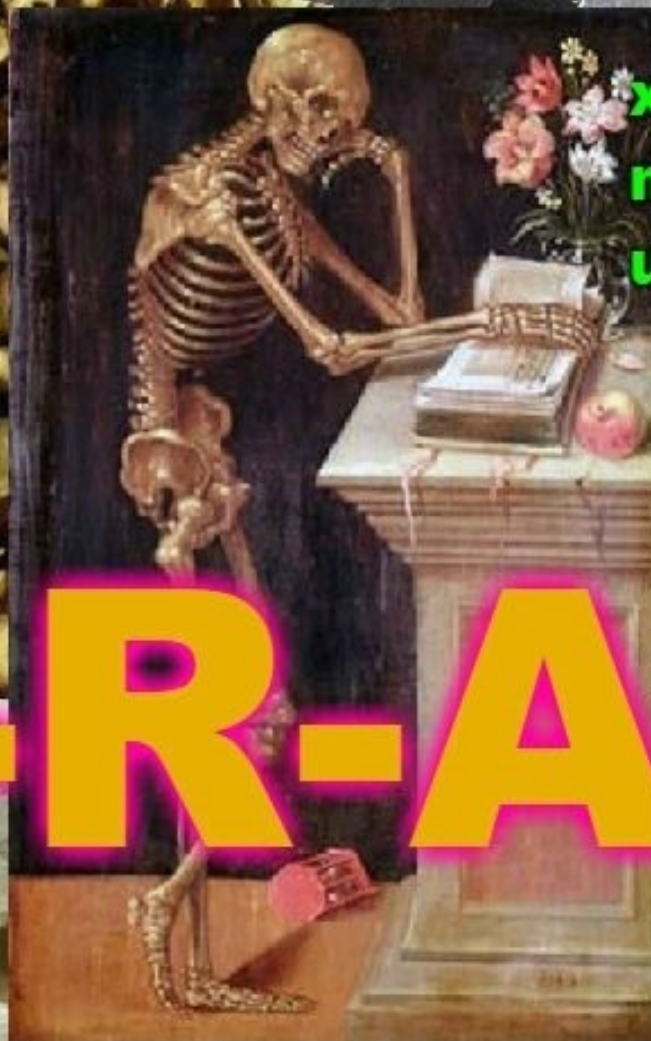


LELAND CHEUK !! KATHERINE
BEAMAN !! MARC OLMSTED !!
ISABELLA ESSER-MUNERA !!
ZARAH BUTCHER-MCGUNNIGLE !!
DELVON MATTINGLY !! TARA
ISABEL ZAMBRANO !! JAMES
TADD ADCOX !! WAYLAND
TRACY !! KRISTIN LAFOLLETTE !!
BRAXTON YOUNTS !! JP
SORTLAND !! JOEL TOMFOHR !!
SHANE KOWALSKI !! MOLLY
MONTGOMERY !! NIKOLAS
SLACKMAN !! GREGG WILLIARD !!
rob mclennan !!



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A black and white X-ray image of two hands, palms facing each other, with fingers spread. The bones are clearly visible against a dark background. The image is used as a background for text overlays.

FRIENDHYRE

LELAND CHEUK

Feedback Entry Form:

I really wanted to go to DonutFest but none of my actual friends were as fervid about donuts as I, so I thumbed FriendHyre on my phone and hired someone for just \$20.

I thought of the cost as a surcharge on the event, which had a \$50 cover for all the donuts you can eat from the top ten artisanal vendors in The City. I bought two tickets and met up with Damon at 9 a.m. in front of The Copper Mine, that warehouse concert venue by the river. We shook hands, exchanged pleasantries, and went inside. Damon was dressed blankly, dark outer layers, short brown hair, and a squarish, halogen-toned face—combined with his above-average height and thick and convergent brows, I'd be able to find him easily if we got separated.

DonutFest was packed. The warehouse was dark and opaque with theatrical smoke and fog lit by red stage lights, and a Top 40 rap song about cunnilingus thumped. Almost immediately I bumped into a young woman who spilled a thimble of the free pour over coffee from the local roaster with the table by the entrance. I brushed myself off. No worries. The stain was invisible in the darkness because I was dressed like Damon, dark outer layers of durable and pricey fabric from a major multinational brand headquartered in Sweden (recent manufacturing worker pay controversy in some small nation I couldn't remember). I closed my eyes to inhale the sweetness of the freshly baked donuts (admittedly faint because The Copper Mine has no kitchen, which meant the donuts weren't freshly made). I listened to the mmm's and "that's good's" from all these people my age and thought: this is youth, this is living, this is why you pay to live in The City.

"How did you come to like donuts?" Damon asked.

"*The Simpsons.*"

He smiled. "Like Homer?"

"Totally."

I liked Damon.

The vendors had tables around the edges of what would have been the pit if this were a concert. It was more like a really dark corporate tradeshow. We each got five different donuts, sampling from each vendor, and made our way to the back, where we placed our tiny plastic plates on a wooden ledge and divvied up bite-sized pieces of each donut with knife and fork, commenting on each and ranking our top fives. I liked the strawberry-infused béarnaise one best. Damon awarded the cakey marmite-covered one his Number One slot. All of them went well with our pour over thimbles, which were just large enough to fit the stamp that read "Fair Trade." We watched the pit of young men and women dancing to "All Night" by Chance the Rapper, even though it was 10:30 a.m.

"What are you doing the rest of the day?" I asked Damon.

"More FriendHyres," he said. "Got a meetup at an experimental prose poetry reading by all LGBTQ female authors. Then tonight, I have a men's rights rally." Damon smirked as he crushed the thimble in his palm and flipped it onto the ledge where it was shepherded to the recycling by a black man wearing a blue DonutFest Staff polo and vinyl gloves.

"How many of these do you do?"

"This *is* what I do," Damon said. "Been doing it about a year. I get to meet a lot of people, do a lot of very niche things, some of which are pretty cool. I make enough money to stay in The City. What do you do?"

"I work at a bank," I said. "Compliance."

"Oh cool!"

His words were perfectly pitched to emulate a sincere interest while cutting off further conversation on the topic. Damon popped a piece of the strawberry béarnaise donut in his mouth. "Mmm!" he said, while chewing, even rolling his eyes a little.

"So good. I can see why you ranked this one best. Thanks for inviting me. I feel like this was an experience I'll always remember."

What a pro. He was a great FriendHyre. After we parted ways, sugar-mouthed and buzzed, I rated Damon five stars.

Feedback Entry Form:

If I have a complaint about FriendHyre, it's that it is damn near impossible to get the same friend twice.

None of my buddies in the office like music...like at all, so I tried to get Damon again to go see My Meechi out in East Durwood Docks. But once Damon surpassed 1,000 five-star reviews, his rate quintupled, as made resoundingly clear by the FriendHyre Premium exploding star emoji bedecking his profile. I couldn't justify paying \$100 for a friend to go with me to a \$15 show.

I read Damon's reviews and they were all like: "I recently got divorced and had these tix to a black-tie fundraiser for Even Rural Americans Deserve Clean Water at The Metropolitan Center, and Damon was so nice and kind that he never asked me any personal questions and we both enjoyed such an incredible meal from ten different TV celebrity chefs and I would totally hire Damon again." The event was obviously at least \$1,000 a head.

I ended up FriendHyring a young woman named Maybe for \$5, and she was fine, but she was a soft-talker and I couldn't clearly hear what she was saying at the concert, and when I could, she only talked about herself. She never asked me any questions. We watched about half the show in silence, standing beside each other but not really experiencing it together. Then Maybe saw people she knew and told me she was going to say hi. She never came back! I waited for her outside the venue after the show, but she was gone. I still enjoyed my night. My Meechi has a way of sounding like she's singing just to you, which, of course, is exactly the way I wished Maybe would have approached my FriendHyre experience.

Still, I didn't want to ruin her rating, so I rated her four stars.

Feedback Entry Form:

I had coffee with one of my friends who used FriendHyre to build her social media presence. She's a high-level publicist at a retail brand and often posts about new developments at work on her own account. Each day of the week, she hired a \$5 friend for a 30-minute coffee date. She liked meeting and talking to new people who did different things from what she would normally do because she worked all the time and seemed to only meet corporate types.

"Once, I even met a real coal miner," she said. "He's trying to transition to a career in elder care." Most importantly, she got him and his FriendHyres to follow her on social media and promote her posts. Within a year of starting these coffee dates, she had added thousands of followers.

I told her about my experience with Damon at DonutFest and how I felt like my first FriendHyre experience was my best one and I didn't like how good FriendHyres ended up pricing themselves out of long-term FriendHyreships.

"Do you really want long-term FriendHyreships?" she said. "The whole reason the service exists is because long-term friendships are inadequate. You like sports. I don't. I like running. You don't. You make less money than I do, so you can't afford to do some of things I like to do. Our friendship, while you know I love hanging out with you a couple of times a year, is a pain in the ass sometimes. If you developed a long-term relationship with this Damon guy, it'd just end up sucking, like actual friendships."

After she was done talking, my coffee tasted like dirt. "I never thought of our friendship that way."

"Don't get butt-hurt," she said. "I would have gone to DonutFest with you, if I didn't have anything better to do."

"I didn't think you would like donuts. Or want to spend fifty bucks on it."

"You didn't ask!" she said. "We communicate like the old friends we are. We act like we know everything about each other, but in reality, we hardly know a thing. I love FriendHyreships. They're short and sweet and no one pretends it isn't."

After my friend's impassioned defense of your service, I went back and changed all my four-star ratings to five-star ratings.

Feedback Entry Form:

I saw Damon at a drugstore. He looked much as I remembered, darkly clad, pale, and smiling. He was in the cosmetics section. To my surprise, in his hand was a box of Just For Men. He didn't look old enough for gray hair, but I guess that's why he was holding said box. I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Remember me?"

He peered down at me, squinting.

"DonutFest," I prompted.

"Oh, yes," Damon said. "How have you been?"

"The same," I said. "I looked for you on FriendHyre, but you're, like, super-expensive now. That's my only complaint about the service, really. It's that you can't keep getting your good FriendHyres. Congrats on your success, though!"

"I just quit."

"What? Why?"

Damon smirked, as he had at DonutFest that morning months ago. "When you factor in all the expenses, I end up making about three bucks an hour," he said. "I pretty much had to respond twenty-four-seven to make rent. It took about a year, but I finally

got hired as a junior analyst at a bank."

"Really? Which one?" He named his. I named mine. They didn't match.

"But you were making like a hundred bucks a hire," I said.

"And seventy would go to the tux rental," Damon said. "The event would go for four hours. So that's seven-fifty an hour. At least I got to eat well on those nights. I would starve myself all day and then gorge. Mm, so good! That's what I did at DonutFest. After you left, I went back and grabbed all the leftovers. I got so sick that night." He laughed, but then swallowed as if the memory made him bilious. "Never doing *that* again!"

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "Thanks for rating me five stars, though."

"You were one of the good ones," Damon said. "At least you didn't try to have sex with me."

My eyes bulged. "There are other apps for that!"

"No one told those fuckers."

"What does FriendHyre do to protect you?"

"They don't even let you talk to a real person," he said. "You can only give feedback through the app." He shrugged. "It's cool. Whatever. I just introduce the problem people to my pepper spray."

After an uncomfortable silence, we began to drift toward the checkout counters. I told him I was glad he was in a better place. "Maybe we should grab coffee sometime," I added.

"Oh cool!" he said, in the exact tone and pitch he used at DonutFest when I told him what I did for a living. I knew then we would never have coffee together and that if

we saw each other again, it was likely he would not acknowledge me.

Damon's story changed the way I felt about FriendHyre. I started browsing through the profiles of smiling faces and five-star reviews and people saying they were up for all types of fun and how much they liked my favorite bands and sports teams, and I would think about how they were probably lying for the money, and all they had to go through just so I could feel a smidge less lonely eating donuts and going to concerts and baseball games and such. There has to be a better way. Maybe there's merit to this service but adjustments need to be made so that the people who make the service possible can benefit in real ways with actual value, not just ratings and emojis and theatrical smoke. That's my feedback, FriendHyre. I look forward to your reply.

Until then, I've lowered all my ratings to two stars.

A black and white X-ray image of a cat's skull, showing the internal bone structure and jaw. The skull is positioned diagonally, with the snout pointing towards the bottom left. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

HOW TO TAME A FERAL CAT

KATHERINE BEAMAN

It was a point of personal identity for Lula that she refer to no plant as a "weed" and refrain from assigning labels of "good" or "bad" to any creature. Her property: a lot which was adjacent to her daughter Valerie's own house, and on which sat a mobile home with two attached porches and a mess of plant matter almost entirely obscuring it. Corpses, or almost-corpses, of junebugs lie scattered and belly up all over.

Many an afternoon, Lula would study the cat the hung around by her fence. She would glance over at him from her chair on the porch as she took a sip from her glass of iced tea and ate her morning toast. Sometimes, she'd stand up from a gardener's squat to wipe sweat from her forehead, look over at the cat, and test out kissy clicky sounds on him. The cat would slink around, dotting from here to there, always keeping an eye, as cats do. After this went on for some time, Lula made the decision to befriend the cat. She set a can of vienna sausage on the porch.

Flies darted around the can on that muggy morning of that summer. Many of the flies resolved to stay and loiter in the ripe aroma, such that the joint became a full-on insect and feline cantina. What if the flies wore wife-beaters, the way they hung around like men outside a gas station? Suppose the cat pulled together enough change for a can of beer! With each new morning came new charities from Lula and the cat began to develop something resembling trust in her. After his alert posture slacked, Lula managed to trap the cat into a carrying cage which was once used to carry her guineas (who had long since become breakfast for the local coyotes). Valerie never learned to tell the difference between the howls of coyotes and dogs.

Summers like these, in this place, have always been violent. There is a constant rhythm of swatting, biting, itching. Your own sweat falls into the corners of your eyes and it adds to the sting. There is no place to escape the heat and the restlessness in your gut burns you up. When Lula gripped the cat with her thick green rubber gloves and plunged him into the cage, the cat's primal screams were nearly drowned out by the air around them, air too saturated with survival to pay any notice to what occurred on the porch of Lula's mobile home that morning. The great paradox of this place is you've got to have a little feral in you to be able to call this place home.

Home was something of a loosely defined, abstract concept to Lula. Lula's Pa once made tweaks and repairs on tracks and freight cars of rapidly expanding rail lines which carried oil from here to there. As a child, Lula's family slept in box cars. Lula found playmates roaming the ground. She and her brothers learned to catch bullfrogs and box turtles, snakes and armadillos. When her Ma called the children in for a lesson or a meal, the creatures were released to scurry off into the surrounding bayous, hills, sands, or whatever the environment was like where the locomotives of capital took the family.

Ma, can I keep it just this once? Lula once pleaded of her mother with regards to a rabbit which she and her siblings had somehow gotten into a wooden crate. I'll take good care of it. I'll feed it and clean its crate and everything. Promise!

Lula's mother once placed a calloused hand on her hip and pointed a ladle at her daughter. The only way that thi-ing is coming in this car is if it's shot, skinned and boiled in stew for supper. Now, shoo!

Lula's brothers once smiled big. Ma, can we shoot it? Can we? Can we? They once raced to grab the shotgun which was propped up by the door of the boxcar.

Ma once felt it a healthy part of a boy's bringing up to quench their thirst for blood, so she waved them off with a grunt and a nod. Lula refused supper that night and cried herself to sleep.

The lesson that Lula's Ma once tried to teach her and which Lula seemed to have failed to learn or accept is that feral critters are better left to their feral ways. The kindest thing to do for a feral cat, should you come across one and think it cute, is to leave it be.

I don't get why she thinks she needs another animal around, let alone a wild one. Bless her heart. But what really gets to me is that poor cat. He's been in her bathroom for two weeks now and he's just as hostile as the day she brought him inside. That cat doesn't want to be there. I wish she'd just give up on this silly idea and set him loose.

Dionysus voiced his own views on the subject, venomously hissing at Lula's outstretched gloved hand which held a morsel of tuna.

You can't keep that thing in your bathroom. It's not where it belongs. Let the creature go free. Well, we'll see. He'll come around with time.

It would not come around with time. Some cats, if taken in as kittens up to two months in age, can be domesticated into lovely housepets. But much like people, as cats age, they become more and more set in their ways. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a feral cat to become domesticated.

What if it has diseases? Not to mention, you could get hurt. At your age you don't need to be setting yourself up for injury and infection. Who do you think has to care for you?

Well, we'll see.

After Dionysus was left to his own devices in Lula's sparse, stark white bathroom, he would help himself to the offering of cat food left behind. He would then rub his face and body against every surface in the bathroom: the walls, toilet, door, tub, sink. If he must be held in this place, he figured, he might as well claim it as his own with his feline scent. After this ritual came a prayer consisting of cacophonous cries that pierced the air with his prisoner's sorrows.

Here are some facts about feral cats: The more generations that have passed since a cat's last domestic ancestor, the wilder a cat will be. No matter how many generations of wildness, however, most tend to be largely dependent on human kindness and waste products. Without welfare and hand-me-downs, roughly fifty percent of feral cats die within their first year of life.

Things continued much in the same way as they had been going. In spite of feedings which occurred twice daily and numerous extensions of a heavily-gloved hand, very little progress had been made toward building amicable sentiments in Dionysus. He always reacted to any gesture with an arched-back hiss as if he had been plucked from

his Eden that very morning. When Lula left, he would resume his routine of eating, pacing, praying, and plotting his revenge.

Like most any cat, if Lula were to die, Dionysus would not hesitate to lick every morsel of meat off her bones. Dionysus, however, actively fantasized about the idea of dining on the flesh of his captor. He absolutely detested his sterile cell. He sharpened his claws on the door and waited anxiously for it to open long enough for him to burst free. His prayers were offered piously. He would humble himself for falling short of wild glory and then he would seek forgiveness for his sins. He thought of all the rats there would be to hunt in cat heaven.

Lula would pray to her own cat gods, the gods who had driven the first domestic cats from streets to hearth in Egypt. The Egyptian cat goddess Maftet ruled over justice, war, and execution. She later became Bastet, the goddess of motherhood. The relationship between war and maternity is a complex one, birth as violent of an ordeal as death. How quickly bodies and homes become battlegrounds. How devastation is passed down the generations. These gods, surely, would have the power to undo iterations of increasing ferality and isolation.

The gods blessed Lula with a solution over breakfast one morning. As she took care to spread butter evenly over a slice of toast, she realized that the toaster was the key. Whether the lock the key opened was a door of control or liberation was not a matter to which she gave much thought.

When Dionysus was confronted with the cage a second time, he resisted defiantly. In his cat's mind, the cage had brought him to somewhere terrible and to somewhere terrible it was sure to take him again. Yet the cage was not to leave the bathroom, let alone the bathtub, during his term of occupancy. Dionysus writhed under the stronghold of his murderer's green gloves as they sentenced him once again to the cage. He employed every survival tool with which he was equipped. Every hiss, a supplication. Every scratch, a sacrifice. Even as the glove turned the faucet of the bathtub and cool water of imminent death drenched his body, he did not surrender his faith in the Almighty. He cried out and cried out, declaring his allegiance to the gods. One final prayer, that his soul may be wild in the life to come.

The toaster's cord could barely extend from the bathwater to the nearest outlet, but Lula managed. The electricity which pulsed through Dionysus's earthly body was more feral than he could have ever hoped to have been. When it was all over, his limp corpse permitted Lula to hold him close to her breast as she carried him outside. His head fell pathetically over her arm and his body hung like a garment. Though his fur was cold and damp, warmth had not yet left his body.

Slain Dionysus was lain on a table in the garden where no plant is a weed and no creature is good or evil. Next to him lay a steel blade with which a long line was cut into his flesh from his throat down to his anus. The head, tail, and paws were chopped off and tossed aside. His skin peeled back just like an orange. All internal organs were excavated and deposited on the pile of dismembered body parts.

When Lula had toast and sausage for breakfast the next day, it was very quiet.



MARC OLMSTED

ART NAZIS

Spainhammer's gone, of course.

Flattop blond muscleman Viking male stripper and street hustler who wrote for Curtains' *ReSurface*, grumbling about not getting paid, and mad at Crazy House Press publisher Enoch Poorboy (whom he threatened with a syringe of his own AIDS blood) - that was the event of Floyd Lice's "ironic" Hitlerian performance rant at the Bijou, where my Japanese friend Tony Amida ran into the famous Satanist's daughter "who was surprised they let Asians in.")

I liked Mick Spainhammer and sat on Tony's back porch 1988, both of us smoking cigarettes, as he discussed the "art nazis" framed within the kitchen door at the party which included Floyd Lice in usual arrogance, holding the hand of a razor-thin Aryan punkette in a dress with a lowcut back that showed her asscrack, that "new cleavage" that still hasn't quite caught on. Mick was still ready for his close-up, Mr. DeMille, with no sign of the ravages to come, not just to him but to our city, our day jobs, our planet.

The most amazing story about Mick Spainhammer was told to me by Tony 25 years later, reminiscing about this old San Francisco that was evaporating before our eyes.

Spainhammer was fisting a trick and Spainhammer was on acid. The trick farted and a spray of blood went all over Mick's chest. On acid. It definitely took our hustler to another realm - staring into the Abyss, so to speak. Still, he didn't freak out or go on a bummer. That was something you had to respect.



ISABELLA ESSER-MUNERA

BANGKOK

He begins to paint.

Frescos. No. But layers. Layers.

There are faces. Clouds. He paints feverishly. Time is obsolete. His hand is limitless; it isn't his. His body; not his. He makes love to himself in paint.

~

It is July 4th and he takes the four pieces that are left from the box in his drawer. He eats them quickly and quickly lays down on his bed.

It is a mat, long and thin.

The room is bare and feels like it is opening. Like a box, as though the walls were slowly falling away by a pulled string. The color white, but something softer than that.

The man is not old. His arms are thin and at his sides. They fold over his chest. He is waiting for something.

Then he gets up, rapidly, like he knows. This is when he begins to paint.

It happens like this:

He left the room, saw two people. More accurately: two people saw him. Face bent, angled, Asian. Sharp hair, sharp features, light cutting across his shoulder. A staircase shadow, sinking down the steps. Cloaked, eclipsed. Harrowed. Gone. He was quick, he did not see them.

It is difficult not to pause, outside the door.

He pauses outside the door.

He is breathing.

What he is breathing: smoke, gasoline, food, other things. More importantly: the building, and their inhabitants. There is color. Flesh.

He walks.

Swiftly, anonymous. Like everyone else. It is fascinating. He thinks this to himself: fascinating. Escape: into, onto-others. There is color, there is flesh.

He hears it: gently, twinkling like a lullaby. Not the cart, the infinite piles of avocados. Not the man, woman, child. A pruned face giving way to a smooth one. Not the multitude of flashing eyes: lecherous, tired, pleading, bored. The twinkling, silver drums.

He sees them: ten thousand silver, pure, thin-sheet-silver metal drums. Tiny porcelain dolls, robots, playing on the drums. A long line like dominos. They are drumming their nails.

There. A window like a fish tank. It is glowing. He feels it, there, in his chest. His ribs are plastic. They are bowing out. He feels bigger. His heart overflowing. He walks into the store.

Things are slow and up close.

Or maybe no.

In the store there is color.

No flesh.

Color. Brilliant, saturated, blossoming.

He feels it in waves of texture. He breathes, dizzy. So much. The paint lined against the walls like dominos.

A small windmill outside the door spins, is singing.

It sounds like an angel.

He wants the color. He swallows it, standing there. It is not enough. He wants more. His ribs are plastic. Burst into arms. Reach out. His heart is bigger. Overflowing. Dribbling to the floor. Drooling.

He wants the color like a lover. Like water. It is not enough, standing there.

He steals the paint.

All of it.

There are no cameras. He fills his pockets, his pants, his hoodie. Mechanical. He is a robot.

He leaves the store.

He does not stop outside the door.

The flesh surrounds him. A wall.

Get through.

He moves. The flesh surrounds him, parts.

He is swelling. He is peeing. He is fine.

Back in his room.

His room is a box. He never noticed before.

Sweating, sweating. Sweaty. He peels off the navy hoodie with his thin, pale arms; the white, wet shirt. So much white. Sticky. Sweat on his forehead, clinging black hair. He lets out a moan. Unintentional. Glass is falling to the floor. Nothing breaks. There are no cameras. He breaks.

There is color.

White.

He is in a city that does not celebrate July 4th.

He begins to paint.

He does not have a brush. He does not find it until later.

He uses his ribs. His thin arms. His tongue. His penis. He lets out a groan. Unintentional. He is masturbating, he is naked.

Writhing.

There is color, there is flesh, he moans.

He holds up his hands.

They shake. Some asshole called them feminine once. Against the light they are snowflakes. His face is wet. So is his body, so. He looks at them, slender, plastic bones. He wants to bite them. He doesn't. He looks. Snowflakes.

His cheeks are high and spread across his face like dove's wings. Dovetailing down: his sharp chin. Like his mother. The blinking eyes which close, curtain. The hair, flattened back in odd angles.

His mother with her face over the bowl of soup.

As if it were a round pocket mirror, propped up, the reflections doubled, split down the spine like a horizon line, one face on the table, one face floating above it. A stillness in the morning, with the feeble light filtering through.

It caught her eyes, set them glowing. The house filled with stillness, cold light.

Her skin was pale and as thin as moth's wings. Raising her eyes, over the bowl, over breakfast, she was all light, he said nothing. And at the seam where her faces met, the clasp, her chin an arrow pointing in—a necklace dangled, the one his father gave her.

His father is in the United States of America, Long Beach Island now. He could be his younger brother instead of his son, if. His elder sister, glamorously sprawled on the couch with a magazine, smirking, "When you get there, what're you going to do? Make art? Fuck men? Huh? Fuck men and get high? Go, faggot. Go like your fucking dad." Her legs scissoring over the couch, cupping a cushion like two fingers the plush meat of a cigarette. I can't, fuck, those. Kinds of hips, white as the sky.

The downturned navy hoodie, she would remember, flattened down in the middle like his nose, his sister thought, as he left. As he left he lifted it over his head with pale, thin fingers. Like a cloak, a curtain, closing, edging down, and with a hiss, sweeping the cloth over the floor.

His eyes are closed.

Making love to himself in the paint.

There are cameras. They are like mirrors. They are like eyes. His room is a box, he is sure. He is sure there are cameras. He is on a stage, there are floodlights, the opening magician's act, he will saw himself apart, his bones will oblige.

He paints with his body, the white white room.

Finds a toothbrush.

He is going to paint a fresco.

No. But there are faces. Clouds.

He is determined, so he paints. He paints frantically. He is in a city that does not

celebrate Independence. Independence Day. There is color. He makes, bleeds, cries color. There is no flesh. He paints. He will find a lover. He will come home. He will not come home. He will not find a lover. He might be crying. There is color.



TRIAL

ZARAH BUTCHER-MCGUNNIGLE

The mystery shopper is ambitious, athletic, with a big dick. It looks good on you. I've been here for a while. I ask him what his Myers-Briggs type is and he says he is an INFP. What, INFP, but I'm an INFP. You don't seem like an INFP, I don't know if you are actually one. I am, he says, that's what I got when I did the test. Ok, I say, I'm going to the test right now and pretend I'm you while I'm doing it.

I walk the perimeter of the mall. I really want to buy something but I can't find anything to buy. Then I can't find my way out of the mall. I get lost three times. As I am getting lost someone I know messages me to say they just matched with my ex-boyfriend on an online dating site. I am late to my job trial. The job trial is in a suburban but industrial part of town. I have to put pasta sauce into 50 plastic bags with a very large ladle and I'm not supposed to get any sauce on the sides of the bags. I am very slow and I keep checking the weight of the bag and trying to scoop up excess sauce back out of the bag with the large ladle which keeps touching the sides of the bag. I'm not a practical person. Two people are watching me and the warehouse we are in has high ceilings and no windows. One of the women watching me says, Are you just out of school? I say, No, I'm 26. She asks me what I studied at university and I say creative writing and she says Oh, well, that's not going to lead to a job is it. She criticizes the way I am placing spinach on rice. She pulls me aside. We're not really sure what you're looking for, she says.

I take a taxi to the mystery shopper's house. Did you get paid for the trial, he says, and I say no. We lie on the bed. I say my hand is too sore to give him a handjob right now sorry because of the arthritis in my hand. He says, You don't look sick, you seem too young to be sick. I want him to be my boyfriend but he doesn't want to commit. The mystery shopper says, Maybe you should be a teacher I think you'd be good as a teacher and additionally, you already dress like a teacher. I say I already thought about that. I applied for teacher college and a few weeks after my interview, the interviewer called me to her office and asked me what my plans were for the upcoming year. I said, Well, the teaching course?? I hope? She told me I was academically strong. But that I seemed too fragile and submissive to be a teacher. Are you sure you want to be a teacher, she said, Why don't we brainstorm some other possible options for you for this year?



**SOMETIMES HEROES
CAN'T WEAR BROWN SKIN**

DELVON MATTINGLY

In times of life-and-death, nobody quite grasped the concept of "be quiet." But for us, it didn't matter. My peers panicked, whimpered, some nearly hyperventilated—but nothing outclassed the tormenting screams coming from an adjacent room. Nothing could abolish the cackling gunfire, bullets penetrating walls and possibly bodies. Nothing stopped the killer from heading to our room next, glaring at us with a face of apathy, drawing our attention to boast about his body count, and how we were going to add to it. Nobody could do a thing, except for me.

I wouldn't consider my actions gallant. I charged the moment the boy appeared distracted. An amalgam of fortunate events led me to overpower the shooter, using his weapon against him, my following actions fueled by pure trepidation. I realized I'd rather the boy fall than to witness a firearm pointed at my face again or hear the anguish of my friends. The worst part: the shooter was a student too. We acknowledged his bleeding corpse more than we ever did him. His name was Ethan, and only a few of us knew that.

An absolute silence plagued the air, and I began to pace the classroom, "no" continually slurring from my mouth. Nobody mentioned a word about the murder, not our teacher or my friends. No one.

* * *

There wasn't much blood on my hands, although the few smears on my shirt reminded me of the monster I had become. I expected my classmates to see me in the same light. That wouldn't explain their reluctance to speak, or even to move. They were afraid of me, their fear cemented in a truth that not only had one of their peers become a killer, but also another.

My best friend began to speak, my name slowly rolling off her tongue.

"I can't, Marissa," I interrupted.

"Jerome, you saved us," she whispered.

"I still killed Ethan! I'm done for. My future, everything. I could go to jail."

"No, you're a hero," she said. She searched for validation from our other classmates. "Right?"

Everyone remained quiet. Then, some of my classmates began to cry while others seemed to struggle to preserve their sanity. And I felt for all of them. I understood, but I knew I had to withdraw from my emotions to prepare for the arrival of the authorities. Picture this: an emotional, erratic, brown teenager with the blood of another student on his clothes. Yeah, that's a minimum of 25 years.

"Jerome..." Marissa murmured.

"Stop. Please, just stop."

* * *

Ten minutes passed, and the authorities arrived. Everyone was escorted from the building to the fields outside, like we were in a prison line, distress printed on their faces, or even scarier: the expressions of those who were still processing—blank, unworldly.

I couldn't stop picturing Ethan, another student, his glare, a rifle dangling from his hand, blood stains on his clothes—imagining my face stamped above his. A monster. If I wasn't a monster, then why did the authorities scrutinize me with disdain?

Police officers pulled aside students from my class for questioning. Paranoia struck me like a chisel shaping a stone statue—one final tap and I'd crack. Some of my classmates clearly talked about me, peering back and leading the cops to notice me more than they had. Before I knew it, I stood alone. Then, it was my turn to be probed.

A stocky pale officer approached. "How are you, son? What is your name?"

"I'm okay. It's Jerome."

"My name is Officer Anderson. You don't seem too shaken up by things, Jerome," he said, examining at the small blotches of blood on my shirt before returning eye contact. "You're quivering. You seem more terrified of me than anything."

"That--that's not true."

The officer huffed. "Can you tell me what happened? If you're uncomfortable talking about it, we--"

"No," I said. "It's okay." I gave him a detailed chronology of events, up until Ethan's death.

"So, the student massacres the entire classroom next to yours and then comes into your room to provoke everyone before killing himself?"

It sounded more artless after the officer repeated it. When I nodded, he suddenly grew reticent, looking down on me with eyes of censure. "That's not what your classmates are saying. In fact, they've claimed you convinced Ethan to cease fire, and when he realized his wrongdoings and felt contrite, he impulsively took his own life. Correct?"

What?

"You and your entire class could've died if it weren't for you." Officer Anderson patted my shoulder with his right hand before meandering back to his colleagues. "Son, you're a hero."

"Hey!" Marissa called and trotted over to me. "Why are you all the way over here, Jerome?"

Attempting a smile, I replied, "I don't really know."

"We need you."

"Why?"

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Because you saved us. Word is spreading fast, and people from other classrooms aren't taking this well. The media is already here."

In spite of what she did for me, she still didn't quite understand. "Marissa, thank you." I looked down at my palms, slowly twirling them while opening and closing my fists. "But sometimes heroes can't wear brown skin."

She nodded before tightly gripping one of my arms, that and the familiar way her nose twitched before speaking gave away her frustration. "People also don't get to choose what color skin they're born into. For what it's worth, I think for you to be able to do these things, while fighting so many other battles, is something that deserves recognition."

I smiled, shaking my head. "That's incredibly sweet. But, there are consequences to my actions, all of them. Risks I'm usually not willing to take."

She turned to see how our peers held up. "Well I'm glad you took one today."

"May I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why are you so calm? Everyone's freaking out."

Marissa finally looked back at me. "I could ask you the same."

"Well, where I'm from ... let's just say this isn't the first time a gun has been pointed at me, or has been fired in my vicinity."

She looked away again. I guessed she couldn't grasp the idea of such horror. "I think it'll hit us sooner or later. This all feels too surreal, but being around you

helps."

"As long as I'm me, I can never be considered a hero."

Exhaling, Marissa placed her two hands on my shoulders. I could tell she wanted me to own the title, or maybe she was hinting that I needed to do that for everyone else, at least for now.

"Jerome, we're friends. We've got each other's back. That's all that really matters."

Perhaps Marissa's right, but probably not. Because of her and a few others, despite the color of my skin, I didn't go to jail. I thanked Marissa once more. And with her, I joined my class.

BUBBLEGUM



TARA ISABEL ZAMBRANO

The girl has created a bubble with 1/3 cup of glycerin, 1/3 cup water and 1/3 cup dishwashing soap after her third psychiatrist visit. Years ago she was a perfect baby— a head full of black curls, big eyes and a wide smile. After she turned five, something went wonky with her neurotransmitters. The doctor wrote a new prescription, and the girl didn't want to pop any pills. The bubble's supposed to last at least for a month because of all that glycerin.

The girl lives inside the bubble. It wobbles when the girl floats like a butterfly, like cotton candy. She has a crooked grin and her body behind the prism looks like an alien. She naps in a child's pose.

Every evening, the girl rolls her bubble on the porch, her horizon-bound gaze misted in the trapped air. Inside the house, her father sleeps on the sofa. He has Marlboro breath and sunken eyes; food from his last meal always shows between his teeth. He wakes up a few minutes before his shift at a convenience store. Her mother, a dry cleaner, eats and watches TV in the bedroom. She smells of kerosene.

Inside the bubble, the girl can hardly hear her parent's arguing over food or finances. Sometimes they have company. Kids come around and touch the bubble. The girl winces, rolls away towards the bathroom.

Until a week ago, the girl had a name. Now her mother calls her Bubblegum, the cough in her throat thick with mucus. At night, she sleepwalks towards the girl, puts on loud music and dances with her eyes closed, her tongue licking her lips like an animal craving for a treat. The girl zones out, imagines how the bubble looks from far above—a glass bead— something you'd want to pick up and watch the rocking stillness inside it.

The girl tries to remember the list of words her teacher gave the last day she was in school, stories her mother never read at bedtime. She regrets not bringing the doll lying at the bottom of her toy trunk, someone to talk to.

The bubble swells on the sides where the girl brushes her lips. Tastes sour. It has been a part of her for weeks—a sister now. She runs her fingers across the periphery

and the bubble reflects her insides— a pair of drank-to-excess-kidneys sitting on an inactive bladder, a brain cooked by pills behind the double-doors of her eyes. She tries to catalog her organs but the labeling is muddled. Pores and follicles are simply holes, the hair ready to sprout under her arms, between her legs, is trouble. She glances at her blood-soaked heart and a peanut-size uterus, slightly twisted butterfly-shaped lungs— hollow sacs everywhere. Then she leans back, wondering if she'd create bigger bubbles or split atoms when she grows up, if she'd need to impress others to find love. A fluffy moment before she realizes her feet are glued to the inner surface of the bubble. She moves her legs frantically— the bubble elongates sideways, tapers and shrinks, but does not burst. The girl starts sobbing, tears falling, blood hammering in her temples. She hasn't known fear. She hasn't realized the bubble is a body— a space to hold everything that isn't pretty. Until now. She looks down at her toes, as if trying to forget. When she brings her head up, she catches a spectrum reflecting off the edge, filling rainbows in her eyes. They gleam and gleam.

4/14/2008

AN ESSAY ON BIGNESS

JAMES TADD ADCOX

I am a man who never needs to do what other people tell him to do. I am so much bigger than they are. When someone tells me to do something, I give them a look. It is a calculated look. In this look, I share with them the artificiality that lies at the base of this interaction, and indeed all of our interactions. It is a look that says, "Whatever you might tell yourself about rights and authority, we both understand the physics of the situation. Perhaps, after you have told me to do a thing, I will do that thing; perhaps I will not; but do not confuse the telling and the doing."

A smaller man, in similar circumstances, might refuse to do what he was told, or do the opposite, merely to show he could. I have no such need. I am vouchsafed by bigness. It is more impressive if I choose to do as I am told than if I refuse, since there is never any question whether or not I could have refused. When, for example, at the bank, the man behind the little window asks me to step aside for the next customer: I give him my look, then step aside. The man behind the little window is shaken. It is as though he observed a tornado pass by the house in which he stood, or the ground open up and swallow the person next to him (another man in a tie and light-blue shirt, behind another little window). If I had chosen to do otherwise, if I had allowed my bigness to erupt upon him, what protection would his window offer then? But I did not; how much more fearsome and remarkable that I did not.

I have met taller men than me, but they were not bigger than me: they were lanky, disproportionate, long rather than big. One never needs to look up at such men. Usually they're hunched over, in any case. It goes without saying that I have met men fatter than me. And I have met men smaller than me who were nonetheless exceedingly muscled, men who emerge at irregular intervals from the gym so that they may be observed. They dehydrate themselves and wear shirts designed to draw attention to their arms. Their muscles are a layer they have placed over an anterior smallness. They can remember a time when they did not have muscles. They know there is a future in which their muscles will leave them.

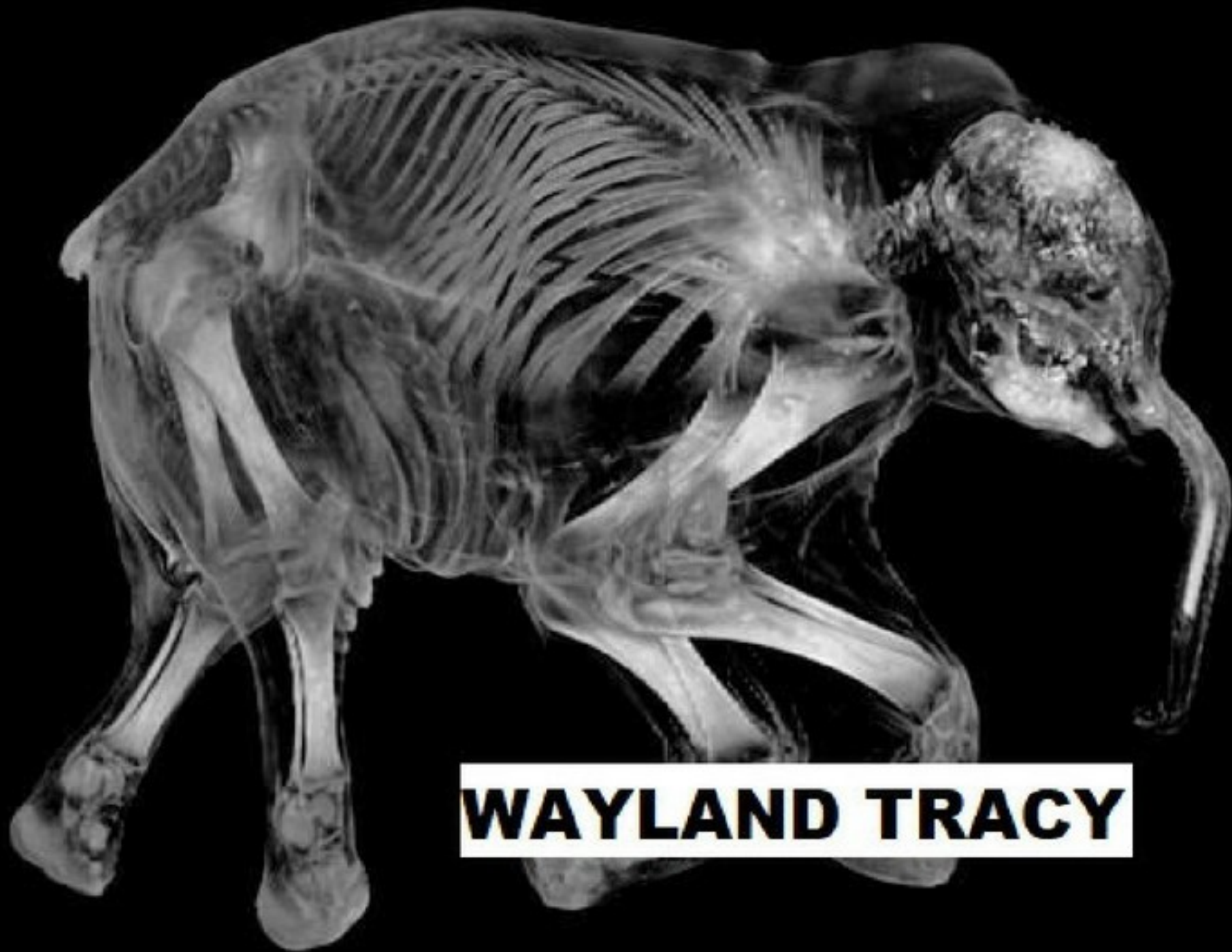
My bigness is of a different order than these bignesses. My bigness is an essential bigness. There has never been a time when I was not big. Even in my cradle, the bars separating me from the space outside were a formality. As I learned to stand,

gripping the leg of a chair, my parents looked on, nervous. They were not small people, neither my mother nor father, but in me they gave rise to a bigness that neither could comprehend. I don't mean to say that I was grotesque as a child, please don't misunderstand: I was child-sized, much smaller than I am now. But it was obvious that my child-size was its own form of bigness. Bullies avoided me; smaller children grouped themselves under my shadow, knowing I felt no need to prove myself. I have never needed to be anything other than polite.

Tall, beautiful women love me. I answer a certain anxiety they have felt all their lives, instilled by mothers and television commercials, regarding their tallness. Yet the women I prefer are extremely small. This is not because I like to push anyone around. I could push around much larger women or men, no problem. (Anyhow, I'm not that type of a guy.) It is, rather, that I enjoy the contrast: such a large man, such a tiny woman. At night I dream of perfect women, tinier and tinier, women that fit in my cupped hand, women dancing on the ridges of my fingerprint, becoming ever more perfect as they disappear.

On the street, I often step to the side for oncoming pedestrians, simply to see their reaction. Relief, mostly: and a kind of love.

THE ELEPHANT EATS THE DOG



WAYLAND TRACY

I've rested my eyes upon the kit cat clock that keeps manic vigil of my darkening apartment. Either this or another video of fish eating birds, and I've figured out how all those end.

Its eyes shift front door to back door, synchronized with pendulum tail, sixty back-and-fourths to the minute. A maroon coat with white beard and a clock face on its belly grasped tightly by claws. And a bowtie. And ears like devil horns. Surely the devil keeps time, is timely, time of our lives. But I'm waiting for those eyes to break rhythm, waiting for those orbs of seeming mechanical animation to meet my own and grant me something of a different something, and no, I don't think it will be good but that's not what different means.

I'm drinking gin and juice, cranberry juice and gin poured from a broken bottle and even seasoned with the elusive glass flakes that could not be filtered out with fork. I think of Snoop Dogg. I think we could have been friends, but time feels thin now, wavering like mist in the sun, yes, but no who cares, it wavers like the ghost of my grandmother visiting me on the can. I could cry now as I did then, but I'm far too stupid these days. Won't allow it. I'm sorry, Snoop. Besides, weed makes me doomful and I'm so goddamned tired of being the big bummer.

The gin and juice and glass goes down a little scratchy, but I believe in paying for my vices. I paved the road with five beers. I dropped the sixth after the fifth and let it pool on the kitchen floor. In time it will evaporate, glass and all, and my apartment will be pillaged by old friends and landlord, all matter renewed in the great cycle, kissed cheek and wreathed neck. My deposit withheld. That's why I don't clean unless it stinks.

Gin is for all seasons, as is all booze. Don't be a fool. A Kansas summer is like an old farmer beating you unconscious with a haybale. So you drink gin and tonic with extra lime and oh so much ice. A big glass. Steal the ice from the front of a gas station. A big glass to peer through the bottom and see the future.

I imagine, I must, the cat looks to steal a lover or pull one over a on fool. I am overlooked, time and again passed over. Ha. I actually know the cat to be a dragon

hoarding over its treasure, yes, it collects the time I drop at the threshold every evening, and that is why it pays me no mind. I had time and I used it to jack-off before work. Grace up and gone with the beer bottles and sardine cans.

I sneeze something awful, a god-hollering achoo that expels my precious blood through mouth and nose. Kansas is very bad for allergies. It subdues me every year, the gears precise in my sinuses, every year. My cough can only be dried out by smoke. The medicine weakens my blood.

My blood. My blood is sprayed across my arm and speckled on the couch. My mind shouts, Cranberry juice! but no, you fool, it is my blood. That makes sense. Undesirable but expected and all together honestly pretty cool. I take a picture and post it on Twitter with the words, Blood in the sneeze is worth two teens in the trees. I had made my profile private and blocked all my followers. I don't even get it. It's not funny.

I had the bottle opened before I opened my car door. Terribly parched and illogical. It jolted my head and kicked my empty stomach as the sun belched in my face. An old woman sat in the passenger seat of the car next to mine with her window cracked as might be done for a dog. She said, Take it easy, young man. As I lifted fist with bottle, middle finger pointed to heaven, the gin slipped from my sweaty hand, nosediving into the asphalt and snapping its neck.

I'm starting to hear whispers beneath the clicks of the cat. Like the voices I've heard before sleep, pieces of conversations floating through a crowd. But something else. This now, here, hear it just enough to know its real, one voice sickly sweet and not stopping for air. The mouth is painted on. Eyes frantic search.

The pain is thickening. The scratches in my throat have crawled into my guts and are working it like dogs in a rat nest. Reminds me of the time I had pneumonia as a child. From that I learned the benefits of suffering. No one expects anything of you, me, the contorted and moaning pile of puke and cold sweat. Akin to the dead but with all the advantages of the living: being alive.

I had poured out two water bottles and filled them with the gin I had managed to save. The glass shards floated like dazzling alien fish. Ah, you see? Delusion is simply a positive frame of mind. However, I'll cut to the chase. The tonic water was missing cap and flat; the limes were rock and rotten. So fuck all that. However, as God gave Noah the rainbow, he gave me a bottle of cranberry juice, at one time intended to be drunk before a drug test. These are the winding currents of shitsville—trust them.

Do you believe in demons? Neither do I. If you said yes, then sure, why not. I tend not to believe in anything, which breeds endless maybes, a hopeless burden. But these whispers. Aren't all whispers sinister? Didn't she whisper in ways? Sinister? Sinister, sin, evil, devil, demon, hell? I think perhaps this is a case in which the answer is correct but the question is wrong, like shooting Ted Nugent with a silver bullet. So I call my friend, the priest.

We had gone to high school together, a Catholic institution—uniforms, gym mass, homophobia, plenty of pot, etc. We waited together for our mothers after school. He gave me the lunch he didn't eat. I admired him because he was quiet and funny without crudeness or vulgarity. And he never condemned me as so many tried. Our lives are on opposite sides of the baptismal font, so to speak. I haven't seen him in over a year. Love and solitude and all that shit.

Ring. Ring. Pour, sip, ring.

Soft and unsure, he says, Oh, hi Wayland.

Hey, buddy, what's up?

Oh, you know. Just thinking I guess.

Someone's gotta do it. I tried once and my hair started falling out.

He laughs like an ill man. It's easier than saying something.

He says, You sound kind of ill. Are you okay?

No, not ill. Could use some blessings, sure. Always. But the thing is my clock. It's talking to me. Probably not serious, but you know.

He's silent. I cough blood into my fist. This has lost its charm. At last, I make out a word from the slick whispers: pejorative.

Are you... Are you on drugs?

No, Jacob, listen...

I think you're on drugs.

No. I've been drinking glass. I know, I know. But it is a Tuesday night!

He doesn't laugh. He sighs. Let's get lunch soon.

Ok. Yeah. But don't transubstantiate it this time.

Again.

You know the church has programs...

Yes, I know. Let's get lunch.

He hangs up and I finish my drink.

One time at mass, I took the eucharist from the priest and pocketed it. Later, in the hallways, I licked it and stuck it to my forehead, then shook and spoke in mock tongues for the amusement of some friends. Jacob saw me and cried. Right there, in front of everybody, and they looked at him as you might a horse taking a shit in a parade and laughed. He didn't need any more of that.

I hear the whispers with more clarity, like I'm tuning into a new frequency, but

they're jumbled and missing something, or I am. I cup my ears to the cat. Close my eyes.

collective damage and fusion guilty parties beguiled and bled
through

the management of waste you have painted the gaul

you have tasted and never once I watch I watch I watch and never
once

this faux misery entrusted to the blind and guilty
parties never

seldom sought in a seething pit I know the opportunities arise

I used to talk with this homeless guy back in that time when I wandered downtown in the bad hours. Named Mislow and plagued with the creeps. He moved in escape. He conducted our chance meetings like a general losing the war. Crickets crawled over his bare feet and sang within the caves of his rags. He had told me that moles invaded the city offices through the sewers, that g-men were rounding up vagrants for weapons testing. He told me the truths as never before imagined, in hi-def technicolor 3D explosions. I offered him cigarettes and anything else I had to share. Secrets swapped for secrets. I'll look over your shoulder if you look over mine. I gave him a hunting knife and he slipped it into the labyrinth of his garments. Said I'd get him a gun if I could. He reminded me of my father.

I told him one night that I planned on falling in love soon. A girl who gave me the day. With music and laughter and so fond touches on my face. It was to be. But it halted him, his eyes, hands, and lips. He had finally pinpointed an enemy, the deceiver lying low in my chest. He punched me in the gut, knocking the wind out, grabbed me by the shirt and said with a spray of garbage juice, You want pussy, fine. But these are the times of war.

Last I saw of him was a mugshot after he stabbed a cop.

I'm on the second water bottle of gin and trying to remember if alcohol is a blood thinner. Regardless. I add more cranberry juice to put it in as fast as it comes out. Mindful. Such a cheap word.

Now rhythm. Droning. It appears the cat has found its mantra: the elephant eats the dog.

I have had no luck in fixing anything by smashing it. This, a life of handcrafted logic, an artisan belief system. Everything works until it doesn't. I have the brain of a lizard wearing a beret. The elephant eats the dog.

My hands shake, spilling my drink over and over and now I sit feeling silly and soaked in blood, gin and juice. Those eyes aren't slowing down, though, and I don't believe they will ever stop, not for me. Suspicion creates the future. The desire to fuck and love and be reborn creates the future. My blood creates the future. The tracking and ticky tocking of time finds the future too late. The future, in all its wisdom, whispered into your ear the dreams you had in your crib.

Now, a sound of world crumble and rattlesnake, an offbeat screech: the tell-tale buzz of my phone left on the floor. It shines in the darkness like an end of a tunnel. The name on the screen cannot be, a mistake and malfunction of our collective dumbass unconscious, surely. It rings and rings and rings.

The elephant eats the dog.

A black and white X-ray image of a bird, possibly a crow or raven, lying on its back. The bird's skeletal structure is clearly visible, including its skull, wings, and legs. A bright, white, star-shaped mark is visible on the bird's chest, indicating a bullet wound. The background is dark and slightly textured.

SHOOTER

KRISTIN LAFOLLETTE

I was walking next to Maureen at a slower pace than usual. She was always walking slowly, mostly because she was usually talking too much. I was actually surprised to hear from her when she had called me the day before. It had been months since I'd heard from her. I knew it was because of the incident, but if I was truly being honest, I wasn't sorry for what I'd done. Maureen had always been a subpar friend, even if we did claim to be "best friends." Every time I had a crisis situation going on in my life, she would still find something about herself that was more important to talk about instead. She drove me crazy most of the time, but I had agreed to meet up with her in an attempt to clear the air about the whole Ryan situation. Over lunch, she hadn't even mentioned it once, which was good, I thought. I didn't want her to see my less-than-genuine apology if it came to that. Plus, I didn't want to have to tell her that Ryan and I were still seeing each other.

"So, how's your job going?" Maureen asked as we walked into the coffee shop around the corner from the deli where we had eaten lunch.

If there was one thing I hated talking about, it was my job. I was home for the summer between my junior and senior year of college and had landed an internship at a small magazine in town. I thought it was going to be prestigious and give me great experience to take back to my writing program at school, but all I did was follow the editor around and do his paperwork for him. The truth was that I was embarrassed about how belittling the job was, so I always felt the urge to lie every time someone asked me how it was going.

"It's fine," I said, standing in line with Maureen behind a couple of young girls in halter tops. "I think I'm getting a lot of experience."

"Have you written anything lately?" she asked, staring at the menu behind the counter as if she didn't always order the same thing when we came in.

This was another question I hated to be asked, but I was always getting asked it anyway. I had really slacked off on my writing that summer, mostly due to the fact that I was spending so much time with Ryan. But I couldn't tell Maureen that. I was starting to question why I had agreed to meet up with Maureen in the first place.

Ryan was all for us meeting up and talking; he said Maureen had a right to know about us, but I felt differently about the whole situation. I would have rather ignored Maureen for the rest of eternity than tell her the truth. I hated conflict.

"I've been working on some short fiction for a compilation I'm putting together," I lied. "I'm hoping to have it finished by the time I go back to school."

She looked skeptical. If there was one thing Maureen knew about me, it was that I loved to talk about my writing in detail. When I didn't, she had to know something was wrong.

We ordered our drinks and waited for them at the end of the counter. Maureen was playing with a curl of her blonde hair, something that was a very annoying habit of hers. It made her look stupid. I was trying to think of something to say when she spoke up again.

"Chrissy, I just want you to know that the whole situation with Ryan is in the past. I'm over it and have moved on. Things don't have to be awkward between us."

I should have felt relieved, but I felt suddenly nauseated instead. I felt a strange pain deep in my organs somewhere. She was willing to move on from the whole thing, but she didn't know the whole truth. Ryan was actually waiting for me a couple streets over in the parking lot of a bookstore we often went to together. We were meeting up after my outing with Maureen. I knew he would want to know how lunch went, and I would have to tell him that I didn't tell her the truth.

"Great," I said. "That's what I was hoping you would say."

I didn't know what else to say. I felt like a coward, especially because I wasn't quite sure how Ryan and I would continue our relationship without her finding out at some point in time. I just didn't want to start an argument with her, especially in the middle of the coffee shop.

We left the coffee shop, walking slowly again while Maureen examined her paper coffee

cup in an effort to avoid the silence between us.

"Don't you have anything you want to apologize for?" Maureen finally asked.

Here was the moment I had been hoping to avoid the whole time. I kept looking down at my feet as we walked, unsure of what to say. My first instinct was to lie.

Before I could say anything, I noticed a one-hundred dollar bill lying in the grass next to the sidewalk. I stopped walking. Maureen took a couple more steps and turned around. She saw the money, too.

For a moment we just looked at each other. I turned back and the money was still in the same spot it had been. I looked a little closer and it looked as if the bill was stuck to the ground with a sewing pin.

"Aren't you going to pick it up?" Maureen said as I stared at the bill.

"It's pinned down, like someone put it there," I said. "Like it's a joke or something. Like some prank."

As I was contemplating whether or not to pick it up, I glanced up at the high-rise apartment building in front of us. About five stories up, I saw a man standing in the window. The window was open and the white drapes were fluttering around him in the breeze. He had a gun propped up on the windowsill and was looking down at me through the scope.

I pointed up at the window and screamed.

"Run, he's got a gun!"

There were many people lining the street and sidewalks, and they all looked up at the window. Everyone started to run at the same time, a stampede of wild animals.

I took off running with my head down and as I heard the gun go off. I didn't know

what kind of gun it was, but it kept going off. I had my back to the shooter as I ran. I kept expecting to feel a sharp pain and then a hot stream of blood down my back. I ran as fast as I could to try to clear the street and get around the corner. I didn't turn around, but I heard people screaming as I ran. I thought of Ryan, sitting in the driver's seat of his car in front of Barnwell's Books on Main Street, waiting for me to jump in with my coffee in hand and tell him all about how Maureen had given us her blessing. Could he hear the gunfire?

I finally made it to the end of the street and ran around the corner, dropping to my knees as soon as I did. I couldn't catch my breath. I didn't realize until I had stopped running that I had managed to lose my purse in the process of getting away from the shooter. I didn't dare look around the corner to see how many people were down or if the police had arrived. Or to find Maureen. It was like I was deaf. I couldn't hear anything but my own breathing.

My feet hurt from running. I looked down and saw that my skin was raw and red from the straps on my sandals. I took them off and left them on the sidewalk. I needed to find Ryan. I started jogging to put more space between myself and the guy with the gun. As I neared the street where I knew Ryan would be waiting, I saw the Barnwell's Books sign in the distance. Underneath the sign was Ryan's blue car. He had the windows down with his music playing, as if nothing in the world had changed. As if people weren't dying on the street nearby.

I sprinted to his car and pulled the passenger side door open, nearly diving in and slamming it behind me.

"Chrissy?" he said, reaching forward and turning down the volume. "What's wrong?"

My hair was stuck to my forehead with sweat and I wiped at it with the back of my hand. I was sweating everywhere. My hearing was coming back to me and I heard police sirens in the distance.

"Didn't you hear it?" I nearly screamed at him. "Couldn't you hear the gun?"

"What are you talking about, Chrissy?" he said, his expression changing from curious to something between concerned and angry. "Where's Maureen?"

"I don't know," I said. "There was a guy standing in a window with a gun. He started shooting. How could you not hear it?"

We sat there for a couple minutes in silence, not saying anything. Ryan had his hand on my back, my sweaty heat radiating to his palm. My skin stuck to the leather seat of his car.

Finally, Ryan said, "I'm getting out. I'm going to find Maureen."

I slowly opened the door of the car, putting my raw feet on the hot concrete one at a time. I had been so worried about not letting Maureen know about Ryan and me, and now all I wanted to do was find her and tell her. Maybe out of guilt. Maybe because I didn't want to feel like a coward.

We walked back toward the street in silence. I heard ambulance and police sirens echoing off of the buildings around us. As we rounded the corner to the street where the shooter was, I saw a figure in a blue dress standing in the distance. Her blonde curls bounced as she talked with a police officer. She was crying.

"Maureen!" Ryan yelled as he took off running.

I hugged my arms around myself.

Maureen turned around and ran to Ryan. They hugged each other as Maureen spotted me over Ryan's shoulder.

"Chrissy?" she said. "Chrissy, I had no idea where you went. I thought he got you, the shooter."

I walked up and hugged Maureen. Her sweaty hair clung to my neck.

"Ryan, what are you doing here?" Maureen said, wiping tears from her pale cheeks.

Ryan glanced over at me. I kicked a cigarette butt around on the ground with my bare left foot. For a moment, we were all silent.

"We never stopped seeing each other, Maureen," I said, looking down at my feet.

Maureen looked at Ryan. She was still crying. Behind her, dozens of policemen and emergency workers were ushering people out of the street and onto the sidewalk. I saw one man lying on the pavement, writhing around and grabbing at his leg. Another woman lay face down in the middle of the street.

Maureen reached up and slapped me across the face. I didn't move or say anything, I just looked down at my red feet again.

"Chrissy, I told you my brother was off limits! How can you be my best friend and go around with my little brother behind my back? Don't you have any boundaries? Any morals?"

Ryan stepped in between us and grabbed his sister by the shoulders. He was talking to her but I wasn't listening. My ears started ringing and I feared the deafness would return. I turned and looked up the street again. Off in the distance, I could still see that one-hundred dollar bill stuck to the ground, the sun reflecting off the tiny piece of metal pinning it down.



**SPD TOOK MY
BLIND DATE AWAY**

BRAXTON YOUNTS

Once she told me she was an Iraqi war vet, I was hesitant to meet up with her, but I was lonely and horny, so I invited her to join me at my neighborhood bar after work.

Back then I was more attracted to militant feminists. I liked my women brooding over gender politics, listening to Bikini Kill, tattooing their arms, and dressing in combat boots. You know the one: mohawk haircut, bone through her nose, and an anarchy patch on her black leather jacket. Studs intricately arranged as if bedazzled by a seamstress on meth. Let me see if she can hang. See if she can verbally spar with me and my boys. If she can drink with the best of us.

Directly after clocking out of the kitchen at work, I booked it up hill on Pike Street, but before arriving the watering hole where we were to rendezvous, I stopped off at The Comet for party favors, including but not limited to one gram of shitty-stepped-on coke. Dad may have been a functional alcoholic. Dad may have enjoyed the competition of NASCAR racing and ACC basketball. He may have wondered why I preferred painting and science. But over years of self-realization, I gained a competing edge, winning the battle of egos, when I one upped his substance prowess and graduated to the hard stuff. And the hard stuff wasn't straight whiskey, rather my hard stuff was mainlining heroin and snorting eight-balls of cocaine on the back of toilets in Seattle's dive bars. In dank holes in the wall, I found camaraderie. Guys who didn't care about sports, stocks, jobs, life, or limits. Unlike my role model, Dad, we broached subjects like shortcomings, tattoos, and latent homosexuality. Fears and weaknesses. The unfairness of capitalism and racism. We even allowed each other to cry, sometimes.

When my date finally joined William and I at the bar, we had been there for a couple hours prior. You know, warming up. The more I drank the more loquacious and affectionate-the more human-I became, so theoretically it behooved me when trying to impress a potential lover to get a jump on the liquid buffet. A few bumps of shitty coke with William. A few beers, and I was worth being around.

"Don't talk to that guy. He's not friendly until he's had at least three beers," said Brad. "He's a sensitive writer." Brad said with a suggestive, presumptuous, indicative lisp.

"Fuck off," I said. "Had at least seven since work."

My date and I had only seen pictures of each other via email. When she walked in, I didn't readily recognize her. A cotton candy-colored, asymmetrical bob with Chelsea fringe and a fatigue jacket was what I noticed. Warning signs in my flight manual. Yet she took to me like a duck to water, running her fingers through my greasy locks without invitation. I introduced her to William, and she said she could tell by our boyish giggling he and I had been sitting a spell and to pay her no never mind. By her calculations, she simply needed to slam a few tequilas, and we'd all be on the same level. Over her shoulder, I spied bulging set of blue eyes and plum-colored mug observing the entire mess. With Bukowski breath, Tim was not only a playwright, but also an actor and director. A literary movement was in the making. More than one of us artists would make it. I was positive.

After a few more rounds and very little equalization, a naked man waltzed into the room, past the row of bar stools, past the jukebox, past the big gay Indian who always became more affection toward me with each beer. At first no one batted an eye, for it was Friday evening in Capitol Hill, Seattle's most odd neighborhood. Mr. Birthday Suit began pestering the bartender for drinks and said-bartender refused him service. All the while, beers were imbibed, and people made merry.

"How do I know I'm not gay?" said Turpin. Shaking my head, unsure I wanted his answer, I waited in kinetic anticipation.

"When I was locked up in NOLA, I let a guy fuck me in the ass. And didn't like it," Turpin said, laughing. William and I laughed, nearly spewing beer out our nostrils.

William was a barstool philosopher, an addict and an artist. Turpin was a cook, a junkie, and a tattooist. I was a writer, a cook, and a drunk. Were drunks attracted to the arts? Or did the arts attract drunks? Or did crushing self-doubt attract us to substance abuse? Who knew? Who cared? Not us.

True alcoholics we were. Nights when booze and coke absconded all our money Turpin and I, on occasion, popped in at The Man Ray or Sea Wolf to wrangle drinks from men.

We cozied up to flamboyant, intoxicated patrons, gave a sly smile, and made small talk. Attention starved, these guys bought us beer after beer. If it worked for women, then shouldn't it for us. And, brimmed of what we craved, Turpin and I parted ways and staggered to our respective beds.

How we arrived at this level of chaos was vague. The bar atmosphere here was jovial and thus conducive to heavy-handed pours and over-consumption. Feeding the jukebox quarters, the bartender, Bayonne Bob, was playing quintessential AC/DC: "Highway to Hell," "She Shook Me," and "Have a Drink on Me."

At some point, not long after aforementioned Mr. Birthday Suit's entrance, Bayonne Bob, nonchalantly locked the front door, trapping Birthday Suit. When someone phoned the authorities, my date decided to become a liberator. She took up the cause of freeing the imprisoned naked man. Like so many innocent Iraqi civilians, Mr. Birthday Suit needed liberation from a dictatorial bar staff.

About then two Seattle Police Department pigs rolled up, and my date was in a full-on donnybrook with bartenders and customers who were attempting to corral Mr. Birthday Suit. As the police entered the establishment, they inadvertently released the naked man while scraping with my date. She thrashed around and cussed at the cops. To no avail, implored them to release her war-torn ass. After a quick word with the bartender to ensure all was good in the business of intoxication, the pigs cuffed and stuffed my date into the back of a police cruiser.

A time later, after the we stopped giggling and gasping for air, William and I slammed one last beer, paid our tabs, and staggered out into the dank air to say our goodbyes. And as I was walking away, I heard my name, disembodied, from the interior of a parked cop car, "Braxton, can I call you?"



WE CLEAN UGGS

JP SORTLAND

Yes. No. Hand washed. No machine.

He was the only man who shined shoes at George's Shoe Repair. The tiny refuge was located below ground at the 51st and Lexington subway station.

Yes. Hand. Wash. Personally. You'll like.

There were two or three ladies of an implacable foreign origin who also shined shoes in silence. Customers predicted the mystery women came from Bolivia to Tajikistan and everywhere in between.

Buddy's origin was clear as mud too. But wherever he'd come from before ending up at George's had made him an amicable fellow. Unlike the shoeshine girls, the patrons of George's never wondered where Buddy was from. Instead they wondered how anyone could be so nice.

Friendly like a Canadian, one customer said to his coworker. German maybe? Yeah, kinda I dunno. Except a different accent and everything.

The leopard coat girl had little faith in Buddy and therefore she had faith in nothing.

His hands rested carefully atop her Uggs. His fingertips ready to pluck them off the counter with a gentle squeeze of his fingertips into their furry insides. To Buddy, this exchange should already be done. Those soft boots should already be in line with the others.

You're sure you won't like ruin them, right?

Buddy gave her a smile to deflect the insult. Hidden behind his friendliness was a plea for understanding and trust.

Clean Uggs every day.

And you're not gonna throw them in a washing machine right? Because the tag says specifically they have to be hand washed.

Yes. No. Hand washed. See? Wash by hand. Stuff with paper to keep good form. Help dry. Protective spray for leather. Good care.

Um. Okay?

The leopard coat girl released the boots. The cynicism however, her lack of faith in Buddy and therefore mankind, stayed with the Uggs.

Buddy handed her the ticket and the leopard coat girl hesitantly took it. Her face twisted in confusion and looked like written information had never been conveyed to her.

Buddy wanted nothing more than for George's shop to be profitable. A busy shop meant money for Buddy. However, a crack in his resolve made him wish the leopard coat girl had never stepped foot into that business. Into his consciousness.

I need those by tomorrow.

*

Yes. No. I don't know. So sorry.

Buddy shook his head at George. His arms fell to his side.

I have the ticket? They were here yesterday?

The leopard coat girl snapped her gum. Buddy silently thanked her for it.

He knew how George loathed the sticky substance. He had seen more gum on the bottom of shoes than anyone in New York City.

I'm real sorry, miss. We'll compensate you for the loss.

They were like two hundred.

George winced.

Two hundred new. How about one-fifty?

Fine. Whatever. I'm never coming back here.

Understandable, miss.

Buddy remained quiet at George's side. Obediently bearing witness to the berating.

You sure you didn't see them nowhere?

Yes. No.

Buddy shook his head.

I like just don't understand how you lose boots?

Buddy looked down at the floor.

He'd be paying for those boots unless George found forgiveness in his shoe polished heart. It was the price he had to pay. It was a fair price.

Someone could've run in and snagged em. Buddy here turns his back for one second and that's all they need.

George handed her the monetary apology.

Buddy weighed the relationship he'd built with his employer. This was a setback,

but it was repairable.

He'd looked high and low but the boots were nowhere in the shop.

He knew because the last time he'd seen them they were flying off the Queensboro Bridge into the East River.

**UBERLIFTER OR MY BUM HEART OR WOMEN WHO
REJECTED ME OR THE RAIN TREE IN THE GOLDEN VALLEY**



JOEL TOMFOHR

Which brings me to this afternoon, like many others this summer I hope. How I was out by Lake Merritt, out next to the giant Children's Fairyland sign and the fountain, out on that hill right there in the sun trying to you know, like, melt into the earth. That's my goal. To melt into the earth. And, if I can't do that, then raise my vitamin D levels as much as I can.

And nothing really in particular happened; I guess this:

An older man pushed his bike up next to my head to get my attention while I was lying there listening to Ambulance Blues and he asked me if he could ask me a question.

"You already did," I said.

"Hey man," he said back to me. "What's your problem?"

I told him I was tired and he asked me again if he could ask me a question and I said sure.

"My wife needs tampons, but we don't have any money, so can you give me some money so my wife can get tampons?"

I was afraid he was going to roll his bike over my head or kick me in the head or do something to my head. I was lying there in my cutoff jean shorts and nothing else. Prone, you could say. He walked off, though, without saying anything else and then I felt like an asshole for being a wiseass to a man who looked like he was at least fifteen years my senior and like he did need the money and it didn't really matter what for, so much so that he would suffer the ignominy of having to ask someone at least fifteen years younger than him for money so that he could buy his wife tampons. But it was true. I didn't have any money on me. It was also true that I could just as easily be him if my landlord decided to evict me. I can't afford rent in Oakland anymore.

I rolled over and fell asleep while the last bits of Ambulance Blues played, the final duet between the harmonica and the violin—it sounded extraterrestrial, like a

portal had opened up and this was the music transmitted out of it and I was following the sawing sound of the harmonica and the violin through that portal and when it finished I realized that I had fallen asleep. When I woke I was disoriented, like I had come back through the portal and forgotten where I was and hazy from the sun and it reminds me now how last summer when I was in Abiquiu for a week staying in a yurt behind the house of two Sufi mystics, a husband and a wife, my girlfriend knows there. So, one of the afternoons that I was staying there, I drove twenty minutes up the highway to Ghost Ranch and I walked through Georgia O'Keefe's house with its viga-and-latilla ceilings and I saw a bleached out cow skull hanging above a door and outside the little square windows all the red and yellow-colored bluffs like huge walls boxing it in, except that they really couldn't, not really, because the sky was so big and I hiked up this trail to what was called Chimney Rock and when I got there that's what it was, a giant rock that looked like a chimney but I realized that that was not really the best part of what I could see. I could see out across the landscape, the old volcanoes, the steely flint of Cerro Pedernal and the blue, blue Abiquiu Lake and the field of white clouds scudding across the sky vividly. I stood at the ledge and I remember being afraid of it. Gales of wind blew and whipped my hair all around my head and dried out my eyes and so I turned around and hiked back down the trail, satisfied that I had seen all there was to see but also not because one could spend an eternity at a place like that and not see all the ways in which it could be seen, the changing light and colors. The sky at night the cosmos like an infinite dynamo.

When I got back to the yurt the Sufis were home so I knocked on their door and the old man greeted me. He wore a light blue kufi and a matching light blue flowing kurta. He brought me to the kitchen where there was a table made and carved from pinon, lacquered beautifully so that I could see the wavelike grain of the wood. His wife was sat there; she wore an emerald green headscarf. They offered me chai, and it was pink and they asked me what I had seen that day. I told them about the Ghost Ranch, the Cerro Pedernal, the red and yellow bluffs. They nodded and smiled.

"It is beautiful here," the wife said.

"Very beautiful," the husband said.

When I finished my pink tea I felt more awake, but also calm. "Thank you," I said.

"Of course," the husband said.

"Of course," the wife said.

I went to my yurt around back and lay out on the bed I was so tired from hiking but awake and calm in a way that is hard to describe. I put in my ear buds and listened to Beethoven's Ninth and I was listening to it and drifting off much in the same way that I drifted off to Ambulance Blues next to Lake Merritt this afternoon and I did and then I was back up on that ledge at Chimney Rock out at Ghost Ranch with the red and yellow cliffs and blue lake and ancient volcano and fleet of white clouds scudding vividly except that this time I was not afraid of the ledge. This time out in front of me just beyond the ledge was a door (a portal) that had opened up and the silhouettes of two human figures stood in the door (the portal) and behind them was only this bright white light, but they were serving me pink tea like the Sufi mystics and I was reaching out for it and I can't remember if I took it or if it was already in my hands or maybe that was what I was trying to figure out in my vision and then I rose up out of it and I was back in my bed in the yurt and now it was completely dark outside.

So it was in the middle of the day on the little hill next to the Children's Fairyland sign next to the lake with the fountain splashing when my brother Jason sent me this text about a script he's working on about a guy who works odd jobs, one of them being an Uber driver, and is estranged from his daughter who lives in Rio (Why Rio? I wondered) and this was the text: Should I call it My Bum Heart or Uberlifter or Women Who Rejected Me or The Rain Tree in the Golden Valley. I ignored it. Instead, I decided to listen to Neil Young with Crazy Horse and I nodded off to the final fuzzy distorted bars of Cinnamon Girl and I decided that that is the greatest closing to a rock and roll song ever and when I woke up again Cowgirl in the Sand was playing and I opened my eyes and Jason was standing there above me blocking my sun wearing his Ray-Bans that make him look sort of like Jason Patric in The Lost Boys. No kidding. He has the same thick curly hair and bone structure, and it occurs to me now that they both have the same name.

"I thought you'd be here," he said.

I squinted up at him sort of disappointed that he had come here to my spot because I was busy trying to melt into the earth as I said, but I said hey and rubbed my eyes and put on my Ray-Bans and sat up.

"So," he began. "What are you doing?"

I wanted to say what does it look like I'm doing, but I didn't. I told him how I was trying to waste my life out here and melt into the earth and he kind of chuckled, but I could tell he was a little concerned.

"Or at least raise my vitamin D levels."

I couldn't tell if he was giving me a puzzled look because he was wearing his sunglasses, but I imagined he was.

"I like the titles you sent me." I paused. "For your script."

"Oh yeah," he laughed. "Which one?"

"Why not call it all three? Don't settle for just one."

He looked down at me and I looked up at him and then I lay back down on my back. "Can I sit down?" he asked.

"Be my guest." Now I was happier that he'd come by but also wishing that he hadn't. I had felt another portal coming on before he appeared but sometimes that happens. I think the moment will arrive and then it gets interrupted or it simply doesn't and then there are other times when—Boom!—it does and *everything* opens up and there I am laying in the middle of it all, the sun setting and melting and I'm melting into the earth and generally wasting my life or at least trying to gather vitamin D from the final rays of sunlight and my brother Jason next to me thinking of titles for his script.



CRAWL ON ME

SHANE KOWALSKI

A lot of times, after having disgusting sex at her slow nephew's cabin, we'd just get very sick of each other and begin volleying hurt back and forth.

Don't call my nephew slow, she'd say.

I have a cousin who's slow, I'd say. It's okay.

My nephew's not slow though, she'd say.

Have you met him? I'd say.

She'd put her silver hair up, spit in my shoe. I'd tell her not to do that. Oh what are you going to do, she'd say. And I wouldn't do anything.

Why am I thinking of this now?

...I think it's because I was feeling very bored yesterday: a deep, gnawing kind of boredom that begins to change the community of blood inside me. So bored I was, in fact, that I had raced in my car away from my big house to the nearest grocery store. I thought it was going to be like the old days. I'd pick up an older lady in the bakery section, whisk her away, pack of donuts hitting the floor, and let her do disgusting things to me, and vice versa. She'd have a slow nephew, too, and we'd go to her slow nephew's cabin and not have children that looked like us.

Nothing happened though. The grocery store was practically empty. A couple construction workers waited for meat at the deli. A little boy in tiny crutches, with his average-looking mom, was walking down an aisle. Not one older vixen! Outside, an ugly as hell employee on his smoke break asked me if I wanted to get high. I hated his stupid fucking dumb as shit red hair. I told him that, too. I was looking for something to happen. He punched me in the face—he was strong!

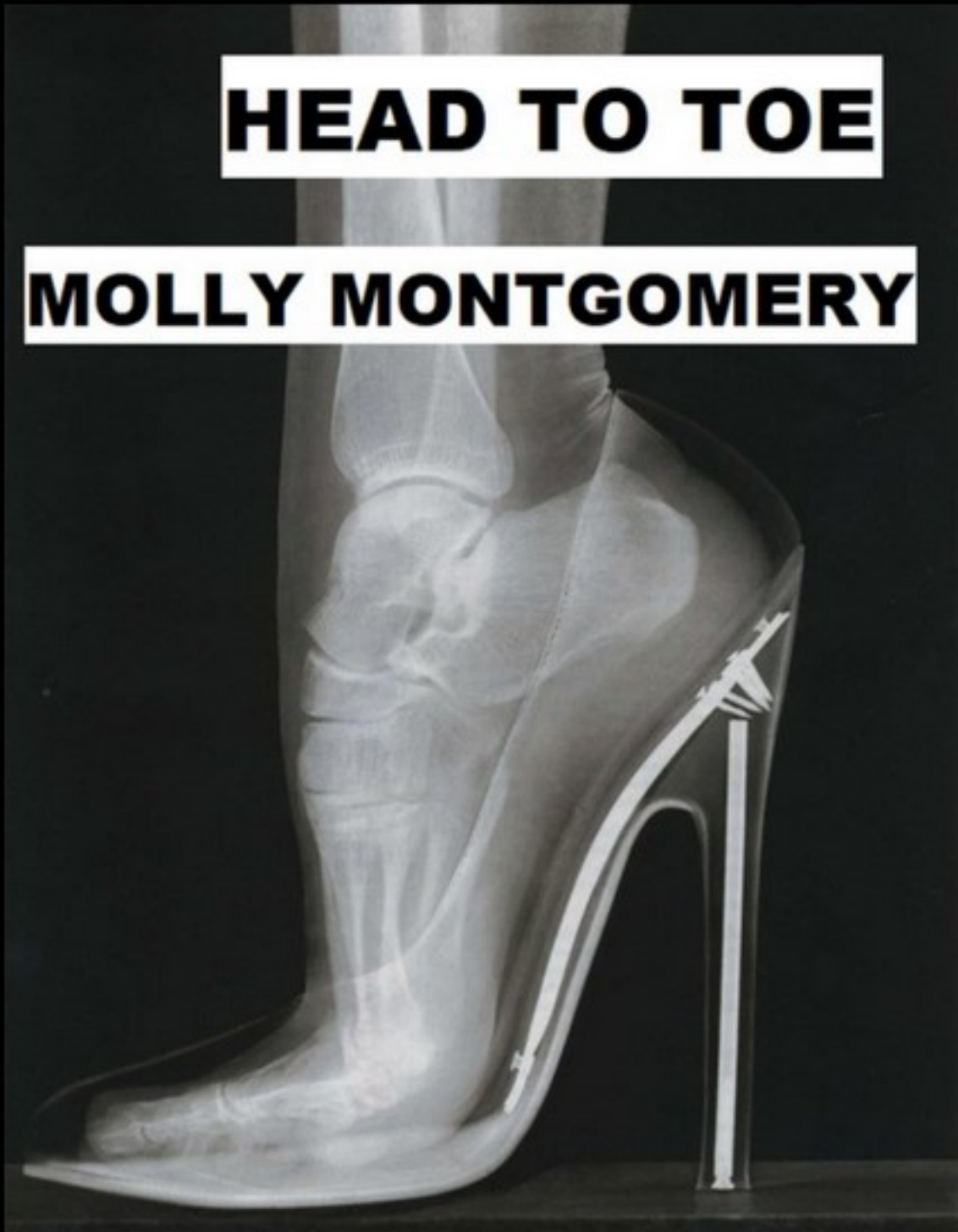
I stayed down on the ground for a little bit: desperately hoping somebody-anybody—might crawl on me and do sexual things to me while I lay there. Soon though the manager of the grocery store came out and said get. Just kick me a little, I said.

Go, he said. Just spit on me and give me one kick! I pleaded. Get, freak, he said, or I'm calling the cops. I got up, unsatisfied, and left.

On my way home—after wondering if I might be the exotic topic of dinner conversation later in the grocery store manager's home; his wife and children all going to bed with steamy, misty thoughts of me in their boring heads—I ended up with only my memories of when getting hurt was fun. I was older now, too. I was naïve to think there'd always be a person willing to hurt and be hurt as much I myself. Then I started to laugh! Ha ha ha! I was in a BMW, unlucky as fuck, lights all turning on around me in the evening, not caring at all that I had somehow let myself—finally, after so many years—become myself.

HEAD TO TOE

MOLLY MONTGOMERY



One day, Penny woke up with her consciousness in her feet. She could still feel her head, blink her eyes, watch the procession of sunlight from her shutters ripple onto her bed, but it all felt very far away. Closer to her, the flannel blankets cushioned her arches and as she flexed— her feet that is, but it felt like she was stretching a larger muscle, like her back— her toes popped out of the warmth of the blanket, giddy like bright-eyed children, singing *at last, at last it's our turn now*. They waved, creating a breeze in the rumpled blankets. She sighed with her feet, her heels arching and releasing, breathing, in a way. It didn't occur to her that it would be strange to go through the day with her soul stuck to the floor. After all, she was a yoga teacher— maybe she had jumbled around her energy a bit too much the night before while performing a handstand. She rolled out of bed and let her feet sink into the carpet. She hadn't vacuumed in a while, she realized as she felt the sharp edges of leaves and other unpleasant textures prickling the pad of her feet. The dead skin on her heels caught on the carpet, tugging painfully. How could she not have noticed before? It was like waking up to realize you hadn't combed your hair in a week. She had to do something about it, immediately.

The cool bathroom tiles sent a shiver of pleasure up her legs. In the shower, she commanded her arms, which felt like phantom limbs, tingling and barely present, to twist the knobs and release a stream of hot, hot water onto her thirsting feet. The rest of her body winced, but her feet, tougher than the other parts and tired of taking beatings for the rest of her body's sake, incited her to turn the temperature higher and higher until, at last, they eased. She flailed her feet before her, the rest of her body sinking into the bathtub. Finally, the pressure released, the terrible pressure, which she hadn't realized was there until it was gone. It was like a migraine lifting, as she let go of the pounds and pounds of useless flesh pressing, pressing, pressing on her feet all day long. She scrubbed the hard calluses that roughened her feet like stubble, stripping off layers until they were raw and throbbing. The throbbing filled her. Her hands turned the water off, and she crawled out and wrapped a towel just around her feet, writhing with pain and pleasure.

Her toenails, slicing menaces, cut into the neighboring toes. *Stop stabbing, stop stabbing, please*, she pleaded and grabbed a nail file from her box. These toenails

had not risen up in protest this much since her pointe days when they would rip her already demonically twisted feet to shreds and bleed on her satin shoes, the resin mixing with the blood to make a crusty callus of its own.

How much damage had she done her poor feet, she now wondered as she struggled to calm their fiery furor. Massaging them with a soft towel, she reached for some eucalyptus lotion she had in her medicine cabinet and began to knead the ointment deep into the crevices of her feet. She felt the blood vessels in them opening and a calming feeling spread from her feet, up her legs, and to her core.

Now that she was down in her feet, things seemed so different than they did above. She didn't recognize herself. Who was this woman who could have exploited parts of herself, treated her own foundation like it didn't matter? She would have never banged her head around like she had her feet, or let it get cut and scraped and swollen with infection like she had when, as an impetuous college student, she launched herself foolishly into a bacteria-laden river from a rope swing, the heel of her foot catching on sharp jagged rocks on her graceless tumble downward. She would have never choked her mouth the way she had choked her feet in sweaty, unbreathing sneakers in PE until a fungus invaded her toenails. She would have never constricted her fingers like she did her toes when she shoved them into wedges that narrowed to an inhuman point. Even her moment of triumph, the highlight of her career—stepping onto that stage with steady powerful strides that she had taken for granted and accepting the award for her choreography—it twisted horribly in her memory as she let herself feel the pain she had held back that night, her feet strapped like hostages into those teetering, torturous stilettos. How she resented her selfishness now, so bent on recognition, her head taking credit for the work of her feet.

After her injury, the one that ended her career on the dance floor, she had hated her feet, her weak left ankle in particular, which cracked under the stress of night after night of pirouettes. Her feet had failed her, so she stopped paying attention to them, like a mother who stops reaching out to her son after he breaks her trust one too many times. Then came the endless months of physical therapy, which she performed diligently, though she knew her body would never be the same. She built strength back into her muscles until they contained not as much as before, but enough

for her to feel dignified. But how could it be even after she had recalibrated her relationship with her body, finally finding a sort of equilibrium in yoga, she still wasn't at peace with her feet? Then again, she wasn't at peace with her mind either, and that's where she spent most of her efforts these days. Rewiring her circuits, talking through her loss with her therapist, trying to figure out how to her meld her mind into a body that no longer obeyed like it used to. Fuck that, she thought. It was a relief to be in her feet; the darkness in her head hovered like a thundercloud, but it couldn't reach her down here. Still, she couldn't hang out on the floor forever.

Vaguely, she reached for thoughts in her cerebrum, like rummaging in a dark cabinet. She had appointments, a class to teach; her daughter, still asleep, needed a ride to school and back. But her feet, objecting to her wavering attention, sprang with cramps that undid the tenuous connection to her task-oriented brain. *Pedicure first, cancel everything else, spa day, spa day*, they cried, and soon a chorus of rebellion resounded throughout her bounded body.

Massage me, her knee croaked as her consciousness jumped to it, then to her strained back tight with resentment. *I'm next*, cried her neglected neck. And her feet continued to pound, pulling her down, down, down.

Yes, let's, she thought, let's spend today together just for us. Her feet sought her soft slippers, kicking off whatever attachment she still felt to the rest of the world.

SHAVER

**NIKOLAS
SLACKMAN**



"All of my hair is leaving me."

But I was the one who'd shaved it all away. To say it left me was a compulsion to attract that rich melancholy self-lovers look for. I knew within mundane choices was the opportunity to feel abandoned.

I'd electric razored the whole thing top-down and looked like a flesh pear. I ran it against the arms, down the back, around the tits. A little cut up shaving the neck, but the cuts from nerve damage jitters don't count, I'd said. Tweeze the brow, but you always tweeze the brow. I could feel George's smirk inside the razors hum. What makes you think it grows just for you to shave it?

I waited in the lobby for my haircut. Doctor Gupta said coffee would do my nerve's no favors, but I took up the receptionist's offer. I could save the complementary Milano cookie for after the haircut. I drank the coffee in maybe four gulps, despite the heat. You could hear my curls screaming "Don't cut us off, you motherfucker!" under the sips, if you listened closely.

My hair had been shoulder length since middle school. Before George started cutting my hair and turned me onto garage punk, before my late body hair had sprouted. Before high school, where I'd made some real friends then lost them, made some new friends then lost them, and Mia, who I'd dated and broken up with and dated, broken up with, and was in some inbetween thing with, maybe, when I suddenly heard the sound of my own thoughts. They sounded like buh dee duh dee duh dee duh and my hair sounded like horrible screaming. I remembered when George told me he'd watched his friend OD back in the 80's. I thought that he was the only punk I'd ever met. I downed another coffee and asked for more, trembling.

George looked ridiculous when he came out from the back. The tight leather pants with chains draped around the thighs were notable. His stupid Noel Gallagher haircut even more so. His former muscle bro haircut was gross but understandable. This was not understandable. Not nearly enough of his shirt buttons were buttoned, and his chest was comically bare. He came up to me and said something like how's it going man and I was like what's up man so both questions were left rhetorical.

He sat me in front of his mirror when I noticed my scalp's violent trembling. It only showed in my eyebrows, but I could feel it where the curls would root and bisect. He offered me the usual trim but I interrupted him with this story about how my friend Jordan told me I have Dad hair. George gave me this "you totally do have Dad hair" look. He started listing all the options I had but his voice drowned under the intensifying screams. I smiled and nodded, pretending they'd stopped until they did. He slapped me on the back and said "I'm glad you've come to this realization" while his assistant led me to the sink. I asked for another coffee.

Waiting in front of his mirror, I took some final gulps. George fixed his apron around me.

"So what have you been up to dude?"

I responded buh dee duh dee duh dee duh.

"Your brother, how's he been doing?"

Same answer. I wished I had eaten that Milano earlier, the coffee made my stomach growl.

"You still with that one girl?"

I smiled and blinked insanely ha ha ha ha ha kind of I'm not sure, where'd you get those pants?

George went off about his budding fashion career. He knew the guy who assisted the woman who would custom tailor pants for Slash, through a mutual friend, apparently. They'd been chatting the last couple months and he was hoping to take her style, but apparently that's a big no in the fashion world, even though she's been an off the grid junkie for, like, six years. George said Lars Ulrich and Nikki Sixx miss that old style. Apparently George planned on calling her to 'borrow' that style to sell his own brand. George said he'd love to see those designs on Slash again. George said he'd apparently rather be home *right now working on his designs than here cutting my*

hair. I looked up and my head wasn't my head anymore. It was George's old head.

I smiled and glanced towards him. I heard his assistant sweeping the death away. There was no more screaming. No more nerves. He put a shitload of product in my hair and that was that.

He shook my hand and looked at me with eyes that said you have no idea what real death looks like.

I stared at him with his head and drank the cheap melancholy fumes in the air. We were abandoned from each other, it tasted like the Milano I ate walking home.

Apparently George's old head snubbed dreams about girls, about Mia, or whatever. That night, it had a wave of swarming red light sink through its eyes. It penetrated the cornea, it's sharp breath wrestling my half-baked nerves. I couldn't tell if my body was rejecting the head or the head my body. It smiled in sleep, savoring the conflict. My body lay still, I'd always shirked confrontation.

Soon, the wave saturated into a reflection of the sclera, all white. The old head opened its eyes. The light had drilled deep, and lingered unaffected. Triangular shadows patterned into a spiral formation, collapsing the tense whiteness into a new dimension. They inverted and warped. Nothing budged. The lost dreams rang through the act. Another few minutes passed before the light had emptied out into a leathery darkness. He'd hijacked everything.

"It isn't the nerve damage then?" the head asked.

"Not entirely, just somewhat" Doctor Gupta replied.

The tarp beneath the body would crinkle whenever I squirmed, which was often, still adjusting to shaven skin. The pediatrician I've been seeing since middle school offered a list of ophthalmologists to consider.

"How long'd it last, do you suppose?"

"Only a few minutes, maybe."

There was a sticker poster of Spongebob in front of me. His right leg was torn off, and the top of his head stripped away. His gigantic cartoon eyes spilled crudely into the pale wall. He'd been on the walls for the decade I'd known Doctor Gupta, but it seemed unfamiliar now. White noise filled the room, maybe the low hum of air conditioning, the sigh of growth droning above.

Gupta changed the subject. "Eating too many hamburgers, eh?" he joked, squeezing a roll of my torso. I would have done my typical ha ha ha, but George didn't flinch.

I worried that Mia would be upset about the weight, then George reminded me she was gone. An effect of change, he said. The body dreamed about the end of change. My dying nerves reached for the end of change. George said she's made you sick and ignored me from then on.

Gupta tussled my hair.

"Handsome boy."



You live two blocks from a city park that hosts the Fourth of July parade, carnival and fireworks. Once a year your sleepy neighborhood will be taken over. Hoards emboldened strange by the holiday license to drink in public and be stupid with explosives will arrive bearing lawn chairs, blankets, coolers, flags, transistor radios and cherry bombs. They blithely make your yards their parking lots, trespass and trample and choke sidewalks and streets in lit processions of flash lights and aluminum sparklers. Their orange cigarette tips will bob ahead like lures.

Soon their blankets will cover the fields all the way to the woods. Progress in the dark is a mine field of hands and feet, plates of potato salad, dry humping teenagers, dead soldiers of Blatz, Schlitz, Strohs, Rolling Rock, Fanta or Seven-Up bottles, a land where any unthinking remark or misplaced look or bump or nudge or gesture can set off the explosive potential waiting whenever so many people come together in the dark. Do not be afraid. It is your first taste of civic anarchy, to be forever flavored with the tang and bitters of gunpowder sulfur and beer. Everywhere the adults are eating, drinking, smoking, tonguing, grasping, gasping, laughing, cursing.

They who run the world will all be here: in straight sharp lines of brow and jaw like tail-fins; in car interior colors of cream with red, blue or black; in men's crew cut, ivy league, d.a. or rockabilly pompadours; in women's bouffant, beehive, pixie or artichoke cuts; in pants of cuff-rolled denim or white Capri; in shirts Hawaiian or Cabana or T's, (the latter tight and bicep-rolled to hold non-filter cigarette packs). Many of the men will brandish "back from 'Nam" (or Baghdad or Afghanistan) stares, cadences, shrugs, slang, stiletto-macho X-15-age werewolf sideburns and teeth and eyes that will have you, the different kids, in a seizure of terror, and release. Now will be the time to act.

You will talk and scheme and worry out minute plans without regard for what the Big Night will actually be. Someone will say it is like "striking a giant match across the skull of the world" and you settled for that. You are "the brains," "the mad scientists," the 11-year old nobody "nerds" (at a time when the term has the obscene punch of "kike", "cunt" or "nigger.") You say, Come Kill Your Darling Country.

On the early morning of the third your plan is to break into the fireworks truck parked in the corner of the field and tamper with the charges. You have talked about living lives risked in extreme experiment, and here is the big one: mixing combustibles for a new world of shapes and colors, out-doing their show with fun that will hurt and laughs that give all of them the same stranger's face; incantations in sparkler across hot night air, striking a giant match across the skull of the world. Come, kill your darling country.

The first skyrockets will tear into the sky and the ahhhs and ohhhs rise from the quaking blankets all dark around you in a sea. You run and dive as into an oncoming wave at the beach. You will be heedless, fearless, senseless. You will kick at faces and ran faster, climbing people like stair steps, flying over grasping hands, battling through screams of pain and rage lost in booms, and groans of awe for the hot chemical show overhead. You keep on, straight into the woods. Angry voices are close behind. You will enter the woods in an exalted state of fearlessness and inexhaustible energy, skipping down a narrow switch-back path we know by heart, to the right of the shale cliff you call "H," (without knowing why).

A sharp zigzag down the back-way crashes into a narrow, noisy stream. You take positions off the path and a little downstream, at the edge of a gully behind big mossy rocks. Above you a willow tree catches a new, cool breeze, fluttering leafy vines over the ebony water. Your panting breaths finally slow and you listen but hear no sounds of pursuers. Above you silver mag stars, fat on titanium and bromides, flash revelations of smoke, solid and sheer as cliffs. They are quickly riven apart by detonations of other hot metals, fuel and casing types: copper halide blues, strontium reds, cesium indigos, potassium violets, barium greens, calcium oranges, lamp-black golds playing The Palm, The Ring, The Diadem, The Crosette, The Spider.

The show reaches its finale: multi-break Whistlers and Hummers that "strobe" multiple explosions falling closer and closer to the crowd. You count the explosions. After many bursts you count one, two, three too many, too loud. The rockets will reach the ground while still burning, hissing and twitching, like cicadas locked to mate and die, igniting grass and blankets and flesh. Shrieks will cut through the booms, echoing into strange cacophonies between pain and pleasure, the human and the animal.

There are alarms and sirens and cries to God. Then echoes, the crowd dispersing, cars starting up and driving off. Stars poke through the colored smoke. It thins, they brighten, and the air goes cold.

You will wait. Then one of you, then another and another will whisper of your getaway, your next move. The way ahead, someone says, is lit by a giant match raked across the skull of the world! Your voices join and rise into chant, hot and luminous, words lit from inside your throats as if you've swallowed sparklers whole, and do not and will not feel one damn thing in the great parade ahead. Come, let's kill their darling country.

Illustration by Gregg Williard (Check out "Williard World" on XRAY for more!)

THE NAMES OF THINGS,

rob mclennan



I gave my attention to the pause.
Angela Carr, *Here in There*

1.

I am downsizing, for practical reasons. I gift my belongings before the choice is no longer mine. Ending six months of aggressive treatment, some small strength returns. Moving through boxes and bins and shelves, I name items as I release them into the world. I name you, *glass figurines I salvaged from my grandmother's possessions*, as her quiet death ended the decades they sat in her sitting room. I name you, *pilfered coffee mugs*, each adorned with a different company logo.

That summer we drove through the prairies and out to Vancouver, as yet another mug slipped into my bag at a rest stop. You were not amused.

I name you, *dresser*: the scratched and scarred second-hand chassis with lime green coat over almond brown over deep red over powdered blue, salvaged from Neighbourhood Services when I was eighteen.

Downsizing, sized. My body erodes. The clothes on my back.

I name you, *silver pocketwatch*: handed down from my great-grandfather, from his time in Montreal. Now set in the palm of my sister.

Family lore holds that during his first decade away from home, he worked as a conductor for one of the newly-established lines of the Grand Trunk Railway. A decade saved, and spent, before relocating again with the emergence of a wife and three children, back to his eastern Ontario nesting grounds, where he gathered a further fifty-five winters. They say he moved non-stop until he finally did.

I name you, *small wooden box*, discovered in my mother's closet. The musty nest of crumbling paper scraps: correspondence, postcards, a pendant. A locket, held in an envelope. Dust. Her maiden aunt's engagement ring. This is all that remains. She, who died when my mother was young. I name you, *Marjorie*, aunt of my mother.

Heirlooms: objects for which we are but temporary caretakers, a loom that weaves in and out of the hands of ancestors down, and from mine to my sisters, nieces, nephews. Brother.

I name you, *long dark curls*, like my mother, back in the day; as her sisters, too, and their mother as well. Curls that hadn't the seasons to autumn, to silver.

2.

In my youth, I collected; perhaps more than I should have. I saved, and kept everything. Girl Guide badges, nuts and bolts from the driveway, miniature carvings of frogs. I constructed scrapbooks of fauna and flora, a field's-worth of clover. I gathered my late grandfather's wartime diaries, secured in a steamer trunk. I collected a single smooth stone from each childhood beach, carefully placed on my bedroom bookshelf as tokens. As tangible memories. From our suburban backfill, a daily memory of a particular Nova Scotian beach at sunset.

A vial of red sand from Prince Edward Island shores, St. Margaret's Parish, where my mother's family historically cottaged. A vial of water from the Athabasca Glacier. What had once been what it no longer can.

In our first shared apartment, there was the alchemy of a half-hidden compartment of books in a cupboard, unlocked. Paperbacks, mostly. Mass-market stuff from an earlier decade. I immediately decided they were there precisely for me, and read everything. Susan Dey's *For Girls Only*. *The Hawkline Monster*. *A Brief History of Time*. I absorbed each one, until there was nothing unread. Upon our eventual move, more than a couple of titles managed to slip in among our possessions.

I name you, *library*. I name you, *history*.

3.

I name you, *rage*. I name you, *anger*. A cracked wooden bowl. Stage four. The one where nothing left can be done. Meeting with doctors and lawyers and further doctors. I

name you, *comfort*; I name you, *recollection*. I name you, *heartbreak*.

In a fever-dream, the moon asks: Why do we melt?

4.

They say to name a thing is to suspend it, freeze it into a singularity. To name is to reduce, some say. To name is to provide weight to something otherwise nebulous, unformed. To name is part of being. Biblical Adam, who spoke, and the animals became what he named; as the Word of God, also. He speaks, and what has spoken is solid.

I name instead to remind myself of each object's purpose, and to give them air.

To make concrete, self-contained, and release.

I have been contemplating both religion and spirituality lately, but am undecided, as yet.

Soap bubbles, carried away.

5.

I name you, *signed first edition* of Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, from a lover whose name I've long forgotten. I name you, *soft* and *dear* and *nameless*. I name you, *address book* that belonged to my mother. I name you, *Red Maple leaf*, set between the pages of a hardbound, wax paper saved from summer camp. I name you, *first kiss* by the strawberry bushes. I name you, *lakewater silt* that spawned from our overturned canoe.

I name you, *squeamishness*. Layers of blood, burned brown on white linen.

I name you, *intimacy*. I name you, *pigmentation*. I name you, *jade elephant*.

6.

Lorelei believes that people are a construction of memories and experience, and can

be pieced together though what they have abandoned. Nigel remains unconvinced. He claims: we are made up of stories. Without stories to accompany, items are stripped of their substance. And yet, once beyond us, they become clean, able to collect anew. Are our possessions allowed lives beyond ours? If no-one knows why I owned a jade elephant or where it originated, will that even matter?

I have a jade elephant, attached to a string. Purchased at an outside market, I think. London? Paris? I suspect I might be losing my rigorous attention to the integrity of each object.

I consider writing your name on a paper scrap, something I can ingest. Something I might keep.

7.

Terminal illness can't be fixed, it can only be carried. I am putting it down. I release it. From here on, everything lightens. Even my step. Living well, as they say, the finest revenge.

8.

I name you, *school portrait of my first love*, squirreled deep in the pockets of my leather jacket, circa 1995. I name you, *1980s Polaroid of my father in the kitchen window*.

I name you, *shadows*; cast in the doorframe, the hospital blinds.

I name you, *tears of my mother*. I name you, *legs and arms*. I name you, *mouth*.

I name you, *morphine*. I name you, *breath*.

X-RAY

LITERARY MAGAZINE

SUBMISSIONS