

The Opiate
Fall 2017, Vol. 11



The Opiate

Your literary dose.

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Cover art: Georges Arnauld de Ronsil (1698-1774), *Dissertation sur les hermaphrodites*, 1750

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Dedicated to anyone who has ever felt caught betwixt the concept of male and female

“It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. ... Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated.”

-Virginia Woolf

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Editor's Note

Gender, evermore the hotbed issue as we progress through this bizarre entity called the twenty-first century, it has been said, is an illusion. And yet, for something that supposedly doesn't exist, it sure has a tendency to fuck with all our heads on a daily basis. What does it mean for those still too old school—too trapped in the straightforwardness of the 50s—to bandy the term "gender fluid"? Judging from the generally outraged reaction that comes from using so much as a false pronoun, it means anyone still claiming to be purely "male" or "female" ought to lock themselves inside and throw away the key. There's no place for you in this new era of Kaleidoscopic Genitalia.

Then again, what man or woman hasn't had to embody so-called stereotypical characteristics of the other gender in order to get by in this world? The single mother forced to play the nurturer and the breadwinner, or vice versa, the father shoved into the domestic role, a "twist" that has served as the basis for many an 80s/90s TV or film plot (e.g. *Full House*, *Three Men and A Baby*, *Mr. Mom*). In this regard, gender isn't so much an illusion as it is interchangeable within a single person to serve a specific cause in the moment of necessity.

Sometimes, however, biology usurps what we feel is necessity, as is the case in Erin Smith's "The Yellow Wrapper," a coming-of-age tale about a preteen named Annika who lives in perpetual shame over recently contracting her period—that lifelong disease that no woman can get rid of until she's day old bread and can't even delight in a bleed-free existence without having to acknowledge that she's now bereft of any semblance of youth. This very distinct symptom of being female speaks to the fact that to attempt to dismiss gender as a concept rather than a congenital fact of embryology is naive at worst and utopian at best.

The third conversation from Anton Bonnici's almost feminazi (it is, after all, based on the philosophy of Valerie Solanas) *Some Stupid Bitch Killed Ana Peaceful* also brings gender into the equation. A chess game between Lor, a woman with a penis (again, the cover of this issue just continues to be relevant), and her occasional girlfriend Zina, leads to a heated argument in which Lor proclaims, "I'm a woman born with a dick for fuck's sake. Can you fuckin imagine what school was like for me? When the other girls were getting their periods I was getting my boners." So yes, there it is again, this "problem" of gender and how it's constantly driving us all batshit crazy, most especially when we place all of our expectations on benefitting from the cliché responsibilities of a woman or a man (hence, in the latter's case, the presence of the criticism "Prince Charming Was A Foot Fetishist [& Other Dark Truths About Prince Charming]).

Our continued serialized publication of Leanne Grabel's originally illustrated *Brontosaurus*, which details in an almost tongue-in-cheek children's book fashion, the events leading up to a rape is another testament to the confines of gender. For rape is something that, yes, truth be told, only a man can commit. So here we go again, gender always playing into things, whether we want it to or not. In sexual violation's case, it's as Joyce McKinney once said: trying to rape a man is like "shoving a marshmallow into a parking meter." It just can't be done.

But not everything in *The Opiate Vol. 11* is so gender-focused. We've also got stories of alienation

(Mary Di Lucia's "Untranslatable" and "Gena"), displacement and identity mishap (Salvatore Difalco's "Minotaur"), nomadism (Armando Carlo-Gonzalez's "Bivouac"), personification (Tim Conley's "Her Feet"), Ponzi scheme strategy (David Z. Morris' "Pyramid") and, shall we say, employee dissatisfaction (Lisa Attanasio's "The News About Edward").

Our particularly robust poetry section begins with Kathryn Chan's "Lyndsay and Paris" (no, it's not about Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton), somewhat falsely assuring, "There is always Paris—or rather—there is always negative space between you and the rest." Her second poem, "Dear John," touches on the disappointment that comes with the notion of being "romantic," expecting porcelain and getting plastic, as she so eloquently puts it. Following is Kenneth Kesner's "Saut de Chat" and "still somehow," each brief poem poignantly cutting to the quick of a deeper truth about humanity.

Jacklyn Janeksela's "Fuck Your Church" makes no bones about "worshipping" in a new era, one that allows us to wave "goodbye to frightened energies we have carried inside our bodies." A difficult feat as you might imagine, considering the global political climate.

Andrew Fenstermaker's all too relevant, gun-centric poem, "The Silence We Have Driven From Our World" speaks to the lust so many have for this mechanism of death, and all because of the collective that "spits revenge," regardless of whether this means homicide or suicide.

The apocalyptic vibe persists with "The Last Lust" by Colin Dodds, addressing the pertinent American lusts for "the destruction of the world" and "eat(ing) fried chicken." Craig Bruce McVay's "Into the River" and "Use Nouns and Verbs" both acknowledge the general over itness that comes when one can finally enjoy the luxury of knocking on death's door and therefore ceasing to give a fuck about names, memories and certain established rules and regulations.

Timothy Robbins' "Lavatory" (yes, I've also published a poem called "Toilet" in the past, but I'm not anally obsessed, *je te promets*) infers that there is beauty in unlikely sources, even, occasionally, loneliness. Natalie Crick's "Shadows at Night," too, offers a particular stance on the pangs of longing, and the immutability of time.

The political bent of S.A. Gerber's fittingly titled "Commentary" ruminates on the current "barometer for personal morals," which appear to be at an all-time low. That being said, who could possibly want sobriety? No one, as is made clear by the Michael Marrotti poems "The Second Day" and "Sobriety."

David Barnes' volatily titled "Molotov" is an almost impressionistic portrait of the "enforced boredom" that is supposed to serve as our modern opiate of the masses, proving that the only card that seems to keep coming up in the metaphorical tarot deck of life is the Con Man.

"Fall" by Amy Barry is another succinct reflection on a perpetual feeling of desolation looming. Kinga Fabó's series of six poems, "Amants," "Androgène," "Anesthésie," "Je ne suis pas une ville," "Le parfum de Süskind" and "Poison" prove that *The Opiate* has no respect for people

who don't speak French.

On that note, thanks to Malik's gift for networking and courage/ability to live in Europe (I tried and failed thanks to my love of luxury beauty services—sure, they're available, but they're not half as good or cheap as in Amérique—and an insatiable need to be able to see a new movie release in theaters right when it comes out), our network of international writers just keeps expanding, spreading the literary revolution of *The Opiate* ever further.

Like to Paris-based Bruce Edward Sherfield, whose trifecta, "The Decent Things to Do," "The Creator" and "Failure looks a lot like Father," combine together to create just the right delightful amount of snark. The wonderful weirdness lingers with Edward Bell's "Stacey," repeatedly begging some form of the question, "Stacey, can you please come into my office?" The poem also pays homage to the number one proponent of marrying the opposites herself: Virginia Woolf.

Paul Harden's short and sweet "Today" deftly condemns the political arena and complacency of today, while the subsequent "Active Acting Anarchist" by Nina Živančević elaborates on the theme of "neoliberal madness." The pain of existence, indeed, does somehow feel more palpable than ever (but then, maybe that's because the internet didn't exist in previous times of crisis). Thus, Khalil Anthony's "Fight" queries, "...doesn't pain, the lingering of it, help you to a certain extent? to remember." In a world of lily-livered instant gratification lovers, pain is avoided rather than respected for the strength it can give.

The "Epitaph" to our poetry section is Steve Dalachinsky's poem of the same name, proffering the Coco Chanel sanctioned aphorism that you can always choose what you want to be and then become it (for example, I am the last artist in Brooklyn, where everyone else is just an "artist." Sorry, the shade throwing within in me is like Tourette's).

Finally, I would just like to add that, apart from the first issue of the magazine, this is by far the most burgeoning, pagewise. So cozy up with your spiked cider or, for you more Mormon types, hot chocolate and prepare yourself to let the complexities and intricacies of *Vol. 11* set your synapses ablaze.

As usual, if you would like to submit, please send your work to theopiatemagazine@gmail.com. And try to remember that there is no money in art unless you managed to rise to fame in the 80s or sell something grotesquely commercial to a publisher. Yes, I'm talking to you, Emma Cline.

Xs, Os and sincerity from your increasingly debt-ridden Editor-in-Chief,

Genna Riviaccio

FICTION

Minotaur

Salvatore Difulco



THE BUS

I could smell exhaust fumes. I wasn't fully awake. My estranged wife Carolina had knitted the burgundy mohair sweater I was wearing, before she started hating me, but I had no memory of putting it on. I rubbed my face. A glimpse of my hands made me start. My fingers looked swollen and inflamed, fingernails discoloured. I performed violent jazz hands, hoping to restore circulation. But this was painful.

People on the bus looked like animals bearing reproachful burdens. A commensurate odour prevailed. Life in the city can be hard. Yet I felt little empathy for them, my fellow beasts. We had failed. We had all failed. What was left for us to do but despair, moving from foot to foot, or hoof to hoof, like doomed livestock?

The bus driver leaned to his open side window and blew snot from his nose in a silvery mucous-jet.

He turned and caught my eye. Blue-tinged steel-wool sideburns coiled from under his ill-fitting navy driver's cap. The black holes of his nostrils yawned, small black eyes peeping out above them, like their satellites.

A man beside me, who bore a resemblance to a fine English horse, lifted and lowered his chin, fluttering his lips. I held the stanchion, white-knuckled; an unpleasant disequilibrium threatened to topple me whenever the bus swerved or jerked to a sudden stop.

"You don't look well," said a woman wearing red plastic, gripping the same stanchion, in a falsetto rivaling that of Johnny, Señor Wences' talking hand. Her arm seemed unattached to her small, round body. I tried not to think about it too much.

"I slept poorly," I said.

A whiff of salami breath made me turn my head and face the window. Clouds darkened the world outside. Perhaps a great storm was moving in, a monsoon, to cleanse the city.

"I know who you are," said the woman in my ear.

My ear tingled. A man seated below the window, missing a third or so of the facial surface area typical for a head of his size, smiled. I could not imagine what accidents or procedures had led to this, so I averted his gaze and stared at an advertisement adjacent to him for a *Phantom of the Opera* production scheduled to open that autumn.

The intrusive woman had shoved beside me and tucked her small head under my arm, extended to grip the stanchion to my right. The man with the scant face raised his eyebrows. This reaction made me feel a kinship with him that, in retrospect, amounted to nothing, but at that moment bolstered me: no matter what the woman said, I would keep cool.

"I know where you're going," she said.

Sometimes with people like this, it's best to just go along.

"So tell me," I said.

"I know," she said, drawing her hands to her breasts. Her hands, covered with fine dark hairs, rubbed each other. "I'm invited to the same party."

I tried to piece all this together with zero success.

"I'm a friend of Nessus—you know. We met at his summer shindig. I came as Ariadne." She framed her face with her hands and curtsied. "You were going on about *Sleeping Ariadne*," she added, "reclining after a delirious orgy, radiating in the glow of apotheosis."

I stared at her, waiting for the break in character, the telling laugh, but it never came. This was a case of mistaken identity, or a delusion

carried forth from some other scenario, and from other characters, unrelated to me.

"What's my name?" I asked.

"At the party you said your name was Minos, but I know that's not your real name."

The man with the unusual face raised his eyebrows again. What I perceived as an expression of empathy, if not sympathy, turned out to be one of urgency.

"My stop," he announced as the bus slowed. He hopped to his feet and exited without touching a single person or thing.

"Tonight you're coming as a Minotaur," the woman said.

"Say again?"

"You said you were coming to the next party as a Minotaur."

This had gone far enough. I broke away from her and squeezed to the front doors. Someone or something violently lunged behind me as I shoved through, but I ignored it. Looking behind you pays no dividends, neither in horror films nor in life. The driver swung his face around, his nose with all its blackened pores stopping an inch from mine.

"What're you think you're doing, mate?"

"I want out."

He pointed to a large laminated sign above him that read:

EXIT BACK DOORS ONLY.

He bared his teeth, which could have been wooden dentures judging from their hue and grain, and glanced backwards.

"Get going," he chortled.

"I'm going," I said.

Faced with the atavistic energy of the riders, I thought of a ruse. Rather than shoving through

them to the back of the bus, I remained at the front but ducked behind a man with the breadth of a silverback gorilla, obscuring myself to the driver, who intermittently checked his rear-view. The goliath serving as my shield could have played professional football in the United States or wrestled professionally, I'm convinced.

When the bus came to a stop, I waited for the driver to open the doors, front and back, since people stood waiting at the stop, and bolted for the front door before anyone made a move. The driver roared curses behind me, taking the matter too personally perhaps, a mistake if you ask me, but I moved swiftly, as I can when I must.

ESPRESSO

Thought I knew the city. Used to work as a bicycle courier and thought I knew every inch of it. Clearly not. It was upscale, this neighbourhood: high-end fashion, gourmet foods, designer kitchen supplies, extortionate furniture. Chi chi cafes and tony eateries glittered uninvitingly. I entered a zinc-encrusted espresso bar and took an aluminum stool at the gleaming counter. I was the only customer. The barista, back to me, ponytail shaking as he worked, must not have heard me enter. I could see him, bearded, serious, black plaid vest impressive, in the mirrors behind the bar, but his downcast eyes and furrowed brow indicated complete focus on the task at hand.

I cleared my throat, more loudly than I'd intended, startling the barista, who whirled around holding in his hands some kind of metallic

sculpture or icon.

“It’s you,” he said. “I’ve been waiting.”

Before I could say anything, the barista raised his hand.

“Existence is bizarre,” he

pays the rent. Correct?”

“They said you’d be feisty.”

“*They?* Tell me what’s going on before I—”

“Before you what?” interrupted the barista. He placed

century.”

“Seriously,” I said, “where am I? Got off the bus a few stops early. They must’ve redeveloped this whole neighbourhood, it all looks new to me.”

“Life in the city can be hard. Yet I felt little empathy for them, my fellow beasts. We had failed. We had all failed.”

said. “Consciousness contradicts reality, undermines it.”

“When you finish polishing your toy—a double espresso, and tell me where I am.”

“Apotheosis requires encounters,” he said, smiling. He rested the statuette—a horned animal or hybrid creature, in brass—on the counter, and turned to the espresso machine. “We’re in the Seventh Circle of Hell,” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

“Practicing your stand-up? Love good stand-up. This gig just

a demitasse filled with thick black coffee at my elbow. Steam rose from it. “Sugar?” he asked.

Of course, sugar. He placed a chrome sugar bowl beside my cup. I stirred in two teaspoons and tasted. Not bad.

Resting his elbows on the counter, the barista opened his hands and settled his chin on them. “I know,” he sighed. “We get the coffee from a family-run operation out of Naples who’ve been roasting their own organically grown and specially blended beans for more than a

“He’s my talisman,” the barista said, nodding to the statuette, “traditional symbol of the unconquerable force of ego, haha.”

“I need to be...” I stopped myself and glanced at my wristwatch. Almost eleven.

“You were saying?”

“None of your business,” I said, when in reality I’d forgotten where I was going, drawing a blank. I racked my brain, but nothing came. A sense of panic washed over me, buzzy, cold.

“What’s the matter?” asked

the barista.

“Where did you say we were?”

“This is a Minotaur,” he said, holding it under my nose.

Buffed to a rich shine, it exuded a faintly coppery smell. All told an impressive property. It could have easily crushed my skull with a violent blow. The barista tossed the statuette from hand to hand, a manoeuvre that looked reckless to me.

“Do you know what a Minotaur is?” he asked.

“I don’t fucking care.”

The barista smiled. “Picasso did some splendid Minotaurs. Do you know Picasso?”

“What do you mean? I know of him. I know his art. Whatever.”

“I want you to do something for me. If you do, I’ll tell you exactly where we are.”

He abruptly disappeared into the back. I examined the statuette. A bull-headed bipedal creature. I recalled reading about the Minotaur in high school mythology, but if someone had held a gun to my head I wouldn’t have been able to shorthand whatever myth it appears in, or explain any socio-historical or symbolic associations. How did it become part of my day, a day when I was scheduled to sign my divorce papers? Ah-ha! I thought. I was headed to the lawyer’s office to sign my divorce papers! Carolina and I had been separated for five years. So I wasn’t demonstrating signs of early onset dementia. But damn, I’d missed the appointment. Carolina would see this as a deliberate attempt to forestall the inevitable—she believed I still loved her.

Shortly the barista returned holding some kind of mask by one of

its two horns. It was quite large and as menacing a mask as I had ever seen.

“What the hell is that?”

“The construction’s well done,” he said. “Real craftsmanship went into this bad boy. No detail glanced over. That’s real bull hide and real bull horns, man. But get this—foam padded interior. I kid you not. We hit our tester in the head multiple times with boffer swords and he barely felt it, and the mask stood up to further beatings—bats, chains, whips—no rips or tears.”

“What the—*what?*”

“You’re skeptical. Okay. Some cons. Not easy to see out of it. Zero peripheral. Even seeing ahead challenging—keep eyes centred on the eyeholes or you’re blind. And the interior of the head is huge, made for an Andre the Giant, haha. Your head appears normal-sized. But the testers kept it on without too much wobble using a wound towel—like a turban. I strongly suggest you copy.” He placed a rolled white towel by my elbow.

I stared at the mask, the sharp horns, the flaring nostrils.

“Did my ex put you up to this?” I asked, however unlikely she’d go to such lengths.

“Your ex?”

“I’m not putting that on,” I said.

“But you came here for it, didn’t you?” The barista leaned over. “You need it for the party, no? The costume party.”

“But I—”

“Come on, man. Don’t get weird on me. Just put it on.” He patted the towel. “The towel will keep it stable. Come on. I don’t have all day.”

CHIAROSCURO

The world is divided into distinct halves. The right side bright and full of chattering people living good lives and willing to talk about it. The left side dark, thronged by sullen figures absorbed in dark, unspeakable thoughts. I’m having trouble breathing. I expected as much. And hearing, forget about it. Might as well be buried. But that comes with the turf. The bifurcation of the world, however, comes as an unpleasant surprise. Who knew? Maybe one of the eyes has a darker lens. That’s too easy.

The bus rumbles and wheezes along. No one dares sit beside me, there in the middle of the back seat, no one from the dark side, no one from the bright side. My peripherals are blocked, but I know that no one sits to my left or to my right and that no one will sit there.

I’m perspiring heavily, armpits soaked. Raging thirst. I just want to get home now. My plans for the day have been scotched. I just want to get home and think about the next thing, the next thing I must do. A young man in a tight black suit sits in front of me, to the left. He turns and smiles. An exception in the gloom. I see half his face as I try to adjust my eyeholes. Dark-haired, square-jawed, exuding cocky but friendly energy. I nod in acknowledgment. I understand how this must look.

“What’s your story?” he asks.

“Supposed to be a Minotaur.”

“Speak up, man.”

“I’m supposed to be a Minotaur!”

“Yeah, I gather that, but the question is *why?* I mean, in the middle of the day?” He taps his wristwatch, holding it up as though he knows

I'll have trouble spotting it without assistance. "Kinda early for a costume ball, eh?"

"That's later, yes, a party." A party to which I wasn't invited, speaking of which. "But I was trying on the mask and—well, I can't get it off."

The young man chuckles into his hand.

"It's not funny," I say.

"Sorry, I don't mean to laugh, but you can't get it off?"

"Believe me, I mashed my nose, ripped my ears and almost broke my jaw trying to get it off, but no go. I'm—it's fucking stuck."

The barista and I had spent the better part of an hour trying to pull the thing off, after I let him convince me to try it on "just for the hell of it." The towel must have got jammed up inside there and we couldn't get the mask off my head no matter how we tugged and twisted it. The barista said we needed a lubricant and grabbed a stick of butter from the cooler and greased me up, but all that did was stain my shirt. I figured my only option was to cut the bastard off.

"That's fucked up," says the young man. "Like, really out there."

"I know. And I missed an appointment to sign my divorce papers. My ex will be pissed. She thinks I still love her."

"Do you?"

"It's—it's been five years..."

"Anything I can do?"

"Like what?"

"Take you to Emergency or something? Tricky getting that thing off by yourself."

"No, forget that shit."

The young man stares at me with serious eyes.

"So you're just going to go

home and do it yourself?"

"Yeah, I'm going to cut it off."

He leans over and taps the mask. "Gonna need a saw to get that sucker off."

"Think so?"

The young man rings the bell and looks at me sadly.

"This is me," he says.

"So it is."

"Good luck with that."

"Yeah, thanks," I say, barely containing my tears.

Her Feet

Tim Conley



She doesn't care for us, said Left.

Right did not answer, so Left elaborated: she doesn't like us. She is ashamed of us.

What good will come of talking about it, Right, the more Gallic of the two, answered wearily.

Uncovered by the bedsheet, their ankles communed gently in earliest morning. Just as they may fall asleep after resting in position, so, too, do they wake on their own, for reasons of which even they may not be certain.

It bothers you, too. You know it does.

Right sighed. Those who have heard feet sigh know what a profound melancholy is shared in hearing it. But the foot rallied, after a moment, and said, She has never abused us. Physically, I mean.

You enjoy all of those shoes she chooses to wear, Left tartly replied.

Well, look. Some of those shoes are lovely, but that's not the point. We can have aesthetic differences but those are hardly substantial grievances. And yes, we carry everything, we are pressed and beaten by the earth, but that's the job description, isn't it? We're

not lungs or eyelids or teeth or, or anything else! We have to do what we have to do and there's no good to be had in complaining about it. And we have some bad days. Terrible days. And some of the shoes are wretched. But that's not the point!

This was the longest speech that Right had made in many months, and it gave them both pause. Left wondered whether the ears were listening, and of course they were, for that's all that ears do: they greedily, indiscriminately absorb sounds, but just as a glutton does not truly savour food, the ears—even these ears, which when nibbled, would dispatch thrilling shrieks all along the nerves and have the whole skin horripilate—consumed and left collation and assessment to the brain, which at this time was by its custom immersed in trifles and obscenities and not available for comment. For their part, the ears did not care.

Left tried another approach: so you're content.

I didn't say—

Or, Left continued, there's nothing to be done. Which one is it?

You really want to talk about this?

You don't? countered Left. I know you're unhappy. You know that she doesn't like us.

It would be nice if she didn't speak so badly about us.

She doesn't even keep it to herself!

The neck, which might not have been fully awake, chuckled to

ative, sounds drawn into her ears, living ears that did not speak but passed along to the brain, which would have to work through all of this material eventually, awake or otherwise.

If we were to become detached—

Free from her?

It would have to be a cut—

Something sharp.

Something sharp. Then we'd

such mechanisms would allow for a swift, liberating amputation.

I don't know, I don't know.

Merveilleux, said Right. You don't know. You started this conversation.

We have to do something. We're agreed on that much, aren't we?

Merveilleux, Right said again.

Right was sullenly remembering the

“And yes, we carry everything, we are pressed and beaten by the earth, but that's the job description, isn't it?”

itself.

Through the open window came the voices of the workmen on the roof of the building opposite, calling to each other with the usual workday greetings and complaints, banging about and turning on a radio that gave voice to music from people who were decades older at this moment than they were when they had recorded this music, or even now dead, their arms and kidneys and eyes not awake and not conversing, not singing and not asleep but utterly inoper-

be free.

It would have to be quick, Left's voice quavered a little.

Something like, like an industrial accident.

Neither of them had ever set itself upon a factory floor. Left could not help thinking of a bottling plant, or at least what Left supposed a bottling plant must look like, with rows of bottles being filled and capped and shoved along by other bottles waiting to be filled and capped and shoved along, and could not envisage how

recent occasions that Left had gotten in the way while walking.

Perhaps the hands would help us, said Left. We could ask the hands to help us!

Left correctly interpreted Right's silence to mean that the hands would not help anyone, the hands were only in it for themselves, the hands could not be trusted. Left had never mentioned this to Right, but Left had a bit of thing for hands.

You're a poor judge when it comes to hands, said Right. You've

always had a bit of a thing for them.

Left, shocked, did not know what to say.

Voices from the past carried by the radio to the ears asked whether you wanna dance under the moonlight, squeeze me baby all through the night, oh baby, do you wanna dance?

The bladder began to rouse itself. The bladder was never fully awake, and never fully asleep, or at any rate it seemed to dislike either extreme.

We're going to start work any minute, Right observed.

Recognizing this unnecessary observation as an attempt to be friendly, Left eventually answered, Yes.

Do you do you do you do you wanna dance?

It's not their best song, Left said.

I didn't mean anything bad about, about your thing for hands. Right gave a short cough, which the ears gulped down. You know, I've noticed it, that's all.

Well, said Left.

Whatever you're into, Right continued. Whatever makes you happy.

Her hands prefer not to touch us.

I never gave it much—

Think about it now.

The bladder was muttering in its ancient language.

Maybe this whole discussion of escape from her is crazy. Maybe we should consider some kind of job action. You know, refuse to work until we get more respect.

It's worth a try.

You think so?

I do, yes.

All right.

And you know what else?

I'm all ears, said Right. To borrow an expression.

Let's hold out for a specific concession. I'm thinking a holiday. A holiday for us.

It's been a long time since we went dancing.

A night of dancing.

Go bigger. A night of dancing somewhere fantastic.

Switzerland. A night of dancing in Switzerland.

Then the universe stretched and stretched. The nose was suddenly drunk and the eyes resumed their harrumphing debate on everything and anything. The brain was waking. She.

A night of dancing in Switzerland!

Fair and just demands.

She was going to get up, hair and arms and waist were moving, she was getting up.

And bathing in a river. Let's demand that, too.

In Switzerland.

Yes, said Right.

I can see it now, said Left.

Bivouac

Armando Carlo-Gonzalez



Three a.m. and I'm trashed riding Route One instead of watching my mom's girlfriend's dogs. This far out is all marsh, flat strip malls, empty fast food restaurants and their empty parking lots, grass sprung up from the cracks in the concrete. Sleepy's Mattress Store, too, the neon sign outside turned on high against the black of its insides, rows of mattresses laid out like marshmallow coffins for two. I fill two plastic cups full of Tanqueray, one for me and one for Jimmy, and drink them both. I stick a cigarette between my teeth and bite. The booze and the tobacco are doing the trick. I swerve in and out of lanes on purpose and for no reason at all.

The walls in my room sigh at me. My ceiling stares like a parent realizing their kid probably isn't going to figure it all out in time to have a nice life. You don't need to be a soldier to bivouac someplace.

Anyone can do it, anywhere, in anything, even a beat-up forest green Pontiac known as the Vageen Machine, Destroyer of Virginities, that belongs to my father, the one I promised to have back to him six hours ago, have driven around and slept in for a week straight. I have the Doberman and the Chihuahua in the backseat, the site of my father's countless extramarital revenges, the span of their professions broad, cocktail waitresses and kinesthesiologists, baristas and bus drivers, an art student he thought he might marry and a door-to-door knife saleswoman he thought he'd have to murder. A diaper is tied around the Chihuahua's waist. Twelve years old and no one taught him how to hold it in. Life would be so much easier if we could defecate wherever we pleased. It's impossible to tell someone else the thing they should be doing with splatter on your heels. I don't know these dogs' names. A kiss at the door and a pleading

look was what I got from her. You can watch them here, you know, and you can stay, too. The Chihuahua humps when he gets nervous. I drink too much liquor and can't finish. The Chihuahua tries to mount the Doberman, and the Doberman nips him in the mouth.

The army called about Jimmy a month ago. His father mowed the lawn after he heard. His mother called mine, not in tears, voice steady as a tuning fork ping, to tell my mother what happened. I could've gone with him. It's not like I had anything important going on. Any deadbeat can lay tile and swing hammers for minimum wage. It takes a real hero to be a young man dead. I went, not showered for three days, in clothes smeared gray from cigarette ashes, sweat and booze stink emanating off me in hot cloves. Not caring was my tribute to Jimmy, the cousin whose armpits smelled like they'd been dabbed with chunks of skunk-ass, and blamed the family computer's browsing history, melons, big melons, knockers, big boobs, on me, and left the condom on my pillow after banging his girlfriend in my bed. My aunt and uncle did not tell me to leave. Why don't you come on home, my mother asked me on the church steps, as if concerned.

My self-imposed exile has not kept my mother at the kitchen counter all nights with a handkerchief in hand. She spends her nights in bed with that perfumed flamenco instructor with the hair that gets everywhere. Dad makes her care. He needs his Pontiac back to drive his friend, she's just a friend, to a wedding out in Pittsburgh, and he wouldn't ask me at the expense of flaunting to my mother how easy it has been for him

to move on. I'd have gone, my dad told me one night, drunk, *27 Dresses* on the television, I'd have gone if they called me. Too young for Nam, too old for Afghanistan. You had your chance to go to war, pal, and instead you gave her the house.

I didn't need to go. Jimmy didn't, either. I told him that. I told everyone that. They all seem to think I need a good reason to do a bad thing. Any reason is good enough if the brain is limber. Cannibals ate children because they thought it would lend them vitality. Cave people used to leave babies in caves if they had no way to feed themselves and the baby both. I'm twenty-five and still live at home and the receptionist at the roofing and sheetrock firm who is thirty-five lives in her mother's basement with four children by three men, and she asked me what I thought I was doing with myself that was so special. Not reproducing at rates on par with Third World countries. Not lying as hard as I can to myself and my family that I've got it figured out so that when I do move back into my parents' basement, they can't be mad at me for lack of trying. Not getting my legs shot off in a war that is and always had been fated to end with a mushroom cloud. What'd I think that would earn me? People don't carry confetti in their pockets. It doesn't matter, the roads I ride are dark, Aliotta Jeremiah Haynes bleats *tomorrow is another day* on my radio, the Tanqueray somersaults in my belly, and I don't even have a village I torched with napalm to regret.

There goes that dark mattress store again. I could put this Pontiac through the front of it. Death is still a fun little prayer to me, something for my imagination to grin at before the

truth swallows it. Before the mattress store's glass panel windows loom towards me and shatter my skull, and cut my face open in a million places, and the terror of the finality of my decision saps the movement from my muscles, and I can see my soul shedding my body like a skin, and I am not overcome with some brilliant bolt of meaning in my last moment, but the thought that, shit, I definitely left the front door open. My head on a Tempur-Pedic, my spine on a waterbed, the dogs licking up knuckles of glass, the shower of blood spattering everywhere, in bed frames and mattress grooves, along the walls and the tile floor cracks, the poor balding bastard with a mustard stain on his tie who comes into work ready to sell mattresses and gets handed a mop to scrub away the last of my earthly remains, cursing as his comb-over flaps onto his forehead and the cops explain the scene to my parents, and those same cops smoking their cigarettes out front of the store ten minutes later: *kid was living out of this shitbox, can you believe it, didn't go when he could've, got his eight hours now, that's for sure, har har, ho ho*. Even the people in my fantasies have blankets of hatred to wrap themselves in against the world. Just like I didn't have the balls to go, I don't have the balls to buy the ticket to that horrorshow and slip it to my parents. It's easier to accept that I don't need what I want if I don't have to lie.

I zip towards the city to find my blanket. I know where he'll be. He's been there the last three nights. The Combat Zone, where Navy sailors used to drink and fuck their shore leave stipends away. All the old strip clubs are gone, now, and the bums scurry from streetlamp to

streetlamp like roaches celebrating the departure of the exterminator. My eyelids are at half-mast. Traffic lanes are suggestions to be ignored. Red lights might as well be green. The city rises up at me in a black, towering mass, as black as the lightless streets of the suburban towns, the skyscrapers like giant licorice D batteries powering the purple of the clouds. At a street corner, the bum I need dangles his legs over a mailbox and screams that he is a spider. I stared at him the first night, and he told me I looked like James Dean. The second night, I drunkenly stopped and talked to him. He told me he was crazy, certified crazy, wide-eyed doctor saying holy shit that guy's crazy to another doctor crazy, his meds kept him serene but he was about out of meds, and money, too, could he bother me for a cigarette, I looked like a nice guy, like James Dean or something. The third night he didn't recognize me, and asked me for a cigarette, and I drove away. Tonight, I stare, and he stares. He calls to me for a cigarette. I give him one, and light it for him. I'm a spider, you know, he says, you should be careful around me, I'm a hungry, hungry spider, and I'm just going to eat all these people up. The Chihuahua humps the Doberman. I laugh and put my car in park.

The News About Edward

Lisa Attanasio



There were no sunbathers, no sun. The icy salt water stung his eyes and filled his throat. He choked it back. The surf knocked him around but he fought against it, struggling to remain conscious.

Edward reached the small body and pulled. It yielded immediately. He swam back to shore with the boy tucked beneath one arm, careful to keep his head above water. On the dry sand Edward slumped, hands on knees, struggling to catch his breath. He looked down at the boy. He told himself it was the sort of thing that only *he* could have pulled off.

“You’re alright now,” Edward pronounced. Then he took Domenico by the hand and they slowly made their way back to the hotel.

Was it only his imagination? It seemed that as

soon as they entered the lobby, the desk clerk scrutinized them under stern, heavy brows. Edward let go of the tiny hand. He motioned to a sofa tucked away in a corner. “Go sit down,” he told the boy. He passed the desk with a nod and a broad smile designed to mollify the taciturn clerk and entered the hotel bar.

It was only last night in this same bar that Edward, soaked through with his favorite bourbon sours as well as a brainless bravado, had gone toe-to-toe with Gary Erp, liaison to Ixmar’s Taiwanese manufacturing division.

Now he found a few of his guys crowded around the oak bar. They really were his guys, he told himself, even Gary, even if Edward never managed to ship another motherboard again.

As Edward bellied up, a low chuckle circulated. “We were just discussing you,” said Freeling.

“Naturally,” Edward quipped, happy, but not surprised, to find himself the center of attention.

Freeling glanced at the others. They were stifling their laughter with some difficulty. “So what are you going to do about it?”

“About what?”

“The elephant in the room.”

Freeling waved for the bartender. “You’re going to need a little something,” he said.

A man can only suffer so much, Edward thought. “It’s all taken care of,” he replied.

Freeling’s smile faded, and he looked almost pained. “I very much doubt it,” he said.

Edward left the bar and took a few laps around the hotel. He couldn’t find Gary anywhere. He wasn’t even sure what he’d say if Gary suddenly appeared, but no matter. Rehearsal was for losers. There were elephants, sure, but there were also lions.

No Gary, but he did find Bruce, and Bruce was his pal. Bruce had nothing on Edward. There was no chance of Bruce luring some big account away, or a girl that neither really wanted.

This was the second day of the convention. Tomorrow, there would be meetings all day—some open, some closed—including a seminar on the revolutionary socket. But day two was set aside to network and mingle, during which time participants were strongly encouraged not to ruin themselves.

“Eddie, I’d like to give you a piece of advice, only because people are talking,” Bruce said, and he took

the older man by the elbow and led him a few steps to privacy. “Put yourself in their shoes, even Gary’s. None of this is fatal. You can still pull back from the edge.”

Edward had little to say in return. He accepted the words with docility before changing the subject. Where could he have his suit pressed for the banquet?

Later that night, Edward took the elevator from his fifth floor room down to the lobby. Through the open ballroom door, he saw the gentle backs of his colleagues as they helped themselves to the buffet.

The clerk at the desk was now a young woman. Edward had seen her there before. She was a bit plump, and not terribly attractive. Her crooked name tag said something of no importance. She greeted him with a nod and a broad smile.

Edward decided to drop by the desk for a quick boost. Her smile let him know he deserved it.

“Good evening, Mr. Sperling,” she said.

“Tell me, do you think this goes with my suit?” Edward asked, and he held out his necktie for the woman to inspect. It was tiled all over with emperor penguins, each penguin himself sporting a tiny tie with an even tinier penguin.

“That’s very sweet...I mean, it’s funny,” she said, and she laughed.

Edward laughed back. He’d taken tremendous care in dressing himself. There was that silly tie designed to disarm his adversaries, but also the carefully curated Italian suit to announce his exemplary status. And did you get a load of those wing tips?

Done with the clerk, Edward had taken a few steps toward the

ballroom when she summoned him back. “Oh Mr. Sperling, before I forget. There was a problem with your credit card. It’s been declined.”

Edward fumbled through his wallet for another card. He came up with a blue one, all the while muttering that someday his machines would replace the low-level courtesy worker. Then he wheeled around and returned to the elevator, riding it nine stories to the very top floor.

Edward felt an airiness now in his soul, but surely not a liberating one. A fire alarm pierced the silence of the corridor and Edward stood fuming. There was Bruce, cowering in an alcove intended for an ice machine. A door or two opened lethargically.

Untranslatable

Mary Di Lucia



It is not that it was a box of oranges, it was that the word itself, “oranges,” was already written in another alphabet. The box itself was sturdy. The oranges were stolid and orange and reminiscent of exotic places and vitamins. It was your so-to-speak “home.”

Your so-to-speak home, the box of oranges, was easily opened with a crowbar.

Who were you, when the man with the crowbar asked?

You did not know.

What were you?

You did not know.

And were these two questions: 1) in essence the same question; and 2) things for which it was nec-

essary for you to know the correct answer.

That is:

To know something about yourself.

To be known.

To know how to say something about yourself besides “I do not know.”

You are always in motion. You are falling down. You are getting back up. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. The box is open and the light is bright, the sunlight. The shopkeeper is there. He does not know who or what you are. He does not even know what oranges are. And yet he asks you, and then when

you say you do not know, he renames you for himself: Cheburashka. Little one who keeps falling over. Little one who is smuggled over in a box of oranges, a word in an alien alphabet, a box of stolid orange spheres redolent of the exotic and the mundane. Southern breezes and vitamins. Were you an orange among oranges? An export among exports? A displaced immigrant expatriate exported in a box where you were already the only one of your kind. Sent back to the wrong place from somewhere you already didn't belong. Cheburashka.

booth. You did not even belong in the zoo, that they did know. You were not an animal, a plant, a microbe, or something children's parents would pay for them to come and see at a zoo. No child would drag its babushka over to watch you eat lettuce or peel a banana in your cage. There was no reason for the guard to stand there with a gun because you seemed to be harmless. The zookeeper's eyes are dull, as dull as the shopkeeper's but in a different way: he is angry. Angry that science does not know who you are. You have eluded science. You

it is a furniture store, perhaps it sells household items: oil-cloth, twine, coffee in cans, packaged cheese, condolence cards. The storekeeper has greasy hair and a tie which is too wide. His hair is styled in an obvious and thus inelegant flip. It is decided. Here is what you will do for a living—for everyone in this town must work. Everyone must earn their keep.

People will pass by and look in the window and see you, and come into the store to buy something, out of the sake of pure curiosity. What is it? A defective toy? they will ask, and

“...you answer what is becoming your universal response to the universe: I do not know.”

At the Zoopark, it is no different.

The men who had assessed you in the invisible laboratory at the Zoopark were clear that you were unknown to science, which was knowledge. They sent you back to the zookeeper and the shopkeeper who awaited you there at the guard's

should thus not exist, he seems to think, defiant creature. Slap on the cheek of knowledge.

Where are you next? Bartered between the shopkeeper and the storekeeper to whom he perhaps owes money or custom? You will sit in a window in a store on a backstreet of the small provincial city. Perhaps

then they will spend money elsewhere in the store. You will be a sort of advertisement. An attraction.

The two keepers like this idea. They pause. Is it a defective toy? the storekeeper asks the shopkeeper, though you are right there.

What are you, they ask you together, point blank, defective as you are.

Again, you answer what is becoming your universal response to

the universe: I do not know.

You do not know. Maybe you *are* a defective toy.

But, will you work without pay? you think to yourself.

Even you know that this is wrong. And for the first time, you speak up. Yes, you will sit in the window, yes you will work for the men as a defective toy who will attract customers to the store, in exchange for what benefit or salary unclear, but you know that this is not all for you, this window-life of work.

Where will you live, you ask.

You cannot live where you work, just as a box of oranges cannot be home forever. You must have somewhere to sit when you are not falling down. You must have a place to sleep. They must provide it for you in exchange for your work, the work of your existing on their behalf.

The men are startled at what you have asked, or at least silent for a moment, to hear you speak so clearly. The canny storekeeper puts his fingers together in a point and looks down to address your question in a way that makes it perfectly clear that you may be defective, or even valuable to them, in a way which will make you all the more to be held accountable, even cruelly so.

The glass phone kiosk, nondescript, grimy, close to the window, catches their attention.

“*This*,” indicates the man with his fingers, “*this*” will be your so-to-speak “*home*.”

So, it is the phone booth, the phone booth where you spend your nights. The label from the box of oranges is glued, in a jaunty diagonal, across the wall, and you are vertical now, propped up so as not to fall against the glass walls of the

booth. But you are not watching the label, or the phone—which will not ring, for it is a public phone, which promises connection, but only if you call out. And you do not have anyone to call. You are watching a top. You watch and watch and watch as the top spins and shakes and spins. The top is spinning so quickly that it seems to have no motion at all. It makes a humming sound, almost imperceptible, and something about the motion is observable, for it makes your eyelids heavy, it soothes you perhaps the way a mother’s lullaby would, a mother who would teach her always falling down child how to stay in motion but still stand up—to stay in relentless motion, perhaps, and never to fall down, never to be forced to sit, and feel, feel whatever it is or was that the motion keeps you from feeling.

But you have fallen down. You are sitting, fallen, leaned up against the glass wall, and you are feeling something.

What that is, you do not know.

This condition, this temporary place, this inability to get up, or stay upright, in a phone booth where no one will ever call, next to a top which cannot keep spinning: it is indeed revealed to you at last. It is your so-to-speak home.

Gena

Mary Di Lucia



“And do you know how many lonely people there are in our city?”

from *Krokodil Gena*. Soyuzmultfilm, 1969

He was an African crocodile, who had a job at the local zoo as an African crocodile.

Each day, he sat on his rock, basking, while the crowds came to see him. There were plenty of crowds. Thus, all day long, through the bars of the cage, he saw many people. They were friendly to him. And the cage, or the region behind the cage, was pleasant: there was a rock, a pool with a deep hole in it, and very clear water so everyone could see him swimming around (which he did only occasionally, as the water was a bit cold for him), a tree, a sandy

beach, and some large leafy plants. And it was all his.

The zoo closed at 5. By 5 after, he had changed from his work clothes into his suit and straw hat, and with the paper under his arm, he clocked out of the zoo, slipping his time card into the machine by the front gate, and walked home. Sometimes, as a treat, he would buy himself a lemon ice from the concession stand on the corner. He ate well at the zoo, but always kept his refrigerator at home supplied with delicacies: fine cheeses, exotic fruits, like mandarins, or mangoes, and usually he had a tin of prawns or smoked clams in the back of his cupboard. Before he went to bed at night, he always let himself have as much jam as he wanted, and he didn't mind about dipping the same spoon in and out of the jam jar after he ate from it, for he had no company, and expected

none. Blueberry jam was his favorite, but he made it a point to try all different kinds of jam, jams he hadn't ever tried before, jams with berries he wasn't familiar with. In that sense, jam too was one of his delicacies, as well as somewhat of a learning experience. It was how he educated himself about the world.

He was an African crocodile who was very fortunate to have a steady job in an important provincial capital. What's more, as he reflected in the long summer evenings, this was a job, the rare job, which allowed him to be himself. True, there was a uniform, but it was his own skin, after all, and nothing to be ashamed of: it was what people expected. A crocodile wearing the skin of a crocodile. He was no different from any other crocodile to them, in his body; and of his mind, his habits, they knew nothing. Whenever he ran into anyone on the street, someone he knew from work, he nodded to them politely, but did not stop to exchange pleasantries. *Ah, there is the crocodile who works at the zoo*, he imagined they thought to themselves, and nodded.

The years wore on, though. He had been a young crocodile. He had come to the city full of hope and expectations. His home was far away and he had also been aware without too much thought, that perhaps he would never see it again, its muddy banks and flat, marshy plains.

It came back to him at times like the refrain of a song he had only forgotten for a short time: he was an African crocodile who had a job at the local zoo as an African crocodile.

He did not seem bothered by it. It did not seem to make him particularly sad or to seem odd to him at all. He did not seem to mind

the crowds during the day, nor did he seem to mind the walking home alone in the summer evenings, with his air of cheer and his crisp suit, home to his pied-à-terre with its pleasant balcony.

There did not seem, to him, to be anything false about the cheer, or any kind of awareness that the cheer made the great loneliness of his existence even more of an abyss. The fact that he was able to go about his business, unconcerned, as a crocodile, while no one ever even remarked that he was a crocodile among humans, or that he never once felt himself, as a crocodile, to be different from the rest of the people in the town, never seemed to come into his consciousness, or if it did, he did not seem to find it odd, or uncomfortable in any way.

Day in, day out, he was a crocodile who worked as a crocodile in the zoo. He was always a crocodile, in his work, in his life, there was no respite from being a crocodile. Work and life were contiguous. It was not clear how the being a crocodile in the zoo, as a job, could be differentiated from being the crocodile in his own life, as part of his greater existence. There was never a sense of needing to perform the deeper exploration—why was his existence as a crocodile on display in a zoo? What was it about being a crocodile which was worthwhile to the people, to the crowds, enough for them to come and want to see? Where were the other crocodiles and why did they never come to see him at the zoo? The bars on his cage at the zoo, he told himself, were also simply what the crowds expected; they were the conditions of the workplace, as a circular saw might be for a brain surgeon, or

the necessity of using a certain kind of disinfectant and wearing a white apron for a confectioner. Not pleasant, but routine, easy to get used to, and more symbolic than actually useful. There were no bars needed when he interacted with people on the street, when he walked home, by himself, on those summer evenings, down the boulevards that were fragrant with blossoming trees.

He was not a danger to anyone, as the bars seemed to imply. He was a harmless, civil, brisk, well-mannered African crocodile. He had come from far away, he had gotten a job in the zoo, where he worked as an African crocodile. He was not a danger to others or to himself much as a prostitute who went home in the mornings to make breakfast for her children and send them off to school was only a prostitute. Or as a butcher was just a butcher: he had salad for dinner like everyone else and he lifted his hat to Mrs. Pig when he saw her on the street. The prostitute was married to the policeman, but when they saw each other, during the day, they nodded to each other politely, only half-seeing. The butcher's daughter sat behind the pig child at school though they never ate lunch together. They were polite but they were not friends. This was how society functioned.

But this was what was worse somehow, for him, if he thought about himself, about being a crocodile who worked as a crocodile. About being a self who worked as a self, who was itself, all day long, behind bars, in a zoo, for people to look at, day in, day out, keeping up appearances, seeming happy, brisk and sociable, unbothered, unashamed under that thick skin, under that thick, thick skin

coating that kept in more than a crocodile.

What was it that was under that skin? Inside there?

What in fact was the zoo? Who were the crowds? He had a pleasant life, a quiet life, not too many demands. No one was looking, or jeering. He lived in a good neighborhood, in the capital city, he had everything he needed, and enough of what he wanted.

What was it?

Was it that I was an African crocodile who had a job as an African crocodile in the zoo, who worked as a crocodile...?

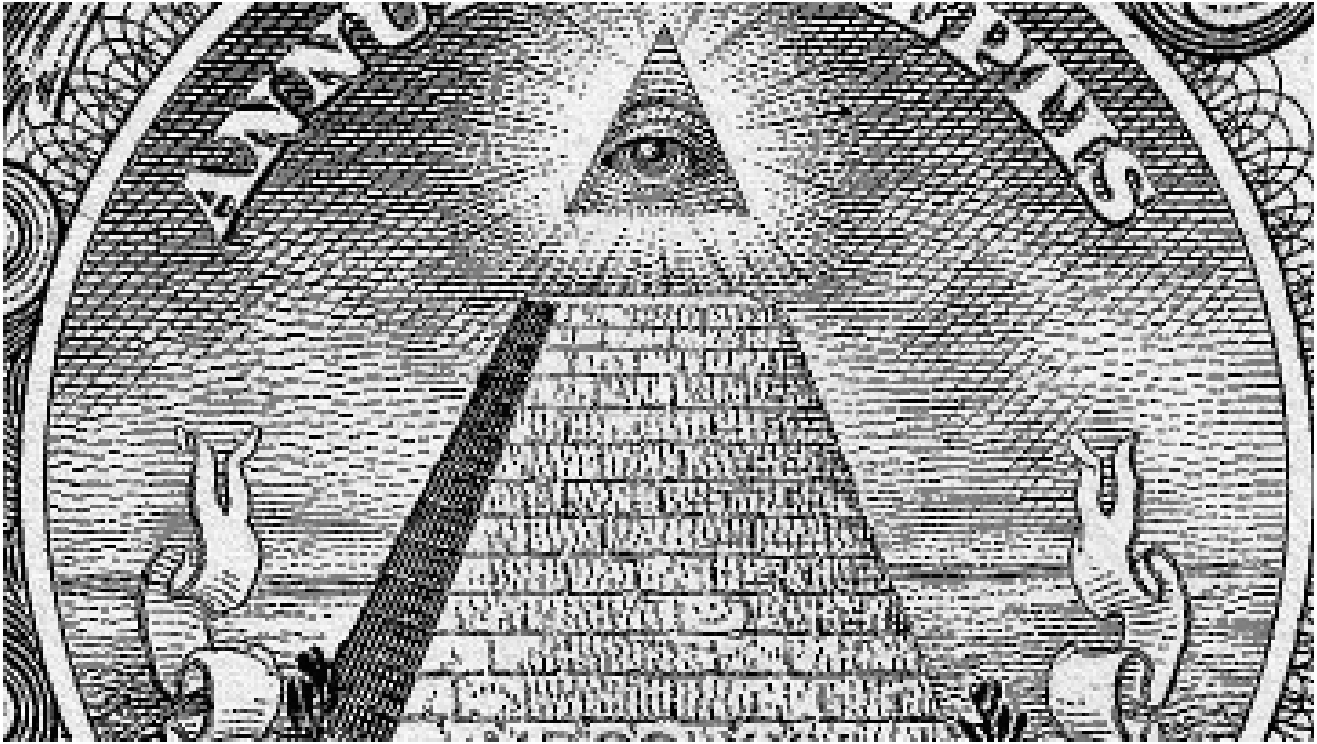
No, that was not it.

He was an African crocodile who worked as an African crocodile in the zoo.

That. It was all there. If only I could understand it, beneath my tears.

Pyramid

David Z. Morris



“**T**his is after three minutes,” I say, and I hold up the picture in the brochure. “But if they don’t use it every day, it goes away, they’re not permanent results. I love using it on my stretch marks.”

I do this maybe twice a week. It works out, I’d say, about one time out of five. I mean at least they get something out of it. It actually really, truly works out a lot less often than that.

“You’d get a 35% commission, or more, depending on whether your team is selling.” She’s listening, but I see the glaze in her eyes—I’m not worried though, it’s just defensive. I haven’t even gotten started. “To go up, you have to sell, let’s say, \$1,000 worth of products. Not just you though, you or your team. Let’s say your friend Esther, she joins your business...”

I go into autopilot for a while, I have these bits and pieces that I pull out again and again. I’ve done it

enough it’s not even work.

“I always do events, because they’re fun, and I love to call partying working. We tell them what we have in our product line, what we don’t have, we just have a fun girls’ night and put masks on. They’re experiencing the product. These products sell themselves.”

“Just tell them you’re having a party at your house, you’re already doing it, you might as well make money.”

“You might want to get on the diet yourself,” I say—you know, casually, not mean. Because I’m not mean. But I’m honest.

“Or the detox. Maybe you’ll lose weight.” And she could stand to, and it’s not like she had a baby. “Maybe you’ll lose weight and that’ll attract your girlfriends. You can tell them, you know, I’m taking this. And bingo, that’s a sale, or even better, that’s a bigger team.”

To meet indifference or skepticism—there’s always indifference, there’s always skepticism, no matter how desperate these people are, they don’t see the lifeline they’re being thrown. But I just power through. A prospect is like a dog, they need to be dominated for their own good.

“You have to hustle at the beginning to get them, let me tell you. Building your downline is the most important thing you can do.”

Oh, and you want to give them the numbers last of all, the costs. If you can wait until they literally have their credit card out, wait. Before that, divert. Tell them stories. Don’t cave unless they seem genuinely upset, or like they might get there. Tell them how much they can achieve first, and the investment will seem smaller.

“Working this for ten years, my friend Janelle has seven people under her, and she makes \$700,000 a year. That’s where the money is—commissions. And it depends on what level you are in the company, how much you’ve sold.”

Of course, that number is sales, not profits, but sometimes you have to gloss over the details for these girls. I’m doing them a favor, because once they’re in, they’ll get it. The details don’t matter so much.

But also, make sure they know how badly they’re doing, how much help they need. These people aren’t like you and me, most of them. They’re not meeting me in a Starbucks because they have job offers flooding in, like it’s this or Goldman Sachs. No.

“Who needs benefits? This is not working, this is fun.”

Most of them, of course,

end up leaving the starter pack in the corner of some closet, in a storage unit, I can’t do anything about that. I try and coach them—and why wouldn’t I, their success is my success—and I do my god-knows-it-best.

But still, this is a girl who showed up to our meeting in a t-shirt and a pair of friggin’ jogging shorts, the nylon kind with the piping that cut almost all the way up to your hip bones on the side. And, my god, I’m not even kidding *flip flops*, in public, in New York, and her hair pulled back and no makeup on at all. Pudgy and slumped over, she barely even looks me in the eye.

I mean this is what we’re working with.

She’s hopeless from the start—but that’s actually kind of a good thing. Maybe she doesn’t trust herself, and that includes her own skepticism. So you put your optimism in her head. It’s like a transplant.

She says she wants to do something creative. That’s as specific as most of them get. “Something creative.” Even if she wasn’t full of shit—I mean really, what is that, “something creative”?—even if she wasn’t full of shit, the creative types that I do know, *real* creatives, none of them know how to win. Maybe a couple of actors, but even most of them just hamstring themselves. Like the theatre is where the real art is. I’ve heard that shit so many times.

That’s what I’ve really learned from all this. I used to feel bad that I hadn’t discovered myself, whatever that means, I still don’t really get it. But then I realized I just need to get where I’m going. That’s all there is to it. I see the same thing in you. Sure, you’ve experimented a little more, but in the end you’re

practical. Right?

The triggers—“next level,” the “District manager” title that they’ll have if they recruit just four of their friends—those are the real rewards, not the money. They want to feel important, but they’re not willing to do the work to actually succeed, most of them. That’s their problem, but it hurts me, so it’s not like I want them to fail.

There are more options around New York than there are most places, even for people without an education. But that’s extremely relative. Would you rather work a union job in the subway for the rest of your life, or own your own business, and have a staff? I mean come on.

A lot of the time I’ll bring the baby, or even better, if he’s free, I’ll have my husband sit in the car for about the first fifteen minutes and then bring the baby in, like he’s really sorry to interrupt but the kid’s desperate for Mommy. Because what they want more than even the titles, more than even the dream of success, is just a plain old *life*.

I mean Christ, look at this girl. She’s from Ireland. She’s fat, and she’s depressed—although if I’m being honest she was very pretty. Very pretty. But, like, she’s gonna make it in New York? In *flip flops*?

That’s why this beautiful baby—I mean, maybe not as beautiful as I’d hoped, let’s be honest, but look at his dad, we have to be realistic—he’s such a winner. He’s smiling, so open, so honest and real. I’ve always been good at this, but with him, I’m *killin’*.

I always tell them, by the way, that they need to keep cynics and skeptics at arm’s length. There will always be a few, oh, it’s a pyramid

scheme, it's a scam, it cost you *how* much, et cetera et cetera. Those are negative people, I always tell them, usually after I give them the starter kit. Negative people don't deserve to be in your life, because your life is going to be great.

"The best thing for me is the relationships I've formed and the friends I've made." They love this, although the real truth is that relationships come from relationships, and my family is from the city so I have plenty of those, but this girl, god, if she's got two roommates that she actually can stand she's probably doing pretty well. But you know what? Some of them rise to the occasion. They really do. And it's great to see.

I tell her that I just took a trip with one of my downlines. I like to make sure they understand that this is both a serious business and fun. It's everything in one package.

"I feel like you've got this. You instantly saw the power of the network." They want to hear that they're good, that they can do it, of course they want that, who doesn't. Even I could use a little more affirmation every now and again, and look at me.

"If you were to start with nutrition, that would be good. Just start yourself out, on the cleanse, on the diet, so you have results to show. And then you can just get six or seven people on it, you can start now, just tell them, guys, you're gonna see the results happening soon."

In the end, she hemmed and hawed and we went back and forth just a little too long. And so I left her there. If they don't get that credit card out, you always want to leave them first, let them know you have some-

one else to meet with, leave them there reminded that you're someone with another appointment, while they can just sit around enjoying coffee. Let them think about whether that's who they want to be.

So I walk out the door, and she smiles, very polite, and waves goodbye. That's a good sign, I might hear from her—or I might not. And then she might really turn herself around, or she might not. I've done what I can, I've put it out there, the possibility of something larger, of something meaningful.

And why am I telling you this? Well, because I think you'd be good at this. I have a starter kit with me. In fact I have two—one for you to try, and one for your first downline. Two hundred bucks apiece, and I'm telling you that straight up because you know how this works, I can tell, you're sharp, so why not be up front? Trust me, it's a steal.

Some Stupid Bitch Killed Ana Peaceful (Or Four Unbelievable Conversations and a Murder)

An Erotic Comedy Inspired by the Life & Intentions of Valerie Solanas

Anton Bonnici

Conversation #3 A GAME OF CHESS

Zina Gipposkya (ZINA) – A professional Russian international escort woman.

Lorena Roberts (LOR) – An ex-professional American intersex escort woman.

Zina Gipposkya (ZINA), is in lacy underwear and a bathrobe, and is playing chess with her American friend Lorena Roberts (LOR), also, in a bathrobe but with normal underwear underneath. ZINA is playing white, LORENA is playing black.

ZINA Pawn to d4.

LOR Pawn to d5.

ZINA Horsey to f3.

LOR Pawn to e6.

ZINA One more pawn to e3.

LOR Pawn to c5. Oh, have you read about Ana?

ZINA I stopped reading about Ana. Pawn to c4. What about her? Has she won some other cunt of the year award?

LOR Nope. Hot horsey to c6. She got killed. About a month ago.

ZINA No shit! Ana got killed? Who killed her?

LOR This writer she was in talks with to produce her movie. When Ana did not greenlight the project this girl got a gun and shot her dead. Bam. Three shots. First shot, right in the face straight through her phone.

ZINA What do you mean straight through her phone?

- LOR Ana was apparently on her phone when this wild as fuck girl walked in and shot her point blank right at the phone. The shot went through her phone and into her face.
- ZINA Fuck. That's some messed up shit right there.
- LOR Yep.
- ZINA Did you go to the funeral?
- LOR Damn no. Didn't feel like flying all the way out there. Anyway, I heard it was a closed coffin deal...
- ZINA Ha, go tell Ana that's the way she's gonna go, shot in the face whilst on the phone. Big horsey to c3.
- LOR If you ask me, she had it coming. Badass horsey to f6.
- ZINA I always knew you two didn't exactly see eye to eye but, "had it coming"? A shot in the face? That shit's really cold, even by your standards. Tight pawn to c5.
- LOR If I hadn't had enough of fuckin cops feeling my balls in stinky ass cells, I would have popped the woman myself a long fuckin time ago. Dickhead Bishop to c5. Your tight pawn is mine.
- ZINA You can eat that pawn all you want. I have a lot of pawn, and this one goes to a3. But I still don't get the hate.
- LOR The bitch went all out alpha on us as soon those studio exec suck ass suits started gold showering her motherfuckin face. Pawn to a6.
- ZINA Are you still sore about that? That was years ago. Let it go. Pawn to b4.
- LOR I did let it go. But when I heard she got killed, I just, damn... it brought it all back. We could have done so many fuckin great things together, we were onto something. And then Vera and Ana moved on and I was left on my own to start out from bloody scratch; not even a film role, you know? Nothing. Dickhead to d6. I became the freak again. It was high school all fuckin over.
- ZINA Fair enough. Dickhead to b2. How's Vera doing?
- LOR Oh Vera is a wreck, she's having a total breakdown; but at least she has someone to help her through it, an ex-student of hers. I'm tucking my Old Cunty King right in this corner here.
- ZINA She has someone else already?

LOR Oh no. She's been with her for a couple of months now, Vera and Ana had split up way before the murder.

ZINA How did I miss all this? Queeny bitch to d2.

LOR Same way you ended up back here, you were too busy getting your hot ass tapped all over the goddamn planet! Queeny Supabitch to e7.

ZINA High five to that! Holy Dickhead to d3.

**"It's your
move, bitch."**

LOR Is business still cool? Apart from what happened today of course...

ZINA Apart from earlier today, business is amazing. I have a couple of guys in every major city: three guys in Paris, two guys in Rome, a guy in London, another two in Berlin, then there's Switzerland, I even have a guy on this small crazy island called Malta. And they're all top cash. I don't do those short notice calls anymore, I'm done with that shit. I do weekends and holiday breaks, nothing short of two grand a job. And I don't do druggies and don't do gang bangers. I was so pissed off at myself for not seeing it coming with Rodney.

LOR I thought you liked bad boys... Big pawn to c4, gimme that little pawn of yours.

ZINA Not when they start collecting AK47s and dwarves. Dickhead to c4, so your big pawn just got rammed by my holy dickhead.

LOR I need to call some reinforcements, another pawn to b5. Did you say dwarves?

ZINA That's where I drew my line with Rodney.

LOR I think it's story time baby.

LOR Hohoho wow! For real??

ZINA For goddamn real. Five dwarves. And he's like, I would love to see you do it with my dwarves tonight, you like dwarves right? These are my dwarves, I bought them from this friend of mine. Don't worry, they're happy here. This is gonna be so cool, you know? And I was like, "No, I don't know, I know nothing about you buying dwarves from friends, and I want to know nothing about you buying dwarves from friends, when it comes to you and your dwarves I'm Jon-motherfuckin-Snow and that's the way I like it."

LOR is laughing hard.

ZINA Crazy fucking dwarf collector. Dickhead back to d3.

LOR But why did you freak out? You don't like doing small people?

ZINA That's not it at all. I bet it would have been quite a fun night if it wasn't for the way he talked. It was all this bullshit of "I bought them from a friend," "they are mine," I mean these are people, he's talking about people, my brain just couldn't handle it, I was like no, I can't be a part of this, I don't want to know more about the fucked up world this fucker lives in.

LOR He must talk about you in the same way though, no? I'm sure he's got friends somewhere that know about you and he probably tells them shit like, "I have this girl I bought, she comes over for the weekend and sucks my cock for forty-eight hours, amazing tits I tell you man and she's not cheap..."

ZINA If that's what he says then he's a deluded fuck because he never bought me. He might have hired me for a night or two, but that scumbag piece of shit never bought me.

LOR Rented you, hired you, bought you, isn't it all the fuckin same? Sexual servitude in exchange for currency. Whether it's temporary or permanent or whatever, cos what's permanent in this suck ass life? It's all the same. Let me tell you what freaked you out. You freaked out cos when you saw those fuckin dwarves and he said that they're his, that he fuckin bought them, something in you, some small prickly voice in your fuckin head told you, "That's it, that's what you are. You are just like one of those happy ass dwarves that just got bought off a friend by a rich white prick called Rodney." Big-ass tower dildo to d8.

ZINA Fuck you.

LOR Oh come on don't be like that.

ZINA No, I mean it, fuck you.

LOR It's your move, bitch.

ZINA I'm not playing.

LOR What the fuck?

ZINA You can't just assume to understand what's going on in my head when I haven't even had the chance to properly understand it myself. The only reason you're saying that is because you have... your own... issues...

LOR Issues? That's not the word you wanted to say and you know it. Whip it out.

ZINA No that's not ... I mean... That is what I wanted to say.



LOR You think I have more in common with a person born with dwarfism than I have with you because I have a dick.

ZINA That's not what I meant!

LOR I see all of us as freaks because I have my "freak issues," so my opinion is biased and therefore invalid, right?

ZINA Have I ever been a bitch to you, bitch? Ever?

LOR Fair enough. No you never were. But.

ZINA But what?

- LOR But you're the only one of all my girlfriends that hasn't slept with me.
- ZINA Oh now you're the one holding back. It's not "sleep" you want me for.
- LOR Ok, let's be more explicit. You're the only girlfriend I have that has never given me head.
- ZINA So just because I had this emergency situation tonight, and now I'm your guest, then I have to suck your dick?
- LOR Of course not. You don't have to do anything. You're one of my dearest girlfriends, and whether I see you in two, three, four fucking years or not I will always love you. I will also always love you whether we agree or disagree on why you did not fuck the dwarves. Likewise I will always love you whether you suck my girl dick or not. And yes, yes, I'll be of course the first one to admit that I do have what you might call "freak issues"; I'm a woman born with a dick for fuck's sake. Can you fuckin imagine what school was like for me? When the other girls were getting their periods I was getting my boners. But just like all the other girls, my breasts were swelling out and Jesus fuck my moods were swingy! So yes, the fact that I am someone whom people have lengthy political discussions on what the fuck I should be called, does affect my judgement on these issues.
- ZINA And what has this got to do with me?
- LOR Because this is about all of us, all of us women, whether we are women with cunts, dicks, black or white, all of us women in this fucked up world, are treated like fuckin freaks. And deep down all of us know it, every fuckin single one of us. I'm just in a better position to see it and call it out for what it fuckin is. Whereas girls like you will do everything you fuckin can to keep your blinkers on, including not blow a sweet little dwarf dick or my charming lady dick.
- ZINA Queeny bitch to e2. That is your story, not mine.
- LOR Awesome dickhead to b7. Keep dreaming, sister.
- ZINA I better hide this Royal Cunt. Is this why you stopped working?
- LOR Partially, yes. The money was always good of course because I'm an oddity, I'm something people would like to "try," you know, a once in a lifetime experience. You won't believe how many guys that wouldn't ever fuckin dream of touching another guy's dick have sucked my cock. And they paid through their fuckin noses to do so. Supadick horsey to e5.
- ZINA My fuckin horsey fucks your fuckin horsey at e5. So, having your dick sucked by dudes, and getting paid for it, doesn't that make you feel special?
- LOR For a time, truth be told, I thought it was cool. Yeah, I enjoyed being a rare treat. And there's the power aspect of course; I'm a girl that gets to say suck my dick to a guy and mean it, literally. But that wasn't what pushed me over to quit the life...
- ZINA What then? I can't even begin to imagine living another life.

LOR I stopped because I want to live in a place where life is not about buying and selling. This is what I can't stand anymore. All of it is just about buying and selling, that's it, that's our entire life, selling shit so we can buy shit. We have to sell everything here, absolutely everything. Our bodies, our ideas, our skills, and not just us, it's everything and everybody. At base level everybody has to fuckin sell his or her life, both men and women, so that we can buy a life. Why can't we just fuckin live? Why do we have to sell our life to buy a life? Why not simply live?

ZINA But what you're saying is you want to become a fuckin commie; I'm Russian, we've been there, it's shit. I don't remember enough myself but I've heard stories from my mother and her mother. The alternative to a life where people sell to buy, is a life where you give every thing to receive nothing.

LOR I'm not talking about some fuckin revolution. Fuck that. I'm talking about leaving. Just leaving all this. We are doing it. A bunch of us.

ZINA Leave where?

LOR Off the grid. It's a group of people I've met online and they are building a place, it's going to be out in the middle of nowhere, somewhere, I can't tell you where. But there's a solid plan for a very different life; we're putting together the money to get the technology we need and then once everything is set up that's it. We'll be on our own, we'll live a very simple life but we'll have everything we need. We'll eat, we'll read, we'll fuck, we'll create things, and even if things don't work out, fuck it, it's worth a shot.

ZINA Wow. And what will you be doing there, specifically?

LOR Some of my time will be dedicated to running the place, everybody has to help in things like growing food, teaching the children, cleaning and general maintenance and stuff; but after my day routine I want to write and perform. I'll be running my own little production studio there and I already know a couple of people that are interested in filming and all that.

ZINA So you're going back to that indie porn project you always wanted to do, the one you were working on with Ana before...

LOR Before she dumped me. Exactly. Something like that. Still my dream.

ZINA A dream is a dream baby.

ZINA reaches out to pick up a chess piece, LOR stops her hand and gets closer.

LOR What about yours? You still opening that fantasy brothel you always wanted?

ZINA I don't know... I don't know what I want anymore... Don't laugh.

LOR Why should I laugh?

ZINA Don't judge.

LOR You? Never!

ZINA Sometimes I think I want children, just children, I don't want to have a man around, no way. But yeah, I think I want children. Save enough money to buy a cool place and... I feel ridiculous even talking about it...

LOR No it's not ridiculous. If this is what you're feeling and this is your wish...

ZINA But look at me. I'm a stupid bitch talking about fuckin motherhood.

LOR You can talk about whatever you like. And your future is yours to make.

ZINA But I have no one outside of my business and I have no idea on what to do with myself. All I have is this body and this face and all I know how to do it is sell it, suck and fuck. Even I know that this is not enough to be a mother. I don't even have friends.

LOR You have me. I'm your friend.

ZINA We haven't talked in three years!

LOR So what?

ZINA Do you think of me? Like, before I got in touch with you today, have you ever had the thought about where I might be or what I might be doing?

LOR Of course. And then I say to myself, she must be handling five dicks at once just right now, and I have a laugh about it all on my own. I do care for you Zina. Why don't you come with me?

ZINA To your project?

LOR It's not just a project, it's a new life; it will be unlike anything we've ever done.

ZINA Hey, I've lived on farms before. I know how to milk a fuckin cow. I just don't know whether I can get back to that kind of life.

LOR But that's exactly it, this is not a going back. This is a creation of something new, something different. Away from all this. And we'll make a baby. I'll help you. It would make me so much happier if I had a good friend with me when I left.

ZINA I wish I had the balls to say yes. I truly do. But I can't see it, I can't imagine another life apart from this one. I think that I've totally hated my life and I've also completely loved my life so much, always changing from love to hate to love again for so many times, that now I can't tell which is which anymore. This is all I know and I don't know if things will ever be different for me.

LOR But don't you ever desire something new? Something different?

ZINA *(evading the question)* We didn't finish the game.

LOR moves over to ZINA and sits on her lap.

LOR This is more fun.

ZINA I guess someone's having their dick blown tonight...

LOR Don't worry honey, I swear it's gonna be better than dwarf dick.

ZINA That, my girl, is something I never wanna find out.

*Photo by Maria V. Bonnici
Of Potters' Demons Production Lab: ofpottersdemons.com*

The Yellow Wrapper

Erin Smith



First the bra, now this, Annika thinks as she slowly tears the saturated pad from the crotch of her underwear, positive the sound of the adhesive and the crinkle of soft plastic can be heard all the way down Park Hill to the Piggly Wiggly. When it's finally out, she sits on the cold porcelain seat and listens, hearing only the sound of her breath.

She pulls the pad's bright yellow wrapper from the pocket of her jeans. It's been there all day, a constant reminder—as if the fear of leaking wasn't enough—and it is damp now and wadded into a boggy lump. She rolls the pad back in the wrapper and clutches it, feeling the warmth, as she tiptoes to her bedroom.

Down the hall thumping bass and howling voices pour out of her brother Ben's stereo and a

slow trickle of smoke escapes despite the dirty t-shirt shoved under the door. The smell reminds Annika of when they hit a skunk driving out to Grandma's last summer. Ben will be in his room all day with that nasty smell leaking out.

A year ago, in the old house, Ben didn't spend all day in his bedroom. But a year ago, in the old house, a lot was different.

This duplex—three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a backyard no one uses—had been an early Christmas present for the three of them after Annika's dad became just a voice on the other end of the phone and a check in the mail. The fights didn't stop—but Annika only hears one side.

Annika hears one now through the wall she shares with Mom as she closes her door quietly and

goes to the window that faces the untouched backyard.

The late winter lawn looks crispy and dead. Overgrown brown weeds snake up the fence that separates their yard from the tree line. She can see through the bare trees to Maple Street, cars stopped at red lights.

When she opens the window, a cool breeze blows in, bringing with it the smell of roasting pork from the Piggly Wiggly. She leans out the window into the cool day, away from the rising sound of her mother's voice, and pitches the pad into the

Colby and the paper grocery bag he uses as a backpack.

"Christopher Columbus." Annika fills in the *o*, the *p*, the tiny, oblong hole at the top of the *e*.

The whispers continue. To Annika, they are as loud as the pad ripping off her panties, but when she looks up, Mrs. Dehughes only yawns and pats the sides of her large hair, which is unnaturally puffy, almost like it was placed on her head in haste and without regard to proportion. Mrs. Dehughes hadn't stopped them from calling Colby "Paper or Plastic," either.

Denise puts her pencil to her mouth and considers the page in front of her. Denise is either thinking about Ponce de Leon and his country of origin or she is good at pretending, too.

Annika doesn't turn or look at Britney and Madison. Their ire could be drawn by motion. But she has to wiggle as the too-large pad is jammed uncomfortably in her butt crack and between the lips of her vagina. Movement brings the odor and for a terrible minute that is all she can think about, all she can smell. She is nearly choking on the rotten

"...she was a ticking time bomb."

lifeless grass.

"Match Each Early Explorer with His Country of Origin," the instructions at the top of the paper read. But Annika can't concentrate. Instead, she colors in the holes in the letters, feels the uncomfortable trickle in her pants and listens to the whispers of Britney and Madison behind her.

"She looks like a *cowgirl* in those Levi's."

The girls snicker. At the desk beside Annika, Denise sits in her Levi's, pencil to paper, drawing lines between each column.

This semester it is Denise and her Levi's. Last semester it was

She looks back at her paper. "Ferdinand Magellan."

The *e*. The *d*. The tiny, oblong hole at the bottom of the *a*.

"Who even *wears* Levi's anymore?"

More giggles.

Another *d*.

Annika glances at Denise and thinks of Mom, sitting at the kitchen table, bills spread out in front of her and her hands spread over her face, shaking silently, pretending she doesn't smell the scent of skunk coming from Ben's room. But it always explodes in loud voices eventually. Annika pretends to be invisible then. She tries not to move or make a peep when it starts, as if her stillness will end it sooner.

stink of dark blood. Denise turns and for a second Annika is sure she can smell it also.

Denise's eyes land on a spot somewhere behind Annika and the whispers stop. Annika holds her breath and counts to three.

As Denise turns back to the front, their eyes meet and Denise smiles. Annika's face flushes, warmth wrapping around her neck and climbing to the tops of her ears. With a quick breath, she looks down at the Os, the Ps, the Ds and starts to color as the giggles begin again.

A year ago, when they were living in the old house, Annika brought

home the flowery packet all the girls were given at school after going to the music room and watching the Video. The packet contained a booklet, a calendar and a single pad. She'd hid it in her room away from her dad and Ben. That night, seated at the foot of her bed, Mom flipped through the little information booklet and asked Annika if she had any questions.

On the Video, a female doctor wearing an authoritative white lab coat had pointed to a graph and said, "The average age is twelve. Or, roughly one to two years after breast development."

So the Video told Annika all she'd needed to know: she was a ticking time bomb. Mom had already taken her to JC Penney to try on bras, against Annika's will.

"You really need one, honey," she'd said gently, pointing to the rack of white lacy bras—some looked like undershirts, some like in the movies.

Now, in the new house, Annika takes out the calendar and draws a circle on the day before and a line through today, just like the nurse told them to do. She thinks of the box of Mom's pads under the bathroom sink, half full now. She's been using them as sparingly as possible, making sure one lasts all day, no matter how heavy and drenched they become.

Mom will notice soon.

Annika swallows thickly and walks out to the living room, shaking nervously. Mom is at the kitchen table, smoking, her eyes red-rimmed. The acrid scent of the smoke mixes with the skunk smell coming from under Ben's door.

Annika wrinkles her nose reflexively and opens her mouth to talk but is cut off by the buzz and pulse from Ben's room. Mom punches out the cigarette in the glass ashtray

and brushes past Annika, pounding on Ben's door and shouting. "Turn down the goddamn music!"

Back in her bedroom, Annika spreads out her dad's business cards on the floor and plays grocery store in her mind.

As the pounding and shouting continue, she buys bread, milk, and eggs through blurry vision. The total is \$12.45.

"Charge it," she says, her voice wobbly, wiping at her wet eyes. "No, wait. One more thing."

Pads. So Mom won't notice. So Mom won't have to deal with that, too.

She runs her dad's card through the imaginary credit card machine, signs the receipt, then goes to the window and looks out at the dead grass, brown but for four spots of bright yellow.

"Name two reasons settlers came to the new world," Denise reads in a whisper barely audible. She follows along under the question with her pencil, then puts the eraser back to her lips.

It's a group assignment. Mrs. Dehughes counted them off in twos and then went back to her desk to pat her hair and file her nails.

"They came for the *rodeos*," Britney says behind them. She and Madison laugh. Mrs. Dehughes looks up with a scowl but goes back to her nails.

Annika looks at the side of Denise's face and tries to read what might be hidden there.

"The New England Colonies were dominated by..." Denise reads, turning to face her. Annika shrugs.

"Levi's *Five-Oh-Ones*."

The laughter behind them is deafening; it's all Annika can hear.

"Puritans," Denise says, cutting through the noise, leaving Annika with only the sound of blood throbbing in her temples. She swallows as Denise fills in the blank with perfect, bubbly writing.

"Do you know they're making fun of you?" she whispers.

Denise smirks, filling in the next blank without consulting Annika.

"They'll be mean to anyone. I guess it's just my turn."

Annika furrows her brow. She remembers last year, when they were still in the old house, when she first wore her new bra to school under a white shirt. She never made that mistake again.

But then Colby brought his books to school in a grocery bag.

But then Denise wore Levi's. And then...

The ding of the intercom cuts off Annika's racing thoughts and everyone looks up expectantly.

"Attention students," their principal's voice comes through full and deep. "A piccolo is missing from the band room. If you have taken it, please return it immediately. Thank you."

Everyone looks back at their papers and the giggling begins.

"Maybe it's under Mrs. Dehughes's wig!"

A snort and more laughter.

Denise shrugs as if to say to Annika, "See?" and continues to fill in the blanks.

"Would you like to spend the night at my house?" Annika offers. "I can ask my mom."

Denise walks into Annika's room and puts her overnight bag on the floor.

"So this is my room," Annika says, gesturing weakly around the pristine room, a condition of the sleepover.

"I like it," Denise says, studying the items on Annika's desk—her picture of Grandpa's lakehouse, the bowl of her dad's business cards. "You have a swing set or anything?"

She throws back the curtains and looks out at the empty yard. Empty except for the yellow pads spread in a semi-circle around Annika's window.

Annika rushes to the window as blood fills her cheeks. "No. We don't use the backyard."

"That's too bad," Denise says, staring at the ground and squinting. Annika feels her heart in her throat, beating faster and faster. "Are those...pads?"

Annika cannot meet Denise's eyes. One month, a dozen pads, both her room and Mom's facing the backyard and it is her new friend who sees them first. She wants to die. Instead, she looks out at the pads, her eyes wide as if seeing them for the first time.

"I don't know where those came from," Annika says, her voice constricted, sounding like a liar even to her own ears.

Denise is quiet. In Annika's mind, Denise has already packed and left. On Monday, Denise's voice will join the mean whispers. Finally, something to take the place of Denise's Levi's. "*She throws her pads in her backyard!*"

"I think it's kind of cool," Denise says.

Annika can't breathe. She sits on the edge of her bed and whispers,

"I guess."

"I mean, whoever did that is pretty cool to not care," Denise says, sitting down next to her. "At least I think so."

"Like you're cool," Annika finally manages. "Like you don't care what Britney and Madison say about you."

Denise sticks her hands in the pockets of her Levi's.

"But I do care," Denise says. "What they say hurts."

They sit in silence for a minute. Then, the phone rings and Ben's music starts to hammer.

"But I think they're afraid, too," Denise says. "I think we're all just afraid."

Ben's music and Mom's voice fade.

"Maybe we should pick them up?" Denise asks. "I mean, we might want to use that backyard this summer for a camp out."

Annika stands, feeling lighter. "I'll get a trash bag."

Annika switches on the bathroom light and catches her reflection in the mirror through sleep-filled eyes. The crotch of her flannel sleep pants is bright red with blood. She thinks of her calendar, knows it can't have been a month, then remembers the nurse telling them it takes a few months for things to even out.

There are only seven pads left in the box under the sink. She takes one out and pulls down her pants. The blood is everywhere—soaked through her underwear and pooled in her pants. She sits on the toilet and listens to the drips.

It's Saturday. She and Ben

usually sleep in until at least noon while Mom works her weekend job at Wal-Mart. She must have been woken by the wetness in her pants. Mom is still home; there are heavy steps as Mom goes back to her bedroom, probably grabbing the earrings she forgot to put on. On her way past the bathroom, she pauses.

"Annika? Are you okay?"

"Yep," Annika answers, wiping the thick blood and pulling her soiled pants back up.

"There's bologna in the fridge for a sandwich when you're hungry. We're all out of chips. Sorry."

Mom sounds sorry. She sounds tired. Annika wonders if that is her way of being afraid.

"I'll be home at four," Mom says, walking away, keys jangling.

Annika goes to the hallway. "Mom?"

Her mother turns and comes toward her. Annika's hands are trembling, fidgeting with the soft, yellow wrapper. She should be pretending. Mom needs her to be invisible.

"I gotta go, sweetie, I'm late..." Mom begins.

But Annika can't be invisible today. Today, she needs Mom to see. Without a word, Annika pulls at the crotch of her pants, flaring them out to expose the red stain, too afraid to look up.

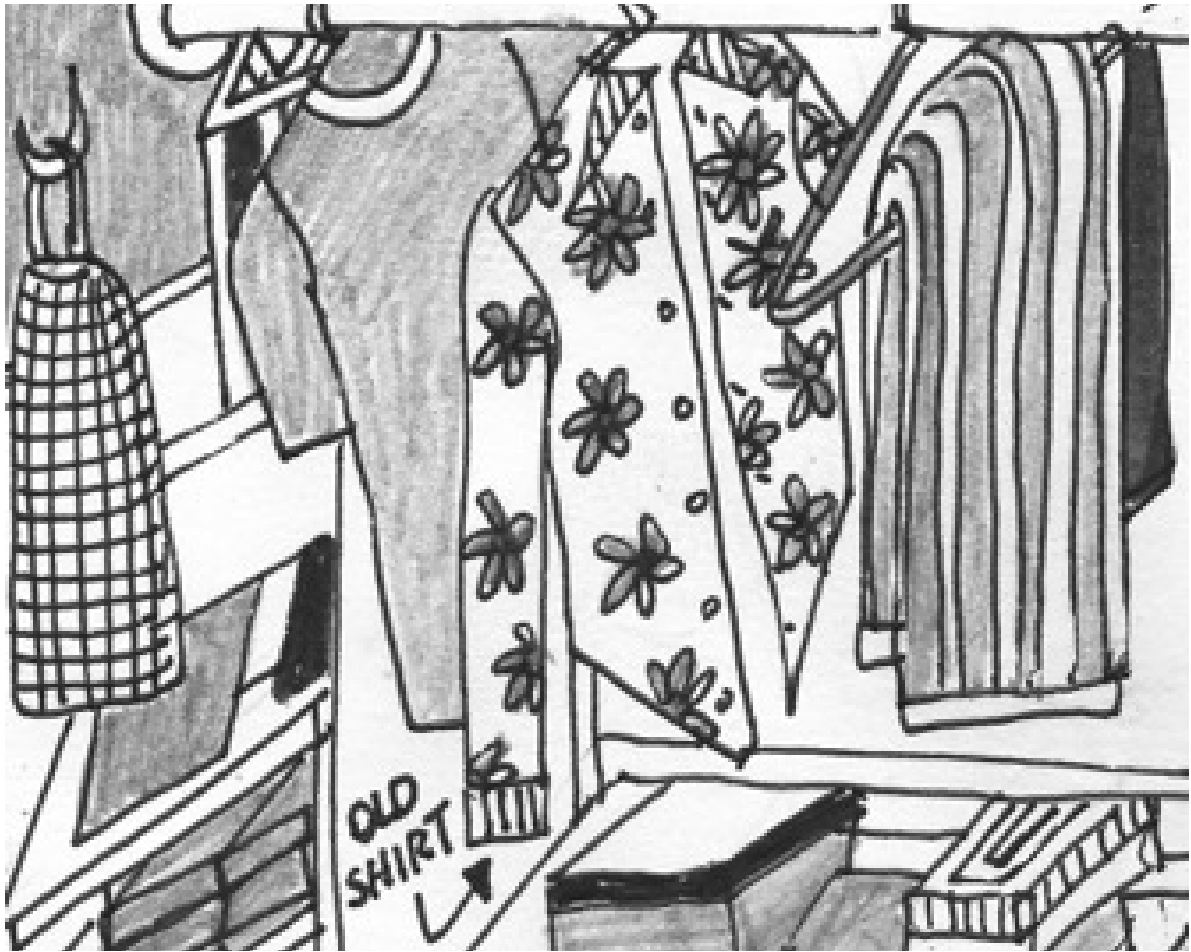
Mom sets her purse and keys on the counter and kneels in front of her and pulling her chin up so they look in each other's eyes.

"You'll have to use my pads for today," Mom says with a sad smile. "But I'll grab you something better when I leave work."

As Mom pulls her close for a hug, the pad clutched in Annika's hand no longer feels so heavy.

Chapter 4: Cherry Pop

Leanne Grabel



I'm a virgin.

But this is an old shirt.

-Darynda Jones



After the joint and the tequila, the rifle one got up and rifled Jill out somewhere in the darkness. I heard Jill shuffle away. I envisioned her long, skinny legs. Bony ankles. Freckled feet in those cool, strappy sandals she bought in San Francisco. I could hear her schussing away. I also could hear a new low-pitched static in my head. Like rapids around the bend. Deep.



The knife one got on me. The ski mask was in my face. I saw the gash of its mouth. I smelled garlic and fear. Its body was on me. Its penis was pushing. It was kissing me. Smashing its lips on my lips. As if lips were a weapon. I wanted to turn off the sensation. Gird my whole body like my nose to a stench. But I felt like I needed to feel it—for a second. It was SEX. Dang. I'd never had it. Never felt it. Never done it. I'd been envisioning it for a decade. I had to feel it—for a second. But I felt nothing but friction. Callus to callus. Fear as epidural.



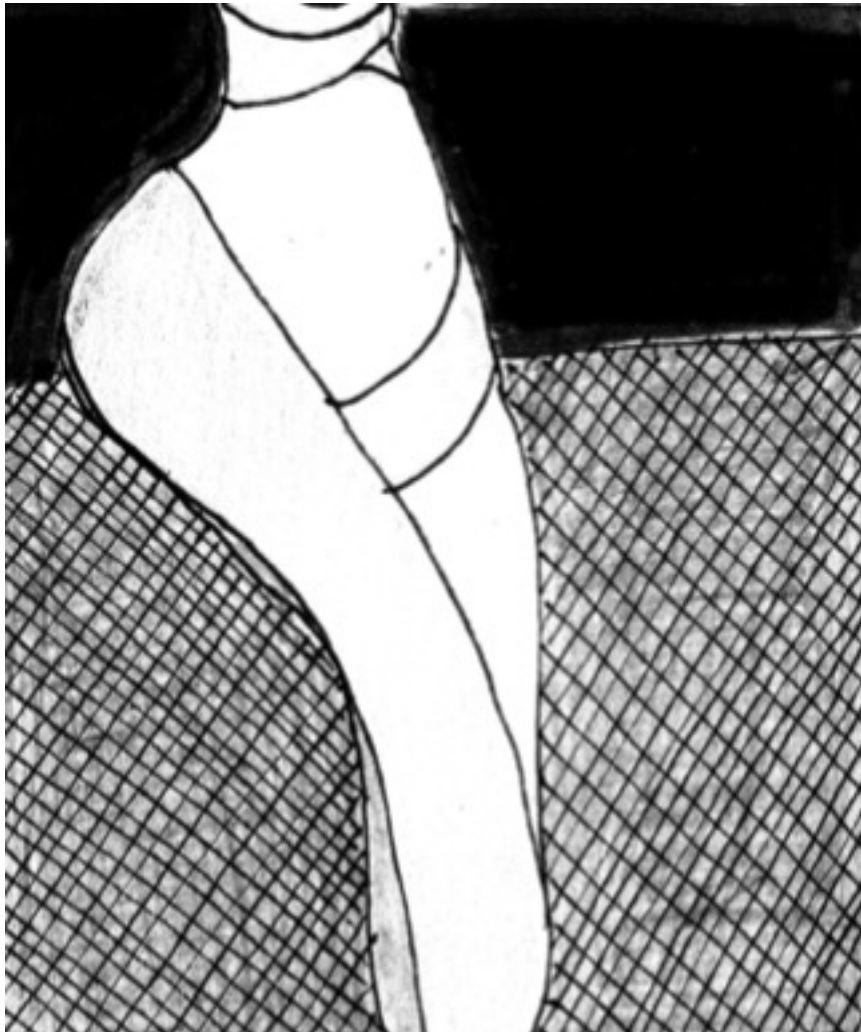
And then I lay there. Flat. Stunned. Ponderously floating. If that's possible. Envisioning home. Plotting survival. My body was stiff. Like a metal pipe dangling from my brawny, agile head, the Motherboard.

“Grunt.” It said. “Grunt.” Then got off. And the other one shuffled over. Its pants were pooled at its feet like a puddle of piss. “Grunt.”

I lay there. Curled up and dry. Like the last piece of bread in an old loaf. Sensation had been flung out like a softball.

Chapter 5: Hope Smells Like Coconut

Leanne Grabel

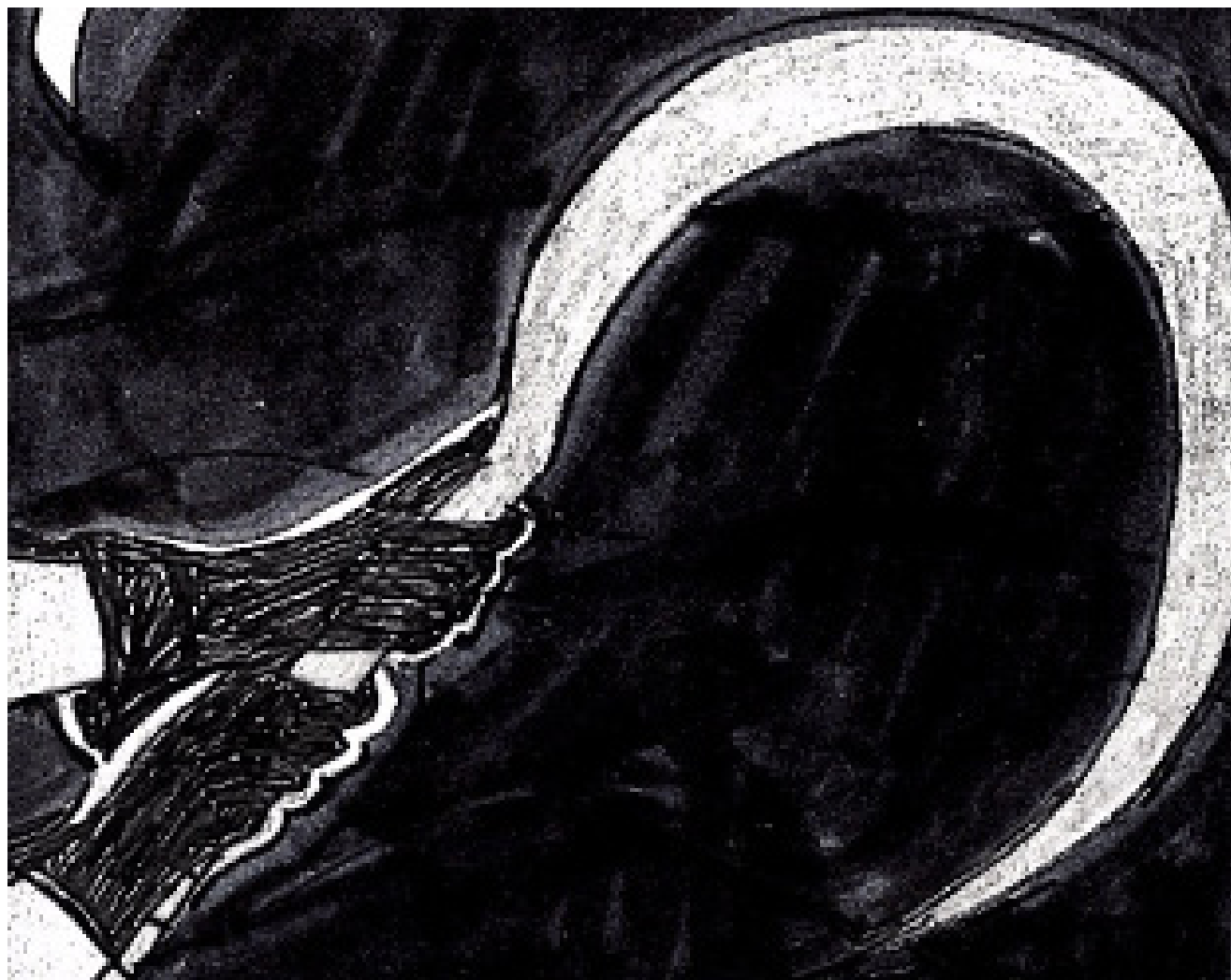


Hope wears pointe shoes.

And smells like coconut.

Aleyana, 5th Grade

Portland, Oregon

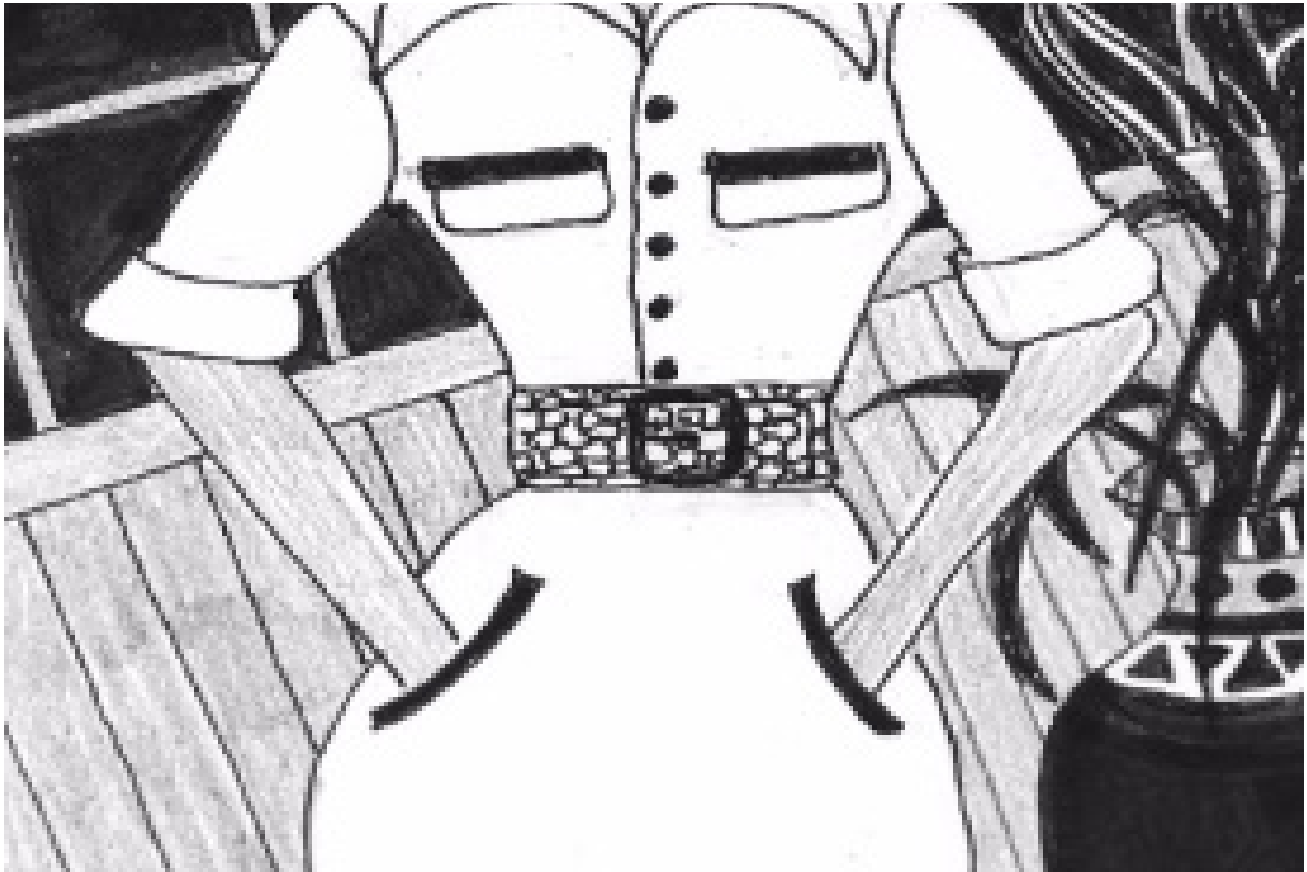


Now it was about whether I would die. Was Jill dead? There was no sound but the ocean. It sounded exactly like the inside of my head. Roaring. I was hoping this wasn't the part where I got shot in the eye or gouged in the belly or axed in the back. Or worse. My God! I envisioned every hideous thing I'd ever read or seen on the screen. They might scythe off my breasts. They might chainsaw off my head. I was sodden, saturated, glutted with fear.



Jill schussed back. Phew. And the rifle one rifle-butted the two of us back into the van. The knife one tied us back up. He tied our hands to our ankles. He put the blindfolds back on. He did a crappy-ass job. I could totally see out the sides. The rifle one came back with Daniel. I couldn't believe it. Maybe they weren't going to slice us and dice us and turn us into Hash of the Privileged.

They got back in the van. And drove. We bounced around in the back like sacks of defeat. My legs were slapping together violently. I was waiting for one of them to turn around and slice off my legs, to stab me in the eye, the guts, to shoot me in the brains, the breast.



My favorite clothes from childhood started walking through my mind, reminding me of my innocent, ignorant past. So far away now. There was my red plaid wool dress with one hundred tiny red buttons from the neck down. There was my turquoise dotted Swiss shift I made in Home Ec. There were lots of puckers. But the color was breathtaking. Caribbean aquamarine. It made my skin look caramel. Even I could tell. There was that raspberry shirtwaist. My first form-fitting grown up dress. With its wide faux alligator belt. No. I wasn't womanly at twelve. I blossomed late. But when I wore that dress, we all got a whiff.



I saw my majorette boots. Chalky white. With their commanding heels and tassels. Both gold. I felt like a Palomino in those boots.



I saw that jar of Ovaltine at Gina Millican's tall white house with its tall white columns. I was so impressed with those tall white columns. And Gina's tall white beautiful mother with her tall black hair. O. I could see the irritation. A quick squint of her eye. A flash spasm along her jawbone. Mrs. Millican was always dressing for cocktails. I remember her in black kid gloves. And Mr. Millican? The opposite. Cute. Freckled. With a darling nose. A San Joaquin Valley boy. With his orange hair and saddle oxfords. He flopped around like her lap dog. He reminded me of Ron Howard.

Chapter 6: Sandy Poofs of Dust

Leanne Grabel



*A tragedy is a tragedy,
and at the bottom,
all tragedies are stupid.*

-Stephen King

They just kept driving. They were quiet. Just the sound of tires crunching and scratching along pebbles and sand. Then they stopped. They got out of the van and tore out of the seats as if ripping gigantic teeth from their roots. There were nauseating cackles. They stripped off the paneling, tossing big sheets of it onto the beach like dried skin. They cracked off the drawers. Cracked off the mirrors. Took the pan of chicken. The bowl of coleslaw. The cassette player. All the tapes. Cat Stevens. Bob Dylan. Emerson, Lake & Palmer. Joni Mitchell. They took them all. They took our backpacks. They took my journal.

I kept expecting them to turn around, crouch and blow me apart at the pelvis, or the ear. To stab me in the breast, or the heart. But they didn't. They just kept walking, creating tiny poofs of sandy dust. It was the happiest moment of my life.

And GOD DAMMIT, they took my butterscotch suede fringed Wild Bill Hickok jacket. Picture sun-kissed English butterscotch. Picture rows and rows of fringe. Picture the best jacket ever. They took the foot mats.





Truth...they untied us. They took the blindfolds off. And they screamed. Go! *Vamanos! Vamanos!* They tossed the keys back at Jill's feet. And they walked away. They just walked away. Their footsteps creating little poofs of sandy dust. It was the happiest moment of my life.

POETRY

Lyndsay and Paris

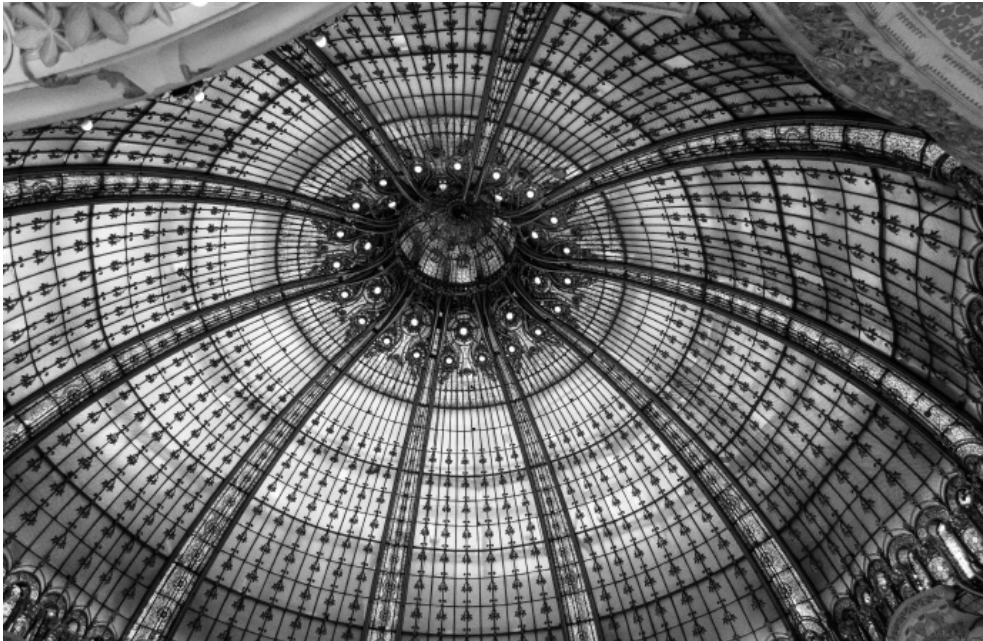
Katherine Chan

“...be grateful for this surplus of bodies and props
make your pain into the shape of a wet tongue and open your mouth with it
allow it to be licked and tender like a gaping wound.”

-Lyndsay Thornton from British Columbia, Canada

There is always Paris—or rather—there is always negative space between you and the rest. Barthes’ theory on the purpose and power of the Eiffel Tower lies within the autarchy of how one feels being inside the tower, surveying the panoramic view of the metropolis and beyond: “one can feel oneself cut off from the world and yet the owner of a world.”

The misty golden hours of Paris illustrate flawlessly the definition of “picturesque.” Bridges of age, dirt, sweat of tourists, Europeans, kings and gods for the crossing; masonry and markings from the Middle Ages warmly remind: take this time for yourself, because otherwise you’d forget, get lost, fall into the abyss of oblivion, normativity, lukewarm feelings. The rows of Haussmann symmetry echo with positive neutrality: you are alone in this and you may rest in it. End the desire to make the next conclusion, predict your expectation; let the Moment take its place, manifest in its magnificence, and depart; separate your reality and the Reality (and rest within, hold onto, the mitigation); put your fingers through your hair, shoot a glance at your own reflection—in the mirror, in the shadow—and be grateful for the surplus of your body. Slide your limbs through aloneness’, pain’s, desire’s sleeves and button down the linger of their attics.



Dear John

Katherine Chan

When did roses become so gorgeously embodied in the antithetical spirit to love, pure superficiality, and emptiness?

I sat across from her and thought, this could be the end. It could also not be, despite her resistance towards creating *the end* with her own hands in order to cease the day. It made me sad to see her so beautiful. White lace folds that looked vintage; I imagined a smell of nostalgia for a time that hasn't folded over.

She said, Rapunzel! Let down your hair! Look out the window.
I looked out the window and there she was. From above, I wished I had long enough hair to rescue her.

She looked the way she did as if to mourn the bride that wasn't going to be; as if to mock the tradition of holy matrimony; as if she didn't want to believe in those moments that she caved in for and made a ring anymore.

I wish I were more romantic and less skeptical, by way to give her hope as opposed to nihilism. I didn't give her anything but my confidence in her: I trust in my ability to recognize when someone stops being right for me, when we stop doing the right thing with each other. So, I trust in hers too.

Seeing those roses was like touching something that is plastic having thought it porcelain. For a moment, I was nostalgic for the time when I once dreamt of romance in and through them. It's a sad relief, much like setting oneself free from demanding love.



Saut de Chat

Kenneth Kesner

in a painting desperate to talk
then falling away into stills
a frame at a time chained to itself
she'd play a scene from a lyric
long before it could be read
a scene about an everywhere
where she's within the lines
she'd say and so hurry to ask
what you think she's just done
to tell of her lovers all of them
lost again in her embrace



still somehow

Kenneth Kesner

people will read our minds
write an abstract and title it
like something that's not right
not all there inside
i'm telling you i'm just like you
afraid of what they don't say
as long as they look past us
with eyes nailed to themselves
in a plaza of lines
they walk in circles of time
to remember they've been there
a sense without end never gone
and a woman bathes someone
in her tears she can never see
and the moon looks down
into a room next door and
there's an orgy but no one's there
only lucifer on a cross
it's nothing you can touch then
another window is broken at the edges
how lives they can slip into walls
covered in the fresco of sometimes
and i'm just as afraid as you are



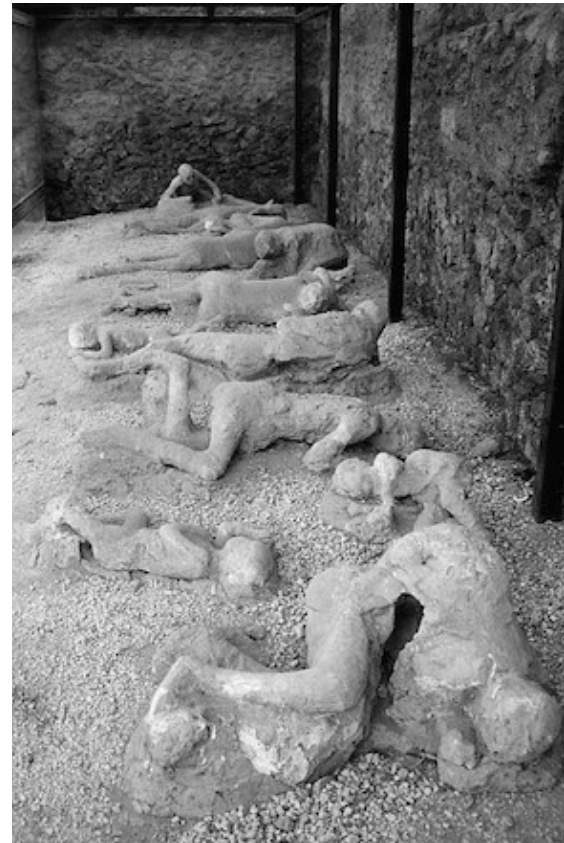
Fuck Your Church

Jacklyn Janeksela

We are bending forward, but not like bowing, not like bowing down at all. This shit is sacred. This is a death ritual. No dead bodies here. Not yet. This is a waving goodbye to frightened energies we have carried inside our bodies; a closing ceremony on fear. Scared no more. We are alarmed and armed for the marching, for a sun we make rise over the horizon; it's all ours. Parade on through; banner a body made of ribbon and coiled worm. Each one of us bubbled forth from this dirt; man, a trial. We're the real deal. No error in these breasts; milk rivers pour, milk pours from our pores. We've been known to suckle more than man; what want of magic.

A crow announces our company, we are glass formed under pressure; our see-through bodies blend with nature; we are invisible. In the early dawn, after the crow has gone, we've already taken what was needed to be taken. Not a single twig snaps. Not one leaf crunches. We be floating. Light as a feather, you've been warned.

We are bending like prayer but not to any church you know. The church of blood and tears, of menstrual blood, of broken bones, of soiled panties, of body parts attached and unattached to lovely ladies' bodies, the church of the serpent that crawls down from our bodies, digs a hole, and waits. This church does not tolerate passive prayer; this church does not tolerate bodies that don't respect other bodies. We fetishize altars with saliva and honey, drip and burn, fur, feather, hair, pestle and mortar, coin, bill, quill, vinegar and urine, paper, pen, tear. Altar yolks fresh ones, fresh ones that carry knife, machete, plume. We are not that broom. We are this here loom, threading through and throughout a world, our mother on that gunfire, gunpowder spoon. Volcanic ash settling when the work is done, when we've burned each violator; bones to powder. We are dusting our faces. We are readying ourselves for a rising dawn, a very round and mild sun. We are fulfilling apocalyptic dust to dust. Oxen pulling carts of bodies to rest, piled high for embers and amber waves of grain, sound. Our church rumbles on the mound.



The Silence We Have Driven From Our World

Andrew Fenstermaker

My gun
never said
a proper goodbye.

I used to hold it
fondly.

Always.

On my side
throughout each day.

Under my pillow
after.

My head full of nightmares
where it wouldn't work
when it was most needed.

The stereotypes
were reflected
everywhere.

The redneck tough guys.

The ruthless gang members.

The renegade poets.

All were true
at some point.

The helpless farmers.

The heroic soldiers.

The horrified kid
who accidentally
just shot the other.

I still have it.

Resting
in a wad of dirty clothes
I'll never wash.

The loudest thing I've ever owned
tucked away quietly.

Fever dreams
of the hunt,
the hold up,
the threat,
the escape.

The brutal war erupting
and the home kept safe from it.

The air
from now on
is gunpowder.

It exhales revolution.

Spits revenge.

Embraces accuracy.

Coddles self-inflicted wounds.

It is patient
and with the slightest touch of a nervous finger
all of that can change.

Farewell,
Dear Friend.

Or rather,
see you later...



The Last Lust

Colin Dodds

Saturday night, the sidewalks fill with music thumping
like the echocardiogram of a huge soul-eating beast.
In the sweaty air, the muses sing only of Lust.

Lust for the destruction of the world,
the sun fucking the moon
in an eclipse dirtier than a lovers' argument
heard through an apartment wall.

Lust to make the ocean explode
and drown out the decades of odds and ends,
the half-meant courtesies and minor slights,
the many lineups and petty castrations.

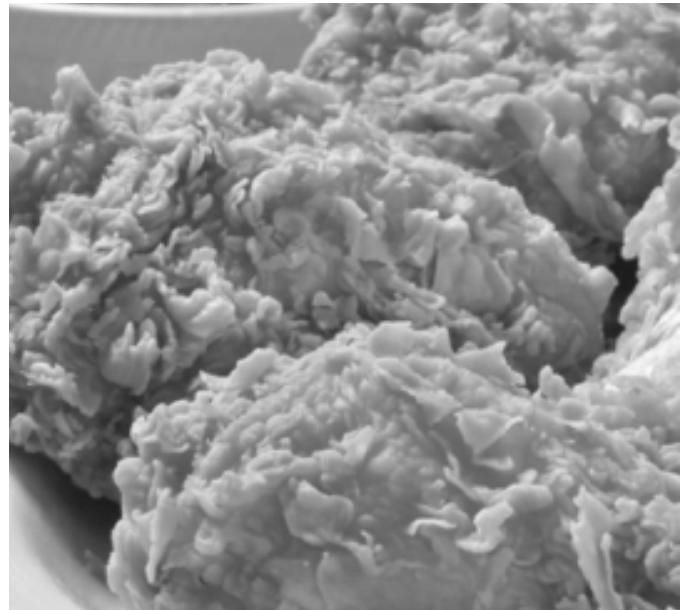
Lust to unscramble the stars
into a lit sign that flashes
Popeye's Fried Chicken
in the immensity.

Lust to eat fried chicken,
while heartbroken astronomers stream past,
scrambling for another faded sensation
to suck the life from.

Lust to make the secret explicit
and the explicit secret once again.
Lust to keep the wheel of appearances spinning
fast enough to stay turned on.

Lust to consummate one last just war,
with an ill-gotten final fuck
in the dead planet's last shuddering breath,
and to abide in a post-coital eternity.

The stomach lurches,
the planet-rending fantasy glows
from under painted eyelids.



Into the River

Craig Bruce McVay

I am old.
I walk into the river,
under the gray stone floeberg.

I am tired, and my eyes are dark.
I lie down, and the sludging water rolls
over me, slowly.

I am old and tired and very cold.
My eyes are dark, and my brown dreams
stagger as if to drown.

The shadows of those I've loved sweep
quickly past me. I see only their black
river backs. I have forgotten their names.

I can't remember
the greens and blues of their waking eyes,
which I won't see again.

And I won't see again
the snow-geese flying over the ice.



Use Nouns and Verbs

Craig Bruce McVay

Use nouns and verbs, poets tell us.
Eschew *be* and the adjective.

A case in point: *to die*, not *to be dead*.
I prefer to say, *Grandfather died ten years ago*,
than *Grandfather has been dead for ten years*.

As if he made a decision and acted on it;
smiled at Grandmother and said, *I reckon*
I'll go feed the horses now.
Then I'll come climb
under the comforter,
and I'll die.

I like the subject to control the verb.
As in *Grandfather read history,*
and he loathed FDR.

Or, *Grandfather taught me*
to swim the summer I turned six;
He said to kick my legs
and pretend to swim like a trout.

I had forgotten swim trunks:
We don't concern ourselves with that here.

I do not like the modifier *dead*. I cannot
bring myself to say, *Grandfather is dead*.
Or *Grandmother is dead*. Or *Mother*— or *Father*—
is dead.

Or, for that matter, *I will be dead*—
I prefer to imagine I'll know
when the time comes,
and I'll die.



Lavatory

Timothy Robbins

The purpose of loneliness. The utility of hearing.
What those men hear.
A gasp they never thought they'd make.
Water coming out of people
as though they are watering
cans tricked into wasting
their vital compound.
Hoses that got bored
waiting for fires to tame
and neighborhood kids to delight.
Water spiraling down into
a manmade underworld.
Our dirty essence arrested and
sent to re-education camps.
A new Muslim at the sink,
humming on one foot.
A custodian's casters wobbling
and squeaking.
The phantom music
of sleep starvation. You think it's
your neighbor's abandoned radio,
faint as a conscience. A fluorescent
buzz as constant, as unpronounceable
as the Holy Name.
The proper use of loneliness.
Hearing's transcendence of its part in survival.
The profanities of a man
who's full of shit and can't
do anything about it. A retiree's
weeping as damped as your gutturals
of pleasure. A father coaching his
newly potty-trained progeny.
A homeless man baptizing his face
in the name of the the Father
and the Son and the Bodysnatchers.
A woman janitor's "Any-body-in-there"
reminding you of courtship's
inevitability.
Farts signaling each
other like fenced-in dogs.
TP holders imitating spurts
of running from gerbils

trapped in their wheels.
Leaks with their longing for lost
plumbers and their slightly
eccentric sense of rhythm.
Footsteps that could belong to a
cop, that deep inside you feel
should belong to a cop. When he
questions you, confess.
The only way to get back to
the beauty of loneliness, the
beauty of hearing when other beauties stop.



Shadows at Night

Natalie Crick

Shadows dance:
The shape of your ghost
A pornography of orchids,
Soft, quiet as new snow.
Night fulls.
Our bodies grow limbs.
They rise and sink,
Feeling for a heartbeat.
Longing, melting
Like dead bees pouring
From a smoking hive.
Tulip petals close.
The stars will not hold back.
They starve for light.
Moon dreams on,
Clumsy as lead.



Commentary

S.A. Gerber

Cannot forgive
past or
prevailing winds.
They have
forever tainted
the stillness.
Cannot ignore
a woman
in fear
or a
hungry dog.
Let these
be a
barometer for
personal morals.
Bars are
low enough
reflecting societies
common denominator.
Sad commentary
is front
page news
on the
dying papers.
Strive to:
House homeless—
Feed hungry—
Love unloved,
and them
who write
in dissent.



The Second Day

Michael Marrotti

Combating
these cold sweats
with timely
hot showers

Sipping
coffee that's
as black
and bleak
as my future

Twisting
and turning
no closer to
a comfortable
place on this
dilapidated
mattress

Becoming
just as redundant
as these other
boring writers

My authenticity
is what separates
me from the rest

I'd like to have
a new subject
or preferably
a confirmation
via text
but I haven't
found a way
to write away
this pain



Sobriety

Michael Marrotti

I've endured
the torture of
waking up to
empty bottles

The temper
tantrums
and despair
of losing an
established
home

All it takes
is walking
through
that door once
to forever alter
your trajectory

Now that I've
tasted life
as it dripped
down my
nasal cavities
triggering this
enlightenment
spawning my
creativity

I decline
any other
way of living
the choice is mine
abstinence would
only necessitate
a code orange
from equilibrium
to destabilization

For I'm at war
with a divisive society
chemical imbalance

and the greatest threat
to a creative mind

Sobriety



Molotov

David Barnes

With the unsaid said,
the family skeletons sit smouldering,
shadows fused to the sofa.
The echoes of afterthoughts
stain the air,
taste of petrol.

*

(then)

the smoky sting of the whisky
brings back that winter
I bought my first bottle of Jack Daniel's

Mum thought I was turning into an alcoholic.
Everything had already fallen apart.
Dad was on Prozac,
Mark was stitched and healed
but no longer whole.
He had the right to exit
the casual ward in daylight,
buy cigarettes or pick up dog ends in the road.

Psychiatrics' modern weapons
had turned out to be not electroshock
but an enforced boredom
that, exactly because it was unsaid,
convinced patients in the locked rooms of their minds
that life wasn't worth it.

The staff papered over the abyss in the daytime
till the doctors went home
then wheeled round the trolley
off the record
to medicate the wrecked and the write-offs.

My fear came on with the darkness
as each day faded
my thoughts sank into our insoluble problems
whispered that it was all my fault.
Late at night I grilled Mark's cannabis leaves
so dry they crackled when I skinned up
and smoked not for the anchorless high
that amplified the fear
but just to have a ritual.

That winter I sat on Silly Bridge with the trains crashing through the
arches
saw the village and the asylum both curious, alien.

I read *Howl* and *A Season in Hell*
holding on to the lines like you hold on to the metal bar on a rollercoaster
that stops you falling out
that will pull you through

*

(now)

In the land of the blind,
the people of the lie
conspire to believe six impossible things before breakfast.
Foxed, they gull themselves

Call up a crystal ball!
What near-future does the tarot tell?
Just this: the new card is the Con Man
he turns up again and again at the top of the deck
All the other cards are Fools

What would Mark Twain say?
That old joke
Have you heard they removed the word gullible from the dictionary?
You can fool enough of the people some of the time



The novelty in the act this time around
is that caught in a lie the Con Man is not phased
is openly proud of his contempt for the conned

No place here for Orwell's honest propaganda I see.

*

Poets are liars who speak the truth
hunters whose arrows always fall short.

Words dog them
clumsy, heavy footed things
scaring off through the forest
crash crash crash

Are they the wise
who know they are fools?
Some kind of clown-anarchist
proclaiming approximations that may trip you into your own truth

*

Waking in the chaos of a friend's 7th floor flat where he thinks about wanting to die
but cannot,
Amidst the cats and the wreckage the cracked cups, torn canvas, tubes of paint,
I find the broken frame of his glasses, and think *This is what 44 looks like.*

Who were you really, brother, two decades back, when you were shut up
in the psychiatric hospital?
while I, barely a ghost, got out with only a felt sense to follow, bristling into shapes like clouds,
like nothing at all, ready to go into battle naked, if you'd wanted me to.
Then down my thin, lizard spine life was opening like a knife
and you, the surgeon, turned your back on the family of broken toys,
stepped in and out of Fairmile hospital like a cat on the threshold
of your life.

I leave my friend's flat,
go downstairs, take a seat in the metro, feel only the seat back, juddering movement of the train,
think of two rivers, the green Seine, the other mud-brown and midnight swimmable, the lights of
Fairmile through the trees,
and home,
where you first picked up this hot thread that draws through the hand a string of disasters.
Something in the rat-brain as sharp and old as flint unearthed from the chalk of the Downs
and a violence that we're still working out

*

(then)

Ritual

Woke to desolation
slight weight in the stomach
loose jaw, inertia.

how many times in my teens did I wake to this?
and mask it, go downstairs
to breakfast

Streaky bacon or Weetabix.
The Guardian's thin newsprint.
Dad to my left - sandpaper face, broad back and builder's hands.
This the moment he came in closest
and I weakened my shoulder, softened or I'd not have felt his touch.
Little brother practicing silent insolence, thinking godknowswhat.
Suicide... Or murder.
Mum, en face, orchestrating Conversation,
drawing a line around what could not be said
pushing it out of sight,
blood sunk below the skin.

so the bodysoul recreates the way
we recreated each other for years
fixing to our places

Outside was the frost, the cold green blades, the white plastic lid of sky.
and on this side of the glass - warm, cosy death.

Fall

Amy Barry

A silhouette swings
beneath the maple tree.
Moss crusted up its trunk.

Lulling into winter,
her white face jewelled
in green, black, yellow and rust.

Shame hangs from twisted limbs,
no longer secret between lovers.

Thoughts —
a network of cracks.

In unison,
her senses sing,
the overhangs of ecstasy.

The sound of crows
cawing
their lonely flight home.



Amants (Lovers - Szeretők)

Kinga Fabó

Tu es libre, a dit l'étranger.
Avant que je n'arrive.
Costume. Pourtant je portais un costume.
J'étais curieuse : quelle serait sa réaction ?

Il a fermé ses autres yeux.
J'enverrai un moi au lieu de toi.
S'adoucir, je le sens, lui aussi. Remue à peine. Il s'étrangle en moi.
Au présent je dois vivre avec un autre mort.

Ce n'est même pas désespéré.
Pas malveillant.
Ça sert l'absence.
Livre l'excès.

(Translated into French by Camille Adnot)



Androgène (Androgen - Androginosz)

Kinga Fabó

Les abeilles sont résistantes, vierges dures à briser.
Des vierges, mais différentes de nous, humains.
Sans ego. Hermaphrodites. Comme la lune.

Papillons. Âmes phalliques.
Phallus d'âme dans des corps féminins.
La fille, les filles de la lune

m'ont attirée mais seulement jusqu'à
ce que je les devine
en amantes.

Je me suis fatiguée de mon égo.
Et des leurs.
Leurs services m'ennuient.

Ça érige un obstacle entre nous. Ni
dedans ni dehors. En vain
je m'efforce. Je peux percer à travers

le mien, d'une manière.
Mais lui, le sien ? Comment ?
Egoïste, persuasif ; mais pour quoi ?

Est-il ainsi par nature,
servile, dépendant ?
De moi ? C'est décourageant.

Il n' imagine même pas, que je dépends de lui.
Je suis la plus forte, celle qui n'est pas protégée.
Résistante comme une femme, austère.

Délicate comme un homme, fragile, douce.
Que voudrais-je ? Je veux qu'il
me jette tendrement à terre,

me pénètre violemment, sauvagement.
Que je puisse devenir vide et neutre.
Impersonnelle, essentiellement une femme.

(Translated into French by Camille Adnot)



Anesthésie (Anesthesia - Anesztézia)

Kinga Fabó

Je pensais : il me laverait.
Mais il m'a juste vaporisée.
Filtré mes couleurs.
Les a repliées. A l'intérieur de la statue.

Puis vinrent les odeurs.
Les racines mal installées.
Come indices.
Sur la table d'opération.

Je suis stérile.
Célèbre au-dehors.
Vide au-dedans.
Mes verbes auxiliaires sont des hommes en coiffe.

Son don : des voies ferrées sans sourire ;
toujours prêt pour la tragédie –
étrange, comme un battement de cœur –
Le péché n'est qu'une décoration.

Je n'ai pas de repos. J'en suis sûre :
Je m'enracinerai quelque part.
C'est un pro.
Il me veut glacée.

(Translated into French by Camille Adnot)



Je ne suis pas une ville (I'm not a city - Nem vagyok város)

Kinga Fabó

Je ne suis pas une ville : je n'ai ni lumière, ni vitrines. Je me sens belle
Je me sens bien. Tu ne m'as pas invitée pourtant. Comment je suis arrivée ici ?

Tu ferais n'importe quoi pour moi ; vrai ?
Allons-y ! A l'attaque.
Une simple poupée d'épouse ? J'habille, habille, habille moi-même.

L'habit reste.
J'opère, car je suis opérée.
Je ne peux qu'opérer.
(Je n'ai aucune valeur pour personne.)
Qu'est-ce qui manque, encore ?

Mais les deux sont des hommes isolément.
Magie éternelle. Confusion abondante.
Lente, sans merci.
Un autre arrive : presque parfait.
Je l'avale.

Je l'avale lui aussi
Il est trop précieux pour être gaspillé ainsi
Je le choisirais : s'il avait su, que je le choisirais.

Mais il ne sait pas. Mon tendre est lunatique.
En vain il est plein : il n'est rien sans la lune, il ne peut pas changer, ne veut pas changer,
de la façon dont les balles en acier tourbillonnent : à la dérive,

le bleu dérive.
Il tolère la violence qui lui est faite, j'avais peur qu'il se reprenne et exige de la violence.
Je me suis regardée,

renaissance, indifférente :
(si je le fais fondre !)
Têtu, dense, hurlant. Ils l'ont bien façonné.
Maintenant il est en transition.
Il est un lac : à la recherche de son rivage.

(Translated into French by Camille Adnot)



Le parfum de Süskind (A Süskind Perfume - A Süskind-parfüm)

Kinga Fabó

Le maestro est en manque d'inspiration
Baptiste procure-en comme à l'époque
Suis son odeur la femme
Elle tourne la tête du brouillard vole-la

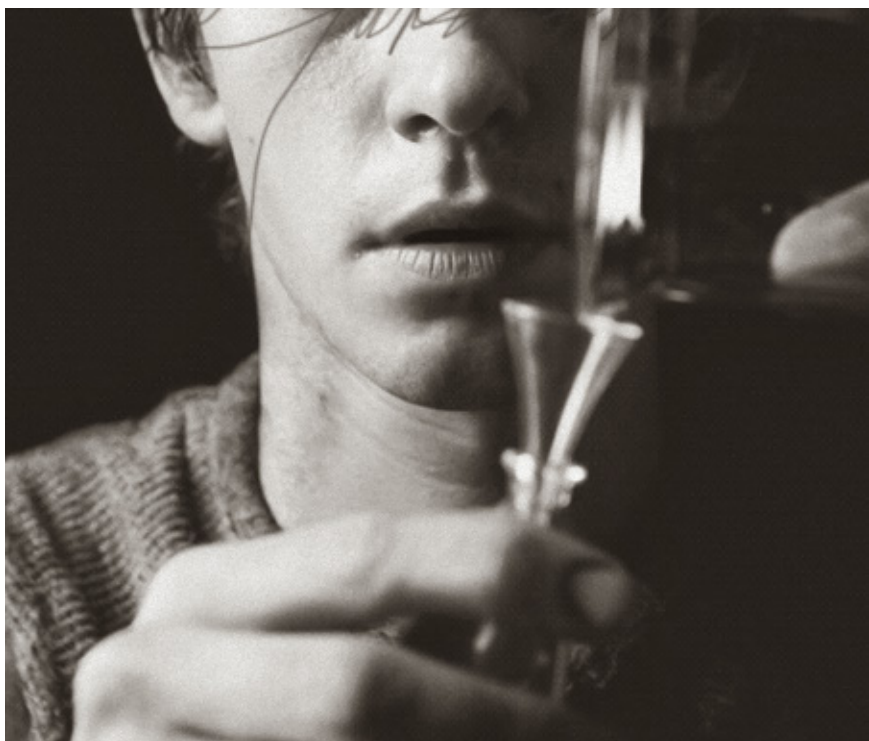
enduis-la et emballe-la dans un sac
laisse-la tremper un moment dans la graisse
afin de préserver sa volatilité
avec chacune de ses gouttes

la graisse l'absorbe
elle t'incite à suivre
l'odeur sur les corps
de toutes les autres femmes

recules-tu devant chacune ?!
que se passe-t-il si ton désir
te rend fou
suis son odeur

(et toi, suave odeur, t'évaporeras)

(Translated into French by Camille Adnot)



Poison (Poison – Poison)

Kinga Fabó

Je ne sais pas ce que c'est, mais c'est très mal-intentionné. Sûrement, une femme y appartient.
Et quelque chose comme un rire.

Je fais tourner la ville sur moi,
fais tourner ma beauté. C'est ça !
Tant de clés, de petites serrures en tourbillon.

Les regards ne peuvent pas tous être en vain. Et la réponse ?
Une simple raillerie.
Le vase m'étreint et me tue, je m'étouffe.

Allons, on ne peut pas dire de mes traits,
même avec les meilleures intentions, qu'ils sont beaux.
Et elle ? La fille ? Son parfum à la mode

Poison. Oui, pour moi, un vrai poison.
Et le vase ?
Il m'étreint et me tue.

Mais que ferais-je sans ?

(Translated into French by Camille Adnot)



The Decent Things to Do

Bruce Edward Sherfield

For the love of god, give the man a podium...
Don't let him stand there, papers in hand like a stranger's dirty underwear, sweating it out with the shakes. The alcohol barely out of his system. From the night...Nights. How many nights? He doesn't even know anymore. Let him stand straight, erect. Let his voice boom from his throat with confidence, square shouldered in the light's embrace. He is up there for a reason. Not for the applause, or the acclaim, but for you, the audience, the mob of social cannibals and broken hearts. With the power to rip him to shreds of commonplace commentary. Exposed and alone, he lacks and is asking for a backbone.

For the love of chocolate, give the man a napkin...
Give him silverware, or wooden ware, or plastic-wrapped fast food one-off utensils. Let him eat with dignity, however pathetic it seems to us, the vile gruel of twenty missed dinners can magically transform into a simmering soup if only he had a spoon. Slave boots become leathery wings if only for the catgut laces. And seasoning. Nutmeg preserves the meat, black pepper to mask the aroma of shiprot, the presence of worms. Give him the chance to taste the pinch of salt, to never notice the situation, the predicament, the maladie, the ills. Let him close his eyes and chew, chew the dream to the smallest conceivable morsel. He will have no trouble swallowing, savoring, reminiscing the moment he wasn't thinking...

"This is it. This is what it is to be starving. This is the sound of my child's stomach growling to death. This is what it is to think about killing. Killing for a decent bite to eat."

For the love of bunny rabbits, give the man a dog...
Man's best friend, they say. A hunter needs his hound. To track with him through the darkened warrens of forest and mind. He needs someone who will accept him unconditionally. In a West Virginia coal town, a retired miner shoots his wife,

then walks his dog, labrador unharmed. The police caught him in the middle of something, something that went twisted in his life, of strange two-legged bipeds and their geopolitical overanalytical, nuclear supercritical, intellectually digital, oversexualized, emotionally cauterized, impotent, incompetent, itinerant, and immaturely digitalized and pitifully unoriginal...

DOG. GOD backwards. Devil dogs, to hell and back, the ice cold fires of eternity unleashed on the human soul, and he will gladly clean up all the shit on the sidewalks of Satan city. This is a dog's life, eat shit and sleep. Bark at the noises of the night, turn around a few times, and plop down in the perpetual ecstasy of being dumber than a rock.

For the love of warm *sake*, give the man a rope.



The Creator

Bruce Edward Sherfield

God is the creator.
God is great. God is good.
When I step away from this shell, God will be waiting for me,
On a path of glory.

Let us pray, for a closer family and solid truth from every eye.
Let us wait, and a sign will save us. God is our church. God is our teacher.
Her name brings forth peace, the very sound of tranquility.

God is everything, God is everywhere. God gives head on the bed in her dead son's
bedroom. But if you go to see her never go on the weekend. The four fathers of her
other kids, their checks come on Friday, one after the other, like monthly marching
soldiers, like punctual whores themselves. Wait till Tuesday. Her lips, the ones that
give, the ones that live, the ones that live on crackpipe, won't be healed before that.
God is a virtuoso who plays her concerto on the cheap crystal flute that no one
hears, her silent cries, yes, a well-worn cliché, but true because when have you
heard of a sobbing sack of *omnipotence*?
God is good, god is poor, and God is a whore...
Two-bit good for nothing, but God don't cry. Nowadays, hell, since eternities...
Nowadays, she don't even try.



Failure looks a lot like Father

Bruce Edward Sherfield

I feel ya, failure
I can feel you...like a vice.
A solid grip
on my short and curlsies
I'm a man, you know, so I talk in the old codes
Of two ripe cherries and a banana
One night, it was, I woke up a blubbering idiot,
The sweat running behind the meaning—
my fruit done rot! my fruit done rot!

Big baby.

Early morning
And I've yet to establish any kind
Of contact with that world outside
My face, to face
a window
by and by the clear light's fondle-prone embrace
Outside world, inside whirled, like whirlwind
Whirlpool, whirligig spun from, around, about
Proper notions mentioned in our manuals on success
I feel ya, failure, in excess
The surprise is more and more
I can feel my father
What he said, what he did, had done
To find purchase on his particular
unreachable inescapable ledge
I can see you, failure
Through a hole in the gate
As you take a sip of some three cubed smoke-flavored
distillation
reclined by the offshooting pool lamps of your
bungalow I long to afford.
As you lick your lips, so thin that it begs the question
Why does such an evil sliver deserve so much saliva?
Stop peeping-tomming me...

It's only minutes after sun o'clock.
And you've started once again...
And I'll be damned to be judged on no proof
until half-past moon a.m.



Stacey

Edward Bell

Jane, 48, university lecturer.
Shop worker told store is closing.
“When are you going to get your clothes off?” she said.

The grey rain dampened the stone around the Pantheon. The bars were quieter than usual.

A lecturer at the university is to meet her husband within wooden panels. She asks softly her husband to kiss her navel and he obliges. After all it was a difficult day at the office; sales aren't good; there are going to be some cutbacks; a receptionist or two are going to have to go. He notices her necklace.

“Stacey, can you please come into my office?”

I specialised in Virginia Woolf. Seymour-Smith's the name and I'm a specialist in Virginia Woolf. My heyday might have been, but my affection is mature.

On the dampened cobbles around the Pantheon, where the bars were quieter than usual, a woman breaks a heel. And the husband, top-button undone, offers his arm, which she gladly accepts. And he thinks of his wife, remembering the traffic before he could see his first born for the first time, and they move on within wooden panels.

The children are sleeping; the maid comes tomorrow. The wife knows her husband's kinks and adores them. They sleep in a bed that no-one else knows.

She'd been at a conference on Woolf that day. **LOVING THE OTHER.**

He had been driven home after taking some clients out to the Raspoutine night bar.

“Stacey, could you step into my office please?”

Coffee pervades the marble kitchen by a maid’s doing. A husband’s hand lingers on the wife’s thigh.

“I’ll have to take those shoes to the cobbler’s,” she says, while the children line up to go to school.

A conference on Virginia Woolf called “Loving the other.” The Raspoutine calls, while a wife breaks a heel on the cobbles around the Pantheon.

The jewels are casually resting on the bedside table. More bad news in the paper.

“Stacey, would you come into my office please?”

Where are the female voices? The husband shatters the dreams of another young woman. And it smells of office. Back at home, the couple sits in front of the living room mirror which they’ve made love by countless times.

Why do I have to write the last lines of a young woman’s hope? It smells of office. All this time dominated by men in the emperor’s new clothes and no perfume.

“Stacey, will you come into my office please?”

The wife’s jewels flash in his eyes, and my cold pen cannot stop recording.

One more desperate Woolf gone; one more cuntish Seymour-Smith still living.

I have to lie to my younger self, screams the boss-man inside.

And do you know what I’d call this? I’d call it a fucking continuation of History.

MISSING IN ENGLAND



Virginia Woolf

VIRGINIA WOOLF BELIEVED DEAD

Novelist Is Thought to Have Been Drowned Friday— Had Been Ill

ASKS STATE FOR MENT

Governor Com to Place Before 100,000 Issue

9,000 BEDS

Governor Also for Ward's Is Delay In

Special to THE ALBANY, April man urged the to approve subm bond issue to the ber, for the arec mental hygiene sent a special houses, making of three bills, c issue, the second for temporary re hattan State Hos postponing the p of that institut 1948.

Today

Paul Harden

We are the
Roman mob
Rome is burning
We are still
in the Colosseum
applauding the gladiators



Active Acting Anarchist

Nina Živančević

You can put these inverted commas wherever you like, above any act or action of mine,
The entire cities of Paris, London or Belgrade are my daily stage
where i pound the streets and fill out the refugees' cups with money
As i try not to insult them i tell them
First seelaam aleicum
And when some respond with aleicum selaam
Some also add Shukran
And to some of them i say
Afuan and some of them ask
Me in english where do i come from
And to some of them i answer
I was born in the state of disgust
And to some of them i say
I was born in a dessert
And to some of them
I say i was born in the midst of
Neoliberal madness
And some of them do think
That i am crazy
And some of them think that
I fell in the state of total disgrace
And some of them pat my hand as if
It were Fatima's in disguise of an angel
And so i know
That i have no other choice
But to return home B like broke
T like tired
M like moved to tears
No, i m not an anarchist
My grandfather did it for me
Come to think of it
Now that i'm at home
All alone.



Fight

Khalil Anthony

how do we know something happened if there is no pain to remind us?
i'm sure there are things that happen that don't need pain to help us remember, but doesn't
pain, the lingering of it, help you to a certain extent? to remember.

at least as the scar begins to heal, if there is a wound, the fact that the body is engaging
itself in the act of healing itself, does that do anything in the plight of remembering?

the hydrogen peroxide, the band-aids, the cotton swabs, the blood? something about the
bruise, the pain that lingers begs us to spend a moment remembering, even if it's just to
forget. the healing process always lasts for a little bit of time, and that helps us to remember,
even if we don't want to.

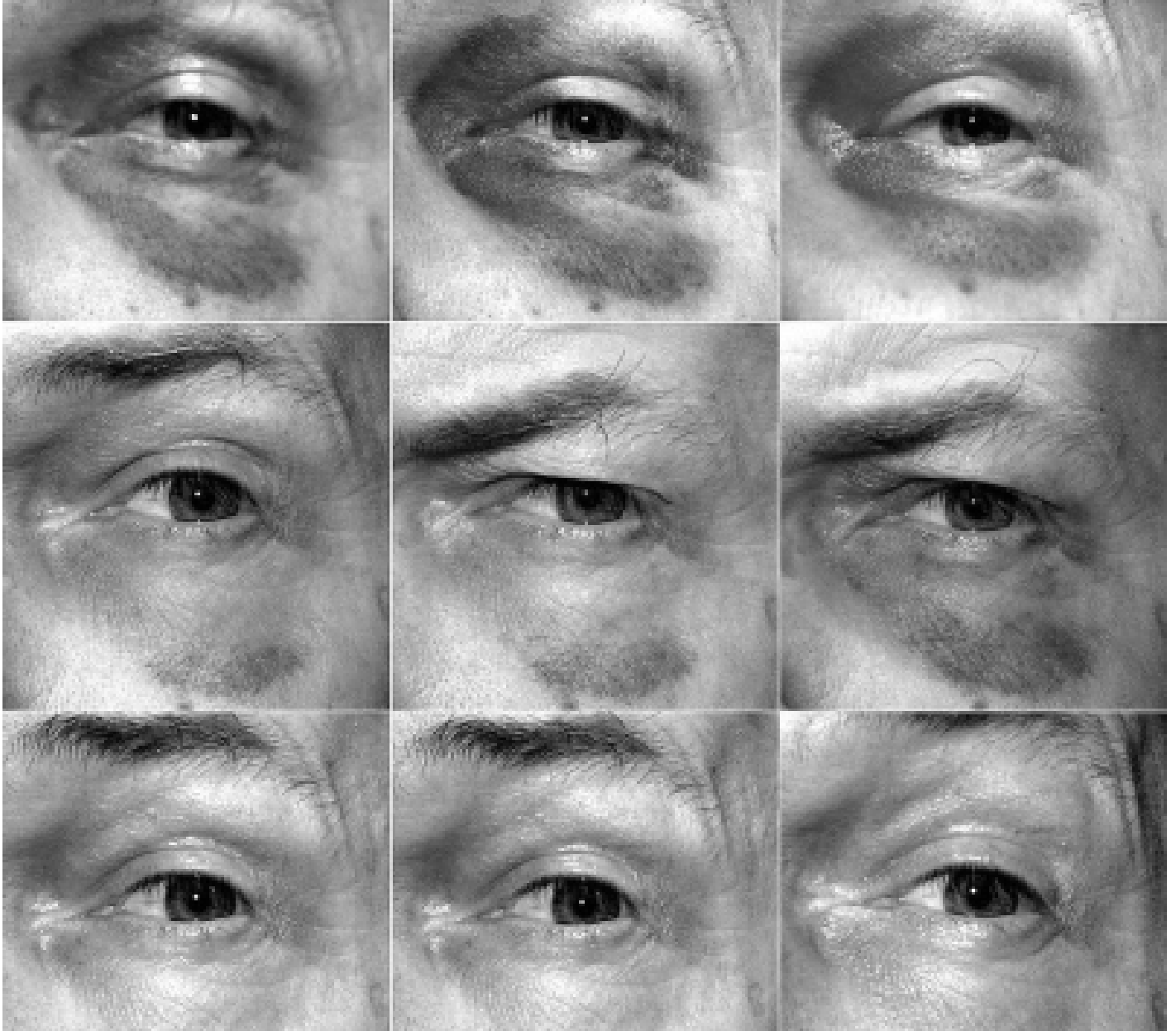
when healing is initiated, and the body responds with all of its agents to create a healthy
space, where it once was, there is only remembering. remembering what begat the wound,
how the wound became a wound, the walk home, the blood, and tears, not in that order, but
them too. They beg to be remembered as well.

Still surprises me to think, scares me to write, but in all honesty I have to admit the only way
that night could have ended was with a fight. I never thought I'd be in a domestic abuse
situation, and technically I wasn't, cause we weren't together as a couple then; just two
men fighting.

I just remember hitting him. He was too close, our alcohol fueled screams,
ready to light the room agni, it all became too hot and I tried to escape. But I swung first.
That's what happened. And I'm not proud, and I couldn't sleep,
I had to forgive myself for my actions but remember that I was the one acting, all of these
years, acting like I still liked you, even as a person.

I lost; the fight that is. That night when we fought, I ought not have swung
cause in the end I am the one who lost that night, the night of the fight.

What did I lose? I keep asking myself that question, and the main thing that keeps coming
back to me is that I lost my cool. Got knocked down too. Felt worth it, in the end. Still does
now. Once we cross a line, where forgetting is not an option, the remembering in this case
lets me know never pretend when it comes to humans. And love. And pain. And scars.
And healing.
And remembering.



Epitaph

Steve Dalachinsky

"I chose who i wanted to be and then I was."

- Coco Chanel

we reside @ madame aurthur's
near the top of rue des martyrs
i fly like ROCKY the flying angel
across the gathering stones

steven's journey across the semi-verse

my call letters: S.D.D.
my i.d. # 9-29-46

tho i am not allowed in
i enter the private gates
needy & un/announced

AX

i have not learned to use the cane
you will so generously bequeath me

...et JE (le) SU(i)S

...and then i was



CRITICISM



Cinderella's Prince Was A Foot Fetishist (& Other Dark Truths About Prince Charmings)

Genna Rivieccio

For so long, the girlish masses were spun a thick yarn about the romantic leanings of the Prince Charmings created by the progenitor of fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen, and then further sanitized and made to seem more heroic and pure of spirit by Disney. But anyone who looks beyond the cursory of what appears to be a “knight in shining armor” can see that the man behind the veneer is filled with strange, illicit desires, ergo leading him to target a poor or otherwise marginalized girl susceptible enough to fulfill them. In one of Andersen’s most beloved source materials (adapted again and again to everything ranging from *Ever After* to *Ella Enchanted*), “The Little Glass Slipper,” the prince that our

heroine, Cinderella, comes into contact with as an eventual means to rescue her from her bleak existence, doesn’t quite see one glaring truth about her so-called protector: the man is a foot fetishist. He can hide behind his ostensible “need” to see the mysterious woman he danced with all night at the ball, but the particular obsession with the glass slipper she wore speaks far more to a man propelled by an unholy proclivity.

After the time gets away from Cinderella and she realizes it’s past midnight—the hour her fairy godmother warned her not to surpass lest everyone witness the breaking of the spell—she flees “as nimble as a deer. The Prince followed, but could not overtake her. She left behind one of her

glass slippers, which the Prince took up most carefully." "Most carefully" indeed. So he could spend the night masturbating into it as he thinks of the one that got away.

As her wicked stepsisters regale her with the drama of the

The sexual imagery and language continues as Andersen builds to the denouement, noting, "It was brought to the two sisters, who did all they possibly could to thrust their feet into the slipper, but they could not effect it." No they could not. This imagery

actuality, Cinderella is being handed over to some sexually neurotic monster.

The innuendo persists in the final segment of "The Glass Slipper" as the sisters "laughed with scorn when the Prince knelt to fit the slipper

"But, oh, *quelle surprise*: the prince doesn't come through for her in the end. Decides to go for some other wisp who can talk (when he wants her to)."

Prince's hunt for the one he quote unquote loves by explaining, "and with so much haste that she dropped one of her little glass slippers, the prettiest in the world, which the King's son had taken up; that he had done nothing but look at her all the time at the ball, and that most certainly he was very much in love with the beautiful person who owned the glass slipper." Or, rather, the person in possession of the feet that fit so perfectly into said slipper.

Through it all, Cinderella can't apprehend the one detail that is spurring the Prince's search for her: a foot that slides in seamlessly into the slipper. You see the metaphor, don't you? The Prince is only interested in a tight pussy that feels just right. Nothing so small that it can't take a large object, but nothing so big that said large object can't experience a comfortable and pleasant slide.

works on both the level of the Prince's member being unaffected by an overly virginal orifice—one that can't fully "receive" him—and on conjuring a flash of a different kind of "foot" being thrust into a different kind of "slipper."

Fixation on the shoe and the foot that it might belong to is further accented by the Prince's royal procession through the village to seek out potential "fits": "Behind him came a herald, bearing a velvet cushion, upon which rested a little glass slipper." Really? Is a velvet cushion *really* needed? Wrap it up in an industrial-strength burlap sack and call it a day. Scratched glass be damned. The symbolism of not just the Prince's foot fetish, but also his desire for a sweet snatch remains a prevalent theme throughout the tale, so long falsely interpreted as a "happily ever after" story, when, in

on the cinder maid's foot; but what was their surprise when it slipped on with the greatest ease, and the next moment Cinderella produced the other from her pocket!" "Slipping with ease," producing things from "pockets"—it couldn't be more perverse and suggestive. And yet, because Cinderella escaped her life of poverty in trade for making her feet and vagina slaves to the Prince, it is considered a triumphant narrative. Audiences, evidently, would rather see a woman prisoner to a man than to a gaggle of women.

Elsewhere in the Andersen canon, the Prince of "The Little Mermaid" is briefly depicted as a reason worth becoming human for. Of course, ultimately, he shows himself to be a cad—a testament to Andersen's more than occasional sense of realism. Conversely, Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* makes

no attempt to paint Eric in even as remotely as unfavorable a light as the young prince Andersen's little mermaid encounters after her fifteenth birthday, when she's finally allowed to swim to the surface.

After rescuing him from a shipwreck (because, yes, it's so often the girl who must rescue the boy), "he seemed to her like the marble statue in her little garden, and she kissed him again, and wished that he might live." That he comes across as inanimate should have been the first indication to the little mermaid that maybe he wouldn't have too much to offer other than legs with something very key in between them.

Yet when he awakens on the shore where other females of the human variety greet him and regards her not at all, the little mermaid desires to leave her own world more than ever. Looking in askance of her old, therefore wise grandmother, the little mermaid is told that there is nothing to be done to gain an immortal soul "unless a man were to love you so much that you were more to him than his father or mother; and if all his thoughts and all his love were fixed upon you, and the priest placed his right hand in yours, and he promised to be true to you here and hereafter, then his soul would glide into your body and you would obtain a share in the future happiness of mankind. He would give a soul to you and retain his own as well; but this can never happen. Your fish's tail, which amongst us is considered so beautiful, is thought on earth to be quite ugly; they do not know any better, and they think it necessary to have two stout props, which they call legs, in order to be handsome."

Obviously, the little

mermaid's grandmother is setting her up to fail, as even most of us "normal" female humans can't get a man to love us more than his accursed mother and father—or himself for that matter. And even though she tells the little mermaid to simply be happy with what she has, to not chase after a dream that can never be, the poor fool still wistfully muses, "He is certainly sailing above, he on whom my wishes depend, and in whose hands I should like to place the happiness of my life. I will venture all for him, and to win an immortal soul..." Oh darling, get a grip, the reader wants to shout. Nothing can stop her from going to the sea witch for help, sacrificing not just her fish's tail for the gamble of love, but also her beautiful voice to give to the sea witch as payment.

After drinking the potion concocted by the sea witch, the little mermaid finds herself ashore, rescued and adored by the prince just as she dreamed, allowed the oh so decadent luxury of "receiv(ing) permission to sleep at his door, on a velvet cushion." How thoughtful and kind of the prince indeed. Treating his "love" like a dog. Maybe that's why Disney had to cut this detail out, among others—including cherry lines of misogyny like, "If I were forced to choose a bride, I would rather choose you, my dumb foundling, with those expressive eyes."

But oh, *quelle surprise*: the prince doesn't come through for her in the end. Decides to go for some other wisp who can talk (when he wants her to). All that sacrifice and all that love the little mermaid gave is for nought, ultimately resulting in her dissipation into nothing but foam. For that's what a girl gets when she falls prey to the dangerously false concept

of "Prince Charming."

In the lesser looked to as an example of a Prince Charming story, there is "Thumbelina" (sometimes also called "Little Tiny"). The tale of a thumb-sized girl, we quickly learn Thumbelina is begat solely because some barren woman couldn't have a child and thus took it upon herself to go to a fairy to grow one from a plant instead (talk about the ultimate in "I didn't ask to be born"). And then when Thumbelina comes to fruition, the woman can't even be bothered to take care of her as she manages to allow an overbearing toad matriarch to creep through the window and pluck Thumbelina from her rose-leaf quilt, commenting eerily, "What a pretty little wife this would make for my son."

The "toad prince," as it were, in question isn't slimy just because of his reptilian nature, but because he's spineless to a fault, going along with whatever his mother tells him, including, "Don't speak so loud, or she will wake... and then she might run away, for she is as light as swan's down. We will place her on one of the water-lily leaves out in the stream; it will be like an island to her, she is so light and small, and then she cannot escape; and, while she is away, we will make haste and prepare the state-room under the marsh, in which you are to live when you are married." So sequester her on a lily pad they do, instilling within her the unshakeable fear of having to be wed to the foul toad. Mercifully, the fish take pity on her plight and set her free, sending her down the river on a journey that leads her to a kindly field mouse after too much time spent wandering through the cold forest in tattered clothing. But the field mouse's kindness also

seems to have an expiration date as he's soon trying to pawn her off on another gross suitor, commenting, "... my neighbor pays me a visit once a week. He is better off than I am; he has large rooms, and wears a beautiful black velvet coat. If you could only have him for a husband, you would be well provided for indeed. But he is blind, so you must tell him some of your prettiest stories." Yet even without acting as geisha, the brutish mole, of course, falls in love with Thumbelina, herself instantly averse to his crude ways and distaste for the sun and the songs of the birds. His reaction to and ill treatment of a presumably dead swallow in the tunnel leading to the field mouse's home further confirms Thumbelina's belief that he is, in essence, a savage. At night, she thinks of nothing but the poor swallow lying in the tunnel, and so goes to it to rest against its breast, through which she can soon hear a faint heartbeat. After rescuing it from its near death, the swallow, in turn, wishes to repay the favor, offering to take Thumbelina away from the mole and to a place where it's warm and bright. Happy to escape, once again, Thumbelina agrees. Along the way, the two stop amid a cluster of large white flowers that have grown in between three pieces of a broken pillar. It is there that Thumbelina spots a human prince her own size and, predictably, "falls in love." Though it's likely she simply fell for the chauvinist because of how awful her previous two suitors were, remarking, "This certainly was a very different sort of husband to the son of a toad, or the mole... so she said, 'Yes,' to the handsome prince." However, if Thumbelina had just given it a minute, she might

have actually either 1) enjoyed being on her own in her travels with the swallow or 2) found a so-called prince charming who didn't deride her with the assessment: "You must not be called Tiny any more... It is an ugly name, and you are so very pretty. We will call you Maia." This is precisely why the swallow clearly feels she's making a mistake, with the narrator describing, "...in his heart he felt sad for he was very fond of Tiny..."

What it all amounts to with these objectively woeful rather than "happily ever after" stories about how a girl comes to find herself relegated to a male purported to be her savior is that there is no such thing as "Prince Charming." Not even in fairy tales when you examine them closely enough.

