

"That traipser may incite violents, and I want to be at the ready!" Holmes declared, as he leant down for yet another whiffle of the swiftly vanishing cucaine.

"Easy, tiger," I niggled him. "We've to make it last, haven't we?"

"What's this 'we'?" the great tongue lashed back. "I purchased this cucaine with my own banknotes! Monitor thine own stash! I know what I'm doing."

And off we went into the night.

Holmes was on a tear, and I could barely keep up with the hurried pace of his feet, tongue, and mind. He narrated his thoughts to me, but they were a jumble!

"No one traipses on my garden! I will despatch with this scofflaw forthwith! Someone will eat a midnight snack of leaded pellets, I declare!"

"Holmes, who was this traipser? What should I be on the lookout for?"

"He was hooded, as I stated, wandering casually, sipping a tankard of tea, and nibbling at a small packet of colorful pastilles bought from the all-evening apothecary, no doubt! Hurry!"

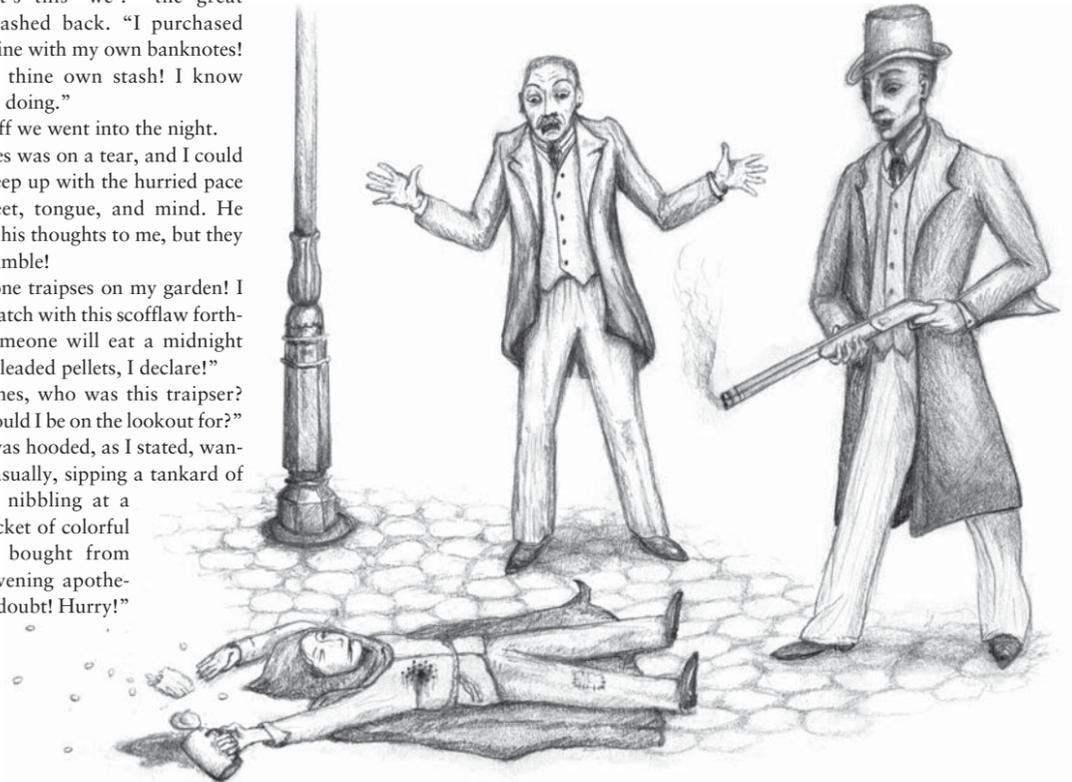
"Holmes, this fellow doesn't sound dangerous in the least! But rather some stumbling friend-fellow whose presence we should feel perfectly safe to ignore and let pass—"

But my argument was called to order by the repeated blast of the Winchester rifle in Sherlock's knotted grasp! Ahead of us, not a brickyard away, the hooded figure collapsed; Holmes's gunfire had done its work! Immediately we stood over the expiring figure, tea dribbling from the tankard, pastilles scattered among the roseweeds.

"What the fucke, Holmes!" I started. "The guy was just walking home! Why'd you shute him!?"

Holmes stood over the prone figger, breathing in fits, a silence in his eyes, his upper lip dusted with a white trail of cucaine. He made no response to my final query, nor to the deputies of Scotland Yard who seemed to echo my consternation. Luckily, the constable of the evening was a chum and schoolmate of Holmes's, and the Unfortunate Traipser, being of a lesser class than our esteemed personages, did not require to him the level of investigation and prosecution that would be afforded to a peer.

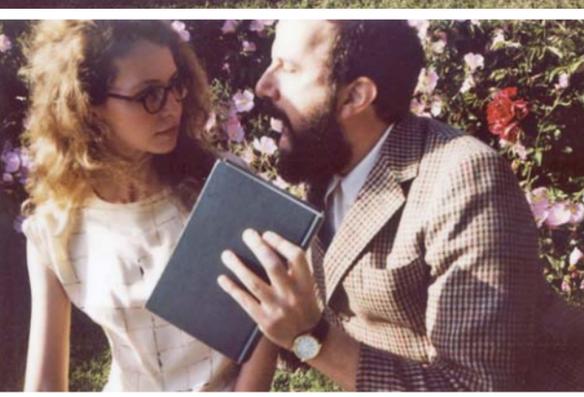
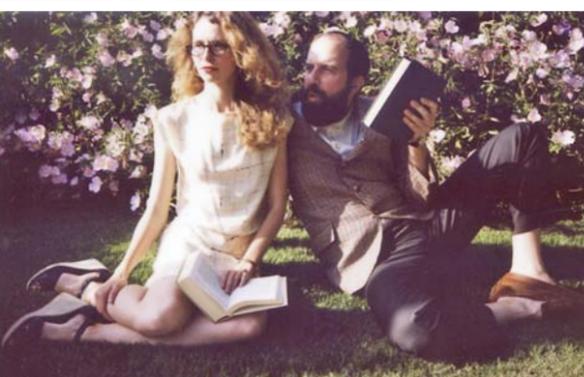
And while I never worked out the why and wherefores of this most mysterious event, I chalked it down to Holmes's intrepid inscrutability, the kind that resides in all geniuses, and, as well, he was probably just a tad cucked up. 



"WHAT THE FUCKE, HOLMES!"

## COMBOVER: MAKE THE BOOK COOK

BY BRETT GELMAN, PHOTOS BY JANICZA BRAVO  
Featuring Yvonne Georgina Puig



Shit, I almost forgot! I got a meeting! A huge meeting! And you know when I say huge meeting, I really mean a *huge* meeting. I don't say stuff I don't mean. That's the thing about me. It's what sets me apart from a lot of the charlatans here. I mean what I say, and I say what I mean. That's the way you really rise to the top. Because if people know that you mean what you say, that means you're not afraid. And if you're not afraid, you're already ahead of the game.

Let me tell you something, people: You can count on your left hand how many people in this business aren't scared out of their goddamn minds. We're all like Jonah in the belly of the whale; however, the difference between this Jonah right here and the other Jonahs is that this Jonah right here and the whale have an understanding. The whale promises to send all the choice fish my way after he swallows them, and in return, I won't build a bonfire in his fucking belly. I love this town, but don't doubt for a second that I'd burn it all down if I had to.

But this meeting will hopefully be a breath of fresh air. Not to brag, but it's with Yvonne Georgina! That's right! *That* Yvonne Georgina. Novelist! Philosopher-artist! Writer! My personal favorite. I've read *Love in the Time of Wanting More Love* about 17 times. And every time it makes my eyes shvitz. She's got this new one, though. Hot off the presses, just simmering on the shelves. *A Degree of Anger Is Equal to Nothing*. I curled up on my pool chair with a glass of Manischewitz and a box of Girl Scout cookies and read the entire 400-page beauty faster than a housefly farts. And I've never felt about a book like I did about this one. I never read a book and thought "MOVIE" so big, bright, and clear.

Yvonne's books aren't for sale, though. Anybody even offers, and she gets all J.D. Salinger without skipping a beat. Which is extra-annoying, because SHE LIVES IN HOLLYWOOD! Why would you live here and not sell your books for movies? It's like some weird meshuga game she's playing with herself. But I went to one of her readings once, and she liked my questions. (Of course she did. I ask great questions.) And she agreed to take a meeting with me. Maybe she's got a thing for the Tribe. Most shiksas here do.

When I get to her place, she's sitting in her yard, and she's reading. Nothing like a beautiful woman reading. Really curls my back hair. Before she even says shalom, I start in with my magic like I'm reading my Torah portion.

"Yvonne, sugar. Sweet sugar Yvonne. Sweeter than sugar. What's sweeter than sugar? Yvonne. You sugar! You got the sweet and none of the sour. You leave that sour to your sweet three-dimensional characters. Listen here, darling. I've read *A Degree of Anger Is Equal to Nothing* more times than I've called my mother in the past five years. And I call my mother a lot. I'm a Jew. That's what I do. But I'm sure I don't have to tell you that. You know other cultures. You know them like they're your own, and then you use your own words and make them ours. I can't get the book out of my head, sweetie. Please, oh please, oh pretty please, do me the honor of doing your book the honor of making your honorable book into a slam-bangin' groovy movie!"

"I hate movies. They're empty."  
"Hey, you don't have to tell me, sweetie. I hate movies too. They're the worst. The best of them are worthless, and the rest of them are less than that. I wake up every morning, and I can't believe I'm in this horrible business, committed to nothing but making these pieces of dreck that go up on a stupid wall. I hate that. That's why I'm trying to make movies into something more than just movies. To me, movies should be... VISUAL BOOKS! I'll take your book, and I'll make it cook. I'll make that book cook, baby! I'll take that book to cook and make that book cook!"

"Shut up!"  
"What?"  
"Shut up already!"  
See that? See how I did that? You probably think she's telling me to shut up to send me on my exodus. Wrong. Here's a lesson: You get a "Shut up!" like that, you better have that contract ready. Because someone's ready to sign. And she signs. She signs that line. And I feel oh so fancy fine!

I'm the best!

This is the third chapter of *Combover*, Brett Gelman's new novel about Hollywood, the beauty of the Jewish tradition, baldness, and sexy shiksas. We will be serializing it throughout the rest of the year. Read previous installments at [VICE.com](http://VICE.com).

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RAW 10

Dir: Manuel Ferrara  
Rating: 9

ManuelFerrara.com/  
Evilangel.com

The eggs were dry and hours old. The heat lamp had raped them of their flavor, leaving hardened cheese and grease running down their legs. The sight of it was rather sickening. One sign read, "With Cheese," the other, "Without Chese." The second *e* had clearly been forgotten and written above the space it was meant to be. An arrow pointed down to let you know, This is where this stray *e* belongs. "Was it so much trouble to make another sign, spelled correctly?" the man wondered, unsure if he was making the worst decision of his life. He saw no difference between the eggs "With Cheese" or "Without Che<sup>e</sup>se." He did see a difference in the biscuits. Some were burnt. Some were not. But mostly, they were burnt. "Who buys pre-made breakfast from a grocery store anyway? Sort of goes against the point of shopping for groceries, doesn't it?" he asked himself. He opted for some fresh fruit instead.

"Can I help you?" The singsongy words came from behind him like the song of the Siren. He turned back to the bright lights and big yuck of the eggs. The voice belonged to the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen that

morning. Her eyes were brighter than all the heat lamps combined, and her skin was darker than a thousand midnights. She had tried to put curlers in her hair for work; they didn't take very well. She was stunning in her hairnet and gold tooth. She smiled larger as she asked again, "Can I help you?" Correction, gold teeth.

She was neither very young nor very old. She had not yet given up on life, and yet she knew her physical limitations. The man wished that he could order her, naked, spread-eagled on a biscuit. One of the not-burnt ones.

"Can you make breakfast sandwiches?" he asked, thinking, "That was a very stupid question indeed." But he was not entirely sure what customary breakfast offerings were in the South, so he didn't beat himself up over the question as he normally would.

"I don't know... I never made one before."

"See. Valid question," he told himself. The voice in the back of his head said, "No, it's a stupid question. They have biscuits, egg, and a knife. They can clearly make breakfast sandwiches, asshole."

"Can we make breakfast sandwiches?" she asked her manager.

"Of course," the elderly woman said without bothering to look up from the bread she was slicing.

"How we do that?" she asked.

"You slice the biscuit with the knife and put eggs on it," the manager said in a dismissive tone.

"See, dipshit," the voice said. "Stupid question."

The girl grabbed the serrated knife in one hand and a burned biscuit in the other.

He wanted to ask her to use an unburnt one, but she asked him, "Where you from?" before he could speak up. Odds are, he wouldn't have said anything even if she didn't ask him that.

"New Jersey."

"It's nice?"

"Parts are."

"I'm going to New York next month."

"It's a nice time to go. Not too hot."

"I've never left Virginia."

"I guess it's due time."

"What's it like?"

"New York?"

"Yeah. Is it nice?"

"Parts."

"You live there?"

"Where? New York?"

"Yeah."

"No, I live in New Jersey."

"That's not in New York?"

"Not anymore."

"What are you doing in Richmond?"

"I'm not really sure. Me and the family just started driving."

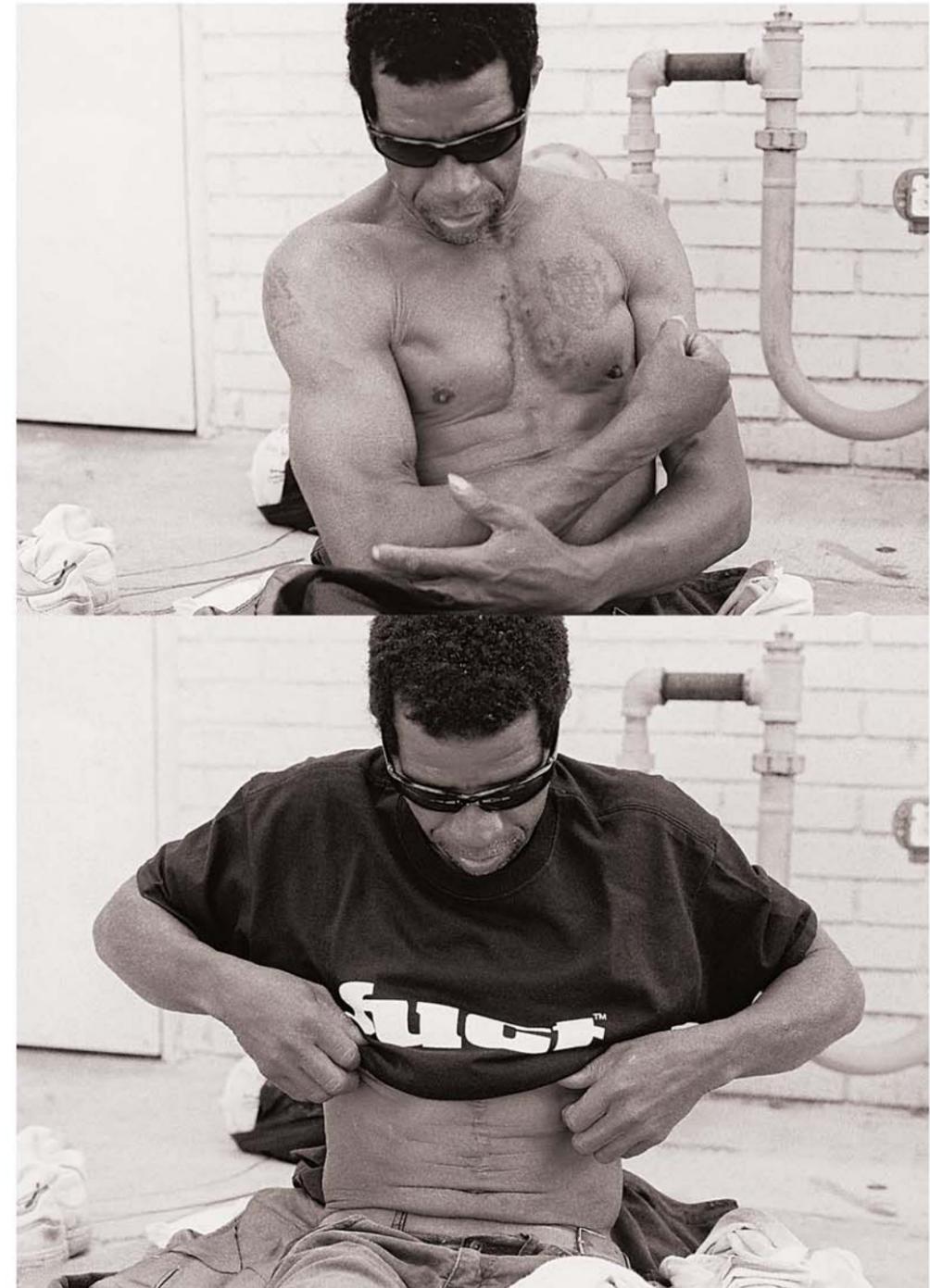
"Well, I hope you enjoy your stay," she said as she handed him the saddest egg sandwich ever made since man realized you could make sandwiches from eggs.

"Thank you. Enjoy New York." He walked off slowly and waited for her to look away, then threw the sandwich in the trash and walked ten feet to the produce.

He saw nice, ripe cantaloupes and thought, "God. I hope I get laid tonight."

More stupid can be found at [Chrisnieratko.com](http://Chrisnieratko.com) and [twitter.com/Nieratko](http://twitter.com/Nieratko)

FACT<sup>®</sup>



SPRING / SUMMER 2012

## SHEPPARD'S VIDEO-GAME PIE

BY STEPHEN LEA SHEPPARD



### PROTOTYPE 2

Platform: Xbox 360,  
PlayStation 3,  
Windows PC eventually  
Publisher: Activision

*Prototype 2* offends me.

*Prototype 2* is an open-world urban-sandbox action game developed by Radical Entertainment, who did the well-regarded *The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*, a game based around a huge, unstoppable rampaging monster, way back in 2005. For *Prototype*, they applied that experience to a character who was their own intellectual property—another huge, unstoppable rampaging monster, but this time he was a shape-shifting cannibal named Alex Mercer.

*Prototype* was released around the same time as *inFamous* for the PS3, and I was one of the few people who considered *Prototype* superior because, although it wasn't nearly as polished, it was far, far more nuanced, way smarter, and more interesting and ambitious.

*Prototype 2* is none of those things. It has slightly better gameplay than its predecessor but is less interesting and far dumber in every other way. To explain properly I need to cite specific examples. I'll do this by comparing the games' endings because they're indicative of the respective strengths and weaknesses. I need to be explicit here because otherwise people will play the game and think, "Surely he's exaggerating; maybe the payoff at the end exonerates the lousy story a bit." It doesn't. So, SPOILER ALERT, if you care about this sort of thing.

As stated above, the protagonist of *Prototype* is former Gentech scientist Alex Mercer, who begins the game with partial amnesia, jumbled memories of people trying to kill him, and fun powers. He learns very quickly that he can consume other humans and usurp their memories and forms. He also reunites with his sister, in a great scene where she says, "Alex, I thought you were dead, it's so great to see you're alive!" but her *body language* says, "Ohgodohgodohgod, I'm trapped in a room with the monster from John Carpenter's *The Thing*; what do I say to make him not eat me?" At the end of the game, some things come out about Alex Mercer: He was a sociopath who was never on good terms with his family; he tried to hold his employer ransom by threatening to unleash a supervirus on New York City unless they gave him a lot of money; they

called his bluff, but he wasn't bluffing, and they shot him when he tried to release the virus.

Which means he's dead. The truth is that the protagonist of *Prototype* is not Alex Mercer; it's a viral mass. The jumbled memories the game begins with are just recollections absorbed from Alex Mercer's corpse, and its default appearance looks like him because his was the first form it ate.

Moreover, the virus ends up being a much better person than Alex Mercer ever was; it actually feels brotherly affection for Alex's sister because it thinks it's supposed to, while the real Alex never did. At the end of the game, it tries to sacrifice itself to protect New York, detonating a nuke to contain a potential second viral outbreak, and only survives due to luck and being damn tough.

In *Prototype 2* Alex Mercer—or at least the viral mass masquerading as him—is the villain. You play as James Heller, a soldier who returned from a tour in the Middle East to discover that a second viral outbreak is consuming New York, killing his wife and daughter. The news blames Mercer, and Heller soon meets him and is also turned into a virus-powered superhuman. Mercer claims that Gentech was actually responsible for the second outbreak and that he wants Heller's help in bringing them down.

Here's the ending reveal: Virus-Mercer, not Gentech, caused the outbreak because he wants to turn the whole of humanity into a race of superhumans whom he'll have absolute control over, ending all war and disease forever. His sister ultimately betrayed and abandoned him (she's Heller's quest-giver for the final act of the game) because she remembers when they got along as kids, but ever since he got his superpowers he's been a sociopathic monster, thus *completely reversing the first game's protagonist's entire character arc and final reveal*.

I'm sure you can understand how someone invested in the first game's story might feel miffed (or even peeved) by the way the second handles things. Disregarding core elements of a previous work to make writing the sequel easier is a narrative trick used only in the worst, most disappointing franchises. Radical Entertainment wanted to make the protagonist of their first game the antagonist of the second, and in order to do it they turned him into a completely different character. Shame on you guys.

I get that it's hard to write a storyline for an open-world sandbox game on a strict timetable. For reasons ranging from art budget to bug triage, literally any piece of content could get cut at any point in development, but this laziness and lack of integrity inform every element of *Prototype 2*'s writing. At every chance it has to be smart, *Prototype 2* is dumb; every chance it has to be subtle, it's blatant; where it could be a game for adults, it's full of "adult content" that will appeal to 14-year-olds. It is in all ways less compelling than its predecessor, and I can only thank the uncaring universe that produced this game for not also making me pay money for it.

This review is based on a retail copy of *Prototype 2* for the Xbox 360, provided by Activision for promotional purposes.

# FINALLY

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BOOK 2

IN STORES  
JUNE 19



Years of crippling constipation are now over. The second volume of DOs & DON'Ts is in stores and ready for you to buy, featuring all your favorite DOs and most hated DON'Ts from the pages of VICE magazine. Yes you said yes you will YES

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## REVIEWS



### BEST BOOK OF THE MONTH: THREATS

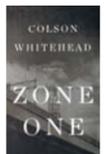


#### BIG RAY Michael Kimball Bloomsbury USA



What Alice in Chains did for “Man in the Box,” Michael Kimball does for “Obese Abusive Dad in the Chair (not pictured on cover).” To those who thought he couldn’t top *Us*, prepare to be utterly punished by yet another high-octane dose of Kimball’s sensitive, acute prose. Why not call in sick next Tuesday so you can get glued to your sofa with *Big Ray* and a family-size bag of your favorite corn-based snack product? (See page 60 for our excerpt.)

MEGAN BOYLE



#### ZONE ONE Colson Whitehead Doubleday

A postapocalyptic-zombies-roam-Manhattan book that aims for lyrical and empathic, trying to be a “smart guy’s zombie story.” Unfortunately, it ends up as an “MFA-teacher’s zombie story,” i.e., it will bore your eyeballs off. Reading *World War Z* very, very slowly in a very, very uncomfortable chair might achieve the same effect.

TITO PICCOLINI



#### THREATS Amelia Gray FSG

This starts off as a kind of detective story in which an ex-dentist loses his wife in a weird accident and the awesomely named Detective Chico tries to help him find out what happened and without you even noticing effortlessly moves into a terrifying exploration of grief and heartbreak and madness that left me short of breath. It made me cry a bunch. Not that it means anything. I cry all the time.

CRYBABY SMALLS



#### HHHH Laurent Binet Grasset & Fasquelle

I love it when literature surprises me. Just when I think something is going to be a zany experimental history of Hhgregg, it’s a super-serious Nazi assassination fanfic laced with meta-author commentary.

MEGAN BOYLE



#### TRIBURBIA Karl Taro Greenfeld HarperCollins

These are interlinked stories about five families—fathers, mothers, children, and nannies—and how they’ve become warped and venal and driven mad by the postbohemian bourgeoisie of Tribeca, and how even these members of the 1 percent are now being driven out by members of the .01 percent. There’s some dark truth in these stories of adults struggling with finally growing up, but you know what? Whoever told you that you could be a writer or painter or musician and live like an investment banker? This is also a book about how the creative upper class pass on the same faux-bohemian values to their kids. And then they’ll wonder why their kids move back home and are unemployed for a decade when they’re finished with college.

GIANCARLO DITRAPANO



#### SISTER STOP BREATHING Chiara Barzini Calamari Press

When I think how Joseph Conrad wrote in his third language (after Polish, then French), I get a huge case of God, I am uneducated. Chiara’s English is perfect. She does not make mistakes. But since Italians have better taste than Americans, their discriminating word choices can really charge a sentence that would be dead with the most common choice of the American mind. Since we have to give everything a name, as if it were the damn law or something, people will call the contents of Barzini’s collection

“flash fiction.” That term has never really jibed with me, but Barzini is writing something, call it whatever. And it hurts you that you’ll never have a sexy Italian accent.

GIANCARLO DITRAPANO



#### SKAGBOYS Irvine Welsh Norton

Oh cool, a *Trainspotting* prequel. And only a decade shy of the (presumably first) *Trainspotting* sequel. I guess the only horse Welsh’s kicked lately is the dead one.

RIMSHOT



#### THESE DREAMS OF YOU Steve Erickson Europa Editions

This is the guy people have been telling me for years is “Pynchon’s heir”? Really? Maybe I missed the part in *Vineland* (it was long) where the Left Coast Boomer stereotype waxes guilty about not being accepted by the black kids at college and connects with his adopted Ethiopian daughter through the music of David Bowie’s *Greatest Hits*, but this shit is beyond square. It’s like if NPR was a book instead of just something I have to turn off every morning when I get to work at the Daily Grind.

TIMOTHY HUTTON



#### KINGDOM COME J.G. Ballard Norton

When I was a child I hated Ballard for growing a sense of humor after his 1,000-percent serious 60s stuff. When I grew up, I put away my childish things (beret) and realized that funny-Ballard beats the living shit out of goth-kids-Ballard. And is also a kajillion times scarier. This is the last book he wrote before he died and both his most hilarious and his most terrifying, because it’s about a racist middle-class revolt in the London suburbs that uncannily presages the rise of the real-life

Photo: Vincent Siqueland



## MEDIS

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EarClick construction for ultimate comfort and fit – this keeps the earphone in place.

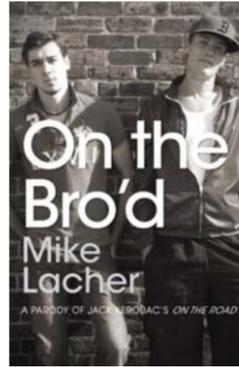


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## REVIEWS



### WORST BOOK OF THE MONTH: ON THE BRO'D

English Defence League, and also because the narrator is like an even more psychotic version of Richard Grant's character in *How to Get Ahead in Advertising*. RIP, dudre. LEROY GUMPTION



### THE PATRICK MELROSE NOVELS Edward St. Aubyn Picador

Four novels that are kind of like if *Downton Abbey* were set now and produced for HBO rather than PBS. In other words, fewer cripples who magically stand up next to fireplaces and more drugs and rape and sex and suicide and sodomy, which is far more representative of the English upper class anyway. TANO SMELL



### KASHER IN THE RYE Moshe Kasher Grand Central Publishing

This is a memoir about a nerve-rattled Jew who got hooked on dope and bounced from one funny farm to the next. Reading this book was like looking out the window, if your window overlooks anywhere in New York, at any time, ever. HOT GYNO



### THE LAKE Banana Yoshimoto Melville House

Of the people who will purchase this book, 3 percent will be named Alyce, 10 percent will be purchasing a Frequently Bought Together package containing *The Lake* and two Haruki Murakami books on Amazon.com, 15 percent will be Banana Yoshimoto fans, 25 percent will have always wanted to read Banana Yoshimoto, and 47 percent will buy it on a mysteriously strong impulse they will later attribute to the words "Banana" and "Yoshimoto" eliciting unconscious memories of banana-flavored Runt's candies and Yoshi from Mario. MEGAN BOYLE



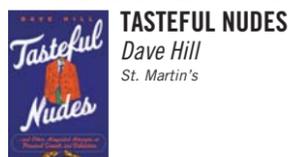
### THE GRIMScribe'S PUPPETS Various writers Miskatonic River

Uh, tribute *albums* are kind of fun because bands can cover one band's songs in their own style, but having different people write their own stories in an established author's style is called fan fiction, and there's already a whole, shitty internet full of it. Only way you could do worse is to make the tributee an overrated, sub-Clive Barker horror writer who intentionally keeps his work out of print to preserve his "mystique." (I'M TALKING ABOUT THOMAS LIGOTTI)



### ON THE BRO'D: A Parody Of Jack Kerouac's On The Road Mike Lacher Adams Media

You would think there would be tons of anal happening in this reimagining of Kerouac's most famous book of male friendship, but there isn't. Still, the whole thing does a fine job of sucking its own cock. INDIAN BUMMER



### TASTEFUL NUDES Dave Hill St. Martin's

The only other book I have recently (ten years ago) read that, along with *Tasteful Nudes*, can also be described as comedic essays was one of those dreadful books by David Sedaris. I am going to compare these two men and their books, but solely for blueprint purposes. The stories from Dave Hill's life are much funnier, he wrote them inside his balls, and his stories are also true just like he says they are. Not like David Sedaris said that his were and then they weren't or something? GIANCARLO DITRAPANO



### GRANTLAND QUARTERLY ISSUE 2 Edited by Bill Simmons McSweeney's

This evaluation is not based on the contents of this book. Not at all. The contents are the same fantastic pop-culture articles you find on Grantland.com, including a piece about Eddie Murphy that should win some kind of award. Thing is, if I can get the same great content online for free, then you better make sure you then resell that content by wrapping it in a REALLY sweet book, not a half-decent one with very crappy illos inside and a dust jacket that seems to be designed by McSweeney's shittiest intern. I mean, the first issue was bound in the same material basketballs are made of! BASKETBALLS! COME ON! You can do better, bros. TIM SMALL



### AGAINST ARCHITECTURE Franco La Cecla PM

This is a novella-length manifesto about the "starchitects" like Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano, and Rem Koolhaas whose egos have been ruining architecture for half a decade, and it is basically the exact, picture-perfect takedown anybody anywhere has ever wanted to write about what's wrong with their profession. Scathing, unpretentious enough for nonarchitects to enjoy, and so irrefutably dead-on that one of his targets (Piano) actually wrote him a blurb, effectively saying, "Yeah. You got me. I'm an asshole." Hats off, you furious wop. TM PRESS



### PULPHEAD: Essays John Jeremiah Sullivan FSG

People have been comparing this guy to David Foster Wallace, but that's a lazy comparison. All that JJS and DFW have in common is that they both write long essays and have those names that are, like, triple names. That's the problem with blurbs: They're often full



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## REVIEWS



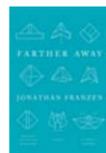
### BEST COVER OF THE MONTH: BIG RAY

of shit. For example, they might say something like, "Astonishing... the missing link between David Sedaris and David Foster Wallace, with a dash of Flannery O'Connor and a hint of moonshine." THEODORE SMELLYFARTS



### MAGIC HOURS: Essays on Creators and Creation Tom Bissell Believer Books/McSweeney's

Mesmerizing... the bastard stepchild of a three-way between Dwight Macdonald, Gay Talese, and the *Paris Review* interviews, mixed in a tumbler by a modern-day hipster-bartender version of Greil Marcus. THEODORE STILLSMELLY



### FARTHER AWAY: Essays Jonathan Franzen FSG

Authoritative and elegant... this is what would happen if you put Jonathan Franzen, Jonathan Franzen's grumpy uncle, and Jonathan Franzen's sense of self-worth in a kitchen robot, set it on mince, and added a few slices of rare, exotic bird meat. THEODORE DEADLYFARTS



### ENERGY FLASH: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture Simon Reynolds Soft Skull

Hey, Britain, quit writing fucking nerdbooks on rock and roll. We want to read about Julian Cope spending two years straight on acid and the KLF firing a machine gun full of blanks into the crowd at the BRIT Awards, not ludicrously overblown track-by-track descriptions of *Screamadelica* (did you know the Andrew Weatherall remix of "American Spring" "pivoted around an exquisite harpsichord motif like a scattered handful of stardust?") and block quotes on MDMA from the *American Journal of Medicine*. Thanks for making rave culture even more boring than it was at the time, which was plenty. HEAVIN HELVIN



### FEAR OF MUSIC Jonathan Lethem Continuum/33 1/3

When these little fuckers first came out and were just mini-histories of classic albums written in Asperger's-esque detail, they were a major guilty pleasure. Then, like some English teacher with a Dead quote above the classroom door, they started letting people write short stories and personal essays "inspired" by the albums, and now look where we are: a 140-page undergrad term paper by Jonathan Lethem on the least interesting record by one of the least interesting bands of all time. What's next, guys, an improvised Bret Easton Ellis audiotope on Kirsty MacColl's *Electric Landlady*? Wait a second, that's actually a great idea. COPYRIGHT 2012 VICE MEDIA



### GOD IN PAIN Slavoj Žižek Seven Stories

Hey, beardo, the nice part about not believing in God is not spending your entire life reading books about that shit. That, and the fucking. ATHEISM



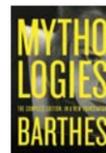
### ON THE GROUND: An Illustrated Anecdotal History of the Sixties Underground Press in the US Edited by Sean Stewart PM

Enough with the oral histories already. It works when you're documenting something like the New York punk scene or David Lee Roth's life that's so packed with amazing stories you can just have all the key players sit around a tape recorder, tell them, "OK, start at the beginning," then let them babble until they hit the end and you hit the stop button. If you've got to have explanatory paragraphs every five pages to connect the dots between Paul Krassner and Gilbert Shelton, you're basically just handing us your transcripts and saying, "Here, you make this." ERIK SPETTS



### BUTTERFLY IN THE TYPEWRITER: The Tragic Life of John Kennedy Toole and the Remarkable Story of *A Confederacy of Dunces* Cory MacLauchlin Da Capo

Toole occupies a similar position to Vonnegut in terms of writers who married slightly cruel humor and an innate understanding of the abject misery of the average person's life with a warm-but-uncorny sense of Middle American optimism, and also in terms of writers whose fans are some of the most insufferably bland "weirdos" you will ever have the misfortune of being bad-breathed into the corner by at your average college party. Good straightforward bio, but I'm sure all anyone's going to care about is the chapter (5) where it explains how Ignatius Reilly was based on a fellow college teacher in Louisiana named Bobby Byrne, and the chapter (12) where it explains why Toole committed suicide. Which is because he was gay. Just kidding, it's cause he was crazers. L'DOYE



### MYTHOLOGIES Roland Barthes Hill and Wang

Jesus Christ, what an eyesore. Book design has fallen a long, long, long, loooooong, long way since the Penguin days of the 60s, but even by contemporary standards this is some for-real dogshit. What are they trying to do, trick Elmore Leonard fans into reading French semiotics? That's only going to make them angrier, you dopes. JEAN BAUDRILLARD



### TREES Anonymous Smithsonian Nature Guide

You know what fucking rule? Trees. You may be thinking, "Oh, what, those wood things with the leafs on them?" and while that's a fair rudimentary assessment, buddy, you've still got *tons* to learn. And to get laid by knowing. I knew a kid growing up who

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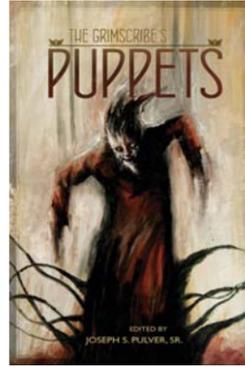


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## REVIEWS



### WORST COVER OF THE MONTH: THE GRIMSCROBE'S PUPPETS

could identify all the major trees of our area like some sort of 18th-century botanist, and though he was pantsed mercilessly every day of high school, I talked to him on iChat recently and he has since had more boyfriends than you could shake the pliant bough of a budding alpine laburnum at.

THOMAS MORTON

**SUBLIMINAL:**  
**How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior**  
Leonard Mlodinow  
Pantheon Books

I can really get behind a book that breaks down, in a scientific manner, how it's highly likely that I'm misremembering the shittiest parts of my life. Here's hoping volume 2 will include a chapter called "Yes, I Am So the Coolest Person Ever. And Extremely Physically Fit."

HEY SALLY

**THIS IS HOW**  
**Augusten Burroughs**  
St. Martin's Press

Theoretically "funny" advice about everything from an extremely preachy man who thinks he's seen it all. How's that for a terrible book idea?

Terrible is how.

HENRYETTA GREENE

**WRITING IN PICTURES:**  
**Screenwriting Made (Mostly) Painless**  
Joseph McBride  
Vintage

Does any writing manual ever start without saying all other writing manuals are bullshit and this is the one that isn't going to try and force a bunch of rules on you, just give you a little guidance and inspiration in order to help you find your own path to success? Might as well throw your necktie into the trash can while you're at it and tell us, "Mr. Manual is my father. You kids call me Wri."

JOEY MCINTIRE

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**HALLELUJAH,  
GIANT SPACE WOLF**  
Daniel Bailey  
Mammoth Editions

At poetry in general, I'm usually like, pshaw. I am not pshaw at Daniel Bailey. I can honestly say he is the poet out there who I see "creating a cosmos." Hey, do you guys do lines? Want to do a line? OK, this book review is about as cramped as a bathroom stall, but I just like cutting lines and giving them out to people. Here's one from *Hallelujah, Giant Space Wolf*: "let's do unto others as we would do unto the hottest Christian girls ever."

GIANCARLO DITRAPANO

**PURE FILTH**  
**Peter Sotos and Jamie Gillis**  
Feral House

I sometimes wish Peter would write a book about something that didn't involve extreme sexual situations/violence/terrible things and turn his hand to something a bit more gentle on the soul. For when he writes good, he's one of the best out there. Funny, addictive and succinct with incredible powers of observation and perception. I have always suspected there is an amazingly beautiful book about love and life buried deep somewhere within his cuddly/terrifying-bearman heart. This book—about porn legend Jamie Gillis' "private tapes"—definitely isn't that one, although it's one of the most remarkable/eyefucking you are likely to read all year.

RYAN GOSLING

**IF I FALTER AT  
THE GALLOWES**  
Edward Mullany  
Publishing Genius

These are good. Plop. There goes another little baby into the drink. Here is the wall to look at. There is the toilet-paper roll. There's the mirror. Yes, this is the life.

Wait, is this the life? Why did you let them finger the cubes in your glass? Are you gay? You are, aren't you? Whose bathroom is this? How did you get here? Where did you come from? These are little still lifes, Mullany's poems, these little cubes in my whiskey that I'm drinking sitting on the carpeted bathroom floor wedged between the toilet and the wall. Keep looking around. It's never going to be the same. Mullany falters at the gallows, because that's what men do.

GIANCARLO DITRAPANO

**MEAT HEART**  
**Melissa Broder**  
Publishing Genius

There are like three Melissa Broders: There's the Melissa Broder in person, who seems very put-together, kind of a deal-maker (I think she's an agent). Then there is the Melissa Broder of Twitter. There's no two ways about how she fucking slays it on there. Then there is a third Melissa Broder, who just published *Meat Heart*, a solid poetry collection I might gloat more over if I weren't waiting to read Melissa number two in its pages, not this third Melissa I didn't even know there was. If she ever decides to harness what she does on that stupid fucking website we're always looking at, some of the most badass poetry ever might occur.

GIANCARLO DITRAPANO

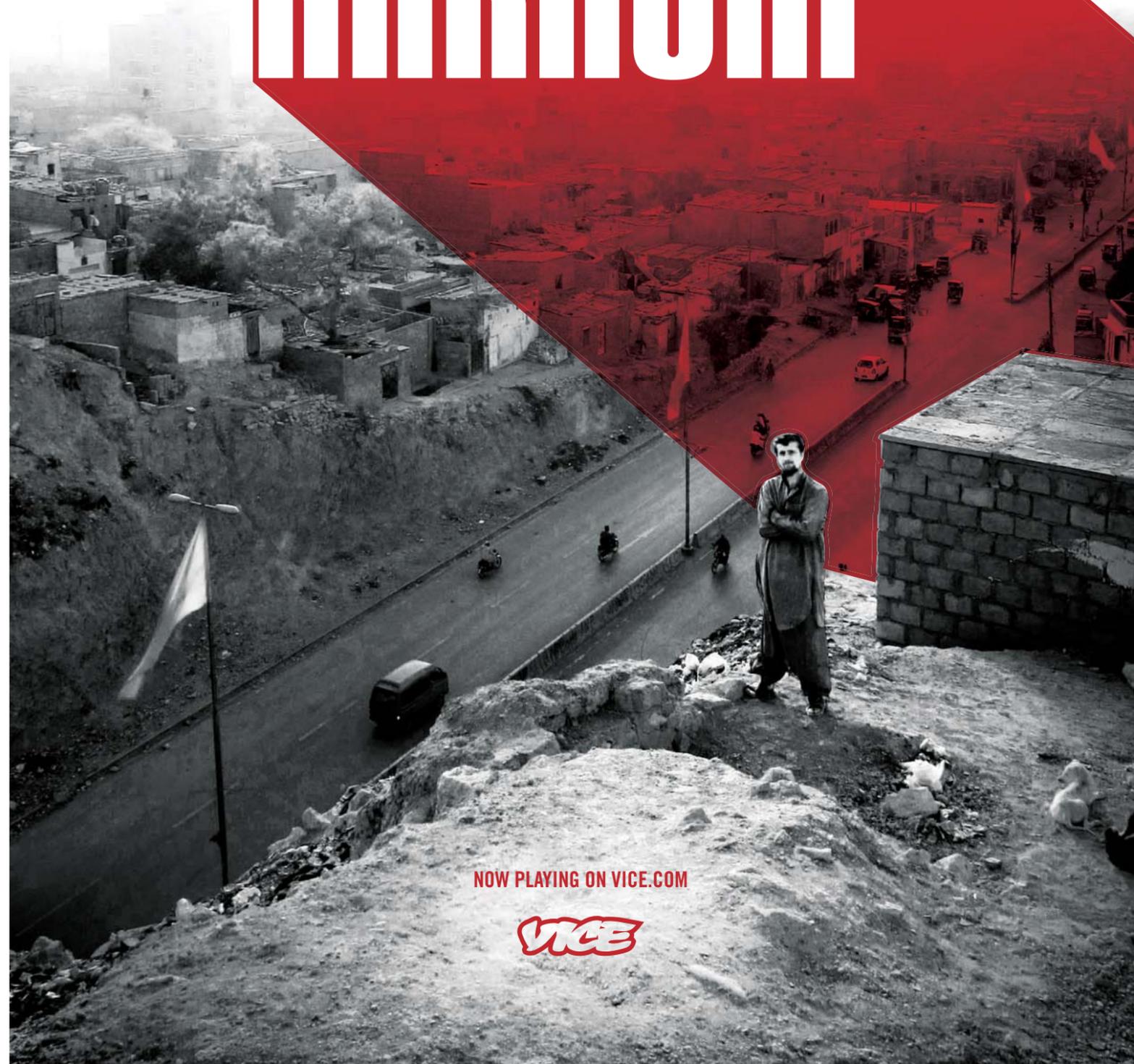
**THE UNSEEN**  
**Nanni Balestrini**  
Verso

Experimental fiction of this sort usually sends me into full-on Dad Mode, but before I could smugly bellow, "Looks like someone forgot to print the periods!" in my boxers, in the kitchen, I realized I was already 150 pages in and texting friends to cancel drinks. A fictionalized account of Italy's *Autonomia* protest movement in the ultra-violent late 70s (the "Years of Lead") centered around the 1980 Trani prison revolt and subsequent bloodbath and told in the naturally punctuationless cadence of a fried-but-nostalgic barstool companion. This would make perfect inspirational reading for all those Occupy kids if they ever took a break from relishing the stench of their own farts.

B.B. KING

## LOOKING FOR TROUBLE IN PAKISTAN'S CRAZIEST CITY

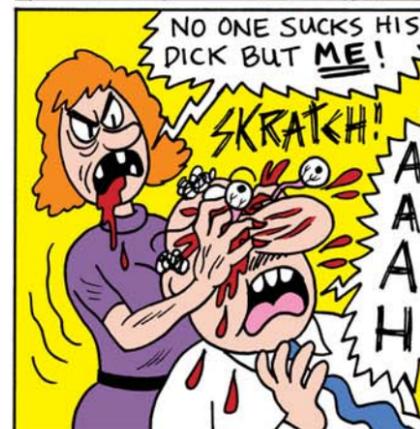
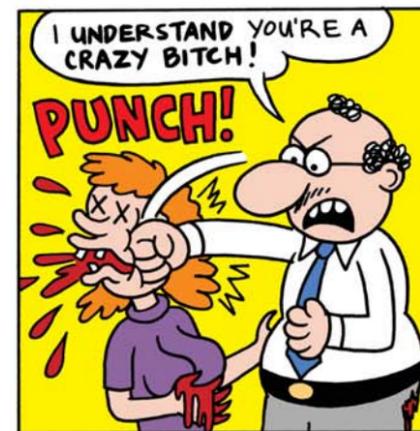
# THE VICE GUIDE TO KARACHI

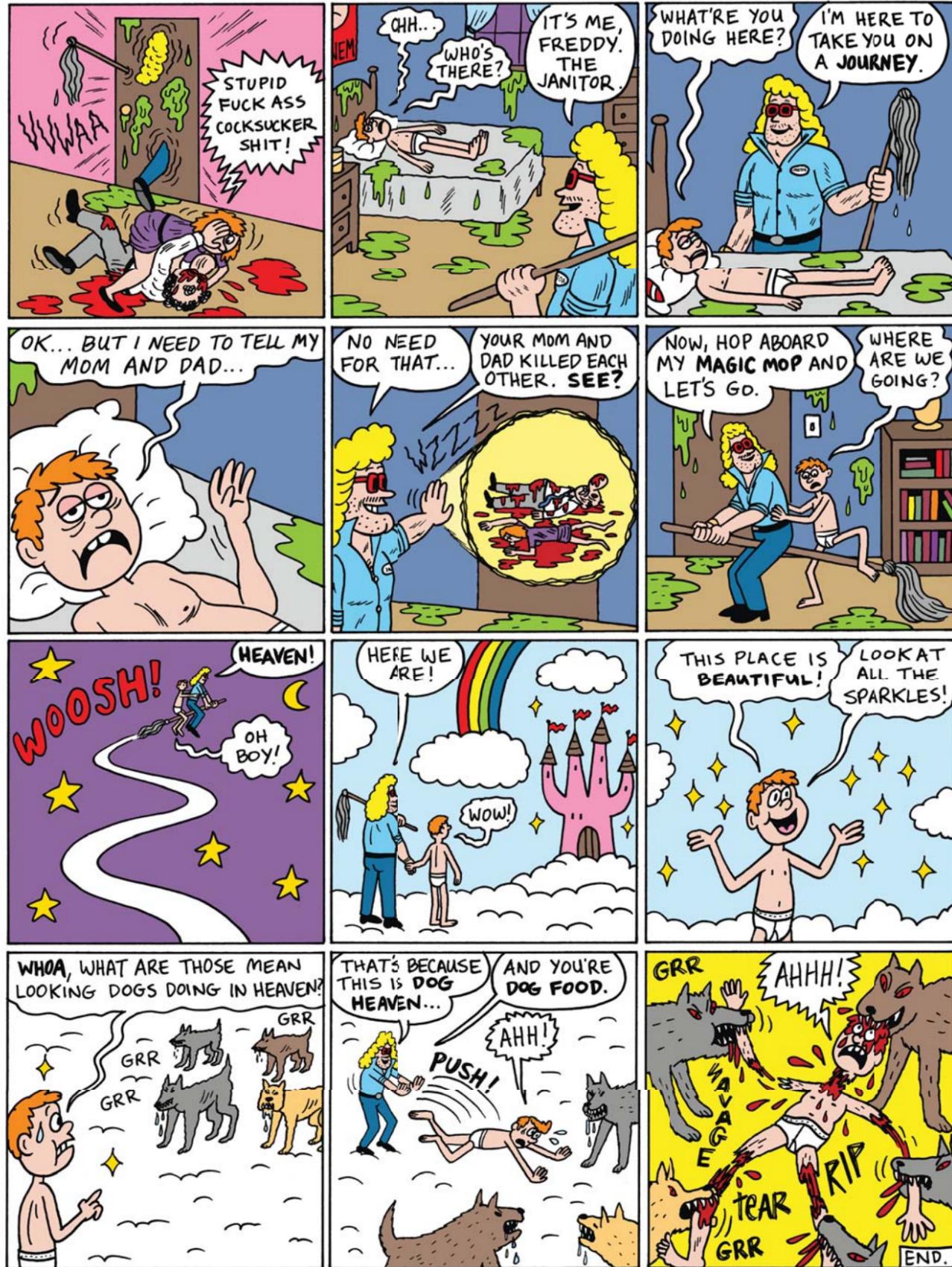


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