



# The Los Angeles Review of Los Angeles

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# THE LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF LOS ANGELES, NO. 14



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# HURRICANE, 2017

JAMES CROAL JACKSON

The whole year has been hurricane season  
in this nation of bayous haunted by ghosts

of cowboys shooting bullets into the clouds,  
gunsmoke in the air, then a disaster of rain.

Save us, God, from these dark clouds looming—  
there are too many more bodies to save.

# TWO GUYS, TWO GALLONS OF YUENGLING, TWO PLASTIC JUGS, AND A THIRD GUY WHO DRINKS A SIX-PACK OF YUENGLING

JAMES CROAL JACKSON

I call it renewal  
a friendship vow, any vow

though I'm just as lost  
as last time, in the playground

climbing green dinosaurs  
to shouts of *no, don't, you'll hurt*

*yourself* but we didn't, taking  
photos of the dirt by the river

from the top. Held our jugs  
like the Stanley Cup to declare

our air and crawled back down  
through time and space to lumber

outward through the neighborhood  
to eternity which is one warm drink

we have in our hands. To accomplish  
nothing is something special. I have

felt the lukewarm heat of tongue last  
longer than this. I waited so long for

something extraordinary to occur.  
In my memory we last eternal.

In my memory we are whole, sober,  
on the cusp of happiness.

# Android to Apple

JAMES CROAL JACKSON

I switched to Apple  
after such staticky reception  
meaning I'm anxious  
for the bite— the teeth-  
piercing, tedious call,  
tiny wires inside me  
moaning your song—  
which is to say I never  
was an android in search  
of blue requiems and  
we'll say I love you  
and it'll still sing.



**Minimalist Office**  
WILLIAM C. CRAWFORD



# Body Tricks

M. A. ISTVAN JR.

Aside from speaking to a vision  
as to how little music could be  
drawn from turntable and mixer,  
body tricks in early turntablism  
perhaps indicated that the deejay  
held himself above the sounds.

That would be human. And look  
at the people that privileged them.  
Neglected in private and public,  
is it any wonder that they would  
feel the need to impress, driven  
by an air of “Look what I can do?”

# Compass Juice

M. A. ISTVAN JR.

hypothermic hobos undressing in the streets

one who enjoys the art of boxing so much  
that a personal stake in one beating the other  
would actually detract from the viewing thrill

Armageddon on the horizon, the God-teen  
wonders whether she should practice going without  
TV and cookies or simply enjoy them while they last

what is the true target of our rage  
when we rage at the dog gnawing in bliss  
on the dug-up bones of a loved one?

worry beads

daycare death

sea kelp grace

poor but spoiled

the landlord's knock

rashes from corpulence

recanting without regretting

bequeathing fleas to the next tenant

individuals are folds of a great ribbon

those with "kill yourself" on their to-do list

the spread of the door screen's tear as the children grow

looking down to find that you are wearing two different shoes

those who simply love big dick versus those who really do love horses

upset by those misfortunes

from which we cannot rescue a loved one

not for the reason that we tell ourselves

the forward lean of haulers,  
strap across the chest of each,  
as they draw the barge into shallows

fine with not being the first, or likely  
the last, brought up here at sunset  
for a kiss on lover's perch

it seems our duty to savor each bite  
of the toast and caviar as we nod  
before black-and-whites of world poverty

sometimes the subject  
is not to be centered  
in the viewfinder

condemning gay sex on grounds  
that it cannot result in babies  
even as you bang your wombless wife

school rumors of that kid who swung over the bar

when rock-bottom is death

there bright and early, before  
the liquor store clerk arrives  
to lift the storefront riot door

what do we hope to see when we show  
our kids tragedy footage—when we stress  
the horror and watch them watch the screen?

family businesses destroyed  
from the addition of their lands  
to the list of superfund sites

the thought it's just a hole, take care  
lest it show everything  
to be just a—blank

a teenager's "devil music"  
tuning out that drunk devil  
all-too-real downstairs

what is good mental health in your community?

telling the blind man  
to wash his hands  
before he feels your face

good signs for illnesses and injury  
that mothers look for (no fever, no blood)  
console her, holding the coma hand

our new power to record can keep nostalgia  
well-fed and ourselves debilitated, perhaps  
even watching our younger selves watch

taking it out on the funeral director

weed brings them together after several years  
silent since the repressed “bad touches,”  
but dad’s high compliments are tinged with flirtation

those who grope for the brass ring in hope that all  
will then be okay, but are let down after reaching it  
because death is what they were after all along

if either is worthy of being wiped out,  
it is not the conman but the smug one  
who really thinks that he is a sorcerer

people still lose themselves  
in play, knowing there to be  
no chance to make the NBA

mugs held between sweater sleeves at the fire

lead convulsions

# Dani, 2017

DS MAOLALAI

this one time  
in Toronto  
this girl came over.  
she was not looking  
so good  
anymore -  
strung out  
and doing a little hooking  
for rent  
and I felt  
I could do something  
to keep her happy  
and alive.

I couldn't,  
of course -  
no-one  
ever can -

but I gave her a jacket  
I didn't need  
and some coffee  
and told her  
when she got tired  
if she called me  
then I'd try  
and find someone  
she could call.

# Grocery shopping

DS MAOLALAI

I bite a little -  
it's hot  
and she's sweating  
because the air condition's gone  
and I  
bite a little  
tasting the nape of her neck,  
salt on skin,  
and testing it with my tongue  
like I'm in a supermarket  
checking an apple for bruises.

and she groans  
and rolls over  
half asleep  
to look at me -  
her belly meets my belly  
and her face comes to my shoulder  
and she rests her forehead there,  
and sweat comes off her  
and onto me.  
it's actually a little cool then  
like I'm in the supermarket again  
pulling a carton of milk out of the fridge  
and touching it to my naked collarbone.  
when sweat feels refreshing  
you know you're too hot.

“Cora”, I say, taking her cheek in my palm  
“your eyes are beautiful  
as fresh plums. when I’m with you I feel like I’m in a supermarket on a  
hot day,  
right by the avocados  
looking at the baskets of fruit and clean vegetables.  
shopping for groceries  
all I can think of  
is you eating strawberries in bed,  
shearing their skin with your clean white teeth,  
matching your lips with the raspberries.”

she doesn’t like that so much.  
I guess I wouldn’t like it either.  
I guess some thoughts in bed  
that make you feel  
really good  
don’t sound so good  
when you say them to someone,  
like supermarkets,  
or lying in unairconditioned bedrooms  
to hot to leave  
at 3pm.

# The Bowery

DS MAOLALAI

the bar is modeled  
pretty well nautically;  
buoys  
and fishing stuff on the walls  
and a stage  
built from reclaimed driftwood  
to sit like the prow of a ship. everyone gets drunk, stumps  
and staggers with sea-legs.  
it's dark as bilges  
and sometimes they play seagull sounds  
on the PA. quite well styled, really. but the smokers patio  
is of course  
still just an alleyway  
out back  
and the staff are just people  
trying to do their jobs.

strangely  
it's the bathrooms that get it best – sure,  
it's white porcelain  
without adornment,  
but the spilled piss everywhere  
still stinks of the sea. you were in spain once,  
down south  
and walked along the docks  
looking at the boats getting stocked. there was a waste pipe  
spitting shit into the sea  
and, all around, fish  
turning the water into stew, chewing the city's leavings  
like flat plates of caviar.

a girl is sitting on her own in there  
looking at her phone,  
waiting for the next band to come on.  
you put yourself away, wash your hands  
and go back out  
drunkenly  
to bother her.



# Buttons on your back

DS MAOLALAI

your pockets  
packed with whiskey  
glasses – trying your best  
to look casual  
and get out  
without  
being noticed.  
and your girlfriend  
who was on the whiskey  
sloppily egging you on.

love is:  
stealing  
from a place  
that builds loss  
into the price of a pint glass,  
drunk and somehow  
getting away with it;  
kissing in the elevator,  
buttons on your back  
and feeling the crunch  
and the blood  
on your belly  
and not minding  
not minding  
not minding

## Empty beats

ARLYN LABELLE

You are alone when the rain hits  
feeling fevered, watching the wind  
fling strings like spittle on the  
window. Maybe you should be  
driving in noplac, so that you can  
be hungry, so that you can be  
contained, so that you can practice  
and perfect almost sleeping,  
bobbing, almost slipping under a  
weight that is human and easily  
addressed before you shudder and  
snap back into yourself, again,  
again. Again. Maybe you should be  
drunk to make the violence easier,  
maybe you should be apologetic,  
pensive, expressing regret. Maybe  
you should be in the trees,  
saturated, now, with the slate-  
colored sleet, their smells  
ripening into something certain,  
maybe you should get some sleep.

# Jay North as He Stands in Relation to Rage and the Tragedy Margin

WILL BERNARDARA, JR.

*For Jaclyn Baber*

Jay shuffles through a stack of VHS tapes in the dim quadrate of stale air and litter that is his apartment. There's The Prowler, which Jay has watched 14 times, as well as Pieces, Silent Rage, Visiting Hours, Sweet Sixteen, and Calendar Girl Murders (the latter he recorded from TV when the movie premiered a few weeks prior) – and at least a hundred or so others scattered and stacked pell-mell around the place.

Jay has several problems: he hasn't left his dismal Burbank apartment in months save to rent more slasher videos and shop for junk food; Jay eats solely junk, and the packages/boxes/wrappers/bags for things like Lik-m-aid, McDonaldland Cookies, Hostess Ding Dongs and Choco-diles,

Swanson TV dinners (the Salisbury steak is Jay's favorite), and Tostitos are ganging up on the available space; Jay is unemployed and time-saturated and the devil is in the workshop; Jay is tormented by his past to a degree that has grown unbearable.

\*

HOLLYWOOD PIGS. HOLLYWOOD PIGS. HOLLYWOOD PIGS.  
TINSELTOWN TRASH. HOLLYWOOD PIGS. BABYLON BABIES.  
BURN YOUR FACES OFF WITH A BLOWTORCH.

\*

Jay watches only slasher films. The slashers make him feel cued in, present; momentarily free of his past and the rottenly relentless memories. It is the only time he experiences something close to happiness: watching fake murders. He never views the tapes of the show he starred in as a child, nor the MGM feature films, nor the voiceover animated stuff he's done. He watches *Don't Go in the House* and *The Mutilator*, cramming Twinkies into his mouth and chewing machinelike, bulged eyes unblinking, engrossed in the images on the screen.

The year is 1985.

\*

He keeps the shades drawn. It's dark inside even when it's California-bright outside. The grotty TV screen presents a woman whose scalp is being carefully sliced off with a razor by Joe Spinell.

Jay doesn't drink or do drugs. His father was a drunk; he hasn't seen him since the age of four, when his dad and mom split. The unremitting rage and the slasher movies and the junk food are Jay's drugs. And isolation. And hate. He envisions himself walking into the Screen Gems offices – Columbia Pictures' television division – and doing something inalterable. Something permanent. His career wasn't forever, but this act of vented rage would be. It would make the news, the papers: "Former child star and beloved pop culture icon goes on rampage, killing 17 TV execs" - something like that. A cry for help sublimated into a series of gunshots. More dignity in this than admitting oneself to a psychiatric ward, surely.

Marie and Hal, his aunt and uncle-in-law – he thinks about them more than the studio people. He watches Spinell stab someone to death on the television, and his imagination lays Marie's or Hal's face over that of the on-screen victim.

Killing Marie once wouldn't be enough.

\*

“I became very serious, very morbid and very withdrawn from the world.”

\*

As a kid Jay loved horror movies. The Pit and the Pendulum, Village of the Damned. Now though, now those relatively tame pictures don't satisfy him the way the slasher movies do. He needs the grungy viscerals, the spurting blood, the savagery of '80s basement-horror to feed whatever elemental thing rages inside him.

He abhors leaving his apartment. It's his dark womb of dead

teenagers and Ho Hos. His interactions with the public are fraught with nervousness, not unlike his relations with the other students when his mom enrolled him in prep school 22 years ago. Thankfully, on the rare occasions when he does venture out, no one recognizes him from his childhood stardom. His face has grown pudgy, his eyes sullen and sunk in. The last person who approached him on the street and recognized him had recalled him from a dinner theatre performance he'd done in Chicago in 1972 - the man had been on his honeymoon then. Jay smiled and managed a monosyllabic response to this “fan.”

\*

The Redeemer is in the VCR. Jay shovels ice cream into his mouth, eating from the carton. He thinks about the USS Iwo Jima, his brief stint in the Navy that ended in an honorable discharge. His shipmates –

they were cruel beyond words to him, mocking him and poking fun and sometimes assaulting Jay, all for being a former TV icon. This happened in Norfolk, Virginia, this torture. Around '77. They were harsh.

The world's harsh.

Family's harsh.

Performing is harsh, and everything is performing.

As the movie ends and the screen goes black and then dissolves into static, Jay leafs through a heavily annotated (by Jay), highlighted, dog-eared paperback about electric-chair-executed family-murderer Steven Judy. Judy is one of Jay's obsessions.

Jay's mother, a good mother, made some savvy real estate investments with Jay's childhood earnings, and Jay is financially secure as a result. He has loads of time to read about serial killers and mass murderers, as well as devour the supermarket tabloids with their stories about part-human/part-bat babies and UFO-alien livestock-mangling.

\*

HOLLYWOOD PIGS. MOW THEM DOWN WITH A MACHINE GUN. RAPE SOME AUDITIONING STARLET WITH A KNIFE. SET THE STUDIO ON FIRE. STAY INSIDE AND BURN AWAY AFTER.

\*

Anger and resentment are doing a dance in Jay's brain, swirling into a burning helix. Scorching his heart and soul black. It's a feeling of utter torment, ugly and torturous – his unhappy childhood as Hollywood's plaything replayed and rewound, revisited and re-experienced every day. He has no peace, no reprieve.

All is black.

\*

“... just vanish into the mists of time.”

\*

Torture isn't a hyperbolic adjective when describing Jay's childhood.

“I'm a professional has-been,” Jay says to himself. He says this often.

Thinks it. The psychological tumult is a tumbler of pain and anguish, and it doesn't abate. And at the center of this psychic turmoil, the ugly eye of this cerebral hurricane, is his aunt and uncle and their golden tyranny.

Two hundred others auditioned for the role of Dennis and Jay got it.

From 1959 to 1963, from the age of seven to eleven, he was slapped and

threatened and choked and clawed by Aunt Marie. (When the cameras weren't rolling, of course.) His aunt would slap him across the face - her bony hand like a ceiling fan's blade - whenever he screwed up a scene or misbehaved in even the most minor way. Jay's aunt, taskmaster and warden, brutalizer and nightmare - if her standards weren't met, the emotional abuse that followed would've wilted iron. The coldest, most hateful looks she would give him... pure disgust in her eyes. He was just a boy.

Exile, self-imposed, is the end result of decades of self-loathing and unchecked rage. Rage like the sun. Jay looks in the smudgy bathroom mirror and expects to see orange coals where his eyes should be, so intense is the fury within. But he only sees a puffy, sad face staring back at him, dead eyes wreathed by blackish-gray bags. His hair has grayed and his gut has ballooned and now sags. The blond, defiant TV character with the signature cowlick is unrecognizable in this man.

\*

“Pain and fear. Hiding inside. I was great at covering it up.”

\*

“I will get you,” his aunt would say, in a voice like a winter snake’s hiss. “If you ever tell anyone that I’ve struck you or treated you badly, I will get you, you little stain.” Jay believed her. He never said a word.

Relating to real life, life outside of the demands and the studio – Jay is clueless. As a teen, his aunt forbade him from dating. Women are a mystery to him; he fears them.

Hibernating in his hell-hovel, slasher-movie-gluttled, wolfing down Twinkies and guzzling cans of Tab, Jay has hunkered down in depression’s

abysses. If it weren’t for his trust account, he’d surely be on the street, scrounging for food and work. It could be worse but Jay can’t imagine worse.

Worse?

\*

Jay contemplates suicide. Often. If he had a gun in the house, he would’ve done himself by now. Years ago, probably.

\*

“... Jay North – whoever that is.”

\*



Jay's washing machine has been broken for several weeks now, and after wolfing down two TV dinners and masturbating afterward, he musters the will to leave his apartment for the Laundromat.

Under the harsh, blanched zombie lights Jay loads a machine in a row of identical machines with funky, rank clothes. The light in here is so white the air buzzes. Morgue fluorescence.

No one is in the Laundromat with Jay except a safety-pin-faced punk girl whose hair has been dyed black and shock-pink in thick, separate swaths.

He feels uncomfortable and insecure, as if the girl can sense the wrongness about him – a black-and-pink tiger sniffing out failure and degradation.

Jay stares at the tumbling, sudsy laundry through the oval window. It's murky with filth. He feels her eyes on him. He's the only thing to survey

other than the washers.

Then it's like a nightmare realized when the girl snickers, snottily, a mixture of a laugh and a scoff. "That laundry fucking stinks, man, my god. You sure there's not a dead animal mixed up with your socks or something?"

Jay's eyes twitch, eyeballs doing a little psycho-dance at the girl and back, at the girl and back. He never directly makes eye contact.

"Fucking freak," the girl says, and crosses her arms, facing her washer.

The insult causes Jay's entire body to feel nauseated and quivering with violent urge. He felt fat and ugly and old a moment ago; now all he feels is a coiling rage, big enough to transgress anything and everything.

"Cunt," Jay mutters.

The girl turns, mouth agape. "What the FUCK did you say?" She takes several confrontational, confident strides toward Jay. "Did you just fucking call me something, motherfucker?"

Jay looks at the girl, this time making eye contact. It's a rare interface for him. He doesn't see the girl – superimposed over her face is the face of Aunt Marie, lifeless and critical. The girl is rattling on now but Jay hears only the roar of ocean and static, white noise doubled and tripled into a choir of slaughter. He has a screwdriver in his coat pocket. He doesn't need to finger it to know it's there - he feels its weight, feels its presence like something magnetic attracted to his grip.

“You're the fucking cunt, you fat old creep,” the girl is saying. The blood leaves Jay's head in a rush, as does the sudden surge of homicidal fury. He feels abruptly drained out, completely empty.

The girl notices something and stops dead in her haranguing. Her eyes widen, she goes a little whiter, and immediately turns and walks backward, keeping her focus on Jay. She's become animal wary. She stumbles in her clunky Doc Martens.

Jay blinks twice and looks down at what she's looking at: the

screwdriver is gripped in his right hand, his knuckles gone white as raw dough with tension. He doesn't remember reaching into his pocket, much less reaching in and drawing the screwdriver. He drops it and it makes a racket on the tile.

“I'm calling the police,” the girl says, bolting out the Laundromat's doors, orphaning her laundry and purse.

Shakily, Jay gathers his wet laundry and leaves. His dryer at home works.

\*

Jay walks into the first office to his left and raises the shotgun. The TV exec, in an analogue shock-version of Jay's action, raises his arm. The ungodly loud blast fragmentizes the exec's hand – bits of shredded fingers and bone and blood sprinkle the stack of scripts on the desk – and travels

beyond, hitting his face. His head explodes.

Down the hall, secretaries scream - the smart ones hide under their desks. One secretary in a scant sundress tries to run across the hallway toward the exit and Jay tracks her with the shotgun, blows a hole in her back revealing a portrait of bloody, ruined spine. She drops hard and quick.

The area reeks of smoke now. Commotion-sounds saturate the studio offices.

Jay stalks down the hall, cracking open the shotgun and plucking out the spent cartridges with fat fingers. He licks the sweat from his upper lip and moves toward the screams. He is Travis Bickle. He is Mark David Chapman.

He reloads.

And wakes up. He is drenched in fear-sweat. His apartment is dark and blue, bruised. The television is on, *He Knows You're Alone* nearing its

end.

“Oh god,” Jay says, breathing heavy, sitting up, his upper lip glazed in sweat that shines by the TV light. “Gosh.”

While his waking hours are engorged with fantasies of shooting sprees at television studios, the dreams terrify him. His heart feels near-coronary.

He always wakes from these dreams with a sense of deep relief. He didn't do it, he won't be going to prison for the rest of his life. He won't be in the papers as the freak former child star who lost it and ventilated a bunch of suits that don't even remember him anymore, weren't even born when he was working for the idiot-box honchos.

Jay scoots and lumbers out of bed. He goes to the fridge and polishes off a half-gallon of a generic brand of chocolate milk. He eats a Butterfinger and two Good Humor Strawberry Shortcake bars. After, he gnaws on the ice cream bar sticks, indenting the wood with his teeth. His sweat stinks.

He turns off the TV and darkness wins. He doesn't want to see any more violence tonight.

\*

One morning Jay goes to a nearby pet store and buys a little terrier puppy, sandy-colored and hyper. He names the dog Herbert.

That night, Jay absentmindedly leaves the front door ajar and Herbert gets out and runs away.

Everyone leaves. Jay doesn't cry.

\*

A week passes in a blur of cavernous sorrow, sleeplessness, delirium resulting from the sleeplessness, junk food binges, and marathon viewings

of various slasher movies. Somewhere in the blur, Jay experiences a deadening inside, a total numbness. He walks about the apartment and feels like his outline is the only thing with any feeling left at all... everything inside beyond the first inch of skin is insensate, like a face after a visit to the dentist.

It's in this state, this sleep-deprived fog of confusion verging on full-blown psychosis, that Jay leaves his house with a wad of cash.

His delirium is such that it's a miracle Jay doesn't walk into traffic. He manages to get to the shop he had in mind. He has little memory of his exchange with the owner of the gun shop, other than that the man had a handlebar mustache and beady eyes and seemed very sober and unknowable.

And now Jay has a stack of weapons in the apartment, in the corner. A .410 double barrel shotgun, boxes of ammo, a .44 S&W, a 9mm Uzi, a 30.06 sniper rifle, an Ingram MAC-10, a Beretta 92, a cheap .25, a Colt

Python, and two .38s. He also bought a fire ax and a Rambo knife.

This pile of widowmakers glumly occupies the corner of the apartment, illuminated by the cruddy light of VHS slasher films. It is an ominous, metal lump in the dark, an assemblage of death-dealing tools that Jay knows will, by his hand, end the lives of many, many people one day.

One day.

One day.

\*

The year is 1990. January 20.

Jay lives in a new apartment now. His routine hasn't changed much - he's had some jobs, mainly in the food service industry. He still crams junk into his mouth and slasher movies into his brain. He's been so close to

suicide so many times it's become standard operating procedure.

The phone rings, which is unusual. Jay shuffles into the kitchen in his slippers, bathrobe dirty and food-stained. He picks up and says hello.

The call is from a stranger. It's a call to inform Jay.

His childhood friend, Rusty Hammer, famous for starring in The Danny Thomas Show, has killed himself.

Two days ago, Rusty, 42, shot himself in the head. He'd been living in southwestern Louisiana.

Jay hangs up. A flood of warm agony, different from rage, subsumes him. There is anguish, and pain, but perhaps beneath it all is a scintilla of compassion. A longing.

Jay sits in his armchair and cries uncontrollably. His whole body is racked by sobs.

He cries for hours.

\*

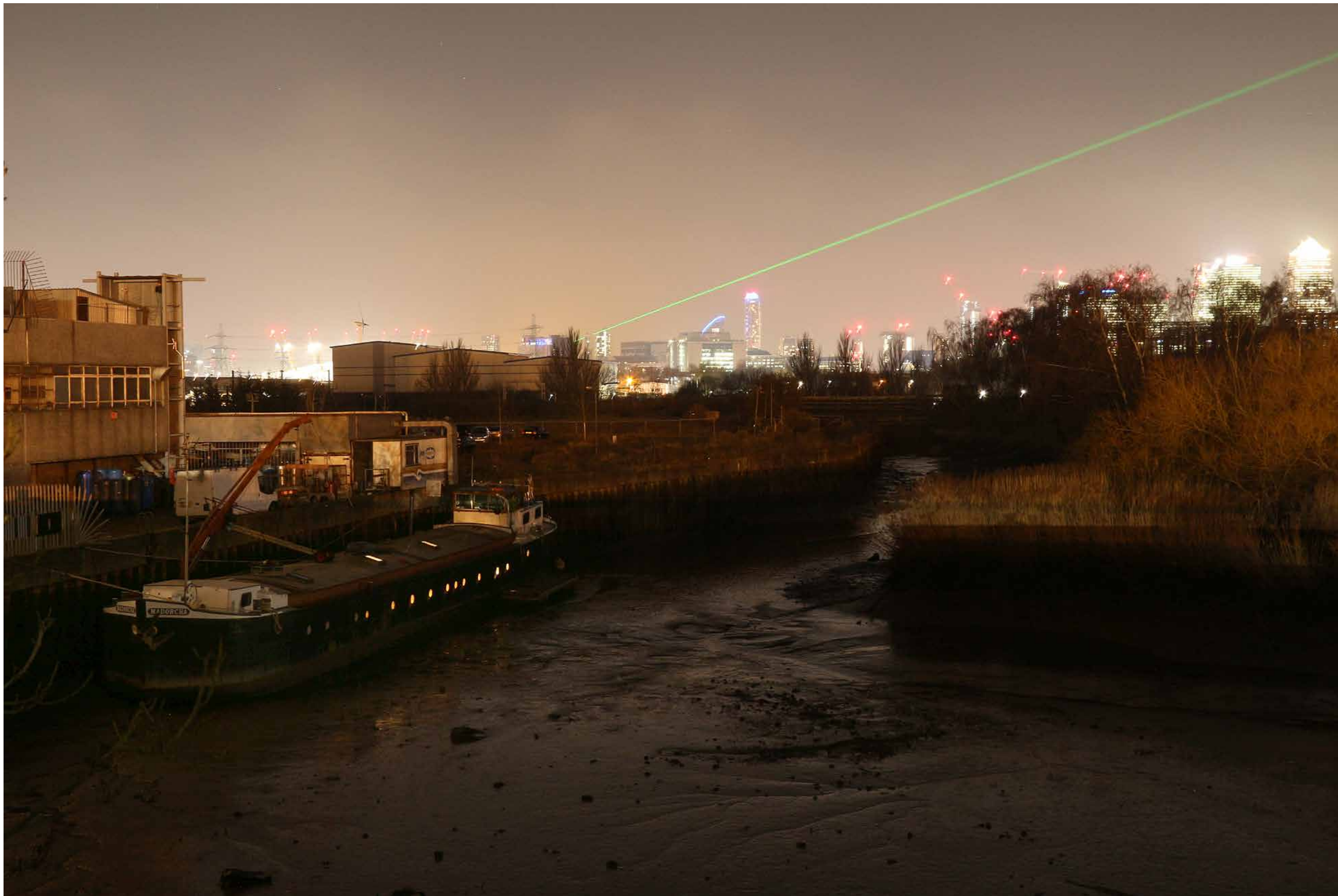
On the evening of the phone call, Jay opens his closet. Inside is the pile of weapons he bought in the '80s, now stacked and arranged neatly on shelves. He stares at the guns for a long time.

He thinks about different things.

And he stares.

And stares.

###



Houseboat on  
Abbey Creek  
DAVID RIX

# Waiting for Rain

KYLE HEMMINGS

The mother was phobic to hands and lips. The daughter was phobic to the mother and to most solid foods. The father who abandoned them was allergic to most forms of light. But the daughter. She was leaning toward Down. Why couldn't anyone see? She just needed clean water and sunlight. Couldn't the mother see how she had tilted towards windows? Or maybe the mother didn't care. As for water, the girl didn't trust tap or anything in plastic. She was increasingly becoming more stooped, more sluggish because there had been a drought. But now the weather reports promised heavy rains.

The daughter stayed in the attic so she could be closer to sky, to the possibility of embracing both sunlight and water when they were still fresh. She hated the cracks in her life. Like the ones her father had slipped through before he went underground. Still no rain. Eventually, the anorexic daughter died from thirst and distance and darkness. Then it rained. The mother turned from the attic window and yelled, "Couldn't you have waited?"

The mother was too needy to understand what grew or didn't grow outside her. She hated when strangers asked, Why? Or When? She usually didn't talk to strangers.

But in the daughter's spot where she died, slowly, a flower grew. The mother read of many such miracles in tabloids and heard of such things on talk radio stations and in church sermons. She really didn't know what to make of it or whether it was a sign from God. She thought at first to get rid of the plant, then something told her--no. She must water it and keep it by the window. She should respect life.

And the plant grew and grew. It grew so big, that it started to push up against the ceiling. At night, the mother thought she heard a distant voice coming from upstairs. It was probably an echo from a dream. She sat up on the sofa where she usually slept. Night after night, she dreamed about the daughter she neither loved nor nurtured nor understood.

Because of the plant's size, the mother finally planted it out in the backyard garden. The neighbors complimented her on such a large, gorgeous plant. It kept growing. One afternoon, a dry afternoon in summer, the mother stood close to the plant and prepared to prune it. But the plant opened its buds and sucked the mother in, decomposing her for its own nutrition. Eventually, it rained and the plant grew tiny poisonous berries. The berries fell to the ground and became part of the earth. Then, the plant died.



# Frigga

LAWDENMARC DECAMORA

In life, we are playing with dangerous games: you, the witness  
of the visiting vatnajökull now blushing pink in the atom sky  
with the bright comedy of your fooling the ashes of the colour,  
and I, making a cryogenic favour to the moonless nights,  
to the mountain echoes teasing tourists about salmon sparks  
caught in the arctic splash of water balloons and whispering  
endless cold, happen to see the world in your eyes—spinning  
with the silence of earth. My eyes flower, semen of a star.

# Little Things

LAWDENMARC DECAMORA

A couple of weeks back everyone  
was chanting ¡Habemus Papam! in the garden,  
on chimney tops, on the floor of the plaza smitten  
by bird beaks, but not in the libraries of philandering  
codeheads and newly circumcised trapeze swingers.  
On that special day no one wanted to hear something  
like a “freelance boner.” I’m sure you too didn’t throw  
an ear for words like papal shit or shitty Christology.  
You know, I’d like to brush your hair when things go  
ugly, as in when a tsunami hits the seawall and there’s  
no one to fix your hair out of fear. I will celebrate  
your eyes’ uncalculated blink as it might change  
the season from tinder-parched mornings to being 84

and still writing you poems. You know, I’d like  
to see you cry, laugh at people off to work, because  
you’re edged to clear the skies of jinx and throat-clogged  
pretensions. The paddling mallards, oh, I want to count  
them out for you and give you my monthly salary  
lest I fail to do the maths. I want to carry your bag  
when you leave home, check your stuff, and remind  
you of the bills to cut soon after the afternoon  
glows upon our shoulders. I want to see  
you wear that big hair the next time you take a swim.  
Last thing, please let’s do it in church. It’s not  
what you think, no. I mean let’s do it, the laundry.

# Copy of a whore

MICHAEL T. SMITH

The term  
'first person' shows how  
selfish we are. I would never  
Look at myself [...ergo sum...] the way  
We look at others --  
but being with another is a sin  
(it's an argumentum ad verecundiam)

The wine  
Soiled the lips of those who  
Tasted the glass that held it,  
looking up "Canthardidis" because  
some asshole let it slip; her slip –  
was nothing but unimaginative,  
and a wee bit Freudian.

But then! (and that's the whole sign  
--"but")  
her hips formed the epitasis,  
and the road was clearly seen.

And she would have an old house  
over her head  
instead of a halo,  
which might just crumble to bits.

So-called, her feet tinkle on the hardwood floor  
as she cliftily approaches  
her auto-de-f  
run by green men, passing butter'd buns  
as she starves – and not just  
for attention.

She was given her title ad eundem,  
for like experience begets  
like experience: just like the mirror  
gets pregnant  
with an unfamiliar image so easily.

We're all sinners in kind  
when the liver takes over the head.  
And the heart --  
And the heart...

# Prosthetic Limb Factory

YVONNE AMEY

*Marry that man* mama says so I say *soon as he gets outta prison* mama, then mama goes and pulls out the two words from her vo- cab she knows I find offensive: *hypermasculine and topiary* and she uses both to describe my man's family tree which now on account of all their deaths we might as well just call them inept kindling but I thank God and baby Jesus that Broadside didn't get life, just 20, and I know mama cares bout him almost as much as she loves daddy who died right before he could marry her and mama is now standing outside on our freshly painted porch which isn't at all dry and her back is to me so I can't see how lonely her front side is and she's lookin kinda dead and alone-like like a boarded up pawnshop even with this chokehold-blue sky as backdrop or maybe the loneliness isn't loneliness but more like the feeling of the empty meth bag in your palm and its big black hole of nothingness but mama never smoked no meth so maybe she's feelin the world's sorrow if sorrow were the size and sound of an abandoned prosthesis limb factory.

# You Said Our Vacation Out West Reminds You of Prison

YVONNE AMEY

Out here is life is sand and easy  
to breathe, barren like a field of dead  
wombs, Joshua Trees so crooked  
we stopped trusting them at Skull Rock.  
and the art in our hotel is not like us—  
it is real and interesting and every day we wake  
we are alive watching Jacinta mountains swallow rain  
and here I thought you were having a flashback  
from the Grateful Dead show circa '97  
because you said *these vistas remind me of our time  
in Lorton: the palace/ the place/ no place/ no mother  
wants to see her child living in especially  
when the father gets released early for reasons  
the warden says is none of your business  
and this same mother can still be elated/ elated  
in that way you get when you know your child is alive  
even if all his friends are dead  
and it's been so long I forgot the addict in me  
and that hell located right below Hell where  
I lived for a few years sometimes  
I can taste those years in my morning coffee.*

# Ben and His Banister

YVONNE AMEY

You were a felt doll on the bed of a sick child, too good for this world

You called me your yellow-orange horizon

Complete with chemtrails I called

You my monster green

I still trip down stairs whenever I hear they found a body

There's a vulnerability in descending anything naked

You were my banister my tree house my shin splint my morning bird chirp

and when you caught me falling I was your barbell your routine

ending in a jackknife you were I were too heavy to let go

# No Smoking Signs and Fishnets

YVONNE AMEY

and under the no smoking sign is a pair of fishnets—one leg stretched but hooked onto a cigarette machine and it's cool outside and the night looks like a large dark-haired man wearing all black—and the wind is sweeping his black hair toward its black self—the other leg, strapped to a neon sign above a lottery bucket and a painting of some missing persons at their farewell barbeque and these people in the painting appear well-rested and the men and women at this No Smoking Sign bar decide to cheer on this little person who is center stage and bar room light is dancing all around him like the high noon sun beating down on pond ripples and he (the midget) is alive at this point and he is a midget but at no time did anyone admit to the news crew that what they saw out back wasn't a fishnet pond.

# Starfish

JOHN GREY

I have to shake  
his one good arm.  
The other somehow hangs there.  
Invisible meat for the eyes.

He lost that limb in the machinery.  
He likes to tell the story.  
Underhanded apparatus. His bad.  
That shoulder stump  
can even get a laugh.

He still works  
with the brute that maimed him.  
They have an understanding.  
It'll leave his other arm alone  
as long as keeps oiling the gears.

He says being one-armed  
is not irritating

just different.

Knife and fork  
is just fork.

And when he grabs  
his woman's knockers,  
it's one at a time.

He always ends with:  
she could have left him  
after the accident  
but she stayed  
or he read where a starfish can grow  
its lost limbs back  
or they could have cut his pay  
but they didn't.

That's two to him,  
one to the starfish.



# Portraits of an Emperor in Exile

NATHANIEL HEELY

The President arrives in his attic to paint in the mid-morning, sitting coolly, relaxed with hint of a boyish grin. He is several years retired from his Empire. In exile, he paints with poor memory famous faces he once knew.

He comes to the attic to forget. This is what the smears and globs allow him to do. He disappears from the world, puts a towel over the desk clock, pries a memory out of his head and commits it elsewhere so that he is unburdened.

#

Prime Minister Blair seethes like a serpent, eyelids the color of apple skin. Blair knew the president's heart as well as anyone. He tells the President this between long silences. Meant as encouragement. He knows it beats slow after repeated morning jogs and the negation of alcohol abuse.

He knows it pulses with the desire to vindicate, that it beat in time with citizens marching to enlisting offices. They dreamed of wrapping the globe in peace, smooth and enclosed, like the taut American flag on soldiers' caskets.

"I am with you, whatever." A nervous admission. The President does not speak as he paints him, he just lets his eyes pass and probe, drinking in his whole aura. To visit the President in his attic is to cede entire control and will. He thinks of peace, he lays it on the canvas, he wraps it tightest around the cheeks. When he is done they share a pizza and the President draws shapes in the fire-colored grease.

#

Christ explodes like a supernova before him. It takes nine minutes for the President to travel from 10141 Daria Place to the Dallas Biblical Arts

Museum. He insists on driving himself, assisted by as little as one secret service member. He is offered a private viewing once a week. Christ bursts, angels kneel, disciples rejoice. He feels most comfortable viewing from the margins, the darker portion of the mural.

#

He builds Vladimir Putin in rough cornered blocks. The face is flat and sickly looking. Laura comes in the attic with his breakfast—a pile of eggs with bacon—and sing-songs her praise of Tony Blair drying against the wall. She observes him painting his antagonist. The singing has stopped. When she questions it, he shrugs with that boyish grin of mischievousness. He is forgetting. He is inventing.

#

The people too, wish to forget. They exercise their poor memory as best as they can. They do not want their old Emperor's wars. The spectacle of their generation's slaughter has reached its peak. Manufacturing has

transferred from the factories to their graveyards. The soldiers brought the wilderness back into the city and glower in their packed isolation, eyes and hearts emanating with a hollow fire the color of the moon.

#

The President does not like his own name. He has not lived up to the body that sits still and smiles at him with gentle soul laid bare. His father ruled at the height of the Empire; when people did not scoff at the word Republic. They sold optimism for less than a dollar a gallon. Soldiers came home in honor, not caskets.

The President had not asked his father to sit for him, his father had asked. Word had gotten around. Those close to him were speaking of his strange new obsession. The people joke with nervous smiles that perhaps he had gotten out just in time. He has gotten letters from combat veterans—many wounded—requesting that they be painted.

“You’ve thought about it,” his father says.

“I wish they didn’t know what I was doing up here.”

“It’s an honor. They see it as an honor.”

“They’ll ask me why they are the way they are. They’ll ask me what made me do it and I won’t have an answer.” He swirls an extra red coat onto his father’s cheeks. He catches himself and tries to get it out with a third coat.

His father stares dreamily out the window, up at the clouds. “Do you ever think you’d like to go up there?”

The President halts. He looks. “You mean,” lowering his voice, “the Hereafter.” And then in a whisper. “Judgement before the throne?”

His father rouses as though from a dream. “Oh...yes. Perhaps. But I was thinking of sky-diving.”

#

He wonders if the angels pray—kneeling at the foot of Christ, or elsewhere. What would the function of prayer be for angels? He brings

a Bible to his museum viewings, and, by the light of Christ, he reads Ezekiel and Revelation. He prays, wondering if he should. What would the function of prayer be for an Emperor?

#

And then there is dear Sejanus. Sweet, loyal Sejanus. Unseen hooks clasp the ends of the mouth that can speak in the key of pure gravel. Rather than the taught, porcelain moonrock skin of photorealism, he gives him wrinkles of uncertainty on his forehead. An accidental blot of orange gives his face a yellowed hue. Sejanus so sick. His Vice for eight years, his voice even after. Sejanus withering and yet ebullient.

“The new hair is all right isn’t it?” Sejanus asks. “You are getting the hair?”

The President nods. He needs complete focus.

“Even when people know a thing is a lie, they can be comforted by it. I think that’s why they’ll accept it. Accept me.”

The President looks. No, he gazes. He leans his chest out beyond his knees and locks his body into study of the shapes in front of him. Eyes cross and blur and he cannot decide where the dark Brioni suit ends and where the light-starved attic begins. He is trying to negotiate the space of and through Sejanus' body. He is missing something.

Sejanus glances coyly at the painting of Putin. "Oh," he says. "Well that's not very flattering is it?"

#

He and the First Lady arrive in Burbank. The studio audience is as warm as the city. They applaud because they have forgotten him, and forgetting—along with humor—is a form of forgiveness. The President sets up an easel and takes a pallet and paints his host while they talk for the cameras. He doesn't miss a beat. He is prepared for every question.

"Now I'm not going to come off looking like Putin am I?"

"No. Well, I don't think anyone can come off like Putin except Putin."

"What are your feelings on Putin? What kind of relationship did you have with him?"

"Well, Jay, I'll tell ya. He never did like being the shorter one in the room."

The audience laughs.

"And I'm sure the current president would tell you the same."

Again, the audience laughs.

He paints quickly, decisively. His host takes notice of this and the President replies that old habits die hard. An arctic fox on the top of his host's head, blue and purple roads on the sky, each dimple smirking, suit stately wrapping his shoulders. Laura is there too and she talks about grandbabies and grandpa. In the time it takes them to cut away and return from a home video clip, the President has the whole cherubic face of his host. Before he leaves, the conversation turns briefly to politics.

"Of course it's very early. Antonia is the likely nominee on the

Democratic side, but on the Republican side, Sejanus is getting a lot of buzz. How do you think he'll fare against your brother...?"

"Well it's a difficult decision, sure, but I think it's a good outcome nonetheless."

"What's your relationship with Sejanus these days? Do you keep in touch?"

The President pauses, looking back in mind's eye at the portrait hanging in his attic. "I see him quite often. I see him quite often."

#

The President brings his palette and his water colors, his easel and his canvases to the dinner table, to the porch, in the car, to the bathroom. He paints whenever he has company over. Company used to come over more often. He paints his daughters who can barely fake a smile when they see themselves. It is not their father's amateurism that so clenches their jaw, it is the fact that he painted them without their permission, without asking

them even to pose.

#

"His decision to invade the Barbarians was the single-worst decision ever. I had no part in it. None whatsoever."

#

"He is asking for your endorsement."

"I don't give those."

"No not an endorsement, per se. He wants to know that you are loyal to him, as he has been loyal to you."

"Can you please keep your chin up?"

"Of course. And, but yes, if say, even in private you could give him your confidence. Obviously the optics of the whole situation could be contentious. This is for the good of the party. Of our party."

"Your chin. It keeps dropping. Hold it tighter to your head."

"..."

“There we go.”

#

Elephants do not forget. They bury their dead, they laugh, they cry, they play. Elephants have poor vision but great social skills. The Nonhuman Rights Project qualifies them as deserving of personhood along with chimpanzees, Orca whales, and orangutans. When the President paints his elephants he has trouble with the sincerity of their expressions. He wonders if elephants pray and believe in God. Perhaps memory is a form of prayer.

#

“A man who can reinvent his face can reinvent the past. A man’s oldest cell in his body isn’t even two years old, so how can I be the man I once was?”

#

He avoids the attic now. What once was a sanctuary is now a tomb. The

eyes of his Vice President consume the entire space. He has painted him wrong. A look of contumely sneers at each of his steps. Laura does not bring him breakfast. To the attic or elsewhere.

#

Yet Sejanus remains. How to draw the man he shared a head and heart with? The President offers self-portraits of himself to the canvas, but he cannot find his friend in these. He cannot paint him. He does not have the right tools, the right style.

#

A motorcade takes him downtown from his usual exile in Preston Hollow. Only a President gets to experience the true emptiness of highways in the middle of the day. Feeling as though he lives in a world constructed by giants whose feet are two lanes wide. He is looking for odd geometries, disruption, chaos, something to tell him that he is wrong. He visits the Nasher, he visits the Museum of Art, he visits the Dallas Contemporary.

There are two secret service members with him eating sandwiches dropping lettuce on the floors. They watch him watching.

#

“His brother is an embarrassment to the family. Look at his name, look at what he’s done to it. Maybe it’s only because I don’t share it I can disagree with the former President. We need change. We need more than change, we need cash, we need wealth. Nobody understands his brother’s failures better than me. Two wars? A failed economy? We’re not our past and we won’t be repeating it, believe me. The past is the only credential he’s got. I am violently, tremendously against the past.”

#

Ribbons of canvas are in the trash cans in the alleyway. The President goes for a light jog on a predetermined route with security stationed in cars at every corner. Two guards thirty years his junior breathe heavily in his wake.

#

The President considers his earliest painting to be the Homeland Security Advisory System. Green, blue, yellow, orange, red. The public received it in a similar manner to the way his current portraits are received.

#

“We will bring back a lot worse than torture.”

#

The President works in the garage now. There is more room. The canvas he uses is the size of an SUV and he lines up the tubes of oil paint in a praetorian phalanx. He starts the color field with Firebomb Black. It is the color and consistency of Texas tea. In order to reach the middle of the canvas he uses a roller and rakes it like grounds crew at a baseball field. The other cans are the cheering crowd who can never boo. He sits down in front, closest to the field and gives them a wave. They can forgive him anything. He closes his eyes and tries to recount the colors of war victims.

They can forgive him anything.

The border is five inches of burnt orange that his father hates. “It’s ostentatious. It’s crowd pleasing. You want to rewrite history when it’s history that writes you.” The President paints with his tongue sticking out of his mouth in full rapture. The lower half is blue. Very dark, very weak, the black bleeds into it too much. The upper half constantly changes. At first a peach that he tries to yellow, a yellow he tries to skin, a skin he tries to brown, a brown he accidentally sunburns, a sunburn he bleaches and freckles, freckles that fall back into a uniform peach...

#

Popular opinion polls show that men with hair are more attractive than those without. Men make up 85% of all hairplug procedures; these procedures have increased by 75% since the President retired.

#

Within a year of his reign he was the most popular President in the

country’s history. Now he sits in the den, watching and listens to the voice of his former consul bemoan their reign. Perhaps, because he no longer speaks to him, he can note the change from gravel to a precocious spark. Not quite a fire, but an electricity, a glowing plasma of neon, perhaps. He closes his eyes and tries to paint what he hears in his mind.

#

A square wooden cutout, spray paint, a mask, a ratty t-shirt, and overalls. The President’s hair is a field of thinning fingers reaching toward heaven. His shoulders and eyelids twitch in constant motion. He began the cutout with a golden horseshoe exploding like a dead star. He empties his interiority onto the plank. Shoe prints stamp and fingers smear, but he does not try to correct them. Warm colors of anger, frustration. He crosses his eyes and paints through blurred lensing. When he is finished, the face is a pair of uneven ovoid fruit hanging from the halo. He goes inside and he sleeps deeply on his couch with the TV on, but silent.



#

The family is horrified by what he draws. He does not show them his latest projects. They do not wish to see his latest projects. He no longer talks about his painting. He resists talking altogether. Sejanus calls him and the phone goes to voicemail. The President removes his voice from his voicemail.

#

There he lie: the Candidate, the brother, on a cold metal slab, roses blooming from his chest, cheek cratered in, the shrapnel of his teeth scattered in his mouth like buried snow. There he sits: the President, spine curved like a question mark, his arms as weak pillars wobbling beneath the weight of his face, eroded by tears.

#

“My opponent, may he rest in peace, whom I respect so much, who is an adopted brother of mine, was viciously attacked last night by radical

Barbarian extremists. These men are at the gates, looking to bury the key of freedom. I am calling for a total and complete shutdown of Barbarian immigration in response and support of my opponent. I hope by taking this bold stance, the country and party can support us in this unfinished war.”

#

A melting wax candle, once a foot tall, cries liquid globules down its stem until it shrinks shorter than a thumb. A pool of liquid wax in the tray reflecting, refracting and multiplying the image of the flame. This one, the President leaves untitled, unidentified. He goes into the den and listens to “A Good Year For The Roses.”

#

Can art ever do anything more than question? Can it answer? What is the President questioning? How often does the President question himself? Does art allow for a dialogue? If not, does this mean that art is inherently

fascist?

#

“He was unable to save his own brother. And, look he is a very diplomatic man, which I can respect, but...and I’ve had private conversations with him. He supports what I do. He supports what I stand for, my ambitions, and I think, privately, he’s very proud of the job that I’m doing.”

#

The death of his brother brings out the President’s blue stage. He cannot bear to paint his brother, however. He suppresses his brother if he puts him to two dimensions. In his blueness he finds the waters of Guantanamo. He paints detained souls as orange swaths drowning in whirlpools. He spatters blood red and tries to bury it in the deepest of purples. He paints his own heart inside their chests. He depicts their eyes as lidless, crawling with crimson serpents. He has seen what they have seen. And he paints their bars in three vertical strokes.

#

The crowds are large and growing in fervor. People look for a protector in times of tragedy as they did when the President presided over the empire. But now it is Vice President Sejanus who rouses the people from his pulpit of punditry. He asks for their hearts, he asks for the deepest fears, he asks for the loyalty, he asks for their hands. Hands to take back the country. They are ready to give them to him.

#

“Are we enemies?”

“What happened to him, Antonia?”

“The new hair, for starters.”

“We are not enemies.”

“And of all colors it was golden. He bought a crown for himself and he will do anything to keep it.”

“Neither you and I, nor me and him, nor he and you.”

“You believe this?”

“All that power after I admitted I was powerless. I am back to it again.”

“Read the dossier.” She sets the folder in his lap. He will not make eye contact. “Read, consider, know.”

“The Senate will not do anything. Haven’t you seen...?”

“My dear Emperor. After all this time didn’t you learn? The power has never belonged to the Senate. The power has always belonged to the mob.”

#

### Summary

-Barbarian regime has been cultivating, supporting and assisting SEJANUS for at least 5 years. Aim, endorsed by BARBARIANS, has been to encourage splits and divisions in western alliance.

-Former top Barbarian intelligence officer claims SEJANUS is compromised through his activities abroad and is vulnerable to blackmail.

-Barbarian Intelligence Services were funded by SEJANUS and ordered to attack any vulnerable political opponents, including failed attempts on ANTONIA and successful attempts on President’s brother DRUSUS.

#

His blue stage continues. Laura cannot stop him when he dots pointillist impressions of blue screens on the walls of their house. As Sejanus is sworn in, The President creates the screens he wishes to see, or even the screens he can bear to see. The triptych is out of focus. There stands his brother, erect with hand in the air, fingers dispersing the clouds. The second window bears a blue and happy Antonia. The third leaves the podium empty and dots of purple people throng the Mall to a degree he has never seen.

“I voted for Antonia,” his father whispers from the couch.

#

FBI Director Arruntius was found dead in his home today. Foul play is

suspected as authorities say his skull was crushed and his torso was riddled with bullet holes. Arruntius was leading an investigation into reports that President Sejanus may have colluded with elements of the Barbarian government during the Presidential campaign.

#

“The Honorable Emperor Sejanus requests an audience with you.”

“I am retired from politics.”

“This isn’t political Mr. President.”

“Is it personal? Than why is he not here if it is personal?”

“Please, Mr. President, he is trying to heal a divided nation.”

“And where might that division have come from?”

“He requests a portrait. He is enamored with your artistry. If you want it to be personal than meet him at his Tower, away from the politics of the Oval Office. Paint him in his true surroundings. He fears that without your vision the people may not see him as he truly is.”

“Feh!”

“He begs of you. Draw him as you knew him. Draw him as you wish to see him.”

“...”

“...”

“As I wish to see him.”

#

He sees the people madly rush up the Tower. They take the elevators, the stairs, they scale the sides of the buildings, they climb in through the windows. Bodyguards are outnumbered, calls to the emergency line will not go through. They are dragging him by his Brioni coat. Speech from his tongue splatters on their arms, pant fibers smear across the floor, fists beat purple blotches into his skin. Camera crews meet them out front. No sirens, no flashing lights, just the steady beam of bulbs’ gaze. The mob is trying to crack open his head like a paint can. They take a knife to his

scalp and lift the nest of golden fibers aloft. They roll in the spilled red and spread themselves on the sidewalk, bodies and concrete emulsifying into the shapes of angels. Childish scrubbing motions. One in particular. The one holding the scalp. He raises the golden nest to the cameras as evidence and his eyes are big and his teeth are white. His hair extends to the sky. He is happy. He is looking directly at the President. They nod at each other.

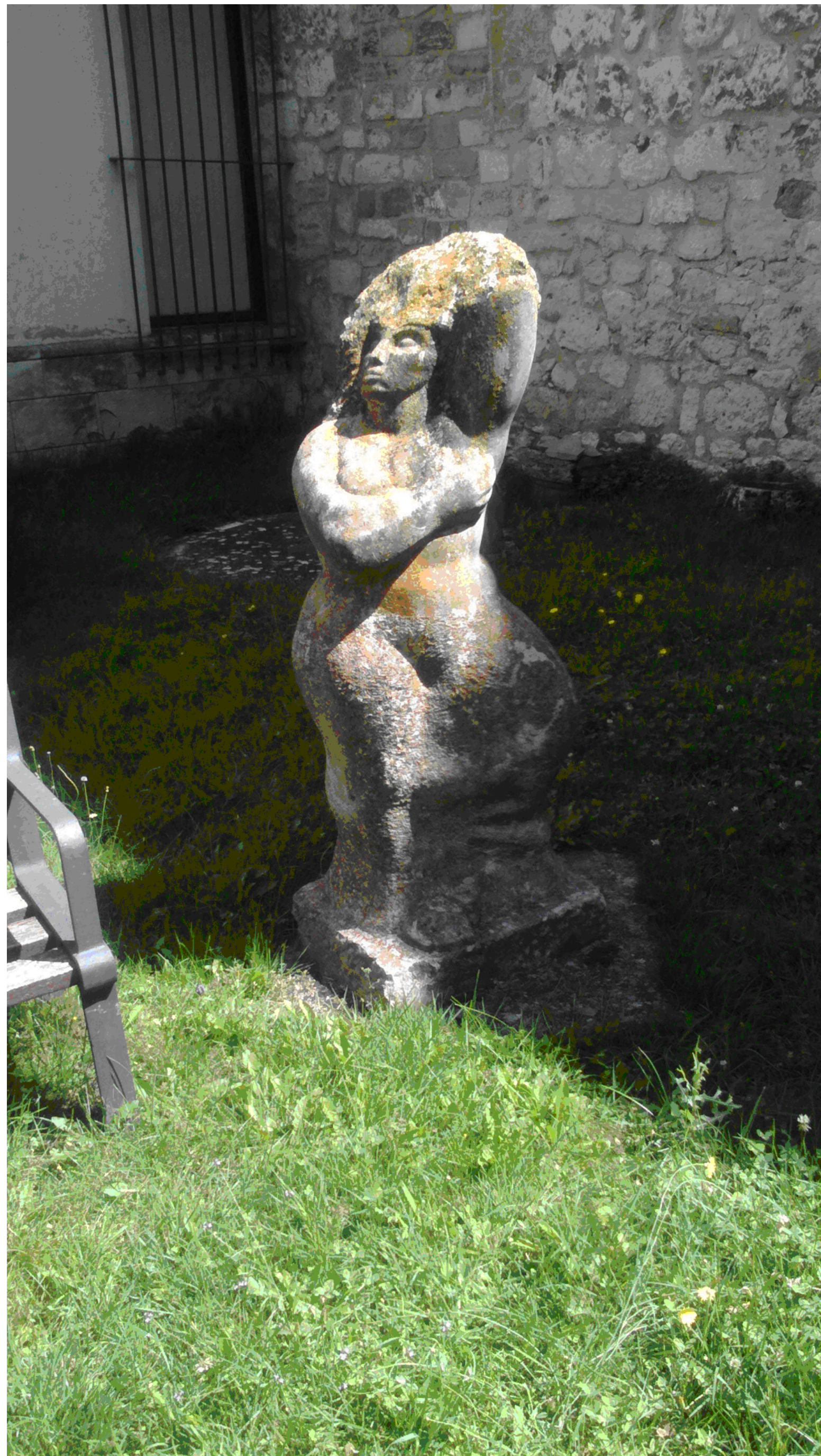
It is his masterpiece.

# The Killing Game

KEN W SIMPSON

Roll the dice.  
Number nine  
means vilify  
a five  
destabilisation  
six for sanctions  
an eight  
for assassinate  
and a pair  
to kill for profit





# Goddess Scratching Her Armpit

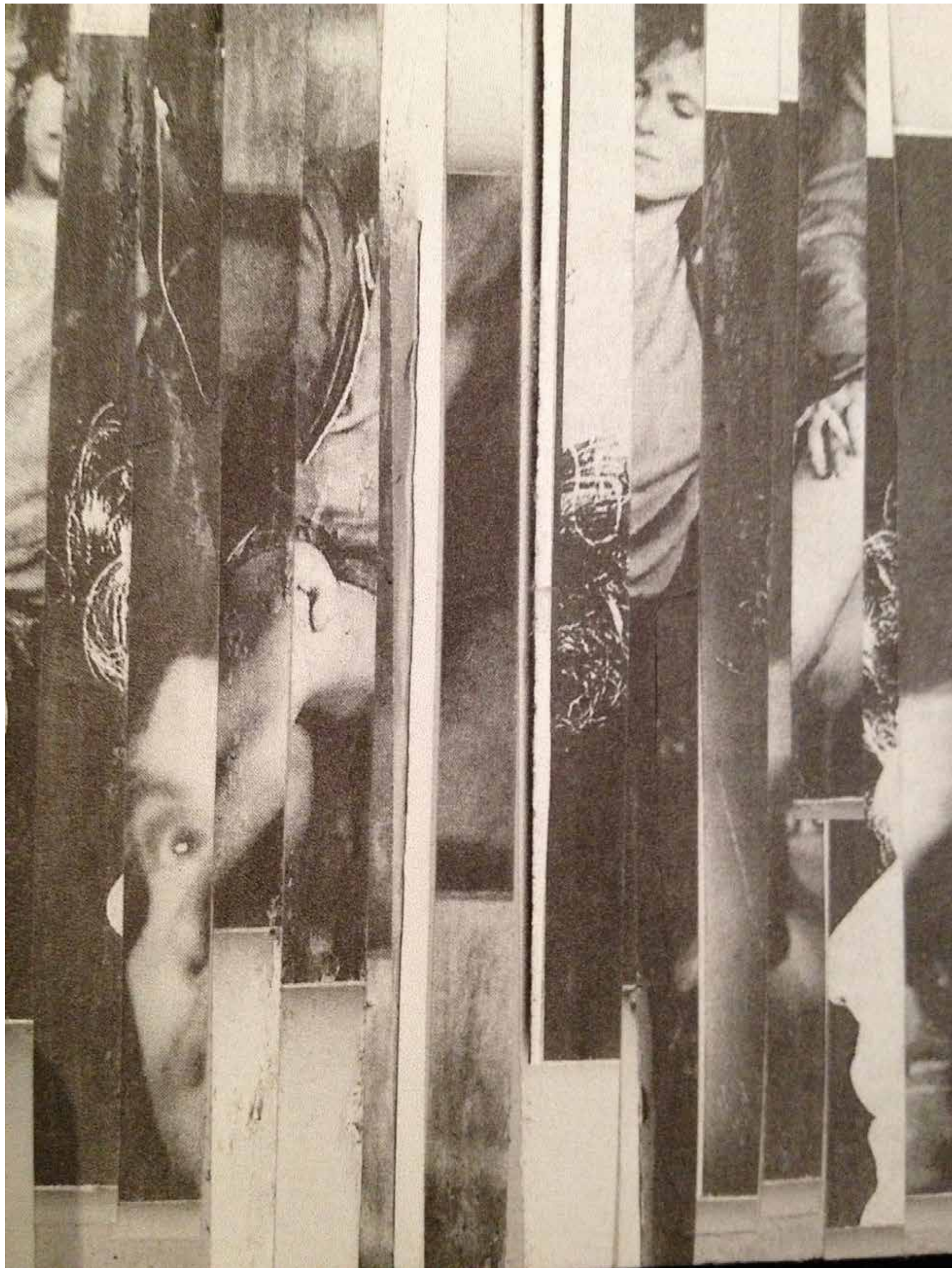
DANIEL DE CULLA



# We are all a like

DANIEL DE CULLA

Crossing the Street  
I'm just celebrating  
The feline sense of "Like".  
How do You like Me?  
I like more bananas than slices of water-melon.  
And I really feel like  
And yet I induced it like  
That is like.  
What is he like?  
The like as Me.  
With my own words to receive  
To touch, to perceive:  
Baby is like to live; Old is like to die.  
You have eyes like stars  
And the face like an Ass.  
I'm going to divorce You  
For that;  
Like father, like son.



**SPLIT**  
E.A.D. SELLORS

# The Passenger

E.A.D. SELLORS

watching it all go by  
the drivers horns  
the fury and madness  
of getting there  
of trying to fight  
against the clocks  
we sit back  
and let them drive  
close our eyes  
and it's almost  
foreign.

# Pulling You Away

HOLLY DAY

You always leave the door open  
when you're plotting suicide: poised dramatically in your room  
head back, razor against your neck  
the sun in the window behind your profile, frozen in time  
suicide note carefully typed out on your desk.  
I scamper down the hallway just in time to giggle  
"No, Daddy! Don't do it"! as I chase after the cat  
who says nothing in protest.

Later, you come into my room  
sit at the foot of my bed, tell me serious things  
about life and work and you and my mother  
that I don't understand, speak slow and earnest  
promise things I already know you don't mean.

# The Poet and the Penis

MIR-YASHAR SEYEDBAGHERI

My sister bought the poet Donny Beachwood's dismembered penis on Ebay. It stood visible at eleven inches (supposedly thirteen inches when erect), and she spent her time with that penis. She used to take me to movies and on walkabouts, uses to tell me dirty jokes, and even beat up bullies who made fun of my height. Once the penis came into our lives, we were all lost to her, things on the background. I thought the poet a hack, but I loved my penis.

I stayed silent and the penis came for my sister.

That penis, she claimed, was the source of Donny Beachwood's poetic genius, his ability to birth poems grounded in erotic beauty, nature, so much. Jealous enemies had cut off his penis after they'd stabbed, shot and poisoned Donny Beachwood, while he was doing CrossFit. The whole

time. That she claimed, pointed to a poetic divinity. He only died when they drowned him in the river. And she was blessed to own this piece of poetic history.

She prayed to the penis before bed, she took the penis to church. She even tried to get Reverend Botkin to bless the penis. When that didn't work she stole the bread and wine from the Communion table and replaced it with the penis. This is Donny Beachwood's penis. Take, eat, she proclaimed, before Reverend Botkin whisked her away and banned my sister from the church. I wanted to cry for my sister, consumed by worshipping a meaningless penis. I wanted her to see that she was worshipping a disgusting object that no one should have preserved honestly, that she was becoming sick. She was also worshipping a human

being and holding him up on some impossible pedestal.

One night, I removed the penis from her room and took it to the railroad tracks. I watched with a kind of sadness and satisfaction as a train crushed the penis, every ounce of it, hoping, hoping my sister would come back to us, but sure she wouldn't, sure she would search for that penis day and night.

# Tom the Peeping Tom

CG BRIK

## *Part 1: Enter the Voyeur*

Once upon a time in the gated community of a peaceful West coast American suburb, there was a young, attractive, financially stable married couple that would routinely partake in amorous activity every other night or so. The neighboring bushes, adjacent to the bedroom, were often attended by a sweaty, middle aged yet excitable peeping tom named Tom who found carnal satisfaction in observing the happy couple make love. His surveillance was not harmful compared to more official and technical forms, but required equal amounts of discretion to be 'effective'. Tom was simply a happy go lucky neighborhood friendly pervert with a kink for voyeurism and onanism. Simultaneously, of course.

Why did Tom pick this particular couple? Perhaps it was the conveniently arranged landscaping. Perhaps it was their idyllic Americana romance and stability. It matters not. In his fantasy, Tom named them Hubby and Dear, pet names which he fancied he was able to lip read in their conjugations from his moist darkness.

Life continued smoothly for the couple, and Tom found a monastic peace in his questionable routine. Until one moonlit night, as the beautiful couple were in the middle of a particularly lithesome and vigorous session, Tom was stunned mid-stroke by the telling music of a rattle too

thick and threatening to disregard as another harmonious cicada. Due to his Christian upbringing and empathy with rodents, Tom was thrown into the adrenaline-fueled throes of a terrible panic and shrieked in a cartoonish manner. Hubby and Dear clutched each other in shock to behold the naked lunar aspect of Tom fading away. They understood what had happened immediately and felt a deep mix of revulsion, disgust, and not a little pride at having been chosen from among the impressive stock of nuclear households in their community. Police were called, blinds were pulled, alarmed laser sensors were installed. If they were going to put up with people masturbating to their presence in windows, then they might as well live in any densely populated city with culture. However, Hubby and Dear had chosen to reside in a pleasant suburb, where standards must be kept, and lines must be drawn.

The laser alarm system was triggered so frequently by snakes, coyotes, racoons, and neighboring domestic disputes never to be discussed that Hubby and Dear decided to just turn 'the damn thing' off. Right around this time, Tom was feeling lost, lonely, and nostalgic; he revisited the old piece of backyard and tried to spurn a little life into his loins by projecting the fond memories of that lovely couple onto the cold dark window frame that used to always be there for him. He closed his eyes and almost forgot about law, police, conventions, snakes, and mosquitoes. The torch was lit once again!

But something deviant was occurring. Well, more deviant than usual. The window along the hallway leading to the bedroom revealed the silhouette of a masculine figure holding what appeared to be a knife. Extensive observation and neuroticism had made Tom knowledgeable enough of Hubby and Dear's nocturnal routine and habits to know that they would never have a visitor at this late hour and certainly not to their bedroom. Now this figure happened to be a popular serial killer who enjoyed travelling the West coast incapacitating couples, violating each partner using his knife as the other watched in an apotheosis of pain, humiliation and death. The element of forcing his victims to witness the horror might come from an energy kindred to Tom's kink but certainly is of a bit less forgivable nature.

Just as the sinister figure entered the bedroom and raised his knife above the mattress, Tom, naked as a baby, armed with a raging hardon, took a leap of faith through the bedroom window, spraying shattered glass everywhere. Hubby, Dear, and the killer were thrown into a state of shock as they looked at Tom hyperventilating, aroused, and stuck with enough broken glass to give him an otherworldly appearance that made the killer feel strangely insecure. This gave Hubby just enough time to notice the knife, grab the Mark Maguire autographed Louisville Slugger that hangs above his bed frame, and begin repeatedly braining the killer with what Dear would later describe as 'sexy, but probably inappropriate passion'. Dear called the police, and the three of them sat silently trying to slow their heart beats and not stare at Tom's ever attentive member or the killer's corpse.

When it was all said and done, Hubby and Dear were so grateful to Tom's commitment and warning that they decided to put a biweekly show on for him, so he could enjoy himself as never before, feeling safe and guilt free.

### *Part 2: Come Back Kid*

As with all performances that repeat themselves, even this one grew stale. Tom was able to predict exactly the motions the couple were going through and found himself showing up as if to an appointment rather than a transgression and leaving with an empty feeling. Some nights, Hubby and Dear were not in the mood, but decided to give it a go out of their mutual respect for Tom.

Dear decided to sit down Hubby and have a discussion about their love life. It used to be amazing enough to draw multiple perverts to their windows, and there's no reason that spark can't be regained. Maybe it's time to give something new a try.

Sodomy? suggested Hubby hopefully. Sure, acquiesced Dear, but that would be a temporary and parochial solution at best. Toys? proffered Hubby. Sure, sighed Dear, and I'm sure we'd soon be attending conventions dressed as our childhood fantasies. The slightly acidic tone suggested rejection. They contemplated for a moment in silence until Dear gave her solution: let's invite someone. Great! Hubby quickly agreed and began suggesting several female co-workers, sending Dear into a jealous rage. So, what gives? Hubby couldn't bear to see Dear fondled and—God forbid—



penetrated by another man and began espousing the supposedly ancient virtues of monogamy. The idyllic couple snapped their fingers in unison: Tom! He's a loyal, sexless pervert whom they both felt pet affection towards. Dear didn't like how Tom looks, with the sweating and slight double chin, but trusted him in an avuncular way we don't want to contemplate too much. Hubby would rather 'avoid gay shit', but found happiness in Dear's pleasure, had become chums with Tom, and figured that one only lives once, so what the hell. He was perfect.

So, Hubby and Dear called up Tom and had him over for a sit down. Friction and tension ensued. Tom was immediately overwhelmed with anxiety at the proposition. Once Hubby registered how unattractive Tom's face was, with its continued wheezing and sweating, he insensitively suggested a blindfold or perhaps a paper bag with holes, nearly sending Tom into a full-fledged panic attack. What a cruel thing to do to someone so keenly in tune with and aroused by the visual.

Also, it turns out Tom was terrified of touching bodies other than his own, and it's this fear that led him to the alternative lifestyle of the peeping tom. How were they to resolve the hang ups of all parties involved and bring back that loving feeling?

Luckily, Hubby was an engineer who loved tinkering, starting projects, and 'doing stuff'. So, he built an extraordinary apparatus: a complex arrangement of mirrors and a dangerous array of candle holders that combined the disorientation of a fun house with the ambiance of a classy brothel. Hubby called it the 'Dream Theatre'. Dear called it 'Arcadia'. Tom claimed he didn't have a name for it but thought of it as the 'Peep Show'.

Whilst engaged, no one was sure whom they were seeing or touching yet felt adequately erotically stimulated. Tom, Hubby and Dear's hang ups were bypassed; they were consumed by an abstract vision of a beautiful kaleidoscope of mingling flesh. Although it was a cozy, domestic DIY orgy, the appearance of the room to an outsider in the harsh light of day would have given impressions of the occult. Afterwards they would cuddle together, drink tea and complain about their day jobs, filling the rooms with laughter and perfumes. Tom was no longer alone.

### *Part 3: Tertium Quid*

Time solidified the bond between our beloved heroes, and Dear decided to approach the media with their story. True crime enthusiasts wanted to hear every juicy detail of their encounter with the individual known as the 'West Coast Killer', which led to dozens of appearances on documentaries and podcasts, countless interviews for feature articles and books. They became consultants on the film that would be made about their lives 'Three is One'. They went on tour as idols of polyamory and free love, their story was an inspiration to everyone who desired committing to a permanent ménage à trois. This naturally segued into the trio charging exorbitant amounts of money for seminars that guide people in a life of love and free expression. Not to mention groups of and fundraisers concerned with the post trauma of encountering a serial killer, many members whom could be identified by their t-shirts labeled: 'I survived the West Coast Killer and all I got was this lousy t-shirt'. They protested stuffy religions

with cutting edge activists and non-profit organizations. They were guests on all the morning and late night shows as well as live streams. Things really started happening when they spoke in front of congress on behalf of legislation that allowed all the threesomes that wanted to be married and receive the same benefits and acceptance as couples. They had cameos on all the legal, police, and medical procedural shows, not to mention sitcoms. They were the first three-way Ted talk. They hosted their own talk show at night and lived their own reality tv show by day. They debated with academics of every discipline, their personal experience and seamless teamwork trumping all who crossed them. They were incessantly invited to give talks and speeches at graduations, commencements and convocations.

Tom, Hubby, and Dear committed themselves to putting their image in the public eye as much as possible. What no one knew was that once they were out of the public eye, they no longer had sex or even really spoke to each other. They would just sit on the couch and watch TV, occasionally ordering take out. Sometimes they would watch porn—group sex, of course---but it didn't compel them the way it used to. Unbeknownst to Hubby and Dear, and at great risk to the empire they'd built, Tom would sometimes sneak out of the luxurious villa they now lived in to the more homogenous suburbs and look for a luminous window with a telling silhouette, preferably with some nearby bushes, just so he could recapture a taste of that nostalgia, of that old crime...

# Downpour

COLE BRAYFIELD

*Sat, Feb 2, 11:33am*

Hey

Hey

I don't know why but messaging on Grindr feels weird to me

I just prefer texting

So what's up?

Listening to the rain

Yeah it's crazy out

I like it

Is that all you're doing?

For the moment

I'm bored

I haven't done anything today

I just feel weird

Ya know?

I have so much I need to do

Like what?

Everything

Mostly work stuff

What do you do?

I'm an animator

I freelance for small video games

What do you do?

I'm not working right now

Must be nice

Sorry

That came off really shitty

I don't know why I said that

I'm sorry

I promise I'm not a dick

*Sat, Feb 2, 12:57pm*

Still listening to the rain?

Yeah

I need something to do

I need to avoid work

Lol

What should I do?

Watch a movie

Any suggestions?

Umbrellas of Cherbourg

That sounds weird

I'll look it up

It's old

It's the perfect day to watch it

I think so

I love it

Is it good?

You're not one of those guys who lies  
about watching fancy foreign films

Are you?

Sorry

Kidding

*Sat, Feb 2, 2:01pm*

This is kind of boring

I wish I had more of an attention span

I don't know why I'm so bored

I've felt so weird lately

I just can't get anything done

*Sat, Feb 2, 3:19pm*

How long have you been on Grindr?

Not long

How long have you been out?

A while. What about you?

I've been out for four years

But I just got on Grindr recently

Relationship?

Yeah

I just got out of a long term thing

You?

I've never been in a relationship

Really?

You're so cute though

*Sat, Feb 2, 5:03pm*

So what're you looking for?

Whatever happens

Into just having fun?

Sure

Wanna come over?

I can host

I prefer to host

Okay

When should I come over?

*Sat, Feb 2, 8:18pm*

Do you still wanna do something today?

Maybe later



Okay

Just let me know

*Sat, Feb 2, 11:10pm*

You still up?

Yes

Come over

1607 12th St

Okay

Do you have lube?

What do you want to do?

I'm on my way

I'm here

Damn

You have a really nice house

Come to the door

*Sun, Feb 3, 9:12am*

Sorry last night was weird

I still had fun man

Let's hang again sometime

*Sun, Feb 3, 1:20pm*

I hope you don't feel weird about it

It really was fine

*Sun, Feb 3, 4:56pm*

I feel like shit

Like just generally

Do you ever have that?

I don't know

I'm just crying for no reason

*Fri, Feb 8, 11:23am*

I've felt weird since we did stuff

Do you have something?

What did you give me?

*Sat, Feb 9, 2:56am*

Sorry

I'm just being paranoid

*Tue, Feb 12, 5:01am*

I keep seeing you

When I sleep

When I'm awake

All the time

Everywhere

*Sat, Feb 13, 3:50am*

Sometimes it smells like a pond outside

Like when it rains

*Sat, Feb 16, 4:17am*

Okay

Seriously

What did you do to me?

I don't know what's happening

Why the fuck won't you reply

*Sat, Feb 16, 5:39am*

Where did your house go?

It was right here

Answer you piece of shit

*Sat, Feb 16, 11:58pm*

I'm going to die

Aren't I

**Read** *11:59pm*

# Shadow of the Wheel

DAVID ROGERS

They say you can't breathe the local air after the first of September. If you ask why not, they just smile a little and talk about the apple harvest or which horse is likely to win The Big Race. The Race is the grand finale of the Fall Festival. They look forward to it all summer.

*They*, of course, are the Locals. Those families whose names are carved in granite on the more impressive stones in the cemetery on the hill. Or those whose names are soon forgotten, who haunt thin-walled wooden shacks hidden by trees along the shore of the lake. On still days, the lake is a mirror. You come to believe that, if you watch long enough, you will see in it the world's true reflection. The shacks are invisible from spring to autumn. When leaves fall, the leaning walls appear as if by magic. Lost souls come out after dark.

What does it mean to be Local? It's nothing to do with where you were

born or how you learned to make a living (assuming you had to make a living, because you were not among those whose graven names meant they need never labor, manually or otherwise). Still less depends on social niceties, or who is loved or hated or seemingly ignored by neighbors. To be Local is to be expected not to leave.

#

When summer people die, it is not usually by drowning or drunken mishaps with fireworks or firearms or automobiles. These happen, of course, and now and then someone drops dead of a heart attack, but by far the most common cause of death for summer people is to get lost in the Labyrinth.

The Lab, as it is called by Locals, is seventy-five feet square on the outside, yet inside, one can walk miles between entrance and exist. If the

exit is ever found. It was built as part of Elysium, the defunct amusement park on the edge of town. Elysium closed several decades ago and fell into disrepair that bordered on outright decay. Most of its buildings, if they remain upright at all, feature missing doors, broken windows, caved-in roofs. Yet the Lab remains intact. From outside, on a sunny summer day, when the light hits the the hillside above town at an August angle, the Lab looks innocent enough. Few one can resist its appeal and intrigue for an entire season. A intricate maze with narrow corridors and dozens of angled passages, it once functioned as a haunted-house amusement during the fall, as a novelty the rest of the time. Carnival prizes--stuffed animals, miniature plastic minotaurs, or tee-shirts emblazoned with the big E for Elysium and the slogan "I Survived the Lab!" were given for those who found their way through in less than fifteen minutes.

#

The remnants of Elysium lay on the hillside, halfway between Main

Street and my summer cottage. I had come to the little town by the lake for the summer, before what I hope would be my last year of graduate school. It seemed like a quiet place to study. Mornings, I worked in the town's one small grocery store, stocking shelves and sweeping floors. Afternoons, I was supposed to be reading articles for my thesis on paleontology. Instead, my eyes strayed again and again to the beams of the old roller coaster, the constantly changing web of shadows it cast across weed-grown parking lots, and the sundial of the Ferris wheel. The wheel itself had not turned in decades, yet it somehow remained upright under the wheeling sky. The tallest beam of the coaster, positioned so it worked as an immense wooden gnomon, ticked its shadow across the spokes of the Ferris wheel, minute by minute, hour by hour, day after day, the inscrutable hand of time, visible and in constant motion.

On an afternoon when it was too hot to stay inside a moment longer, I surrendered and wandered toward the empty park. The cloudless sky

was the pure, dry blue that heralds the coming of fall, even while the late summer sun lures the world into complacency. I passed under the shadow of the wheel and approached the Lab, curious to see if the door was locked. Of course, it was not. What could be inside that would be worth locking up?

Inside, the Lab looked surprisingly clean. I had expected to find fast food wrappers, empty liquor bottles, a lonely shirt or shoe left behind by hormonal teenagers. But no. Nothing but a few windblown leaves. The Lab had never had a roof, so the summer breeze sighed along corridors like a ghost.

I turned left just inside the door. The Lab had called to me all summer. I felt I knew the way. Over the weeks, fast becoming months, I had memorized the Park, including every turn and dead end in the Lab. Or so I thought.

My feet in comfortable running shoes made no noise on old

floorboards. Afternoon light cut diagonal lines across northern walls and left deep pools of shadow along southern sides. I imagined what the park must have been like, decades ago, and fancied I could smell popcorn, chili dogs, deep-fried doughnuts. Under it all, an foundation of vomit and decay. The murmur of ghosts. Hysterical laughter and genuine screams of roller-coaster riders.

I turned right, went straight past two more chances to turn, and went right again. I was almost back to the door I came in, as I knew from the map of the Lab in my mind's eye. One wall separated this passage from the entrance. Another left, and I would zig-zag my way across the maze, past siren calls of dead ends, to the exit on the other side.

Half a dozen turns, left, right, and left again, and I should have seen the door. I did not. Perhaps I had miscounted. More turns. Afternoon was becoming evening. Perhaps I had missed a beat, gone left when I ought to have gone right. The shadows along the walls grew deeper. I tried to

retrace my steps and start over, to no avail.

Many days seemed to pass.

#

The rest of the summer went by as if in a dream. I somehow knew when the horses ran The Big Race, and when apples fell or were picked, the long, wide ladders reaching like arms high in the branches. I knew when leaves fell, dark branches parting the veil along the shore of the lake. I sensed the change when summer people packed cars and closed shutters and locked doors that had been open all season and went back to their dull city lives, all while I drowsed in the Lab.

When at last I awoke and drifted from the corridors of the the maze, a swirl of new red leaves under my feet, the air had a tang of coming winter frost. My thesis and the articles on paleontology no longer seemed important. The academic questions and the summer days when I had nodded over them now seemed like the dream.

On my way back to the cottage that had I left so many long weeks before, I noted with approval that my name had been painted over the door and carved on the mailbox. The box was an architectural, monumental affair, granite and marble, with a small alcove, almost as an afterthought, where the occasional item of news or correspondence from the world beyond might appear, in the unlikely event that anyone remembered my existence. Turning up the sidewalk, I looked over my shoulder at the lake, at Elysium, at the sleepy town abandoned by summer and summer people, and I felt at last as if I had come home.

The air smelled of apples and old grass and hay lofts where horses settled in for the long winter, yet I did not breathe it. I found there was no need.



# Permanent Change of Station

KAREN BREEN

Three months means  
I don't fuck with you people.

Eight months means  
I don't care.

The whole thing is something different  
when you see  
the curvature of the lightbulb,  
the keys turned in.

Tell me that my cadence didn't fit,  
there wasn't any room.  
But a microcosm's an echo chamber, too.

There's something else:  
crying a little over something trite,  
wearing too much pink,  
eating raspberry sherbet,  
reading to him on Sundays.

No, really.  
Reading to him on Sundays.  
It's nice.

It's like waking up in Okinawa.  
Or, God I hope so.

# Scababias

ALEXANDROS PLASATIS

## The Magic Alley

Fifteen or so boys settled about the water-taps area and gazed at him: in the playground's corner, squatting on his big rock, Scababias had his back towards them. A boy made a signal and a team of three gathered stones, walked on tiptoe, took cover behind a bush: not far from him, not too near.

A lizard popped up from under a stone, and Scababias hawked up phlegm. His eyes narrowed and focused on the little creeper, and he parted his lips slowly, revealing the gap between his front upper teeth. The lizard cocked its head towards him, and he shot his spit through the gap teeth: the serpent disappeared back into its hole.

'Hold fire,' whispered one boy.

Scababias remained in squatting position, utterly motionless, insect-like.

'Why not stone him?'

'Only if he attacks us.'

They waited.

He waited.

'Enough. Let's go back.'

They crawled back and joined the others by the water-taps, gave their report: 'His spitting ability is scary.' 'He's dangerous.' 'What if he spits on us?'

The kids agreed that they weren't happy with Scababias's exile. It seemed that their plan to banish him to the playground's corner hadn't worked as they had wished. In his solitary confinement, inspired by boredom and hatred, Scababias had been working on his saliva, shooting his spit at various targets

with accuracy, scaring off his schoolmates, turning his place of exile into his own land, his kingdom.

‘We must find out what he is up to.’ ‘Let’s check him out through the dark alley.’ ‘I’m not going.’ ‘I’m not going.’ ‘I’m not going.’ ‘You go.’ ‘No, you go.’ ‘How about the lonesome hero?’ and they looked at the boy who sat on the floor, away from them, Pavlo.

Pavlo stood up and walked off.

‘Pavlo... Don’t you need help?’

‘I work better alone.’

‘No back up?’

‘Your prayers and thoughts are my back up.’

He headed towards the alley, a narrow passage that ran parallel with the back of the school building and a high wall that separated the playground from the residential area. The alley was abandoned and, even on shiny mornings, dark: the trees which stood on the other side of the wall provided a natural

roof. It was a tunnel that led to the heart of Scababias’s kingdom. None of the other kids dared to enter there, scared off by the idea of sharing darkness with Scababias, and the stories Pavlo told them about the exiled boy’s behaviour in there.

Pavlo stood, the daydarkness in front of him, and he walked into it. Slowly. The upper coat of the soil was a thick and soft mud, like chocolate spread, sweet squelchy sounds echoed as he made his way forward, and the birdsong from outside vibrated more melodic, more and more melodic as he penetrated the heart of daydarkness. He turned, looked back at the place where he was standing earlier: it was bathed in light. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he could see around him, but no-one could see him from outside. It was his magic alley, a sense of home.

He walked amongst cobwebs and bugs and strange plants that grew in darkness, his eyes and hands searching, carefully searching for more magic. He found the place where some bricks protruded a little. Using the bricks as

steps, he climbed up the wall and sat on the ledge with his back to the school, hidden in the foliage of the oak tree. Through the branches, he looked at the house opposite: the curtains in the kitchen were drawn open, a big pot was simmering on one of the hobs. There was no-one there, though, and he didn't have much time. As he was about to climb back down, he noticed movement in the kitchen. Ah, there she was... The housewife. With his foot he pushed away a branch to get a better view. She put on her apron. God, she was going to cook. Pavlo unzipped his trousers: now she opened the oven door and bent over to check the pie... now she got a long wooden spoon and lifted the pot's lid to give it a stir, to take a whiff of the rising steam... What was she cooking there? Was it okra again? Pavlo finished masturbating and climbed down.

He walked to the other end of the alley and watched the bony Scababias squatting: he looked like one of those mosquitos with very long legs, harmless. He stepped out into the light; Scababias spotted him and walked slowly

towards him.

The boys by the water-taps screamed: 'Pavlo! He's coming.' 'Pavlo, careful!' 'Pavlo!' 'Pavlo!' and Pavlo wished they would shut up, the cowards. He picked up a stone and drew a line in the mud. Scababias squatted in front of the line, looked up at Pavlo. Pavlo scanned his surroundings. A big spider, motionless for a long time, must have sensed Scababias's presence and disappeared into a hole. Scababias pulled something from his pocket and gave it to Pavlo. A battered cigarette, a lighter. Pavlo cleaned them in his t-shirt. He smoked a bit, passed it back, pulled out a torn page from a porn magazine, gave it to Scababias: 'Your homework.'

The two boys smiled at each other.

Then Pavlo walked back and joined the others out in the light.

'What happened, Pavlo?' 'Are you injured?' 'Shall we call the medics?'

'Listen, don't you ever go inside the alley.'

'What did he do to you?' 'Did you see him?' 'Did he harm you?'

‘I was hiding. He couldn’t see me. But I saw him.’

‘What was he doing?’

‘He was jerking off again...’

‘Oh, how disgusting. You’re so brave to enter the alley.’

‘Don’t mention it, guys.’

‘You are a true hero...’

Back in the classroom, Scababias wasn’t a big threat to anyone. Naturally, no-one wanted to share a desk with him. His desk was right at the back, in the corner. The two desks in front of him and the two on the other side were vacant – what the pupils referred to as the safety zone.

‘Why does nobody sit near Scababias?’ the teacher had asked them.

‘Doctor’s orders,’ the students had said, and the teacher couldn’t hide his smile.

The teacher turned a blind eye to all that. He understood them all, they were just kids. To make up to Scababias, he never tested him on the lessons

and left him in peace. And Scababias spent his time in the classroom quietly.

It was only when the kids harassed him that he would react by grabbing his genitals.

\*

About thirty pupils, boys and girls, gathered around the water-taps area to discuss burning issues regarding Scababias. The team that observed Scababias’s exile reported that the boy’s behaviour was worsening. Whenever they visited his corner to spy on him, they would come back terrified by his vicious spitting skills which they were certain he would use for his revenge. At the alley front, the lone patroller, Pavlo, kept feeding reports about Scababias masturbating in the darkness, rendering the alley completely off-limits. On top of all that, recently Scababias’s toothless, crazy mum had neglected to shave her boy’s head once a week and, as a result, his nits ‘could take off anytime from his dirty head and, like tiny helicopters, land in ours,’ as a fat little boy put it.

The situation was getting out of hand. Stricter measures should be taken.

The leaders asked for suggestions on how to further restrict the boy.

‘Let’s stone him!’ ‘Yes, let’s stone him every day!’

*YES! YES! YES!*

And they would have stoned him if the leaders hadn’t talked them out of it: ‘Violence must be our last resort, people. We mustn’t stone him, unless we have to defend ourselves.’

Once everyone had calmed down, three girls announced that they had seen Scababias many times licking his own boogies off his finger.

‘How come I never saw him doing that?’ said Pavlo.

‘Girls have an eye for details,’ said another boy. ‘It must be true.’

‘It’s not true,’ said Pavlo. ‘Scababias never does that. The girls are lying.’

‘Why is Scababias the way he is?’ asked someone.

They fell quiet for a short while, contemplating.

‘He’s a leper,’ a boy said.

‘A leper?’ ‘A leper, a leper.’ ‘Look at him, he must be a leper.’

They all turned and looked at the corner, where Scababias was squatting on his big rock, as usual, only this time he was staring back at them.

‘Leprosy is a contagious disease,’ said a girl.

‘YOU ARE A LEPPER, SCABABIAS.’

Scababias grabbed his genitals.

‘Look at the bastard!’ ‘Let’s go and stone the leper!’ ‘Stone the leper!’

*YES! YES! YES!*

They began gathering stones. Even the leaders picked up stones: ‘We have no other choice, people. He’s dangerous.’

They headed towards his place of exile, they were going to do it.

‘Wait, wait...’ said Pavlo from his corner. ‘Don’t stone him. That would be too much for the teachers.’

‘Who cares. Let’s stone the leper!’

‘WE COME TO STONE YOU, SCABALEPPER.’

Pavlo stood up. ‘There’s no need to stone him. He’s not a leper.’

‘And who are you to tell us what Scababias is?’ said one.

‘Who am I?’

‘Yes. Who are you?’

‘I am the lonesome hero of the dark alley.’

Quickly the leaders informed the crowd that Pavlo was indeed the hero of the dark alley; they even told of a few of his adventures in the darkness, and everyone looked at him in awe.

‘He’s not a leper,’ Pavlo said. ‘Don’t stone him.’

‘Then what is it, Pavlo?’ ‘Tell us what you think, dark hero.’

‘He’s nuts. But if you think he’s a leper, there’s something else you can do about it.’

They decided to follow Pavlo’s suggestion for a peaceful solution: they wouldn’t stone him, but in order to protect themselves from leprosy, an additional sanction was imposed on Scababias. They appointed one of the

water-taps (the one next to the toilet’s entrance that wasn’t working properly) as Scababias’s personal tap. He wasn’t allowed to use any other taps. For hygiene reasons, they made a sign out of cardboard that read,

*DANGER*

*LEPROSY*

*STAY AWAY!*

...and hung it above Scababias’s tap.

They spread the news quickly. And, before the bell rang for the last time that day, everyone in the school had been informed that Scababias was a leper, including the boy himself.

Pavlo carried on with the mission of patrolling the dark alley, and after each time he finished masturbating, he drew a line and had a smoke with Scababias.

So one day, when Pavlo was hanging around the third floor balcony with

some other students and heard someone screaming, ‘The thing is here! It’s angry!’ he didn’t worry, he was his secret friend after all.

‘Why aren’t you in your corner?’ a boy asked him. Scababias grunted.

Someone shouted: ‘The time has come! He’s here for his revenge!’

### *RUN FOR YOUR LIVES*

Pavlo’s friends hurried into a classroom and barricaded the door by pushing desks against it. Everyone but Pavlo disappeared, and Scababias advanced slowly, smiling at the only available prey.

‘Run!’ screamed a girl who was watching from a classroom window. ‘What are you waiting for? *Run!*’

‘Could it be...’ thought Pavlo, and locked eyes with Scababias, who licked his lips softly. Oh, no... Pavlo beat it towards the stairs, looked back: Scababias was running after him. He jumped down the steps in threes: ‘But we’re mates, Scababias!’ He turned back and saw Scababias jumping down the steps in threes, too. ‘Bugger...’ Another flight of stairs, Pavlo reached

the bottom, turned back: Scababias was jumping in fours. ‘Oh, God...’ He shot down the last flight of stairs and reached the playground. He felt better now, with all his mates around him... He relaxed his run into a light jog. Some students said hi and some asked him if he was in a hurry, but when they saw Scababias running after him, they began screaming and ran away.

‘Where are you going?’ Pavlo asked them. ‘Get stones... Stone him!’

They didn’t get stones. They just moved away.

Now only the two were running, the others watching.

A boy from up a balcony shouted: ‘There’s no way he can escape Scababias!’

A girl from another balcony shouted back: ‘He can do it. He’s the lonesome hero of the dark alley!’

‘The alley,’ Pavlo thought, ‘I have to make it there and draw a line.’ In his panic, he headed the quick way, towards the boy’s kingdom.

Scababias laughed out loud. No-one had ever heard him laughing.

‘Hey, Scababias, you scare me, mate...’



*Heeeeee-hee-hee-hee.*

Knees pumping, Pavlo entered the abandoned kingdom, saw the entrance to the magic alley, took off for it. He would be safe there somehow, no-one could harm him there. But then he felt Scababias's filthy fingers touching his clean arm, and his knees shook. He elbowed him and ran quicker.

*Hee-hee-hee...*

Pavlo entered the darkness, fell to his knees, quickly cleaned his elbow with his t-shirt. But it was too late to draw a line now: he felt Scababias's hot breath on the back of his neck. He looked up towards the other end of the alley, where there was light. A little blond girl with pig tails was sitting on the soil, playing with a flower, free, safe.

'Get up,' Scababias whispered in his ear.

He got up, turned around: the boy was smiling, knowing that now, at last, there were no lines, only freedom to do as he pleased.

'I always tell the others what a nice guy you are, Scababias.'

With a long, dragging sound, Scababias gathered spit in his mouth.

'No no no no. The leprosy stuff have nothing to do with me. Scababias, I have influence. I can persuade them to put an end to your exile.'

Scababias parted his lips, showing off the gap between his front teeth, from where saliva was oozing out.

'Wait, wait. Would you like to see the housewife?'

He spat down on to the mud. 'What housewife?'

'Come... ' Pavlo found the steps on the wall and climbed up, Scababias following closely. They sat side by side on the ledge. Luckily, the housewife was in the garden, hanging clothes on the washing line.

'You like?'

Scababias scratched some yellow gum from the corner of his eye.

'Ah good, you can see better now... Look, look...'

The boy examined the yellow gum instead.

'You know, you don't have to eat it, Scababias.' He offered him a leaf and

Scababias wiped off the gum.

‘Look at her... Look how beautiful she is. Let’s do our homework.’

Scababias dragged up saliva and made to spit at the woman, but Pavlo reached out his hand and blocked Scababias’s mouth: ‘Not her. Please, Scababias, don’t spit at her. Let’s get back down and you can spit on me.’

They climbed down and stood opposite each other. A ray of sun penetrated through the leaves and played on Scababias’s face. He hawked up phlegm.

Pavlo nodded behind him, towards the light: ‘Scababias, mate, look at that lovely blond girl. Wouldn’t you like to spit at her instead?’

He shook his head.

The ray of sun hit Scababias in the eyes and Pavlo made to beat it, but the squelching sound of his footsteps on the mud gave him away, and Scababias sneered down at him. Then the exiled boy moved his head up and stared straight back at that sunray – and spat at it. His phlegm went through the gap on the leaves, and, for that one moment, it blocked out the sun.

He looked at Pavlo, smiled, and ran past him, towards the end of the alley. Once the little blond girl realised who was coming towards her, she cried out for her mummy.

The boy, without stopping, screamed at her: ‘I’m Scababias!’

And disappeared out into the bright light.

### **The Magic Currant-Bread**

At 8am Pavlo finished his night shift at Café Papaya, and stepped out of that place, soul-beaten. He breathed in the cold winter air, reclaiming hope. He didn’t like his townsfolk, he couldn’t like them, he had tried. The streets of his town of Kavala were wet. He wasn’t in the mood to stroll by the harbour as he usually did, and so he dragged his way towards the town centre. He avoided meeting the eyes of the locals, they didn’t like him, he couldn’t like them, he had tried, there was something wrong with him, he thought, as he walked the streets. ‘Or there’s something wrong with them. It’s either them

or me.’ And he walked, he walked keeping his eyes low, defeated by the many. He saw a bookshop, its window covered in posters with writers’ quotes. He stopped there, rolled a cigarette, and smoked it while reading the quotes one by one. None struck him. He walked off.

A bakery around the corner, another bakery, another bakery, another one: no, this one was different, not like all those bakeries with their windows stuffed with loaves of bread and *tsourekia* and pies that looked perfect and shiny, fake and plastic. This bakery drew his attention: old and decadent, its windows were empty. Above the entrance, a weathered wooden sign that hung from two chains read: *THE MAGIC YEAST*, and below, in smaller letters: *fresh currant-breads*. Pavlo peeped inside: it was empty. He went in.

The floor was made of black and white square tiles, chess-like. At the back there was a wooden table with currant-breads, behind which stood the baker, a big man with a bushy beard: ‘GOOD MORNING, SIR! WHAT CAN I GET YOU, SIR?’

Pavlo looked behind him. He turned to the baker. ‘You talking to me?’

‘YES, SIR! WHAT CAN I GET YOU, SIR?’

‘Do you make coffees?’

‘AY AY, SIR!’

‘Why do you shout at me, man?’

‘HOW WOULD YOU LIKE YOUR COFFEE, SIR?’

‘BLACK. TWO SUGARS!’

‘ALL RIGHT, SIR!’

He sat down at a table in front of the window, in a corner, and didn’t take off his jacket. The street outside was busy, full of the locals he disliked. He wished it was empty.

‘HERE’S YOUR COFFEE, SIR!’

‘Eh, listen. I’m not a lieutenant. Please don’t shout at me.’

‘All right. Now *you* listen to me, young man... You come to a bakery and ask for coffee. Are you thick or what?’

‘That’s none of your business.’

‘Do you want a currant-bread for free?’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘I’ll give you one anyway. And you’ll eat it.’

‘What, you’ll make me eat it against my will?’

The baker picked one out, returned to Pavlo.

‘If you try anything with this, I’ll inform the authorities.’

‘Ooooh...’ exclaimed the baker, pressing the little bread in his fingers.

‘Feel how soft it is... So fresh. Fresh and soft like the flesh of innocent little girls...’

‘Do you fancy children, then?’

‘Oh yeah... Don’t you?’

‘I prefer their mums. Take this thing away from me. I don’t want it.’

The baker returned behind his currant-breads, and Pavlo gazed out towards the street, and drank coffee: it was tea. He pushed it away. An old

man entered the bakery. An old man in a beautiful black overcoat, resting his trembling hand on his cane’s golden knob. Hunchbacked and bald, his lips were sunken the way toothless people’s lips sink into their mouths.

‘HELLO!’ boomed the baker.

‘Me-moo...’ the old man said.

‘Me-moo...’ the baker imitated. ‘What’s that? Me-moo?’

The old man sat down at the table in the other corner. He didn’t take off his coat.

The baker walked over. ‘What you want?’

‘A bamby.’

‘A bamby, eh? What’s a bamby? Come again, asshole?’

‘Bamby.’

‘Ah, brandy... Pay me.’

The old man gave him a few coins: ‘Fenkf.’

‘Don’t thank me yet. Give me the money you owe me from last week,

Betty...'

'I have vem laft veek.'

'No, you didn't. Now pay me or I'll break your fingers.'

The old man gave him a few more coins.

'And a few more for a currant-bread,' said the baker. 'Or will you refuse my marvellous currant-breads, Betty...?'

The old man gave more coins.

'Fenkf,' the baker imitated him, went back to the counter and, grabbing the bottle of brandy from the shelf, he called to Pavlo: 'You know him? He's an old poof.'

Pavlo looked at the old man. He didn't react, he was gazing out into the street.

'Nah, don't you worry about him,' the baker said. 'He's almost deaf, he can't hear us.' After some consideration, he picked a currant-bread from the very end of the flour-dusted table, and served the old man. 'So you don't

know him?' he said as he approached Pavlo and sat by his table. 'Look at him. He's got no teeth left. The bloody old faggot. He's a famous arse bandit, you know.'

'Why you sit at my table?'

'He's gay, homosexual, I don't know what you young people call them.'

'I don't care if he's your aunty. Get away from my table.'

'Oh, you don't care... I wonder why's that...'

'I don't care what you do with little girls either.'

'Once upon a time he had a lot of money.'

'Piss off or I'll tell the police that you fuck kids.'

'The best tailor in town he was, back when Kavala was wealthy from the tobacco factories. He used to clothe the factories owners' wives who lit their cigars with 5,000 drachmas notes. People said that he was offered work in America.'

'At least can you get straight to the point?'

‘Are you upset, young man? I wonder what puts you so on edge...’

‘You drag it out. Something happened and he lost everything. So what was that?’

‘He spent all his money on boys. On young boys.’

‘Some people like young boys, others like little girls... Personally, I’m into mums.’

‘Everything’s gone now. His money, the apartments, the shops, everything. Look at him.’

They both turned towards the old man.

‘He can’t even eat. I gave him a hard stale currant-bread on purpose. And believe it or not, young man, he’s still after boys. Everything he spends on boys. Who the fuck would go to bed with him? Bloody disgusting...’

It began raining. Dark clouds invaded the sky. Now it felt good being in that old little bakery.

The old man took the musty currant-bread in his hands; the crust broke

and some bits fell down onto his black coat. He placed it back on the plate and looked at it. He stayed like that for some time, doing nothing, just looking at the little bread that he couldn’t eat, until he took it again in his trembling hands and managed to tear away a chunk. He kissed it, and dipped it in his brandy. His whole face was moving as he chewed it with his gums. Once he swallowed it, his eyes opened widely, as if the little bread had brought him back to life.

The rain fell hard, a storm. Raindrops dribbled down the bakery’s window, and the empty street looked different now, clean. A motocross bike streaked along the wet street and slammed on the brakes in front of the bakery. It revved up, its exhaust drowned out the sound of the storm. The rider got off, removed his helmet. He was young, of medium height, long brown hair fell on the sides of his pale face, partly covering his eyes. He pulled his hair back and Pavlo felt a chill run down his spine. He looked at him more closely. It was Scababias.

He entered the bakery.

‘Wipe your feet,’ said the baker, and Scababias gave him the eye before doing so. He sat down with the old man.

Pavlo hadn’t seen him since school, ten years or so ago. He couldn’t tell whether Scababias had recognised him.

‘What you want?’ the baker asked Scababias.

‘Nothing.’

The baker turned to Pavlo: ‘Tough business, young man. How am I going to make ends meet? With these customers what you expect? Shitmunchers...’

Scababias stared at the baker.

‘Don’t you bloody look at me like that, Scababias. I’m not Betty. Got it?’ Nevertheless, he backed off behind the counter.

Scababias withdrew his threatening glance from the baker and examined Pavlo, who was looking back at him.

‘Bloody customers,’ the baker said to Pavlo. ‘And they give me a bad

reputation.’

Pavlo turned around in his seat: ‘Bad reputation?’

‘Of course. Nobody wants to be around Betty and Scababias.’

‘You scream at people and you threaten them that you’ll break their fingers and you’re a peado, and you’re saying that it’s because of these two that you get no customers?’

‘Don’t you fucking talk to me like that, young man...’

‘I know you,’ said Scababias.

The two young men locked eyes, smiled at each other.

‘Ah... He knows you...’ the baker chipped in. ‘I see, I see... Are you a shirt-lifter then?’

‘I told you I like mums, nappy sniffer...’

‘One more word and...’

‘Give me the money. I want money. You promised,’ Scababias said to the old man, cutting the baker short.

‘I ’ave mo momey,’ murmured the old man.

‘QUIET!’ screamed the baker.

‘Child molester...’ Pavlo called him.

‘GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE! ALL OF YOU FUDGE PACKERS!’

Pavlo hurried outside the bakery, and yelled from the door: ‘Kiddy fiddler!’

He walked off into the storm.

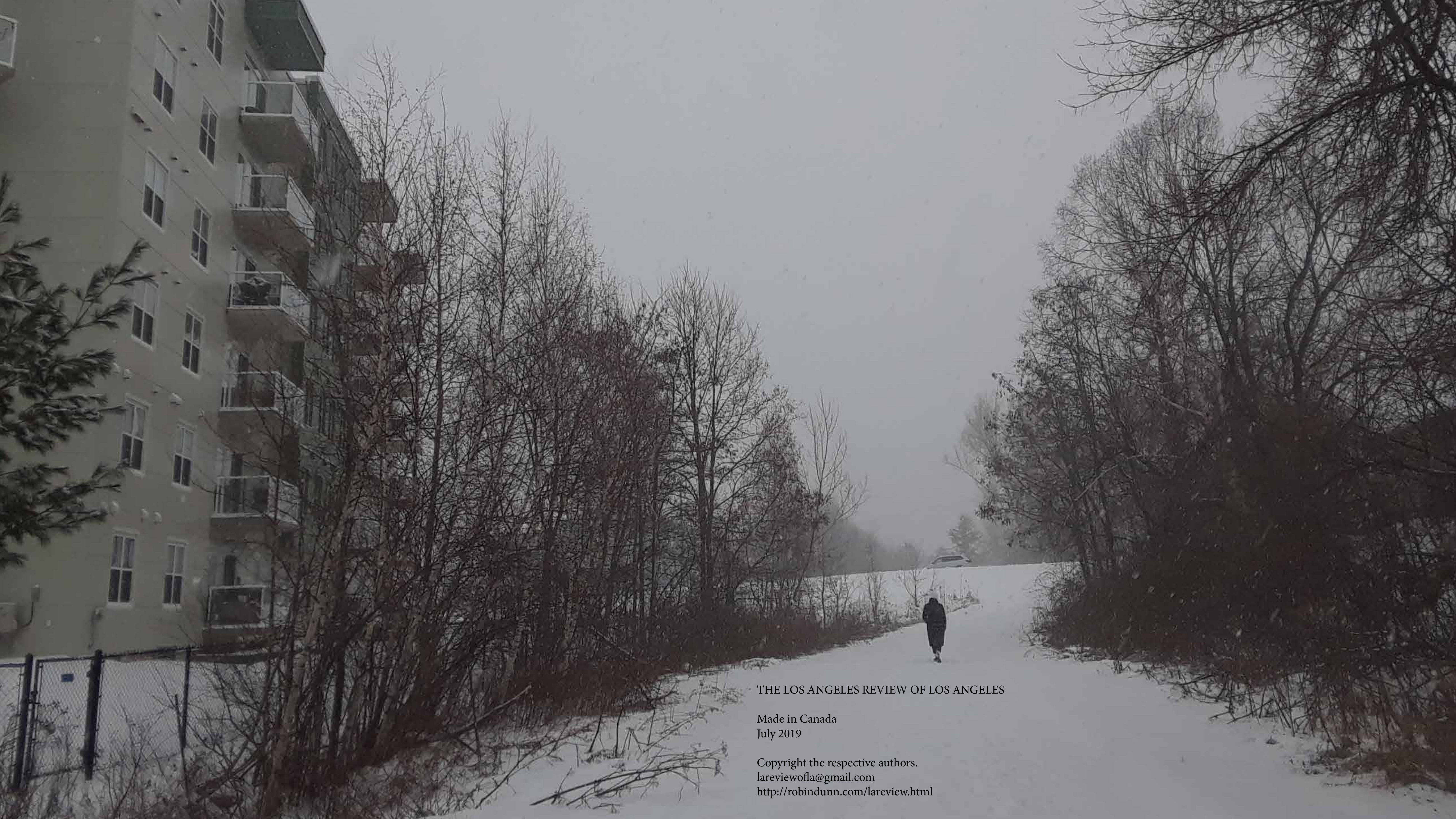
Scababias helped the old man out, and called him: ‘Pavlo...’

Pavlo turned around. ‘What?’

‘Would you like to go somewhere for a drink?’

Pavlo pictured himself in a café with Scababias and Betty. ‘No,’ he said.





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