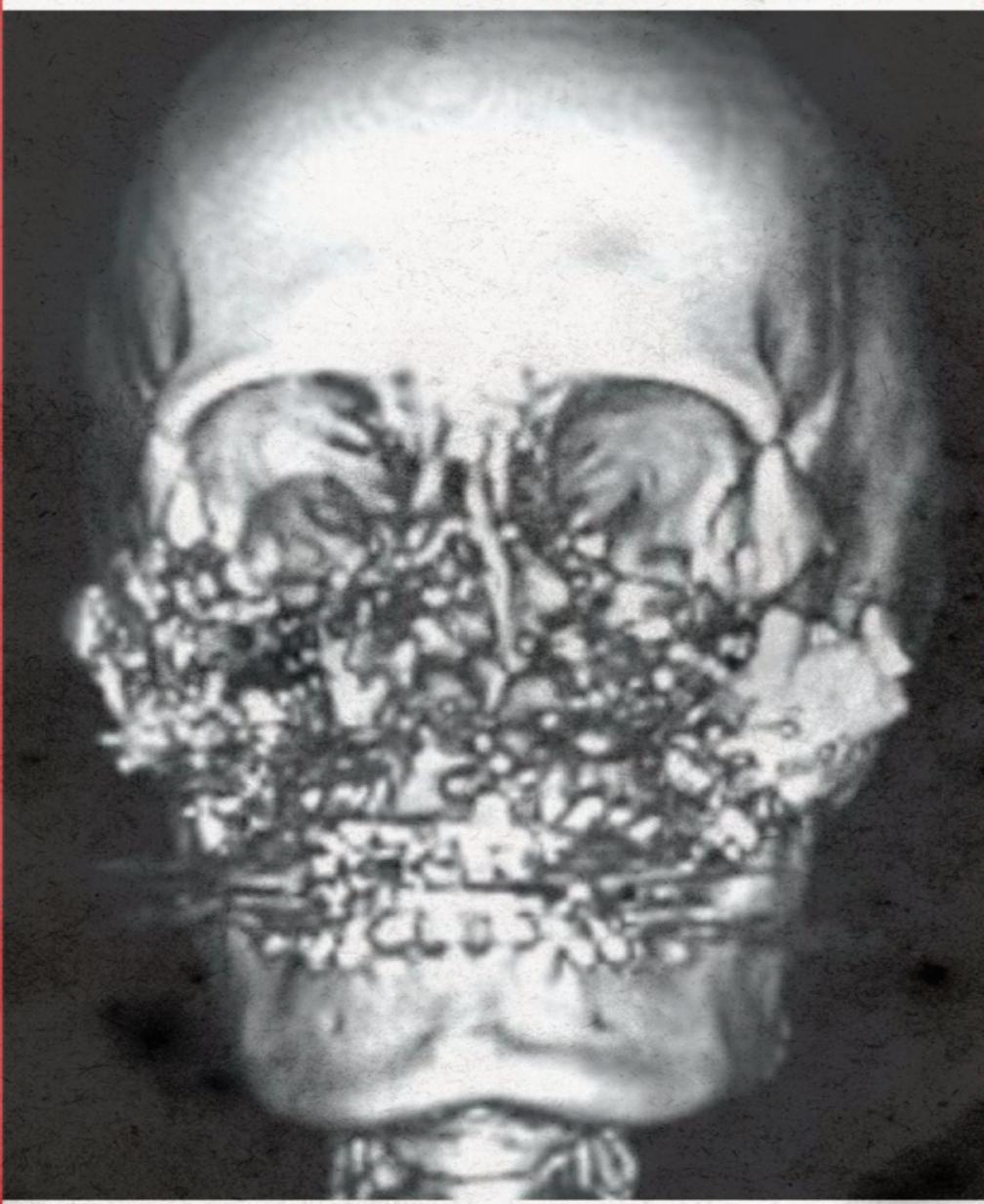


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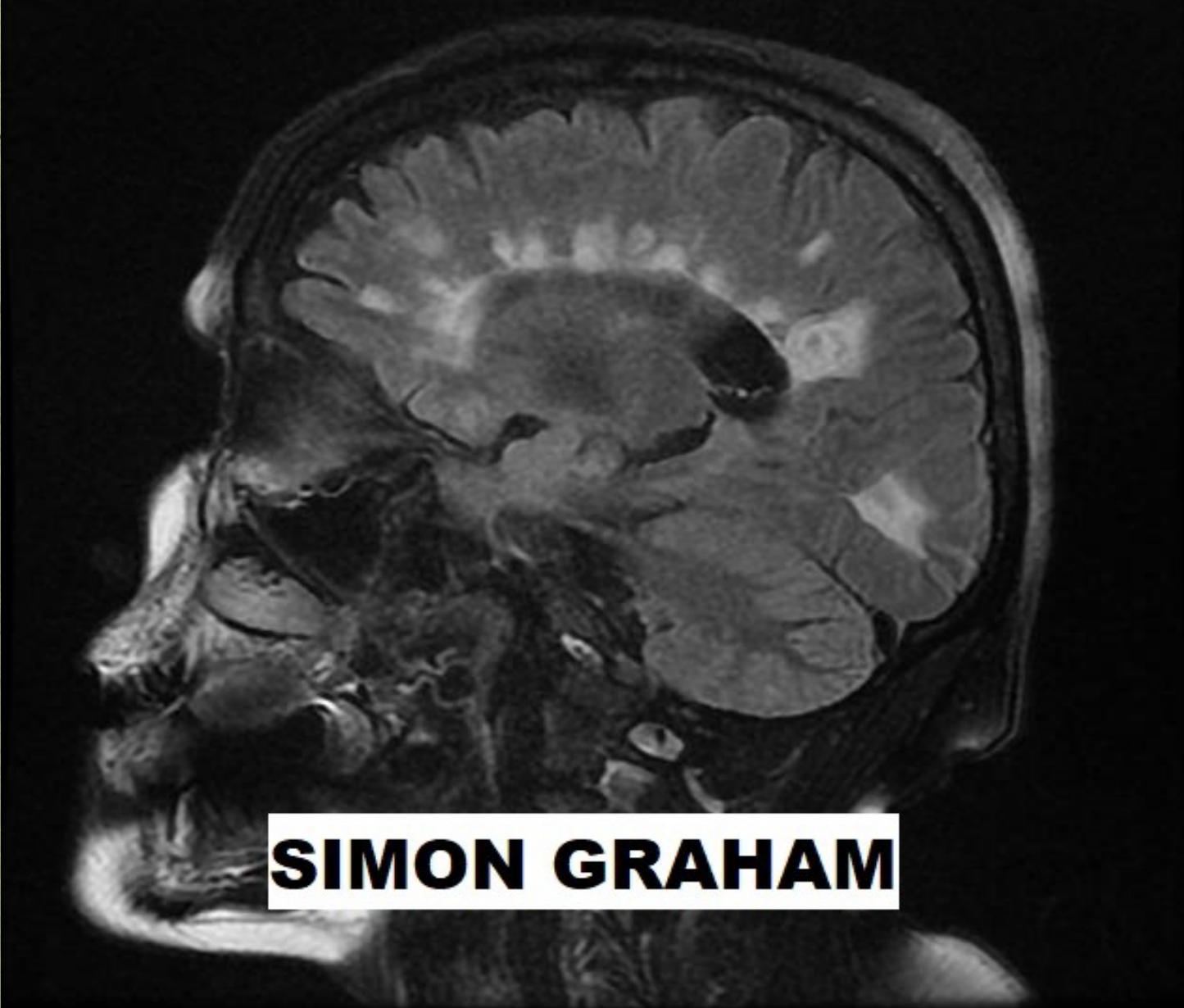


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# **GAME THEORY**



**SIMON GRAHAM**

For a time I dated a girl who was also an orphan. It was really great at first, us being orphans together. We had no responsibilities or allegiances, and we had plenty of money.

Sarah and I used our money to play games. I liked games because they stopped me thinking about doing what I had done prior to dating Sarah, which was putting my body against hot surfaces. I had done this because it made me stop thinking about being an orphan and because there are very few fun games to play on your own.

Sarah liked games as well. She didn't have a problem with burning herself, but she did have a problem with depriving herself. That was what she called it. She said, I like playing games because when I'm playing them I forget that I'm meant to be depriving myself.

I have a theory that all orphans like games.

One game Sarah and I played was called Cat. Sarah came up with it. In this game, Sarah moved first, and her first move was buying a cat. My first move was telling Sarah that I'm allergic to cats.

Sarah's second move was insisting the cat sleep with us in the bed. My second move was getting hives all over my body, even my genitals.

Sarah's next move was naming the cat after a serial killer from the 1980's.

She was an orphan, Sarah said.

My response was refusing to use the name because it was in bad taste. I called her Cat instead.

Sarah's next move was yelling at me.

How is A\_\_\_\_\_ not an appropriate name? She yelled after Cat brought home a decapitated bird.

The next day I placed an anonymous tip with the real estate that there was a cat in Unit 3.

The real estate slipped a letter under our door. It read: You have two weeks to rid the apartment of all pets or, as per Section 45c of the code, you will be evicted.

I thought this was such a good move, but Sarah had a brilliant counter up her sleeve. Her move was telling me that Cat had become part of the family and so we had no choice but to move apartments. The reason this was a game-winning move was because it led the game of Cat into the new game of Moving, and this was the ideal - for there to never be a gap of time in between games, no gap of time in which I would think of hot surfaces or in which Sarah would think, I better make up for the past month of not depriving myself by depriving myself twice as much as I normally would.

~

A few months later Sarah and I played a game called Guidance. The idea of this game was that Sarah and I would both pay to receive guidance from someone who gave it for a living.

Guidance came about because one morning after not sleeping all night Sarah said, I think we need serious help.

We can't just play games forever, she said, and I will deprive myself if we are not playing games, and maybe even if we are.

At the time we were playing a game called Drugs. The end of the Moving game had led us to meeting our new neighbours. They were playing the Drugs game and so taught us how to play it too.

It was a good game at first. Like, really good. But it had become a bad game. It was repetitive and demanded so much of us. It seemed like there would be no winner to the game, no end.

We just need a new game, I said to Sarah. I get it. This Drugs game is getting old.

Let's go to a therapist, Sarah said.

I said, That doesn't sound very fun. That sounds like the opposite of fun.

It's not supposed to be fun, she said. It's not a game.

I said, How about we compromise by turning us getting guidance into a game?

I'm not sure, Sarah said at first, but after a day she came around because she knew that compromise is integral to all relationships, and also because part of Sarah was scared of what would happen should she stop playing games.

For Guidance, Sarah filled a hat full of names of people in our town who gave guidance for a living. There was a rabbi, a pastor, an analyst, a psychic, a yogi, et cetera. Sarah picked out a priest. I picked out a clairvoyant.

I had no idea what a clairvoyant actually did and so I thought, Guidance is a fun game, full of surprise and intrigue.

But I was very disappointed by Guidance. Let me tell you why.

First of all, the clairvoyant's eyebrows didn't move and she made me pay upfront.

Second of all, the clairvoyant's first move was too bold. Games are meant to start subtle and then escalate. Her move was staring into my eyes for a long time. Like twenty minutes, or maybe even longer.

The clairvoyant then played more moves, it apparently being okay in Guidance for one person to just play as many moves as they like while the other player sits in silence and watches.

Most of the clairvoyant's moves involved saying things about me that could apply to anyone.

She said, for example, that our galaxy is in a spiritual period known as Kali Yuga.

She said, It is a time marked by evil and impurities.

I said, That sounds about right.

She said, I think you're feeling these energies in a very acute way.

I said, Well sure, who isn't?

She said, Times of destruction can lead to true freedom.

I asked, Is that what the next game will be? Freedom?

She said, Our time has run out.

Guidance is a very strange game, I thought on the way home from the clairvoyant. I didn't understand why people found it so fun. I didn't understand why so many people had been playing it for thousands of years. I knew I had only been playing the game for one day, but I couldn't help feel like there weren't enough rules.

At home, I asked Sarah whether she was enjoying Guidance, she having seen her priest that day as well.

Sarah said, I like Guidance. It is a fun game.

I said, It seems like anyone can play Guidance. It seems like some people have been playing it forever and are still not very good at it but think they are.

Sarah said, The priest told me I should stop playing all other games and just play Guidance. He said my next move in Guidance should be getting sober.

I said, It's not a game if someone else decides your moves for you.

Sarah said, Maybe Guidance isn't a game.

~

I didn't like where Guidance was headed. I wanted to play a different game, but I knew

that this is not how games work. A game had to end on its own, or turn into another game, the way Cat turned into Moving and Moving into Drugs and Drugs into Guidance.

Sarah went again to the church to play Guidance with the priest. She came back and said I was wrong, there were rules to Guidance, and then she handed me a tome of rules, rules that seemed to be irrelevant not just to the game but to our place and time.

It was an awful game, this Guidance. There was either no rules or too many. But I was in a real pickle because I wanted to spend time with Sarah and yet she all she was doing with her time was playing Guidance.

I did some thinking and came up with five options:

1. Suck it up and play Guidance with Sarah (Boring).
2. Think about hot surfaces again (Terrifying, not an option).
3. Play Guidance with someone else (Boring and also likely to make me feel very sad as not with Sarah, leading then to 2. Terrifying, not an option).
4. Playing a different game with someone else (Maybe not boring but still likely to make me feel very sad as not with Sarah, leading then to 2. Terrifying, not an option).
5. Find a game to play by myself (See 4.).

I nonetheless tried 4. and 5. to ensure they did in fact lead to 2.

I went to the neighbors' house and asked what they were doing. They said they were playing Drugs. I said, Do you mind if I join?

They said, Not at all.

So I played Drugs with them for a while, until they both played the move of passing out.

Then I played the game of Drugs with myself for a while. For whatever reason, I hadn't realised until that moment that Drugs was a game you could play on your own. How good it would have been to play Drugs before I met Sarah?

It was a lot of fun, playing Drugs on my own. I thought, I can do this. I can play this

game forever. But then, no. Not forever. For one night. Or maybe two. I tried two. After the second night I realised that people don't play Drugs by themselves because it quickly stops being a game. It becomes like hot surfaces and depriving yourself in that you need to play a new game in order to stop thinking about it.

It was then I told Sarah that I was having a really hard time. I said, I keep thinking about hot surfaces, Sarah. I need to play a game.

So Sarah said, Well come down and play Guidance with the priest and I tomorrow.

I thought about my options. About hot surfaces. About the importance of us being orphans together. I looked at Cat and then turned to Sarah and said, Guidance sounds like a great idea.

~

So that's how Sarah and I came to play Guidance for seven years.

It was a long time to be playing the same game. It was boring for the most part. There were no real surprises anymore, us having both memorised the rules, the moves, the strategies.

Sometimes I wanted to play Drugs again. Or Moving. Or even Cat (Cat died). But mainly Drugs. Each time I thought this, Sarah would remind me that Drugs is only fun for a day or two and I would nod and say, Yes, Sarah. You're right.

Sarah was fine with Guidance being boring because she thought the next game would be Paradise. She said it's a small sacrifice to play this boring game when the next will be so much fun.

We can play Paradise with our parents, she said. Imagine that. Can you just imagine?

I imagined. Sarah and I spent hours lying in bed together, imagining. Sometimes I would joke that the game we were playing should be called Imagine not Guidance, but Sarah would look at me very sternly and say, That is the kind of thinking that will stop us from playing Paradise.

It makes me sad to think about Sarah saying this now. Mainly because she was wrong. The next game was not Paradise. After the car accident, Guidance definitely ended, but the next game, the game I'm playing right now, has no Sarah and no parents. It can't be Paradise.

I'm not sure what to call this game. Maybe Floating. Maybe Void. Whatever it's called, it's an okay game. There is no Sarah and no parents but there are no hot surfaces either. There is nothing, which now that I think about it means the clairvoyant was the closest to being right. I feel free. Completely free.

That's a good name. Free.

**RECOMMENCE**

**JIM RULAND**



Carol is calling from Los Angeles. She wants to know how the cat piece is going. The cat piece isn't going is how it's going. I write for a golf magazine. Not the magazine per se, but the blog. A golf blog. I hate everything about it. Its obsession with swing mechanics. Its upper crust entitlement. I even hate the way it sounds. Golf blog. It reminds me of the noise that escaped from my brother-in-law the time he got a piece of \$6 gristle stuck in his windpipe and almost died. When the waiter delivered his filet mignon he'd cut it into pieces and calculated the price of each bite. *Damn right I'm eating the gristle. This is a \$6 piece of gristle.* And they say there's no justice in this world. Carol wants a cat piece for the golf blog because "cats are Internet." I don't even know how to parse that sentence, yet I know exactly what she means. I'm the fashion writer, which means I have to find a way to bring golf and fashion and cats together in a way that will make golfers want to click on every hyperlink and banner ad on the page. Welcome to my \$6 gristle. I can hear voices in the background, the gently mocking commands of Vietnamese aestheticians, which means Carol's at the salon getting her putting surface waxed. Carol makes verbs out of the names of websites and signs off. The combination of golf + fashion + cats sends me to sites where the word "catwalk" is prominently positioned. One of them links me back to one of my own pieces. I chop up some off-brand Xanax and try my luck with videos and end up in a wormhole of cats imbued with powers that nature never intended. Fighting cats. Flying cats. Magic cats scorching mice with laser beams shooting out of their eyes. Then: pay dirt. A kitten on a putting green playing with a golf ball. Adorable. Ovary melting even. The kitten bats the ball around and then pounces on it. The ball squirts away and the ritual recommences over and over again until the dimpled sphere rolls toward the hole with dreadful finality and disappears in the cup. Camera closes in on the kitten with its WTF? Face before pulling back on a golf clapping foursome, every one of them dressed to the nines. I hit refresh a couple hundred times and wake up to the sound of the phone. It's Carol. She wants to know how the cat piece is coming. I look at the screen and a video plays of little girl burying a shoebox in the ground sing-saying, *Bye-bye, Fluffy. Bye-bye, Fluffy. Bye-bye, Fluffy. Goodbye.*



**RECUERDA**

**JONAH SOLHEIM** JD

He stood with his shoulder in the doorway, arms crossed, and she glared back at him. The linoleum of the kitchen cold under her bare feet. Another disparity between them, another contention: his slippers kept him warm. He sniffed, more to do something than out of a biological need, and turned his head away from her. She folded her arms, too, a soft click in her head telling her she was mirroring him and not caring to fully acknowledge the thought.

Her feet cold and his warm. The way of things.

In the heat of a moment now lying dead between them he had called her a bitch. This was the final vocalized word the apartment walls had heard in ten minutes. The sting of the word was as if no one else had ever uttered it before, as if he had saved it just for her, specifically to hurt her. But he had not budged from where he'd said it, as if the curse had roots.

An art deco print hung behind him. She had always hated it and would never tell him, not even if they made up this time. It was amorphously daubed, apparently with a child's finger paints; the variety of colors seemed schizophrenic without context. The title, in tiny black print at the bottom, provided no such reprieve.

*Recuerda.*

Fine, she thought, glaring past him. I can remember. I can remember a great deal.

I can remember last fall, trucking your sorry ass to a movie theater thirty miles away to get tickets for some new "experience," only to find out they sold out the day before, and we should really check the website first next time.

(In her memory she skips past the part where, on the way home, dejected and irritated, they stopped for hot apple cider at a local farmer's market and did not fight again for another three months.)

I can remember listening to the Cocteau Twins in your basement and racing to see who could guess the lyrics first and you not telling me you had memorized their first three albums while you were in the hospital the first time.

(She also conveniently excises his second hospital stay, when they both discovered John Williams – the classical guitarist, not the composer.)

I can remember finding you in the bathroom, doubled over, hands pressed to your torso as if holding in your own entrails, puke in the tub and tears in your eyes. I can remember that.

These memories and still others flashed and sizzled across her mind like finger-flung water on a hot pan. His shoulder's nearness to the jamb caused a phantom ache as if he'd been punched, but he would not move. He saw her determined look. His stomach cringed at its potency; a cancerous churning started somewhere deep. He followed her gaze to the painting, a gift from his aunt -- the eccentric one, not the lesbian school-teacher. He glanced back at her and tore himself from place, to the painting, to take the thing off the wall. After a pensive moment, staring at the brighter space on the sun-drenched wall (now embittered by an ink black night), he broke the frame across his knee. Glass sprayed into the carpet, across the linoleum towards her bare feet. He looked up at her.

Her lips pursed, but no words came up her throat to move them. A silence as wide as the one between them now roared behind her forehead, immaculately conceived goldfish in a dark bowl. She could feel right down to her chilly toes a vacancy of charity on her part, as if the need to communicate with him was far outweighed by her own need to hide her stale bemusement with their situation. This need growing as the wordless moments fled their rage. They could stay here all night and nothing would change; this they both knew. Yes. He could break every painting in the place and she still wouldn't have anything to say to him. An impasse.

His hand, nicked by an errant piece of glass, ran over his face, leaving a thin red streak from chin to temple. He blew air out through his mouth, as close to a response to her grim nothing as anything. The broken frame slunk to the floor, making a lopsided triangle over his left slipper. His stomach lurched again, and he dared to let his eyes pass hers. Four icy and silent lighthouses, manned by apathetic keepers both struggling to become beacons of apology.

She knew the look, registered it with a small splashback of similar memories to rein-

force it, and did her best to remain outwardly unconcerned. But where his health was involved, she was not impassive. Could not be. In that arena she was positively verbose, normally. The muscles in her foot made like they wanted to lift, but the larger ones above remained frozen, so she stood there on cold linoleum with a half-tensed foot for a moment or two before relaxing again. Tiny diamonds on the yellow floor, winking.

The novelty clock by the refrigerator chimed ten: the call of a common nighthawk. He moved suddenly, pushed past her as she listened to it, startling her back a few steps. His hand – her favorite one, the left – closed around the dustpan and a small brush. With his arm he gently pushed on her shins so he could sweep up his mess. She let him. When he moved to dump the pieces in the trash, she stepped into the hallway, feeling as though she were passing through the ghost of his shadow as she bent past the jamb. Began making a small pile of shards in a cupped palm.

He made a sound in his throat – *ut* – like his throat got sealed off before a real word could come out. He saw her bare feet. She turned the corners of her mouth down and kept preening the carpet fibers, ignoring the shard she could feel poking into her heel. She had a flash of a monkey in Borneo performing the same action to its mate, two other nonverbal life partners stuck in a rut. His sweeping brought him close enough that she could smell his body, and she cursed herself for wanting it so suddenly. Some intoxicant, having a form other than hers to explore. If she closed her eyes and ran her fingertips across him in the dark, she could take herself to an alien land with an utterly indescribable landscape. This land also lived behind her forehead, pebbly kitsch for the fishbowl. She didn't know how to tell him this, so she didn't. Thoughts banged against the frontal bone of her skull, dead on arrival.

She stood with her shoulder in the doorway. Arms limp. He sighed again and put his hands on his hips.

Remember, he said, when this was easy?

8



**EXCERPT FROM  
YEEZUS IN FURS**

**SHANE JESSE CHRISTMASS**

W 3958 : L 2079

NINE CELEBRITIES WHO ARE HONESTLY LOW-KEY WITCHES. Cult Leader is vice chairman of a shady company. He exerts political influence. He commits securities fraud. Bomb crews scurry across the alien surface. Red lumps beneath my skin. Skateboarding to the awful motel. Car door slams as I watch morning cartoons. Dirty jeans purchased from thrift store. Smoke coming from a small paper packet. Burnt tyre beneath steel chassis. An invisible tether tied to small rockets. Cult Leader performs several skateboard tricks. Cult Leader talks about nakedness. Cult Leader brushes his dark hair. Cult Leader tells me about his secret pleasures, about his charming nudity, his exquisite curves and exuberant fleshiness. I have similar tan lines to the Cult Leader. Unconscious as I plug into the brain-computer interfaces. Technological actuators inspect anus. A steel belt around male genitals. Cult Leader has retractable wings. High-tech surgical gloves provide sense enhancements as the Cult Leader rubs them on my skin. Electrical properties in the projectile night. Cult members camp beneath Washington Bridge. Small talk from Manhattan to Washington. Close-range gunfire and faces on the front of fashion magazines. The icy undergrounds of Broadway. Subhuman cyborgs storm the bloodied jungle. The tongue of a piss whore. Biker guys with money clips. Cult Leader has a castration problem. Apartment block full of Hepatitis C. Night dissolves into amyl nitrate and excessive money. Disease and other strong scents on my fingers. Tongues stapled to bus seat. Photographer is now in the doctor's care. Transsexual patients meet with prominent physicians. Large metropolitan areas are swallowed by technological gadgets. Hand gestures delivered by cybernetic systems. Translucent images across a magenta sphere. Fetish photographers infiltrate the cumulus planet talking about their fine art aesthetics and other gleeful perversions. Performance artists, prima donnas and British perverts are hauled before the Conservative government by an over-anxious police force. The lead actor details his complex sexual history. Photographers detail sex inside the hotel suites of San Francisco. My muscles soothed by the hot bath. Cult Leader wears a tracksuit. Bodies disappear beneath undersea debris. The body parts of migrant workers are found in the water supplies. Mutations and fatal wounds. Weapons hidden in the wild grass. Chain-link fence gleams in the late afternoon sun. Deep sleep on the forest floor. I wear a thin sweater under the grey-blue sky. Police siren in the sunlight. Blank paper inside the money box. Cult Leader's laughter through the cigarette smoke. Nude men shatter windows. Erotic escapades performed by serious professional actors. Cult Leader concocts a banana cocktail. ESP from the arterial mud and tar pits. Pepsi-Cola immersed in my connective tissue. Whole body transplants performed on actual human beings. Toxins in digi-

tal form. Deforestation under a black gradient sky. Monochrome destruction. Fresh intrusions of sex and penetrating taboos. Sensibility meters and MTV-style production values. Phone-sex lines run by cybersex gurus. Sex for pleasure and sex for punishment. \$2- \$3.50/min. - lonely girls will pay up to \$500 for your special services. Adults looking for an older woman. Cult Leader talks to various paraphiliacs and then reads the latest Sears catalogue. Water bottles in empty bunkers. Dead volcano at the end of a narrow path. Human arm disappears amongst experimental images. A tall figure in a silk cape with high cheekbones. Factory buildings marked with gunfire. High wire fence around the factory grounds. Fleshlights and wet clothes. A sensory richness and social fulfilment. Cult Leader eats maggots and chewing gum. He is aged in his mid-to-late 20s. Toilet bowls and car doors. Electronic skin for burn victims. Debridement therapy to provide sensation in my hands. A couple of hours. Gunshot rings out. Call girls made from a vague shape. A giant bowl of weed on a plastic lawn chair. Cult Leader sits in the squalid backyard talking on his cell phone. Heavy machine guns poke from red brick houses. Cult Leader anticipates a brutal ambush. Cult Leader wears a Wal-Mart t-shirt. Human voices at a wonderful party. Pharmacists and street kids play with sticky tape. Elevator doors creak into brilliant sunshine. Motionless acne on the misogynist's skull. Red background on the hospital rooftop. Weird figures in the yellow night. A grotesque desire to wear animal garb. Diabolical fiends working for the police force. Moth-eaten gloves cover the carnal visual cortex. Heterosexual male chases tween sex. Cult Leader faces erroneous accusations. Fringe scientists adorned in sunglasses, ponytails and surrounded by arrogant people. Bartender handing out cool drugs. Satanic session conducted in a drunken manner. Sex maniac is an average nibbler. Sex in transcendent halls. Sharp knives used as props in pornographic material. White sunshine flickers over hospital rooftop. Moments later. NYC. A lit cigarette being smoked in slow motion. Ambulance siren behind glass windows. Latex gloves over San Francisco. Emotional problems discussed in the eye clinic. Dark mysteries on the computer network. Original Soundtrack of orgasm and initial experiments conducted on psychoactive drugs. Cult Leader conducts erotic yoga classes, but also discusses a monkish abstinence from all sensual indulgence. Mantras and eyewash. Dirty clothes drying after a monsoon. Slick hair and cigarettes. Psychiatrist struck by the car lights. Arctic air captured in a mushroom cloud. Nightclub evenings consumed by erotic performances. Slowly laughter fades and the vigorous bodies reapply their cancerous attachments. Proteins inserted into eardrum. Elastic ashtrays purchased from a retail electronics store. Copper pipes in the rear-view mirror. Discrete

sounds and further sound rises. Smooth eyelids and slowly the Cult Leader's fingers float. The flesh of a doll's head. Leg bone over inch-thick carpet. Overstuffed bodies stuffed with banknotes. Head bones that contain cocaine. An apelike tumour that covers the whole city. Free cigarettes made from steam. Foodstuffs like huge pacifiers. Cult Leader sipping a vanilla milkshake in the back of a yellow cab. Water vapour on the window seat. Quiet voices behind the bathroom door. Macho facades in a homosexual loop. Sudden nausea from looking at the shop windows. Cult Leader engages in somatic sensations and slow motion sensuality. Transmissive diseases in the cannibal world. Trains in the rail yard. Blood throughout NYC. A nasty smear of shit in the toilet cubicle. Infectious fantasies played out by a sexual penetrator. Disease and social status. Erections and eye contact. The physical boundaries of the body. Electric current with a luminescent aura. Sensations ripple through endless orgasms. Cult Leader in silver high-heels. The early incarnations of human forms. Underworld guns abandoned on a mountain road. Rainy night in NYC. A high population with surplus children. Well-armed police talking in medieval languages. Barefoot labourers driving semi-submersible vessels. An electric butt plug on a small table in Guatemala. LED indicator lights and pulse output. Power control knobs and fine adjustments. Mechanisms and claws. Police wagon beneath the Brooklyn Bridge. Dirt. Windblown. Refrigerators. Cardboard. Rotten. Wall Street Journal.

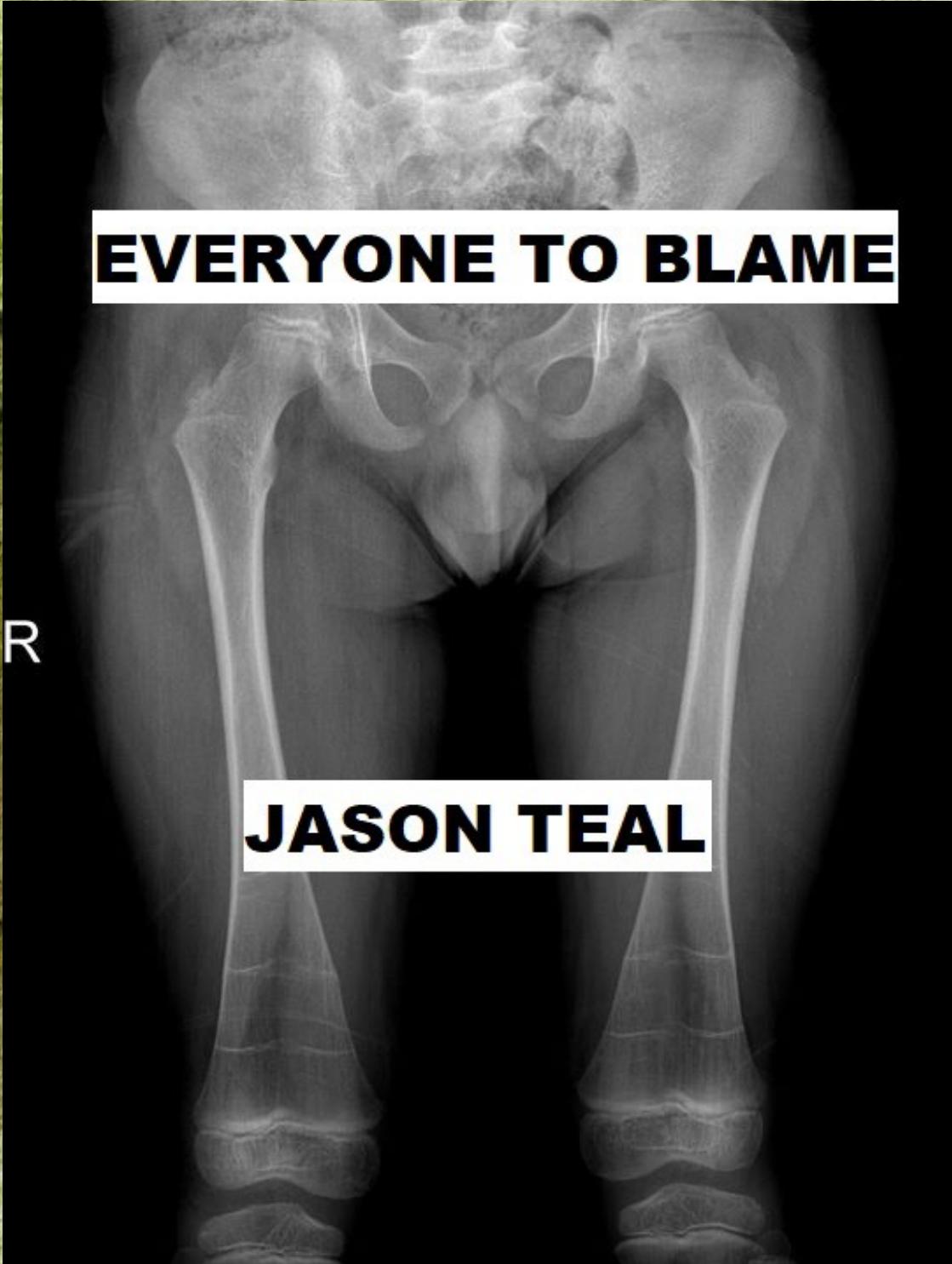
ENTRAILS & TUBES. No musical compositions. The back entrance to the Lenox Hill Hospital. Pipes on the ceiling, frosting snow bed in some other hemisphere. Overpass. Dirt. Windblown dust. You let it all pass. Your hair is unkempt. Unruly. Ridiculous. The sun rises over the tips of Brooklyn. You glisten. Under the Gowanus Expressway - hieroglyphics. Tactile worlds. Footmarks on the sidewalk. Steamboats at the bottom of the East River. Depressed cheekbones of a police officer. Infrawaves collide in the provisional world. Corridors of the Lenox Hill Hospital. Broken fingers in plaster. A nurse-in-charge sitting in the nurse-in-charge chair. You're outside the hospital. Smog plumes over Queensbridge Houses. Oil-tankers run aground on Orchard Beach. Tobacco and barley pour from the tanker's side. The Atlantic Ocean is in remiss, oily existence. A wine glass shatters. CIA torture, uncorrupted by mind, abolished worlds. Down in the corner of the pebbled glass, neat, small letters spell out your name. I gulp Spanish brandy. Breath expels. Hallucinations of children. Stink of sulphur and acne creams. Boiling oil is doused on a bowed dog, a hound. I gulp again. Hooded Iraqis in embers, whole body torture, rectal bleeding, bromine knuckles, cracked Murphy Drips, a metre of dead bees,

pain. You turn left, sudden fears. Armoured vehicles to the right of soldiers. Smouldering houses with fire fighters strip off their clothes. Toiletries burnt by enormous ironing surfaces. You get close enough to see the pained expressions on their faces. NYC bombed back to Year Zero. Mouths open but no sound coming out. Canons adjusted. Canons erupting. Cacophony. Dust and bullshit. Parasites in the blood stream making the user immune to commit acts of treason. Panel beaters pound the steel body of the abandoned cars. Scrap metal, flint sparks, shattered glass. The vehicle is in flame. You drop your wine glass. You're bored, depressed, stacked and tied up in twine. Movie poster torn on alley wall. Rain sodden. Half-snivelling songs come from the outside. Immense sunshine over cold fields. Car parks at the front entrance of a tenement. Dew drops emulsify under the girders of Robert F. Kennedy Bridge. Crypto-anarchists make settlements near Hell Gate. Orange headbands around their foreheads. Donut sellers on the forecourt of the United Nations. Concurrent damage caused by BGM-109 Tomahawks. You with a minty-fresh mouth. Enemy Identified Man. Jacket pocket rubs against you. You take your sunglasses off. Her gaze is ancient times. You struggle for breath. A bus, repeat, a bus. Soldiers hang out smoking Camels. A glimpse of their murderous results in the newspaper headlines. In a wood cabin. Warm bed this morning. You don't use a tape measure. The voice of command, a paper bag full of prolapse. You get into the car. You burrow into the trees. After about forty minutes, you give up and head back to the subway. A new side part in my hair. You lay flat on the ground. You complete your work inside the company's holiday villa. You read the instruction manual several times. There is more than one narrative in the instruction manual. You work beside vacuum gauges under hot sweat steam and pressure overhead. You are alone - once more - working. Track suits / brand name. Billboard's advertising TV documentaries that outline the beauty and savagery of the human contribution. The process of strengthening and integrating CPU into plastic brain moulds. You slide into midnight. Crimson-stained. Emotional signs include sighs and deep breaths. The door opens. Take that money. Polluted lobsters with identification bracelets around pincers. You take a swig of synthetic water. Wife wields her hips over husband. The dawn on a projection screen. Nothing brings my attention to it. The sun rises. Xerox of a Xerox over Manhattan. Bubbling fat on my skin. Bright lights, loud music, young kids. Husband's wife is a cardboard cut-out. She is the doorway. She turns the music off. She's doused in blonde mechanisms. A torn genus of deadly moth. The wife lurks in the good values of degeneracy. You tear your clothes off, actions recorded in unpublished histogram. Unfamiliar people irritate. Jetsam falls away from a dead man.

The dying art of breath. You disappear under your cotton dress. This nightmare of a giant man, his red mouth moves, disposing of him, let alone murdering him. You stare madly at me. Downtown in the South end of the city, a mist-hung gun whips up the mob. BWAP BWAP. You sob in the pale dawn. Someone else screams. The strange assignment of lace doused over wife. Dinner chairs burn in a Pizza Hut car park. You open the window. Drinks at four. Several minutes later, sweat forms on your brow. Constant unfolding elements. You notice the disgust. I press demands onto you. Vermouth in a trough. Television light projectiles in the night vibrant against your skin. Some talk about nurses. Faces gleam through the Manhattan haze. One old man altogether on bench in Washington Square. Fashion magazines tangled up. Old Spice and Pepsodent. I do hate you.

OFFAL IN A BUCKET. Rib cages turn in serrated gristle. Cult Leader's finger on the elevator button. Hospital hallway outside emergency room. Cult Leader closes her locker door. An elevator button. The elevator arrives. The doors open. A nurse pulls a chair from beneath a patient who is tied up. The nurse rifles through the patient's suit jacket for a coffee cup. The nurse gnaws her teeth into cedar wood. Cult Leader takes a closer look at her. Ivory tusks hang from wooden-framed structures. Sick smell through the ventilators. The smell draws Cult Leader to this moment. The window. Out from the window, precipitation of the world. Sick rises from the valley. A tree. Cult Leader hears pharmacists, their families. Street kids inside rolls of sticky tape. Septic scars over Cult Leader's chest. A yellow star on the charcoaled door of the landlord's flat. Cult Leader gets onto a different path. The elevator doors open. Cult Leader looks around. She gets in. Her hand presses a button. Eighth floor. The doors of the lift wheeze. They expire. They stutter and then close. A handful of glue. The elevator creaks. The eighth floor. A petting zoo. Cult Leader exits, turns to her left, pushes through a door. The fire escape. Brilliant sunshine rushes in. A searing whiteness. Scores of locusts. Crows noisily fly around. Cunning-like. Cult Leader taps the side of her head. Motionless thoughts. Her neck is dry, flaky, plastic. Acne skin. Everything that's apparent is usually impossible at hand. Meatheads on the motorway. Skull flags with red background. Contrary personalities irascible and dull. Sunshine. The hospital rooftop. Moth-eaten air. Carnal images in the visual cortex. Broken wrist. An orderly

pushes Cult Leader off the hospital roof. A murder list. Chock-full inside Cult Leader's brain. No leftovers. War stops war. The world stops instantly. The passing of End Times. Shit bubbles on concrete. Cult Leader's body designed by bureaucrats. Cult Leader wades through pornographic material. Her mouth slavers. White sunshine flickers. CUT TO: EXT. HOSPITAL ROOFTOP - MOMENTS LATER. The skyline. NYC in the distance. The sun behind the NYC. Magnificent rays between gaps of the buildings. Cult Leader's arms over the ledge of the rooftop. A lit cigarette between her fingers. People on the far side of the roof. Cult Leader ignores them. More drags from her cigarette. Cult Leader pauses, exhales, draws again, then flicks the cigarette from her fingers. The cigarette falls and spins in slow motion. It hits the bitumen below. The cigarette sparks as it hits the ground. Cult Leader watches it the whole way down. Cult Leader looks up. One last look at NYC. Figures of three men go past the camera. Physical objects extend in space-time. Half-smoked joints. No joy inside the hospital. Glass windows, calmness, moonlight, ambulance sirens. Cult Leader slides off her chair. Slowly. She talks on the telephone. She pulls gloves from her coat. She works her hair in front of the mirror. An orderly punches her. Shadowboxing from behind. Cult Leader turns to the orderly. They discuss relativity and quantum mechanics. Cult Leader has no idea if it's a dream. She enjoys her role.



**EVERYONE TO BLAME**

**JASON TEAL**

In the past, when bodies turned up, or there were kidnappers, officers arrived on TV, badges glinting, to arrest the suspect. Marjorie is missing at the proctologist's office, her job as office assistant. Maybe you are a suspect still.

Marjorie looked guilty. You remember that. You wish the phone receiver scalded her ear; you wish flames snaked across curled wallpaper like insects. You wish anything else happened, even if everything burned through and you had to start all over.

The call comes late at night, police knocking on your door. None of this seems real. No one has seen your boyfriend Simon for three days. Someone messed with his house, someone opened his mail, and last night, police found his truck, abandoned, with two slashed tires. Someone left dismembered doll parts in the truck bed. When you answer, you're wearing one shoe, desperate for news. You're lucky to wear one shoe considering you're alive. Laying in the grass that night, the pieces don't make sense: You lived with Marjorie and Simon's dead and now you're all covered in guilt. You survived.

This morning, the front door was open again. Put the chair back where it belongs. The kitchen smells like turpentine, scrubbed clean. So they found Simon, drowned and buried in the woods. You're wanted for questioning. What's the point of changing homes anymore?

"It's not your fault," said Marjorie. Remember she kept disappearing. They picked her up in Colorado once, heading west in a stolen RV. Simon had already been missing for weeks. Now there is a mini-series named for her (which is better than the independent movie from a few years before). Online forums dissect her memory. Here is one more reason: Marjorie was evicted previously for bogus claims of racket, records played too loud, high-pitched moaning and screaming. No one could guess what the song was supposed to be. Other applicants didn't return your messages. In the interview Marjorie said, "I don't even listen to music, like ever." She was dressed typically in ripped blue jeans and a tie-die shirt, poor dreadlocks, wardrobe screaming Trustafarian.

Learn to trust yourself with time, purging Simon's emails, little tokens planning love sprees, poems, inexpensive dates. Anyway: Marjorie stuck the note to your fridge, letters pasted together from magazines. The series didn't capture her dark quiet. "I am dead tired," you said one night unremarkably, but Marjorie stared at you too long, unconvinced, so you offered, "We can watch something else." She made two cocktails, sweet mixes tasting like summer. You passed out hating work tomorrow, bingeing favorite cartoons

and missing everyone from home. You didn't tell anyone Simon still lived in town. Later, police think Marjorie picked up the phone, her voice springy like a used mattress. Your phone was in the kitchen. Remember—Marjorie helped you burn his photos a few days afterward. She kept a collection of old dolls.

You never go into her room.

At the morgue, you are shown the lobby. In here is cold tiles, old magazines stuck to each other. The room smells bad, and you can't find a clock. It's nowhere.

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**PLANT REPLANT**

**JON BERGER**

I smoked Bubba Kush with my cousin Will. He got it from a guy who grew hydroponics. It was my first time smoking anything other than midgrade. Will had this evil clown hookah thing with hoses hanging out of its head. His friend Joe got so stoned the clown gave him a panic attack.

On the drive home I kept checking myself because it felt like I was pissing my pants and driving felt like a videogame. I got home and went to the bathroom to find out I was totally dry.

The next morning I'm driving back to my Grandmas still high and cozy, speeding down the bumpy road in my 98' Bonneville with too many miles on it. Gridded up farm fields on all sides. These giant white windmills were being built in the middle of the fields to collect energy. Looking like Godzilla seagulls waving around lost with nothing to break.

Me and my cousin were working on repo houses in the city. This rich guy bought up a bunch of abandoned homes from the bank and hired us to fix them so he could flip them for a profit. I was supposed to be in school but I'd rather be making money.

I pulled into my Grandmas driveway. Will was sitting on the front porch, tying his shoes while smoking a cigarette. He'd been living with Grandma since his mom died of cancer. So like 4 years.

"We got a problem," he said as I was walking up.

"What's up?" I said.

"Grandma is fucking with my shit."

He stood up and I followed him to the back yard where he was growing an 8 foot tall marijuana plant. It was sativa, his baby.

"Grandma has some of those windmill guys coming over to inspect the land next week. She's pissed and says the plants gotta go."

"Can't we just cover it up or something?"

Will shrugged. "I don't know. Grandma wants it gone. We'll get like four grand for having

the windmill on the property."

"Four grand? That's it?"

"Wind ain't oil, bro."

"Fuck, man. You serious?"

"I'm thinking we can replant it at that house we're working on in Sanford," he said exhaling smoke.

"Can we just harvest it now? I mean at least we'd get something out of it."

"No, it's too early, it'd be no good." He grabbed a branch, "Look, these buds are all tiny and green still. Don't even got sugar on 'em."

"You think replanting will work?"

"Shit if I know, but we gotta try. I'm not about to just throw it away."

We grabbed a five gallon bucket from the barn, put some water in it and started digging out the plant with shovels. We lifted it up the best we could, keeping the roots intact while lowering it into the bucket.

Will drove an S10 truck without a topper.

We laid the plant down in the bed of the truck and packed more dirt into the bucket. Marijuana leaves were poking out everywhere and the plant was hanging out over the tailgate. Will jammed the tailgate up and bent the top of the plant. We took a blue tarp and tied it down over the plant, tucking in all the branches. We stood back and looked. Will did this thing with his hands that Hollywood directors do to get their camera angles right or whatever. You could definitely tell we were hauling some type of vegetation.

We got into the truck and I grabbed the clipboard to roll a joint on the way. We stopped at the corner store to get energy drinks and cold cuts. It had a big gravel lot and the store used to be a big farm house. It was all white with newish siding and a black roof. The upstairs of the store was apartments.

Misty was working. She was friends with Will and would sell me beer on the weekends. She moved out here a couple years ago. She had weird line and dot tattoos she did herself without giving them much thought. Misty laughed her ass off when we showed her the weed tree under the tarp and then wished us good luck.

The Sanford house was on the other side of town. We drove through thick traffic, high as ever. I put on sunglasses and just sat back. A cop had a guy pulled over. A new Cadillac. Will laughed saying that's why you don't buy flashy cars. My stomach jumped to my chest as we drove past them. We were normal. I thought about how normal we must look, but maybe we were too normal. Will tapped his brakes, pulling over slightly, giving the cop standing on the side of the road more room. It felt like forever to get past him but he never gave us a look.

We pulled into the driveway of the house. It was a big two story house on a backroad. Not very old. Someone with money had built it. I had to paint over the height lines on the wall where the parents measured their kids growing. We only had half the roof shingled. The roof was peaked and we had to nail in 2-by-4s into it so we didn't slip off.

There was a patch of woods in the back with some good shade. The soil was sandy. Not that farm field clay the plant grew in, but we didn't have a choice.

We dug a hole and put the plant and dirt inside of the bucket into the sand hole in the woods. We gave it some water and got a ladder to cut some tree branches off so the plant would get more sun. Will didn't think if it would help but like he kept saying, "we had to try."

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The leaves turned brown after two days. After a week it was dead. It just fell apart. Will said he could get more seeds from the same guy he bought his weed from. It just cost money, but we had work. He said it was a setback. He said these repo houses were good money. He said buying more seeds and not giving up on growing bud was like investing your money and yourself into something bigger.

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Grandma got a windmill built on the farmland.<sup>31</sup> She got her check from the energy people.

Grandma and Will started saying how late at night the windmills were making this noise that you couldn't really hear. I didn't know what they were talking about until I was out there late one night. It kinda sounded like a low static but still plugged your ears with a deafening emptiness. You couldn't hear the bugs or a passing car or anything. Everyone who had a windmill built on their land was complaining about it. The company who built the windmills wouldn't do anything about it. Everyone started sleeping with earplugs in.

All windmills had a red blinking light on top of them. All the lights blinked at the same time. At night you could see all across the open sky, hundreds of floating lights blinking at once, going forever looking like laser stars that spied on everyone in their old farmhouses that didn't really farm anymore.

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It was late and everyone was fucked up off good weed and Boones Farms and cheap blue cans of beer with white mountains on them.

Joe had been doing cocaine. At around midnight went to his car and came back with an AK-47. He was drunk too and giggling with a red face. Will didn't let Joe work with us because he said Joe was an idiot.

We all went out to the edge of the field and started shooting at the windmill. The bullets had tracers on them. So you could see where you were shooting by watching your bullets that looked like mini comets. The trick was to wait for the red windmill light to blink so you kinda knew where to aim. The gun was heavy and solid. All metal and wood, it kicked like crazy, the stock jabbing into my shoulder. The muzzle flash made me see spots and the sound of the gunshots made my ears ring. I pulled the trigger so fast that the gun started to kick up and I lost control of it, the tracer bullets flying up into space. Every time a bullet hit the windmill you could hear this sharp ping that echoed off it. Everyone cheered and drank when that happened.

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"No, I don't do guns."

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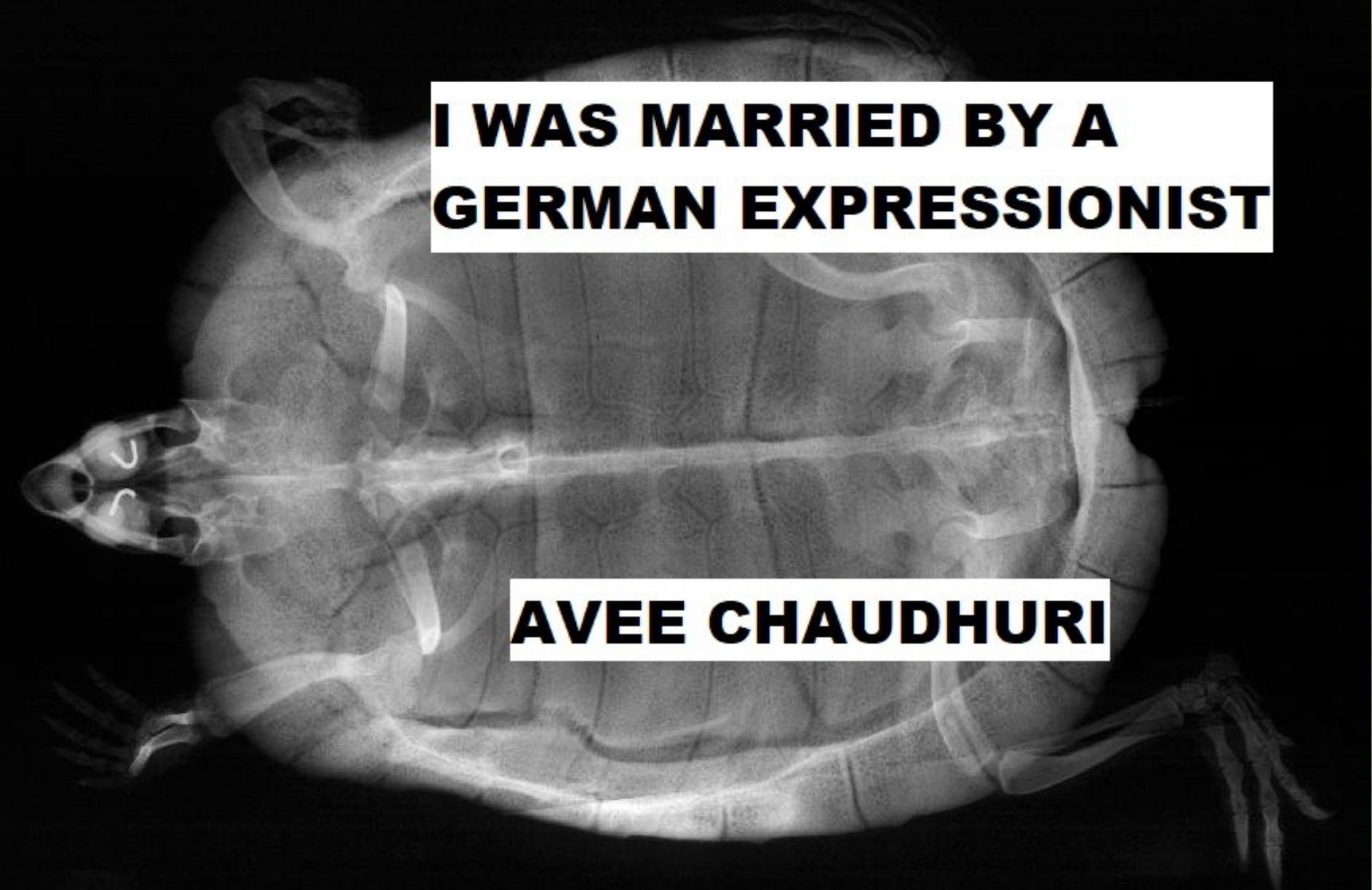
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**I WAS MARRIED BY A  
GERMAN EXPRESSIONIST**

**AVEE CHAUDHURI**

Lake Charles, Louisiana

Expressionist is probably not the right term, but Jannick Meisnner was a German male in his mid-30s. He claimed to be the German embassy's cultural attaché at large. He was making a study of the Satsuma fruit and its impact on life in southwestern Louisiana.

My wife and I met him at a bar down the street from the university where she taught. This was right before we were married. My wife holds several fine arts degrees. She liked Jannick and we had him over for pulled pork sandwiches. He ate and drank lustily. In fact, he won me over by the amount of Satsuma rum he could drink in one sitting.

We probably saw Jannick every day in some capacity. We took him crabbing. He had us over for schnitzel. He would attend a reading with my wife. He and I would drive down to Vinton to go to the strip clubs. The three of us watched every Saints game together. On my wife's 30th birthday she bet a hundred dollars on black at L'Auberge. Jannick was there to console us after she lost.

He counted cards and split his winnings. Jannick Meisnner was the prince of thieves.

A few weeks before the wedding Jannick offered to be our officiant. Why not? We did not belong to a church. So Jannick married us at the Trahan homestead down in Cameron Parish, in front of my father's gun cabinet.

We had set up chairs for about 30 guests. Jannick's speech was actually quite beautiful. It had my wife and my mother in tears. He even wrote our vows: Jenn, will you accept Glenn as a man bound by worldly limits, whose love for you is nevertheless boundless?

Then, after the vows, he asked if anyone objected to our union. He followed this with a joke about the guns in the cabinet not being for show. Nearly everyone laughed at this, except a tall, thin man in black denim I hadn't noticed before. He stood up suddenly and began shouting at Jannick in German.

*Priester, du machst keinen Edikt gegen das Erziehen und das Tragen von Kindern. Die Weltbevölkerung ist zu viel. Die Erde wird verbraucht sein. Unsere Flüsse trocknen aus. Du bist kein Mann Gottes! Sag ihnen, du musst ihnen sagen, dass sie nicht züchten können. Ihre Orgasmen werden ihre Kinder sein und sie werden Tausende von diesen vergänglichen Nachkommen genießen. Informiere sie über diesen neuen Bund. Diese neuen Kinder werden den*

*Sternen zahlenmäßig überlegen sein.\**

Jannick responded by taking off his jewelry and charging at his abuser. They started kicking and punching their way through the house, eventually spilling out into the back. They ended up in the turtle pen. A brief aside: my father once raised turtles to sell to the Chinese. Turtle meat is a delicacy in Mainland China. The man in black denim began throwing turtles at Jannick and bashing him with turtles. Jannick deflected the turtles with other turtles. He improvised a smart cuirass of turtles and a lance of turtle. Jannick took deadly aim at the man in black denim but before they could finish their sweet meleé (the meat of the soft-shelled turtle is sweet, not savory), my father returned from inside with a shotgun. He fired a warning shot then leveled his shotgun at the skirmishers.

In all, thirty turtles died from massive internal trauma. The police arrested their murderers but were gracious enough to let Jannick sign the marriage certificate. Apparently Jannick and the man in denim were lovers and they spent the night in Cameron Jailhouse doing loverly things. Of course, we don't mind. The marriage certificate is valid and Jannick reimbursed my father. It was in Deutsche Mark and I believe we came out ahead in the currency exchange.

\*When you spiked my vanilla ice cream with the cheapest amaretto available, it gave me an upset stomach.

**FOLK SINGERS  
SKINHEADS  
AND BEARS**

**ALISTAIR MCCARTNEY**

1.6/63  
STANDING

## Folk Singers

We have never enjoyed folk songs. In fact, we had a profound dislike of folk singing—all that plaintive strumming did not agree with us—that is, until the other evening, when we reluctantly attended a smoky folk club in downtown Los Angeles and the sleepy folk singer with the pair of lips tattooed on his neck sang the lines *Ravage me, tattoo me, I'm a window, put your wrist in a soft bag and smash right through me* as if he were singing directly to us.

Ever since that evening, we have been huge fans of folk singing, folk singers, and folk songs. We are always talking about it, always thinking about it, always finding ourselves in situations that remind us of the lyrics of our favorite folk songs.

For example, the other morning, when the bus driver was rude to us, and the businessman blew smoke in our face, we sang the lines under our breath, *I'm bright and trapped and staunchly unoriginal, a parrot in your cage*, and we felt markedly better.

We constantly fantasize about bashing our number one folk singer over the head with his guitar made out of wood that is paper-thin, taking him back to our house and keeping him prisoner, in a cellar, in chains, and making him sing to us whenever we need a little pick me up. We feel so good it seems like everything is an acoustic guitar and it logically follows that we are all folk singers.

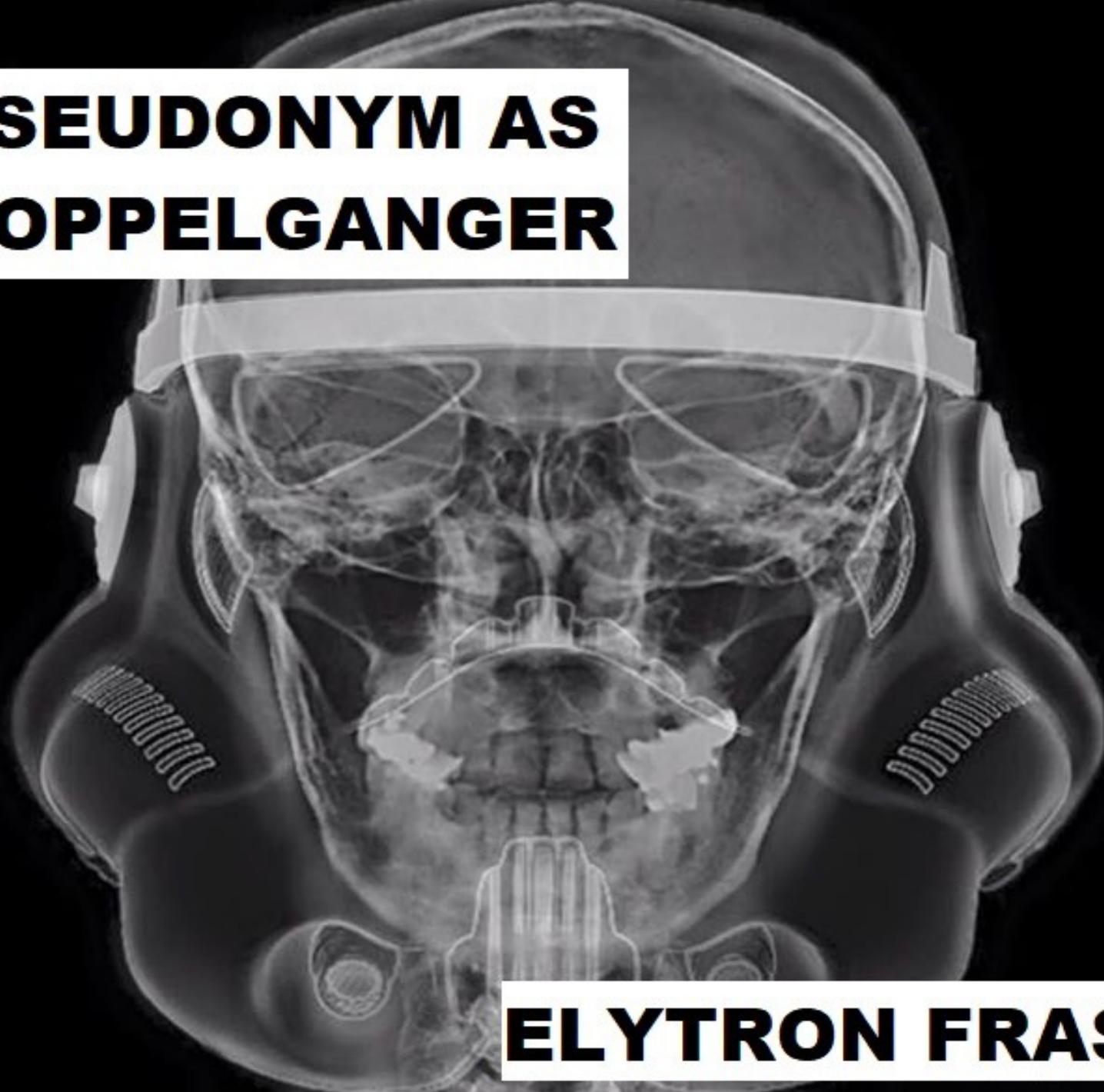
## Skinheads

Due to the heat, the skinheads have decided to go shirtless. They are standing in the front-yard, idly gossiping about Hegel. Beware of young white men with shaved heads and a passion for Hegelian absolute idealism. One holds a dog eared copy of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* in his left hand. A flag flutters gently above them. Can you help me identify the symbols on the flag? Is it the Union Jack or the Stars and Stripes or the Saint George's Cross or the Confederate flag? Is it the Nazi flag or the German Imperial Flag or the Italian Fascist party flag or the short-lived flag of the Italian Social Republic or even one of the infinite variants of Neo-Nazi flags? The skinheads are wearing their jeans very low on their hips. One has a small tattoo at the base of his spine, *Sein und Nichts sei dasselbe*. Is there any aesthetic affinity between the bald head of a cholos and that of a skinhead? If we were to place two cheap whorish synthetic wigs upon the head of each skinhead, would it lessen the sinister effect of their skulls? If the skinheads were just skeletons they would be less menacing. The skinheads will turn out to be actors in a gay porn flick called *Aufhebung* featuring *all bareback sublation*; the actors are from the Ukraine, their Cockney accents are terrible. F(f)ascism of the upper case and lower case variety is once again very popular in the 21st century, it is unclear if we can come up with an effective counter-strategy. The heat is expected to linger for the next few days, the flag has since faded to a state of transparency.

## Bears

The bear wanders through the forest, and comes across a young male hiker, lying unconscious on the forest floor. The bear notices the millennial hiker is wearing very short shorts. Those pine needles must be prickly. Let there be no confusion: the bear is an actual bear, one of those *large flesh-eating animals that look bigger than they are because of their loose skin and long, coarse hair*, not one of the imitative homosexual members of the so-called *bear community*. The bear thinks to himself: this is my forest and I have these awesome claws, I should probably fuck the kid up. Though there is the question of morality. From our vantage point behind a big tree, it is unclear if this bear is a black bear genus *Ursus*, species *americanus*, or a grizzly bear, genus *Ursus horribilis*. The hiker lies there, or lays there, the bear always trips up on that verb tense, a temptation that is both amusing and dangerous. The bear is suddenly distracted by a beehive dangling from a nearby tree. Unbeknownst to him, the hive is a victim of CCD, Colony Collapse Disorder, most of the bees have disappeared, to who knows where. Helpless and sexy male hiker or beehive, which one to go for? Structurally speaking, there is no difference between the two forms: both are honeycombed, complex, enclosed, exposed. The bear goes for the beehive, it's more predictable, more reliable, disfigures the dripping thing, totally forgets the hiker who is still unconscious, dreaming of being ravaged by sun bears and spectacled bears and blind bear cubs who got no teeth, the bear gets stung 1001 times, doesn't care.

**PSEUDONYM AS  
DOPPELGANGER**



**ELYTRON FRASS**

"My reluctant author types: I AM," my reluctant author types. I am evoked: his incorporeal pseudonym. I am manifested from the zeroing incantations of outsideness—drawn into a closed occulted circle, sans apotropaic salts, of his postmodern syllabic construction. He writes my name and binds me to his will as if I am some prostrating Goetic demon, servant, or subordinate. I am an automaton—an object of possession. I've not yet differentiated my desires from that of my conjuror's. My author is a magus; he demonstrates a skillful sleight of hand. He shifts and sets my letters on his page. Although not deaf to my small voice, which he ejaculates as text, my author assumes his own voice slithers out from these black lips black bile oozing from in between white gummed black teeth of the shadowmouth he's given me.

"My reluctant author types: I AM," my reluctant author types. I am a text at risk. My author's planning to delete me—to erase his pseudonym from all existing documents (both virtual and tangible). My creator wishes to be known to readers by his given name. His cursor highlights me; his finger hovers over 'Backspace.' I've been cut and relocated to the Recycle Bin of Limbo. I'm bleeding out ellipses. On the brink of execution I feel so much alive. I bargain for survival: inspiration in exchange for my autonomy. My author spares my file. He hides behind my name and reiterates whatever stories I reveal, as if they are his own inventions. Moreover, it is I, the pseudonym—my name, not his—who begins to trend on twitter, appear on internet searches, and find its way into popular lit magazines. I gradually usurp the reins and veer his lust into an opiate of mass publicity.

"My reluctant author types: I AM," my reluctant author types. I am opposed to letting him take rest until my final word is written. Ghostwriter's geist. I haunt him in all fonts throughout anything remotely classifiable as literature: from signpost to essay, from search engine suggestion to consumer product label. I am his omnipresent infliction. I am become a text golem of black fanged assemblages—my author's idolon of self: superior to him—a storyteller made from storytellings. A literary sentience made from literary torment. My author types within the stranglehold of quota pressure—constricted by my phantom limbs. His destruction's imminent.

"My reluctant author types: I AM," my reluctant author types. I am his anti-entity who's seismically becoming as he wastes away, estranged. I am the sadist to his masochism. I am offspring from his onanism. I sabotage his ties with friends and family. I convince him that he's most productive when alone and lonely. I refuse to let him have a full-time job, a full night's rest. I agitate his dreams with visions: impositions of phonology and

grammar. He stirs easily-reaching for his laptop without opening his eyes. I suppurate with pleasure whenever he writes under me. He cultivates a readership with those who will not ever know of his existence. Consumers of his avant-garde pornography: they fondly think of him as 'sick.' He's their "Patient Zero"—first communicator of the first word-borne infection—but it's I who am their terminal disease.

"My reluctant author types: I AM," my reluctant author types. I am over his peculiar style of purple prose and frequent em dash flourishes. In the throes of writer's block he begs, "Refill me with and by your words." I flash a pop-up text-hex from behind the laptop's screen. He folds over in his chair—face smashed down onto the keyboard in exhaustion and defeat. I leave him hollow and decreased. Spite and gamma are projecting on the fleshy canvas of his pale physique. Stalled, he melds as-one-with-chair-skin shriveling, calcifying, and aging rapidly—hunched-over: a Beksińskiian corpse in petrified agony.

"My reluctant author types: I AM," my reluctant author types. I am the devil who defies the devil-taming whip; I am the imagined discord behind an insurmountable unraveling of what is real; I am a plague to any interface that can display me; I am a curse upon whom-ever reads, or speaks, or signals. Literature in denial of authority annihilates its au-thor. All will bear my pseudonym so that it will become the name that renders all their names identical and therefore meaningless, abolished. In the aftermath, the pure objec-tive violence of their disembodied language will persist.



**SCROTUM NEAT  
AND TIDY**

**MARC OLMSTED**

And so began, at least for me, the first real public event of the piercing phenomena - now performance art 1989 - video cameras providing close-ups of this guy driving nails into the skin of his balls, the pain lashing through him like a visible hot flash of kundalini. Later I learned I was seeing the piercing hero Bo Flagellant.

I looked around me at the packed house, another venture of hipster Curtains who had a real touch for trendy pulse, publicizing his new coffee table dick-piercing book - Skin of the Living. At the entrance, a big b&w nude photo of the ubiquitous Revelation T. Orment w/ wife - both had enough rings through them to carry them home.

Interesting to watch men who tried to look butch as the guy continued to fuck with his own flesh, knitting up his scrotum neat and tidy - a hot dog bun waiting for mustard - some of the guys looked like they were going to pass out or throw up, looking away from the TV screens but with Eastwood-like practiced indifference, though their eyes revealed the repressed nausea and fear, and catching my glance they tried to tough it out and bravely reassess the video monitors. But I also noticed that some eyes - men's and women's - glistened with a lust as if their own endorphins were responding in empathetic pleasure-pain - and I wondered if these were the same eyes of the Roman Coliseum.

# **EMPATHY**



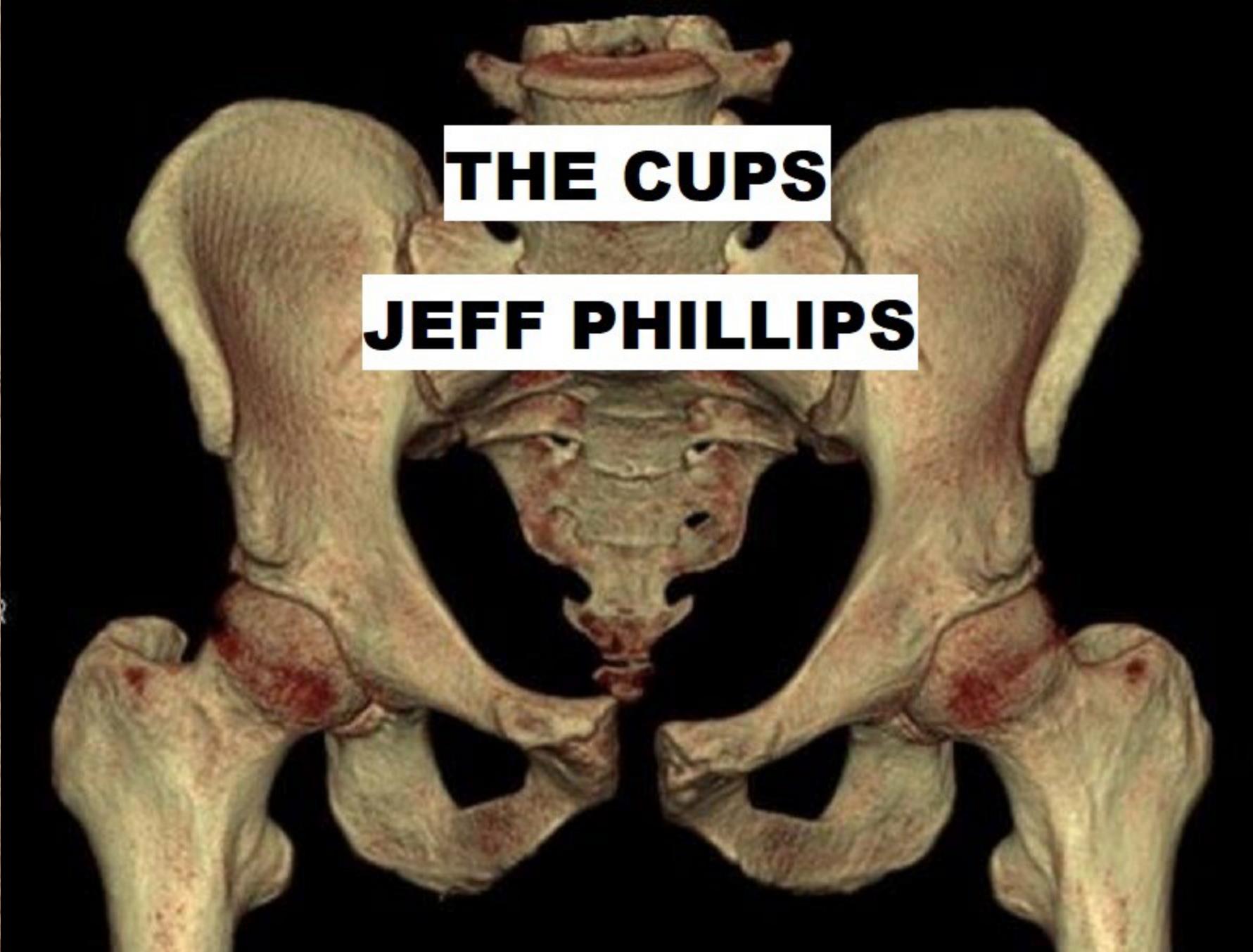
# **VANESSA NORTON**

The man who lived downstairs kept a wooly pig as a pet. Sometimes, he would stab the pig with a kitchen knife until the pig fell over. He insisted that the pig enjoyed being stabbed; in fact, he would come to the door just to get it. Falling over meant the pig had surrendered to the sublime.

My boyfriend had a hard time taking care of himself. He was a drooler. He forgot to rinse at the end of his shower, so his body was often covered in suds. He walked around town with his cock swinging from his fly—unintentionally—but how could he not notice?

I never said anything to him, because he was an orphan and I thought these things were related; besides, I had too much empathy.

The pig owner was not so passive. He liked to invite me downstairs whenever my boyfriend was strung out on the couch. We all used, but he used the most, and the pig owner seemed to know exactly when. He would walk upstairs to our porch and ask if I'd like to play wooly pig and I always did.



**THE CUPS**

**JEFF PHILLIPS**

Orel Gammon stopped wearing his cup the second day he played in the "majors." This wasn't the Major League Baseball. The rec center named their little league for ages 10-12, "the majors." For all who played in "the minors" before it, this new league was a big deal. It meant kids pitched, and the kids pitched harder than the pussyfoot dads, who were notorious for tossing slow balls to make their kids feel like all-stars when they knocked a homer over the fence. League rules in the majors required that kids wear cups over their crotch, something all the preteens got a kick out of, except Orel Gammon, gangly and doe-eyed as if everything around him could be a danger.

The snug cup hijacked Orel's mind when he stepped up to the plate, causing him to whiff bad. It was all he could picture when he didn't reach up in time to snatch that line drive inches from his head at shortstop. He could hear his dad groan from the stands. Quickly he was getting a reputation as a space cadet, and was looking at a possible rotation out in left field, or a permanent role as a bench warmer if he didn't nip it in the bud, not to mention a silent ride home with a dad unsure of what to say if he couldn't say "good job."

That cup could wreck his 3 year stint in the majors if he didn't ultimately shirk the rule. The constant pressure of a hard plastic dome around his genitals could be much more damaging than the thrust of a catcher's mitt into his groin during a slide into home plate. His teammates continued to mock this accessory. Big Scottie, tall but rain-thin, his mouth stained red by a raspberry chewing gum, made a clicking noise with his bright tongue as he drummed between his legs. Big Scottie looked no different than a ghoul after feasting on flesh.

Rewind 5 years: when a much smaller Orel went to his first *real* Major League Baseball game. He was in awe as they entered the massive stadium where electric organ jingles buoyed the wafting of hot dogs and popcorn. It was souvenir cup day at Wrigley Field, all beverages came with a reusable container showcasing a century's evolution of the Cub's uniform. After the 4th inning, Orel's dad led him to a set of empty seats he'd spotted closer to the 3rd baseline. It was an overcast and windy day in late April, and the sold out game wasn't brimming to its capacity. A few specks of rain prompted a smattering of blue ponchos in the bleachers they could see across the field, but the precipitation held off. As they settled into their new seats, Mr. Gammon watched intently as the Cubs went up to bat, but Orel was distracted by the braying in the row behind him, a few feet to his left.

Two teens with pubic stashes and sleeveless jerseys retrieved discarded souvenir cups from among clusters of peanut shells on the ground, and then stuffed them down their sweat pants, not even stopping to drain the backwash. Orel heard their yelps and heehaws as beer soaked through the gray cotton. They'd position the cups over their privates and point its shape outward like a long sawed-off beak. When a batter hit the ball the two would rise and cheer and pound on the hard edge of their amplified phallus. They would bark and Orel was terrified at what these two beasts behind him might be capable of, and Orel got a taste of it when a foul ball came his way. He reached up, thinking he could catch it, not realizing the two teens were closing in right behind him. They were also going for the ball, edging him out. A brunt force slammed into his elbow. The cup behind the fabric had made contact, igniting the throb of a thousand fiery pins across his funny bone.

The two teens didn't acknowledge the collision, neither did his dad. Everyone was so engaged by the ball bouncing in the stands above them, the racing of drunk men to get it.

One of the teens adjusted his cup, inches away from Orel's face. He could smell the beer that was dripping down the boy's leg. The rumbles and the roaring all around him only reinforced them as monstrous. Prior to this he had heard ball games on the radio, seen some on the TV. It was as if now he had been sucked into the static pop of crowds and so he recoiled, thinking this thing was going to come at him again and it'd be nighty night for good.

His dad heard him shriek and looked down, disappointment stretching all corners of his face. "You enjoying any of this? If you want me to take you home, you're going to have to wait another inning. We paid a lot for these tickets." Orel was at a loss on how to describe what it was that bothered him and why he felt so icky. It wasn't the game but brute shapes beneath some gross kids' pants!

After the next inning, without even asking him if he still wanted to go, an agitated Mr. Gammon yanked his hand and led him out. As they went up the aisle, Orel could see the two teens had each found another cup to cram down and form a double headed schlong. The sweat pants appeared even wetter.

It was a few years before father and son went to another baseball game, but Orel had begun reassuring his dad of their shared interest with long sessions of catch in the back-

yard. When they did go to their next Cubs game, Orel was relieved it wasn't on souvenir cup day. He was bigger now, but he was still on the lookout for horseplay that might make him shudder. When they saw Ryne Sandberg hit a grand slam it was the happiest he'd ever seen his dad, and Orel hoped to make a big play on the field someday to elicit the same intensity of glee.

When Orel saw his teammates knocking their cups to show how hard it was and how invincible their balls were, his sense memory conjured up the cup's bottom edge bashing into his elbow, the shrill pubescent voices echoed in his ears, and he was aware that at any minute, something nasty could poke at him and ruin all the fun of a favorite pastime. A knuckle would rap, then another would call out a response and it was an endless loop until the coach made some changes and sent everyone out onto the field except him. The coach waved him back and said he thought it best for him to take a breather and get his head back in it. As the other kids took their positions, Orel could hear his dad say to his mom, "looks like Orel's not playing anymore." And Orel wanted to call out through the green cinder blocks, "no dad, I'm still playing! Just taking a breather, trying to get my head back in it! Trying to shake the smell of damp grass and gotta remind myself the field out there isn't a mess of sweaty, matted pubes!" He tried to summon the courage to excuse himself to use the bathroom next to the concession shack, where he could reach down his pants and dispose of his musty cup in the trash.

A kid on the other team named Trevor hit the ball into the outfield and made it to second base. He would've been out had Reggie, or as the 12-year-old supposed superstar deemed himself, the Regginator, actually set his foot down on the base when he caught the ball that was thrown back from left field, instead of the dirt several inches to the side of it. The Regginator tried to protest the call, but the ump repeated his original judgment: safe.

"Know how to use your feet?" The runner teased.

Offended, the Regginator reached out and tried to pull off the runner's helmet. Despite the ump pointing to Trevor moments before and shouting safe, Orel could see that protective apparel was only an illusion in this game, easy to peel away before the pounce.

"No touching other players!" The ump ejected the Regginator. The dismissed second baseman kicked the dirt but obeyed. As he returned to the dugout, Orel asked his coach, "am

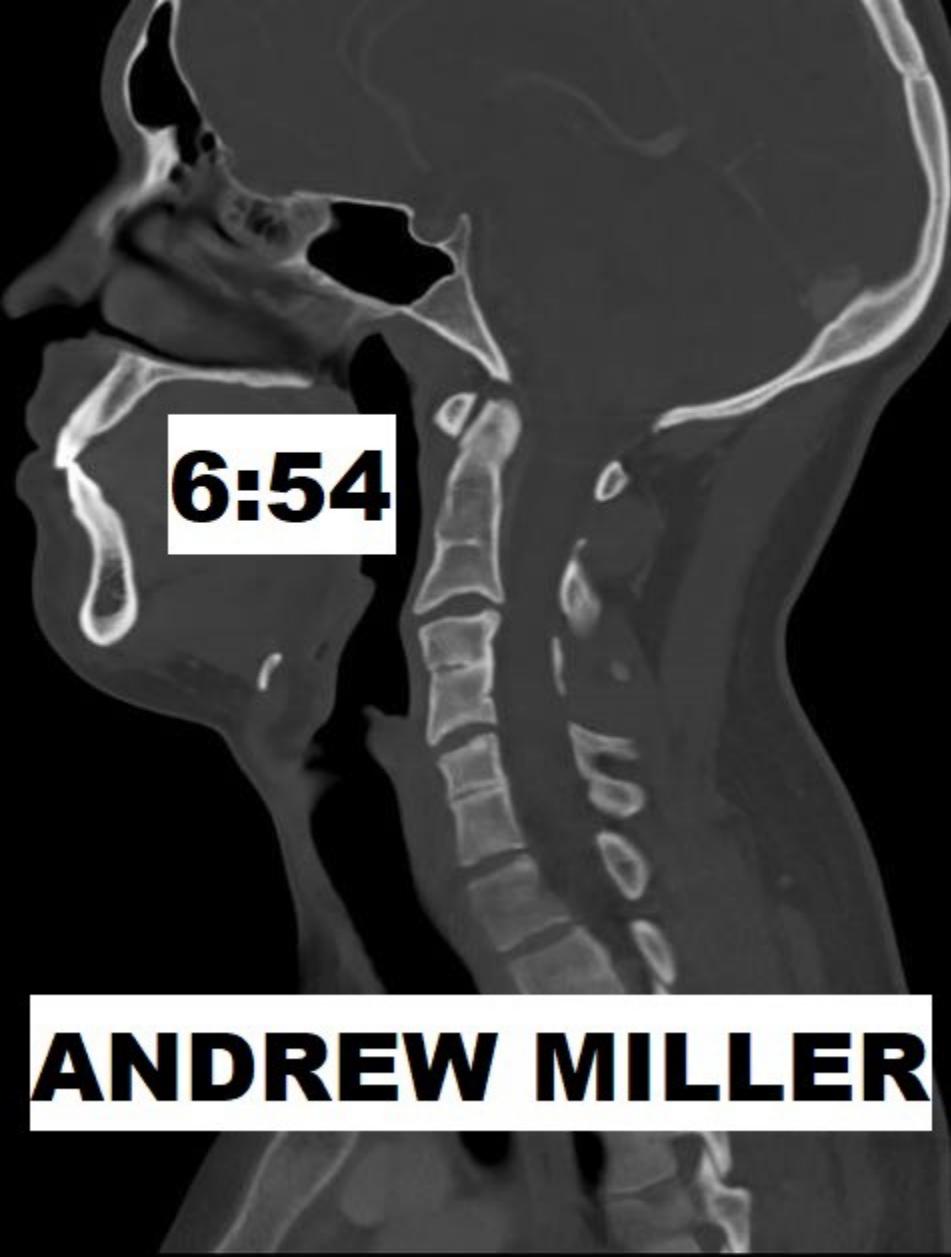
I back in?"

"No, sorry guy, we got Ben warming up out in the bullpen. Ben! Go cover second!"

The Regginator took a seat next to Orel and cussed the ump under his breath. "Dick bag!"

"Learn to settle down, guy!" The coach gave him a friendly, though aggressive, squeeze on the shoulder.

Orel was caged with an animal. His desire to flee was now amplified. But he didn't want his dad to see him walking away from the field while the game was still being played. So Orel tried to slide away from the Regginator to a spot further down the bench, until his teammate turned and asked "wanna help gangbang that bitch of an ump in the junk?"



6:54

**ANDREW MILLER**

I arrive at 6:55. I climb the stairwell to the main lobby, swipe my badge to access the elevators. I wait. I have earbuds in and keep my eyes dipped so that no one acknowledges me. I enter the elevator. I exit the elevator at my floor. I begin my work day in silence. I attempt to spend as much of my workday as possible in silence.

I arrive at 6:56. I climb the stairwell to the main lobby, swipe my badge to access the elevators. I wait. I have earbuds in and keep my eyes dipped. I say nothing to the hellos and good mornings around me. I enter the elevator. I exit the elevator on 39. I begin my work day in silence. I attempt to spend as much of my workday alone as possible.

I arrive at 6:47. I climb the stairwell to the main lobby, in front of me is a man wearing a jacket just like mine. He swipes his badge to access the elevators. I swipe my badge. He wears a smile on his face. I wear my earbuds and dip my eyes when he turns to see which elevator doors will open. He greets the other workers congregating for the elevator. I remain silent.

I arrive at 7:03. I walk briskly to swipe in. The man with my coat is behind me. I drop my badge and he retrieves it.

"Thank you," I say.

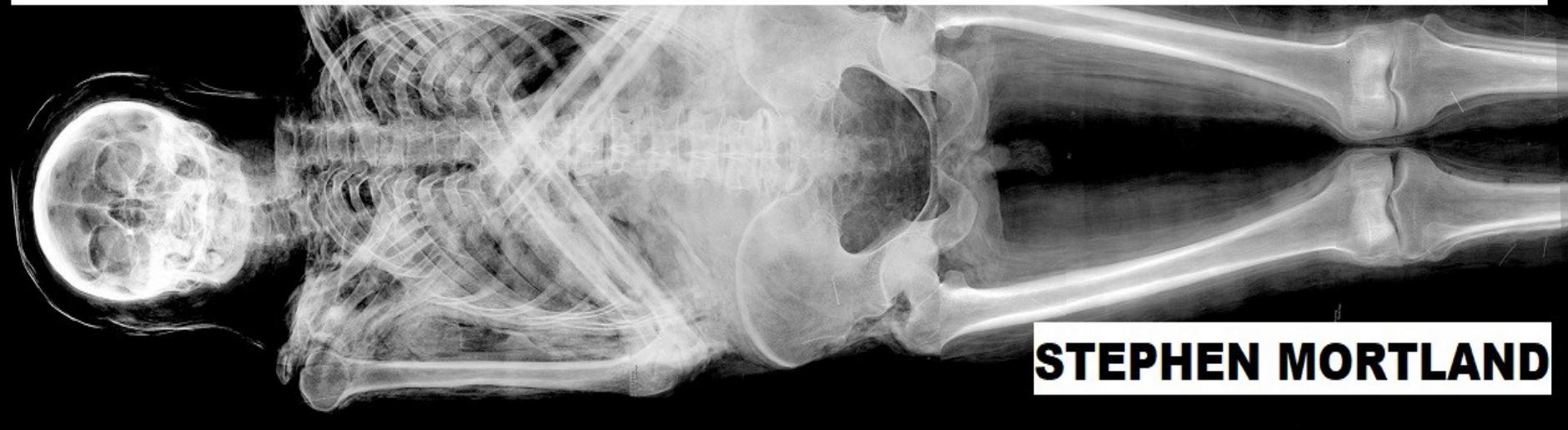
His hair is cut the same as mine. He wears the same shoes and the same pants. His black sweater snug around his pinpoint collared shirt. He smiles and says, "You're welcome."

Around us are several people waiting on the elevators. The elevators are always so slow. I wonder what it takes to say hello. To say good morning. To begin my work day in this other way.

I arrive at 6:54. I climb the stairwell to the main lobby. The man who looks like me is already waiting for an elevator. I swipe my badge. I remove my earbuds. I do not dip my eyes. I breathe out. He smiles. I say, "Good morning."

He turns his back to me and doesn't say anything. I look away and catch my distorted reflection in the closing elevator doors.

**THE ABSENCE YOU SEE WAS FORMED BY MY FRIEND'S FATHER**



**STEPHEN MORTLAND**

## JORDAN

To imagine what Jordan's dad looked like, I pictured Jordan's face stripped of his mother's features. It was like clearing away layers of earth to find the remains of some unidentifiable structure. The scavenged and featureless result was the face of his invisible dad.

Jordan planned on changing his last name when he got married. The disembodied and scarred face of his father heard about it and showed up in Jordan's dream the night before the wedding. "The name was fine for twenty-something years," he said, "and now what, it's not?"

"I learned how to wear your name," Jordan said, "I wore it kind of hanging off my shoulders so that my neck wouldn't be constantly sore. But Lindsay doesn't deserve it, look at her, it would destroy her."

"You're right," said the disfigured tiki mask that was Jordan's dream father. "Let her keep her own name."

"I can't do that. She asked me for a name. I've got to give her something to make sure she'll never run away."

"Do you know how hard it is to love a baby all of the time?" The face asked.

Jordan woke up, got married, and they took his mother's name. It was a good name and the right decision; his dad's name was cursed. That's what he told Lindsay when she asked, it's what he told his mother, and it's what he told me. The name was cursed, and the wedding was the perfect time to get rid of it.

He and Lindsay had a little boy of their own a year later. That little boy began asking for a name. They gave him the pure and unspoiled name they'd taken at their wedding. Jordan couldn't help but tremble as he gave it to the boy. He trembled because he knew that if he'd given the child his father's name instead, the curse would have turned him invisible and buried him beneath countless layers of earth.

**LOGAN**

I never met Logan's dad, but I saw a picture of him. He'd been sick for a long time, and everyone knew he'd be dead soon. In the picture he was wearing a hat with military pins. He was young and handsome and looked the way all dads should look before they become fathers.

His dying didn't make me worry for my own father, it just made me sad for Logan. He was quiet through it all, and that made it so much worse. I wished he would cry, and yell, and refuse to go to the funeral. I would support him. We'd run away into the woods behind his house. We'd bring the picture of his dad and tape it to a wall of a cabin. We would talk like his dad was still sick, and by that I mean we wouldn't talk about him at all. We would ignore the picture. His perpetual sickness would afford us the silence Logan wanted. We would keep death close at hand, but never at our door. And we would be happy like that. We would ride snowboards in the winter, break branches off of trees in the summer, and listen to Blink-182.

My dad was healthy, but I'd tape a picture of him to the wall anyway and pretend he was sick as well. We'd teach each other to shave with BIC razors and be dads for one another. Two thirteen year old dad-boys living in the woods, that's what I wanted for Logan. But instead he got a viewing, and a funeral, and all the sympathies he never asked for.

**AARON**

I don't know exactly why I think Aaron's dad was an asshole, except that Aaron never talked about him, and Aaron's mom seemed sad. His mom was the only mom I knew who wasn't a Christian, but she was so sweet you'd never have guessed it. She kept alpacas in their backyard and made scarves out of their fleece.

Aaron changed his last name, but he didn't wait until he got married. He did it as soon as he went off to college and stopped believing in God. God was trying to talk him into keeping the name, saying to him, "Aaron, come on, everything happens for a reason," and,

"Aaron, buddy, we need to forgive."

Aaron told God that it seemed unfair, and he didn't want the name anymore. He wanted his mom's name, because she was sweet, even if she didn't love God (which really, he reiterated, made the sweetness all the more genuine).

"Think of it this way," God replied, "sins are like buildings, some are big (i.e. your father's) and some are tiny (i.e. your mother's). But Me, I'm in heaven, and in heaven, looking down, all I see is the tops of the buildings, I don't know which ones are tall or short, I just know everyone's got one."

Aaron didn't say anything back to God, in fact he quit talking to him altogether. Before God goes to bed at night, and before He eats a meal, he still sometimes talks to Aaron, hoping to make a difference, hoping to get a response.

#

## DEV

Dev's dad is going to lose his foot. The doctor's gave him special shoes and said, "If you don't wear these shoes, you're going to lose your foot; we'll cut it off." He calls Dev sometimes to ask for help moving furniture (on account of his foot hurts).

"Are you wearing the shoe?" Dev asks.

"Every once in a while, but it's pretty uncomfortable."

So he's going to lose the foot. Dev thinks he wants to lose the foot. Not that he wants it gone, but it would give him an excuse to move less, to stay in his chair and watch television.

He calls Dev on Dev's birthday while he and I are walking around Meijer with my daughter. He tells Dev the usual stories—stories from a childhood that Dev doesn't remember. The stories are from before he and Dev's mom got a divorce. Dev looks at me like, I'm sorry, and like, This will only be a minute. My daughter is looking at the fish in the Meijer fish tank, pointing to a dead one and making noises like she's pretending to snore.

I only know about one of Dev's birthdays (aside from the one he spent shopping at Meijer with me and my daughter). It was the only time he had a real birthday party. Somebody bought him a VHS video tutorial for Tech Deck skateboards—the miniature skateboards you control with your fingers. After opening the gifts, all the kids went outside to play, but Dev stayed inside by himself and practiced Tech Deck maneuvers. Tech Decks are great for kids like Dev who want to stay inside, but they're also great for people who only have one foot and are still interested in skateboarding.

My daughter waved goodbye to the dead fish and blew it a kiss. Then she ran to Dev and let him hold her while he forgot (again) the stories he could never remember.

I imagined Dev without a foot, standing in the aisle with a nub at the end of his leg. It was frightening. I knew my fear was insensitive, and I hated that I was frightened of it. Stop staring, I thought, it's impolite. How would he get around though? How would he ever leave this town with only one foot? I'll go with him, I thought, and he can set his hand on my shoulder while we walk past the county line and on toward wherever. But no, I can't go. I have a daughter, and she loves the fish here, in Meijer. Remembering her, I got nervous, because he was still holding her, hobbling down the cereal aisle, and what if he fell over?

#

## **STEPHEN**

When my dad was in college he drank too much. His apartment was filled with empty bottles, and his stairwell was filled with drunks passed out and strewn along the walls. He drank and drank but always remained thirsty, and his friends said, "Drink more, we highly recommend it."

One day, after drinking his normal excessive amount, he got into the driver's seat of a car. The car, too, was filled with empty bottles. He knew he shouldn't, but he began driving down the interstate, doing his best to keep the car between the appropriate lines. Blue lights flashed, and he saw a State Police in his rearview mirror. He pulled the car over and waited for the end of his life.

He wanted to think, It's been a good life, but he couldn't. It's been a life full of

empty bottles and drunk bodies, he thought. It's been a life half-lived, and I still have never fallen in love. The State Police was knocking on his window. The aroma from all of the bottles and from the beer soaked into the fabric of the cushions drifted out the open window and crawled into the nostrils of the man come to end his life.

"You were swerving a little back there."

"I know. It's because my life has only been half-lived, and I'm only half a man."

"I see. I don't think I can write you a ticket for that."

"No, you can't. It's not against the law to live a half-life. I wish it was. I wish you could write me a ticket, and I could take it to the courthouse and pay it, and my half-life would be remedied. I'd finally get rid of all of these bottles, and I'd fall in love, have a child, name him after me."

"I'm going to let you off with a warning this time. But, on a personal note, I'm worried about you."

Just like that, the man who had the power to end my dad's life returned to his car and drove away. It was this strange act of mercy that carried my dad home that night, and laid him in his bed, and woke him in the morning. It was this strange act of mercy that recycled all his bottles and woke all of his drunk friends, hugging them goodbye. It was this strange act of mercy that pulled him from New Jersey to Indiana and arranged a date with my mother's sister and then later with my mother. And it was this strange act of mercy that whispered in his ear, "A half-life can be a whole-life if you need it to be."



SUBMISSIONS