
Senior Projects Spring 2021

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2021

Basement Girls

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Recommended Citation

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Basement Girls

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

Basement Girls



SKYLAR HAUGE

Thank you.

Mary Caponegro, for mentoring me.

My parents, for making me.

My friends, for having me.

No. I love you more.

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Basement Girls

In January, 2013 I was 13 years old. I could think of myself as Baby-New-Millennium forever because I don't think people will still be thinking things in the year 3000. There was the big story in the new reports about those girls who had been kept in that basement by that man for 12 years. Those teens had lived in the old millennium exclusively. There were stories about their pregnancies that would become movies about seeing the sky for the first time. There were stories about bodily things and ungodly things. Soon after was the Boston Marathon Bombing and I told my dad that The Basement Man deserved the death penalty more. I should have just said sooner. The Marathon Man didn't wake up everyday and decide to build a hell, he woke up one day too desperate to get to heaven. We assume. He was an American, merely inducted into another cult of expediency, and maybe only did it for the reasons my dad says, "only in America do these things happen." Because people are privileged enough to believe they deserve greatness. I'm not sure if I'm people yet. Being in a room with 70 virgins won't make you any less of a virgin. But I hated running anyway and proclaimed that I would rather just die often. I knew just enough of the world to assume being held in a basement, maintaining only that amount of clarity, for an indefinite and later-reported-on infinity, would be worse than being struck down by God while doing laps for my Health-Department-mandated ritual sacrifice. I had prayed for that.

When you look directly into a laser, you don't go blind right away. You wake up the next morning and wonder why it took you 12 years to break the trope that all stories begin with "I woke up." They teach you not to do that in middle school. They also teach you about lasers and

Manifest Destiny and Flowers For Algernon. I wondered how those cautionary tales, the children who looked into lasers, had spent their last night of sight. It only matters because they didn't choose it: Like being born on Y2K, like living in a basement, like telling your father the truth. I'm not sure if I'm people yet. Did they spend it experimenting with drugs that make you smarter and then dumber? Did they spend it wondering if these 70 girls online are real virgins? Did they spend it learning braille or piano or hemming or applying for marathons or learning sign language? Did they spend it with mice? Never Forget. I know they won't.

Moms on the news cast the Marathon Man as a good kid who'd gotten into trouble, the way they cast their daughters as canaries who had surely only gotten pregnant in the dark. The way they cast their daughter in pageants. No one knows why caged birds sing, just that you must put a blanket over them at night to get them to stop.

I imagined the blankets they had in the basement were the foil ones for runners and the transient. I learned on the news that year, they could be used as tourniquets. I wonder if those girls had learned that too. I'm sorry for wondering. But The Basement Man had surely already been mad enough not to care about their heartbeats under his floorboards. They were not both dead and alive to him. He opened his box every day for 12 years. He only lasted one month in prison. He killed himself by using a prison blanket as a tourniquet around his neck.

Later that year, more basement men were pulled from the woodwork and put on the news. Was it because the authorities had stopped searching for those other girls when the cases got cold in the

dark? Had those girls stopped searching for salvation? In 2008 Obama ran on “Hope.” I don’t remember his slogan in 2012. Was it “Never Forget?”

My dad said the Marathon Man deserves to die more because he killed so many more people. He doesn’t understand how many times one girl can die. It’s at least 9. The end of suffering is always death but I’m on a runner’s high that makes you smarter, then dumber, so I die and die again without realizing it.

The whole world is flooding like a basement. The pair of canaries on the ark just flew away because they smelled smoke. The Bible teaches you that “I woke up” belongs in the middle of the story. I only know how to pray by running in circles. If I was trying to save someone in a disaster right behind me I would only know how to take the long way around. Obama’s slogan in 2012 was “Forward.”

My house was built in the 1920’s and the basement was sealed off. My dad liked to believe it was because moonshine bootleggers lived there. There was evidence but the police had stopped looking. If I break into my basement I might find twinkies still edible from the last millennium. The Mayan calendar just ended. They knew there were too many Gods for the world to last forever. Maybe the world would be less deserving of the death penalty if it had gone out with a bang. I whimper in gym class. Twinkies were just discontinued. If I opened my basement, maybe there would be someone who used to be a 13-year-old girl down there. Maybe by the time I open my box she’d be dead. Maybe she would have escaped. I pray the “I woke up” belongs at the end

of her story, even if that means it's in the middle of mine. Maybe she got into a nicer basement with 69 other virgins. Maybe she folded her tin foil blanket into origami so it was all that was left, floating like an ark. But the basement would probably just be full of the kind of alcohol that used to make people go blind.

Piranhas

Eli offers to make me a Negroni because they stocked up on untaxed alcohol in New Hampshire.

“Ok.”

They don't get up and I know they wanted to explain why they could more than they wanted to do it. I think that if you're only considering New Hampshire being a libertarian is probably ok.

Eli says no one here anymore understands them. They are just like everyone left here.

Eli's class background: the only people who understood were driven out the way they hadn't realized they are yet. The difference is Eli tells me this while those other kids model or drive trucks or bank their investments or make dinner or try to forget us or marry rich or teach The Netflix Algorithm to write weirder tv for us all or try to model or try not to be kids anymore.

We're too far-left to have to try to be anything, even right sometimes.

“The most telling example was freshman year.” Eli had been talking about all the random sex they had when they were fifteen with “much older men.” They would never be able to live with the guilt if the state found out and sent the other person to jail for their story. By then they knew “what was up.” Eli lied about their age because they had to. My comrade would never say out loud how they would never utter “me too.” But now we get drunk with the names our parents gave us. We have moved off campus and started telling people “how things have always gone

down.” The other kids started saying those things too and then I stopped knowing what those kids say to anyone.

In some freshman dorm Eli had said, “It was part of gay culture.” I’m sure it had still seemed relatable. They were waiting for a “me too.”

A girl in the room who is here still but was not me said, “We all know gay men are predatory.”

For the first time in a while I know I’m allowed to respond to this, so I confirm how harmful a trope that is. How: “That’s how people have always tried to scare kids like us by making us older and scarier. Even the shows The Netflix Algorithm writes because it learned people love to hate-watch cast queer people that way: *like queerness is sexual*. Sexual is adult. *Like being an adult wrong is for adults who were kids wrong or were kids too far wronged*; And whoever says it’s inappropriate to tell kids what being gay is still thinks being gay is inappropriate.” But I can’t say anything about the rest. Eli told me they knew she only said it because she is from the South. I can’t say anything about this because Eli’s from the South too.

Eli had a fairy phase and a tank of piranhas they didn’t know were piranhas until they kept getting bigger as the other fish disappeared.

But that other girl is still left here too and she told me earlier tonight that when she was a kid she had the IKEA 1999 bug theme room and I think we kissed once freshman year. She told me

tonight how her parents were cool for keeping it gender neutral. I use Eli's name and not hers because I'm a piranha too.

I had the IKEA 1999 dinosaur theme room and I would run outside to catch the fire truck not the icecream truck and my mom made me feel like being effeminate was sweet like mucus, too saccharine and melted when invested in. Being a woman is what had made my mom an adult. She hates pink and isn't far left enough not to always have to try so hard to be so right. But she thinks she's older than she is. She's scared too.

Eli says if they are the first person with a dick the other person has been attracted to the person always falls in love with them. I wonder how many of the "much older men" fell in love with them. They say it because it doesn't matter and because they say they are not here to make friends. We're all just here to make friends until we realize that about ourselves.

Eli's mom said the piranhas had to go because sometimes they jump out of the tank and bite. Their dad tried to use a net to get them out of the tank because he was a "raging alcoholic." I picture Elmer Fudd trying to kill Bugs Bunny with a flaccid gun and falling off a cliff.

"Oh my god did he pour whiskey in the tank?"

Their dad had to pour a gallon of bleach into the tank because he was a “raging alcoholic.” They find time to make me a negroni and I know they made it here because now there is alcohol to spare.

Eli says the other kids still here will all move to Brooklyn to be gentrifiers. That’s why they’re here to make friends.

“I think no one here thinks about what they will do after this. But I guess that’s how they end up there.”

Piranhas don't kill each other. They just leave bite marks in the other fish big enough to make it. The other kids all dropped out of college like empty bottles of bleach next to a fish tank full of dead piranhas; dissolved and burning to the touch. We run towards the sirens and ignore the little songs until they just melt away.

Eli says, “You know how some people kind of fall in love with whoever they lose their virginity to? It’s all just like that.”

Eli and the girl who said “we all know gay men are predators” are eskimo siblings. I assume we call two people who have hooked up with the same person before “eskimo siblings” because of how few people still live in the arctic... The shared lover is a noted trope, an igloo of a man. He looks too old to still be here but it’s easy to picture him chasing down an icecream truck. He’s the

kind of man who moves somewhere where you can fish all year round through a glass floor. I'm eskimo siblings with him too though. We all get to know each other too well even if our walls are made of glass, just waiting for the next thing.

That threesome is all from the South and they all have siblings and I don't. I was scared that my parents would have another child because there is only so much water in the tank. The South is dry and maybe they are too attached to their grammar there.

I had tiny rubber dinosaurs that would grow in cups of water until their size turned into holes, until they would just dissolve if you tried to take them out. My mom bought me them at IKEA before you had to pay to pretend you were not an American.

I don't know where we're going next but I know the glass starts where the bleach ends. I hope I get to bite the hand that's pouring it before I die. I hope my prehistoric teeth haven't dissolved. I hope the negroni will still fuck me up if I only take tiny sips. I hope by the time I'm driven out I'll be drunk enough to realize it. I hope I get big enough first.

HeartBreaking News

The spider you murdered in your room was a mother.

Rachel Maddow stayed at a Trump hotel in the 90's and said the room service was great.

Tonic water has as many calories as soda.

Your dad found your negative pregnancy test.

The neighbor through your thin-walled apartment does not in fact have a small dog.

The janitor of your highschool sent you a friend request on Facebook. He was fired but you don't know why.

The disease predates the astrological sign.

The .01% of germs that can kill you frolic on the spouts of hand sanitizer.

Hypochondriacs can die in car accidents.

Your gay ex-boyfriend just married a woman named Stacy.

Your pills all fell in the sink and you'll have to swallow the taste of death every morning to stay alive this month.

The guidance counselor is calling you into her office.

The unlisted serving size of cigarettes is not in fact one pack,

Like the candy.

In This House



In this house we believe that Dog Prozac works on humans and sitting in one Dunkin Donuts can sit you in all of them all at once and the world may be hole sized but its only sphere deep and taking your mom's Multiple Sclerosis Estrogen can make you anyone you want to be. I want to be in the Dunkin Donuts in Tokyo because my roommate had sleepwalked into my room like my mom used to and sprawled out over the entire bed where I fucked some man I met in the airport an hour prior. And I was. But that wouldn't happen for years. I'm 22 but I'm still 15 and I'm in a Dunkin Donuts in New Hampshire and my mom's house is in Vermont and I can't remember how I got here.

The Trick to controlling your dreams is to realize you're dreaming. The trick to realizing you're dreaming is to not remember how you got there. But I had walked right through the doorway. Like a glory hole, like a donut, like the kind of love you don't have to wear a ring about.

In this house we believe love isn't love and you can use Grindr to see the secret lawn signs in front of everyone's houses. In this Dunkin Donuts we believe Grindr is the only way I can get home tonight. It doesn't take long when you're fifteen. You are in 'the middle of nowhere'. Alcohol is untaxed and the brutally ugly just want to love you and drive you home across state lines. The conservatives don't believe in felonies. Before I finished my donut I had someone coming to pick me up. I messaged "Please." "Bring me home." He would cross the state line twice to make it happen. I stare at the ring of glaze frosting crusted on the bag like the aftermath I already knew.

Then a cop car loops into the parking lot. He is here.

Prozac flies through my veins and I don't know if cop cars have seats that recline all the way or if they are blocked by that gate for prisoners and dogs. He says, "Be honest with me. Are you just using me to get to a hotter Grindr man's house." I'm loyal from my dog's prozac but I would rather have a friend who lies to himself. There would be less space for him to lie to me. I say, "I'm not, I promise."

I don't tell him where I live because I know it won't be the first stop. I don't think cops can just drive off-duty cars across borders and we are doing business. We park in a field and he makes me be honest with him again. It's warranted because he thinks I'm five years in the making, not six months and I'm honest that I don't have HIV. That's more than enough for a cop who was surely already a cop in the 80's. In this house we believe me when my pants are unzipped. I click my

heels together. It feels good like an oil twister in water. I'm cruising in Oz. I've been rescued from every Dunkin Donuts in Kansas. His head looks like the side of a mugshot the wall sees. I'm beautiful from my mom's pills. I'm beautiful when I imagine what his face looks like instead of learning how it feels.

He spits out the window and it stays rolled down until we cross the state line. He nods to the little border officer and I figure all cops know each other, that the inside of one cop's mouth can sit you inside the mouth of every cop in the world.

If my mom's still up she will see a cop car drop me off and assume I was caught doing something I had done. When the car slides into the driveway she's pacing around the living room. She walks in a circle trampling down the carpet to prepare it as a bed. He was just another scarecrow in a field but I won't miss him most of all. My mother takes my face in her hands and I know she's already asleep again. In this house we still believe.

Baseless Statues

The statue of George Washington outside my highschool was dismantled because he owned people.

They left the base.

Girls get to be statues when they grow into symbols not women.

Naming is cutting. Naming is violent.

Everyone remembers which hole has their lover's name beside it at the 9/11 memorial. They stick flowers in the holes.

Tripophobia.

Life is like a box of chocolates. It's what you get when someone doesn't know you well enough to know what you actually want.

When agoraphobics get to heaven it's just their house again.

Blind people in Ukraine touch the Stalin statue's face to learn who to hate.

If I looked into a laser wrong today, tonight I would memorize whose face is where at the Hollywood Wax Museum.

I would also have sex with my eyelids closed one last time.

Why does my hypnotherapist have a laser pointer?

I am banned for life from the Hollywood Wax Museum.

I am banned for life from Heaven.

Life is like a box of chocolates. It will kill your dog.

The highway outside my highschool had a bomb threat. The package turned out to be just a bag of candy. They destroyed it. The whole campus smelled of cotton candy.

They put spikes on the base of the statue they dismantled so homeless people can't sleep on it.

There is a playground in Russia made of all the decapitated Stalin statues.

Rousseau said intimacy is killing or being killed.

Tomorrow I am leaving a bunch of vigil candles around my lovers at the Hollywood Wax Museum.

When does CPR become necrophilia?

A coyote vest has spikes on it so coyotes can't eat your dog.

Did they change the name of the game from Snakes and Ladders to Chutes and Ladders before or after the invention of gunpowder?

My fortune teller's crystal ball said I will go blind tomorrow.

Can my urn be a snowglobe?

Holes are shapes. Someone makes all shapes: your eyes or God or culture or vacuums for those other things or a series of other holes.

The world may be hole sized but it's only sphere deep.

Will they change the name back to Snakes now that guns are less of a danger, socially?

Are dogs colorblind? Or are they just racist if you teach them to be?

Tomorrow I am bringing a coyote in a vest that says “seeing” to the Hollywood Wax Museum.

The world is bound with wisdom teeth stitches.

It is upsetting to think about a hole shaped only by other holes.

A blindfolded palm reader touched the hands of an amputated Stalin statue and said he never loved his father.

Rousseau said everyone tries to be a particular sort of someone, holistically. Then they cut it off and put it on display to be ranked and stitched into the hierarchy of everyone else.

Maybe you’ll blow up. Maybe someone will give you flowers.

I want to go blind 16 minutes into being famous.

What’s on the backside of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs?

Can I social-climb up the pyramid scheme?

I am tying my wisdom teeth stitches into a knot from across the bar.

Hello Darkness, I feel like I've been seeing you around everywhere lately.

My dog is a coyote wearing a coyote vest on a leash.

Rousseau said the desire to be seen as better is crippling.

Having a vision for yourself is oppressive.

Oedipus complexes are for terrorists.

This hole was built only for you. This flower is made of glory.

Were the pyramids modeled after a particular woman's breasts?

Coupe glasses were modeled after Marie Antionette.

More people died from Jamestown than Jonestown.

A coyote ate my glasses, then I put it on a leash.

They assassinated the wrong wax figure at the Hall of Presidents.

Can my ashes be mixed into Kool-Aid?

Dog Prozac works on humans.

Last time I felt alive I was playing laser tag and I was shot in the back and had to wait in the dark for the game to be over.

You're it!

If you have to see it, you never truly believed.

The Next American Prophet

The Next American Idol was lined up with a number pinned to his shirt, waiting to be judged, in a rental convention hall, in San Antonio, in 2013. Some of the contestants, whose souls, once bared, America will want contextualized, get a video montage before they are sent to Hell or Hollywood. The American version of Idealism had already turned into metaphysical ideas of material. So he told us which false idol to see his soul in like any Third Coming.

“Most people look at me and they see a twinkie little white boy. But I'm so much more than that. I'm really just a big black woman trapped in a little boy's body.”

Back home they had always called him Peaches, after the kind that roll around with regional charm like catfish out of water to bluegrass bands. When he started singing for them, they called him Papa. Papa Peaches was the natural Southern Twinkie that would be discontinued from the show, like the dessert, after three weeks, but would surely survive the apocalypse. One of the celebrity judges jeered, “Papa don't Peach!” Then, he would make them all see. To make an impression, you only really have ten seconds.

In the backstage confessional of his montage he said he was different: “He didn't do covers.”

He sang, “I’m a gypsy on the rise, I’m a woman in disguise, Don’t you know Papa Peaches don’t lie.”

He was above doing covers and whatever producer spoke into the judges’ earpieces wanted to get under covers with Peaches.

He sang, “I may be Gay but that’s ok, God ain’t just one thing.”

He proudly confessed, “I’m all the dirty stuff that comes out of Mississippi.”

He was straight Hollywood material.

Whoever controlled his clip-microphone’s control box glowed a warm red light through his striped shirt. At least the stripes were horizontal. He was the third to go home and he said, like anyone with a number pinned to their shirt, that we hadn’t seen the last of him. Papa don’t Lie.

() () ()

About a decade later the college kids were on their winterly break for commercialism. It was the kind of college where one could imagine seeing telephone-pole pull-tab ads for students themselves. Not that they were open with the public, or willing to be servants to anything that didn’t get them high or get them power. But as a mixed media project: photography and

performance art and sculpture. Community inclusion to create the collegial hierarchy that turns paper into bad art, and this Island of Misfit Toys into a Neverland for the kids who are dressed like the dogs of their favorite celebrity: Little Charlie Chaplins in their same iconic outfits, before we name the outfits after them, before the dictators they are satirizing have to look like them, before the internet must speculate on who inspired whom.

Everyone is for sale and they are kleptomaniacs: evolved to forage and gather but pure-bred enough to consent their release into the world as hunters.

Harrison needed Eli's help to stay the alpha in covering people on film. The public was worshiping another student photographer's work, deeming him worthy of a confessional to contextualize it for them. Harrison needed to remind everyone that the boy was just a dog before he got sent to heaven first.

Eli said, "That interview is fucked up."

The photos in question were revealed to be about suffering from the male gaze of male gays. Eli was Harrison's token friend for issues of this matter: a golden idol that could be stuck into a slot machine when one wanted to claw something up.

“It’s misogynistic. It’s as if there were some new danger, aside from the one of being seen by anyone: that they could judge you as attractive because some productive voice spoke to their own devices. The voice wants you to come out and let you make it come, release.”

But straight boys are not material.

“The only specific threat is to his masculinity.”

As Eli spoke, Harrison found something to burn for besides the threat to his own. Eli had signed no consent form but had given Harrison release.

Harrison would maintain his place at the top of the pack for now. His paper would stay art. They were on break. Harrison was packing up to go someplace he could hang pull-tab ads on more traditionally shaped, americana telephone-poles, for the community to sell themselves to him. He was headed down South. He would befriend them like he had linked with Eli. They would surely crucify themselves into subjects. He loved to link and if you build it they will come.

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Eli was a senior. Caleb was a wise fool. He was just old enough to stop being nostalgic for highschool and start being nostalgic for times he had not lived through. Caleb had pulled Eli’s number off of Grindr: Devising to sell himself until consent had formed between them. Caleb

had needed to make someone really see his dynamism ever since his highschool band was cremated.

Caleb explained, “You know, I think in some ways every gay man is nostalgic for the AID’s crisis. Now it’s like we don’t hold a real place. It’s all about other voices. There was so much community back then.”

Eli asked how he could possibly think that on a first date arranged through an app meant for cruising, and Caleb had ruined the dynamic by burning for power again.

“As if there’s not still an AID’s crisis!”

Maybe Caleb felt he was a black woman trapped in a little boy's body.

Maybe Caleb revealed it, the wish to be in danger, in some veiled attempt to convince Eli they already were, only because growing up, he had never been stageworthy enough to wear an orphan’s costume. Maybe he had to demonstrate that he had been conceived immaculately and raised by a higher power exclusively; Someone should project that onto him.

All prophets are orphans. How could a virgin not die in childbirth? You can’t bear out someone else's soul when you haven’t even tried baring out your own yet. You’ll die.

Maybe all orphans are prophets but not all prophets are orphans. It depends how well Caleb can sing. If Caleb had been born when he wanted to be he could have watched Madonna's second coming. When the name went from meaning the Virgin Mary holding a baby from the only time she'd ever come (Thank God), to a Material Girl: the poster idol who hugged the plague ridden in hospital camps, Like A Prayer. Eli knew it was only because Caleb was from Hollywood. He had surely grown up around people who would have placed flowers in the mouths of guns if they had been born when they wanted to be. Eli was from the South and they knew better. Eli had grown up around people who, granted the same wish, would have needed no draft to join the infantry of an earlier, more civil, war. *Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened.*

Madonna was the original celebrity to promise, "*It Gets Better.*" Before everyone's opinion only mattered online.

She was keeping the people who imitated her alive, a poster to *Hang in There.*

Caleb missed his Prior life. He had missed his shot to be an Angel in America. It seemed like Eli wouldn't give Caleb even one little death, let alone a number that would prove Caleb could have lived through that plague, succumbed to it and been reborn. But he could still be both the kid who bared his soul and the, "Twinkie getting cancelled this year." Eli would roast him to all their peers.

Being burned always proved you meant something to the people doing it, like God plaguing you because you're the idol trapped in a post. Flames embody your passion. Even in the Peri-Madonna world, the rent was up on the whole social convention. That's what their priors had said on Broadway. But Caleb was from Hollywood. Behind the curtains are windows on screen. And it didn't happen if the stream wasn't live.

Caleb only wished for a hug from Madonna because she'd gotten older. Now she was allowed to adopt orphans and dogs. Other, self identified orphans go to church and learn to sing. Others find each other and learn to steal. *Please Sir, Can we have some more?* Because we are: More.

Eli had been burned before too, without a civil permit. Phoenixes in America steal like the gypsies, who we are not allowed to call that anymore. After their little deaths they need new material to live on in. And Caleb was still here, for now. Later, Eli would relive every part except this, so their community could judge the sophomore. For now, just as Eli suspected, Material Boys come like it matters. They come fast. It's easy to get a rise out of them.

() () ()

Down South, an idol emerged from Harrison's post. Those same telephone poles through which Americans' votes for an idol had been virtually signaled in 2013, before everyone's opinion only mattered online, now were used only to search for the dogs they had lost, then to find other dogs to replace them, after someone's irresponsibility kept the things that imitate them from being

sterilized, or Like A Virgin. Peaches was used to holding arbitrary numbers on paper and ending up on camera for it. The post-bark crosses of all those who did and did not believe in him, were his to bear.

Peaches was a shot Harrison could not miss. Everyone in Harrison's classes was dreaming about showing photos of reality TV's surviving failures. Had they grown even more real since the last breath of airtime? So real that the life was streaming out of them and the esthetes could only look directly when they were covered up in flashes? Harrison built the pictures of Peaches in a field. Real artists "made photos." Taking them was for posers, who are certainly not worthy of catching the people who America already knew could spill their guts. Harrison excitedly showed the post-opp online.

Harrison didn't have to pitch anything to get Peaches to come. Harrison was just another crooked straight boy who smiled a lot, but he was from a world of material of more.

() () ()

Eli was drunk. A productive voice wanted them to be nostalgic later for a drop of uncensored life they would hardly remember.

Eli had not watched American Idol in 2013. They did not remember what they had been doing instead. Whatever it had been was not angelic enough to signal the end of the world, but drinking

turns even gold medalist survivors into esthetes of their own lives. They remember the past and forget the present, all those past lives that are covered in the ashes of themselves, the metallic dust that stains photo paper into art.

On Youtube, Eli watched the judges pigeon hole Peaches and Peaches confess into the lens-deep hole of glory and America want him for the way his dirty parts fit together behind a TV-deep wall with only his idol sticking out.

Eli watched Peaches cry because it was over and he was still here. Eli got Peaches's number from Harrison while they were still here too. Eli was already eager to forget they had ever loved idols who only come through holes in the wall, unable to see them, like they usually could. Eli was a veteran of forgetting. If they had to, they would forget again, hungover, in morning.

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Peaches had not aged a day. The first thing Peaches asked Eli on Facetime was what time they were born. He didn't ask if it was when they wanted to be.

Peaches's life had already been detailed extensively in response to, "What's up?" This is the question everyone thinks they will have a breakthrough on, one day, and then they will really make them all see.

Peaches had a child with a woman who was still his wife in some estranged addiction. But that's ok. God ain't just one thing. He had been in one of America's forces. Eli would not remember which element the force tried to tame because Peaches clearly saw all the elements as interchangeable. Eli did not ask what other things Peaches felt were interchangeable: if Peaches still felt he was a black woman. Peaches's Plague. Peaches had planted many things that had to be frosted over. Eli knew better by now.

Eli reported the month, day, and hour of their birth: practiced on many first dates so their rising sign could reveal who they might have been born as. But for Peaches, every second counted.

Like many burned out stars, Peaches did not believe in astrology. He explained his alternative conviction: Integrated Human Design. While Peaches calculated who Eli was, they searched the web expecting to find that Peaches practiced alone. Instead they found a doctrine "composed of chakras, genetic codes, western and southern astrology, and quantum physics." Like the memetic study that bore it, Integrated Human Design was culturally informed to propagate wildly, even if it was wrong. Hollywood was obsessed with it.

Even celebrities want to say, "That's so me." to increasingly deep impersonal reflections: waiting for every screen, printed with the false idols of themselves, to be seen all the way through like a veil worn to their weddings with their higher inner powers. Until then, they had been merely estranged.

Looking through his horoscope, Peaches saw Eli as his prophet. Peaches explained that Eli's Incarnation Cross, what ultimately defines your purpose on Earth, was of The Sleeping Phoenix. They were a cool thing trying to get hot. It was all about passion, no one could capture them.

"That's so me."

The Sleeping Phoenix had a sampling soul, reflecting rather than identifying. It's one who has to wait a full moon cycle before finding clarity. *Not all Women.*

Eli identified.

Peaches said, "When you go up to a child sitting in a field picking apart a flower, muttering, 'he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not', and ask them, 'Do you love me?', they will say, 'I don't know.' That burns. But they really don't know, which is very difficult. It's hard because it's so different from how the collective opporates."

Then, Peaches, like anyone with a number, started talking about the end of the world. Maybe Eli was so much that it was all that was left.

"There will be no more markets. No one will feed us, neuter us. Someone will have to teach the children to hunt and gather. You."

Eli sampled the idea of teaching kids to shoplift. They'd have a following in the next age of individualism. Peaches said Eli might die one day.

He wanted to meet in the South while we are all still here. They were from the same place, to which we will all return. Peaches had always figured his soulmate might not be mutual.

“I don't know.”

Soulmates you meet online often test whether or not you can die. Only real things go home, meet your parents, find out if you have them.

Peaches had gotten too real. When Angels fly too close to the microscope of real life, we have to burn their wings off, cover them up in flashes. Peaches had been himself on each unaired day, living with the congruent personage of a maniac.

He materialized after being burned on American Idol, only to show that Idealism, the American force that kills, that built him, was not bright enough to really transform him, for he rose every morning remembering all his dreams. But Eli hoped maybe they were enough. Or more. Eli prayed Papa Peaches really didn't lie.

And, if Peaches could change, if he was a gypsy on the rise, the only thing he stole was the ashes he emerged from: made of all the dirty stuff that comes out of Mississippi. He was not a catfish at all, even online.

His ashes were a mix of every medium to the spirit world, all the media that mattered.

Madonna's dog's name is Gypsy. There had probably been many replacements like the mascot of a school Eli could never have gotten into. The Gypsies were all French Bulldogs so their deaths were little. All the students at Yale call themselves Eli's.

When other people identify as other races, maybe we will speculate on who inspired whom. Maybe when these people are discovered and roasted, it will expose that coming back as something else only prophesizes every race, won or lost, is the same: Simply posts for drivers to race by. We wait for an angel to outlap us.

Eli never made Peaches come, but he would not have come fast. Peaches was everlasting. The highest orgasm is reached through immaculate conception. When he really died, it would matter.

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Harrison was back from his run-of-the-mill visit down South. It was an unprobing operation, no sterilization was necessary.

He and Eli were getting high enough not to worry about outgrowing their costumes (looking like their parents), and eating Twinkies.

Twinkies had been un-discontinued. By 2013 they had deteriorated into merely covered rolls lined up amongst mudpies in the market, all too real accompaniments to TV dinners: junk, food. The culture had forgotten their trope of immortality and some Yale Ad-Man figured cancelling the sweet that never aged, that could professedly survive armageddon, would go viral enough to boost sales post-resurrection. Dematerialize, idealize, sell out: The Holy Trinity of Business. The apocalypse was a marketing stunt. But being cancelled meant, once upon a time, you mattered.

Eli didn't say much about the call with Peaches, what Peaches had said to them. It would extinguish the flame, a birthday wish you can't share or else it won't come true.

They were stoned and bored. Eli suggested they go on Omegle, the website that randomly pairs you in one-on-one video chats. One click refreshes the window, ending the call and unveiling a new stranger.

"Sick." Harrison answered, in slang, un-feverishly.

Many users are devotees. There's a surplus of tumbling blog posts with secret signals for the site of "pretty much the most fun you can have with absolutely no consequences." Some of the

posters find each other by asking, “What is air?”, which immediately ends calls with those outside their sect. If the answer is something real, they know they are not seen. But Eli and Harrison were above these seedbeds of those looking for answers.

They would play their own age-old, clandestine game.

() () ()

It always starts the same.

A warm red light dawned the latest reckoning night. You choose one word and discover other people wearing the same dog tag. They chose “Gay.” The chats always begin without warning, coming on the screen with no ringing around the rosy to determine who is plagued or who will fall.

Eli asked, “What’s up?”

Harrison giggled at the euphemism. Almost everyone goes on Omegle for the same reason, interchangeably with other websites for dirty stuff, already playing with themselves, really just waiting to show you.

A man with blue astroturf as carpet answered, “Can I come for you?”

That was their cue. Their faces frosted over. Something stiffened.

“Yes but you only have ten seconds. Or else. Your time starts now.”

That was all he needed. He flashed the screen.

He was moving forcefully enough to give himself rugburn, so fast, so uninspired: a fish out of water desperate for any fluid to sustain himself.

This is what he said he wanted, so why did they always look like this.

He rasped like he was sanding a wanted ad for his arrest off the community post.

“Your time’s up.”

Now they would berate him.

“You’re pathetic.”

“No wonder no one real wants you.”

But, the thing is: he just kept trying.

“You ask for permission and you can’t even come.”

“I mean no wonder. Look at yourself.”

They were getting tired of looking at him too. They were getting bored. The pearly gatekeepers were sending him to hell and they were laughing. But they needed a re-embodiment to flame.

One click. *Spinning wheel of death*. The second coming.

He was in a dimly lit room. Pornographic moaning disseminated from a TV in the background. His jaundiced stomach protruded from an ill-fitting T-shirt.

“Will you help me come?”

“Yes but you only have ten seconds. Or else.”

He careened like there was a gun to his head. He was frantically flogging himself, trying to jerk tears. His time was going, going, gone. Maybe the background noises were too loud. Maybe it was all about other voices.

Eli yelled, "Cancelled!"

But the doughy rolls stayed uncovered.

"You're a nobody. Your belly button looks like a black hole."

He kept trying to reach some form of glory.

"Who's that fucking in the background? Your mother?"

"I bet she wishes you were never born."

One click. Third coming.

It was a child. Did he have parents?

One click. Rebirth.

It was a black woman in a meridional living room. Maybe she joined the Gay tag by accident.

Maybe it was a mistake that she didn't belong. She listened to their silence and chose to end it all

for them. Maybe she was an angel who saw that they were more than enough but could only end the world they shared.

Junk, Junk, Soulfood.

Spinning wheel.

“Please, can I come?”

Ten seconds. Or else.

He was so blurry and moving so fast. The window was pixelated. It was patterned like the divider screen between the confessor and the reverend. Not being able to really see their dynamism keeps you honest in the booth.

Times up. No more.

Harrison used the computer’s trackpad like a mechanical claw, picking apart the little world behind the glass. Eli’s exchange rate as a token that permitted all this would be forgotten in the faux-gilded morning.

He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me.

One click. Regeneration.

He was in an animal costume, the kind that imitates characters. Eli had read that what gets them off is not watching others that wear them, only the animations that formed them. He was surely too real for himself.

Ten seconds. Or else.

The costume didn't cover what mattered.

Often the animators were inspired by the fans too. The producers were bored by now.

When his time was up, Eli called him a Twink in a bear suit, a pitiful little freak.

“Get a life!”

He kept going. He was getting desperate. Death is not the end, but what doesn't kill you makes you not matter at all.

One click.

The Next American Prophet was online just waiting to be judged. *So Hang in There*. Eli and Harrison were not dogs. They were celebrities warranted to send lives to Hell or Hollywood as they streamed by.

Next.

Before his time could start running out. He asked, "What is air?" He was interchangeable with the next contestant. They didn't realize he had his own covert disingenuousness, that he was a catfish, all the stuff that comes off the internet.

One click. Re-creation.

His room was covered in overlapping papers. The walls were glazed over with something. Modge-podge. He was quiet. He had to be invited to come for them.

He only had ten seconds but he touched himself like it was the first time.

He could fit fifteen minutes of fame into ten seconds like God is just one thing. He looked directly at them, climbing up a pole that signaled their connection. Eli and Harrison were suffering from his gaze like they were women in disguise, they believed in him.

Three seconds.

One of the posters behind him was a photo of a pet hanging off some bark-covered post. It said something but it was illegible. Maybe, up on the wall, it was practicing what it preached.

He reached the top and he was so far away, little as he died. He was in a district of red light where one-on-one deaths are for sale.

A live red stream came all over everything, splattering his webcam.

Before he could wipe it clean and dawn his new body for them:

One click.

Sitting duck, sitting duck, sitting duck, phoenix.

Come, rise up and race to outlap us. If you can't do it, you have to stay up here and randomly damn the next victim like your own death never mattered.

Spinning wheel.

Harrison said, "That was so sick."

It was all plagued.

They were high enough to hardly have lived through this time, to remember. They could be nostalgic later, and do it all again.

The exchange rate of bodies was up to some algorithm that assigned them long numbers at random. One click and everything stays the same. But the sickness is a visit not for sale, some ungodliness given from above. They were high like degenerates.

Resurrection.

With each new awakening were the growing pains, signaling you are not the end. Please Sir, can we have some sterilization? More. The boys are not all lost. Material is built up. *It Gets Better.*