

Fall 2010

## Fiction Fix 08

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# FictionFix

Issue Eight



FF 8 FALL 2010

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COVER: COMFORT  
BY JIM FUESS

# Fiction Fix

THE LITERARY JOURNAL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA

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Thanks to Thomas Karst, for submitting "[ ]" with a count of not only words, but also spaces, and for letting us borrow the idea.

## Table of Contents

<i>Note to Readers</i>	2	<i>A Sea of Logic</i> Joshua Learn	79-81
<i>His Malaise</i> Anthony Bell	3-7	<i>Alice and Bob at Play in the Zero Field</i> Terry White	83-87
<i>Death of a Fat Man</i> Scott Neuffer	9-20	<i>Cantor Matyas Balogh</i> Mathias B. Freese	89-100
[            ] Thomas Karst <i>Editor's Choice Award</i>	26-36	<i>The Pussycat Master</i> Traci Burns	103-113
<i>I Made a Little Movie</i> Cody Pearce	37-47	<i>Euglogy for Johnny Thunders</i> Brian Alan Ellis	121-123
<i>Raw Footage</i> Jacqueline May	49-65	<i>Toy Soldier</i> Naná Howton <i>Readers' Choice Award</i>	125-138
<i>Avoiding Mr. Screamerhead</i> Dan Crawley	67-74	<i>Author &amp; Artist Biographies</i>	139-144

# Artwork

## Anthony Aiuppy

*Untitled works* 101  
131

## Jim Fuess

*Comfort* *Cover*  
*Woodchuck* 14  
*Nightmare* 51  
*Bump* 72  
*Fish* 75  
*Quizzical Protozoan* 76  
*Crying Crow* 77  
*Dream* 78  
*Support* 82  
*Tumble* 91

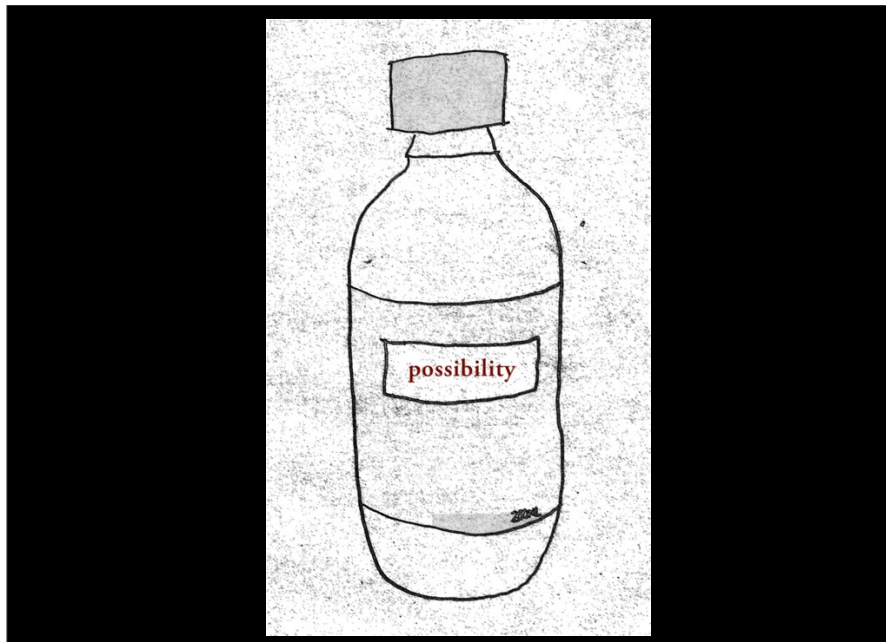
## Francis Raven

*My Medicine Cabinet* 1  
6  
39  
40  
58  
115-119

## Tom Wagner

*Metro-Union*  
*Station 001* 21  
*HUD* 22  
*Up and Out* 23  
*Air* 86  
*Stadium Chapel* 114

*Artist Biographies* 143-144



A literary journal is a very unique object — a space within which writers from different origins and with distinct voices can meet. Each journal has its own personality, some broad and encompassing and others narrow and specific. Perhaps one thing which all journals have in common is possibility. Here (within) is a space where connections can be made — between stories, between authors and readers. That is, possibilities, imaginings, presented for you, Dear Reader.

We are pleased to present you with another diverse and beautiful issue. We invite you take a sip (and gulp)...

Warmest regards,  
April

# His Malaise

by *Anthony Bell*

You begin to wonder why you're sucking so much. Where you're going wrong. What word needs to be replaced or whether any of them do. You are a man at the center of crossroads that share 360 degrees of identical background, a man who has forgotten which way it is to anything.

Maybe the editors are idiots.

You collapse the story and open a new Word document, wanting less of a puzzle. The blinking black rectangle floating in whiteness doesn't diminish your dilemma at all. So into space you recede.

You think about the reactions of those who've read your work: your family, a few friends, a literate coworker, an illiterate coworker. What direction did their lips first move after you asked if they'd read the story yet? How was that first intake of breath? Their eyes, how did they roll?

Dunno.

Maybe you don't want to remember because then you'd concede to knowing that they didn't enjoy the stories as much as they said so, because if they had, wouldn't—well, wouldn't they ask about them? Maybe as the ending sentence to a football conversation, or after concluding an inquiry as to whether Sarah has a cute, available friend. Or are you being self-conscious there buddy, reading too much into nothing?

The feeling remains, though.

You pick up that magazine you didn't get published in and read the first line of a story. Compared to one of yours it's interchangeable, yet your cover letter was returned with a rejection.

In story after story and book after book you've read numerous examples of bad writing, of dull, clichéd, and gilded passages you've put so much effort in eliminating from your work.

You slap the magazine onto your desk, and after not feeling the release you want, hurl it across the room, but it unfurls and flaps itself into a stall, still ten feet from the intended wall when it sighs to the ground. The rumpled literature—published, rumpled literature—seems to moon you; its curvaceous checks split by an offending crack directed your way, and you want to cuss, and loudly. A quick explosion from the gut, but you don't, fearing it will come out wrong, fearing your voice may even squeak or you won't hit the

timbre you imagined yourself reaching, instead inverting the force of the moment into an adolescent's embarrassment. So you don't cuss, not even quietly. Like a deflating doll, you blow the frustration from the side of your mouth. Your arms fall to your sides. You want to fall to the side. What is there to fix? What sucks? Why?

You want more than a form rejection. You want a personal rejection, something scribbled by the editor on your returned cover page, illegible but replete with the potential that could reverse the suckiness your stories amass like bad cholesterol. Something acknowledging your work. Something pointing out how the plot is too disjointed when in fact you thought the clarity was there; something spelling out your mire with dialogue, how your characters speak as though in an Orbit commercial; something telling you the story is great, but not for this magazine, although such and such magazine may be interested.

However, you have none of this rejection, and without it, you're reluctant to continue modifying your stories, playing with the dialogue you're unsure the quality of, erasing the chapter that seems superfluous but also necessary because you wrote it—you're reticent because you can't get the car to start, and you're unsure whether you should be fucking with the same solenoid or batch of wires when they could quite possibly be the farthest factor from the cause.

So here you sit, with accomplishment bearing its rear-end your way and not slumped against the wall, and with numerous stories you don't know how to proceed with. And rent. Don't forget rent.

To compound your problem is the killer idea you've entertained all day, the story needing to be written, and soon. But the latest rejection has again lowered your already-weathered optimism, and the ups and downs of hope are more strenuous than those of running stairs. So which direction do you walk with this? You like the story and see yourself loving it as you write it. Yet there isn't a damned thing you want less than to write this awesome story, receive opinions from five others, revise it twenty times, edit it, send it out with a raised chest and level chin, only to receive a form rejection eight weeks later with a euphemism for: "Sir, it is unfortunate that your story was too sucky to warrant a personal response; you suck at life—and writing; please at least cease the latter."

Negative, buddy. Can't stop doing what you love, delusional like Pepé



Le Pew following wonderful scents with unrequited passion or not. There is a way, that's a given, but still you stand at the crossroads, without the perspective of a hundred miles farther on to summon. And having studied the stories contained in the magazines you've submitted to (as recommended by said publications) and that studying having not raised your publication chances, you consider the practicality of really enjoying, really putting hours in, and really screwing another interesting idea.

You like the stories you've written and have allowed time between the writing and revising of them to accumulate a good dose of objectivity. With this acquired requisite, you've evaluated them to be quite good.

That thought remains for a minute.

You entertain the idea that you're an idiot, not the editors.

It's a sour idea, and there blinks the rectangle on the blank Word document before you. The probability is high that what will progress in front of that blinking rectangle once you begin typing will, for some reason of which you'll be uninformed, not meet the requirements for publication in the magazine you submit it to. The probability is also high that in the beginning few weeks after submitting it you'll feel positive about your publication chances. Then continuing into the final few weeks before the average response time, you'll be telling yourself you're positive about your publication chances (because not to would invite sure rejection, as everyone knows). And as you open that letter you'll no longer be able to tell yourself you're positive about the desired answer because you've been in this same position a dozen instances before and can't imagine a different result.

But for the sake of argument, as your stepdad would say, trace everything back to where you started. Go from the beginning and, piece by piece, examine all you touched. Your stepdad is a handyman, a do-it-yourself, figure-that-shit-out kind of guy. You once replaced the alternator and voltage regulator in your mom's '67 Malibu and when reconnecting the battery it sparked like crazy and a wire smoked. For an ohshitohshit instant you pictured the classic engulfed in flame, the midnight blue paint peeling back as you hesitated back and forth, seeing neither a fire extinguisher, a bucket of water, nor a time machine. The mitigating lies rushed to your mind as the mortality of your life became real for the first time as you imagined confronting your mother before she viewed the horror herself.

You weren't destined to die that day, however, and you learn there's a dead short, a current going directly to ground. The handyman told you so. You replaced two simple components, but that didn't go as planned. The simplicity increased your frustration, as did your hunger and the dismal day at work. The

car was not covered in fire, though, so you knew the pooch hadn't been screwed yet. You took a literal step back, then went from the beginning, checked the battery, which looked correct; then inspected the connections on the regulator and traced your way to the alternator. Sometimes all a person can do to control the urge to hurl something and yell is snicker. That and shake their head. You forgot to apply the buffer nut between the alternator and its battery connection.

So, for the sake of argument, you love what you read, the books about fantastical situations with vampires, ghosts, space voyages, telekinetic kids, and dead narrators, but maybe that's not what you should write.

At least not now. Maybe the editors aren't idiots, and maybe you're not, either. Maybe you're just a beginner, with no good or bad connotations with the label.

That black rectangle continues to blink, and it seems to countdown now. Seems to blink more slowly, become more prominent in the white expanse. You recede into space again, daydreamer eyes arising, unfocused but aware. You like your stories, but you're not publishing yourself, so you begin typing. Words pop from nothing onto the white page and try their damndest to keep up with the rectangle, always close but never quite reaching it.

Words explode everywhere, huge and with no linear sense as they arrive from your mind because you don't maintain the luxury of scrutiny as the story rolls on. You type and type and type without much thought or pause in the depression of keys. Type and type and type. And type some more.

Then you're done.

The story has reached its end. You read it over, then read it again. It's a normal story without any fantastic elements; a story that could occur tomorrow or yesterday or in Nebraska. There's feeling, but it's too subdued to engage you. You don't much like it. It's bland. Granted, the language is nice, but the story is boring.

You don't feel revising necessary. You change a word here and there and give it a nice, broad title to match its feel. You search online and read the "about us" on a dozen literary magazines' websites. You pick three, then flip a penny to choose the one you'll send it to. You don't care that the penny isn't three-sided. It lands tails. You forgot to designate which magazine was heads



and tails. The next day you send the story out.

A week passes and you've forgotten the main character's name in the story. A second week passes and you've forgotten you've even submitted the story. During that second week, you write the story you were hyped about the night you wrote the one you have forgotten. You spend hours doing nothing but writing. You are exhilarated. It's surreal, has twists and turns, even a drop. You've managed to sweat, for Le Pew's sake.

Four of your friends read it; your mother reads it; two of your mother's hearing-impaired clients read it; Aunt Jonnie down in California has you email it to her so she can read what all the talk is about; your college literature teacher reads it. That literate coworker of yours reads it. Everyone loves it. The reactions are honest. They are interested. They want to know why you ended here—hey, maybe you could make it into a book. Yeah, a great idea, another agrees. Would you, please? You're ecstatic that they're ecstatic. You read it over one more time, smell the paper, and send it out. It's hard to stop smiling; they hooked you good.

Three weeks later you receive the response in the mail. In your room, you look at the letter as it sits atop your desk amid magazines, books, pens, and a CD case titled Music for Readers. You stare for a few minutes. Then you open it like a child who still believes in Santa. That smile is on your face again. The letter seems thicker. Its envelope is torn open and that smile is still pulled back by fairies with hooks in each cheek.

But they release you, because they aren't allowed to return to their magical realm with those they snag. You burn the SASE with the contents inside.

Two weeks later you receive another SASE in the mail. You look at it funny because you recognize your handwriting, but not the magazine you supposedly sent a story to. You unfold a cover letter. There is scribbling along the bottom, a whole paragraph.

Again you're like that man standing in the center of the crossroads, that man who turns ninety degrees four times with no change in scenery. You snicker and shake your head, and walk, just putting one foot in front of the other.

# Death of a Fat Man

by Scott Neuffer

He's only 28. A doped-up walrus. A lump of obesity oozing over the sides of the hospital bed. She scoots to the edge of her chair, drawing closer.

"Marty," she whispers. "Party Marty," she whispers, hoping this jest, this playing of his secret nickname, will mitigate the preposterous dominion his body claims in the thin space of the room.

She hates the way other women ask her why with incredulous eyes. *No, seriously, why?* Because she is thin and not bad-looking. Because he is so obviously not not bad-looking. Just listen to his breathing, that deep, raspy groaning. It's horrible. If only she could give her thinness to him. If only she could lift him with her lightness.

But there is no lightness in the room. There is only dread. She feels the pull of his enormous mass, pulling the walls of her world into his dying, collapsing star. True, she already has painted her eyes black — thick shining strokes of black eye shadow — but not for the occasion. She always paints her eyes black. She paints her lips black, too. She dyes her hair jet-black and wears it short and spiky. But her Goth mystique, no matter how grave, can't save her now.

She listens to the scurry of nurses outside the room, the squeaky rolling of portable beds and IVs, the scuffing of soft-soled shoes across linoleum. She imagines his nurse, old and cynical, scrubbing her hands in some random sink, scraping the smell of his death off her skin.

"Have you visited Marty yet?" Raven asks.

"Nope," Manny answers while rummaging through the house fridge.

He stops, not finding anything good to eat, but also fearing he might appear callous. He turns to his coworker.

"Have you?" he asks, affecting a soft, considerate tone.

She shakes her head. Her eyes are deep, stirringly dark and beautiful.

"I think we should go together," she says nonchalantly; but her face betrays the hot gleam of incipient seduction. It's a smoothly chiseled face with taut olive skin and sleek black hair. Her body is a lithe, light-bending blade.

"When are you thinking of going?"

"Tonight, after work," she says.

*Tonight.* The word blooms in his head like a lascivious flower. He smells Levina at the edge of his nose, Levina from Panama whom he met the night before at the club. He instantly remembers her sharp, floral odor, and the exotic purr of her accent.

No, Manny thinks. He can't ignore the image of Marty, his obese body laid cold and flaccid on the sterile sheets of a hospital bed, contrasted with the flickering memories of nights they worked together, like two guys who'd just met in a bar, the crude jokes they made, the earth-exploding roar of Marty's laughter, the unfortunate stench of his person, like shit mixed with syrup.

Arising with these memories, Manny feels a vague self-righteousness, an urge to tell Raven that he knew this day would come, that Marty had no future with the way he ate and drank and smoked cigarettes. But before he blasts a fat man dying in bed, Manny remembers his conscience, socially attuned.

"Alright," he says. "I can meet you there."

"What time?" she asks, and the playful seduction in her eyes solidifies into a more serious force, the smoldering darkness of sexual expectation, a contract of sorts.

Oh, to be a womanizer in California, Manny thinks, in the days of the Mercedes-Benz, double-shot latte and wireless cellphone, to reap the post-9-11 anxiety of upper-middleclass hotties. *Let the devil tempt her towards me, but let not disease neither taint my loins nor touch my blood.*

By now, though, Manny has discovered the dead end of Raven's suggestiveness, the fenced-off elusiveness of her nature. He has discovered a creature eternally unsure about what it wants, lacking a decisive core, a primary root, living only in the surface of its moods.

Looking into her beautiful face, Manny senses that the ebb and flow of her evasiveness may be triggered by something deep inside her, something old and terrible, an irrepressible menace. In contrast, he envisions Levina, who is similarly dark and slender in countenance, but untainted and uninhibited in character. He's thrilled by her effluent innocence, her steady ignorance of stigma. The women he's had lately have been the opposite: scarred, damaged, shamed. There's a public restroom on the pier where he takes them. Not Levina, he thinks. She's different.

Manny decides he'll shorten the hospital visit. He and Raven get off

at 7. If he skips the barbecue with Levina and goes to the hospital straight from work, he guesses he can be done by 8 and back on the beach with Levina before absolute nightfall.

“I’ll go straight after work,” he says, signing the contract in her eyes, exchanging futures.

*Why not try for both?*

The Crisis Response House is a sky-blue rambler tucked discreetly in the rolling hills of California’s central coast. Half an hour from the ocean, surrounded by shapely ranches and wineries etched in the hills, it looks like the quiet, pastoral residence of some happily retired couple.

In reality, the house belongs to a large not-for-profit company specializing in the care of mentally and socially challenged adolescents. Children in the agency can be placed in the house if their domestic situation has been deemed “in crisis,” meaning they have become a threat to their loved ones and/or themselves. Crisis Response allows each client a three-month residence, during which time his or her behavior is hopefully modified and valuable social skills learned. The program offers a lighter, more personal alternative to other forms of institutionalization, and the house’s primarily college-aged staff credits itself with having saved countless children from the soul-numbing oblivion of mental hospitals.

Marty worked at the Crisis Response House for almost a year before getting sick. Prior to that, he worked at Ashen Oak State Hospital some fifteen minutes up the road, the largest mental facility of its kind and home to California’s criminally insane. At Ashosp, as it was commonly referred to, Marty trained as a psychiatric nurse. Because of his enormous weight, pushing 500 pounds, he was frequently called on to quell violent episodes — patients gnashing at each other with fingernails and teeth; or cornering some poor nurse with sexual desire so pent and mad it foamed from their mouths. Marty’s weight was used so often as a physical suppressant that inmates came to fear him and eventually nicknamed him, “The One.” During his breaks, when he sat in the courtyard smoking cigarettes, he mused over the secret pride this nickname provided him.

It was during one of these breaks that Marty met Jessie. Unlike the other nurses, she didn’t look at him with the usual mixture of gratitude and disgust. When she emerged from the metal doors, he noticed the luscious blackness of her lips, the winged blackness of her eyes, the spiky and refulgent blackness of her hair; novelties of darkness drawn dramatically against the dire paleness of her skin and the absolute white of her nursing jacket. Her body

was slender but not seductive; her steps were nervously clipped, fluttering. She fluttered in his mind like a frail bird, like the innocent creature of some dark and perverse world that had wandered away and now found itself uncertain beneath a bright and empty sky.

She stopped in the middle of the courtyard, nervously eyeing her surroundings. Marty sat in front of her, slumped on a concrete bench. There were a few other people scurrying on the edges of the cement square, but no one in between her and Marty. Just the mystic wreath of smoke around his head. The strong pull of his swollen body. She still remembers what he was wearing that day: a huge, glossy-white medical coat with a single pocket over his heart, billowing down over black, baggy jeans, shredded at the ankles, and a giant pair of worn-out sneakers. His hair was as jet-black as hers, a staunch pad of it. His eyes were nuggets of obsidian, gleaming with lost warrior secrets, signaling the native tint of his broad face, the dark stubble of his chin and cheeks. His eyelids were big and purple, strained by obesity, but somehow balanced by the silver stud in his stalwart nose.

Jessie fumbled in her pocket and whipped out a cigarette. She raised it to her mouth but hesitated to slip it between her lips. She held it in front of her face, between her elongated fingers, on the outward sway of her wrist, all hooked in the strange contortion of her arm. She tried to look pensive and sexy, but she fluttered with nervousness. Suddenly, almost manically, she fluttered towards Marty. His huge heart bellowed. It was already overworked, churning, grinding to keep up. He felt faint; his breathing became quick and dizzy. He felt sweat form in the folds of his fat.

“Do you have a light?” she asked, and although she was thin, her voice was deep and husky, like the blare of an organ.

“Yeah,” he grunted, swelling with panic.

He tried to stand up, so he could reach into his jean pocket. He leaned to one side and planted an elephantine hand on the cement and pushed off. But his spine whimpered in the effort. He collapsed back on the bench, breathing hard and raspy, and his face reddened with shame. He looked up. All he could see was the blade of her body, reflecting the sun in a vertical line of blinding white. He tried again, grunting as he pushed, his face twisted, but again he collapsed on the bench.

“Sh...” he uttered, his panting devouring the unfinished word, his chest heaving in great cataclysms of motion.

“Sh...” he tried again, but couldn’t complete the word. Sweat glistened on his thick warrior skin. He coughed, spat a gob of brown.

“Shit,” he finally managed.



Jessie grinned. Her nervousness was consumed by fluttering wings of invisible fire.

"It's okay," she said with inexplicable spunk. "I already got a lighter."

A shrieking laugh cracked from her lips.

"I'm sorry. I just..." she stopped mid-sentence, suddenly unsure, anxious once more...

"I just wanted to talk to you!" she blurted out. "I don't know anyone here, and you seem really cool."

The pink faded from Marty's face. Jessie removed a lighter from her pocket and lit the end of her cigarette. Marty extinguished his and probed in the shirt pocket over his heart for another. The sweat was cooling his shame. A fresh, nervous joy throbbed in his mind. He wanted to say something, anything to keep her interested, but, in its upheaval, the strange new emotion had abandoned all his regular words and their perfunctory meanings. He was washed anew by tingling throbs of blankness. He looked to her face for an answer and found the same sweet revolution in her eyes, blue eyes painted black. Twin seas of light diaphanous blue thickly, sharply rimmed by darkness.

"Here," she said and handed him the lighter.

He lit the end of his cigarette and cherished the first drag.

"How long have you worked here?" he asked, keenly aware of how heavy and grating his voice was.

His heart faltered at the thought that such a light and sweet creature couldn't tolerate his monstrous elocution.

"This is my second week," she said.

She too hated her voice. Someone once had told her that she sounded like a cow.

There was a moment of silence. The smoke wisped from their cigarettes, combined in brief coronation above their heads, illumined by sunlight, then swallowed by sky. Their courage thrashed in that ocean of sky. Then Jessie spoke.

"Party Marty," she chortled. "I like your name."

He looked at her. She had breached the sink of doubt in her own fiery, spunky, completely random and ridiculous way. He saw that beneath the lightness, the giddiness, there hid some terrible secret, barley contained by the pale curves of her skin, a secret of awful and constant force that perpetually struck her into nervous flight. And he saw how she had tried to mitigate the effects of this secret by transforming its pain into a vogue of darkness. All her Gothic modifications constituted a seal of suffering, a sign of warning but also



of victory. She reminded Marty of a singed bird, a black dove, and he would have to rise in order to catch her.

Within months, they were married. Neither had a lot of family, and it was a small wedding. Marty then transferred to the Crisis Response House to work nights, and Jessie stayed on at Ashosp to work days. After her shift, she'd drive to the house and drop off food, right when Marty's shift was beginning. Most nights, he worked with Raven, and she liked those nights. Raven was extremely attractive, but this didn't bother Jessie. She knew that someone as high and elusive as Raven could never stop and stoop to love someone like Marty, or even spend time considering why someone else would love him. It would be a waste of her time, and so, save a faint look of repulsion, she showed no searching disbelief when Jessie entered the house holding a greasy paper sack laden with fast food.

But Manny was different. She dreaded nights when Marty worked with Manny. She initially found him very handsome, his lean frame, his dark hair and dark eyes, but there was something unsettling about the way these features aligned themselves and probed the outside world. He looked at her not with contempt, but with sympathy, true, prying sympathy, and this bothered her more than any amount of condescension. In condescension, people

were cruel, but they were aloof, as the emotion naturally required distance between the better and lesser objects; insult was diluted as it traveled the space between. Jessie had more than space; she had Marty as insulation. But Manny's presence penetrated even that. He infiltrated the core of her mental world, and because his reaction was one of sympathy, it could only mean that what he'd found inside her was something dire and pathetic, something deserving of his compassion. This caused the walls of her world to shudder. She knew exactly what he'd found, not something exclusively about her, not her dark history, but rather her sanctuary built of Marty, that cloistered vigil, that secret moon rising in her chest. He had found its moribund seal.

She denied it. She couldn't risk asking him to change. She didn't want him to change. His voluptuous stink was hers, and it abounded with unprecedented affections. Early in the dark morning, after work, they'd fire up the grill, and she would cook him hamburgers and hotdogs, this on top of the meal she had already brought to his work. She would drink a light beer, and he copious amounts of cola and whiskey. He would get drunk and parade around the house in nothing but his underwear. The naked folds of his fat would jiggle gloriously as he romped, as he whooped and hollered and danced. He would tell her awful jokes that were so asinine she couldn't help but laugh. And she did what she could to make him laugh, because his laughter was earth-exploding; it shattered the inequities of her past and floated her on a roaring ocean of joy. Then he would try to lower his voice, trying so lovingly but unsuccessfully to soften its tone, so he could whisper how precious she was. He was like a giant child in her bony arms, and she strained to hold him through the few hours of sleep, as his bravado faded, as he succumbed to slumber.

"My Party Marty," she would whisper, cooing his dreams.

A month before their first anniversary, Marty got sick. Fever took his body and began melting his insides. When Jessie rushed him to the emergency room, he was placed in intensive care. Doctors found a strange sore on his skin that looked like a belated birthmark. They told her they'd seen similar cases. Some mysterious and malignant germ was spreading through California. The media hadn't picked up on it yet, and doctors, working with the government, were scrambling to figure out what it was before mass hysteria broke loose. *In your husband's poor...um... questionable condition, his body is not able to fight it.*

The strange mark became the virulent seal of his fate, the point into which death dug its cold, stark fingers and scrambled his inner organizations. Although it lasted only a week, the dying was long and torturous. His body

gave up buckets of liquid infection in return for morphine. Awake, his moaning was unbearable, his talk gibberish. In sleep, he gasped and groped for air. There were endless processions of doctors, dozens of them crammed into the room at any given time. Their white cloaks buzzed around his colossal, dark body, which they'd splayed on the bed like a monster specimen for inhuman experiment.

This lack of dignity hurt Jessie more than anything. Her love alone had shaped him. Her love had defined what was noble in his nature. It had given integrity to his otherwise ludicrous form, the same way his love had dignified her. But as his condition worsened, her love lost its guiding power, and Marty degenerated back into absurdity. A doped-up walrus lost at sea, bellowing pathetically as it died. In vain she tried to save him, to lift him with her lightness, her wings of invisible fire, but his death was obstinate. There was no recourse, no one else to help soften his fate with love. Not one family member or friend or coworker had shown up. When the doctors and nurses vacated his room, she fell prostrate at his side and pounded her tiny fists into his mammoth chest. She wept for his recovery, and when his body lay unmoved, she wept for her own consolation.

Manny Cash loves driving. He looks for women alone at the wheel, sealed in the tight, metal space of their automobiles. He probes into the secrecy of their lives the way a grizzly bear would pry open the back hatch of a new Toyota 4-Runner in search of food. There's a secret fraternity on the road, he thinks. Strangers separated in strange vessels all floating together on the surreal spinning of their tires. No one knows where the other is going, yet they catch glimpses of each other through spots of glass: salacious smiles, full-on eye-fucks, or, more often, flashes of distrust, rage, a passing tableau of despair hard as asphalt. A stop sign proffers eternity...

Quick! There's a black BMW with blonde-haired hotness barely visible behind the tinted windows. She's passing you. Or how about that depressed, middle-aged brunette driving the minivan? She looks like she would release years of pent-up fury, take you in the back of her tract house, slip the ring off her finger and mollify her petrified dreams of romance by pounding you into oblivion. He thinks of Raven driving in her Subaru (he can't see her in the rearview mirror), and how behind the yuppie exterior her face glimmers dangerously. Or Jessie, the blackened blade of her body, whimpering and willing from loneliness in her Ford Escort. No! he thinks. What the fuck? The oak-split air whistles in the cracked windows of his not-so-cool truck....

His cell phone suddenly chimes, and its ring is intensified by the scen-

ery, by the huge hollow of drained sky above him, and the plumes of pinkness flaring in the west, and below the unscrupulous sprawl of cooling, darkening greenery. His cell phone rings with uncanny urgency.

“Hay lo,” Levina says upon reception, the trace of her accent crinkling like fire. “Howz mi estupido?”

“Me so tired, me so horny!” he jests, using a phrase lifted from the first movie they saw together, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*.

“Yeer stupid,” she says.

“I guess, but baby, I got some bad news...”

He anticipates her silence, and when she doesn’t speak, he proceeds:

“I gotta go to the hospital and visit a coworker.”

“Whin?” she squeals.

“Right now.”

The silence recurs, followed by a melodramatic sigh.

“I thought we weer to have dinner,” she whimpers.

“I know. I’m sorry. But my co-worker is really...”

“I thought that we weer to go to the beach and barbecute.”

The very jingle of her mispronunciation evokes in Manny the beauty of the ocean. He envisions a wholesome expanse of sand, a churning curve of crystal sea, and the sky above like a long, glistening mirror strewn with thick, twilight clouds, throbbing, longing incarnate. He sees their fire on the beach, circled in stone, the flames like liquid tongues, curious, curled, crackling in the dancing declamation of their love. He sees bloody chunks of meat hung on crude driftwood skewers, the blood dripping and sizzling in the lustrous heat. He sees a bottle of wine lifted from a cooler of packed ice, meltwater dripping from the dark, curved glass. He divines the rich, erotic tang as the wine slips down the throat, followed by more wine, succulent ribbons of meat, fresh bread, fine cheese, slightly moldy strawberries. And after their stomachs settle, they’ll make love on the beach. Their conjoined bodies will move as one body beneath the blanket, becoming one breath, one small whispering. Their love will grow like a nascent star, an infant incandescence whose light makes claim against the darkening sky.

The vision is irresistible, and it fills Manny with strange rapture, at once serene and urgent, like the feeling of sunset: the softly spreading tranquility of color, coupled with the anxious knowledge of its inevitable diminution.

“Estupido, are you there?” she asks.

Manny feels his stomach sinking with the car in their hushed descent of Cuesta Grade. An obscure doubt grows in his head until it resembles the image of Jessie. He first sees her paleness, professing the weakness of her con-

dition, and then he sees the novelties of darkness she’s fashioned in order to negate such weakness, the crow-black hair, the zombie eyes, the crypt keeper’s lips. He thinks how she has strived so hard to contradict death, even in her choice of a mate. She and Marty appear preposterous together: a tiny, flighty woman paired with that huge, morbidly obese man. The fact of their love bothers Manny now more than it ever has. In the beginning, he empathized with her longing for the impossible, her idea that she could save him. Manny, too, is afflicted by impossible dreams, but at some point, he thinks, one has to throw in the towel. Now she demands not only his sympathy, but some concerted effort of consolation. He knows that she’s scared shitless. He knows that she’s alone. But she caused the damn misery herself, he thinks. Everyone knew Marty was destined to die young. His fate, tied to 500 pounds of drooping, reeking flesh, couldn’t have been otherwise. She knew it going in, and she tied herself to the sinking star... In this way, Manny justifies not going to the hospital.

He’s only 28, and *OH GOD HE’S DYING!* A doped-up walrus. A lump of obesity oozing over the sides of the hospital bed. Before they, the other, can push her out of the room, she kneels beside him, she strokes his hair, she runs her fingers across his cheek. His eyes are giant, bruised eggs. The heaving of his chest an unformed memory.

“Party Marty,” she whispers, trying to rouse him, trying to wake him.

If only he knew how much he means to her. His significance to her life is proportionate to his weight; his obesity anchors her in happiness; but now its corruption pulls her into the putrid boundaries of space.

“Party Marty!” she cries. “Party Marty!”

But it’s no help. Soon, he will die. White coats will rustle like the wings of doves trying in vain to revive the jelly mass of his body. The walls of her world will collapse, and she will know the darkness she has sought so hard to govern.

It’s never what you dream. There’s no fire, no sizzling meat, only a grease-stained sack from Burger King and a paper cup of Diet Coke where wine should be. He checked his account before coming and found it drained. So here they find themselves on a beach cluttered with condos and tourists, on a penniless sand littered with cigarette butts and soggy newspaper. Above the brooding ocean, yards from them, the sky is severe with twilight, clouds like shards of glass, yet where severity usually begets beauty, there is no beauty, just something random in the air, glib and terminal, as pop music whines from a



far-off convertible.

“Mi cutie,” Manny tries to jest.

He offers Levina a hamburger, and she shakes her head.

“I no eat that,” she says. “Boison.”

He throws her a defensive look.

“It’s not poison. It’s American food.”

“No, es boison,” she repeats. “I thought we weer to barbecue.”

He sets the hamburger down. In a mashing, sucking frenzy, he draws soda from his straw. When he looks back up, her hair, her eyes, are glowing darkly in the grayness, matching the shade of her scandalous bikini, and giving way to the luminescent, silken contours of her body. Desire ignites his loins. His head is emptied of blood and refilled with a rushing, swirling terror — he has to have her, or else he’ll die from lack of dignity.

“I got an idea,” he says and jumps to his feet. “Follow me.”

Startled, sandals flailing, she is led to the shack of public restrooms on the pier. To them both, the shattered sky around is dizzying on that edge of antiquated wood, and the smell of sea-salt and creosote further stings the senses.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“I’m going to the bathroom, but I want you to meet me in there in a minute.”

“No se,” she says. “I no know what you want.”

“Just count to 60, then come in and find me. Okay?”

She pales in confusion. His face glimmers dangerously.

“You go in the bathroom with me, okay?” He gives her a little tug.

“But in a minute.”

In the tight, foul-smelling space of the bathroom, someone has left a fresh turd spinning in the toilet of his stall. He flushes it down with fury. Jessie grows in his mind like a germ as he wipes off the seat, as he pulls down his pants and positions himself on the toilet. There’s no artificial light in the restroom, which makes it perfect for his devising, but in the dimness he can’t see the tally marks on the metal partition beside him. So he runs his fingers along the cold metal until he hits them near the bottom: one, two, three thin indentations. Instantly, he’s hard with the recollections of women he’s had in the stall, the filth and noise and acute pleasure of it. Sitting there, he begins to play with himself. He strokes his sex into power, stokes the primeval fire, but suddenly stops when his fingers graze a crusty patch of skin on his inner thigh. In the darkness, he bends down and strains to see what looks like a birth mark. As he prods it further with the edge of his fingernail, the bathroom door swings open.

“I’m in here,” he says distractedly. “I’m ready for you.”

Little does he know that Levina already has left the pier in confusion and disgust, and that the shadow moving toward the stall is not that of a woman, but that of a very large man burning with loneliness.

Jessie stands in front of the mirror. The bathroom is a typical hospital bathroom, small, cramped, sharp with disinfectant. A pop-up knob ensures the water won’t be left running, but she turns the dial to hot and pins the knob with her elbow, while using her other hand to wring the soap dispenser of its last few drops, as pink as bloody semen. Soon, the room is steaming with heat, and after contorting her body to properly lather, she lifts her elbow and plunges her hands into the taut current of scalding water. With a weak cry, she begins rubbing down her extremities, grinding the reddening surfaces of skin. But even in that scalding friction, the feel of his cold flesh still throbs in her fingertips. The crackling sound of the sheet being pulled over his head still resounds in her ears. The stink of his life, the sour smell of his death, still lives in her nostrils. And she hates it! She hates him! She leans over and slaps hot water onto her face, slaps harder with each wincing shock of pain, until her will breaks in a squeal of despair.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” a woman asks, knocking lightly on the door. “Ma’am?”

Jessie bites her lip, fights the cringing of her eyes.

“I’m alright. I’ll be out in a minute.”

She listens for footsteps, for the soft scudding of shoes on linoleum, but she hears instead, barely, the tremulous breath of the nurse on the other side.

“Really, I’m fine,” Jessie says.

The faucet turns itself off, and she wipes the mirror with her forearm, noticing first that her makeup is gone; only traces of it remain in her lower eyelashes like a wet ash. As the hole in the glass widens, she stares incredulously at the image revealed there. A face as lovely as any looks back at her, a face she hasn’t seen for years, now glowing like the flushed heart of a white rose.

She leaves the bathroom and has hardly reentered the bright, buzzing world of the hospital when she hears her name being called.

“Jessie,” the voice calls, and it’s the softest, sweetest voice she’s ever heard, as if Marty has come back from the dead with the body and voice he always wanted.

She turns to find Raven standing in the hallway — not the high, superior Raven of the Crisis Response House, but Raven small and subdued, heartbroken, friendless, offering her condolences.





Metro-Union Station 001

HUD



Up and Out





[            ]

*by Thomas Karst*

He sits naked on the floor of a shallow cave, his face mud-smearred, muttering soundless incantations. Pressing his hand to the cold floor, leaving a print behind. Standing, pacing, returning to the cold rock floor, he is waiting. He is alone.

He is young, maybe eight years or so, boney but strong. Legs and arms scarred from running through the wild old brush. Skin the color of ancient wood covers the boney structure, so his insides wont escape. The boy's matted dark hair hangs over his shoulders and moves like so many pendulums telling time. Time, which cannot be reckoned in his dark eyes, hangs in suspense as he paces over the cavern floor. Eternity haunts that place.

The barren sand colored wall warms as sunlight pours across the interior of the hollow, blank except for the cracks and texture, time-splattered in stone. The boy crouches before it enamored, he is motionless. For a moment, he seems to be a piece of the wall that grew legs and could walk away glancing at his origin. But he does not move. Only his breath stirs the air as he stares; the precipice before his eyes.

Sunlight warms his back, but still he does not move. In the air a death-calm remains like the whisperings of ancestral breath, piercing his skin, violating his lungs, becoming [a]part of him. And the wall stands. Silent. Motionless in the late daylight, watching over the boy like a sentinel, a blank slate projecting a presence or reflection.

The smell of a smoldering fire creeps into the open mouth of the cave, past lips and teeth of stone. Smoke-black spirits move in and out of space and time like ghosts trapped between here and now, this world and another. Rushing translucent like veils between the wall and the young eyes so intent upon it. The boy does not blink to close off the wisps of smoke from his eyes. Tears form and fall splattering in the dry dirt at his feet, painting trails that are left running down his cheeks leading nowhere and everywhere all at once.

Again moving, he stops at the fireside peering into the blackness of charred wood around the outside of the ring. The red-orange flames contrasting with the burnt-black remains of once illuminated timber, like memories running over each other leaving emptiness or vague recollections.

The boy brings handfuls of charred and powdered soot to the base of the unrelenting wall still staring at him from the back of the cave. A pile of black dust is beside the boy as he crouches before the wall, still peering into it like a mirror without reflection. Only time is reflected there in that place.

As he reaches a single blackened finger to the void, he pauses indefinitely for moments, like a statue in time, unaware of itself or its relation to another within, trapped like a ghost between wall and self, between cave and world, between here and now, between space and time.

The late-day sunlight warms the wall like leaves in autumn or incandescent filaments as they ignite or are put out. Orange hues like candlelit backdrops in cheery country houses reflect off the oblique mirror, recalling memories of homeliness to homeless beggars on crowded streets before night has overtaken. More like dawn breaking than one would guess at an hour of sun falling over the distant horizon in the background. And he stands, as if hung between two worlds, for the benefit of spectators he still doesn't know exist, waiting – though his is a waiting unheralded, unmatched, unaware, yet almost aware. Still, he is alone.

As night falls he stands finger upheld in anticipation. The twilight radiates upon the wall, like a dream of humanity glimmering before it awakens in cerebral shocks of reality existing in the mind. Night continues and yet he is unmoved as the moon creeps across the sky through ether like a reflection in water, the sunlight cool upon its face. It speeds toward the horizon before the cave, spewing translated light over the wall. Its light is somehow different than the starlight, yet intermingling with it carrying remnants of the ethereal in photonic form which vanishes in a spectral display as it collides upon the blank state.

As the day breaks, turning the blackened sky into a foggy grey that descends upon the world merging together the certainty of night and day like a translucent veil starlight vaguely glows through, the cry of some mystical beast looms over the plains, creeping through the mouth of the cave as a hushed muttering echoed in that hallow for an eternity. The boy moves his blackened finger caked in charred remains toward the blank wall. He presses the flesh to the cold rock like the meeting of souls before they are torn apart

forever. He lingers.

Torn, in the noonday sun he stands unmoved, again frozen in time. And as the sun creeps toward the horizon, he waits for the veil of daylight to be pulled back letting the stars pierce the dome above. Gradually, slowly, again they break through the transparent as the sun removes its shroud over the world. And he moves. A finger in soot smeared onto the rock wall leaves behind a line remembering its origin, similar but something altered.

# # #

Forever, but I just arrived.  
 It is cold. I am cold.  
 Feels like the ground will be iced over tonight.  
 Who...  
     Who am I? Afraid?  
 Yes, afraid.  
 Of the shadow creeping out from you, the breath, the char-black  
 emptiness painted on a blank slate?  
 Who...  
     Who am I? Remember?  
 Ree...  
     Remember! Remember. Remember?  
 I remember a...  
     A wall! A graffiti covered wall. Black like night, like  
 shadow, like a cold nothing painted in time, moving through me vaguely. Then  
 clearly, clearly! Recalling yesterday, place outside this rock tomb, I moved  
 like smoke through eyes, eyes, so many unseeing, and then sight. The veil of  
 twilight revealing starlight against the cold rock, but it was black and empty,  
 swallowing the light, the rocky hallow, the world, even myself into brilliant  
 darkness, no longer blind except to everything, all of it.  
 I am...  
     Yes! Shaking. Afraid?  
 And cold.  
 Cold and afraid. Because of the darkness?  
 Because of...  
     because of me?  
 Yes, because of myself.  
 I...  
     Where are you?  
 I am here. I've been here forever, a shape, a movement, more than  
 you can count, like water pouring over sand, or a reflection, a cry in the night  
 howling in response.  
 What...  
     What do I remember? I remember that line, my first, as it  
 remembered me. Telling me where it came from, what it was. A creation. My  
 creation! I. I the creator, have made it.

Startled, I turned, looking out at the world.  
Where? How? What? am I. I am here.

Hot in  
the mo  
uth of  
the ca  
ve with  
the sun  
light di  
rectly a  
bove. W  
ind mo  
ving pa  
st my fa  
ce, spirit  
s no dou

bt, other eye's from somewhere I cant... And  
it will end, I know it will, unless, unless I can...

**am**

Terrified.

Silence outside, no different...  
it is different, just a thought. Where? Where? Where? Where?

Cant outrun this...  
feeling...  
murmuring...  
I am                    afraid.  
alone and

On the wall            |            reminds me...  
  
I am a creator. I will create again.

My ha  
nd co ve re  
di n b la ck  
so ot li ke  
the da wn co vers  
the stars; I trace my self  
onto the stone wall,  
an image in the  
likeness of ...  
I.

ALONE  
Don't leave me  
If he goes I'll be stuck here  
Franklin  
Chardines

Cant sleep. I'm staring back at myself now from  
the wall. Cold, grey and ghostly in the twilight I  
can trace my own steps, I DONT NEED YOU  
HELP! Whether or not you hear that is... doesn't  
matter anyway; there's nothing that can be done  
I've never been so bold and now the walls of this  
place are closing in on me. Me! [ ] hear that?  
Not from out there I guess. But [ ] will, I pr

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I'  
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[a  
lp  
art  
of  
my  
self

some where on a wall.





# I Made a Little Movie

by Cody Pearce

So I made a little movie. It's called *The Wildmen*. I borrowed my friend's digital camera and used his illegally downloaded Final Cut. I could never afford the stuff myself. Not on a part-time salary at Doggie Heaven, a local hot-dog joint. The movie is a fifteen-minute short about the human survivors of some unspecified nuclear apocalypse trying to ward off radioactive mutants in a desert wasteland. There. How's that for a pitch? Boiled down to the essentials. I bet Tom could never explain his movie so simply. They say if you can't pitch a story in 25 words or less, it's not worth trying.

But don't get me wrong. There's more to it than that. I work for a living and I know the pain of modern life. And the paranoia. *The Wildmen* is all about paranoia. The threat of terrorism, the economy. How we face these tumultuous and uncertain times when everyone thinks the world is going to hell at the hands of some asteroid or presidential candidate. But mostly my movie is a bunch of people sitting around in a concrete bunker talking Camus and masturbation. But it tells the truth; right down to the desolate visuals we shot on the sand dunes of Little Talbot Island.

Tom graduated from NYU film school and is currently back at his parents' place, a palatial estate on the St. Johns. His movie also concerns a post-apocalyptic universe. It's titled *Bloodbath 3000* and involves flesh-eating zombies and some rabbit virus that caused the whole mess. I saw his thesis film posted on his MySpace Film page, a bland teen sex comedy involving cheerleaders, football jocks, the proverbial nerd with glasses and a strategically placed grapefruit that gives way to the big laugh at the end. Unfortunately, I have to admit this kind of shit is what sells to the general public nowadays. Especially the sex appeal.

I was planning on having some sex appeal in my picture as well, but things didn't work out between Chris and myself.

I've known Christina Maple for years. We went to the same high school together, Brandenburg High, by the abandoned coffee factory. She wasn't the prettiest girl on campus; there were plenty of blonde waifs with bodies thin as aluminum foil that attracted more attention. In fact, Chris has always been on the chunkier side, but by no means fat. She just has some

curves to make her features more supple and inviting. There were quite a few boys in high school that shared my views and virtually all ended up luckier than myself. I've never received more than a peck on the cheek from Chris. We've been good friends, but I know my weight is an obstacle to any deeper relationship. Still, I can't shake my deep lust for her.

Chris has wanted to be an actress for as long as I've known her and to this day I see her as a burgeoning Scarlett Johansson. She had a brief modeling career and even got an agent for a time, but she never got past doing local fashion magazines. Like me, she hasn't managed to leave Jacksonville. Currently, Chris is going to law school out at the beaches and interning at Tom's fathers' firm. But whenever I talked to her I could tell she still dreamt of the red carpet. She carried herself like a famous actress, always wearing sunglasses and wide-brimmed hats, eating lunch at \$30-a-plate restaurants.

I knew I had to cast her in my movie when I saw her playing Vivian in the West Municipal Theatre's production of *The Big Sleep*. She was absolute heaven in her tight gray women's suit, perspiring sex with every syllable that came from those pillow-shaped lips. "A lot depends on who's in the saddle," she told the actor in Bogart's role, bending towards the lucky guy so he could get a long look at the top of her bubble-shaped breasts.

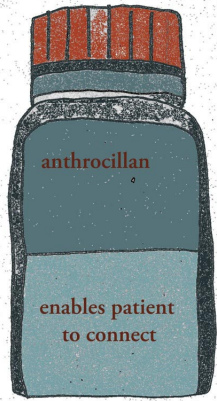
About a week later she came into Doggie Heaven. We hadn't talked in a while, but our friendship was one in which it didn't take long to catch up.

"I saw you in the play last Friday. You were really good," I said behind the cash register as I rang up her total.

Chris smiled, "Oh my God. I can't believe anyone even showed up." She had her cell phone pressed up against her ear, but she said nothing into it and I couldn't really hear anyone on the other side either. I wondered if it was her new boyfriend. Chris went through boyfriends like I went through chilidogs on slow days. I was among the first to hear about the time she lost her virginity back in junior year of high school. She was barely sixteen. The guy was in college. I felt sick after she told me.

Chris whispered a goodbye into her cell and put it back in her purse. "So. What are you up to these days, besides cooking wieners?"

She laughed and I forced a chuckle as well. "I'm kinda doing this short movie," I began. "I plan on submitting it in the Golden Reel Competition." The Golden Reel was part a of nearby film festival with considerable prestige. Two of the past winners have gone on to direct features in Hol-



lywood and the majority of those who placed have at least gotten into nice film schools. The kind Tom graduated from. The possibilities were limitless in my mind.

“What’s the movie about?” Chris asked.

“Well...” I thought about the plot I had in mind so far. There was only one female role and it belonged to a lesbian psychologist/Olympic gymnast who may or may not be the only woman to survive the mutant apocalypse. She has been holed up in the bunker with all these other male survivors for about a year and she starts sleeping with them out of a noble attempt to repopulate the Earth, but it turns out she’s barren. “It’s a little complicated,” I began.

“You wouldn’t mind doing a sex scene would you?”

Chris laughed. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“What kind?”

“Nothing too personal.” I imagined her naked breasts before the camera. I had a part planned for myself. “Maybe just some kissing and stuff.”

Chris sort of frowned. “I’ll think about it,” she said.

I e-mailed her the script as soon as I got off work, performing a quick revision first. I cut back the nudity as well as a mutant sex scene, while giving myself a part with her.

I met with Chris a few weeks later to discuss details at my mother’s house.

“Didn’t you used to have an apartment?” Chris asked when she arrived. I was 26, but the free lodging allowed me to spend more time writing and less worrying about the bills. Plus, my mother needed the company after the divorce and I hated my old roommates. They would bring over girls who laughed at my weight. “It’s only temporary,” I said. I led her into the living room where a couple crew members and Lyle were waiting.

Lyle was a friend from work. No one really knew where he came from though I know he had a stint doing off-Broadway plays for a few years. “It’s too cold up there. Too much negative energy,” he told me. He had once won an award for playing a talking lamppost. Lyle had shaved his head and

eyebrows for the part of Octavian, the male lead in my script, a drug-addled philosopher character. However, I hadn’t written Octavian as someone specifically bald, but Lyle told me that the nuclear fallout would cause all sorts of cancerous problems. He had been writing a journal for Octavian, trying to get inside his mind. I’m not sure he had even read the entire script.

“So. How are we gonna do this?” Chris asked. She was wearing a tank top and tight jeans and I had to keep from ogling her as she crossed her arms underneath her breasts accentuating their size.

Lyle thought she was too fat for a starving survivor but I had told him to shut up.

“Well. You play the lesbian psychologist Lyra,” I began.

“I figured that.”

I told her about the rest of the cast and that I would be playing the role of Logan, the hero of the story who ends up marrying Lyra.

“You’re acting in this?” Chris asked.

“I figured I’d give it a shot,” I said, hoping she would be okay with the news.

Chris laughed. “That should be interesting.”

“What? You don’t think I can act?” As if I would need to act with her.

Chris talked less and less as the meeting went on and I explained how I was going to block all the scenes. She spent much of the time staring at her shoes, while Lyle pushed for a darker, more extreme approach to my story.

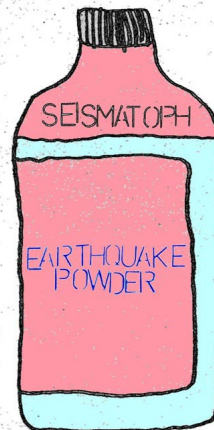
“We need this to be way outside the mainstream,” he explained. “You and Chris need more of a dangerous relationship. It would be interesting to have such fluid gender roles. I’m thinking she’s almost like a dominatrix. You know with the whipping scene and all.”

“There’s a whipping scene?” Chris asked.

“Lyle, I cut that scene from the script,” I said.

“Why? That was your best material,” Lyle said. “That’s the whole reason I wanted to do this movie in the first place.”

“Look. I want a more positive light on the subject matter. We’re dealing



with the apocalypse here. It may be dark enough.”

“But you’re gonna need more sex. Tell me you at least kept the orgy scene?”

“Orgies. I don’t know if I do orgies,” Chris said.

“Well. No. No. I’ve taken all that out,” I said. “Now it’s just a relationship between us...Between our characters.”

Chris looked at me quizzically. “This isn’t what I read in the script.”

Lyle turned to me, furious. “You’re compromising yourself for her,” he said. He got up to grab a drink from my fridge, letting the reality of the situation sink in. I wasn’t sure how to respond. The bastard was right. “And you call yourself a filmmaker,” he added sitting back down with his drink.

I called Chris over the next few weeks during our pre-production period. I left e-mails and text messages, but she her only response was she was too busy to begin shooting. *This is unprofessional*, I e-mailed to her. *If you really want to act you’d be more proactive about this project. This could be your big break.*

Finally, she sent me a text that read: *I don’t think I can do the movie anymore. It’s just not my type. Sorry ☹. Good luck. I’m sure you’ll do well.*

I didn’t become furious until I saw the article in the papers about Tom’s movie a week later.

Tom didn’t have any real actors in *Bloodbath 3000* besides Chris. He doesn’t seem to understand the delicate nature of acting. The breathing exercises. The rehearsals. I had met Tom only twice before making *The Wildmen*, but I knew his family well enough through his older brother, Aaron. I went to high school with the guy. He was a major presence on the baseball team, earning a scholarship at Alabama, which eventually led to a position in the minor leagues. Back in high school he used to call me the “white whale” when I ran past the batting cages during cross-country practice. I stopped running without my shirt shortly afterwards. Aaron dated Chris, though I never told her what he said about me. They were together for a couple years until she caught him cheating on her with one of the cheerleaders.

Tom followed in his big bro’s footsteps in high school, becoming a star receiver on the Bradenburg football team. However, he passed up his scholarship opportunities to attend NYU film school. It appears daddy represented Spike Lee once and got him a few recommendations. Tom’s success has appeared many times in the *Times-Union*. They published an article on his \$30,000 thesis film shot in town. His father even purchased an abandoned warehouse so he could set up his own studio: *Silver Leaf Productions, Ltd.* The place is named after the street he grew up on, a veritable den of waterfront

McMansions.

“I feel so blessed,” he said in an interview once. “I just know God has big plans for me.” I stared at his picture on the bottom corner of the front page. He looked like a fashion model, always pouting for photographs. I wanted to punch him right in his aquiline nose. He was planning on submitting *Bloodbath* for the Golden Reel competition.

When I told Lyle the news he just shrugged and said, “It figures.”

I began rewriting the script, while Lyle brought some of his “female friends” over to my house to audition in Chris’ place. He still pushed that dark sexual angle and I agreed with him, but I couldn’t cast any of the other girls. They were all airheads, emaciated and sallow. “You want me to do what?” they would ask after every sentence of explanation. None could deliver a line like: “I love you, even with the prosthetic arm” or “Let’s make a child right now,” and give it real conviction. None could bring the sexuality that Chris had.

So instead I wrote *The Wildmen* as the all male, dark depressing vision that you see on the screen. I also took out my own role of Logan. Lyle delivered a powerful performance, though I would have preferred a better wardrobe. He insisted that his character was some kind of Neo-Adam, walking around in soiled rags that barely covered his genitals. “This world would be like a furnace underground,” he told me. “They wouldn’t need to wear much of anything.”

We were a week into shooting in my garage when things started to reach a breaking point. The location resembled at best a dusty wine cellar rather than a nuclear fallout bunker, but it was at least big enough to hold all the lighting equipment (Which mostly included a bunch of household lamps) and the entire cast and crew. Lyle was practicing his speech on how to kill the mutants through Buddhist meditation when he stopped and pulled me aside. It was clear to him and everyone else that I was nervous. I slept maybe three hours a night, ate one meal a day consisting of potato chips and left over hot dogs from work. My weight had gone from moderate flab to being on the verge of ballooning over my waist. I went through each day chanting my director’s mantra: *Why isn’t the camera charged? Where is the charger? These lights aren’t bright enough. The mutant make-up looks too much like green Cornflakes. We need more money. Lyle’s running late again. No one knows their lines. We need to rehearse more. We need more money. When am I going to find the time to shoot this scene? To Edit? We’re out of money. Why am I even wasting my time on this trash when people make a hundred thousand movies like this each year using digital cameras and editing software?* There were a constant string of nightmares in my head. Tom had a complete schedule posted on his MySpace page. He had an allotted budget, from his parents

of course. All I had were mental doomsayers, each with a separate prophecy printed on cardboard signs: *You're not a good director.*

"You know, you're not that good of a director."

"What?"

Lyle was whispering so the rest of the crew couldn't hear. "I'm sorry, but this thing is turning into a real mess."

"What? Why are you acting in it then?"

"We're stuck," he said.

"Stuck how? We're getting things done." We'd just finished one of the most technically difficult scenes in the picture. It was where Lyle and the other survivors learn how to cook mutant feces so they won't have to resort to cannibalism.

"There's no desire here. You need to make your audience want to eat the cooked mutant feces," Lyle said. "I'm just not feeling it. Maybe we should rewrite the scene."

"I'm not rewriting anything. We're too far into this."

By now everyone was watching our argument. It was a sick fascination of mine, but I wanted someone to be filming it, though I probably would have punched that person's lights out. It could have at least made for a nice YouTube video.

Lyle sighed. "I may be done...for a little while."

"Jesus Christ," I yelled at him. "You can't back out now. The festival is in three weeks. You're my main star." I had dropped my role entirely after Chris left.

"I need some time to collect my bearings. The whole thing is disturbing my Qi," Lyle said. He walked out and I told everyone to go home. We were shut down, indefinitely.

That night I received an e-mail from Tom. *Hey man. I heard you were doing an apocalypse movie too. I just wondered if you wouldn't mind stopping by my set. Maybe we could help each other out.*

I thought of a three things when I got this message. The first was how I could possibly sabotage Tom's shoot. Steal the DV tapes. Accidentally trip and fall onto the camera. Spill some water on the equipment. Unleash a family of rabid raccoons inside the studio.

Then I thought about Chris. We hadn't talked since she started doing Tom's movie. Would it be too awkward seeing her there? What would I say? Would I tell her that I changed the script entirely after she left? That I only wanted her for the role? She would probably slap me in the face. I know she's

never thought of me the same.

Finally, I thought of the advantages to such an invitation. Perhaps I could gain a competitive edge by seeing how much Tom had fucked up his own project. Surely I was not the only person with problems. We both had similar ideas. I needed to know what sort of clichés he had in his picture, so I could avoid them in my own. If I ever got back my own, I thought. I called up Lyle and asked him if he wanted to come with.

"I hope you mean to sabotage his set," Lyle said.

"Let's see what his movie looks like first," I said.

Lyle and I showed up to the studio during a fight scene. There was blood everywhere and some tall meaty boy dressed in tattered clothes and covered in pasty white make-up like a kabuki performer. And then there was Chris, the zombie's victim. Her body was covered in red corn syrup and she looked like she was shivering from it.

Tom had a much bigger crew. He had multiple grips operating the boom and the lights. There was even a best boy, bringing over sandwiches and bottled water to the cast and crew. The worst part of it was the camera. Tom was using a regular home camcorder. A handheld piece of crap. At least I had borrowed a nice camera from a friend. Tom explained that he had talked to some of the festival judges in the Golden Reel at one his father's parties and they said there more interested in a gritty handheld style. This is probably due to all the nauseous handheld camera work in Hollywood movies nowadays.

"I prefer a more old-school approach I guess," I explained.

"Yeah, but at film school they kept saying that everything's going to digital anyways."

"I'm sure NYU film school would know everything," I said.

Chris was staring at us. A make-up person adhered fake bruises to her face.

We walked over to a set full of smashed out buildings made of some kind of rubbery foam substance.

"Yeah. NYU knows their stuff," Tom said. "But you definitely have a safe bet shooting in a more traditional, professional style."

"Yeah. I probably could have gotten into NYU," I said.

Lyle laughed.

"I just never bothered to apply," I continued, ignoring Lyle. "Back in college I thought I was going to go into accounting like my dad."

"So you were a business major?" Tom asked. They were setting up filters to diffuse the lighting on the apocalyptic set. There were ten or so tech-



nicians running around laying out wires.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“That’s definitely a safer bet than film,” Tom said. “Lord knows if I’ll ever make a profit off this kind of stuff.”

“Yeah, but film is my passion. I can’t ignore that,” I said.

“You think this is too bright?” Tom asked, motioning to the set.

“You need more shadows,” Lyle said. “There are more shadows in life than that.”

“Yeah. More shadows would be nice. It would make it much darker, scarier,” I added.

“I think you guys are right. We’ll get rid of some of the backlighting.”

Tom left to talk to the technicians.

“Very original,” Lyle said.

I elbowed him in the ribs.

“So you’re stealing our ideas, huh?”

It was Chris. The make-up artists had done a great job. There was a large gash across her forehead and her hair was pasty from all the blood and guts covering her.

I thought of telling her something clever, something like ‘You look exactly how I feel right now.’ Instead I told her: “Tom invited me. He wanted to exchange ideas and stuff.”

“If only you had any,” Lyle whispered just loud enough for me to hear.

“Well. He’s got a real professional set here, doesn’t he?” she smiled.

“Yeah,” I said.

“How’s your movie coming along?” Chris asked.

*Like shit and it’s all your fucking fault.* “We’re almost finished,” I said.

“That’s good.”

“Yeah. Everything’s fine.”

Tom came back over to us. “We gotta get back to shooting and my Dad only lets visitors stop over for a short while. But if you guys wanna stop by again just give me a call.” He told me his cell number and I pretended to store it in my phone.

The next week, I dragged Lyle back onto my set and finished the picture. We shot 14 hours a day. I made Lyle do 60 takes of him emerging from the fallout bunker (the backdoor of my house dressed with aluminum foil so it looked metallic). I had to get just the right light on every scene. We shot at 6 a.m. in order to get the pinkish glow of dawn. We shot through the night making sure every scene had full coverage. Every angle, every alternate line of dia-

logue. I promised my actors free meals for a month. I promised Lyle \$300 out of an account I no longer had. I promised him I would be the best possible director he ever had. I promised myself I would stop eating fatty foods, stop drinking beer, stop masturbating, and cut off all connection to the Internet until I finished. I promised everyone that *The Wildmen* would be the kind of mutant-freak of an amateur film that surprises audiences and baffles critics. A movie no one can ignore. Their eyes won’t even blink in its presence. Perfect.

When I completed the final edit I locked myself in my room and slept for 24 hours straight, getting up occasionally to take a piss.

I saw Tom again the second night of the festival. He sat behind me with Chris in the back row of the theater. “You excited?” Tom asked. He was beaming at everyone. He and Chris were holding hands.

I looked over my shoulder at the two and nodded. I had sweat through two layers of shirts from the nerves. Lyle sat next to me, occasionally spraying deodorant on my clothes. “You perspire like a rainforest,” he said.

Both movies were slated for the late night horror fest on day 2 of the festival. It was held at a small dusty theater on the Westside of town. The audio was overblown and the seats had no cushioning. The crowd consisted mostly of college kids and 30-something bohemian types that sported goatees and old thick-rimmed glasses. There were 12 movies shown that night.

*The Wildmen* screened first. I looked down at the floor for most of the beginning. I didn’t want to know what kind of reactions were coming from the audience. I heard sporadic laughter at some points, like when Lyle ate the mutant feces. Most people didn’t say anything. It was silent during the most intense scenes: When Lyle and the other survivors encounter a mutant woman, green and crusted over like an old boat. It’s eyes searching them for some kind of understanding. When they find out about other survivors who have already left for a safe haven. The scene where Lyle laments the absence of his wife and children, lost to the infection.

No one clapped as the end credits rolled.

“This was really weird.”

“Depressing.”

“Ugh. That was disgusting,” one girl said.

Tom’s movie came on next, but it didn’t fare much better. There were more laughs though. Tom had submitted a B-monster movie on par with a wannabe *Night of the Living Dead*. Cheesy dialogue and all. And how many times do we have to see a zombie movie where the military comes in to save the day? Chris still looked sexy covered in blood, even after she lost half her

fingers to a particularly hungry zombie. A few pockets of applause broke out at the end when the survivors blow the up the Monstrous, an enormous zombie creature that was basically a rip off of Nemesis from *Resident Evil*.

After *Bloodbath*, the movies got considerably better, until they screened the winner of the Golden Reel: *Manatee: Quiet Killer of the St. Johns*. It was a 40-minute opus shot on film with lots of expensive underwater photography and a surprisingly terrifying sea cow complete with fangs and special claws that allow it to crawl on land during one scene.

The screening ended and everyone pooled into the lobby to grab drinks at the bar.

“Killer manatees?” Tom said, beer in hand. “Talk about ridiculous. I can’t believe it won.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Anyone who can make a manatee scary has got some serious talent.”

“Yeah. I suppose. But still...” Tom downed his beer.

“I mean at least it had some creativity. It wasn’t just, you know, another zombie movie.”

“You didn’t like *Bloodbath*?” Tom asked.

“Of course he didn’t,” Lyle said. “He was too busy drooling over our ‘masterpiece.’ Talk about a movie that made no sense.”

“Hey. You starred in that movie,” I said.

“I know,” Lyle left for the bar.

“I thought it was nice,” Chris told me, though her words sounded forced.

“Well. I’m definitely submitting mine to a few more festivals,” Tom said. “You can’t let one manatee fuck up everything.” He threw an empty beer bottle in the trash. “Anybody want something to drink.” Neither of us said anything and Tom left for the bar as well, leaving Chris and myself alone.

“Are you going to submit your movie someplace else?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. And I really hadn’t. Winning the Golden Reel was the only real goal I had set for myself. The rest were pure fantasy, walking red carpets and taking three picture deals with major Hollywood studios. I could see myself in each one. I would field interviews. I would make it onto the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*. The critics would bash my picture, jealous of the box office receipts they would bring in. I would be the first person to direct popular Hollywood movies with a sincere, honest message. I would be their dark messiah of truth and the masses would eat up every word.

“Maybe you should think about it,” Chris said. She always knew when I was depressed and I smiled, telling her I would.

That night I dreamt I was in my movie, struggling to make it to the drop point with the other survivors. I was in Lyle’s role. We were due for rescue by helicopter at noon. They had broadcast it on all frequencies and we were the only ones left on ground. I could hear a chorus of wails behind us. The mutant army hot on our trail. I was no longer fat and bloated. I was tattered and frail, gasping for air in the toxic environment as I ran to stop them before taking off. We’re too late, I feared and I knew that it was my responsibility and my fault for anyone left behind.

# Raw Footage

by *Jacqueline May*

Today's challenge: Create a dessert that includes a meat, a vegetable, and a complex carbohydrate.

As he stands in the improbably shiny show kitchen this morning, Steve's eyeballs feel like they're coated in kosher salt. Last night his roommate, Gordon, had another manic rhetorical flare-up. While Steve tried to block the noise with headphones, Gordon stalked around the bedroom shouting that trans-fats were killing America; they were a tasty chemical weapon stopping Steve's heart. Right now! Steve, you're dying!

Dying didn't sound so bad to Steve or, probably, to the cameraman who couldn't leave during such potentially interesting footage. Gordon knew he needed to shut up. He would stop talking, plant himself on the edge of his bed, and twitch until the pressure built too high: "Steve, the chemicals! You don't even know!" Eventually Steve slid into his usual useless sleep, full of Miri-dreams. When his alarm went off, he thought dark thoughts about the producers who wouldn't let him switch bedrooms after Hoa and Brittain were eliminated. A whole empty room across the hall, and he's stuck with Gordon because Gordon is good television.

This morning when the guest judge, executive chef from L'Etoile, announces the challenge, Steve almost forgets to make a joke. He's thinking ahead to the textures of grains, to maybe pork chops and molasses, when he realizes the rest of the chefs are waiting for him to speak. Before any episodes have aired they know what Steve's edit will be, that their reactions will be made to seem spontaneous.

"Well, hell," Steve says, broad and aw-shucks, "it beats chitlins!" He is a terrible comic-relief oaf today. Nobody laughs. Anyone would say this who endured the last challenge, which left Selene sobbing, Nidhi drunk, Allyson muttering in the hallway and all the judges gagging on Steve's attempt, which looked like something out of the dumpster behind the Inquisition. Brittain's chitlins were edible, but he was too quiet, not the bitchy Liberace he'd seemed at first, so off he went.

The guest judge smiles at Steve. "Intestines, zey are very difficult. Zis dessert will be better."

"Thank you, chef," Selene chirps. Her black Bettie Page bangs ac-

centuate the roundness of her cheeks, the wide divots of her dimples, the sweet firmness of her determined little chin. Everyone who meets her wants to cuddle her. Off-camera she once called Nidhi a "fucking brown bitch with herpes and an IQ of 10." Steve wonders whether viewers will see that Selene. He bets not. She's going to win.

Next to Steve, Gordon's twitching up and down, bouncing his heels against the tile. He's always like this at the start of a challenge. He's happiest holding a chef's knife – a Kerzbrunner, of course. ("Kairtz-broo-ner," the producers nag, "say the name every time!") He gives himself to the food. His talents deserve to win, but he's not stable enough to be trusted with the prizes – the money, the restaurant consultant to the stars, the cookbook deal.

Miri would win if she were here. She would have conquered the chitlins and now be plotting an outlandish quinoa-raisin torte striped with carrot-ginger icing and spicy nouveau mincemeat. Or something. If Steve were capable of thinking up a Miri dish, he'd actually deserve to be here: to have beaten out dozens of applicants for his slot, to have hung on for seven challenges while ambitious sous-chefs and culinary-school dazzlers rolled up their aprons.

But if Steve deserved to be on "Mean Cuisine," Miri would probably be on it instead.

The night before he left for what was then called "Untitled Cooking Competition Dramality," Steve stopped by Miri's apartment one last time. The basement-like smell of the cinder-block hallway socked him in the gut, a sensation of similar heft to the thrill it had replaced.

Miri's sister answered the door. "Hey." Margot was a leaner, drier version of Miri – her dark hair chopped shaggily at mid-neck, her hips less generous, her skin grainy. Had she looked like this – flattened, dehydrated – before? Steve couldn't remember. "I thought we'd be seeing you today. You leave tomorrow, right?"

"Right."

"You must be pretty excited." She grinned at him like a fond babysitter, but her eyes were sad.

Steve looked away. "I guess. How's she doing?"

"The same. The nurse said she's getting more responsive, but I don't see it."

Steve had to ask. "Have they found out anything else?"

"No. They say they're still looking, but it's not like she's a priority, you know? At this point either she comes back or she doesn't."

Inside the apartment, Miri looked like she had been ladled into the armchair from above. The light from the TV tinted her face a wavering gray-white and glinted off her eyeballs. As Steve leaned down toward her, her fingers twitched together in her lap. Steve jumped; behind him Margot sucked in air, then let it out slowly.

Steve kissed Miri's cheek. She smelled almost like herself. For an instant he wondered if he would survive.

"Talk to her," Margot said. "Might as well."

Steve cleared his throat self-consciously. "Hi, sweetie." Margot brushed past him and went into the kitchen. Steve said, "So, I'm going to L.A. tomorrow." He sat down on the floor half-facing the armchair and picked up one of her hands. It felt like it had never held an object. He stretched the fingers flat and sandwiched the hand between his. "I wish you were coming," he said.

Margot came back into the room with beers, glanced at Steve, set the beers on the coffee table, plopped down next to him on the floor, and wrapped her lanky arm around his shoulders. "I know," she said, patting him. "It's OK." She smelled like Miri's shampoo; Steve softened against her, then immediately sat up again. With Miri's hand inert in his, Steve allowed himself the thought he had been trying to banish: that he wished, after all, that he had killed her.

The swanky official-sponsor grocery store is white like the set kitchen, like the chef's jackets with the contestant's name embroidered on the left breast and "MC!" on the right, like the soundstage where they filmed the show's promos. (Steve had to say, "When I cook, things get crrrazy!") All the whiteness makes Steve's ears ring. He feels like he's trapped in a locker room; at any moment the other chefs might descend on him and snap him with towels and tell him to put on a bra.

Gordon skitters through the store like a water bug; his cameraman can barely keep up. He caroms off Steve and knocks over a basket of quince.

"Quince!" Gordon sings, twirling. "Quince on the flo-ho-hor!" Steve squats to help corral the fruit. He puts a couple in his basket. Surely there's a place for quince in a quinoa-raisin torte. The meat could be quail. "Brought to

you by the letter Q," he could tell the judges.

Steve is all out of funny.

Nidhi stomps over to the quince basket, trailed by her camera. She's wearing the pink spiked collar today. "Fuck," she says to Steve and Gordon as a general greeting. "I cannot believe this bullshit challenge." Humming, Gordon wanders away to thump gourds.

"Fuck," Steve agrees. The theory among the chefs is that the more they swear during a conversation, the less likely that conversation will make it into an episode. They may be wrong. "It's fucking ridiculous. Who would ever make this bullshit?"

"Who would fucking eat it if they did?" Up close, Nidhi has under-eye circles you could park a boat in.

"Besides the motherfucking judges?"

"Motherfuckers. I could have Alain Ducasse growing out of my ass and they'd still call me an amateur." She kicks a stray quince, sending it bounce-rolling under a display of regional apples.

"Motherfuckers." Steve likes Nidhi. They smoke together on the roof in the evenings. For all her grouchiness she's a better person than sugary Selene, and more interesting than Allyson the Earnest Mom Doing It For Her Kids. "You made it this far," he offers. "They must think you're a good chef." If this were true, Steve wouldn't be here to say it.

Nidhi gives him a look. "Say something funny. Save your chunky ass."

"Fucking brown bitch."

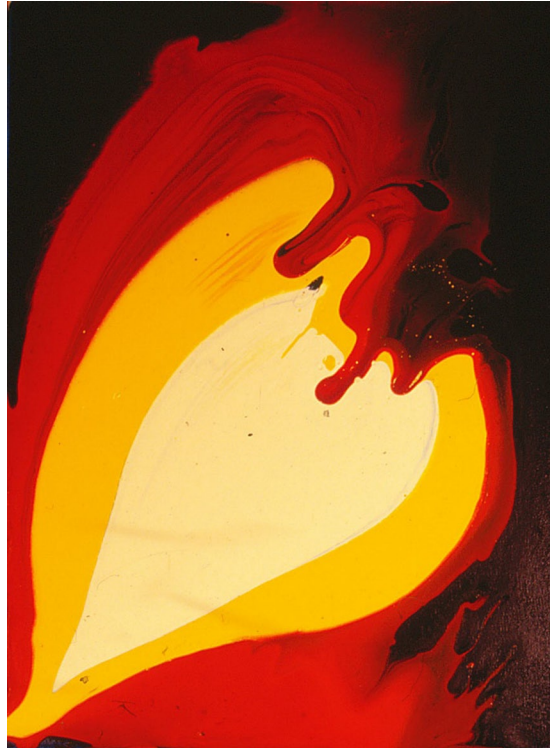
Nidhi holds up a finger. "Let us not forget the herpes."

Steve's cameraman suppresses a laugh. "Do you find something amusing, young man?" Steve demands, gazing sternly into the camera.

"Damn it, Steve," says the cameraman. "Quit doing that, or you'll never get any airtime."

Nidhi swats Steve. "Come on, quit fucking around. Let's buy some motherfucking groceries."

Every challenge, Steve imagines he is Miri, walking the aisles. Imagines that doughs spring together beneath his masterful fingers. Imagines that herbs whisper to him, that knives – Kerzbrunners, of course – nestle content-





edly into his hand. Imagines that he wouldn't rather find a nice normal recipe, written by someone else, for something obviously delicious.

It never helps. Today he has the quinoa and the quince and the raisins and the carrots and the mascarpone and some flank steak and candied ginger and brandy for the mincemeat, but he's still stuck. He feels like a crucial lobe of his brain has been removed, but it's a lobe he never had. Until he met a woman who did have it, he never minded.

Miri was Boston brown bread baked in a coffee can. She was roast chicken gleaming amber under an oven light. She was bacon and scallions and potatoes and eggs and red peppers all fried together, popovers oozing butter, and brownies studded with half-melted chocolate chunks. She was a feast Steve couldn't believe he was invited to.

It must be a measure of his current mental state that he thinks of everything in gastronomic terms. He used to be nothing but a decent weekend cook. He liked to invent muffins to leave in the break room at his office and to invite friends and neighbors over for international experiments (like Spanakopita-palooza, when he and phyllo dough finally forged a truce).

Miri tagged along to the tapas party with the girls who lived downstairs. He got the impression she worked with one of them, but he barely had time to shake her hand with his hastily dried one before he had to dash back into the kitchen to save the calamari.

That night, Steve had been using the oven, the electric griddle, and all four burners of the gas range. With that, the landlord's apparent desire to slow-roast his tenants over the radiators, and the addition of nine extra bodies to Steve's one-bedroom apartment, everyone sweated. Steve's regular guests knew to dress in layers, and the ones who lived in his building showed up in the tank tops they'd been wearing already, but Miri hadn't been warned.

During dinner Steve watched her sweat: watched the roots of her soft dark hair dampen and separate and her nose begin to glisten, watched her wipe her upper lip dry with her napkin while pretending to blot away wine. She tried to push up the sleeves of her heavy sweater, but they wouldn't stay. She caught Steve watching her and yanked her hands apart as if she'd been doing something inappropriate, and then she smiled at him. "I'm overdressed."

Steve glanced down at her breasts, which were of a size that even the thick sweater was powerless against, and she caught him at that too.

"And I have boobs, yes."

Steve felt himself blush, but figured he was safe because he was already bright pink from the heat. "Sorry." He expected Miri to turn back to the friends she'd come with, but all along the table, conversations had sealed off. The girls from downstairs were debating whether to buy a rabbit, Steve's office mates were trying to enlist the couple from down the hall in their basketball pool, and Steve's old drug dealer was detailing some new chemical miracle to a nice kindergarten teacher Steve had just stopped trying to date. Steve and Miri were an island in the center. To keep it this way, he said the first thing that came into his head: "Do you want a shirt?"

"Do I what?" Miri leaned forward and her breasts pressed against the edge of the table.

"Do you want to borrow a t-shirt? I feel bad; it's a furnace in here."

"Oh, no, that's OK—" She considered. "Yes, please."

Steve wrestled his chair free of its neighbors and escaped. Miri followed him into the bedroom, plunked down on the pile of coats on the bed, then sprang up. "Ow! Keys."

Steve bent to look through his t-shirt drawer. He was giving her a detailed, close-up show of his butt, which was not exactly that of an Olympic swimmer, but he couldn't think of a graceful position to switch to.

"Listen," Miri said.

"What?"

"No, just listen."

Steve straightened up and listened. The sounds of the party came into focus: a jumble of laughs, the clunk of fork against earthenware. A woman called, "Mas sangria, por favor!" and giggled. Then came the gentle sucking sound of liquid pouring, and the clattering of ice cubes, and a man saying, "Is this really a squid? It's not bad!"

"Is there a better sound than that?" Miri smoothed a chunk of hair away from her face with a dreamy tenderness. "Happy people, enjoying your food?"

Steve, looking at Miri, the warmth of her brown eyes in her flushed face, the sweetness of her wine-reddened lips, the curve of her thighs against his mattress, could imagine a sound that might be better. After a pause he said, "It's beautiful." He wanted to touch her. More so when she came out of his bedroom in his old college t-shirt, twisting her hair off her neck. But he didn't make contact until he kissed her the next night, when she stopped by with the shirt, which smelled of some intoxicating alien detergent, and a paper plate of tiny pecan tarts with crusts like a shiver down the spine.

Miri worked for a caterer who didn't appreciate her, who wanted his advertised menus to be accurate, and who wasn't interested in learning to make or trying to sell her experiments. She took to calling Steve during down times at parties and weddings and describing her own version of the menu. Always she'd cut herself off with: "But you're a cook; you know how I feel."

So for her he was a cook. He complained to her about his software job, which he liked. Between dates he holed up at the library, taking notes on techniques and ingredients, which he both hoped and feared would come up in conversation.

The first time Miri cooked for Steve, she made simple dishes – roast chicken, potatoes, broccoli, biscuits – but their flavors were new, complicated, both what he expected and nothing like it. The broccoli had figs and Thai chilies in it, and Steve would have eaten the entire pot, except that the chilies accumulated and suddenly he realized his head was on fire.

"That was the best dinner I have ever eaten," Steve told Miri over dessert (carrot cupcakes with cardamom), raising his snifter of cool, soothing milk.

He expected denials – he'd learned already that Miri could not take a compliment – but she said, "Thank you." She leaned over the table, kissed Steve on the tip of the nose, and settled back. "Next time it's your turn."

All the next week, Steve imagined the scene. As he pored over his growing accumulation of cookbooks, he saw himself serving Miri the best food he had ever made – galaxies beyond even his spanakopita. The fulfillment of every ounce of his potential.

He saw Miri eating it. Saw her smile politely, nodding encouragement as if praising a child's drawing of a dog with all four legs on one side. Good try, Steve. Have a sticker.

Intellectually, Steve knew several things. He knew Miri had already eaten his tapas and enjoyed them. He knew that if Miri really liked him, she'd like him as a software analyst with above-average culinary skills. He knew he was being an insecure idiot, and the only smart course of action would be to cook a nice meal for Miri and let her reaction take care of itself.

He knew. And yet. If she left, if she stopped calling – the thought made Steve want to cry and hyperventilate and punch someone. He couldn't stand it. He couldn't risk it.

The night before his meal, his mind was such a frenzied and inhospitable landscape that finally he called his old drug dealer. Steve rarely bought from Joel now; he'd left his two-bowls-a-day habit in college, and he'd never had the guts to try one of the concoctions Joel smuggled home from work.

Joel's day job as a research chemist for a drug company dovetailed beautifully with his night job as a dealer, though the drug company and their stack of legal forms bearing Joel's signature wouldn't have seen it that way. His recklessness always seemed less brave than oblivious. Before Joel, Steve had thought of drug dealers as cool people with expensive jackets.

When Steve went to Joel's apartment to pick up the pot, Joel met him at the door. "I gotta show you this, this is the greatest, you will love it." He did a little grapevine into the living room.

"Man, can I just have my pot?"

"Check this out. Check this out!" Joel fumbled among jars and beakers on a table and pulled out a clear glass vial half full of a grayish-yellow powder. "That chick at your party wouldn't believe we were developing this. I bet she'd give me her number now!"

Poor kindergarten teacher. "Uh, sure," Steve said. "Can I –"

"It's perfect. They're testing it as a painkiller but it's so much better."

Steve rubbed his eyes. The apartment smelled like feet and hair dye and Hot Pockets. In eighteen hours Miri would be eating his food.

Joel uncapped the vial. "Smell it!" He shoved it into Steve's face. Here was the hair-dye odor, though faint. "See, isn't that great? Almost no smell!"

"Great, yeah."

Joel burst into a lengthy recitation of chemical detail. Steve recognized "carbon." Joel finished, breathlessly: "But you can't tell anyone the formula!"

"No," said Steve, "I can't."

"Help me think up a street name? It's a happy drug, so it needs a happy name."

"Like 'ecstasy'?"

"Don't be an asshole. It's nothing like that, it's much more subtle."

"Joel, can I please just have my pot and go?"

"You're so narrow-minded. This is better than pot. Nothing else is so gentle. You just eat a tiny bit and you're happy for like three hours."

"You eat it?"

"Sure! Just a tiny, tiny sprinkle. I've been putting it on my cereal."

Stillness trickled down Steve's limbs. He was afraid to move, afraid of what he might be about to do. He swallowed hard. "Is it addictive?"

Joel gave him an unbearably cocky grin. "Shouldn't be." He laid his lanky arm along Steve's shoulders. "Stephen, my friend, now is your chance. Become part of chemical history."

The next night, Steve seasoned both steaks with a spice rub that included turmeric, and one steak with a hint of an additional yellow powder. Just a sprinkle. No worse than serving her a drink, he kept telling himself.

Miri swallowed her first bite of steak and smiled politely. “It’s good.” Steve tried his own steak and found it deserved exactly that reaction: pleasant, not enthusiastic. He wondered about Joel’s chemical skills. He wondered how long this evening would last. He realized he was staring at Miri as she chewed, at the shifting contours of her jaw. A speck of yellow stuck to her upper lip.

Halfway through the steak, Miri’s pupils began to dilate. She sucked chipotle sweet potatoes off the fork in a new slow way that gave Steve an instant erection. Still holding the fork in front of her chin, Miri swallowed, tipped her head back, and moaned, “Oh, God.”

Sex that evening was otherworldly. Miri rubbed against Steve like a cat, murmuring low in her throat. Steve wished he had tried Joel’s powder himself, but the bliss rippling across Miri’s face was a high of its own. He felt like Paul Bunyan. Paul Newman. Paul Prudhomme.

The intensity of the high kept Steve awake worrying, but the next morning Miri seemed fine. “That was wonderful,” she said. “You can cook for me any time.”

Back in the show kitchen with his quince and his quinoa, Steve doesn’t feel like cooking for anyone. Certainly not the judges, who like to call his dishes “unsubtle” and “amateurish” and “baffling” and “Applebee’s.” They ask him what he was thinking. He says something wacky and self-deprecating. They tell him they’re not sure he has what it takes. They send someone else home.

At the station next to Steve’s, Allyson is boning a chicken. Steve can remember a time when he found this verb hilarious. The quick certain strokes of her knife mesmerize him, the brutal geometry, the surrender of the pale flesh. He’s too tired for this. Everything is so white.

Allyson rubs her nose with her forearm and notices Steve. “You doing OK over there?” She’s sympathetic but chiding, the total mom.

For the benefit of the camera behind him, Steve leers at her. “Just watching you bone.”

“Ha, ha.” She bends over the chicken and with the knife tip delicately wiggles a leg bone free. Steve turns back to his ingredients. First to marinate the steak: brandy, lemon juice, raisins, ginger, maybe something with more of a bite – would Miri use black pepper? Peppercorns? OK, peppercorns, sure. Selene crusts everything in peppercorns and the judges love it.

One of these days Steve is just going to snap and serve them a bowl of Rice Krispies.

Steve glugs brandy into a pan, then swigs from the bottle. Two challenges ago he would have done a terrible Julia Child impression to make Allyson laugh for the cameras. Or to launch Gordon into an endless ramble about grape farmers or something. Steve’s burned out on playing the funnyman.

Across the kitchen Gordon’s skinny shoulders sway delicately as he chops. Further down the same counter, Nidhi drops her Kerzbrunner with a clatter. “Motherfucker!” With one hand wrapped around the other wrist, holding it at chest height, she stalks to the nearest sink. A dark line of blood rolls down onto her cuff. She jerks the cold-water faucet on full blast, sticks the injured hand under it, yelps, and turns down the water pressure. Steve knows better than to offer sympathy. All the contestants get cut, and they’re all embarrassed when they do. Burns just happen when you work with hot food, but a cut signifies a lapse in knife skills or concentration. Steve isn’t sure how he’s kept all his fingers this long. He turns back to his station and very carefully cuts up the candied ginger and the flank steak.

Nidhi isn’t the only one having problems today. As Steve spreads his unsettlingly compliant quinoa-carrot batter into layer pans, there’s a shriek and a crash. Steve glances over and sees Selene amid a swamp of ground-meat mixture chunked with ceramic shards, her seamed stockings splattered with raw meringue.

His eyes round, Gordon sucks in a breath, like a child spotting an angry teacher. The camera operators scatter to capture everyone’s reaction. Nidhi, now wearing one rubber glove, could be fighting a smile. Allyson says, “Oh, no,” but makes no move to help Selene.

The producers make everyone wait in the lounge while production assistants clear the mess away. Selene plays woeful Kewpie doll for the cameras, but under the table her feet in their kitschy embroidered clogs lash against



the floor.

Selene has to start from scratch. Steve can't help feeling a little sorry for her. She's out of most of her ingredients, so she goes from chef to chef flirting for extras. Allyson gives her an artichoke. Gordon offers cornbread. Steve measures out his mascarpone and gives her the rest. Nidhi says, "Sorry, I'm using everything." Selene picks up a half-full jar of apple butter from Nidhi's work space. Nidhi snatches it out of her hand.

As Steve's torte layers bake, he beats puréed quince, cardamom and brown sugar into the mascarpone. And, what the hell, a few grinds of pepper. A fingertip taste astonishes him: it's good. He moves on to cooking the meat mixture on the stove. As the brandy sauce reduces, he leans over the pot and inhales. With the rich scent of the beef comes a prickle at the back of his nose and a wave of intricate sweetness. It smells like something people would want to eat. This shouldn't surprise Steve, but after the chitlins, after deconstructing Thanksgiving with culinary-school snot Ari as his partner, after trying to impress based-in schoolchildren with new twists on perfectly good snack foods — it does.

He's twisting around to give the nearest camera a big smile when Nidhi bellows, "God-fucking-damn it!" Another injury? No, she's scraping frantically at a pot on the stove. A cameraman moves in to film the food and Nidhi elbows him. She whirls to face the rest of the kitchen: "Who turned up this fucking burner?"

No one says anything. Gordon holds a bunch of sage in one hand and a knife in the other; both tremble. After a long silence, Selene shrugs cutely. "The flame had gone out," she says, innocent. "I just turned it back on."

With Joel's powder, Steve and Miri were equals. While Steve's guilt took a lot of the fun out of cooking for Miri, the rest of life made up for it. Miri told him how glad she was to have a boyfriend who shared her passions. They had sex that made Steve feel skinless. He used Joel's powder himself sometimes, but it didn't hit him like it did Miri. It knocked the world slightly askew, made it shimmery. Mostly it made him gaze at Miri. Even sober he couldn't get enough. He wanted to grip her hard enough to leave finger marks.

One night Miri showed up with a video camera and a link to the online application for a new cooking competition show on cable. She pushed Steve down in his computer chair and leaned her breasts against his shoulders as he read the webpage.

Steve knew he wasn't good enough, but Miri could convince him of anything simply by existing nearby. They made the tapes. Miri cooked her

signature broccoli and a chicken napoleon thing with ground walnuts, and though she didn't look at the camera enough, she came off as skilled and articulate and lovably giggly. Watching her through the lens, Steve thought his chest would explode. When they switched roles — and apartments, so producers wouldn't connect the two tapes — Steve was so uncomfortable that he cracked a compulsive string of dumb jokes, then tripped over his shoe and flung a loaded spatula across the kitchen. Gobs of soufflé batter slid down the fridge door. He convinced Miri not to reshoot and sent the tape in unedited. It wasn't like he had a chance on the show, but Miri wanted him to apply, and pleasing her was all that mattered.

And then this task got harder. As they waited to hear back from the show, the powder stopped working. Maybe Miri built up a tolerance; maybe something went wrong with Joel's latest batch. Miri's enthusiasm for Steve's food began to wane. The euphoria went out of the sex and left them on bare dry land.

Steve was already gripped by a desperate, finger-scrabbling panic before they had the fight. The fight arose from nowhere, from Miri's day of assembling timbales for the wedding of her high school boyfriend, from the wilting heat of Steve's apartment and a difference of opinion regarding which movie to see. When the flames died down, Miri's cheeks were shiny pink with tears, and the whole lower half of her face was clenched tight. Steve had seen this expression on her only once, not directed at him. He knew what would happen next: She would get up from the table. She would tell him he'd never fooled her, that she'd never seen anything but a fat impostor who couldn't cater a Lutheran picnic, a meat-handed fumbler whose sexual moves seventh-graders would mock. She would leave for good.

In a haze Steve went into the kitchen, dished out two bowls of the beef curry that was beginning to scorch on the stove and dug out his new bag of powder. Joel had sworn the last batch was fine, but in the face of Steve's desperate rage, he'd knocked twenty bucks off the price. Mechanically Steve sprinkled powder on top of one bowl. Watched the yellow grains float, insignificant. Added another sprinkling. Dumped more, maybe a tablespoon, straight out of the bag. Stirred it all in.

He set the bowl in front of Miri. "Here. Be happy."

After a few bites she smiled at him. "Thank you for cooking. I'm sorry I yelled." She tucked her hair behind her ear in the caressing way that always killed him.

After a few more bites her movements slowed, her face slackened. She groaned. She swirled her finger through her curry and held it across the



table for Steve to suck.

When Miri finished the bowl, she was swaying in her chair. Steve tried to get her to stand up, but she sagged like a beanbag. She slid down his legs to lean against his shins, looking up at him with vacant amusement. Then her expression flattened. She convulsed. Steve lunged to catch her before her head hit the floor. The dull sound of it hitting reverberated all through his skeleton.

His torte assembled and firming up in the fridge, Steve finds Nidhi on a couch in the lounge, not raging like he expected, but crying. Her elbows dig into her thighs and her spine curves downward like the graph of a disaster. Her camera guy films steadily. Steve wonders if the camera operators have trouble re-engaging when they leave work, if neutral observation becomes their default state.

He sits next to Nidhi and rubs her shoulder. “Don’t cry, motherfucking bitch.” Steve’s camera guy sighs.

Nidhi glances at Steve. Droplets balance on her lashes, powerless against the sheer volume of mascara. “I’m so gone.”

“Come on, what about fucking Selene? Did you fucking see her fucking dish?”

“She’s Selene.”

It’s a good point. Steve abandons the fuck-masking. “At least you’re going last. You have time for damage control.”

“They remember the last dish.”

“OK. So. Worst-case scenario: you get kicked off because of Selene. So you go to the hotel and watch HBO with Brittain and Jessica, and in like two days I show up and we all have a good time. And fucking Selene wins, like she was going to all along, and we all go find nice restaurant jobs and do a couple of talk shows. Yeah?”

“Fuck.” Nidhi starts crying again, harder, and Steve tries not to seem alarmed as he keeps rubbing her shoulder.

“Shit,” he says gently, “I didn’t think you cared so much.”

Nidhi punches him in the arm, hard. “You asshole, how else am I going to get my restaurant?”

“Loan?”

“My credit fucking sucks. No one will lend to me. My family doesn’t talk to me, and, God, look at me. Who’s going to invest in some fuckup dyke’s curry place?” Nidhi never makes Indian food. “I don’t even know anyone with money. Do you have money?”

“No.”

“Fuck you, then.” Nidhi drags the toe of her boot across the industrial carpet, producing a shuddering noise.

“Maybe it’s just a little burned.”

“Fucking charred.”

“Still. Remember my postmodern blackened turkey fritters? And they kicked off Hoa because his potatoes were too simple.”

“Those were some fucking great potatoes.”

“Uh-huh.”

Steve puts his arm around Nidhi and they sit in silence, listening to the muffled sounds of plating, clanks and scrapes and the distant farting of squirt bottles. Gordon’s voice yells, “Balsamic now!”

“I miss cooking for people who don’t know about food,” Steve hears himself say.

Nidhi peels the rubber glove away from her wrist and stretches it until it threatens to tear. “I just want my restaurant.” She lets the glove snap back and winces in a satisfied way. “All I ever wanted is a goddamn restaurant.”

Steve’s heart lurches. He has heard this exact sentence before: Miri’s couch, with the mingled scents of fried chicken and sweaty scalp rising from her hair. Her boss has chewed her out again for deviating from the recipes. She wants to strike out on her own so badly. Angry tears shine on her flushed cheeks and tense jaw. She’s upset enough to swear.

Steve looks at Nidhi. Her spikes and angles and what’s-it-to-you posture couldn’t remind him less of Miri’s softness, but the despair in her dark eyes is piercingly familiar. In that look Steve sees adorable villain Selene defeat everyone who plays fair. Everything is wrong. Miri should have had a restaurant.

“Motherfucker,” he tells Nidhi, “take a walk with me.”

Joel offered one last batch for free to thank Steve for not killing him. “I told you, just a sprinkle,” he pleaded, his eyes darting around his living room. This was after Joel showed too much scientific interest in Miri’s overdose – “Did her lips look blue at all? Was she having trouble breathing? We’ve had some depressed lung function in the rats, but only with huge doses, just ridiculous” – and Steve punched him in the eye.

Steve considered punching Joel again, but he took the bag. At home, he left it on the table so it snagged him every time he passed. Late one bleak night, he washed down a spoonful with a glass of water. It tasted like dust. He lay on his bedroom floor all night, finding patterns in the sheetrock, alter-

nately laughing, sobbing, and yanking hairs out of his arm. The next morning he felt weak, cleansed, loosened. The world stretched flat around him like a calm sea. What good were guilt and grief and anger? That the doctors had already classified Miri's case as a medical fluke, not a criminal matter, was a sign. Miri would be OK, or not, and so would Steve. All he needed was a change of scene. When he flew to L.A. for his final interview, he brought along a jar labeled "Turmeric."

They manage to evade cameras for just long enough to cram into a bathroom stall and confer.

"I swear I haven't used it here. I haven't even taken it out of my cabinet." Steve had meant to use it carefully, to stay on the show, right up until his last visit to Miri's apartment. After that, he smoked all his pot and spent half the night taking the jar out of his suitcase, imagining implausible ways to destroy it, shaking it to watch the powder clump and separate, and putting it back in the suitcase. In the rush to catch his plane the next morning, he forgot to take it out again.

"I swear," Steve repeats.

Nidhi looks skeptical, but she follows Steve out of the bathroom, back into the white chaos of the kitchen. Their cameras catch up with them ("Damn it, Steve!"), and they're in trouble, and Gordon's dessert is going out to the judges right now, now! plates! and Selene is twittering over her ginger artichoke bread pudding, trying to unmold the soupy mess onto a plate, and Allyson is shaving strips from a block of chocolate, but they keep crumbling and she says "Shit!" in her wholesome mom-voice, and who could notice or care that Steve digs a spice from the back of his workspace cabinet and shows it to Nidhi?

Steve shakes the powder into a ramekin: one, two, three, four scant shakes, one per judge. Against the glass it looks like nothing.

"That's it?"

"Just a tiny sprinkle. That's all you need." He pushes the jar against the back wall of the cabinet. Nidhi opens her mouth as if to protest, then shakes her head and takes the ramekin to her station.

A frazzled Gordon returns from judging and goes into the lounge. Allyson carries her chicken artichoke custard tarts with chocolate shavings into the judging room – Allyson's food always sounds awful and tastes great – and Selene angrily ladles her pudding into bowls. Steve sets his torte on the counter and admires. The layers are clean and distinct, and while the colors – orangey brown, muddy brown, and pale green – won't awe any-

one, the contrasts of chewy cake, silky filling, and syrupy/tender mincemeat might. It smells wonderful. He hates to cut it. He's scattering raspberries next to the first dense slice when Nidhi appears behind him: "Looking good, motherfucker."

"Thanks. How's it going over there?"

With a quick fingertip, Nidhi swipes a blob of quince filling from between the layers. As she tastes, pleasure flashes across her face. What replaces it looks like fear.

"Hey!"

"Cut from the other side, dumbass." The words are normal, but her voice is suddenly cold. She scoops more filling from the other side and is gone.

Unsettled, Steve trims one of the disemboweled edges. He tries a forkful. It's tasty, almost the Miri dish he'd imagined. Allyson returns, smiling, and joins Gordon in the lounge. Selene pastes on her cutest expression and carries pudding into the judging room. Steve arranges raspberries. Across the kitchen, Nidhi mutters.

Before they try his dessert, the judges tell Steve he seems subdued. They ask if he's having trouble with his fellow chefs. He should crack a joke, but all that comes out is, "I'm tired." Like Brittain, he is ruining his edit.

The guest judge from L'Etoile calls the torte "exquisite." The food writer, a finch-like old woman, twinkles at him: "Steve, who really made this?" The fitness model takes an uncharacteristic second bite. The head judge tilts his head, regards Steve through his professor-ish glasses, and decrees, "You've been holding out on us. This is very nice work."

Steve watches them eat his food without grimacing or invoking the names of chain restaurants. The clink of forks and the moist sounds of chewing begin to dissipate the fog he's been living in. He had forgotten how good this feels. A longing to share this with Miri lances through him.

Back in the kitchen, he stops by Nidhi's station to wish her good luck. Breathing loudly through her nose, she continues grating lemon zest over her ugly heaps. Steve walks away, snubbed. Something about Nidhi's sauce is odd.

The color is different. Yellower.

He dives for his cabinet. The jar is gone.

The door to the judging room slams shut behind her. Steve follows. All four judges, Nidhi, and four cameras turn their gazes on him.

"Out," the head judge says.

"Was there something you wanted?" the little food writer asks nicely. Steve blurts, "Don't eat that!"

The judges exchange looks. “Why not?” the head judge asks.

Nidhi’s eyes, desperate, defiant, are skewering Steve right through.

“Please don’t eat it.” He hears himself, how pathetic he sounds, how jealous.

The head judge clearly agrees. “Nidhi’s food isn’t your problem.”

Steve fumbles to speak, knowing he has to explain, has to, but unable to make himself say the words that will destroy everything, and Nidhi stares him down with those eyes until his neck prickles, and then a production assistant escorts him out.

He sits on the floor of the kitchen, running his finger along the blade of a Kerzbrunner. It doesn’t cut him. They’re crappy knives. From the judging room he hears Nidhi trying to talk over the judges. No one sounds happy. Nidhi’s tone becomes pleading, and the other voices go silent. Then begin again, more cheerful. Someone laughs. Someone else. They are all laughing. Someone pounds the table and a dish breaks and the laughter doubles in size. Someone moans. The sounds become cacophonous, bristling and bulging in all directions, and Steve starts to wonder about the cameras, the producers. Will they step in, or is a table of tripped-out judges too good to cut short?

Someone cries out. A PA runs in, clutching a towel. Steve sees behind her a crush of people and cameras on the far side of the judges’ table, a pair of tiny yellow pumps protruding. People shout “Check her pulse!” and “Who’s got 911?” The head judge leans on the table, wheezing. Nidhi stands like stone.

As the commotion splinters and spreads, as Gordon and Allyson and Selene and their cameras come in from the lounge to investigate, as the ambulance is called and the wet towel is draped across the food writer’s forehead and the other judges are helped to lie down on the floor, as Nidhi is ushered into the lounge by a producer, Steve stands in his white slice of kitchen and admires his torte. It is beautiful. If he had more powder, he’d pour it all on top. He stabs a fork into it and chunks crumble off the side, but in his mouth the cake is perfect. The raisins yield in a voluptuous burst of brandy, and the pepper strokes the back of his nose, and his teeth journey downward through the textures, through chewy and springy and creamy and back to springy, home again in quinoa, and it is so good, this thing he made, good enough for Miri, so good he stands there eating and eating, filling himself with its intricate spiced sweetness, crowding out the death of the old woman, this maelstrom of good television, all the bitter things about to happen.

# Avoiding Mr. Screamerhead

by Dan Crawley

Clement stood on his backyard patio, his whole body rigid, immobilized. All around him clumps of weeds framed the chipped edges of the small square patio, and a few steps off the slab a dense overgrowth of weeds had overtaken a brief but very steep slope. A tan cinder block wall enclosed the yard, and on the other side of the back wall the thick overgrowth continued its hilly descent. All of the surrounding mountains also were covered in green; it had been a very wet winter for this desert region. The very bottom of the canyon was cut by a four-lane interstate. A low lying sun reflected off scores of windshields, creating a conveyer belt of sparks. But Clement didn't seem much interested in panoramic vistas. Instead he scrutinized the waist-high slope of weeds below him.

Clement tugged at the short sleeve of his shirt and mopped up the sweat on his forehead. The genuine sweat-inducing heat was still a few months away. Next Clement mashed the heels of his hands into his eyes, like someone might do at the side of the road, standing next to an unsympathetic DPS officer. He reached into his shorts' pocket and pulled out a small key ring. Then he hurled his keys, only three of them on the ring, down into the slope of weeds.

Clement yanked out a cell phone from his other front pocket.

"Hiya Weave," Clement said into the phone, sounding distressed. "It's me. Hope you get this message soon. I'm locked out of the house. I know, I know. I lost my house key, my car key—my whole key ring. So...I'm really consumed with finding my keys at the moment. I'm sorry I'm wrecking your plans for tonight. We'll rain check it. I...I'm free all other times... like you don't already know this." He lowered the phone and held it against his hip. Clement took one step onto the dirt, leaning slightly forward, and let out a long yell, no words. Two small birds rocketed out of the weeds. Clement threw his cell phone into the weeds.

Clement found the gardening shears and a hoe where he'd left them last, around the corner of the house. They were rusting in the dirt, a circle of weeds closing in.

Clement opened and closed the gigantic scissors with a lot of effort,

the pin joining the blades markedly tight. He tried hacking away some of the plants at the top of the slope, attempting the beginning of a passable trail, but grew frustrated and tossed the shears behind him onto the patio. He picked up the hoe, a sun-bleached price sticker plastered across the blade. He jabbed his shoe into a larger bush at the top of the slope and squashed it down as if it were a billowing parachute trying once more to lift off the ground. The next step was more of a slide. Clement's next two long strides crashed him down the slope through the thicket. The hoe was a wild rudder. Near the bottom left side of the slope Clement fell to his knees, his upper body continuing forward. The hoe, now a dangerous pendulum arcing over his body, missed the back of Clement's head by inches.

He yelled, again.

Clement finally stood and leaned his upper body one way and then the other, his feet steadying themselves on the slanted ground. A yard or so above him the harsh sunlight, partially block by the wall, cast a shadow that horizontally halved the entire slope. He began hoeing, with great effort, and soon made a narrow path back up the hill. He dropped the hoe and limped toward the sliding glass door. He tugged on the handle. It wasn't budging. Clement swore as he picked up the hoe again and, this time, gingerly made his way down the slope. Once back at the spot he fell, Clement hoed frantically at first, and then eased up a bit after clearing a fat comma-shaped gouge around him. The front of his shirt and the thighs of his shorts were stained green, his knees dirt-torn and bleeding. His waxy palms sprouted blisters, which he couldn't help picking now and then. Dark blotches sprawled under the armpits of his blue shirt. Clement pushed around the springy plant flotsam and searched the exposed dirt.

A latch sounded off. The glass door slid wide open.

"You back here, Clem?" a woman's voice called.

"I'm here," Clement said. "I'm down here."

Weaver appeared at the end of the patio. She stood with the toes of her high heel shoes almost touching, as if she was soon diving off a board. She wore a short black gown that showed off her pale legs and sun burnt thighs. Her freckled shoulders bore ultra-thin spaghetti straps. Her bright red lipstick and nail polish matched exactly. She clutched a small hand bag, maybe large enough for her cell phone, if that.

"Hiya Clem," she said with enthusiasm. "Nice, the house is officially unlocked. Let's go, let's go."

"Hiya Weave," he said, looking down into the weeds instead of up at his wife.



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the slope through the thicket. The hoe was a wild rudder. Near the bottom left side of the slope Clement fell to his knees, his upper body continuing forward. The hoe, now a dangerous pendulum arcing over his body, missed the back of Clement's head by inches.

He yelled, again.

Clement finally stood and leaned his upper body one way and then the other, his feet steadying themselves on the slanted ground. A yard or so above him the harsh sunlight, partially block by the wall, cast a shadow that horizontally halved the entire slope. He began hoeing, with great effort, and soon made a narrow path back up the hill. He dropped the hoe and limped toward the sliding glass door. He tugged on the handle. It wasn't budging. Clement swore as he picked up the hoe again and, this time, gingerly made his way down the slope. Once back at the spot he fell, Clement hoed frantically at first, and then eased up a bit after clearing a fat comma-shaped gouge around him. The front of his shirt and the thighs of his shorts were stained green, his knees dirt-torn and bleeding. His waxy palms sprouted blisters, which he couldn't help picking now and then. Dark blotches sprawled under the armpits of his blue shirt. Clement pushed around the springy plant flotsam and searched the exposed dirt.

A latch sounded off. The glass door slid wide open.

"You back here, Clem?" a woman's voice called.

"I'm here," Clement said. "I'm down here."

Weaver appeared at the end of the patio. She stood with the toes of her high heel shoes almost touching, as if she was soon diving off a board. She wore a short black gown that showed off her pale legs and sun burnt thighs. Her freckled shoulders bore ultra-thin spaghetti straps. Her bright red lipstick and nail polish matched exactly. She clutched a small hand bag, maybe large enough for her cell phone, if that.

"Hiya Clem," she said with enthusiasm. "Nice, the house is officially unlocked. Let's go, let's go."

"Hiya Weave," he said, looking down into the weeds instead of up at his wife.

"Why are you down there?"

"I lost the keys," Clement said. "Like I said on the message." He pointed all around him. "I'm looking for them."

"Down there? But how? Never mind. You can look for them later," Weaver said. "Clem, I'll help you look for them later. You still need to shower. Come on, we need to get—"

"You got here fast. My message sounded that bad, huh?"

“Actually, I left work early,” she said brightly. “Like I told you this morning. And I changed at work so I’d be all ready for our big plans.” Weaver made a pose and dramatically waved up and down her black gown.

“I guess my message sounded bad?”

Weaver grinned, her teeth whiter because of her lipstick. “You didn’t sound that bad. You’re frustrated, you lost your keys. Come up here, my darling; going out will do both of us good.”

“I can’t,” Clement said matter-of-factly. He scanned the exposed slanted ground beneath him. “I need these keys.”

“Right now? We’ll use my keys until we find yours.”

Clement looked wounded. “You made the plans.”

Weaver squatted and picked up the gardening shears. She smashed her purse between the side of her ribs and an elbow, awkwardly holding the shears out in front of her like a toppling tray. “These are killer scissors.”

Clement squinted up at Weaver, although the line of sunlight was now far up the hill and he stood completely in the shade. “I think I hurt myself,” he said. “I fell down.”

Weaver easily chopped the blades together.

“After you lost your keys? How, of all places, did they get down there?”

Clement sighed and said, “I was doing nothing all morning, like usual, so I thought I’d clear out some of these weeds before you got home.” He lifted the hoe as if Weaver hadn’t noticed it until now. “Whack at a few bushes. Get...everything out of my system while trying to clean up...” Clement’s voice gave up.

“You’ve cleared away a lot so far,” Weaver said, nodding her head, pointing with the shears. “This weekend I’ll help you and we’ll finish the job. Then we’ll have a proper looking backyard.”

“As you can see,” Clement said, waving a hand dramatically up and down his body, “I had a bad accident and the last thing I want to do this weekend is weed. Weaver, I fell really hard...all the way down this hill. I had just begun hoeing a few weeds up there when I must’ve lost my footing and tumbled down here. I guess my keys came out of my pocket...in the fall, and I know they ended up somewhere around this general area.” The sides of his shoes were buried under an avalanche of dirt.

“You screamed,” Weaver said, now pointing the blades at him.

“I what?”

“I heard you scream at the end of the message.” She moved off the patio, and was in the act of scalping a few small yellow buds off an especially

tall weed. Weaver bent over, her bony elbows jutting out. Her black strapless bra was a wide belt cinched across her pale chest. “You left me a message and then you screamed out.”

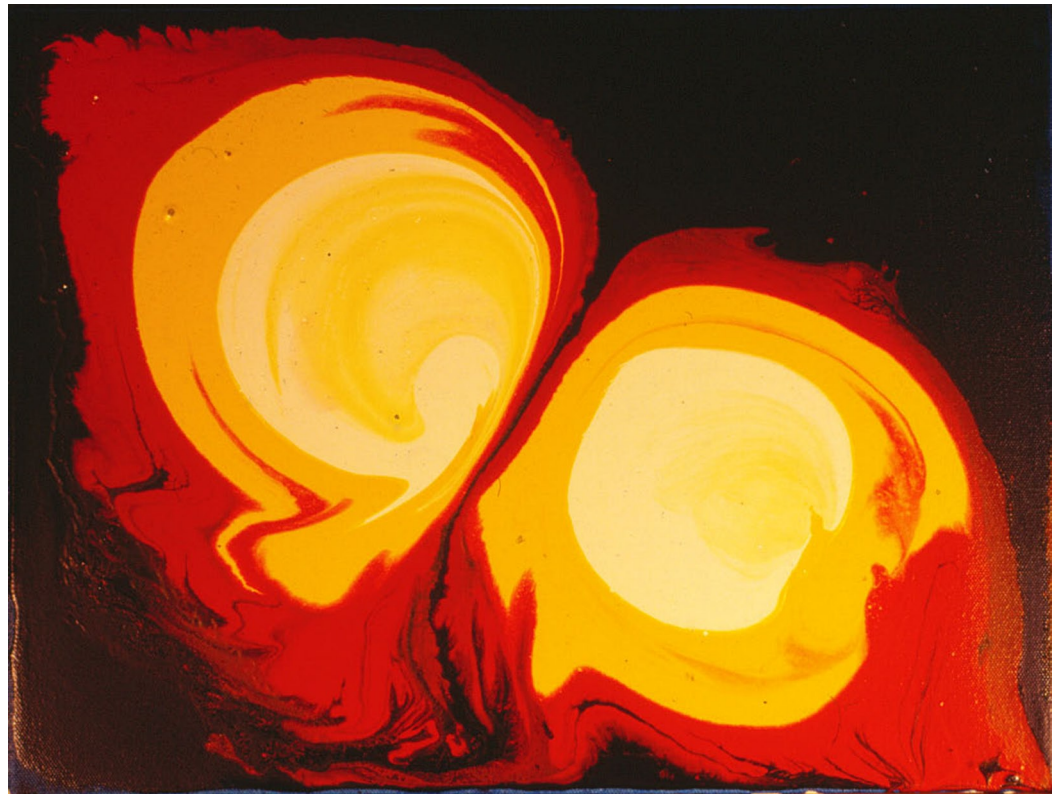
“I guess I did. When I was falling. I called you and must have stepped too close to the edge. A crazy misstep.” Clement twisted his upper body to the left. “I think the phone came out of my hand...as I was rolling and rolling. It flew that way. Both my cell phone and my keys.”

Weaver straightened up and pursed her glossy lips. She was thinking. “So you called me and said you lost your keys before you fell down and lost your keys?”

Clement’s voice rose an octave. “You know, I’m in pain right now.” He jerked around the wooden handle like a gear stick. “Listen. I fell and lost my keys and then I screamed out—”

“It’s okay, calm down, honey.” Weaver’s expression remained good-natured.

“Let me find my keys. Can you do that?”



“Yes.”

Clement hoed aggressively for a few moments, and then he slowed and used the blade to shovel small piles of dirt. Weaver watched her husband, barely moving, the shears drooping at the end of her hands.

“I guess my scream sounded pretty bad?” Clement finally said.

“Not so bad.”

Clement let out a weak, “Aaaaah,” and smirked and leaned heavily against the wooden handle. “Crazy,” he barely said. He squinted up at Weaver.

“Actually,” Weaver said, smiling. She swayed back and forth as if she was holding in a burst of laughter. “You know who you sounded like? Think about it, Clem. Mr. Screamerhead. Remember Mr. Screamerhead?”

Clement said, “Oh my God.” He wiped at his face with his shirt sleeve.

“He sat on the fire hydrant—”

“He lived on the bus stop bench.”

“In front of those apartments—our first home. I haven’t thought about him in years, Clem. Every morning, as you left for classes, I’d remind you, ‘Now, you steer clear of Mr. Screamerhead.’”

“You thought he might throw a rock through the wind shield,” Clement said, his chin now on his hand on top of the handle. “Or worse, pee all over your hood.”

“All he did was scream,” Weaver said. She stretched out her left leg like a slide. “He’d sit all day and night, looking at the traffic on Apache Boulevard, screaming his head off. No words. Did you ever hear him speak one word? No, only, ‘Aaaaaah.’ Poor guy. Can you imagine what was going on inside his head?”

“He wasn’t screaming because of what was inside his head,” Clement said. “He was upset, that’s all. He didn’t know where to go next. What to do next.”

“Oh, Clem,” Weaver said. “Oh, Clem, come up here.”

“Can’t we just go out another night?”

“Aren’t you tired of being cooped up in this house?”

“No.” Clement hacked at a waist-high bush near him.

“Let me take you out.”

Clement stopped hoeing and again leaned heavily against the wooden handle. “My right foot, Weaver, is killing me,” Clement said, sounding so feeble, on the verge of tears. “Maybe it’s broken.”

“Your foot is not broken. Stop it, already.”

“I’m not lying, and I feel horrible about missing your great dinner

plans and a movie or whatever. I do. I’d give anything if I could march right up this hill and go with you, I swear. I just can’t. I can’t, Weaver. So now you can stop it, okay? We’re staying home because I’m in terrific pain and I’m not.... Listen, can you just go? You can go and have a great time without me, okay?” Clement speared the hoe across the slope. The heavy end disappeared in the thick weeds, the wooden handle bobbing diagonally like an oar.

“Do you really want to blow off the only person who feels as bad and depressed as you do?”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes, yes, I do.”

“You’ve a place to go every day.” Spittle flew out of his mouth.

“You’ve got everything going for you. You’ve got everything you want.”

Weaver took a deep breath, and said with emphasis, “I want to go out tonight with you and you don’t. So I don’t have everything, do I?”

“Can’t I just find my keys?” Clement shouted.

“Fine. You’ll need these then,” Weaver said. Her bony elbows straightened and the gardening shears took flight.

Clement dove into the weeds. He blew hard and the webbing of green-bleed twigs and pollen and dust floated around his reddened face. He spit and spit, blinking his glistening eyes.

“Clem, it landed a mile away from you.” She went on, taking all of the stab out of her voice, “I’m sorry. I’m just very upset. How am I not being supportive? Just tell me. Tonight means...please, please, come up here. Roll up here, if you have to.”

Clement dug his hands into the earth, his fingers burrowing like a spreading runners.

Weaver hiked her dress up over her pale hips. She kicked off her shoes and stepped down the narrow path Clement had cleared earlier. She held the hem of her dress in a tight ball at her stomach, and the weeds scratched her white skin. Her bare feet flinched at the thorns and sank in the soft dirt. She finally stepped over Clement’s body and sat down, straddling his lower back. She picked a twig out of his hair.

“Clem, I really wish I knew how to help you. Tell you what comes next. How can I help you?”

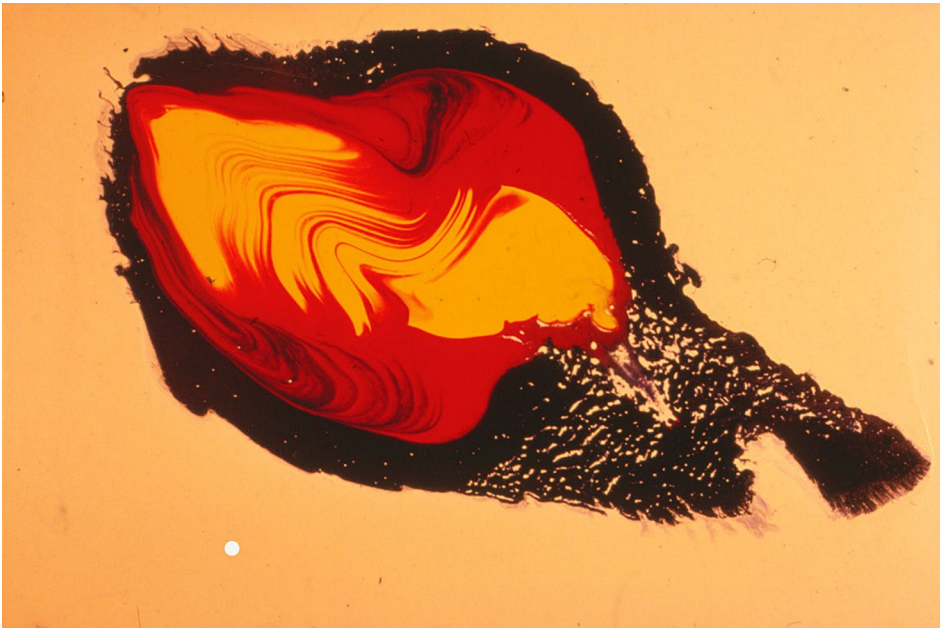
“You can’t,” Clement said in a monotone from beneath her.

Weaver reached over his right shoulder and yanked at his elbow. Clement put up a little resistance, but, after a moment, she pulled his hand out of the soft dirt. She reached over and pulled out his other hand, this time without much effort at all.

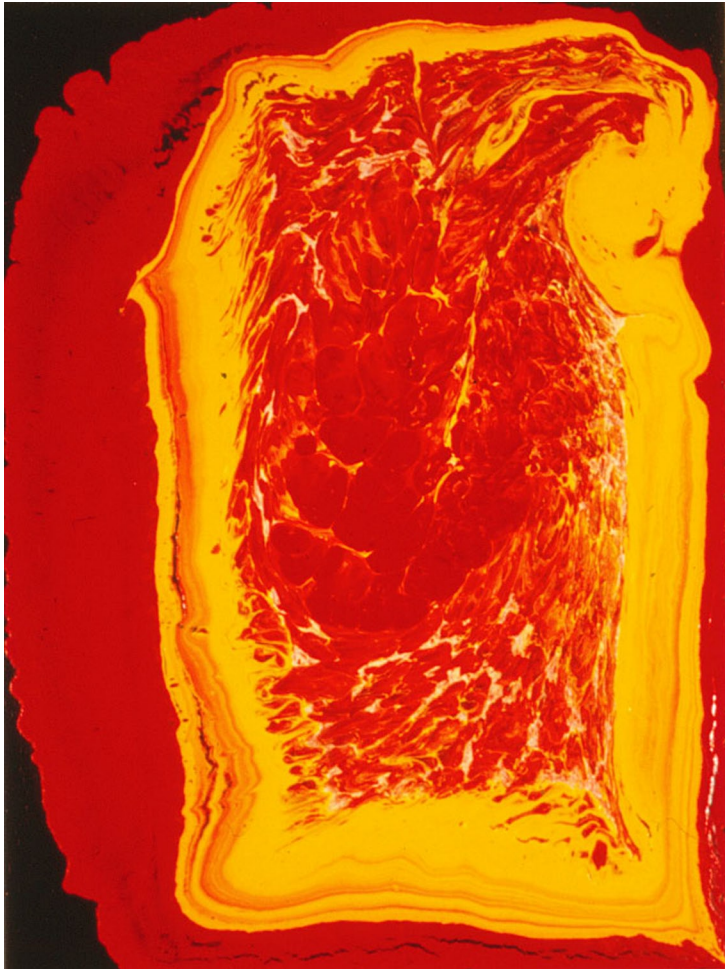


Jim Fuess  
Liquid Acrylic on Canvas

Fish



Quizzical Protozoan



Crying Crow

Dream



# A Sea of Logic

by Joshua Learn

We pushed our raft into the Sea of Logic to see if we could stay afloat.

A biblical flood swamping forests and towns prompted us to create our two-man ark. With an economy of space in mind, we packed only the most nutritious, long-lasting food and all the tools needed to measure orientation.

After we set off, two distinguished scientists with an organized plan for survival, the sea was initially calm and we floated for many leagues. We had a sail we'd calculated would blow us to safety if the trade winds were right. With a pen and a few maps the numbers looked good, and for several days we traveled westwards.

Then one night the stars suddenly blinked out and shortly after the rain came down in a heavy curtain. For the first day we clutched to our maps and theories but a rogue wave bounced us briefly in the air and swallowed most of our precious tools. We were purged under direct exposure to the elements while lightning flashed around us, exploding waves with its stabbing slice. We held on for hours, clutching the wooden planks upon which we'd gambled our minds and living consciousness. On the second night of storm, our small hull was struck by the Driftwood of Unpredictability and our senses were completely jarred — for a long time I had no sense of space or direction. When daylight finally broke I discovered a few planks had broken free from our raft, the realm by which we stayed afloat had shrunken perceptibly. By the third night my rational broke down in an erratic moment and I tossed the binoculars high across the water in sacrifice screaming, "Take this offering, great Poseidon!!"

I awoke to the taste of salt in calm waters and couldn't remember whether the occurrence had been but a nightmare. I looked around to find the binoculars were gone but the theories still seemed sound — I must have hallucinated their departure. I broke into argument with my companion after I joked, "It seems Poseidon accepted my humble sacrifice."

"There is no Poseidon just as there are now no binoculars!"

The argument escalated until we dropped into cold silence, glaring at each other from opposite corners of the raft until sleep interceded. The

next morning we discovered the raft wasn't moving — we were anchored somewhere in the Eddies of Insanity.

We dipped into our rations in order to get our minds working but to no avail. Shortly thereafter we lost track of time — the notches my companion had been scratching into a plank of wood with his fingers had become blurred when his split nails splashed drops of blood across the measurements. The chart now read that we'd been afloat for four notches and two bloodstains. Through all of our arguments, neither of us could raise a satisfactory theory on what that translated to in standard measurement.

At night I hallucinated numbers and formulas; I chanted quotes of Hume and Rousseau to keep us afloat and expostulated astonishing theories on the origin of the cosmos. Then suddenly a clear vision struck me and I asked, "What if the Sea of Logic is only the single facet of a massive ocean?"

My companion threw up into the water — the clear water was now a blending of murk.

The next morning I achieved sudden enlightenment and dived down seeking pearls and other treasures resplendent as the fruits of understanding. I carried our only flashlight and scuba tank but I couldn't reach the seafloor. When I gave up and ascended, a vast shape moved close by my person and I panicked and dropped everything. I surfaced two meters away from our boat sputtering, "*Monster!*"

My friend pulled me aboard the raft and slapped me in the face. "Shut up, you fool! Don't you realize we've reached the reef? The Barrier of Science!" I looked outwards and surely it was so. Our minds clear, we paddled towards it with our hands and kicked with our feet but once we neared, we realized our great error in calculation. A moment later our raft was dashed against the sharp coral with the breaking of the waves. Wood flew everywhere and all we could do was gather the largest piece — no more than two square meters in size — and push off once more.

"We now have no food or water and there's no land in sight!" I exclaimed but my companion sagely countered:

"That statement is incorrect. There is water everywhere and we have an endless supply of food for thought."

We laughed hysterically as the sea spun us in spirals. Later that night, I awoke from sleep to the sound of my companion chanting pledges of undying love for the bare-breasted sirens he claimed were all around us. I looked out at the ocean but in the darkness my powers of observation were fuzzy. I tried to focus my pupils but I could see nothing in the darkness.

"But love can only exist if there is an object, and if he claims his

undying love, then it follows that the object *must* exist,” I said to myself unsurely. I couldn’t remember if it was a scholarly quote and if so, who had stated it. I was losing my support as the waves continued to toss. I lied down on the plank of wood and held my face against four notches and two bloodstains.

My companion had taken his eyes off the unknown ocean for an instant to watch me. His end of the raft had begun to weigh more heavily. “Is there no logic in love?” he accused.

“Damn you! I don’t know,” I answered as I lifted my face off the wood — water had begun to wash across my face.

In response to my question, he sat down and began ripping out his long hair. He wrapped it around a single pencil he’d managed to preserve in a pocket in his tattered pants. He jammed it into a small knot in the wood so that it stood upright like a miniature deity and bowed low before it. In between prostrations he glared up at me with the same accusing eyes while I took a silver coin I had preserved in my own pocket and rubbed it for good luck.

On our final night, we were chasing shooting stars by kicking the water with our feet from the end of the raft. We were trusting to a sudden omen my companion claimed to have received from rubbing his hands together in front of his hair-pencil deity, now dubbed ‘The God of Clarity.’ As we kicked I prayed to any gods or spirits that cared to listen to provide me with my own vision for guidance. Just then, a rogue wave picked up our humble vessel and flung it far from our minds. The clouds cleared from my eyes and I saw light.



# Alice and Bob at Play in the Zero Field

by Terry White

I was born in 1950. Hydrogen bombs would be tested from Pacific atolls to the Nevada desert by the time I reached my first elementary schoolroom, and old Father Hennessy would loom from the pulpit with thundering sermons about enslavement to Communism. (He liked to smack fist into his palm as he ended his oration on the evils of "the hammer and the sickle").

One morning, Fr. Hennessy came to our playground at recess where we were flipping baseball cards, horsing around, playing Rover, Red Rover. He had a head full of shiny silver hair, a kind drunkard's face (I once moved the wine cruet away too soon and he gripped my wrist hard and held it there until the wine emptied). The nuns despised him, but he paid them no mind. We ran to him. He extended his arms like the big statue of Christ the Redeemer above Rio de Janeiro. Probably intoxicated, he said we could all go home. We took off—all but the bus kids—at the word and raced homeward in all directions scattering like minnows.

My father, like my uncles and grandfather, worked for Great Lakes Towing Company. I myself sailed the Great Lakes and made very good money for a teenager. I didn't mind being on the water for weeks on end while moving up or down the lakes, because I liked to read. Religion and English were the two subjects favored by the sisters of the Holy Humility of Mary—or the blue nuns, as they were called.

When I was five, my mother took me down to George O'Leary's shoe store in the harbor to buy me a pair of new shoes. My family and all my cousins used to buy their shoes from him. He was a neat, tidy man who wore white shirts and a Navy blue suit. He was clean-shaven and completely bald, no Caesar fringe, so that top of his head gleamed under lights. His voice was soft, not like my father's, and had a musical, lilting quality.

My father worked belowdecks on the big diesels that propelled this 90-ton workhorse. As a boy occasionally allowed to tag along for the day, I watched the men prepare to make a tow while the captain stayed in the pilothouse. My father coiled thick tow ropes, as big around as pythons, in loops back and forth on the stern. I loved those red-and-green tugboats as they cut through the water. High above me in the bow of the lakeboat, I

would see an arm toss a painter tied to the hawser down to a tugman on the afterend. The steamship's cargo hold was like a great monster with its belly stuffed with billions of taconite pellets, as many as stars, mined from the ore fields of Minnesota.

There were three tugs tied to iron bits cemented into the dock. The men called them niggerheads. The Idaho and the America were my favorites. After a tow, the men would go to a bar and drink. I drank ginger ale or orange soda and played Skee-ball. The men had huge bellies from consuming so much beer.

Twenty-five years before I was born, sitting in his study in Göttingen reading the liberal Berliner Tageblatt, Werner Heisenberg dreamed of meeting Albert Einstein. His work with Niels Bohr at the University of Copenhagen would result in his appointment as the youngest Professor of Theoretical Physics at the University of Leipzig at the age of 26.

At 26, Einstein was living with his older Serbian wife Mileva and their infant son Hans Albert, at 49 Kramgasse, Bern. Their two-room apartment was reached after a long climb up a steep staircase, but it was all he could afford as a clerk in the patent office. In what would be known as his "miraculous year," Einstein would produce five papers for the *Annalen der Physik*. The fourth paper of 1905 would grab the world's attention with its  $E=mc^2$  formula, proving matter and energy were exchangeable concepts. His final paper, modestly entitled "On a Heuristic Point of View Concerning the Production and Transformation of Light," would set a course for modern physics that would change everyday notions of reality, nature, God, and the universe more profoundly than had Newton's *Principia*.

Gone forever was the notion of a gossamer ether through which light traveled and stars twinkled. (For Newton this pervasive condition of absolute rest was nothing other than the eternally enduring Almighty.) Einstein wrote to a friend in May that his light theory was "very revolutionary," but he did not wholly trust it, and he would never accept its probabilistic view of reality despite the fact that Heisenberg and Erwin Schrödinger in the 1920s were already establishing the validity for quantum theory with mathematical matrices.

Einstein philosophically desired a universe of causality, one comprised entirely of granular atoms or one existing in discrete, continuous bundles of energy (his quanta), these flowing, indivisible packets of energy, never at rest. "God does not play dice," Einstein would famously say—to which Heisenberg's Danish mentor Niels Bohr would respond—although no one is certain of the verbatim response: "Einstein, stop telling God what to



do with His dice."

I sailed the Great Lakes for a couple years as an ordinary seaman, then I hitchhiked home from the Bethlehem Steel plant in Gary, Indiana where my boat, the Lehigh, was tied up. My girlfriend and I eloped to Monroe, Michigan. We bought wedding rings at a jewelry store near the statue of General Custer. Back home, I asked our parish priest to marry us at Mother of Sorrows, where I had gone through the eighth grade and served hundreds of masses. Father Kelly had a brogue and an unwavering sternness and refused. I had stopped believing in God by then. My wife's face wet with tears as we left the parish house.

Three years before his prestigious appointment, Heisenberg hoped to meet the great man at a lecture to be given in Leipzig. Widespread anti-Semitic agitation at the time might have prevented this. Heisenberg was handed a leaflet on his way up the steps to the lecture by a student of the most prominent German physicist of the day; in it, Einstein's theories were deplored as Jewish propaganda. They would meet three years later in autumn at the Solvay Congress in Brussels. By then, Heisenberg had perfected his uncertainty principle based on Schrödinger's breakthrough experiments on wave mechanics. The meeting was cordial but Einstein refused to concede to the theory of uncertain relations, arguing that unobservable quantities were essential to all theories. Future mathematicians, he hoped, would prove this so.

In 1935 Einstein and two colleagues published a paper on the strange nature of quantum superposition. A quantum superposition is the combination of all the possible states of a system. If, for instance, a laser-bombarded isotope of beryllium has a top-spin, diagonal spin, or a down-spin, its mate will arrive at its detector with a corresponding opposite spin. Researchers have sent these

subatomic pairs down fiber-optic lines and discovered the same result every time. The isotopes (physicists facetiously call them "Bob" and "Alice") in these experiments) cannot communicate with each other en route to their detectors—unless it is at many times faster than the speed of light, the universe's automatic braking system, according to Einstein.

This brings me to Schrödinger's cat in the box. Schrödinger's what-if experiment works thusly: place a cat in a sealed box with a flask of hydrocyanic acid and a radioactive source in a Geiger counter. Isolate the box from any decoherence. If a single decayed atom is released, it causes the counter tube to discharge, releasing a hammer to break the glass tube of poison, which kills the cat. The cat's life is dependent on a single subatomic particle. After a short elapse of time, the cat, he argued, must be seen to remain both dead and alive to the universe outside the box. It's a classic *reductio ad absurdum* argument, but he never intended to prove that a cat could be dead and alive at the same time.

Schrödinger called it *Verschränkung*—"entanglement." Einstein called it "spooky action at a distance." When he and Schrödinger exchanged letters in 1950, Einstein was fulsome in praise of this so-called "Copenhagen interpretation." A system stops being a superposition at the moment of observation—one must look inside the box to see if the cat is alive or dead.

The problem with the cat paradox, as contemporary cosmologists have noted, is that the cat and the observer are necessarily "entangled" at the moment of observation.

When opening the box, the observer becomes entangled with the cat so states of observation corresponding to the cat's being alive or—as Schrödinger himself inelegantly expressed it, "mixed or



smear out in equal parts"—is not possible. At the moment of observation, the already split-cat has further separated into an observer looking into a box at a dead cat or an observer looking at a live cat. No single-state perception is possible to collapse into until both observer and cat are joined in a common system state where the information known is held by both the cat inside the box and the observer looking down into it. Different branches of the universe, in other words. Both real, both possible. Einstein insisted nothing could travel faster than light, but quantum computers will make today's computers (i.e., Turing machines) with their ones and zeroes seem like quaint Amish buggies shambling up to the starting gate at the Grand Prix.

At 26 I taught for a small college in Salem, West Virginia that underwent a transformation from Baptist affiliation to a private, Japanese-owned university. I remember a couple of cousins named Fontana who played football. One of the cousins was illiterate and copied what I wrote on the board in his tiny, sloping penmanship.

On the day I went with my mother to George O'Leary's shoe store, however, something was wrong. Shoes boxes lay strewn all over the store as if someone were piling them up for bonfires. New shoes were scattered about, still folded in tissue. He was dressed in his dark blue suit and his mel-low voice was the same, but I sensed my mother growing nervous as Mister O'Leary brought one pair after the other for me to try on. He set each pair next to my feet as gently as if they were swaddled newborns. I don't recall how long we were inside but my mother hustled me out of there with a nervous explanation that I knew was a lie.

Did I read about his funeral or did someone tell me of it? I have no clear memory. I was too young to know what Alzheimer's was, and I would not learn of Newton's melancholy second law until high school.

In the zero-point field where all energy disappears, a single cubic centimeter of this emptiness (a "morphogenetic field" or "the thin stuff from which everything is made") has a density of ten thousand billion to the power of four more energy than all the matter in the known universe. We cannot measure it. Like Bob and Alice, "it" knows everything that happens in the universe, instantaneously and with absolute accuracy. It is where all action at a distance occurs in perfect synchronicity at ten-thousand times the speed of light. Jung called it the collective unconscious. It is a field of information or, if you prefer, a field of pure consciousness. Some say it is God.

We move inexorably toward something, if not chaos. The light that reached me is always eight minutes old. In the "diabolical mechanism" of

my brain is a box of memories where lonely misfits gather—but no cats, alive or dead. A man stands in an empty store, a boy watches his father coil a rope, and a gentle whiskey priest stretches his arms toward children at play.



# Cantor Matyas Balogh

by Mathias B. Freese

In the Hungarian town of Monor, Cantor Matyas Balogh taught his liturgical prayers to a few bar mitzvah students for very little money. The cantor gave lessons to supplement his meager income, the synagogue providing him with two rooms in the back of the sanctuary. He had an old cast iron stove for heat during the difficult winters and a hot plate. And there was an ice box that kept the butter, cheese and milk reasonably chilled. The cantor always kept some chocolate in the ice box. One wall of his living room was lined with crooked and sagging pine shelves that held his musical arrangements, prayer books bound in goatskin, a picture or two of him with other students at a seminary many years ago; here and there a *tshatsbke* from his travels, a Spanish silver goblet for the Passover seder, an incense box from France, and several postcards from a stay in Vienna, his favorite of all cities. A porcelain mezuzah he bought at the Alhambra in Granada.

As he made breakfast for himself, one egg, only once a week, jam, hard pumpernickel bread and a glass of tea made from leaves, he put a sugar cube between his front teeth and sipped. Cleaning up he always left for mid day as it took away from the pleasure of breakfast. In the morning he did his scales, running through lyrics in his baritone voice which had a low register to it, as if a cello. Now and then the cantor took some honey so as to keep his instrument resonant, tuned and refreshed. On some occasions he might sing to himself a Gershwin tune he'd heard in a cabaret in Vienna. He was a quick learn and very fluent in several languages. Loving Gershwin, he was probably the only cantor in all of Monor if not the entire county who sang a little Gershwin. One of his favorite 78s was Oscar Levant's interpretation of "Rhapsody in Blue." And he was probably as well the only cantor in Monor who read Kafka, his favorite stories "The Burrow" and "In the Penal Colony," all contained in slender literary magazines Rabbi Rosenzweig gave him as a present in Vienna, saying "Kafka speaks to these times."

Life for the cantor had its rhythms and regularities. News over the radio was grim as the Nazis were on the march across Europe, Hitlerian tirades broadcast almost on a daily basis. Hungary was next, the cantor knew. Having traveled as a young student, he considered migrating to Russia, but with its history toward the Jews it was far from a good choice; he thought of Poland,

but like Russia, a land of pogroms. Vienna since *Anschluss* was now Nazified, Hitler's haunt as a young man. The cantor had read *Mein Kampf* underlining with his favorite fountain pen passages that revealed anti-Semitism of an extreme kind. The diary reeked with Jew hatred. Hitler had told Cantor Balogh exactly what he had planned for him. The cantor chose to stay put, to master his fate, if he could while here, in his birthplace, old Monor.

With no relatives alive, the cantor seemed to have friends everywhere, often former students who had learned from him over the years in different congregations. One had emigrated to America, settling in a place called Brooklyn and who periodically regaled the cantor with his adventures in the New World. The cantor kept these letters in an old tin box and from time to time took them out and reread about all the oddities and personal excitements of his former student, Moishe, now situated in an orthodox synagogue in Flatbush, also in Brooklyn. The cantor read beneath the words and sensed how vital and alive life was in America. One sensed that in singing any Gershwin song.

Reading Moishe's letters was like devouring a good piece of chocolate which prompted him to consider walking to town to the shop that made homemade sweets. He had sequestered some money for pleasure as his cost of living as a single man was minimal. At 51 he could stitch his own clothing, iron as well, cook some meals, make a reasonably good goulash, wash his underwear, all the basic needs of a bachelor who had only a few gray strands in his beard which he trimmed back as bushy ones annoyed him. Things out of place vexed the orderly and rational mind of the good cantor.

At the sweet store candies of many kinds were neatly arrayed on paper doilies, piled upon one another like chocolate Mayan temples, others concentrically displayed like Stonehenge, wheels within wheels. A paper label always gave the price by piece or weight. The selective customer could begin with one piece and add increments from there. On the two counters specialties were presented and customers sampled gladly and freely. Cantor Balogh walked about tasting this and that, always coming back to chocolates, assessing talmudically, what treats, given what change he had, might provide the best sustained pleasure. While Christian scholastics had obsessed over the number of angels on a head of a pin, the cantor savored the differing qualities of chocolate, quite the gourmand. And since he didn't like to gobble his food, for food is a major event in Jewish life, the cantor savored everything about life, even down to sucking a charm to its last piquant snap of flavor. He wasn't a connoisseur; if anything, a sensualist.

The cantor observed a woman in her forties, statuesque, her bust

firm, her hands in a muff, glide about the shop, clearly deciding what sweet she might buy. She came his way, paused, “What would you suggest as I can’t seem to make up my mind, they all look so good?”

The cantor was amused. “I prefer chocolate in any shape. Whatever else is added – almond, hazelnut or cherry pieces – are only extra delights. The sweet chocolate in this shop is extraordinary.”

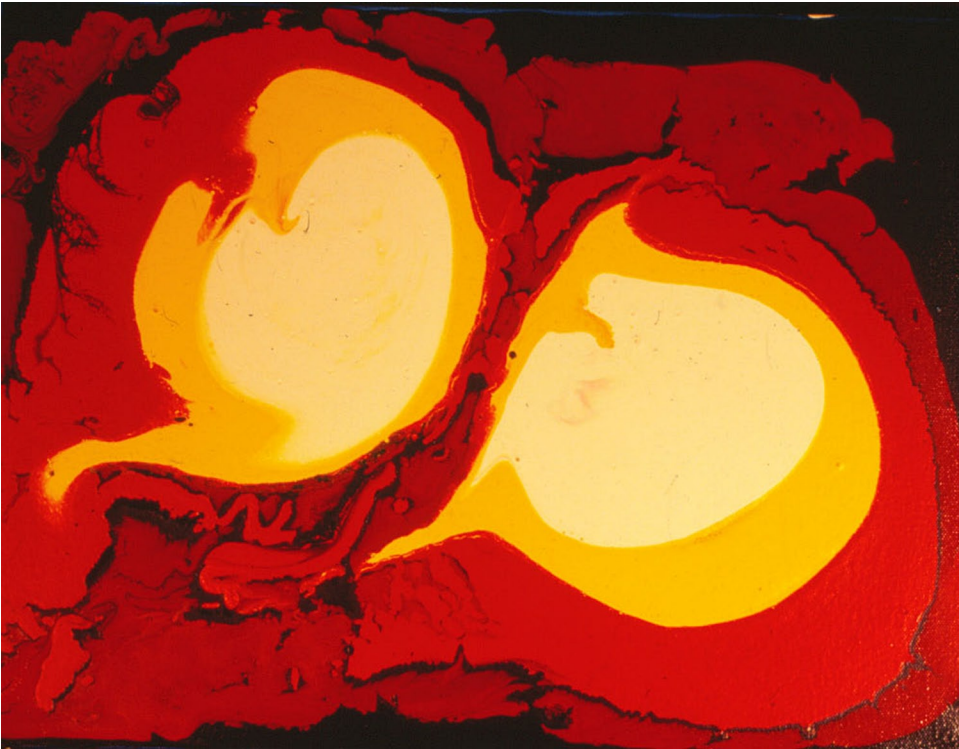
With that the woman asked the confectioner for a selection of chocolate pieces and not to go beyond what might be reasonable.

“May I offer you a piece, sir?”

“Oh, no, no. I’ve had my limit. Thank you, madam.”

“Are you sure?”

The cantor was a bit rusty, not having engaged the female sex for some time now. Quickly, he adapted and asked her if she might have coffee with him. He thought himself abrupt, but loneliness can do that to you, he mused.



Surprisingly, she agreed and down the block they chose a café they both knew and liked.

“And what is your name?”

“Rebecca Katzman.”

“I’m Matyas Balogh.”

“And you told me on our way that you are a cantor at a local synagogue.”

“Yes.”

“And what does a cantor do exactly?”

“We sing in Hebrew.” And he smiled.

Rebecca found that evasively dry if not witty.

“And do you frequent sweet shops?”

“All the time. How else should I keep my voice in shape?”

He enjoyed playing with her. In fact, the cantor was having a delightful time away from liturgy, like being in gay Vienna once more. And it had been a few years since he sat across a mature woman and made small talk.

“What do you do, Rebecca?”

“I work for a law firm as an assistant.”

“That must be very interesting during these times.”

“We don’t do immigration work if that’s what you mean. We are less controversial. It’s all so dry, mortgages, titles, interest rates and the like.”

“Do you like your work?”

“Work is work, Matyas. Real life is afterward, like meeting you in a sweet shop.”

The cantor enjoyed her calling him by his first name, it felt so less abstract.

“So, it sounds to me, Rebecca, that you haven’t as yet found your calling.”

“And you, Matyas, is being a cantor all that you could be?”

“No, it’s not. However, it has its riches. I come from a family of cantors. It was meant to be, I imagine.”

“You mean you couldn’t choose otherwise.”

“In a way I felt obligated to do it and so far it hasn’t been a dreadful experience, not at all. I have managed the discontent.”

“So, we’re not so different, you and I. We put ourselves second – and the years go along and we grow older and one day we become aware that we’re mispending our brief lives.”

“Rebecca, I came to town for a piece of chocolate and now I end up with a philosopher.”

She laughed, her face quite pleasant to the cantor, charming in manner and poise. Her fingers slender, nails polished, he observed her ears were small.

“Matyas,” again his name said warmly, “I think a lot.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I have a mind that struggles to be aware. I observe – that’s more than enough for any human being. It may be our only task in life. Others, of late, regrettably, seem to want to control that – or do away with it completely.”

Her seriousness touched him. “Rebecca,” he said disarmingly, “if the conversation goes on like this, I’ll begin to take notes. You drop ideas on me like gum drops.”

With that, she thrust back her head and laughed, quite infectiously at that. Charmed with her, the cantor easily joined in, both laughed for they were enjoying one another and how pleasant that was for the cantor who could be not a little somber.

“Matyas, lawyers at my work cannot experience what we just did, for certain. As a cantor, after all, you must be filled with anecdotes, jokes, fables, parables, that keep your congregation amused. And your taste in chocolate is impeccable.”

“Rebecca, I sing at weekly services, tutor a little, leaving wisdom to the rabbis.”

“Matyas, I must be off quite soon. Next Wednesday, I’ll be by again for more sweets. Will you be at the shop? Perhaps at about four?”

“And may we come here again for talk and laughter?”

“Of course.”

With that they parted. The cantor relished watching her hourglass figure glide down the street accompanied by one or two prurient thoughts.

During the next few days the cantor thought Rebecca, not liturgy or preparing young boys for their bar mitzvahs. He chuckled when he realized he had eaten three eggs that week, the equivalent of a box of chocolates. And he knew what he was about when he actually had a barely redeemable suit cleaned and pressed. “Katzman, Katzman, I need you like a hole in my head,” he thought, having his evening glass of tea and again treating himself to an extra sugar cube. “I’m smitten,” he said to himself, enjoying how anticipation for their next meeting actually brought a modicum of pleasure to his circumscribed life.

At last it was the day to meet Miss Katzman, and the hours dragged on while he listened impatiently to the croaking altos of his two bar mitzvah students. Finally, he was on the street in his refreshed suit, a tie that took him

10 minutes to knot, polished black shoes, his only dress pair.

Katzman was waiting at the doorway of the sweet shop, again with her muff, for it was cold.

“You look quite debonair, Matyas. Shall we go to our haunt?”

After coffee and a delicate pastry, they began to chat in a more serious vein.

“Are you going to be intense once more, Rebecca?”

“Do you find it troubling to feel my ‘intensity,’ as you call it?”

“On the contrary. When I sing a deeply moving prayer, I’m in a world of my own. All significant music has to be interpreted. I’m always searching for an inflection, a tone that might reveal to me and the listener, the possibly sublime meanings of the lyrics. And if you encourage me, like in some American films I’ve seen (he quickly thought of Alan Jones in “The Firefly”), I may well break into a song in the middle of this very bistro.”

“You don’t worry me, one bit, maestro Matyas. You can sing to me at any time, any place. I dare you.”

So, Cantor Matyas Balogh took a furtive glance about the café and sensed a song might be welcomed by the patrons. But what should it be? A lullaby in Hebrew, an intricate chant from the liturgy (not the place), a little Gershwin, yes, Gershwin.

Boldly now, the cantor took Rebecca’s hand and sang to her “S Wonderful” in that burnished mahoghannied baritone of his. Patrons looked toward the couple, smiling, amused, for these were sad times, oppressively felt.

Crooning to her, the simple lyrics began to make sense to him on other levels and he felt somewhat embarrassed but his creativity, his singing gave panache and he expressed himself to her with undercurrents romantic and yearning.

Rebecca’s face was a kaleidoscope of feelings, and she let herself succumb to the moment and was moved by her cantor friend, her Matyas, “Dear, Dear Matyas,” she actually said to herself, as he sang to her, with those piercing hazel eyes.

When he had finished, she stood with all the rest of the café and clapped. Shortly after, the gracious owner refreshed their coffees and brought tarts to their table in gratitude.

“Matyas, this is the wrong word, but you are a delightful ham.”

“I embarrassed you?”

“The music is so delirious and alive. I didn’t understand all the words for my English is not as good as yours and it would have suffered, no doubt, in translation.”

“You feel America in it. I know it’s hard to sit there and have someone sing to you. So uncomfortable! It was done to me by my father and I would cringe until I grew older and realized that there is much affection in that exchange. Isn’t there, Rebecca?”

“While you flirt with me you are endearing, my Matyas!”

So the cantor and Rebecca reached that point in which they became a couple, although nothing had been said as if the informality of it was to be cherished. Words couldn’t contain it. The cantor knew he had found someone intensely affectionate and with the spice of an exceedingly sharp mind which kept him off balance at times, for Rebecca had an unusually pragmatic worldview—or realistic side, if you will, to her in contrast to his thinking processes, more of a raveled sleeve than anything else. Gently Rebecca rubbed his nose against the way things are while he was off into what they could be. Matyas Gershwin had the world while Rebecca tangoed with it, silky long-limbed connections and then quick and rapid turns, swirls and swerves away from it. Rebecca always partnered well with what *is*. The cantor could abide all this for she knew his need – the cantor needed to be *felt*.

Throughout the fall months the couple walked the by-ways of small Monor, supped at restaurants previously unknown to each, saw a few movies and strolled the parks now littered with dead leaves, harbinger of the wintry months ahead. The newspapers and radio propagandized while the fascist Arrow Cross party grew stronger and bolder each day. Monor’s Jews knew the time was at hand. The lovers avoided in their conversation anything that might intrude upon their dream state. It was a subtle agreement they had come upon while the world was preparing for invasions, death and dying. Poland had been invaded in 1939. The Blitz was ending in England. The eastern European countries slavishly mimicked the Nazis so to keep some marginal measure of national sovereignty. Admiral Horthy was doing just that. Any aware person understood full well that the civilized world was collapsing.

Rebecca had decided to shatter the bubble they had dwelled in these past few months. At some profound level, she realized, as a woman, she had to manage this dreamy relationship, configure it, for Matyas seemed suspect. Was he aware?

At dinner one night, she destroyed it all. Her belief was that Matyas, now her lover, would prove durable.

“My dear Matyas, I’ve many things to tell you this night. Are you prepared?”

“Prepared,’ I don’t know what that really means. Are you hinting at something threatening to our relationship?”

“Not exactly. Allow me to tell you more about my story, for you and I have colluded in not exploring that. I know so very much more about your past than you know about mine.”

“I have learned not to ask human beings such questions. However, you are about to tell me of your dark and shadowy past, a long line of lovers, one a Magyar prince, that you have an illegitimate child; that you were a streetwalker in Vienna and are now contrite.”

“What fantasies! What a perverse imagination – from a cantor as yet.”

“If you want me to feel guilt, I don’t. I gave up guilt many, many years ago. It is a wasteful emotion. By the by, never forget, a cantor is a man.”

“Some guilt is not a bad thing.”

“Perhaps. But I’m not a sinner. I am lustful in bed with you. Should I feel guilt about all our gymnastics?”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Good. Now to your point.”

Rebecca smiled. Gathering up her intent, she began. “My parents, my sister and brother, many of my cousins are either dead or in concentration camps. Although born in Hungary, my father was a businessman and for awhile settled with our family in Poland. It was there that his business was confiscated by the Nazis. Before we were interned, he gave each of us what monies he had and told us to flee Poland. I don’t know if Sophie and Paul are alive as father shrewdly told us to separate and take different directions. I returned to Monor. I hide in the open spaces of this closed society. I told you my last name because you are a Jew, a cantor no less. To remain a human being I have to trust now and then. In these past few months I have behaved recklessly. It’s hard to give up being free.”

“And what do you mean by all this?”

“I cannot afford to be happy. Pleasure will not be mine for many years. I can only afford a piece or two of chocolate in life. You’re now in my life and I was caught off guard. No Jew, Matyas, can afford to do that. I worry about you in that ‘cave’ of yours behind the synagogue. They’ll come for you there, in time. What will you do? Lace up your tefillin and do a jig for them? Or perhaps sing ‘S Wonderful’ to the arresting officer.”

The cantor was taken aback.. So much thrown at him in such a heavy way, part criticism, part biography, part urgency – even scolding, an amalgam of care and concern, all with an electric charge to it. A warning. An alarm. A call to reason and action. A shaming of how supposedly indifferent he was to the world about him.



“‘S Wonderful’ has to be left out of it, Rebecca. Do not use it as a weapon against me.”

“Yes, not a little harsh. I used a very dear moment about us against you. I just sense over these passionate few months that we have overlooked these dreadful times.”

“What is to be done? you say. I’ve my world and it’s threatened. I know that very well, believe me. I know the future will be bleak for me – and you. Should I not make merry? Should I give up my love for you? Should I give you up entirely and take on a profound level of despair as my companion? Rebecca, is depression the answer? I realize prayer is not the way. I have loved, abiding, profound. Is this not the way?”

“I wasn’t ready for such an answer. I may have misread you because I was fearful, and you can be cavalier. Matyas, I’ve learned to be alone. In that, I find strength. Have you learned that as well?”

“I’ll share what I can of what is very private to me. Struggle to be patient as I tell you this.”

Rebecca drew close. Was she to hear intimacies that she couldn’t deal with? But she knew, given her past, all was old in human nature.

“I’ve skirted relationships all these years because I was a fool. I shunned affection, although I craved and desired it. I avoided love because I had doubts about my own capacity not only to experience it but to return it as well. And, Rebecca, it was all a self-made charade. We lie to ourselves each day. We are made up of lies, not truths. Truths, as you know, are often unbearable. How should I say this? Man fears nighttime. And he loves daytime. Yet we often flee more from the light than the dark.”

Here the cantor paused, filled both their cups with tea. Went on.

“You and I are on a lark. Our ship is love and our feelings sail. We need no direction in these times. The compass is broken. I’m not a simple cantor lost in his studies. There are hundreds of cantors all across Europe’s shtetls who will be wiped out – blessed be their souls – because they find truth and love in their teachings, books and prayers. Who am I to judge? I have found love which really, Rebecca, if we look at it clearly, is meaning. Love is meaning. I’m alone because, like you, I know who I am, what or what not can be exposed to me, what I can or cannot realize or be aware of. Tonight you thought you had pricked my bubble, but there never was one to begin with. I’ve lived, coupled and loved you these rare and precious few months, free of illusions, totally aware of our shared folly and how precarious all this is.”

Here Matyas sipped his tea, smiled at Rebecca, for he had his say so far.

“I’m overwhelmed, Matyas. You have said so much for both of us. In a way you’ve stated eloquently what our love is, for I thought it was indifference on your part, but it’s commitment, isn’t it, Matyas?”

Raising his cup, Matyas said, “I love you in ways I hope to imagine for I would die if any harm came to you. I love you because you’ve become a part of myself. Can you grasp these awkward words?”

Rebecca placed her hand upon his.

...

The lark continued. Love making now was urgent, febrile, intensely all consuming as if the moment couldn’t be sustained. They both desired duration, above all, of time profoundly felt and experienced. The time of chronology only made them anxious for events were worsening – Jews were being gathered and herded to be sent west to hell. Horthy’s government actively worked with the Nazis to that end. Synagogues were ransacked, looted and set on fire. And the first issuance of yellow stars began, what Matyas called his “gold star,” as if a grade of excellence.

Meetings between them were now constricted, either her small studio or his “cave.” When they made love, it was neither sex nor lust but appeared in tender coupling. Both understood very well, though unspoken, for that was the magic of it, that in their love-making there was a sense of search, for that explosive moment in which the outer world shattered and vanished. What was craved was an experience, a mutual event between them that signified their oneness and thereby revealed what was essential to each as lover and individual. At moments Rebecca felt this rapture, an inordinate closeness for self and other; at moments Matyas was ravaged by a radical sense of endearment for Rebecca, quite explosive. Each was now sharing an extraordinary awareness of the other.

Early snow as Rebecca hurried through the cramped village streets of Monor with her groceries as she was to make dinner in their “cave” this evening. She knew at once when she saw the synagogue doors swung open. Rushing through the aisles of the sanctuary, pews overturned, the eternal light torn from its chain, she made her frenetic way to the back door that led to Matyas’ rooms.

His small living room was a shambles – shelving and books scattered about, picture frames shattered, his tea service now in pieces. And Matyas was not here. Gone. Rebecca sat down on his one soft chair. Taken away no doubt, she thought, the soldiers had destroyed what they could.

Matyas’ ancient tefillin passed down to him on his bar mitzvah by



his father were strewn across the floor, the leather boxes smashed and the straps creased probably by boots crushing them. His tallis was in a corner, now a wet clot of snow and mud. As Rebecca's eyes desperately grazed about the room she saw a letter-sized envelope, spared, angling out from two books. She retrieved it and on its face it read, in English, perhaps meant to confuse the Arrow Cross, "Rebecca, for you."

Sitting down, she opened the note. It began with Gershwin. "S Wonderful! 'S Marvelous! That you should care for me."

Dearest –

This note was written days before I was taken away. It's the end of our lark. Probably, if they haven't torn it up, by the time your eyes read it, I'm on a train to Poland or Germany. I will not be back. Maybe as I speed toward my fate I'll give up being a cantor and become a rabbi. No more Gershwin for me.

All that I can say to you has been said by my flesh, my hands, my face, our joining together as one. Words carry no freight in this instance. You once asked me if I was alone. Well, I think not. I have you in heart and mind and you comfort me, despair is lifted. You are a psalm for me to utter in the darkness. All of us must die in some fashion, but not all of us have lived as lovingly, as deeply as I have in your presence, in your arms, in your embrace.

Survive for both of us! Live, my darling.

Your loving,  
Matyas

Rebecca rose from her seat with his letter in hand, but as she went for the door she stopped herself, and turned. Looking about the disarray, she saw Matyas everywhere – torn pictures of him in seminary; his goatskin siddurs that the Arrow Cross urinated on; the porcelain mezuzah, now splintered, he had shown her on her first visit; she noticed the postcards from Vienna and the shattered demi-tasse cup he had bought there; she traced with her fingers the rings left on his table by his coffee cup; and she was pained at the crinkled black papers used for chocolate which he had treasured for some reason. A slew of journals, newspapers and magazines littered the floor, reeking from piss.

She looked again as if it were for the first time about his quarters. A

small box filled with yomicas and tallises for his students soaked in ink; his favorite fountain pen, an American Schaefer purchased in France, was snapped in two, its nib pushed in; several books by Freud, especially his favorite, he had told her, *Moses and Monotheism*, were shredded, their pages strewn about; a tarot deck that Matyas could interpret; again postcards with pictures of Michelangelo's "David," Seurat's "Sunday on the Grand Jatte," which he thought simply wonderful, and the Eiffel Tower among others, had ink blotches on them; a pink rubberball for his students to play "catch" between lessons; an old chess set made in Jerusalem, he had explained, with male figures of scholars, Maimonides as king, the kings and queens with broken heads; a book by Spinoza, another by Melville, actually set on fire, some pages charred; a glass paperweight in the shape of a Mogen David, millefiore, from Italy, looked as if smashed with a hammer; an untouched, new book of stamps, for he was always corresponding with former students and finally a profile shot of George Gershwin in a mahogany frame – his nose extended with crayon to accentuate it, one crinkled black candy paper glued to the top and the date they had first met inked in on its bottom. All this was not as remarkable as knowing he could speak five languages, write in three, or quote long passages from Byron's *Don Juan* as he often did in bed with her.

Leaving everything aside except for the letter and the dated chocolate paper, Rebecca cherished the room for a moment, for it contained everything she would ever need to remember about her cantor.



Anthony Aiuppy

# The Pussycat Master

by Traci Burns

Andy likes his eggs scrambled hard, almost burned, tough and brownish. I like mine fluffy, maybe even a little underdone. This morning I cracked four eggs into a bowl and stirred them, added a splash of milk and some pepper, poured them into the already-hot skillet and watched the bubbles. I scooped a few out of the skillet when they looked about right for me and ate them standing up in the kitchen, waiting for Andy's to blacken. When his were ready, I put them on the plate next to his already-buttered English muffin. I poured his coffee and added the milk. I never tell my girlfriends that I feed Andy like this, but I do it every day. I'm compelled to do it. I have fifties housewife genes, domesticity in my blood. I can make any recipe exactly right on the first try. You could eat dinner off of my kitchen floor.

*Well, then, eat dinner off of it tonight* was the e-mail I got today from P.M. P.M. is short for Pussycat Master. I met him online. I call him P.M. in my head because I don't like thinking the word *pussy* all the time. I'm not a prude, but that word makes me uncomfortable. I wrote to him this morning telling him about my domestic bliss. I thought he'd be interested in the subservience implicit in the housewife schtick. I thought he'd think even more what a catch I was, what a wonderful girl, he'd be surprised at how much I think about things, how I analyze every stir of my spoon in the eggs, every minute spent Dustbusting up the toast crumbs on the living room floor. When I first met P.M., I thought his name meant he wanted to be the master of my – well, *you know*. It turns out his name means that *he's* the pussycat, he's a genuinely sweet guy. And he's ordering me to eat my dinner off of my kitchen floor. I have to admit, I'm excited.

Andy and I got married right after I graduated from college. He was graduating from law school, and he got a job right away at his Daddy's law firm. I was an English major; my options were more limited. I worked for a little while as an assistant manager at Barnes & Noble but we decided that I could quit and just be a housewife for a little while. I keep everything clean, watch Oprah, talk on the phone to my girlfriend Margaret who has a two-month-old with a colic issue, and I write e-mails to P.M. I always made fun of people with online boyfriends – it seemed corny and desperate, something reserved for people with chronic flaws, like a harelip or a stutter. P.M. lives in Las Vegas and,

from his pictures, looks like a gray-bearded Danny DeVito. Andy works out three days a week; he has a tan and a head of thick blonde hair, but when I'm with him at night, I close my eyes to try and imagine the gleam of nightstand light on a bald head.

Andy isn't home yet but I'm expecting him any minute. For dinner I made steaks, baked potatoes, asparagus with a balsamic vinegar drizzle. There's a blueberry pie in the oven. The house smells like Lemon Pledge; there isn't a pillow out of place. I am even wearing an apron, one that used to be my mother's – it's pink and black, very 50s, with a pattern of little cartoon dogs. I keep staring at the kitchen floor, the black-and-white tile. It's gleaming up at me, daring me, exciting me. I still don't know how I'm going to sneak away from the dinner table to eat off the floor, but figuring it out is thrilling. I hear Andy walk in; I open the refrigerator, stick my head in, looking for nothing, pretending not to have been waiting for him.

"Hey, baby. Dinner's smelling good. Willya grab me a beer out of there?" Andy drops his armload of papers and work paraphernalia on the kitchen counter, grins at me when I hand him the Miller Lite. He looks so young, almost younger than he looked when we were in school. He's wearing a suit, a pink dress shirt, some loud paisley tie. I love the way he dresses, I have to admit it. There's something fundamentally great about a man in a suit, especially a man in a rumpled suit, with the necktie all loose and the shirt all wrinkled.

Back in the day, Andy would never have believed he'd be wearing a suit and tie every day. In 1990, he wore skintight black stretch jeans, Cure t-shirts; he dyed his fair hair inky black and spiked it up with cheap hot-pink hair gel. He always smelled like cigarettes and metal – I can't explain it, the metal smell, but it was something sharp and exhilarating. There was a certain kind of girl back in 1990 for whom Andy was the ideal boyfriend; he had women all over him, all the time, and he picked me. At the time I was too self-conscious to ask him why it was me he'd chosen – maybe I didn't want him to examine his choice for fear that he'd realize he'd fucked up, *wait, what am I doing with this chubby enthusiastic girl?*, he'd send me back and pick another mate from the long line of tall, skinny, chain-smoking arty girls dying to be near him. He never talked much about our relationship – he was never much of a talker; he communicated with his silences, or at least that's what the arty girls thought. They thought sitting next to him at a party for three hours and not saying a word was the sexiest thing on the planet. I always hated it; I'd always get up and leave him, chat up the gay boys by the punch bowl. I like small talk; it makes me feel alive and goofily human. I don't mean for it to sound like we



never had fun with each other – we did, we were totally in love, I guess I’m supposed to say we *are* totally in love but I don’t feel it any more. Life feels ridiculous and routine. I don’t feel necessary, really. I’m seized with desire to ask Andy now, right now, at this bland 6:30 dinner hour, I want to know why me. I imagine what I’d say. *Tell me right now why you love me. Give me three reasons you’d rather be with me than anyone else. Turn around and close your eyes tight – now tell me what I’m wearing. Did you even look at me? What color are my eyes? Do you know the freckle constellations on my back? I know yours.* I sigh. I lose my nerve.

“You ready to eat? I have everything all done.” Andy nods and goes to sit at the table. He’s so spoiled, but he has no idea. His mother was just like me; I don’t think he really grasps the concept that this is something special, that this doting is a gift. I put his plate down, put mine down, go put in a cd. Lyle Lovett. Something laid-back, cool, and smooth. I am feeling none of the above. The dark pink of my steak’s inside gives me away. I cut my meat into squares, cut my asparagus into manageably-sized bites, mash the potato together with sour cream and salt, but I eat nothing. Andy shovels food in, guzzles a beer. I sit and wait for him to talk to me, but he won’t – he alternates his gaze from his plate of food to the gray-screened television set in the middle of the living room.

“Grab me another beer, baby? And do you mind if I turn this off and turn the tv on, watch the news a little while?”

“No, of course I don’t mind. Here, I’ll do it.” He is satisfied. Sometimes it’s like having a big, dull child instead of being married to another adult. I don’t know what I want him to say to me. He never asks how my day was – I can’t really remember if he ever did. Maybe he did and he got bored of the same nothingness filling my mouth every day. God knows I did, and now look where I am.

I take my full plate into the kitchen. The people on CNN are talking about terror, terror, always terror. I take my knife and scrape the contents of my plate into a centrally located white tile. The apples of my naked knees hit the hard floor. I bend at the waist to take a bite of steak, holding my own long hair back with one hand. I’m not sure if I should sit back up between each bite while I chew politely, or if I should stay down like a dog. I choose to sit up. It’s almost like doing exercises while you eat. Bend, bite, chew, repeat. I love the feeling of my teeth picking up food off the floor. It really is so clean down here, every corner of this universe dust-free. I bend and chew, bend and chew, feeling my face flush when I think about what P.M. will say, how when I tell him what I’ve done he’ll call me a good girl, such a good girl, the best little girl in the world.

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It’s two months later and I’m driving down the interstate, barreling, really, driving fast as hell, jacked up on adrenaline. I’m meeting P.M. at a bar – an S&M club, to be more exact. It’s called The Dungeon. I am not a fan of dungeons or the idea of dungeons so there is a huge possibility for discomfort. I don’t know how he talked me into doing this. I never meant to see him face-to-face – that wasn’t even a part of it. I never thought about actual sex, actual stubby hairy fingers on my actual soft slip-white breasts, but now thinking about it has me in a fervor of disgust and joy. I don’t know what is wrong with me at all. I definitely need a drink. Traffic on the interstate is awful; it’s all glaring red taillights, the sharp interruption of honking horns, the other motorists not willing to let me over when I’m in the wrong lane. The traffic is putting me in an extra panicky mood, which may be good for the situation at hand. I’m not sure. I’m not sure about anything at all in this moment. I’m listening to an old Depeche Mode tape from college and the music reminds me of being drunk in sweaty, tacky bars, baring my navel and my teeth to the blacklight, rubbing my blurry body against as many others as possible.

P.M. has started calling me on the telephone. He only does it during the day, when Andy’s at work. Every time the phone rings during the day I lurch out of my chair, propelled by butterflies and static electricity. I feel like a high school girl, giddy about a boy on the other end of the line, analyzing every breath and pause, but P.M. is no high school boy. He’s way better than that. He talks fast, with a New York accent – he must be a transplant. I never ask him about his life; I try not to care – and he talks *dirty*. I sit, drink wine, listen, rapt. Sometimes I do what he tells me and sometimes I just lie and tell him I’m doing it, but it’s great either way. Sometimes he says things so close to the unsayable obscene heart of my secret desire that my voice disappears down the back of my throat and I’m just a throb, a surge of red energy, raw on the other end of the phone, swallowing, swallowing. I have to be sure to erase the Las Vegas call from the Caller ID. Usually when Andy gets home from work I jump him. I’m ready for a body at that point. He must be thrilled, thinking he’s married the sex kitten of the universe. We fuck on the floor most often, me on top, and I’ll reach down while we’re doing it to cover his eyes with my hands. I don’t want him to see me. I feel like a liar, I feel unfaithful, and with no eyes watching me I feel less exposed. Andy never mentions it afterwards. When we first started dating, we took acid together and spent six hours kissing with our fingers in each other’s ears; it was like living underwater together in a universe of spit and sea-creature tongues. It was absolutely fantastic. That was the first night I told him I loved him – I said it first; after

only two dates, I was ready. We were coming down off our drugs, lying on our stomachs in dewy park grass in the amazing purple early-morning light, and I said, “I need to go somewhere and get a Coke and some buttered toast. And I love you.” He smiled and smiled, each of his teeth a separate glowing moon I could see my reflection in. How did we get from there to here? It can’t be all my fault. It’s probably all my fault.

Back in the car, Depeche Mode starts in on “Master and Servant” and I crack up. I’m diffusing my own tension with laughter. “Forget all about equality!” I’m singing along in my best fake British accent, then I begin to wonder if I picked the right outfit. It’s summer, and warm, so I’m wearing a black tank top, an aqua silk skirt, expensive black sandals with a much higher heel than the shoes I usually wear. P.M. talks a lot about his love of women in heels, how they lengthen the leg, tilt the ass up at a dirty little angle, make the woman stand a certain slightly uncomfortable way, so even though they kill my feet, the shoes are the only part of the outfit I’m sure about. They’re totally sexy.

I find my exit, turn off. I’m fumbling in the passenger seat for the instructions I printed off the internet. This whole endeavor suddenly seems ridiculous and I really wish I was a different kind of person, a *freer* person, instead of who I am: the kind of person to do a crazy thing like this and then fret, fret, fret the whole entire time and not be able to enjoy any of it. The city roads are dark and bright all at the same time; I’m driving past KFC’s and convenience stores, past groups of rangy boys in baggy clothes on street-corners, past strip-malls filled with cell phone stores and nail salons. The world seems desperate and temporary. I’m suddenly hungry – I’ve been so nervous I’ve forgotten to eat all day. I stop at a Taco Bell, then think better of it – Taco Bell food is messy and runny, and what if it gives me the farts? I do not want to have the farts tonight! I walk to the convenience store next door, where I buy a pint of milk and a pack of cigarettes. A girlfriend of mine once said, “Milk is like liquid meat,” which did not gross me out at all (her intended effect) but instead has made me think of milk as a first choice for food when I don’t feel like actually eating. I drink the milk and smoke two cigarettes; I haven’t smoked in a while and I get a thumping headrush and a hot surge of nausea. It is sticky black and neon out here and it is nearly midnight. Andy thinks I’m spending the weekend with my parents; my parents think Andy and I are going to the beach. It’s like high school all over again. The wind is a warm hand tugging at the hem of my skirt. I get back in the car, start driving.

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The first mean boyfriend I ever had was Xavier. Xavier wasn’t his real

name, his real name was Josh, but I sat in front of him in French class senior year and Xavier was his French name, and I liked saying it so much I never stopped calling him that. We all had to pick French names; mine was Dominique. Our French teacher Mme. Adams was young, barely out of college, and beautiful. She had thick dark hair and lips like a little juicy plum, and she spoke French with a Southern accent. She was a terrible teacher but a fun person. Once Jacques, a nerdy boy whose real name I can’t even remember, called her over to his desk to explain some graffiti – someone had pencil-drawn the words “HAIR PIE” in huge, intricate block letters on his desk, right next to a goofy-looking hairy triangle.

“What’s a hair pie?” Jacques asked, peering up with his watery blue eyes.

“If you don’t already know, I can’t be the one to tell you!” Mme. Adams choked, trying not to laugh, trying, trying, but finally giving up and giggling until she wept and her nose started to run and she had to excuse herself to go to the bathroom.

Every Friday we had a *fête*, a party, everyone would bring food and drinks and we’d just sit in the classroom talking and eating. During one of those *fêtes*, I was sitting at my desk enjoying a ham and cheese sandwich when Xavier leaned into my ear and said, “I fucked her.” I was startled.

“Who? Mme. Adams?” I asked. He nodded. I paid attention to his face for the first time ever, for what seemed like the first time I’d ever paid attention to a face in my life. His lips were full and turned up at each corner in this perfect way, so even though he wasn’t smiling, he still had a smartassed look. His eyes were so dark blue they were almost purple, and he didn’t stop staring at me, he didn’t take his eyes off mine for a second. It was great. His forearms were thick. He had spread his legs out so that his feet were on either side of my desk – one clunky, giant black skater sneaker on either side of me. It felt incredibly intimate to be between his legs like that, especially when he was talking about sex.

“You are *lying*.” I turned my head around to glare at him, to give him a *bullshit* look, but those purple eyes caught me and made me vulnerable, so all I could do was stare and listen to my heart beat. I felt suddenly, immediately jealous of Mme. Adams.

“I’m not lying,” he said, then, closer, again, so close to my ear it tickled and I wanted to jump back but I also wanted to stay right there, getting buzzed with the electricity of his voice, “you want me to tell you about it?” I did.

That night I was in Xavier’s bedroom. It was a funky wreck; every



surface was covered with dirty clothes, magazines, dishes, books, God knows what. I was thrilled to be in the middle of it. His parents weren't home. He told me the story of Mme. Adams, how he'd been at a bookstore and had seen her and the two of them had started talking, how they liked the same authors, they both liked Bukowski, and did I read Bukowski? I admitted to Xavier that I didn't. I was disappointed in myself. I was sitting on the floor, having cleared a semicircle of carpet, and I was staring up at Xavier on the bed. I was doing that self-deprecating girl thing of trying to pretend that I didn't care if he told a story about sex with another woman when truthfully the only thing I could think about was his body and my body and skin and oh my God here I am in his room what's going to happen is something going to happen do my boobs look o.k. is there anything in my teeth did I wear good underwear today is he going to want to have sex with me? I wasn't a virgin but I wasn't very experienced either.

Suddenly I didn't care about the story of Mme. Adams any more. I was impulsive, always have been – I pulled him by the wrist down onto the floor with me. He lay on top of me, not kissing me, not doing anything, until it was so awkward I almost couldn't stand it. Then, just when I was about to wriggle away and run out the door and cry, he kissed me. A ferocious kiss full of teeth, my first kiss like that, and it felt like I was finally awake within my body and awake within the world. Every palpation of my lower lip with his teeth was like a heartbeat I hadn't noticed before. I tried to move to put my hands on his head while we kissed, which was when I realized he was holding my arms down. I moved them; he pressed down tighter. He held me down like that, down on his floor, on that soft mat of dirty boy clothes, and he turned me into his girl. He wouldn't let me move until the second that I became incredibly frustrated, then he'd move me where he wanted me to be. He wouldn't let me kiss back, would pull away and away, leaving me with my mouth open, rooting for him. When we fucked he told me I had to say all the words, had to tell him every single thing I wanted, and then when I finally cleared my throat of the shyness and said it, he said, "What? I couldn't hear you. Say it louder."

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My tires are crunching on the gravel of The Dungeon's parking lot. There are a lot of cars and a lot of people standing beside their cars or walking in little clusters. Most people are wearing black. I park far away, try to practice breathing, to regulate my heartbeat. There are no lights in this parking lot and the building is like a big ugly warehouse and P.M. is in there somewhere, this man I've been giving the most intimate parts of myself to for most of the

past year is in there, inside that nondescript building, big-belly-up to the bar, maybe, drinking what he likes to drink, which is whiskey, straight. I flip my mirror down and reapply lipstick; I'm wearing a very dark red, almost bloody, and my lips look like a bruise blooming in the middle of my face. Potentially I have the whole weekend free; I could meet him in here and request to be taken away, back to his hotel room, where God knows what will happen to me. It will be completely out of my hands, which is why I like P.M. so much – he knows the relief of taking it out of my hands and putting it in his own. He knows how to flip me, turn me around so the things I think I'm in control of are taken away, so I'm just a body, stretching and raw, needy and satisfied all at the same time.

Walking towards the bar, I stumble on my unfamiliar high heels and nearly fall; I steady myself on the bumper of a giant black SUV with tinted windows – *what if that's P.M.'s car? It's such a big, ridiculous, sexy car!* I giddily think. I pay my cover charge and walk inside. The crowd is mostly young; there's a little stage set up where girls with duct-tape X's over their breasts are spanking one another with little leather paddles. The music is so loud it just sounds like fuzz. I beeline for the bathroom. I need to look at myself again, need to steady myself against the reality of a bar-light bathroom mirror reflection.

People are fucking in the bathroom. It's totally obvious to all of us who are in the bathroom and *not* fucking – we're all making eyes at one another, like *there they go, at it again!* as if it's someone as familiar as a roommate having all this public, noisy fun. I check my reflection and am pleased to see that I look pretty cool – not just cool as in hip, cool as in calm, cool, and collected. I don't look anxious or shaky. I put on more lipstick, aware that I've just applied a coat in the car, but also aware that, in a place like this, three or more coats of lipstick is not going to make me stand out all that much. The bathroom fuckers are reaching the critical point now; there's a series of metallic *thuds* and a little spasm of funny-sounding heavy breathing and then the girl screams, "Oh God, Jesus, I'm dying! I'm dying!" and it's too much for me and I have to get out of there before I lose my cool altogether.

I'm supposed to look for P.M. at the bar. I can't believe he had us meet in this place. It's like the cartoon version of everything we've been talking about for the past year, and if it's really his scene, I don't know if I can go through with it. There's a store adjacent to the bar where you can buy leather harnesses, dildos, leather whips, dark pink latex miniskirts. Fetish Wal-Mart. I feel ridiculous and kind of angry. I really want a drink. I scan the rows of bodies perched on barstools – none of them are P.M., not even close. What if, after all this, *he stood me up?* The idea strikes me as funny, and I giggle as I or-

der a vodka and cranberry from the cute young shirtless bartender with thick silver barbells through his painfully tender-looking nipples. I pierced Andy's nipple when we were a new couple. He was numb from whiskey and ice cubes and I did it at a party with a roomful of people watching. I was drunk, too, but Andy didn't know it. My hand did not falter. The needle through his red flesh was like a promise, a kiss, like a wedding ring, only sexier. He only kept the ring in for about six months; the piercing wouldn't heal properly. The skin didn't want the metal.

Thinking about Andy makes my whole body feel confused. I live so much in my own head that I have no real idea if the problems we have are *our* problems or only mine. I suppose, though, that if they're mine, they're ours, in that completely awful bear-my-burden codependent marriage way. I imagine seeing Andy circa 1990 walk in the door of The Dungeon – he'd be right at home. Shirtless and skinny, with a blotchy red right nipple and the tightest pants in the world. Just then there's an eerily familiar voice at my ear.

"Hi, sweetheart." I turn to look; it's P.M. He's wearing a black button-down shirt and looks younger in person, although he is probably not very many people's idea of *hot*. I smile at him, but my voice has disappeared and I can't talk. I finish my drink in one unladylike gulp; I even drool a thin stream of cranberry out the side of my mouth. I can't think straight enough to be embarrassed about it; I just wipe it away with the back of my hand like somebody in a t.v. commercial about thirst-quenching. Now that he's here I don't want to look at him. I try to think of somewhere to look, but I can't think of anywhere good, so my eyes focus on P.M.'s hands, which are thick and hairy-fingered. P.M. is staring me up and down and up again, stopping at all the important parts. It's almost like I can feel those hands on me. P.M. stops the bartender, orders a whiskey for himself and another vodka and cranberry for me.

"Make it a double, please," I say to the bartender – or, rather, to his nipples, since I suddenly seem unable to look anyone in the eye. I wonder if I should small-talk; should I ask P.M. about his flight, about the hotel, should I find out if he's eaten at any local restaurants, should I recommend some? I don't know what the protocol for this situation is. And just then there it is, bearing down on me like an animal – P.M.'s face, his breath, his beard, his teeth, all up close, all at once. The kiss is awkward at first but he stays there until it gets better, and by the time we're done, our drinks are sitting neatly on napkins in front of us and my face feels pink and abraded by his beard. I like the feeling. I have been kissing the same lips for ten years now, and P.M.'s mouth on mine makes my tongue feel shiny like a medal, shiny and brand new. I wonder if I have lipstick all over my face. I hope I do.

"What do you want me to do to you?" P.M. asks. "What do you want now?"

"I don't want you to ask me," I say. "I just want you to, you know, *do it*." God, I hope he doesn't think I mean *do it* as in *sex*. I didn't mean for it to come out like that.

"Okay. Drink your drink, fast. Then we'll go outside."

I gulp again; the extra vodka makes me screw my face up a little bit. P.M. laughs, and I feel as precious as a little doll in a box. I am a teenage girl just coming into her own. I am not a married woman, childless, no career, nearly thirty. I do not waste my life. A girl like me would not waste her life. The vodka makes my limbs move with warm, friendly fluidity as I walk out the door just a little bit ahead of P.M., just so he can get a good view of my legs in the high heels, my ass in the silk skirt.

P.M. points me towards a car – not a big black SUV, a bland rental car, an egg-shaped wheat-colored bore of a car. Inside, it still smells new. I can't believe I'm in the car with this man. He could drive me away and murder me. He could kill me and fuck my dead body and throw me in the river like a croaker sack. I don't think he's going to do any of these things, though. The night is amazing; it's really starting to smell good outside. I roll down the car's window, stick my head out like a dog riding down a highway, only we're sitting still.

"What are we doing in your car?" I ask. I feel flirty, vivacious.

"We'll just talk. That bar was fucking ridiculous. We had to get out of there. You want some of this?" He has a silver flask, warm from being near his body. I take it from him and pour whiskey down the back of my throat. I try not to let it touch the inside of my mouth at all so it won't burn and taste awful, but it still does. I make more faces. "You drink booze like a teenager," P.M. says, fondly.

"Hey," I stare at him, "what's your real name?" I'd always made a big deal about not wanting to know.

"You serious?" he says. *Now* we're talking like two people who know each other. Now we know the ropes.

"Totally serious. Lay it on me, daddy."

"It's Andrew."

I'm quiet for a minute. "*Bullshit*."

"No bullshit! I always thought it was such an odd coincidence, but I could never *talk* to you about it, because you're so stubborn, you and your boundary issues." He looks a little pleased with himself.

It's just now occurring to me that I talk to P.M. on the phone like I'd talk to a girlfriend – Andy this, Andy that, grocery shopping, houseclean-

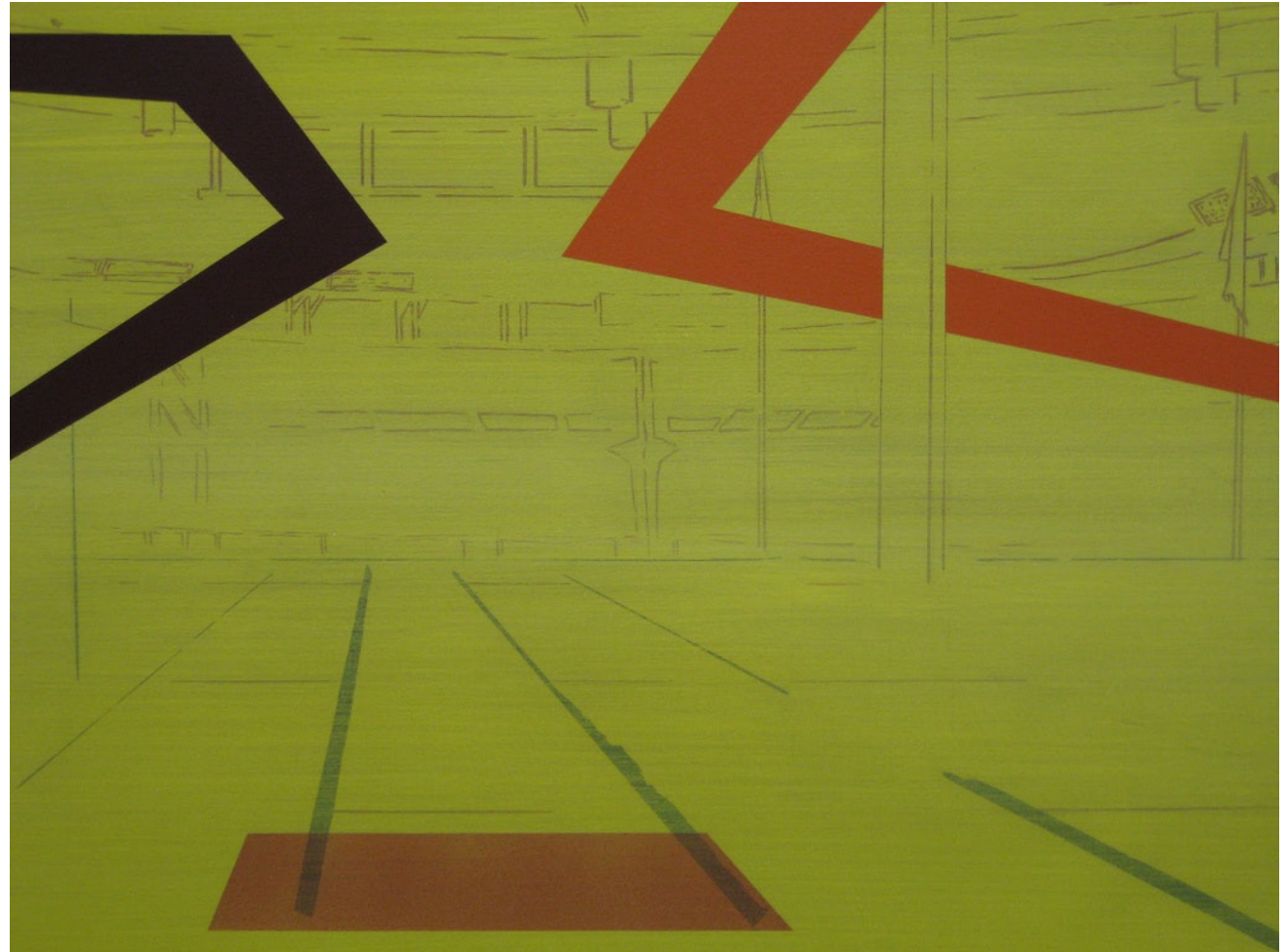
ing, should we have a baby *now* or should we wait, blah blah blah. I'd always assumed he'd be interested just because I was young and cute and I was talking to him – that should be enough for him, he shouldn't need anything else – and now I'm realizing what an asshole I was. I mean, he did plenty of the talking, too, but his was mostly dirty – I never asked him about his life, and if he volunteered information, I'd cut him off, shut him up, and he was always so gracious about it in his domineering way. I feel suddenly beholden to him in a huge way.

“So everyone calls you Andrew and not Andy?”

“People call me both. I prefer Andrew. *Andy* is kind of a douchebag name. No offense.”

I wave my hands around as if to imply *no big deal*. I want to ask P.M. everything else now – *What's your job? Do you like it? What were your parents like? Have you ever been in love? Tell me about the best kiss you can remember. How was your day? No, really, how was it?* Instead I say, “Close your eyes. Now tell me what I'm wearing. Don't forget the details.”

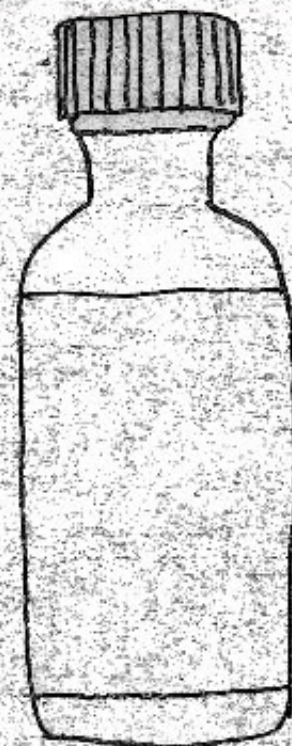
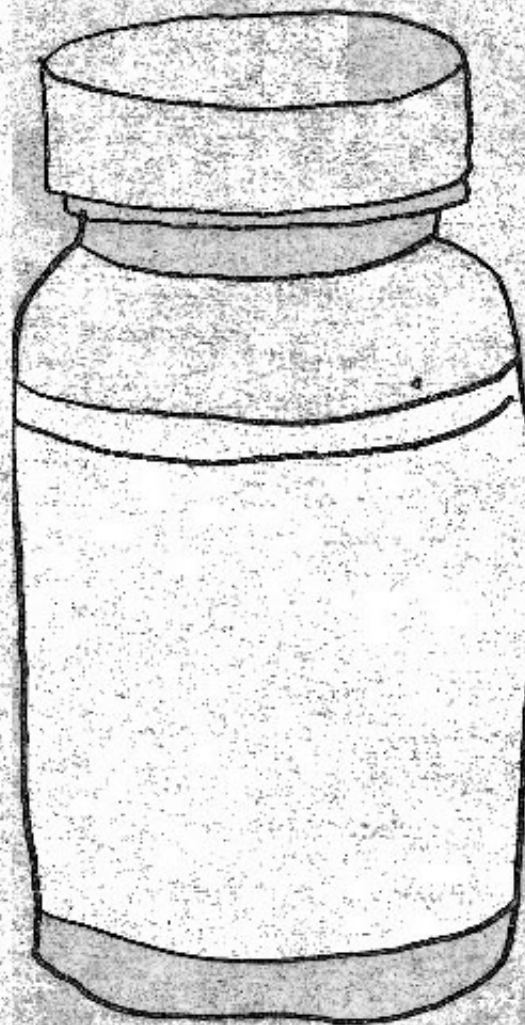
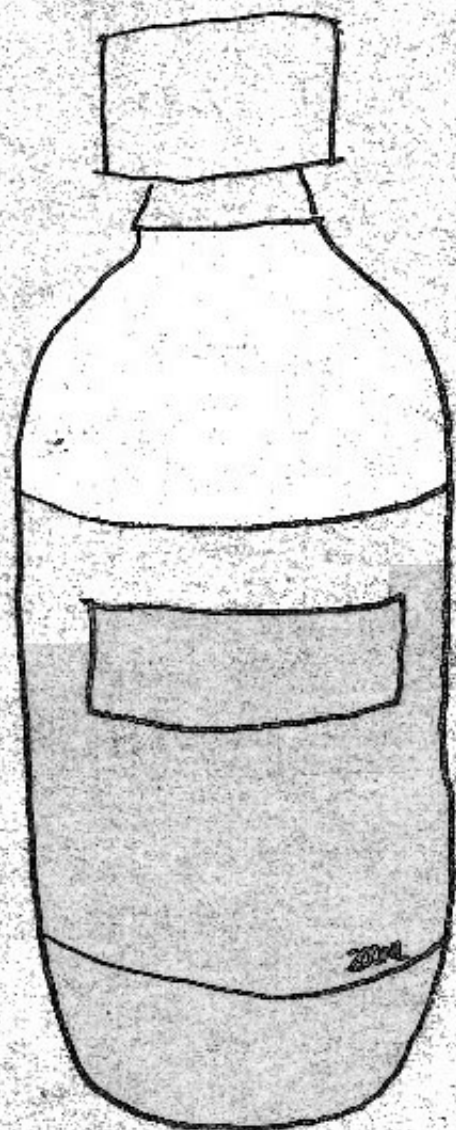
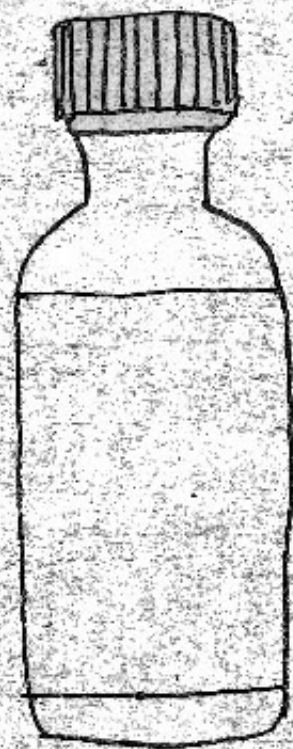
He remembers everything, even down to the tarnished silver of my ankle bracelet, even the bitten dark red of my fingernails. I wish he wouldn't, but he does. With his eyes closed he looks very handsome in the moonlight. I imagine him playing the piano. I don't know if he can or not, but if he can't, he should learn. He'd look great doing it. The whole world suddenly feels like a chain of one lonely person reaching out for another, and the wind just whips through us as if we were made of tunnels, as if we were never really there at all.



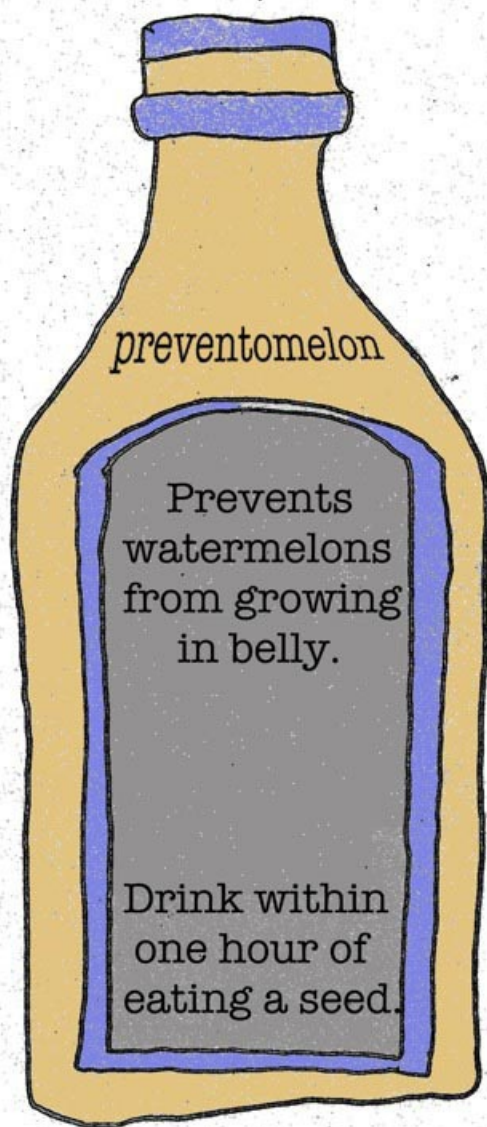


# My Medicine Cabinet

Francis Raven



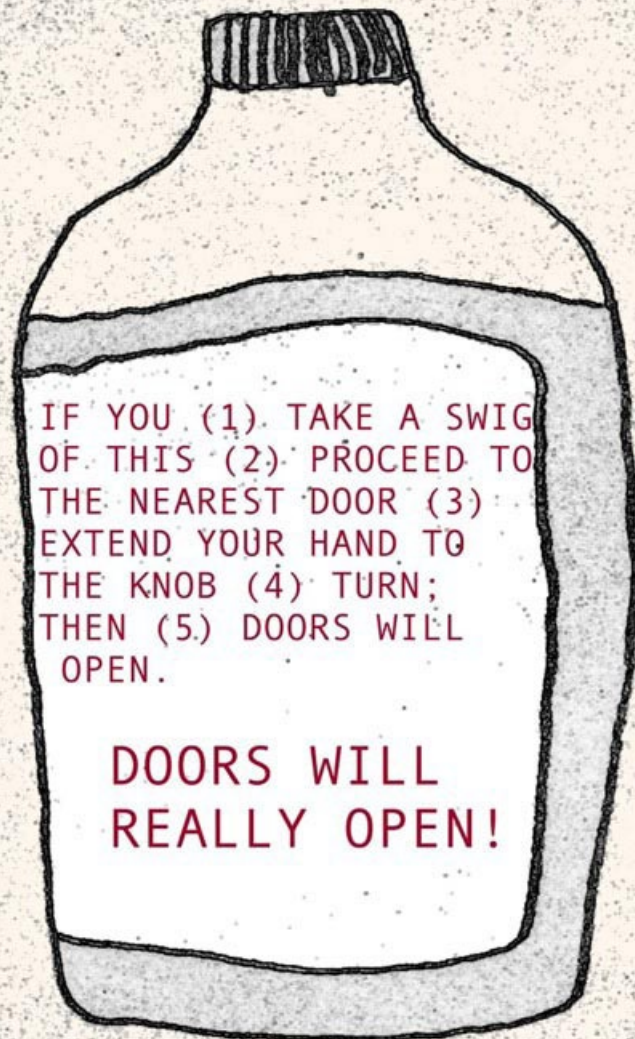




*preventomelon*

Prevents  
watermelons  
from growing  
in belly.

Drink within  
one hour of  
eating a seed.



IF YOU (1) TAKE A SWIG  
OF THIS (2) PROCEED TO  
THE NEAREST DOOR (3)  
EXTEND YOUR HAND TO  
THE KNOB (4) TURN;  
THEN (5) DOORS WILL  
OPEN.

**DOORS WILL  
REALLY OPEN!**

# Eulogy for Johnny Thunders

by Brian Alan Ellis

Johnny Thunders is dead. Hit and run. Not even a year old, and for my money, the coolest kitty ever to walk this whole good-for-nothing planet.

Hadn't seen my poor, neglected Johnny in months, and here I am burying him. With my bare hands and a shovel I am burying him. In the backyard of the house Phoebe and I had once lived in together, he is being buried.

I look over and see Flora, Phoebe's rich-bitch mother, the same woman who's convinced everyone, including Phoebe, what a "childish mess" I am; which, in a sense, is true, but Christ, what a lousy thing to tell people—to take so much pleasure in telling people.

Phoebe and I had found Johnny—as big as my fist, then—living under a couple's trailer. The couple (friends of Phoebe's) had agreed, after much begging, that we keep the cat. "For Christ's sake," they said. "Take it, take it!"

They had many cats, those people.

Yet who knew that one day *our* feline friend, *our* once prize, would get run over?

I'm sorry, Johnny, but no one bothered calling the number on your silver UFO-shaped name tag. No one bothered taking your smashed body out of the road. No one bothered.

This, to me, is terrible cat-killing etiquette.

There are rules.

A few years ago my brother Seely and I, on our way to some mush-for-brains party, struck Mimi, the neighbors' cat, while pulling out of our parents' driveway.

Seely said, "Shit! Let's step on it," but I said, "No way!"

So while reciting what we thought would be a smooth apology but was anything but, we wrapped up Mimi using an old issue of *Leg Show* we'd found crumpled in the backseat of the car (lousy etiquette) and delivered her to the neighbors, a saintly old couple who took the news as well as one could, which is more than I can say for Phoebe and me.

In fact, if I knew where the assailant (or assailants) lived, I would go over there. I would knock on their door. When they answered I would present Johnny to them. I'd hold him right up to their hit-and-run face and say, "Look, just *look* at what you have taken from us!" They would of course gasp, and I would maybe toss in a blood-curdling "Argh!" or two.

For dramatic purposes.

For good measure.

It's hot as balls out. Phoebe is on her knees. She is sobbing, pulling up fistfuls of grass and dirt. Johnny Thunders, wrapped in a *Star Wars* blanket, dead, is about to be lowered into a small hole I've dug in the ground. Flora, standing with her arms crossed, looks on. The smirk on her face, like she has better things to do, like she deserves a bronze effing star for even being here, makes me want to clock her in the head with the shovel. I bet she finds our little ceremony to be trivial bullshit. Screw her. I wish I were digging *her* grave, not Johnny's.

Following the split, I'd agreed Phoebe could keep Johnny. I didn't really want that, but because Phoebe had insisted and because I was doomed to surf couches for a while, it seemed only proper. Despite the daily fourteen-hour shifts Phoebe would work as a nurse's aid. Despite my righteous indignation.

Me, I had plenty of time to care for Johnny. But it was too late. The decision was made. So I spent several straight days either drunk or hung over—when I wasn't at work I was at the bar spilling drinks, getting into fights, making a real ass of myself. Girls would sometimes let me make out with them, but never would they let me fondle them or have me take them home, which wasn't a surprise:

I no longer had one.

So I cut off all communication with Phoebe—first deleting her from my FaceSpace page, and then erasing her number from my cell-phone. Still, I missed Johnny. I missed Johnny more than I did Phoebe. It was strange, heartbreaking, and I knew that instead of being the pushover I was, I should have been more like the guy going through the custody battle in that one Dustin Hoffman movie—only instead of a child, I'd be fighting over a cat. A cat named after a dead junky, mind you. A cat I loved.

I think of Johnny—snow-leopard white, with brown and gray spots circling his belly—sitting outside the bathroom door, purring, as Phoebe and

I showered; or sleeping at the corner of the bed, somehow peaceful, during the sound and fury of Phoebe and me hate-fucking.

Then there's Johnny peeing on Phoebe's great-aunt's ugly home-made quilt (an heirloom); Phoebe knocking him around with her shoe, screaming; me knocking Phoebe around, begging her to stop.

After a while, Johnny didn't give Phoebe the time of day. It was only me he trusted. There was resentment, of course, and our relationship never recovered. It only got worse.

And to think things were finally looking up.

I'd curbed my drinking, found my own apartment, went back to school, and even began work on an album of folk songs. It was good.

Then it all went to hell. Then I pulled in behind Flora's black Mercedes. I pulled in behind a goddamn hearse.

I pat the ground with the shovel. Johnny Thunders is down there. Phoebe comes up behind and, still sobbing, wraps her arms around me. I don't want her touching me, but I let her. Then she runs over to hug her mother. Flora doesn't care. We've been outside for what seems like hours, and it's still hot hot hot.

Part of me wants to believe that Johnny committed suicide. I'd like to think that having to deal with Phoebe and her mother for so long was just too much for him. I know it sounds silly, but that's the only comfort I have.

So I kneel. If my body were not balancing itself against the shovel, surely I would tip over entirely and possibly never get back up.

Johnny, for my money, was the coolest effing cat on this entire crap-dishing planet.

"Well," says Flora, "shall we call it a day? Are we through yet?"

"I dunno," I tell her, tears stinging the cheeks of my sweaty, sun-burnt face. "I don't think the hole is big enough."

Then I catch Flora roll her eyes and I think:

Yes. Yes, Flora, I've decided. The hole I dug is just too damn small.

*For Jacob Crown*



# Toy Soldier

by *Naná Howton*

James left his legs in Iraq. They were cut off just below his groin while the sun shone through the white tarp of the tent serving as a makeshift hospital. He was conscious when the saw cut through his flesh and bone and his blood drenched the sand under the medic's boots. He did pass out from the pain, before the anesthesia took effect and woke at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, in Germany. There, a steady flow of soldiers arrived daily, some in worse shape than he was. Morphine made it all seem like a marvelous blur of memories; he saw flashes of images, like his running shoes leaving indentations on supple green lawn, a soft breeze lifting the folded grass blades back to their original positions, erasing his imprinted steps as he went on.

Eventually James was discharged and flown back home. He arrived at Logan Airport on a cool December morning. A fat woman, whom after a moment he recognized as his wife, Mary, waited for him.

They drove home through leafless streets and crossed the Charles River, which reflected light gently, a change from the blinding reflection of the desert sun on the Humvee rearview mirror. Her convertible Ford Mustang, their only car, had been replaced by a utilitarian blue van, and he didn't have to ask her how she felt about it: Her driving was nervous, a succession of rapid accelerations followed by hard braking. Drivers honked at her now and then as she changed lanes, uncertain of what lay in her blind spot.

The first thing he noticed when they arrived home was the ramp attached to the kitchen door. It was an eyesore. The American flag flapped in the wind and there was mud where grass grew in the summer. A yellow ribbon had been tied to the mailbox by the curb. She wheeled him out of the van and the smell of fresh wood reminded him of saws and the whirl of their motors.

"When they took me in, after the explosion, they had to amputate me immediately," he said.

"We don't have to talk about this," she said.

"They could not wait for the anesthesia to take effect," he continued. "They had to cauterize me as soon as possible or I would have bled to death."

"That's gruesome and I don't want to hear it," she said and pushed him up the ramp.

The inside of his house had changed dramatically. The carpet had

been removed throughout and the exposed hardwood floor needed finishing.

"It's easier to roll on," Mary said in the living room.

"What happened to the china cabinet?"

"The social worker said you needed room to move around."

He had never liked the piece anyway. It was large and the double doors, made of curved glass, only produced in some cow town back in France. The moving company had insisted they needed to build a crate to move it or the insurance wouldn't cover any possible damage. It cost a small fortune to move it from California to Cambridge, but Mary, who already resented having to move east had put her foot down and insisted she wouldn't leave without it.

"The bathroom is outfitted for you too," she said.

He sensed a slight resentment in her voice. He wheeled himself to the bathroom. The room was much bigger now that the tub had been replaced by a shower, which had a tile seat for him, and bars on the wall. The stall had a slight slant so that water could run to the drain and still allow him to wheel in and out. There wasn't a showerhead, just a hand-held spray. The toilet was new, and higher to allow him to hop on from the wheelchair.

He went across the room, rolling easily on the tile floors and out the other door that led to their bedroom. The bathroom had been expanded at the expense of the bedroom.

He wheeled himself back to the kitchen where Mary roamed around, emptying the dishwasher.

"We need a little stepstool for you in the bathroom," he said.

She ignored him. They had often discussed how public places that had only one bathroom disregarded short people. She had said she was going to write a letter to the office of disability and complain that the business of replacing toilets to serve a handful of disabled customers didn't take into consideration that a great number of people were too short to use the new seats. He knew she had been only half-joking.

"I mean," he said, "it's already hard to be short and use one of them and with your weight now..."

She turned around to face him. "My weight," she said, "is not up for discussion."

He looked at the palms of his hands and saw that they were red from the little he had wheeled himself around. He felt tired.

"Can you take me to the garage?" he asked.

The space where her car used to be wasn't big enough to park the van, but empty it looked enormous. She had left the remainders of his school projects on the workbench and his fishing gear in the corner. He remembered

having caught a golden trout once on the Kern River, a species on its way to extinction in that corner of California. He remembered how it caught the afternoon light when it jumped as he reeled it in. He returned it to the river, feeling ashamed to have used the green glittery PowerBait to catch a fish that deserved a hand-made dry fly. He wondered if he would ever feel like fishing again and thought that in the end, one doesn't always get what one deserves. He saw that she had taken down the clear plastic containers with Christmas ornaments from the shelves and set them on the ground, probably planning to bring them into the house. During their first year in Cambridge they didn't have much money, so he made Christmas ornaments out of scraps in his lab at M.I.T. where he was working on his Ph.D. in material science. He realized that most of the things on the shelves were now out of his reach and the realization made his knees itch. He reached for them and found the empty legs of his pants. A sense of desperation overwhelmed him, and anger toward Mary. It had been her idea that he should join the reserves and get partial funding for school. He pushed the wheels forward and picked up one of his fishing poles. He almost started crying; his shoulders trembled. Mary must have noticed it because she took the fishing pole away from him, put it back against the wall and wheeled him out.

Two friends from M.I.T. stopped by in the afternoon. They, like Mary, did not want to talk about the war, and when James mentioned it, they patted his shoulder.

"Man, I am sorry you had to go through that. What a waste," said Matthew, the tall New Yorker whose research was in direct competition with James'. "I am glad you survived."

James wasn't sure how sorry Matthew really was, but what irritated him the most was the patting on his shoulder and how Charles, the guy he had just met before he was shipped out to Iraq, imitated Matthew's tone. They spoke in soft tones reserved for funeral parlors.

"I tell you, if you thought working on a thesis was grueling you ought to walk the sands of Iraq carrying your 60-plus pound gear," James said while Mary passed around water glasses.

"Well," said Matthew softly, "we all can't wait until you come back to the lab."

"And having to dodge bullets, too," said James.

"I have to show you this new composite material I am working on," said Charles. "I think I am onto something."

They changed the subject no matter how often James tried to stay on the Iraq track. Eventually they cut short their visit and left.

At night Mary helped James to bed and lay down beside him. There was a slight shift in the mattress and he almost rolled over onto her. He had to resist the gravity, holding onto the sheets until she settled on her side and the mattress was still. Her dark eyes looked sad and she touched his chest, running her fingers down the scar that went from below his breastbone to where his pubic hair started. There she let her hand rest for a moment, and he shivered, associating the reaction with the cool air in the room. She took it as encouragement and held his penis in her warm hand. The passivity of being on his back, half the man he used to be with a woman double his size, made him feel utterly out of control. A wave of panic rushed through his veins, like it did when he lay on the hot sand, after the explosion, losing blood, and unable to move, his left boot a few feet away holding what he recognized as his missing leg and the right leg nowhere to be seen.

He pushed her hand away and she turned her back to him. The mattress shifted and he rolled against her back. He kept his arms against his chest as if to protect himself against the enemy she had become. As he dozed off, he knew by her breathing that she lay awake.

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The next morning they went out for brunch in Boston and he sat in front of his half-eaten bowl of oatmeal, wondering if the outing had been a good idea.

"It's a pretty day," Mary said. She was looking, not at him, but onto the sidewalk where people with their wool coats peered into windows.

She sounded chirpy, as if she had made a resolution overnight to cheer him up, to cheer herself up to the best of her abilities. Her thick black hair was loose around her shoulders and her eyebrows were set so far apart from each other that her forehead seemed to be the widest part of her face. He felt her trying to make an effort to reacquaint herself with the sullen fellow he had become.

"It feels good to be alive," she went on when he did not answer, but she was still avoiding his eyes.

The word "alive" made his legs hurt. It was an absurd feeling, to feel pain in limbs that no longer existed. Doctors in Germany had told him the feeling was common among people who lost limbs and that eventually it would go away. He yearned for the time when this bizarre sensation would be gone, when the itch on his feet would stop, when the pain in his shin would disappear. How could physical pain be real when the source of it no longer existed?

He resented Mary's cheerfulness, her attempts to lift his spirits by taking him out when all he wanted to do was to stay home. He thought of the

guys back there in the desert, who called him 'the engineer.' He had little in common with those career soldiers, he the educated reservist, but the sharing of perils and pre-made meals brought them together, and now they shared an intimacy they could no longer share with anyone else but themselves.

"Some of my friends are still back there in that godforsaken land helping people who don't want to be helped and when they do want help, it is something we can't give them, like a new home or a job in the Green Zone where it is safer."

"Why do we have to talk about this?" Mary asked. She shifted on her chair uncomfortably and looked away from him. "I can't get over how beautiful this day is for a December day!"

The scar on his chest itched as if he needed a reminder of the surreal thing his life had become. He surveyed the café; Mary was not the only chirpy one. People chatted and sipped lattes, poked at their eggs with their forks, smiled at each other. A baby banged his spoon on the arm of his high chair and when told to stop, grinned at his parents, exposing two small teeth in his lower jaw. A couple held hands across the table and it made him look at Mary's hand, busy with her fork, a strange hand he didn't recognize, couldn't place, couldn't remember having held.

Looking at people in the café, at their cheerfulness, anyone would think these were times of peace. He was a sour reminder that a war was going on, but nobody cared. He felt like a broken toy soldier tossed in the trash can.

"Were you in a car accident?"

He looked over at the girl. She was perhaps 5 or 6 years old and she had muffin crumbs on the front of her checked blue and green Sunday dress.

"A car accident, right?" the girl insisted.

Her mother touched her arm and reprimanded her. She looked at the purple heart on James' chest, mouthed an embarrassed sorry and went back to her conversation with her husband, who looked like a Harvard lawyer, clean-cut and wearing a fancy gray wool suit. He had fought so that these people could keep their way of life, their after-church Sunday brunches.

"We could go walk along the river to see the leaves," his wife said and then blushed.

Since she had picked him up at the airport, words like "walk," "run," "stand up" made her blush like when he had for the first time told her, "I want you," in the back of his father's Buick.

His memory of the girl in the Buick lingered with him. How she gave in to his advances, flushed and hungry and how afterward the skin of her cheekbones was dotted with red and sweat and she laughed as if he had been

tickling her, her hand over her mouth with coy delight.

For a moment he wanted to rescue Mary, as if the act would bring back the girl in the Buick. He wanted to smile at his wife and tell her what a good idea it was to go for a stroll under the birches and maples and the tall white oaks. But he looked at her and all he felt was scorn, as if she were a stranger who had killed the girl and taken her place.

She had hardly made eye contact with him since the airport, except when they were lying in bed for a brief moment. As she sat across from him she spoke casually looking over his shoulder, as if speaking to someone standing behind him. Why should he be the one who rescued her from the discomfort she obviously felt in the company of her crippled husband?

A man at a nearby table opened the *Boston Globe*. James saw him turn the pages, skip a story about Iraq and settle on the sports section.

When the waiter went by, Mary waved to get his attention and asked for more maple syrup. The extra syrup was just an excuse to get away from him for a while, he suspected. Though her pancakes had sucked up all the syrup she bathed them in, they still looked wet and brownish, with streams of amber liquid sipping out of the air pockets.

The waiter did not make eye contact with him either when he put the syrup on the table. Hardly anyone did. James did not resent them because he remembered looking the other way when the beggar at the corner of Hampshire and Columbia approached his car as he drove to work. The red light held him prisoner of the faceless hand with the cup; he had been glad when the man moved his business elsewhere.

He tried to think of pleasant things, and as he watched the waiter set two cups of hot chocolate on the table to his right, he remembered the fudge maker at the Baltimore Harbor throwing chocolate in the air as if it were ribbons; he remembered the smell of caramel and the crowd clapping for the performance.

"Aren't you finishing your oatmeal?" asked his wife, wiping her plate with the last piece of pancake.

"It disagrees with me," he said.

Food disagreed with him since the surgery, when he had lost a foot of his intestines and part of his stomach. She shook her head sympathetically.

"You can have it if you want," he said.

"No, I shouldn't," she said, not convincingly.

He pushed the bowl toward her and she dug in. Afterward she waved at the waiter for their check.

He took a deep breath and looked out again. Life went on under the



bright sunlight that had moved indoors, crawling over from the edge of the glass wall into the room, up the legs of tables and over their tops, reflecting from stainless-steel creamers. The clink of silverware on plates was soft and soothing in contrast to the cacophony of sounds in his memory, sounds of bullet volleys shattering glass, wood, bricks, flesh and bones. Particularly flesh and



bones; a sound he could not quite describe, that reverberated with a dull splat, like a shovel hitting a pile of sand.

Outside, she pushed his wheelchair across the Longfellow Bridge, past young people wearing M.I.T. sweatshirts running toward Boston. When they passed they made an arc around the wheelchair. They too did not look at him.

The wind lifted his bangs. His army crew cut had grown into a disorderly mess.

“I need a haircut,” he said.

“What?”

“I could use a haircut,” he shouted over the wind and traffic noise.

His wife had trouble pushing him. The wind coming from behind them brought her panting sounds to his ears and a mild sour smell of sweat to his nose. She stopped to catch her breath and they watched the Charles River move slowly, a silvery flow around the hull of boats covered with white tarps on the Cambridge side, retired for the season. It would be a while until spring, when the colorful kayaks and sailboats would navigate up and down stream again.

After a moment he said, “What a tableau we make: the cripple and the fat lady.”

The stroll over the bridge was improving his spirits as he always imagined water would have done in the desert. He wanted to talk about the land so far away now — how the pumps in the fields made him think of anteaters, constantly sticking their noses in the ground. He wanted to talk about how beautiful some women were, with their dark mysterious eyes full of promises that could have been of pleasure or death, and how ugly they were, when they happened to be ugly, with reptile skin and toothless dark mouths.

James looked along the banks, where the forest-green bearberry bushes poked from under the carpet of yellow foliage fallen from the trees, leaving dead-looking limbs pointed toward the blue sky like the dry leathery fingers of people in the desert.

On the other side of the bridge, they crossed the street into M.I.T.’s courtyard where the school dome, like the helmet of a World War I soldier, seemed to protect the brain of the institution was deserted.

“I used to play Frisbee here,” he said. “The materials science department is right on that corner of the Infinite Corridor.”

“I know where the department is,” she said.

James realized he kept thinking of her as someone else, the impostor who didn’t even look like his wife. She had been there often. He liked when



she showed up unannounced sometimes and the way his professor or his colleagues gawked at her. It made him proud to be her husband, such a pretty girl. On the grass, the wheelchair didn't roll as easily, so Mary pushed him to the paved path and wheeled him across Massachusetts Avenue to the student union.

"Do you want something to drink?" she asked.

"No, thanks."

"I'll be right back, I'm thirsty."

From where he was he could see her paying for a bottle of water and a candy bar. She ate it in the store, chewing quickly. When she returned to him, the corners of her mouth were stained with chocolate.

She wheeled him back to Boston. Across the bridge they met John, his running buddy. It was an awkward moment as John stood there panting, catching his breath. He had met Mary only a couple of times and ignored her now, as if she had only been Jame's caretaker.

"I was planning to come pay you a visit," John said finally.

"I'm coming to the lab tomorrow," James announced.

"Great. That's just great!" said John and he patted James on the back.

James was furious. There was the patting again. People had never patted him on the back before, but now that he sat at their chest level they found it perfectly acceptable to do so. He glared at John and thought that if he had opted for the heavy duty electric chair, he would have rolled over his feet right there and then.

"Well," said John. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

And as he started to trot away, he turned around and waved, "say hello to Mary for me."

Mary flinched and her mouth opened as if to say something, but instead she struggled with the chair over the uneven sidewalk of the bridge.

James was grateful when they got to the car and he saw how flushed she was, how sweat had made dark stains under her armpits. But the feeling passed as quickly as it came; it wasn't his fault she was so fat. His wheelchair was extra-light, made of aluminum and carbon composite, the stuff of fishing poles, and he was barely 110 pounds these days.

He watched the beads of sweat on her face as she drove, and again he felt he should thank her for the effort, but didn't want to call attention to how much bigger she was now. He didn't know how to be grateful and tactful at once, so he stared out the window at the brick buildings crowding each other. At the street corners pedestrians waited to cross, carrying shopping bags. He saw a menorah in an apartment window and on the street level of the same

building a deli window was decorated with Christmas lights and a toy reindeer moved his head up and down toward a cheese platter as if it were a pasture.

The static of the radio surprised him; he blinked and looked at it. Her fat little hand gripped the dials, scanning stations. Her hand went back to the steering wheel when Christmas carols filled the car.

"Oh, please!" he said.

"Don't you want to get in the spirit of the season, honey?"

"I can't stand it," he said.

"It's such pretty music."

"It's too much. It feels obscene."

She turned the volume down, but left it on.

He wanted to turn it off, but he had not yet mastered how to scoot forward on his butt. He sat there feeling like a prisoner of Santa.

"I was thinking we should decorate our tree tomorrow."

"Which tree?"

"I'll get one," she said.

That used to be his job. He always got a small tree for them, about two feet tall, to put in their window, and they talked about how they would have a much bigger one when they had kids. The thought made him laugh now.

"What's so funny?"

"I was thinking, how in the world are we going to have kids now?"

"The same old way, honey."

"I don't have legs to prop myself between yours and if you sit on me, I'll be as flat as a slice of ham," he said laughing.

"That's not funny."

"It's hilarious!"

He was shaking with laughter. His belly hurt, but he couldn't stop himself.

"No more... no more!" he begged.

"I am not making you laugh," she said sourly, but she had the sense to change the subject. "Let's stop somewhere and get eggnog and cookies."

"Dear God," he said. He had spit on his chin and on the clipped empty leg of his pants. "You are so cheerful, aren't you?"

"It's good to remind ourselves things could be worse."

He gritted his teeth and wiped his nose with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Fine," he said, "I'll write Santa a letter and ask him for a pair of legs."

"Why are you so upset, honey?"

"Why? Why? You popping pop tart poriky. Can't you see why?" The

series of p's made him want to laugh and his last fit still made his belly hurt, so he stiffened his chest and tried to control the urge

"It's OK, honey."

The detachment with which she endured his insults took the edge away from his desire to laugh. Instead he was upset, so upset he had trouble breathing, so he rolled down the window and the chilly wind seemed to clear the inside of the van. Again he felt the legs that were not there in his furious desire to swing them because there was so much room between his bottom and the dashboard.

At a red light he observed a man on the sidewalk. He was about his age, mid-20s, wearing a sweater with the Red Sox logo on his chest, his face vibrant against the holiday lights. He lit a cigarette while he walked, peering inside the shops. James had a suffocating desire to strangle the man, but as the van moved and he caught the fresh air, he rolled the windows up again and felt his rage turning toward his wife. He held the rage in his belly, in the disguised, controlled way he had often used when confronting the public on the streets of Baghdad.

"Mary," he whispered.

"Yes, honey."

"Why do you suppose a man in my condition would have any reason to be cheerful?"

"You are alive, and the same can't be said of the Humvee driver."

"That's such a pile of crap," he said softly. "Such a pile of crap. Why is it that people love to compare misery? Like who suffered more. I lost one leg, you lost two. You lost two legs, he lost his life."

"To put things in perspective," she said.

"I don't care about that," he said. "I feel the way I feel despite whatever worse things have happened to others. I'm miserable, but I don't want to join a miserable men's club to feel better."

The car was stopped again and he watched people through the window of a Starbucks.

"Look at them, Mary. Look at them sipping their tall nonfat caffè latte with extra foam and a hint of cinnamon. You look at them and you think we are in Iraq on a freaking picnic. Look at them."

"At least they don't hate you like they hated Vietnam vets."

"I wish they did, Mary. As it is, I don't exist."

She nodded, but he wondered if she understood him or she just wanted to humor him. He stared at her profile as the car lurched forward. She had grown a triple chin and her dimple was gone, swallowed by the layers of

white skin with a soft hint of pink, like a skinless chicken breast. She grew fat with the country, detached, oblivious to what he was going through.

James watched her get out of the car and walk around it. Her figure in front of the van seemed enormous, her breasts jutting out in front of her. He waited for her to come around, holding the door handle, wary of this fate. He fought an impulse to lock the door when she paused at his window and remembered that she had to go all the way to the back of the van. He saw her go away, her figure filling the rearview mirror and then he heard the back door open and the ramp lowered. Soon he felt the forceful pull on the handles of his wheelchair and the dashboard receded from his view.

The air outside was biting cold and he missed the warmth of the van, but she slammed the doors and pushed him along the newly built ramp into the kitchen where the smell of burnt macaroni and cheese hung in the air. At dinner, the night before, he sat there staring at his plate of macaroni and cheese and seeing maggots, the maggots in the body of the teenage boy his squad had found in a Baghdad suburb.

He felt nauseated again as she parked him in the living room, in front of the TV set. She casually dropped the remote control on his lap and moved around trying to tidy the place, piling tabloids in a corner and picking up candy wrappers. He watched her bottom squeezed in her navy blue sweat pants and felt a mixture of disgust and desire for her ever-expanding ass. The desire surprised him so he searched for the roots of it and found nothing.

She took her trash to the kitchen and he heard the refrigerator door open. He put the remote in the pocket of his shirt and wheeled himself closer to the kitchen door, where he caught sight of her back while she stuck her hands in the fridge and brought things he couldn't see to her mouth, smacking her lips. His desire was growing. He blinked and saw her there, her face pressed against a shelf in the refrigerator, held by his powerful hands while he took her from behind, anchoring his legs firmly on his feet. His scar itched and his stump hurt.

She got the carton of orange juice and drank from it, throwing her head back, and he heard the gulps as the juice went down her esophagus. She put back the juice, and moved aside, which allowed him to see her next target. She took a jar of olives and stuck her hand in it. After she stuck a few in her mouth, her fat little fingers like night crawlers wiggled inside the jar trying to grab the last olive.

"Haven't you stuffed yourself enough?" he asked.

She turned to look at him, squeezing her eyes as if he were an apparition. She stopped chewing, but her mouth was still full. She swallowed slowly,

refusing to move her lips, refusing to let him see she had food in her mouth.

“I can see what you did all this time while I was risking my skin for the likes of you. You stayed indoors watching TV, reading tabloids and stuffing your face. Have you looked at yourself lately? You look like an elephant seal.”

He was angry and he wanted to make sure he hurt her. An overwhelming feeling of power crawled up the legs he had in his memory, and he felt his stumps warm up.

“You are a swine, and you keep growing fatter, lazy and unaware.”

The word “unaware” awakened something in him. He fought the erection coming.

She put the jar down on the counter and closed the refrigerator, all the while facing him as if afraid of turning her back to him.

“I moved here for you and that is what I get,” she said.

“Oblivious, latté-drinking sow,” he went on. As if he were a blow-up doll, he felt his groin engorging and air filling his chest, inflating his arms.

“I sold my car,” she was growing angry too. “I sold furniture that had been in my family for four generations.”

“Poor you!”

“Well, there is a miserable men’s club. You aren’t the only member, whether or not you care about it. You fucked me.”

“I can’t remember the last time I did it,” he said.

“You fucked me up, you jerk,” she said. “I changed my life for you and you can’t even see it. It’s all about you, your misery, your miserable state.”

“I don’t know who you are,” he said. “You fooled me, you took over my wife’s place. Who the fuck are you, fat lady singing in my kitchen?”

His fury flared and his desire to really hurt her surged. He closed his hands around the metal of his wheelchair and squeezed it hard. He wanted to have his hands around her neck and watch her choke, watch her tongue stick out of her mouth while she turned purple, while her eyes bulged out of their sockets. He wanted to settle a score.

He threw the remote control at her and it hit her in the face. A trickle of blood started on her eyelid. She touched it, saw the blood on her hand and looked more appalled than angry. She backed away when he moved forward, and he stopped to recover the breath his anger was stealing from him. He took in air, but not much, as if whatever feelings filled him were a physical manifestation that occupied spaces in his chest, in his arms, in his penis, leaving little room to breathe. He hurt all over; even his skin seemed to distend. Fueled by his rage, he summoned his strength and moved his chair toward her.

She opened the kitchen door, and he worked harder to get to her

before she ran out. But she wasn’t fleeing. Instead she waited for him calmly and the power of her good legs only made his desire to take her larger than life. He craved her then and it infuriated him.

“I never wanted to move here, I hate the cold,” she said. She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. The smeared blood made her look like a crazy woman. “I hate that I can’t reach the toilet, I hate that I had to leave my job to move here. You never cared about me, it was all about my looks. I hate the way you look at me like I disgust you.”

“That’s right, you disgust me!”

He got to her and she caught his chair. He wanted to tell her what a futile exercise it was to try to stop him, but she was fast. She clasped the chair and pushed it out onto the ramp with a force he never knew she had. The chair rolled quickly and the next thing he knew, he was on the ground, his face in the mud.

The cold made his cheeks hurt all the way to his gums. He tried to push himself up, but he couldn’t. He lay there stunned, the cold air forcing tears that left frosty tracks on his muddy cheeks. From the corner of his eyes, he caught her figure, just a dark outline of a human form by the poorly lit kitchen door, the silhouette of her breasts heaving up and down.

“Don’t come back,” she warned him. “Don’t come back until you feel grateful enough to thank me for wheeling your worthless crippled ass around.”

“I am a soldier in the biggest, most powerful army in the world,” he cautioned her. He wanted to warn her that his buddies would make her sorry, but the very idea made him giggle.

“I’m serious,” she said. “Don’t come back until then.”

She slammed the door and he was left in the dark. The quiet of the winter afternoon seemed to welcome the evening too soon. He lay there, rubbing his finger on the crust of frost on the mud, his penis shriveling. Somewhere in the blurred field of his vision he caught the glow of televisions coming through the windows of the neighborhood.

## Author Biographies

**Anthony Bell** lives in Washington State. He is a student, a smart ass, and loves to get lost in the summer on two wheels. He has publications forthcoming in the anthologies *Strange Tales of Horror*, by Norgus Press, and *Dark Things I-V* by Pill Hill Press.

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**Traci Burns** earned her MFA from Georgia College & State University in 2005. Her work has previously appeared in *Realpoetik*, *Gumball Poetry & Backwards City Review*. She lives in middle Georgia with her husband and two daughters. Her favorite color is orange and her favorite poet is Frank O'Hara.

**Dan Crawley**'s work has been recently nominated for Dzanc's "Best of the Web" anthology and was awarded a creative writing fellowship in fiction by the Arizona Commission on the Arts. His stories have appeared in the *North American Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Everyday Genius*, *Quarterly West*, and elsewhere.

**Brian Alan Ellis** lives in Gainesville, Florida. His fiction has appeared in *Skive*, *Zygote in my Coffee*, *Thieves Jargon* (as Brian Rentchek), *Corduroy Mtn.*, *The Big Stupid Review*, *Dogzplot*, *Underground Voices*, *Midnight in Hell* (as Alan Shivers), *Glossolalia*, *Conte*, and *G Twenty Two*.

**Mathias B. Freese** Author of *The iTetralogy*, a Holocaust novel, winner of the Allbooks Review Editor's Choice Award, and *Down to a Sunless Sea*, a collection of short fiction, finalist for the Indie Excellence Book Awards, I am a psychotherapist and teacher. "Cantor Matyas Balogh" is from my new collection of stories now in progress, "Working Through the Holocaust." A book of essays, "The Parable of the Seawall," will be published in Spring 2011. My writer's blog is at [www.mathiasbfreese.com](http://www.mathiasbfreese.com)

Originally from Brazil, where she grew up in an orphanage, **Naná Howton**'s short stories in English have appeared in *Cipactli* and *The Rio Grande Review*. She's a graduate of Stanford University and MFA candidate at Columbia University where she finished her novel *Burning Seasons*.

**Thomas Karst** lives in Jacksonville, Florida with his wife and eighteen month old son. He is a graduate of the University of North Florida and is patiently waiting his return for graduate studies in Literature. Recently, he has been reading, reading, reading, in hopes that doing so will make writing less daunting.

**Joshua Learn** is living on top of a mountain in Taiwan in an ageless state due to the confusion of three calendars. He would rely on the passing of the cosmos to gauge time if it weren't for the perpetual cloud dissembling his earthly attachments.



## Fiction Fix

**Jacqueline May** has an MFA from the University of Illinois. Her work has also appeared in *Stirring* and *Prick of the Spindle*. She lives in Milwaukee and teaches at Alverno College.

**Scott Neuffer** is a 28-year-old journalist who lives and works in Gardnerville, Nevada, with his wife Maria. His stories and columns have appeared in *The Record-Courier*, *Nevada Appeal*, *Tahoe Daily Tribune* and *Carson Valley Almanac*. He is currently seeking a publisher for a short story collection and can be reached at [scottneuffer@hotmail.com](mailto:scottneuffer@hotmail.com).

**Cody Pearce** received a B.A. in English with a concentration on Creative Writing at Florida State University. He currently attends UNF where he is working on a Masters degree in Public Administration. He works as a park guide for the National Park Service, usually stationed at Fort Caroline. He has written for the Times Union. He is a Jacksonville native.

**Terry White** writes mainly crime, noir, and hardboiled fiction. He has published short stories in ezines such as *A Twist of Noir*, *Sex and Murder Magazine*, *Yellow Mama*, and *Flash Fiction Offensive*. He writes book reviews for *Boxing World*. One of his stories was selected as one of the Best Of for 2009 in *10,000 Tons of Black Ink*.

# Artist Biographies

**Anthony Aiuppy** I started college in 2006. I was determined to become a graphic designer. When I couldn't land a job in the design industry I decided to continue my education in fine art. I had never painted before spring 2009, but after my first painting I was addicted. I became a junky. I was consumed with the smell of the paint, the tension of the brush against a taut canvas, and the freedom to experiment with raw materials and authentic processes.

It seemed that almost overnight I went from playing with textures and designing compositions on a screen to making scenes and using my hands to create physical works of art. My affair with painting blossomed when I was exposed to the works of Richard Diebenkorn, Robert Rauschenburg, Elmer Bischoff, Mark Rothko, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler and Adolph Gottlieb.

I continue to use the design elements and principles earlier learned in my current body of work. I am sensitive to the linear qualities and spatial aspects of painted compositions. I use large brushes to apply paint. I wipe out passages of paint with towels or my hand; then re-apply more glazes and textures to the abstraction. I use water and medium to create a distressed look to the paintings. At times, paint flings about, clinging haphazardly to the surface. Other times, I scrape away layers of paint with knives to expose the rough canvas. I keep the paintings loose while at the same time keeping the integral design.

The important thing I do before painting is research. I read books, articles and study as many artists as possible. I continually study new processes and visit galleries and museums. By no means am I limited to non-representational painting. On the contrary, this style frees me up to create convincingly authentic works of representational art.

**Jim Fuess** works with liquid acrylic paint on canvas. Most of his paintings are abstract, but there are recognizable forms and faces in a number of the abstract paintings. He is striving for grace and fluidity, movement and balance. He likes color and believes that beauty can be an artistic goal. There is whimsy, fear, energy, movement, fun and dread in his abstract paintings. A lot of his abstract paintings are anthropomorphic. The shapes seem familiar. The faces are real. The gestures and movements are recognizable. More of his abstract paintings, both in color and black and white, may be seen at [www.jimfuessart.com](http://www.jimfuessart.com)

**Francis Raven**'s books include *Provisions* (Interbirth, 2009), *5-Haifun: Of Being Divisible* (Blue Lion Books, 2008), *Shifting the Question More Complicated* (Otoliths, 2007), *Taste: Gastronomic Poems* (Blazevox 2005) and the novel, *Inverted Curvatures* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2005). Francis lives in Washington DC; you can check out more of his work at his website: <http://www.ravensaesthetica.com/>.

**Tom Wagner** is a painter in the Washington DC metropolitan area, who investigates urban architecture and sense of place. His work has recently been exhibited at Brazilian Army Commission, McLean Project for the Arts, NBC4 Asman Gallery, Holter Museum, MT, Delaware Center for the Arts, Museum of Fine Arts, Tallahassee, FL, and is included in the public collections of: US Department of Health and the DC Call Box Project. His paintings have been published as cover images on *Playbill* for Carnegie Hall, NYC, *Euphony* for Univ. of Chicago, and *The Literary Review* for Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Tom Wagner has received grants, awards and fellowships from the following institutions: Vermont Studio Center, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Puffin Foundation, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, The Washington Post Educational Foundation, Virginia Commission for the Arts, and Phi Delta Kappa.

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