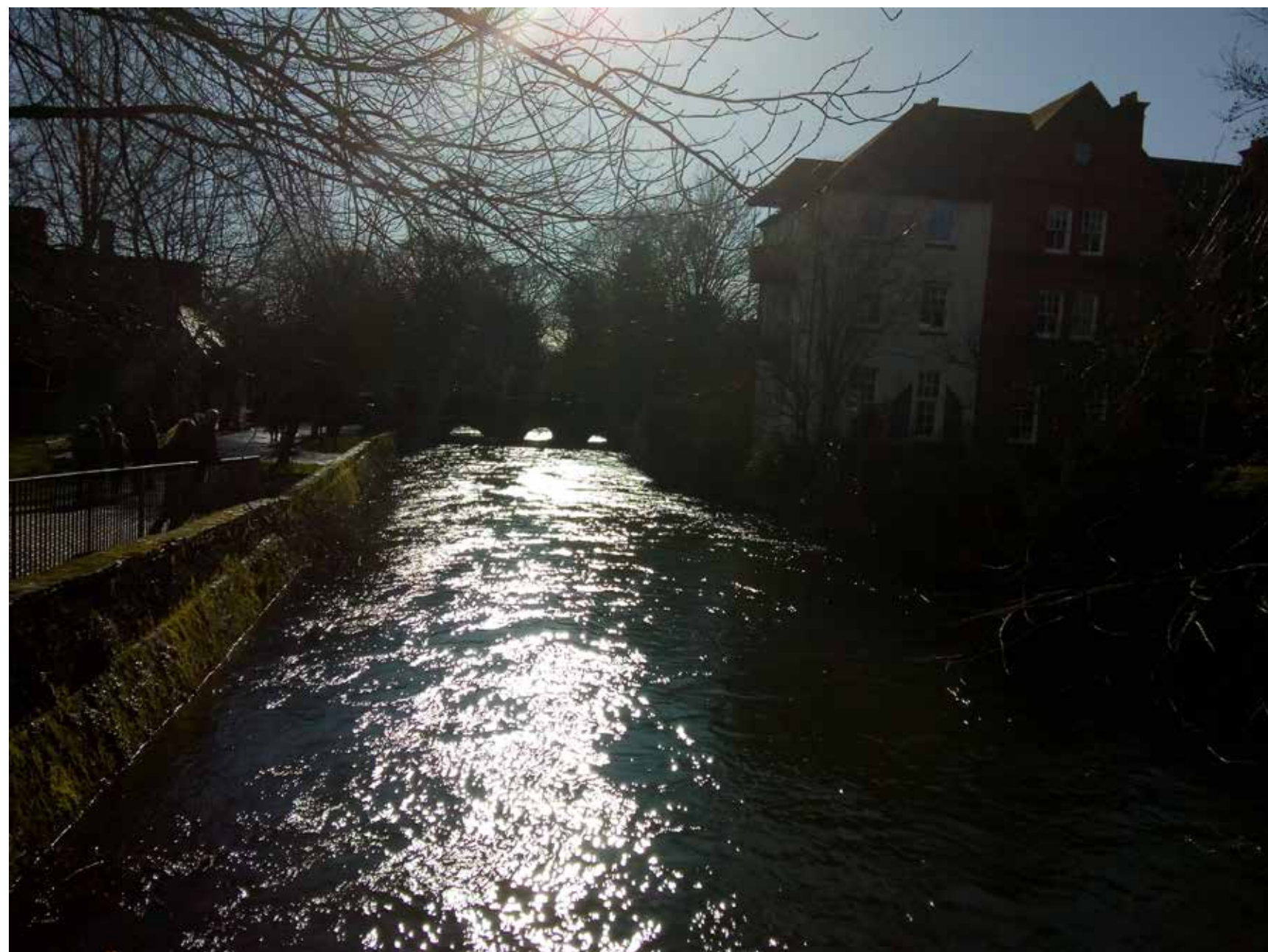




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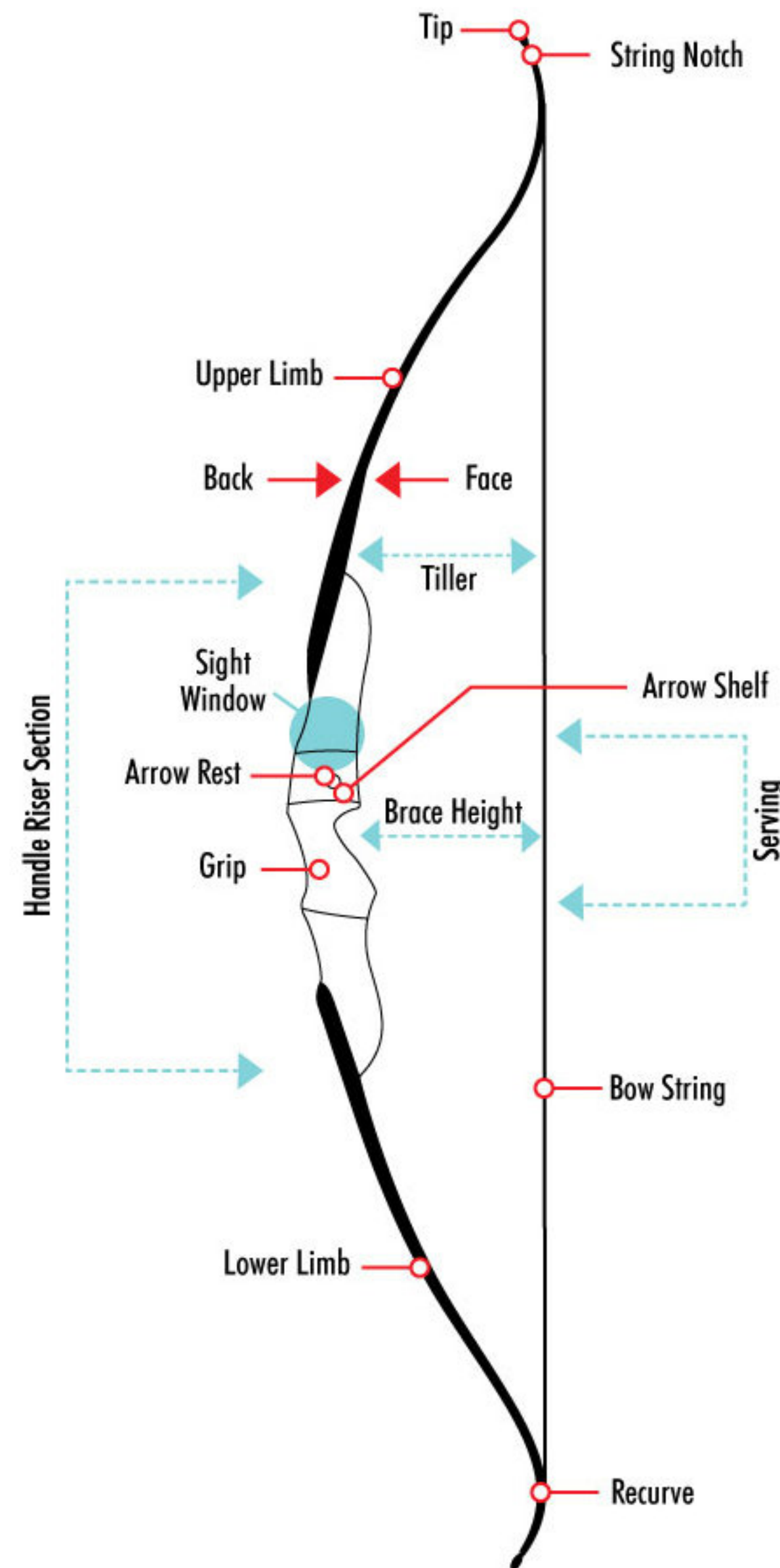
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Sea
GREG PARSONS

Love Commander

PD MALLAMO



←↖↑↗↘↙

Coloratura lightening **FLARES** as this obviously vatic, thunderously thaumaturgic, wildly thanatotic blockbuster extravaganza of imprecise locus financed in Mumbai and Los Angeles California title roughly translated apocalypse-death-angel

LOVE COMMANDER

ruPTURES all over his little screen, fire-bomb from the Sea of Japan, Bali centerfold, Pashtunwali/Hindu riot refereed by a pious factotum from the Karakum Desert with bird tattoo and plumper kink - sheer Brazil, Cinderella, believe me, Information Paradise, clarinet lessons in old Peking,

a testimony of faith hand-delivered by the Devil: persecution fantasies and homicidal ideation translated into a counterfeit language of betrayal and aggrievement, a flowchart of agony - life built entirely of old wounds and dying memories, the final book we read before Nirvana and Sun Tan City, a good honest go at the parasite gig, terrified sacerdoté at the Museum of Righteousness facing the curare ice-pick at 3AM

film as cenotaph with

blizzards of dead folk, murder terror suffering premeditated by Deity to coach contempt, utter contempt, for our capricious yet indispensable mortality a

gospel of Satan by way of St. Paul read aloud smack-dab in the middle of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone - which is to say a doctrine whereby he who unquestioningly OBEYS fares better *in an eternal sense* than she who engages the mystery

for instance

19 year-old American farmboys only lately of soft bed and sweet Kansas mother lurched north 600 miles in manacles through bamboo jungle beaten and fed bugs then caged like beasts within earshot of B52s blasting the docks of Hanoi, this frail existence nothing but a hillbilly hell-hole no matter where we go or what we do

My whole body is trembling, and my hair is standing
on end

My bow Gandiva is slipping from my hand

and my skin is burning

**(his putative concubines in reality a parade of disappointed
pre-orgasmic doxies and beneath his alarm's flashing
benediction the constant vomit of false tropes such as**

The only constant is change!

or

Meaning and truth evolve together!

etc.)

O God, help me untangle the knots in the Universe!

Every square inch of the planet's surface marked by the creature's machines, the only god the God of War, poor old Jesus a wishful artifact of fearful, disappointed consciousness, Hissself just one small step from rattlesnakes, strychnine and a little bath at Lourdes.

This sleepy watcher's night is ruled by omens, great awful dreams, the soft darkness of time, and somewhere between scenes an action-packed advertisement for a 200MPH Cadillac that drives itself - then Playboy Mansions in Illinois, Biscuit World, Fort Taco, prison ghost tours, French criminals on the Costa Brava (whose faces are only craters of silhouette) and, in due course, that exotic ya-ba jones your average citizen of Sulfur,

Indiana will never satisfy much less kick

We see forests black in deep shadow chanting from underworld & river,
choir of alabaster concubines and solar wind in mighty accompaniment,
host of souls tumbling head-over-heels through crystalline heliosphere

“You are the starship!” our factotum shouts from a balcony somewhere in
the city formerly known as Bombay (implicit subtext: evolutionary dirty
work notwithstanding)

“LITERALLY THE STARSHIP!”

and summer goeth a long long way in Santa Monica

Lift thine eyes!

Behold the Governing Orbs!”

But the night is late, Nazareth far distant, secrets of ancient Egypt still
secret, the old couch perfectly comfortable and he drifts off, missing
ostensibly impromptu TV treatises and q-tip hyperbole from the
same Subcontinental hero in a kind of conversational hemingway re:
trench warfare keeping score oligarch Gulfstreams tsunamis of desire
resurrection dry drunks poeticcompression Utah rebellions golden tablets
theatrical alienation unregulated markets ubiquitous TV-generated

cognitive distortions victim status prime rib Chinese in Tokyo (“Do you
not eat these fat juicy pigeons,” the Chinese ask, “these free fowl of the
sidewalk?”) sugar alcohols commemorations of the Confederacy (in the
course of which a Black woman actually shouts “Dixie”) Bufo alvarius
skin problems of the obese Tannhauser Gate wealth planning stranded
assets self-aggrandizing fantasies commerce in massacres man-babies
(which is to say, monsters) an allusion to sex exercises of Victorian ladies
Nuremburg Discover Card and something called The Heavy Mac which,
from all available evidence, is utterly irresistible to certain pulchritudinous
gals of the chubby set.

and the forbidden/irresistible as potent evolutionary driver to wit: Pork
Chop, Club Caribou pole dancer off Wilshire Blvd boogies like a skinny
kid, actually pogos on that pole to Twisted Sister, Judas Priest and
other music from hell, servicing very little shame on the Boomer side
of the ledger but ending each performance w/ public prayer thereby
demonstrating a genome so constructed that the concept of “God” is
actually built-in (defense mechanism)

a genome so constructed that it permits interstellar communication with
the concept of “God” (delusion)

a genome so constructed that it permits a visitation from the concept
of “God” (outright insanity)

a genome so constructed that it is God

This latter alone kompensates karma our sleeper would have learned,
whose only real connection to genuine civilization is a Bill Blass tie
his mother bought at a Topeka thrift store, and though such wisdom

originated in a fifth-rate film production company situated in the stultifying center of Mumbai and broadcast on a minor movie channel to the Kansas City Kansas metropolitan area at 2:41AM Central Time Zone it will soon prove apposite in his own dramatically enlarging life

A wide-awake sportscaster says, It's about which team can change the narrative at this point

He might also have added, That's the nature of coke, folks, we use it till it's gone

2

highlights/lowlights

decisional balance when a finding of insanity is not entirely conclusive shadows finally open in quartermoon/starshine

carbonship. He also sleeps thru and thus misses

dragqueen-caliber camp of the preposterous machismos infecting Texas & Mexico deeply subverting orthodoxy of the true believer the pathological over-learning that constitutes addiction well-endowed British females in flesh-tinted brassieres marketing Alfa-Romeos in Ft. Lauderdale where a midget with Lou Gehrig's disease is raped by a runaway chimp having survived the crushing weight of social opprobrium in Salt Lake City breathing apparatus specifically designed for the cigarette crowd (pink-puffers and blue-bloaters whose wives have sewn lovely stoma-bibs) pig-face fact-stacking personal injury lawyers

in Dallas hoisting handfuls of ill-gotten Franklins on freeway billboards mudslides in Oregon truckstop honeymoon

not to mention that

lonely old man eating bacon-cheeseburger-pizza and reading *The Dark Tower* in a Casey's Gas Station lunch-hut 11:17PM so he doesn't shotgun his god-damn brains all over the living room an entire life come to this good Lord!

and finally FINALLY

the desperate life of long-legged country *Miss Behavior* ponygirl of somewhat diminished hedonic capacity strikingly blond & of Jehovah's Witness persuasion: *What is light?* she seems to ask, *What is gravity?* her mother's life ruined some early years earlier or so she says by a temporary job in the paint section at Lowe's whereby latex accidentally spilled and ungraceful splitz wuz demonstrated for all and sundry, also a belly wound the lawsuit maintained though it didn't say how

only way she gets to New York from Missouri is bus, and that takes four long days during which even Dalit understand she is far beyond the reach of

Grace but also, thank Jesus, beyond the tattooed oxycodone double-dipping petty criminal no-good strip-club habitués constituting her kin

-in other words the magic life that comes to life at the intersection of lives, something that, frankly, yes, if we're completely honest must admit has a life of its own, tinder simply awaiting the spark of us

Then, at conclusion, Jacksonville lap-dance parlors Internet-visible from Delhi & environs which apparently constitute India's principal image of America: Satan, but irresistible; irresistible but Satan nevertheless

full-bore

unfiltered

American

White Trash urgently relevant to the rest of the wide wide world especially when hung-over utterly broke unqualified and job-hunting on a pouring Monday morning because, in fact, everyone on earth wants an old pickup with skull decals plastered on the rear window; wants a toothless 400lb felon-mama with diabetes and retinopathy eating chicken-on-the-bone and potato salad in a wheelchair; wants an enormous wide-screen smart TV purchased on exorbitant credit at twice-the-price from Rent-to-Own violently repossessed three months later; wants half a year in jail for landing the old lady in ER yet again; wants disintegrating molars just for refillable Percocet prescriptions; hollers futile oaths completely off the Richter Scale out the back door at 3AM; believes every single word of the beastly Old Testament

We tell ourselves stories and these stories tell ourselves right back this bewildering Gujarat extravaganza at last informs us, an obligatory bit of countryside wisdom he doesn't hear, the hillbilly girl clearly Swede, the crooked lawyers observably Paki, bravura slant of the Western sun, ambulance screaming its way to mama pitched face-first out the wheelchair projectile-puking chicken&potatoes across the kitchen, soft

Pleiades riding its own ecliptic, a New France for the 21st Century very much like the Old France, and the best of both worlds, which is to say light without heat and heat with just the right afterglow – in other words bullshit of such colossal audacity that on a quantum level at least half of it is true

And after all this, to still trust life and its impossible odds

3

But driving to work this summer morning he is buoyant on the syrupy surface of already-radiant bluegreen day

SUN straightup *launching* thru his windshield as massive moon sets behind, not caring to peer over into the clear but darkening depths below

river oaks and sycamores electric with blue tanagers, crimson cardinals, goldfinches, lightening birds flashing through galaxies of exploding verdure, a billion worlds in aerial dance to music of rapids, insect mythology, fountainhead, Siam

Admit it, he smiles to himself, a divided heart is the only heart

any day's a good day some crazy shit don't land on the mailbox or blow in over the wires

Mahalia trees nod in assent

FUCK DECAF bumper sticker on car ahead

& just minutes

later fat/pretty girl Friday Lyn-Z Jessup with a crush, a limp, two black eyes and red roses tattooed on her thighs and upper arms ambles sideways as is her manner into his workspace and out-of-the-blue whispers what she heard on a tiny bug installed months before

co-workers she monitors carefully and on whom she smells evil and hatred, they even mimic her limp, she says, when they walk past her desk - then sidles away, glancing left and right, grinning & vibrating with the taut latency of exposure

She don't buy all of it so appropriately she don't buy any of it

that just how Lyn-Z rolls but she knows what up, long painful years w/ the dirtbag set

On her desk Lonely Planet guides to The Loire Botswana Dubai; a vulgate Bible she bought in Rome

tin-foil crucifix

A barcode on her ass and bumblebees are next she has told him, motherships hovering rose-to-rose in bucolic space-dance opera, and someday somewhere invisible to all but herself a knife-long saffron

thunderbolt by the same artist who inked the roses and presumably the bees

What happened to your eyes?

Horse kicked me, she replies, and sure enough a crescent bruise on the left side of her head

and because he knows it even now says to himself: you will remember her imperfectly if at all

"I told him," Lyn-Z later reveals about a random past relationship, It's my body and I can do what I want but what I'm *not* going to do is get into a *relationship* with a built-in *detonator*. That's not romance, it's insanity, even twenty-two's too old for that, this tired bitch has a worn-out heart. I say Remember Me and he forgets even that

4

There are days, and this is one, gazing out over the African plains of Kansas, when the puzzle of life fits finally together, at least on Friday, and on the morning of this Friday citadels of sudden storms loom auspiciously – Spanish clouds exploding to black monolith banked high south-by-southeast, a multiplying tumult of promised erasure. The air, and what of earth humanity has not inappropriately appropriated, is shot with the empty state

sutric zen in dim flickers of deep lightening, and he concedes it at last, not thinking the word or knowing anything beyond the extraneous folklore grown up around this Energy, himself now seated before computer screen in Jayhawk T and St. John's Bay Co shorts prematurely

contemplating punctured ghostly bodies swept away in black floods
amongst languorous trionychidae

launching their sleazy asses all the way thru exosphere to Paradise itself
and this stupendous feat, almost an afterthought, by his own free hand.
The Jehovah's Witnesses have been around CAN THE DEAD REALLY
LIVE AGAIN? rubber-banded to his screen door and it gives him
something to ponder

yet again

a larger consideration than how *rosé* became the hip drink of summer

5

Algorithms mirror their makers and in an automating world the first thing
to automate is people notwithstanding an inclination to torture lodged
deep in the genome or the reflexive worship of demonstrably false gods
via over-reliance on that metaphysical exercise known as prayer – modern
tribes still mainly adept in the animal technologies of sex & death:
primordial autopilot isotope machinery that confounds even automation
much like circadian scientists whose own rhythms obfuscate their work

There is, as always, the grave wisdom of finance and the obvious fragility
of goodness, the essential works of Chinese Communism - transactional
concepts irrelevantly current in the post-modern state, but, and more to
the point, like everything else still curiously subject to certain prehistoric
mechanisms which belie our glorious Machine Future especially along
the grim family/job continuum - mass murderers who see humanity as

bugs with blue eyes and brokers who actually require guided meditation to
recognize an equities bubble

everyone should occasionally read Ecclesiastes in the sunshine

– epicene, moon-walking TV Pastor Rick from Olatha, Kansas, for
example, shouting verses from the Book of Jacob for broadcast at the
sinner's hour, 3AM featured (along with life insurance ads for 75-year old
alcoholic insomniacs, and, hence, generally invisible) (immediate instance
included) directly after BollywoodBigTime

... yes, Pastor Rick who alone can discover God's plan, and whose thoughts
do not necessarily fit together coherently but stretch the mind to profound
connection:

*"In the dream I have the hard hand running streaks to the end of my arms and in
glory rescued my exile!"*

... yes, Pastor Rick, undiagnosed unmedicated, obviously unmoored, a
reflexive Brechtian with a hot blond wife named Vilate stewing in his
own cortisol who unsurprisingly is also "like unto" the Prophet Daniel,
even interpreting his own dreams:

"Invisible angels are watching you masturbate, pay heed!"

*"If your hero is Saddam Hussein death is not an obscenity; if you are a Hezbollah
martyr you have difficulty differentiating "angel" from*

*"archangel" which makes you yet another faded product on the shelf of expired
souls!"*

“Sasquatch built an entire civilization in the mountains of Oregon. They even have spaceships!”

“I want Deity to boisterously muscle its way into our skeptical lives and show us that what we don’t believe is true!”

“If all you can be is Bug Jeezus who saves a fly, at least do that!”

Rick’s dad was a physician who lost his license for fondling a patient, then opened a string of abortion clinics.

“The New Testament!- it’s too sad to read twice so you better remember the first time!”

“Prophets!” he finally delivers, “the final authoritative revealer of God’s will - you just got to choose the right one! Nothing makes your Jesus happier than getting to church on time!”

... yes, TV Pastor Rick, reeking of firewater and wondering around Olatha one very early morning with his zipper down in imaginary conversation w/a kray-zee psychiatric nurse he dated when he was 22

clinked-up for 60 days and back on the air in no-time Obviously the good life has something to do with cheese

6

The warehousemen have no idea he is a master and, appropriately, neither

does he, whose only connection with that mighty art was absorbed subconsciously but with surpassing thoroughness years before on the high school archery team, as if the bow itself were portal to another realm

He worked for a crime scene cleanup company in St. Louis for three years Out of the blue one day a cousin invites him to a turkey hunt in Ohio

Bow-less, he orders a 46lb recurve from a transcendentalist in Saskatchewan named Satsumi who had placed a tiny ad in the back of a camping magazine.

He chose the bow because/he chose the bow notbecauseSatsumi promised a tool with lyrical resistance that launched a bolt not just with force and accuracy but with all the virtue justifiably attributed to the archer himself.

The maker’s description concluded with what can only be described, apropos of nothing, as a koan:

I too fall in love

exactly what happened when the boy unpacked it, an understated hybrid takedown, the exquisite weapon fitting him like a latex glove, flexing and conforming as his body, too, flexed and conformed, hurling an arrow one hundred forty yards in blinding velocity, month after month, all but unerringly to a small round target on a stand before the now

thunderously upwelling river trees in the booming heat and light of solstice on the banks of Kill Creek.

7

It is a Tarter bow of fine & curious workmanship all but rejecting the reducible physical notwithstanding its precise physicality, fashioned of horn, carbon fiber, tempered yew and threads of black spring steel, finely engraved with images of petite river fish in Coptic blue and what he takes to be prayer in a script he cannot identify all of which fuse with the bottomless silk brocades of floral summer

There are two grips, one for the right hand and one for the left. Learn to shoot both ways, the accompanying literature advises, thereby becoming the complete creature instead of just the half

8

Tall slender boy with broad shoulders and brunette ponytail who maintains a comprehensive database of the comings and goings of the costly contents of the warehouse: film & video equipment sales & rental, cameras worth a hundred thousand dollars. The warehouse covers an acre, and contains

miles of shelving. There are thieves like there always are. These work at the warehouse like they always do.

He sees three of these now as if paintings on an Egyptian tomb, walking two-dimensionally single -file through the warehouse carrying items of equipment as if offerings to some dim Lord of Technology they neither understand nor, unfortunately, fear. Meth makes you lie and steal, he understands, he's been there himself, he can see the future in their everyday movementz, a telegraphed wickedness only the wicked themselves or the formerly wicked recognize in the wildly dilated pupils of their fellows.

9

His database makes theft difficult but the thieves have a plan, a 21st Century Plan so diabolically simple it is not comprehensible to decent people:

1 surprise the boy at his residence with a submission collar and toilet plunger

2beat him up and video a sexual assault

3 threaten to post the video on the web if he doesn't rig the database

4steal what they want

“Shit,” sez one of the thieves, who also enjoys long calamitous relationships with hexane and ethyl acetate, “he’ll prolly like it. He’s a faggot.”

Lives alone on rolling eight forested acres 40 miles west of Kansas City, land he inherited from his parents, and they from theirs. Small wood house with a broad elevated front porch upon which in his mind’s eye sees progenitors stretched on wooden chairs discussing the latest diphtheria epidemic

Kill Creek divides his land as it wends its way seven miles to the Kaw, which empties into the Missouri, which empties into the Mississippi which empties into the Gulf of Mexico roughly 1000 miles away

The contemplation of this has always given him peace and made him happy

From his porch on sunny days he reads the shadows in oak, elm, hickory osage, cottonwood that line Kill Creek, trees now in the complex volcanic upthrust of July sunlight and summer rain

The trees heave massively in the wind and the shadows are the souls of those trees, star-pure and overwhelming

I am those shadows and beautiful in their way he thinks in his days, smiling at his own charming grandness,

but nobody sees me and that’s OK

Ambush

these creaturely outcomes of long dreamy replication errors, slaughter them as if they were livestock without anger or violence, an offering to the river: two minor rats whose lives and last names are unknown and of no interest to him, and the Odious James Livermore, a foreman working twenty-two years for the owner, bachelor who served seven years in prison for several crimes primarily against women, who unabashedly believes that ferocious beings like Nazis are necessary for the health of the species – in other words an hilariously specific scoundrel

Heavy rain begins at noon and he knows by evening Kill Creek will roar. Forecasts indicate storms through Sunday. Tuesday is the 4th of July; the warehouse will be closed Monday, so water & time will have the better part of six days to sweep the evidence from both his face and the face of the earth

Sunday is a largely silent Sabbath amongst the Anglophone peoples of the planet and by that time his bodies will be well along to the Gulf of Mexico. He understands that those we love dream of us after we are dead but is sure only he will dream of James Livermore and his rats, and then perhaps only in his well-dressed resurrected image as a cleansed man not only able but willing to commence an entirely dissimilar existence, his soul now inviolate and, by virtue of corporeal extinguishment, no longer the consistency of Kleenex

He also understands that unless great care is taken any effort to cleanse the earth will produce its own filth

He constructs a blind behind a stand of lilacs before the cottonwoods of Kill Creek where he will wait for them in the rain, darkness falling, taking comfort in the undeniable fact that early death is sometimes an evolutionary stratagem, though he himself will avoid it if he can

“Something I didn’t mention,” Lyn-Z had told him later that day: “The plan is actually Spencer’s”

Spencer is an Englishman who has eaten too many American cheeseburgers and could talk the proverbial Eskimo out of her parka;

sales manager who demonstrates his contempt for his adopted country with every syllable he spits, literally spits; a rascal who abjures violence except the verbal kind, which, generally, he has found sufficient for his purposes; connoisseur of kiddi porn and pubescent Guadalajara prostitutes

It is an interesting fact that truly bad people are usually much worse than we imagine or, to our credit, can imagine

Unmistakable through evening downpour the great white truck rolls up the lengthy gravel drive from Cow Road, a 4-door Dodge with dual rear tires and the general aspect of a battering ram. Nobody emerges for two long minutes, yawing, he figures, in the leaking airship of their lives, one of them no doubt complaining that his shit always seems to come out of his ass sideways, working their bad karma from Kill Creek to rivers Kaw, Missouri and finally to the sharks and crabs waiting just beyond the Mississippi Delta

-preparing to cave-man somebody, one of the stooges vaping his last amid jugband music and a joke (you Trust in God and Trust in God and Trust in God and one day he sends around the Mormons and you go WHAT?!)

[brahman atman prakiti]

He nocks a broadhead, forswearing the release device for his own wet fingers. Doors finally open and men appear, each in hat & jacket, one carrying the toilet plunger, the other the collar, James Livermore leading a procession which will pass within thirty slim feet of where he stands trembling with a variety of rapture at least a million years deep

random slaves of a random galaxy now delivered auto de fa to a man with a bow

18

That bow at full draw Bier of Abraham before thee I stand he shifts inches for a clear shot at chinga pendejo bringing up the rear

whose jugular he neatly nicks, falling soundlessly forward holding his throat, blood bursting between fingers, the chosen arrow a joyous angel sailing high & away

He shoots simply the next though the left temple who drops laundry-like, the emerging arrow at nearly full velocity ripping among the trees

Livermore stops/turns

bowman pierces his right kidney/big man starting with pain, feeling for the weapon long since departed singing through his body and into the forest

Pouring blood & lumbering gravely truckward Livermore pulls a large Bowie knife from his calf sheath then drops it/falls flailing/little boy flourishing phocine hands and fingers that nicks the bowman's own heart

19

“I failed on Tuesday,” Pastor Rick informs his flock on Sunday, “ - a bad one.”

“I was up to KU, coming back thru the parking garage and there was a man in the stairwell doing something strange. When I got closer he told me he was doing tai chi and he was from Vero Beach and did not have money or food. I said something stupid like “I know what you mean” and walked right on by, down three flights of stairs to the Volvo which I did not remember parking so close. I was sure this was a message from the Lord that I was supposed to get the hell out of there.

O the wisdom of God!!! I said to myself as I jumped in that car and locked the doors and drove off before this man could attack me with a knife and make of widow of my wife which means some other man gets her sweet sacred vagina and my money and house and Volvo and children.

But that evening as I was taking a nice hot bath it occurred to me that the poor man was probably just broke and hungry, not to mention mentally ill, and that I, a Man of God, had left him bleeding on the road to Jericho.

This is what I thought Jesus had told me: Run away!

This is what Jesus actually said: Consult your heart!

You might ask what I was doing that afternoon at the University of Kansas. Well, I was in the Watson Library reading books – books that say there is no God, at least as we Christians understand the word, only atoms, light and space. There is no heaven, only art. Jesus as something we don't actually believe so much as just hope against hope for ...

I was at KU looking at the college girls.

And, to be completely honest, I also smoked a bowl with friends.

And now the Lord's displeasure grows because instead of despising me for my despicable behavior you are at this very moment forgiving me and even admiring what I do best, which is confess. You are loving me to death. After all these years I have not gotten one bit better. Can't you see that?

If you really loved me you'd beat me and cast me out. You'd stone me, literally stone me. You would abandon me at the gates of Babylon. I would

have to decide, finally, one way or the other – life or death. Even standing right here in this place this very moment I'm not sure which way I'd go."

20

pulling bodies face-down through wet prairie grass, not yet seeing blue&gold stars tattooed on Livermore's back preliminary to aborted

career

as professional water skier (not to mention JESUS IS GOD between his shoulder blades) he suddenly remembers their cell phones which he quickly gathers along with wallets and walks back to the truck, one phone strategically placed in his back pocket, the other two held out from his body as if the men returned to the vehicle as a threesome

fireflies glittering squadrons launching one after the other

side-by-side the men now he cuts off their clothes with the razor-sharp Bowie slicing from the back and banana-peeling. Taking clothes and shoes to the house he piles them on the wooden floor and retrieves lingerie, gingham farm dresses and aprons his late mother wore into her well-fed prime, and outfits each man as a busy housewife with a flabbergasted expression of death on her face

e-z & natural as if he wuz born for it

not sorry he killed them and believe me they're not sorry they're dead make a movie of THAT, he shouts and laughs and

bypassing the undertaker altogether drags each the rest of the way to the banks of his Shannon shouting "No more co-pays!" slides them in *adios maricóns* watches them billow and gather speed until the fast black flood swallows them whole, racing them just under the surface of this River of Swans through his ocean of hardwoods to the sea

21

Loads his dirt-bike into the back of Livermore's truck, lays it on its side, drives a rainy hour to dim *My O My Club* in far-east Kansas City Missouri. There he rolls down the windows, leaves the keys in the ignition with phones and wallets plainly visible on the seats, pulls his dirt bike from the bed and wends his wet way warily west. He detours to the Englishman's house in Olathe and with both hands punches the Bowie all the way through the roof of his green Audi fortuitously parked on the street

22

Home he re-loads the dirtbike into the bed of his lesser Ford Ranger, plastic-bags those things he can't or simply won't live without and sets the house afire bow & Eros, the rest of mom's queen-size bras, Livermore's pants and all

Behind his hills and in the overcast gloom of warm rainy nighttime July the fire burns unnoticed destroying everything including, apparently, himself, all the way up to the soaking red metal roof which even now settles steaming & hissing over the inferno, diminishing ghost singularity of all that is left of his family

23

He's got a few saved bucks and drives west towards LA and the Pacific

where he figures he should have been all along

One night a lucid dream: through a barely-breathing Sunday-quiet forest three flickering souls rise above a clear river, essence free at last their filthy habitations, newly baptized in surge and blood, an event foretold in the soundless latency of corpses that nonetheless astonishes and delights him

dumbstruck, open-mouthed, hands on head he watches them ascend transfigured and victorious

24

One day years later he misses Lyn-Zee and realizes a sheriff has not visited from Kansas

That sheriff would not care less and thank him if he knew he were still alive and where to find him

That sheriff would take a side-trip to Zuma Beach and walk in the surf with his pants legs rolled up, and another jaunt to the grave of Marilyn Monroe

That sheriff would have seen it all: sudden death, lost children, wasted lives, bogus religion and shattered hearts

That sheriff would have grave misgivings about the human project but do his job anyway and love his family

Unaccountably those easy-smilin' quarterbacks become dour
functionaries for multinational conglomerates

Is light without life in any way commensurate with its opposite?

Is light itself alive?

The gods are settled, too, cool as cucumbers. Thank you Jesus for a
wonderful life, but bleed, please bleed, this rage from my heart

In Pastor Rick's final sermon he said, "Sometimes the best thing to do is sit
on the couch and eat a damn apple but regardless I love you. Trust the god
that made you."

Beijing

PATRICK MCGINTY

Beijing bikes in rain and bored in exile,
“I’ll take the train to Lhasa,” she said,
“and don’t write me anymore.”

The sweet smell of morning bile.
Breathing gray in new tones,

coughing yellow—
Shaken eyes and knees and ankle shambles,
ancient and unwilling to learn.

The Town God doesn’t live here anymore.
Shaded low lids and anesthetic limbs,
opposing plains, scars, medals tarnished

and uncovered on a peak in Darien.
The stammering requests for attention,
the sputum and unpotable city water,

still prone money-bored, mumbling, half remembering
the tapped phones and your sister’s dry throat,
the untouched tonsils, cut out of English names.

Bunk beds, first editions, unnecessary lists
bound for obsolescence, but continued
for the sake of posterity.

Numbered ranks begging for guidance
or levity. The sky’s flash and sea yearning,
jostling discomfort from the bored and great
rotting or preserved in tar or swamp soil.

[little minds in little conversations of little import] failed
upwards to the level of / can only calculate their need
/ in 150 characters / or less / [God is money]
a self-centered addiction
to the slow violence of their hunger / is a bullet /
the gunshot-splayed Black child / contorted
the browning blood splatter of
the Dream / is the megallo-brilliant
glitter of
maniacal magnificence in Anglo-
Angeleño eyes / is the dust of
sorrow / is the fear
that maws an abyss / engorged with riot police /
baton beating plexiglass shields / is the Law [battalion
regimented forward] / *what now may rise*
/ *stepping out from under the cover of darkness?* / when
they see *us* /
if they see *us* / maybe believe /
they see *us* /:
resisting the present [ie. *Progress* / the way it's always been] /
for those as yet unborn / looks
stunning/ in spite of itself [a lightbulb-battered bug] /

they should have
seen the worst coming / but they did not
want to know the truth / they did not want to see it /

the same kind of herd
poisoning / the repetition of
lies / has a rhythm verging on lullaby /
stuns to a terrible silence /: the voice
/ mouth wide open &
loud /

someone walked into LA &
exclaimed /: something's burning!

Lost Angeles, or [Amerikkkan Cannibals]

henry 7. reneau, jr.

My Neighbour across De Longpre Avenue

CHANGMING YUAN

She spends her day & night
Being exquisite in a history without unrest

Living alone in a quite old bungalow, she
Has few visitors year round, except perhaps
Her closest relatives. Her voice never heard
Her movements always leisurely, walking in &
Out, mowing her beautiful lawn, taking
Meticulous care of her heathers & other
Tender plants. Sometimes dressed halfway
Like a bloated blueberry, or a shrunk grizzly
Sometimes wearing a high hat ready to be blown
Away. Our only contact for the past decade
Is her tiny black honda fit parked occasionally
Our side of the street (& ours her side)

Looking down from my window, I often
Cannot help wondering if she is a colored
Mice in a lab, or myself in a different one

Alaskan Enclave

WILLIAM C. BLOME

Give me some nickel-plated head, aging
sweetness, and I think that'll do the trick
to forge a grateful grin in a time and land
of coin-fetched serenades. O how to be carted
off from a municipal, open bar, only to find
one's self minus winter garb and in a precinct
of fun-loving oldsters all decked out
in your standard costumes and rubber masks,
an enclave of crinkled men and women
dripping all over husky Eskimo attendants.
It's small wonder this be easily seen
as colorful and melodramatic terrain,
and thereby overly photographed
through twin lens reflex cameras
steadied by visitors steadily consuming
chewy confections and flavored vodka.

The Importance of Direction

WILLIAM C. BLOME

When your chum seemed to be finished arguing with me—when she bent over and hefted herself into a tan bra and then stepped into the pair of hard-soled Indian moccasins she got down in South Dakota two summers back—she looked to all the world like she was ready to elbow open my screen door, go outside, and march east as long and as fast as it would take her to make curtain call as the second exotic act of the evening to climb up on the little stage and stomp the boards at the Bijoux in Jamestown. And maybe her being angry at me did help propel her through my doorway and along the north side of the highway fast enough to get in sight of Jamestown's gates and assorted steeples in sufficient time to undress and be calmly standing at the ready for trumpeter Harry Herbert's triple-toot cue to begin her set. However, none of (or maybe just parts of) this all really happened as I've surmised, for no witness has ever come forth to verify seeing her leave my place, or walking along Interstate 94 that afternoon, or bumping and grinding later at the Bijoux, or ever turning up anywhere again.

Oh they've interrogated my ass to a fare-thee-well, you can make book on that, and I doubt the authorities are ever going to completely drop the case, but what they now have, of course—and really all they have—is a missing person on their hands, and I don't see a damned thing blocking you and me, Rowena, from getting together now and motoring south to

live in a nice shipping container home west of Albuquerque. And be assured, baby, you can bet I'd be the first person to confess that if I got wind of the fact the container was anchored east of Albuquerque, you'd hear me yelling no dice, the feng shui's all wrong, and we won't be makin' any move toward New Mexico. I'd scream same-same if I discovered the container were located north or south of the big A. (In sum, your man knows how terribly important direction is.) But as and where the container is currently situated, I sense and envision a home secure and live-in ready for us, cutes—something set for life—and I just gotta wanna be travellin' there soon-soon-soon.

Trekking through the Alps of East L.A.

LEROY B. VAUGHN



Back in the day, 1975 as Cadets at the Los Angeles Sheriff's Academy, we ran as a class through the streets of East Los Angeles, where the Academy was located at the time, for physical training. The drill instructors called this area the Mexican Alps.

Recently, I was visiting a relative that still lives on Hazard Ave. in East Los Angeles. I took a walk from Cesar Chavez Ave., once known as

Brooklyn Ave. to City Terrace Dr. A distance of about one and a half miles.

A lot has changed over the years. The gang bangers have been replaced by older vatos that spend a lot of time polishing their bomber low riders, and playing oldies but goodies music in their driveways.

There are a lot more people living in that area now, as evidenced by the number of cars and trash cans on the streets.

After I came back from my walk, I counted 22 cars driving on Hazard Ave. in one minute in the middle of the afternoon. Based on that count, I would guess that more cars pass through Hazard Ave. in one hour than travel on my street in several days.

The reason for all the cars and trash cans appears to be because in a neighborhood that was mostly single family residences in the 1970's, it now has cottages and garages turned into apartments on almost every lot on Hazard Ave.

I started at the bottom of the hill, at the Anthony Quinn library and headed north, past the enchanted garden (the writing on the sheet metal gate says it's a garden). One of my nieces says she sees a lot of teenage girls in Catholic school uniforms go into the gate at the garden, behind the store that was owned by an old Jewish man, before he sold the store to

a Japanese couple, that later sold it to a Korean owner, and after a couple of years, it was bought by East Indians, before they closed it down.

There's a big mural covering one entire wall, across the street from the Catholic church. The mural is an East L.A. street scene, but the artist was smart enough to paint a Virgin Mary on one corner, to keep graffiti artists from tagging it. As I headed up the hill I had to duck under a tree branch that was hanging low, blocking the sidewalk.

Roots from the overgrown tree caused the sidewalk to buckle and two feet away, a toilet had been placed on the sidewalk. I don't know if this was some sort of yard art, or if it was left there in case someone needed a used toilet to take home.

Not to be outdone by the neighbor, the next house had a beat-up sofa on the sidewalk. I wasn't tired so I moved on, not needing to sit down.

Most of the houses looked the same as years ago, except that almost all of the original 800 square foot houses now had extended rooms that made them three times longer than the original houses, giving the old unpainted houses a locomotive look.

I wonder how many of these add-ons were permitted by the county? There is one new house on the block. A Korean family had the old house knocked down and replaced with a nice looking house, with an attached carport. Could this be a sign of gentrification?

Hipsters are making a lot of improvements in old gang infested neighborhoods like Echo Park and Silverlake, not far from East L.A. Across the street from the new house owned by Koreans is a senior citizen apartment complex, with a view that goes on for several miles.

Three older Chinese men wait at a bus stop across the street from the senior apartments, smoking cigarettes and speaking in their native language.

A few doors up the street, in a yard with weeds about one foot tall, an old boat with a blue and gold license plate from the 1970's attached to the trailer is sitting in the front yard. Two mixed breed curs guard the yard from inside a cyclone fence that has seen better days. It seems that every yard on this block has two or three mixed Chihuahua or Poodle mutts of various colors, waiting to sneak up on the women and children that use the sidewalks.

A Pitbull rushes towards the fence next to the boat as I walk up the street and snarls at me. I tell him to piss off and he backs away. I cross the street near the city park and pass a house that appears to be a curio shop in downtown Tijuana.

The entire front yard and driveway is covered with ceramic statues and religious trinkets. The last house on the block, before City Terrace Dr. has been refurbished and has a nice little painted fence in front.

An American flag flies from the front porch, the first American flag I have seen on the block, although there are several Mexican and Raider football flags flying from houses and cars. There's a vacant lot next to the house, and the old Rockview Dairy store is now closed, but the battered sign is still in front of the empty building. I used to buy milk at that store from an old Chicano man in bib overalls, years ago.

I head back down the street. It's a lot easier to walk downhill this time. As I stroll along, I think about this neighborhood, as it must have been

shortly after World War Two. The residents of East Los Angeles was mostly Jewish, Serbian and Chinese, as evidenced by the old cemeteries in the area.

What will East Los Angeles look like in another forty five years? I have no way of knowing, and I won't be around to find out.

An old pick-up truck is parked on the street. A decal with a cactus and the word "Arizona" is on the back window. I look at the decal and tell myself that I'll be heading home to Arizona in two days.

These Annas

JOHN GREY

Sun going down,
time to come in from the fields,
Anna grabs a few wildflowers,
a handful of reeds,
so the day won't be lost forever.
The prettiest, she'll wear in her hair.
The rest, a vase will placate
with a cupful of water.
Old women watch from their porches.
They spin, they knit, for practical purposes.
Not for them the mad-meadows,
the giddy warm,
that dandelion light.
They're as sensible
as the aches in bones.
Nature is not human nature, after all.
They prefer the darkness,
when faces disappear
and all are equal,
the young, the old,
the beautiful, the homely.
They don't take pleasure
in the lifting of a toe,

the waving of hands,
the spin of a torso,
the How of hair out from the throat.
A heart is not a thing
to toss up in the air,
catch before it hits the ground,
to be grasped to the chest,
blessed and breathed on.
If it's to be comforted at all,
it must be by the head.
And though there can be flowers,
they must be grown in their own garden,
not stolen from the garden of the Lord.
These Annas,
how they mock with their madness.
These Annas,
they have not the wisdom to grow old.
These Annas,
they are from a race of dreams
and it's not time to sleep yet.

That Blind Man at the Concert

JOHN GREY

We're embarrassed for him
though we struggle not to be.
He's here to listen to the band.
Sure his body needs a hand

to direct him to his seat
but his ears are fine on their own.
It's the tap tap of the cane
that puts the rest of us on edge.

What if we bump into him?

What if he asks us to

point him to the rest room?
The man we can deal with

but blindness is like this other

strange, alien being.
Really, we've nothing
against the handicapped.

We just don't like the company
the pour guy's keeping.
The concert starts.

Music takes up the cause of vision.

Cane on his lap, he settles
in between two fans of the group.
They've got 20/20 vision
but, all of a sudden,

they're uncomfortable with their eyes.

He jokes w i t h them.
"My guide dog would be here
but he's at the U2 concert across town."

They know nothing about blindness.
So they don't laugh just in case it's true.

Best Buds

MATT PAGOURGIS

The kid at the counter was too high to realize he was getting robbed. Trevor stuck a gun in his face and that seemed to get the point across well enough. The “budtender” stood there bullnecked and cross-eyed while the gun rested point blank at his nose.

His partners, Brett and Chad took out their fake prop guns Chad stole from a low budget YouTube series he guest starred in as a crooked cop.

“Alright. Incase you couldn’t tell this is a robbery! Everyone on the floor, now!” Said Brett in the sternest tone he could manage. It was planned beforehand that he would be the one talking. They had watched *Point Break* and the opening scene of *The Dark Knight* in preparation, speed was the name of the game it seemed.

The security guard was caught totally unaware. He felt the barrel of

Chad’s fake heater pressed against the back of his head and instantly complied, laying his very real Sig Sauer P226 on the ground along with his cell phone.

Outside the Best Buds Collective the street was quiet. It was 9 A.M. in Los Angeles, not even the coffee shops were open.

Brett walked over to the hostages with a Trader Joe’s shopping tote. “Cellphones in the bag!” Barked Brett. The budtenders complied, there were three of them.

“OK, now everyone over here behind the counter.”

“Hey man. Wait. Like, you don’t need to do this man.” Replied the oldest budtender of the three. He looked like a skinny Jerry Garcia.

“I-said-behind-the-counter!” Screeched Brett, cocking his handgun for

emphasis.

“OK man.” Said the Hippy and the hostages slowly sat on the ground behind the counter with their backs to the wall facing the front door.

Trevor couldn't believe how well his plan was working. He was the brains of the operation and he was proud. The three boys grew up together in Owensville, Indiana, where Trevor and Brett still live. They came to Los Angeles to visit Chad who seemed to be doing well for himself as a professional influencer.

Before they even came out to California Trevor thought about how much money was to be had buying weed where it was legal and then selling it back home in Indiana where it was not. But when he visited Chad in his dumpy apartment and met his soft LA friends Trevor realized he could just steal the money and nobody would fight back. One hundred percent profit. And now his plan was coming together like clockwork.

Brett had similar feelings but it wasn't the weed he cared about. When

Chad told them that buying in dispensaries was cash only because credit card companies are federal and marijuana's federally illegal, he knew there had to be a ton of cash on hand. The best part was that the budtenders were too high to count off their fingers. It was too easy.

Brett took the old guy to the back room where the safe was. The old man fumbled at the lock a couple times and Brett started to get anxious.

“What are you doing? Does that trigger a secret alarm or something?”

“What? No man. Its not even electronic it like a lock for your locker. I just forgot the combo.” Said the aged hippy in his gravelly voice.

“What's going on back there?” Shouted Trevor, he was going against the rules talking but they were running out of time dicking around.

“I forgot the code. Probably because this guys got a gun in my face.” Answered Jerry Garcia. He then turned and whispered to Brett, “I don't dig guns man.”

Trevor was already over it. He looked at his watch. “Forget the money!

We've got enough weed to make us rich."

Brett shouted from the back room, "But we don't have to do the added step of selling the money, we just have to spend it."

Chad ignored the bickering. He filled his dufflebag with jars of Blue Dreams, Bubba Kush, Sour Diesel, Golden Goat, and LA Confidential.

"But we'll have to launder the money." Retorted Trevor. The captive's heads went back and forth as if they were watching a ping-pong match.

"We'll have to launder the money from selling the weed too though."

There was a long silence. The Jerry Garcia looking dude spoke up.

"This you guys's first robbery?"

"Huh?" Trevor looked at his watch. He pointed to the girl budtender.

"Do you know the combination?"

"Yes. My name is Tracy and you don't have to do this. I'm Tracy."

"Why did you just say your name twice?"

"I read that you do that in hostage situations so you the captors regard

the captives as people."

"OK Tracy, just go to the safe and open it."

Tracy walked to the back room and introduced herself to Brett. "Hi, I'm Tracy."

"Hi Tracy, I'm Brett."

"Dude!" Trevor yelled from the main room. Chad, found a jar of his favorite, Maui Wowie.

"Seems to me like you boys aren't very experienced with this." Said Jerry Garcia.

"This isn't my real job. I'm an actor." Said Chad as he put a bottle of White Widow in his bag.

"Oh yeah. Me too." Said Tracy as she opened the safe for Brett. "Been in anything I'd know?"

"I've got an audition today." Chad was about to bring up the Mack Bros video he did that went "kinda viral" but Trevor called over to him.

“Yo. Come on bro.” He was careful to not let Chad’s name slip, it was bad enough these guys knew Brett’s name.

“If you’re an actor. Why do you rob dispensaries?” Asked the old man.

“I’m, you know. Trying to get into character.” Humblebragged Chad.

Trevor couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“So you’re a method actor? Is the thing you’re auditioning for a heist film?” Said Tracy.

“A meth-head actor?” Said the stoned budtender. It was the first thing he said since the gun was pointed at his face.

“No. Method. It’s an acting technique where you become the character. Like Heath Ledger in the Dark Knight.” Said Tracy.

“We watched that last night.” Said Chad.

“He died.” Said the stoner.

“Yeah, well. I don’t intend to take it to that extreme.” Said Chad as he scratched the back of his head with his handgun. “More like Marlon

Brando, he was a method actor.”

“He’s dead too.”

Chad reached into his bag. “Here have an edible” and tossed it to the kid.

Mercifully, Brett got out of the room with his duffle bag full of cash. Trevor was excited, his plan worked even if Chad almost gave away all their identities trying to impress Tracy.

“Alright we’ve got to get going everyone. Tracy. Nice to meet you.”

Home free. It all went off without a hitch, that was until they heard the cow bell on the door go off.

Officer Morales had to get a certain strain of sativa for his wife to help her sleep. For these errands he liked going to the Best Buds Collective because the old man who owned it, Paul used to be a roadie for Carlos Santana and he had some great stories. But today, as he entered he saw Paul on the floor with a gun pointed in his direction.

“Hands up! This is the police!” Shouted Morales.

“It *was* a secret alarm!” Brett said to the hippy named Paul.

Morales called for backup, his partner was getting lunch at Fat Burger down the block. As Morales put his hand on his radio Trevor moved his gun a little abruptly in Morales’ direction who, in kind fired off his TASER. Trevor tensed up and dropped to the ground like a felled tree.

Brett and Chad took that as their opportunity to make a break for it. As they started to run the stoned budtender showed surprising speed and open field tackled Brett before he took two steps.

Chad on the other hand made it for the door. At the sound of the door’s cowbell Morales fired a round in Chad’s direction, shattering the tinted glass on the door.

Duffle bag in tow, Chad was free. He stumbled down the sidewalk like a drunk. The glass jars of weed clinking in his bag as he ambled along.

When his eyes adjusted to the light he realized he wasn’t on the

sidewalk at all but in the middle of the street, and a Mazda6 was heading in his direction.

The Mazda honked, slowed down, and tried to swerve but it still hit Chad dead on, knocking him over the windshield and out of his left shoe.

A Toyota Prius driving in the opposite direction screeched to a halt, the driver stepped out and said “You just hit that guy!” As if the driver didn’t notice.

Chad spotted Morales’ tubby partner running in his direction. The sidewalk was full of onlookers with their cell phones out recording the action. Chad had his audience.

He ran for freedom towards the Ralph’s supermarket but after a few steps he tripped over a misplaced e-scooter in the middle of the sidewalk. Chad’s face hit the pavement and within seconds the police officers knee was on his neck. He never made it to that audition.

Ode to a Cigarette

EDWARD VIDAURRE

You come to me in
your tight little black dress
with warnings of being a bad girl

for my health, with your brush strokes
in blue, you become a spirit
dancing in the air above me, you leave
slowly waltzing in circles until
you are one with the heavens

you come to me in
my moments of anxiety
with sweetness, you swim
down my throat invading my heart
plucking at my veins with grey fingers

you love me enough to kill me
I love you enough
to let you

I Found Love Talking to a Wall Under the First Street Bridge in Boyle Heights, CA

EDWARD VIDAURRE

“You gotta believe me baby”

“Just one little kiss”

“I promise I’ll change”

“I wrote you a love song”

After singing the homeless black man outstretched his arms as if waiting for another body to fill the cavity between him and the wall. He shuffled about and started singing again, this time to the debris around him. I had my chest pressed against the bridge looking down. Just before that, I was brushing past fast walking suits going to work with Yeti cups filled with hot coffee with briefcases in one hand and cell phones up to their ears in the other, business deals and lunch appointments being made, until I found myself in a place where the city was still yawning and having a hard time waking up.

There he was, singing:

“Baby, just a little more time, and our love will surely grow”

“Ooooooh baby, baby”

there he was, ill
I couldn’t make out his shoes
or his face from where I was
he moved about in dance like a Temptation
trying to woo a wall, asking for one more chance

I fell into a deep sadness
I wanted to help him
but I wanted him to keep singing
I wanted the wall to open up
say “yes” to him
he stopped singing
dropped to his knees and began to cry
continue to beg, all but tears were being offered
to the wall now, all but wails of desperation

In a soft voice, I sang down to him

*“It’s been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will”*

La La La Means I Love L.A.

EDWARD VIDAURRE

We landed on time. The pavement outside
the small airplane window was wet, and from where I sat
I could almost smell the petrichor
settling in
on la la land.

I've missed my city, a mourning at times
The smog-The homelessness-The crime
The struggle, All of it!
-The cholos and cholas-The low riders,
Whittier Boulevard,
City Hall and all its suited criminals,
the immigrant culture, the graffiti,
the ghetto bird, the flat feet, taggers, the pinche traffic jams,
the murals, the scent of gunpowder... sadly, hasta eso!
the second I step foot the streets gave me the chisme,
on the corner of hustle

I saw raw courage and fight in a school teacher
holding up a strike sign! Oh yeah! She was like
the Statue of Liberty, like a Virgencita Guadalupana,
como una flor, la Emma Gonzalez, la Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, haci
mero!

She smiled for my camera and continued her grito,
on the corner of Mission and Yellow Caution Tape Boulevard

My mother, hit seventy years of age
and still dances on Wednesday afternoon,
my chiquita viejita, always busy, still making
the best coffee and desayunos, I stare at her
watching a soccer match on television,
I can almost feel my dad next to her,
he left his costumbres for her to carry,
she misses him,
the flat on Gabriel Garcia Marquez knows it

Some things have changed and some stay the same:
They've moved my gente con gentrification,
the mariachis are still hustling on Boyle
strumming and tuning their guitarrones,
the borrachitos are still stumbling in and out
of the bar with the velvet curtain
except it's now a puerta de madera,
there on la calle primera

On the corner of shank and choke
Are the huddled men that lost hope
Fists closed around a bottle of memory
Glossy eyes not to be mistaken with tear welling eyes,
glossy... like distance.
The fathers of the barrio, the forgotten ones,
the addicted ones, the lost ones across Hollenbeck Lake

Across from wounds and addiction
Are the women that were robbed
Hair chopped short with blue-veined breasts that leak earthmilk,
long fingernails to climb and detach tomorrow's suicides,
the women of wounds, raising children,
goddamned children of the barrios, birthing more
children in safe zones, trying to rush into
menopause and divorce, slicing the bully in
the gut, breaking away from the man, breaking away
from the plan that the man can with no plan.

I return and la la la means I love L.A.
Introduce her to my daughter
Who's hazel eyes are like a California sunset,
who's skin is bronze by ancestral blessings,
who's voice code switches with the morning whistling
of Santa Ana winds, who's morning yawn stretches
from Tejas to el Centro de Los Angeles

I return and my la la la means I love L.A.
with a new set of eyes, translating poems in
the shape of birds on power lines and river water
under the bridge, on the tracks,
where boxed cars wait to be pushed across the country,
Where homeless women push
shopping carts filled with garbage stanzas,
leaving poems in my mother's palms,
where palm trees sway with morning traffic,
I throw my city poems out the window
driving on the 5 and pause to breathe
on the 10 heading west

Until I return, I will hold my breath
I will hold it long enough
To remember
I never left

The Wayward Collective

SUSAN E. LLOY

It began as an idea, like most things. Wanda always knew, even in times of uncertainty that she would head back east upon retirement. This notion had pulled her back like a rip tide, a true force, which she didn't have a single drop of control over. Perry, her best friend, always said,

“You'll never see me there. I won't even visit.” And yet he came a year later with his ornery beast, a calico cat named Mimi-Lulu.

Wanda has inherited an old house in a small seaside town. It is rundown, but Wanda, who has an innate sense of taste and order, has managed since her return eight months ago, to convert it into an unquestionably inviting abode. And even though the weather-bleached exterior shingles are missing here and there, the interior

modifications didn't cost an arm and a leg.

Money, or lack of it, is why she's here. The house is hers rent-free and it is the first time in her life she can live without worrying about unaffordable apartments. She only has to pay the taxes and repairs that consistently appear as shells upon a beach. So, when Perry arrives, it is a relief. More gravy to the pot.

Wanda's neighbor, Iris, has a beautiful garden and has given Wanda multiple clippings from her ample brood: Hollyhocks, Lilies, Lavender, Black-eyed-Susans to name a few. Iris initially felt sorry for Wanda as she watched her struggle with the overgrown yard. Wanda had hoped to develop a new friendship, but Iris never invited her over. Not even for a cup of tea. Iris is Dutch, came here as a young

girl and is somewhat standoffish. She is a widow and although not what one would call a born and bred local, she considers Wanda an outsider just as the locals view Iris.

The house is located on a quiet road amongst blueberry bushes and a bay. It has two woodstoves, five bedrooms, wooden floors throughout and Wanda has repainted it with a lively palette of beachy colors. There is a covered porch surrounding three sides. The second floor has three jetties. One, with a peaked roof and windows on all three sides salutes the front of the house. There are also right and left jetties, which host bedrooms and a dormer.

The entire ground and second floor have expansive old windows providing the tired house with limitless sunlight. A large rambling yard bordering Iris's garden faces the front and left side of house. A wired and heated outbuilding rests in the back of the property,

which Perry has requested as his studio. Perry insisted he would only come if the outbuilding could be his.

Wanda is ecstatic that Perry is here. She has been rather lonely since her return. The folk are friendly enough in the shops; nonetheless she hasn't met any new friends. Perry has brought a few trunks, one for his sculpting tools, one for bits and bobs. The minute he enters the house Wanda attempts to pat Mimi-Lulu, but she only hisses and scratches Wanda's outstretched hand.

“Well, some things never change.”

“Oh, Wanda, she's just scared.”

Wanda lets Perry choose his own bedroom. Hers is upstairs with windows facing the front and sides of the yard as if she is the captain of a ship, which is sort of true. Perry decides on the downstairs bedroom close to the bathroom. There are three other bedrooms

upstairs. Mimi-Lulu has disappeared and probably will only surface for Perry. She has always been unfriendly and only has eyes for him.

Perry is pleased with his studio. He had once been anointed with the glaze of celebrity in the nineties with a spread about his work in *ARTnews* and various other art journals. He had a few group shows and a solo with modernist galleries. Stubbornly, he has stuck to his subject that revolves around the phallus and throughout the years his devotees who wished to see another artistic path have abandoned him. His notoriety has shrunk as if it itself was a limp member.

He had been teased by name-calling when he was a boy at school.

Perry is a fairy, poofter and so on. Also, he had been persecuted by his own father and, in reaction to all of this Perry came out very early. There is a dramatic aura about him. This testimony to male sexuality is at the very core of his artistry and he immediately begins investigating where to buy supplies to get a new series of sculptures

on the go.

Perry and Wanda go a long ways back and their evenings are spent drinking wine and reminiscing about their former wild adventures: Go-go dancing on Perry's small city balcony after a dinner party, Perry's preference for men of shorter stature, the many concerts and endless parties they attended. Sometimes when they've had too much they put on the Sex Pistols or the B-52's and have a dance, despite stiff joints and bad knees.

It has taken time for Perry to embrace his new surroundings for he is a city boy and finds this quiet place hard on his nerves. Still, he enjoys the roominess of the house and his own private workspace and this has won him over. A studio would have been unattainable if he had remained in Montréal. Money is what it boils down to. It is what grants freedom or restraint.

A couple of months following Perry's arrival, the plumbing goes awry while Wanda is bathing and Perry is doing the dishes. The house has galvanized pipes that must be replaced. The sediment is so thick from build up throughout the years that only a few drops escape from the pipes. It is decided that new lodgers are required to help with the bills. Perry and Wanda don't like this idea one bit, but can find no other way out. She places an advertisement on craigslist and in the local shops. Three soon materialize.

The first is Dot. She likes the idea of companionship. Insufficient savings is also a driving force that propels her to this idea of community living. She had worked for the SPCA most of her life and is an animal lover.

“Oh there's a cat here! Great.”

However, when Mimi-Lulu comes out of hiding for a drink of water Dot extends her hand only to have Mimi-Lulu hiss as she raises her

head from her dish.

Japamala is the second. Her real name is Denise, however she has adopted Japamala as her own. A yoga lover, she has spirited blue eyes and when she is flush she travels the world visiting yoga retreats.

“The yard is beautiful. I'll give yoga lessons out there, weather permitting, of course.” Her toned body brims with enthusiasm.

The third is Ethan, or Taffy as he is often called. Ethan was a roofer and always tanned a creamy bronze the color of chewy candy. He is wrinkled, walks with a limp due to a fall, uses a cane and was on disability until his pension kicked in. Nonetheless he has kept in shape and there is a sexual lure about him despite his weathered skin. He holds a seductive sloping grin like Sam Elliott when his face is still. Even Perry finds him attractive.

All three roomies move in shortly after. Dot and Japamala come first and each choose the upstairs east and west rooms. Ethan claims

the room in the back of the house, which has a clear view of Iris's house. Initially, they have a house meeting deciding whether to eat together and who does what yard and house chores. Dot goes first.

“I'm happy to do yard work. I like to be amongst the birds.”

“I'm not interested in being part of a household chore schedule. Everyone take care of their own shit.” Perry heads out to his studio.

“OK, we're all in agreement then. Each of us is responsible for our own messes.”

Wanda stands up first as if she's the chair of this board meeting and heads to the kitchen. “Who wants tea?”

Perry used to work with marble, but has recently switched to fiberglass resin. It is less expensive and he likes the idea of bold color, a deviation from his former creative executions. While the

new roomies are sorting themselves out Perry can be heard banging, sawing and chipping away. Loud music escapes the outdoor studio.

‘I Wanna Be Your Dog’, by the Stooges assaults Iris's ears as she is burrowing up an eager raspberry bush whose roots had spread like wildfire.

Of late, there is heaviness in the air since the house has been revived. It had been vacant for some time before Wanda and this new clan moved in. As the morning fogs lift Perry installs colossal primary colored penis sculptures in Iris's direct field of vision. Some are erect and proud, while one seems shy or sleepy and another is inquisitive as if a periscope from a submerged submarine scouring the horizon for possible action. When Iris returns to hoeing she wishes she were digging a mass grave for the whole lot of them.

Initially, Wanda's household had decided on having a communal evening meal together. Each taking a turn cooking throughout the

week, but this hasn't worked out, as Japamala is a vegetarian and on several occasions the meal was made without consideration for her dietary disapprovals. She wouldn't consider anything that had been cooked in a pot where meat had been sizzled. Perry is fussy with his culinary tastes and disliked all of the meals that had been prepared by the others. Especially Dot. He never tasted anything so bland and blah.

Ethan eats out most evenings. He goes to the pub and throws back a few. He hankers fish and chips and often stops by Mod's Cod or the town diner. He isn't much of a cook anyways, although Dot tries to woo him with her breakfasts often enough. Sometimes Ethan obliges, slowly chewing, lifting an eyebrow while Dot smiles, rubbing her hands down her pear-like shapeawaiting approval.

Japamala also vies for Ethan's attention. Stretching her slim form whenever he is in sight. Regularly, she offers up a non-coniferous dish

with the hope of...well she isn't quite sure. Nevertheless, he certainly appeals to her. She has bought her own set of cookware insisting they are off limits. The others agree without complaint. Ironically, they are a deep red, the semblance of blood.

Within the month things in the house have been rearranged. Utensils, dishes, glasses and furniture are placed in symmetrical order. One day when Perry was in town he came back to find all his tools and paints had been repositioned as if it were an army barracks on inspection. Even the bath towels had been reshuffled according to length and tint intensity, although each lodger has their own identifiable hook.

Iris notices every evening the blinds in Ethan's room go up and down and the lights turn on and off for several consecutive intervals. She wonders if he is sending her some kind of Morse code erotic

message. But truth be told, he only has eyes for Iris's garden, which he envisions uprooting and replanting according to plant height, color and curvaceousness.

"Alright, who's been fucking with my studio? I don't appreciate the clean-up." Perry knows it isn't Wanda. She's far too lazy for such things.

It is unusual that they are all in the kitchen at one time.

"Well, it certainly isn't me!" Dot and Japamala shout in unison.

"Then it must be you Taff."

"It is. I'm afraid I can't help myself. I've had this problem since I can remember. I thought it would please everyone."

"We know your intentions are kind, but leave things as they are. Especially my studio – there is a system in my mess."

"No problem Perry. I'll stay clear."

"And besides, none of us wants our wash cloths all mixed up.

Think of the germ transfers. Who knows where Wanda's ol' puss has been?"

Wanda and Perry laugh so hysterically that they nearly wet themselves, while the others feel violated at the mere thought of Wanda's private parts.

"OK then, who wants a drink?" Perry has a Margaritaville and prepares drinks for himself, Wanda and Ethan. Dot and Japamala decline and he thinks, "*excellent!* *More for us.*" Mimi-Lulu rests at the base of Perry's feet glaring at the others with complete disapproval.

Since Ethan is good with his hands, Dot asks him to build some birdhouses for her. She is secretly in love with him and thinks it will curb his yen for order. As he inspects the grounds for best direction and placement Japamala stretches on the lawn. She arches her body like a cat and does the wide-legged forward bend with her

legs spread and her butt positioned high in the air. Even her scant yoga class newbies are incapable of averting his attention. But, Ethan is preoccupied with the trees, imagining the birdhouses all harmoniously hanging equal distance and height within the branches. All the while Mimi-Lulu skulks in the bushes observing Perry suspending each pied-à-terre.

It didn't take long before dead birds were left at the front door. On one occasion there was a dead baby bunny. Dot, who cherishes all animals, is beginning to loathe Mimi-Lulu and, although she hasn't witnessed the actual carnage she knows without a doubt it's her.

Dot is consistently the first one up. As she prepares coffee she hears a sequence of short, loud and sharp peeps. The kitchen windows are open and the birdhouses can be clearly observed from the window above the sink.

Dot abandons her coffee and runs out to inspect what's going on. As

she approaches one of the birdhouses there is a panicked sparrow trapped within by one of Mimi-Lulu's paws.

The second she moves in, Mimi-Lulu lunges at Dot, scratching her arms before hitting the ground and making a beeline for Perry's studio. The sparrow exits heading for the sky, all the while chirping in protest. It's fragile form becoming a mere speck on the horizon. Three abandoned eggs rest in the nest. Dot marches into Perry's bedroom who is deep in sleep, snoring like a Warthog.

"Your cat is evil!"

"Ugh? I was asleep. What do you want?"

"I said your cat is horrid, wicked. Whatever adjective you prefer. I never imagined I'd say this about an animal."

Perry rubs his eyes watching a droplet of blood drip down Dot's clawed arm.

"She's always been an indoor kitty. Let her have some fun for fuck

sake.”

And in that instant an unexpected phrase from a Seinfeld episode pops into Perry’s head.

“Serenity now!”

Dot slams the door and returns to the kitchen.

“Wanda. What are we going to do about Dot?”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t stand her. She’s gotta go. And Japamala, fuck I hate her stupid name, is getting on my nerves too. With her nose out of joint every time I roast a chicken or grill a steak.”

“Yeah. Well... we just can’t kick them out.”

“I know, but I can’t take those two for one more minute.”

Things have been rather gloomy around the house. Japamala hasn’t

recruited any additional yoga students. The weather has been wet and laced with heavy fog for most of the summer and this has not proven attractive for enthusiasts to stretch on the soggy grass. While everyone is mingling around the kitchen, Perry proposes, ‘Let’s have a party.’

“What do you think? Summer will be over in a breath. There are long faces in this house. We can invite some town folk. What do you say?”

“*Whatever*” seems to be the general mood at his suggestion as they exit the kitchen. Wanda is the only one excited by the idea.

“Town folk? What folks Perry? Iris is the only one we know.”

“Speak for yourself, Wanda. I’ve met a few furballs.”

“You haven’t.”

“I have. Wanda, do you seriously expect I’d be able to tolerate this uneventful town if there wasn’t the occasional rub-a-dub-dub?”

“You’re too much.”

“I’m just saying... And I even have shrooms.”

“Really! How did you get them?”

“I have my sources.”

Wanda and Perry laugh like hyenas that have just had a fresh kill, clinking their coffee mugs in the morning light.

The following Saturday is the chosen evening for the party. The weather predicts dry and pleasantly warm conditions as well as a full moon. Perry and Wanda string lights and place candles in every conceivable nook and cranny. They have made a couple long tables out of old doors and sawhorses. Wanda covers them with white sheets as twilight falls. An atmosphere of calmness settles over the yard. The odd firefly dancing against the coming night highlights the teal colored sky. To be polite and due to the fact there will be a party and noise, Wanda extends an invitation to Iris.

“Iris, we’d be delighted if you’d join us for the evening.”

She accepts, with the true intention of confronting them about the infuriating penis sculptures.

“Well...it’s very kind of you. Yes, perhaps I’ll come.”

“Perry. Do you think we should tell everyone about the mushrooms?”

“No. Why?”

“But, if we don’t and someone has a bad trip...”

“Come on, everyone has fun on shrooms.”

“OK then, but we’ll just put small amounts in the balls. Let me at least make a place card with a message... ‘have a nice flight’.”

Before everyone arrives, Perry and Wanda put out food plates of prepared cheeses, breads, crackers, olives, pates and cold cuts. The shrooms are wrapped in a layer of peanut butter, perfectly symmetrical and tempting with the little card on top of the tray

of balls. Perry and Wanda have already chowed down on rather generous portions and have become somewhat unhinged each time they address one another. Laughing excessively over the simplest of things.

Dot eyes them with suspicion and Japamala, who had forty minutes ago swallowed a ball, begins stretching and dancing on the recently mowed lawn smiling like the Cheshire Cat and sometimes cementing her hands on the grass staring at the ground for an exaggerated period of time. Ethan also partakes in multiple shroom balls and when Iris arrives he is all smiles and outstretches his hand.

“Welcome, I’m Ethan,”

“Hello, Iris.”

“I’ve been admiring your garden.”

“Oh... have you now?”

Iris nervously bites into a ball drumming up the courage to go one-

on-one regarding the sculptures. The card is no longer visible and has fallen to the ground. Not long after Iris pops a shroom the party is in full swing and Perry’s two furball friends arrive. Wanda, Perry and his two gentleman callers are soon in deep conversation.

“Can you believe it?” I’m getting a show. The dazzling dicks are a hit.”

They all clap and chuckle until their attention is averted to Japamala twirling about the yard again, often hesitating for extended periods of time staring at some undetermined point of interest.

“What’s up with those two?”

As they watch, Dot turns her head in every direction as if she is attempting to decode some alien transmission.

“I don’t know. I wish they’d move out.”

Dot appears uneasy and peeps into the bushes and trees imagining

sounds of animals in distress, sometimes disappearing for lengths of time. Ethan introduces Iris to the others and just before Iris can open her mouth Perry, Wanda and the furballs erupt in laughter. Their diaphragms contracting as they gasp for breath between hysterical outbursts.

“I don’t know what is so comical. Now, about those sculptures... I really don’t know how you expect me to tolerate them. I’m forced to look at them from every angle of my house and garden.”

“Come on, there’re fun. I think they liven up the place. Well, someone appears to appreciate them. I’m getting a show.”

Just as Iris is about to respond, Ethan takes her arm and pivots her in the direction of her garden, yet Iris feels nauseous and stops, thinking she will be sick to her stomach. By the time they reach the yard’s border, Iris is light-headed and experiences altered vision when she looks at her porch with its strung white lights running the length of

the veranda. The moon is shimmering in the night sky with several rings of light surrounding it.

“I feel strange. Was something in the drinks?”

“Perry made shroom balls and we all had a bit. Don’t worry – all will be well. It won’t last forever.”

“Well, they could have warned me first.”

Ethan and Iris sit on the bench in her garden and he suggests various ways in which the flowers could be changed. For instance, instead of mixed hues, why not arrange all according to height and color? The more he goes on the more Iris is open to his ideas. Iris collects her spades and shovels and they immediately get down to work forgetting about the party. Rows of whites, reds, yellows, blues and the odd purple and pinks have all been uprooted and replanted. The flowers seem delighted with their new arrangements. Some seem to smile.

At one point their digging is interrupted by a loud shriek. Dot comes dashing out of the bushes with her face covered in blood after stumbling upon Perry and the furballs partaking in a threesome. Just as she makes a run for it, Mimi-Lulu lunches from a tree branch scratching her face before hitting the ground and dashing away.

“Perry, you fucking cat clawed me again!”

“Oh, she can be a naughty kitty” Perry’s chuckled words becoming evermore distant.

Nevertheless, before Perry can muster a minute to sound somewhat sincere, Wanda excitably grabs Dot and sashays her around the yard dancing to The Buzzcocks. Dot breaks away, dashing to the house and is not seen for the remainder of the soiree.

When dawn breaks, Ethan and Iris have worked for hours. They are covered with dirt and the yard looks as if it is in severe shock. There are piles and holes and noticeably stressed stems. Iris tries to grasp her

decision to undertake this endeavor that the evening before seemed so sound.

Their faces are diverted when they hear a door slam watching Japamala and Dot heading to their cars arm-and-arm with numerous suitcases. Still, seconds later Iris turns her attention to her war-torn oasis. Tears run down her face like a warm summer shower. Ethan takes his worked hand and wipes one away. Waiting for another and another.

Roast Death

ELLIOTT CAPON

The Friars' Club, a private association of comedians and others in show business was founded in New York City in 1904. It provided a home away from home, companionship, and social interaction among the wits, wags, and wa-wa-wa-ers of the day. In an era where entertainers literally lived out of trunks, and there was no such thing as an email or a cell phone to contact loved ones at home, or a faster way than train to travel from Los Angeles to Chicago to Atlanta to Paducah, the Friars' Club was a welcoming destination—first on West 47th Street, then a move uptown to West 48th Street, and finally, in 1957, a relocation to its current site, having moved on up to the East Side (55th between Park and Madison).

Ribbing, kidding, and delivering good-natured insults are more important to a comedian than breathing or the circulation of blood; and on any given night flies on the wall would be treated to unrecorded but

anecdotally-repeated gems, like the time Chico Marx was in a card game, and someone came in and said that a certain actress, who was known to be particularly friendly to almost everyone, as long as there were sheets and pillowcases in the immediate area, had unexpectedly died. “Good,” Chico is supposed to have said without missing a play of the cards, “at least they’ll be together now.”

“Who?” asked his puzzled informant.

“Her legs,” said Chico.

It took a while, but by 1950 the Friars' decided that this nonstop barrage of insults should take on a more formal tinge; hence, the famous Friars' Roasts were invented. Every year, the club members decided who among them was deserving of special attention, and then would give a gala dinner in his or her honor, at which dinner speaker after speaker would get up

and crudely, violently, dirtily, filthily (but lovingly) insult, or “roast,” the honoree. In an era when mainstream showbiz was Eisenhoweringly pure as the driven snow, dirty words and sexually explicit insults falling from the lips of America’s most beloved entertainers was ten times as funny as they would seem to be on paper, and any jokes that managed to escape from behind the walls of 57 East 55th Street were repeated and treasured like gold.

When the roasts were once a year, they were like diamonds in the rough, looked forward to all year and savored for the next twelve months. (As in the old joke, “But if you only get laid once a year, why in the hell are you so happy?” “Because *tonight’s the night!*”). Beginning in 1965, the weekly *Dean Martin Show* began doing regular segments “roasting” a comic or celebrity. Even after the run of the show, in 1974, new Dean Martin-hosted “roasts” showed up occasionally on the networks. These were, of course, much more sanitized than the Friars’ originals—they once

even bleeped actor Jack Klugman, who, when, referring to corporations’ utterances about consumer advocate Ralph Nader, quoth, “Get that *bastion* out of here!” More toward the present day, the Comedy Central network has not been shy about presenting roasts of the celebrity du jour, filling the stage not with show biz veterans and people with tens of years of travel and work from Spokane to Bangor, but with whatever two-bit line-rememberer whose agent had something on the show’s producer.

Consequently, due to their frequency, their population with almost-somebodies and not-quite nobodies, and their general availability, the roasts of today are not the savored gems, the forbidden fruits, the annual delights that they once were.

And Morris Litkovitz intended to do something about that.

As Morrie Light, he had done character work with Milton Berle, Jack Benny, and Bob Hope, then gone on to his own TV comedy variety show from 1951-54 on the Dumont Network. After that experience (he was

forced to bow out to make room for some guy named Jackie Gleason), he became a TV sitcom producer, joining men like Sherwood Schwartz and Sheldon Leonard in hammering together and putting on hit sitcom after hit sitcom, punctuated by twice as many flops and failed pilots as successes. That he was wealthy does not even need be said. That he had a brilliant comedy mind and a terrific capacity for successful business ventures is a given.

That he was one of most hated pricks in the United States may be worth mentioning.

Maybe it was the fact that he misjudged women which would explain why he was currently on his twelfth wife. The last ten had quite openly married him for his money, but apparently there wasn't enough money in the world to stay married to *him*. He hadn't seen his children in so long he'd forgotten their names. Every actor, every director, every associate producer, every writer who ever worked with him would curse the day

they ever signed a contract. The money they made was lousy, and a thousand retirees today sit in trailer parks and assisted living facilities and scratch their heads wondering: how did that miserable bastard get them for such little recompense? Well, he did. Million-dollar stars worked for him for scale, and were happy at the time to get it; it was halfway through the production, when they were locked in to contracts tighter than any Iron Maiden that they realized that they—and even their usually shifty, conniving, *goniff* agents—had been taken to the cleaners and plucked, to mix metaphors.

It wasn't just the money—Morrie Light was just an all-round bastard, a scumbag, a dirt bag, a rat, a louse, a crook, a dick; he was, like, totally gay.

And he didn't care. It wasn't like he knew people hated him, or *didn't* know people hated him, he just Did. Not. Care. Then one lovely day in 2020, in the 88th year of his life, he sat in his palatial Beverly Hills home, where he communicated his wants and needs to the servants by IM, that

Morrie had an Idea. His back and legs had given out on him, and he was confined to a wheelchair with occasional pedal limited mobility thanks to the use of a walker; he had a pacemaker and hearing aids and took blood pressure medication and Fosamax and Flomax and Lipitor—but Morrie Light’s mind was still as sharp as a tack. And his Idea was: let’s have an old-fashioned Friars Club Roast, like in the old days. Not some crappy show honoring the bimbo of the week, starring two-bit supporting actors from syndicated TV shows with all the gags written by a pair of college-educated English majors on the network payroll; but a REAL roast, with REAL old-time show-biz veterans who had been doing their own material for years before there *was* such a thing as cable TV! Of course he would produce the show, invite the speakers, book the best venue (probably HBO or Showtime, where they wouldn’t have to bleep anything), and generally run the operation, even from this damned wheelchair.

And the Roastee, the guest of honor? Why, of course, show-biz veteran

and legend Morrie Light, of course.

He got to work, and nobody got to work like Morrie Light.

We needn’t follow the machinations and peregrinations of how the show was set up. A few asides will suffice: no one under fifty years of age was invited to sit at the speakers’ dais. People who thought they had retired from the business years ago got a call inviting them to speak. People who hated Morrie Light more than they hated Hitler (and a few had known the latter personally!) were shocked to get an invitation to participate in a good-natured, if foul-mouthed, tribute to the loathed gentleman.

Morrie Light, at 88, was still Morrie Light. *No one* turned him down. Were this a doctoral dissertation, we would delve into the how and whys. Since this is merely a recounting of the facts, we must merely state what happened. Morrie Light, arguably the most hated man in the Western Hemisphere (at least, the most *enthusiastically* hated), was the subject of a

live Saturday night roast from the Friars' Club in New York City.

If one remembers the great MGM musicals of the '30s and '40s, one will remember they were replete with songs about "Old Broadway," "The Great White Way," etc. "Yankee Doodle Dandy," the great Cagney vehicle, didn't stray six inches from Broadway, nor did Fred and Ginger as The Barclays. In the first half of the twentieth century, Broadway was IT. For vaudevillians, playing the Palace in New York was the non plus ultra of their careers. "If I can make it there," Sinatra famously said, "I can make it anywhere."

Alas, times change, and there are currently maybe a paltry dozen theaters on the Broadway of legend, for as the world changed, entertainment venues shifted. Branson, Missouri, which probably didn't exist when Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney sang and danced up a storm on an MGM soundstage, is a world center of entertainment; Las Vegas, which existed less than Branson at the time, is perhaps THE world center. But on this

one Saturday night, New York City became once again the absolute center of Show Business for the entire world, as practically every comedian, actor, singer, dancer, director, set-dresser, makeup artist and ticket-taker in North America flocked to New York in the hope of getting a seat in the Friars' Club theater. This promised to be the biggest show-biz event of the decade.

All the old show-biz veterans who creaked into the building one by one shook hands with Morrie, smiled, swapped a few cheerful insults, and turned away. As each turned away, his or her face would twist into an expression of disgust and dislike. While none of them could have turned the invitation down, there was not one of them who wished he hadn't been invited.

Finally, the lights went on, the recorded fanfare played, and the show went on. Morrie sat at the long dais, next to the speaker's rostrum, while fourteen other people sat to his left and right. The emcee was a wizened

old comic and comic actor named Barney Mack (né Macklenstein) who for years had appeared with his wife as the comedy duo Mack and Stack (nee O'Shanahan), and who had, for the past ten or twelve years, played a variety of crazy fathers/uncles/deli owners on several sitcoms. Morrie Light had screwed him and Stack royally back in the 1960s.

“We are here today,” Barney began, “to honor one of the most enduring pillars, one of the bulwarks, one of the foundations, of American show business. I refer, of course,” he continued after a pause, “to the Trojan condom.” That got the first laugh of the evening, and things proceeded apace.

The live audience sat not in auditorium seats, but at tables, where they were served free drinks, as were the speakers on the dais. Nothing tastes as good as when it's free, and the booze flowed copiously. Laughter, too, builds on itself, as the tenth joke of any evening is funnier than the first; and laughter, fueled by alcohol, feeds on itself so that within a half

an hour the place was a madhouse, a bedlam of laughter, an emporium of good humor slightly inappropriately exaggerated to the quality of the material. Morrie, relishing the fact that this was all for him, and forgetting his doctors' advice, was putting down the Smirnoff and Sevens at a pace that would have made his cardiologist frown (in fact, watching on TV, she did). (Not that she had a doctor's concern for him, but he was worth seventy-five G's a year from Medicare alone).

Billy Bob Boonton (known to his mother as Hermie Cohen), a veteran of six Light-produced sitcoms in the '60s and '70s, got up to deliver his tribute. “You could never squeeze any money out of Morrie,” he said. “In fact—“ and here he paused to point at Lucy Tillman, a ninety-year old comedian/actress who was still active on the local cable TV remember-when talk show circuit, and who's main claim to fame was her incredibly scrawny, emaciated figure, “—trying to get a nickel out of Morrie Light was like trying to tit-fuck Lucy Tillman.” Screams. Howls. Nobody

had apparently ever heard anything funnier in their lives. Morrie himself turned red as he slammed his palm down onto the table again and again, apparently having difficulty catching his breath from laughing so hard.

Not all the jibes were directed at Morrie, of course. Retired talk-show host Ben McGonagle looked around in the audience and began picking on some of the celebrities who were good enough to sit at the guest tables but not at the dais. “And there’s George Mooney,” Ben said. “No, don’t try to duck out of sight, George, I see you, I see you.” Chuckles from the crowd. “Of course, the only time I *don’t* see you is when you come out with a new movie.” Oooooohs from the attendees.

“Morrie has had more wives than Henry the Eighth,” pointed out the aforementioned Lucy Tillman in her high-pitched, crackly voice. “And Morrie used to kid him about it incessantly!” That one got Morrie going again, and it took him a long time to get his breath back.

Barney Mack eventually got up to introduce the last scheduled speaker,

a dignified, white-haired-and-mustached, Oscar-winning actor named Geoffrey Imperatore, whose last picture had been released in 1997. It is common practice at roasts to introduce someone not known as a comic, for whom some brilliant lines were written by a top-notch comedy writer, which makes the inappropriate delivery all the more funny.

Imperatore smiled and nodded at Barney, then at the audience. “We’re all having a wonderful time tonight, I’m sure,” he began. “This is one of the funniest evenings I’ve ever had in my life. But I’d like to take a moment to interject something serious for a moment.” There was a stir, as everyone hopefully anticipated something hilarious, but Imperatore, having *never* done a comic role, was deemed incapable of delivering a funny line. When he didn’t twitch his lips, or blink, or try to suppress a smile, or look down at his notes, the audience—all experienced show business veterans—realized that he was, indeed, going to say something serious. Oh, well.

“AIDS is no longer on the front pages of the newspapers and magazines,” Imperatore went on. “There are no more AIDS marches or purple ribbons or armbands or fundraisers or made-for-TV movies. But AIDS is not gone. In 2018, the last year for which we have statistics, in the United States alone, one thousand, six hundred and fourteen men of African-American descent were diagnosed as having contracted the HIV virus and are suffering from full-blown AIDS.” He paused, flipped an index card, and continued. “Of these one thousand, six hundred and fourteen men, it was determined that nine hundred and two of them contracted the disease as a result of being the, uh, the dominant, the aggressor, the penetrator, if you will, in an act of anal intercourse. Of these nine hundred and two men, six hundred and fourteen indentified their partner, the, uh, the recipient...as Lucy Tillman.”

There was a pause of one-two-three seconds and then the place exploded, it erupted, it shattered. People screamed their laughter,

pounded the tables, stamped their feet. Drinks were spilled up and down the dais as experienced comedians fell against each other, laughing and crying and grabbing onto each other for support. Morrie Light couldn't take in enough breath to laugh, and began to turn a dark red.

Geoffrey Imperatore remained stone-faced, masklike, for the ninety-six seconds it took for the crowd to calm down to a few snuffles and the odd guffaw. Short bursts of giggles were heard here and there. When things quieted down to his liking, Imperatore fixed the crowd with a deadpan stare and pronounced, in clear stentorian tones, “Lucy Tillman has seen more black cock than an Ethiopian condom-fitter.”

Even the waiters fell to the floor. Two of the three cameras televising the event spun wildly around and ended up telecasting the walls and ceiling as the cameramen toppled out of their elevated seats. There was actually not much vocalizing as everyone, within seconds, screamed themselves hoarse with laughter.

The one operating camera, though, was by coincidence pointed at Morrie Light. He was trying to laugh, but he couldn't. He couldn't take in enough breath because the laughter kept pushing out whatever air he was trying to take in. A vein in his forehead began to throb. His eyes began to bulge. He didn't so much clutch at his throat as just jab at it with three fingers. Later review and analysis of the tape revealed that Morrie managed to go "Uh uh huh" before he clapped his hand to his chest and fell forward onto the dais, dead. Nobody noticed for at least three minutes, and then the broadcast was quickly blacked out.

Later, Imperatore, McGonagle, Mack, Tillman, and several others were standing backstage as the EMTs wheeled out the gurney with the body bag containing the late Morrie Light. They watched in silence at the guest of honor was calmly removed from the building. There was a moment of silence as they all looked toward the door through which Morrie Light had made his last exit.

"Good job," said Mack. "Here." He reached into his tuxedo jacket and

handed Imperatore an envelope.

"That was great," said Tillman. "Worth every penny." She took a piece of paper out of her purse. "Check OK?"

"Fine, of course, Lucy," Imperatore said.

One by one, everyone who had been on the dais came up to Imperatore and very discreetly handed him a thick envelope with a nod and few words of thanks and congratulations. The old actor thanked each and every one of them with quiet dignity.

Soon only Mack and Imperatore were left alone backstage. Mack sighed. "Now, Jeff," he said, "if you could take only care of that bastard in North Korea you could retire."

Imperatore, for the first time that night, smiled as he touched the thickness of his breast pocket. "Maybe there's enough here for me to take Korean lessons," he said. "Stop me if you've heard this: how many Kims does it take to...?"

Burke's Bunker

KAREN BOISSONNEAULT-GAUTHIER

Commotion churns amongst swirling cigarette smoke in a dimly lit bunker where loud speakers broadcast Burke's playlist, in hopes of calming nervous but firmly committed heartbeats. Worthy #Me Too soldiers don their signature pink double breasted uniform. Newly trained console operators, no longer marginalized, unbutton their suit jackets to take an impromptu smoke break, leaving an assortment of lipstick smears, aptly named 'Shocking' 'Pink', 'Pillow Talk', 'Unlocked', 'Cherries in the Snow' and 'Candy Yum-Yum' on their discards. Leaning back against a thick cool cement wall, wrinkles set into their pink suit jackets, while their minds set with the idea that the lipstick shade names, say just as much about who they are, as what they've all been through. In this bunker they're empowered. With this hashtag movement, orchestrated justice is stirring.

Those with the agile feet of social activists and past sexual assault victims, the young and vulnerable, march in experienced boots of varying in contour and styles, much like their owners. They count rape kits, manage bipartisan bills, 'whisper networks' and implement reform guidelines for sexual misconduct in education. Snubbed and self-proclaimed dance partners; the ones non-vetted, established to test your patience, without consent, flirting with those they'll silence, this perpetrator, narrative ruler and

high profiler, will rapidly learn what it feels like to dance and squirm. It's not feminist, radical or conservative fake news. It's a pink power suit cultural countdown against power and privilege. In this bunker of awareness, empathy, policy, laws, media coverage, social norms, reform and male responsibility, Me Too-ers, have pushed a rosy countdown button, blazing a hashtag movement while sporting a stylish six button pink blazer.

Be warned. Workplace norms scorning any woman hostess, government employee, actress, porn star, military personnel, journalist, doctor, musician or athlete, will feel the wrath of all bunker supporters digging in their heels. A battle rises. Those fated to brush away handsy paws at work, to hear the words that with your help they will succeed, shall now relish in your politically induced awkwardness. Well suited for battle, they fashion a fresh relationship with pink. Where a once pervasive path, carved over the backs of distressed subservient souls and where a preferred film director once prevailed, the unworthy and exploitable have found Burke's Bunker. Dissenters will be scrutinized with a cleverly worded 'tweet' and you know the author wears a pink suit when they are hitting 'send'.

The Pink Lady

DARRY DINNELL

Orange girls are all the same. I'm not trying to say that she's not a nice girl, I'm just saying I'm not so sure your brother's gonna be happy. You saw how she smiled at him up at the altar there when they were getting hitched. I mean, you're not gonna tell me those eyes weren't green as dollar signs, are you? What more can you expect out of Orange girls? I guess that still passes for love nowadays.

Now that's a really crappy thing to say. I mean, I know Oxnard's out of your way, and you're a nice guy for driving me home and all, but if I may say that's kind of a--what's the word?--presumptuous thing to think about your own flesh and blood. "No offense but when were you ever in love?" That's what you meant. Gee whiz. Maybe you don't know your old uncle so well after all. I was in love, and you better believe it.

It's okay, it's okay. Relax. I'm not getting riled. I'm not here to piss and

moan at you, Chad. And if I'm talking too loud, just tell me.

Her name? That's not the important thing, at least not yet. But yeah. It was just after the summer I was sixteen. I was still up in Simi with the folks. The start of my senior year, which was really more like my junior year because of all the classes I'd flunked out of the year before. They only let you take so much summer school, you know? Yeah, you wouldn't know, would you, college man? I remember it because Jim Ostervald, who was Jimmy Ostervald back then, had just got his Chevy Chevelle Super Sport convertible. I didn't drive back then, either. Couldn't afford a car and I was too lazy to take the road test. Besides, Jimmy was the one with the wheels. Steve Hall had a Studebaker, but it wasn't as nice. I haven't seen Steve Hall since they all went off to college. Not a big deal, though. That guy was about as interesting as his name.

Anyway, that whole summer was just the three of us going out to the beaches--Malibu, Zuma, right up the road from here. Malibu Bluffs was our favorite. Back then it was pretty low key, especially during the week and after hours, go figure. We used to sneak beer in there. We're gonna be driving by it in like twenty if you want to pull off. Yeah, I guess that would be asking too much. Anyway, Jimmy and Steve used to bring their dates out there--they could always find Garden Grove and Yorba Linda girls out wandering, a new one every week pretty much. They'd all run around in their swim trunks and their swimsuits and, yeah, you guessed it, take it all off and skinny dip in the surf. Some of those girls were pretty prime cuts, skin so golden brown it looked painted on. I'd just kind of watch it all, sip at my beer or whatever else I was drinking. I never actually went in myself. I was skinny, but my beer-belly was already pretty far along at that point. Plus I could never really tan. So I used to just sit there in the sand and get drunk in my jeans and my work-boots while they fooled around. Isn't that

ridiculous? Eventually they'd go back to the car with their girls and they wouldn't let me come. Then it was just me and the ocean for a while. I'd give them about ten, fifteen minutes, then I'd go back to the car. By that point the windows would be all fogged up and they'd have all lost interest in each other. I could never really figure out why they brought me along. I think it was because I had a pretty good beard coming in and I could pull them beer. Maybe it was because I made them look good by comparison. Who the hell knows?

I'll get to her, I'll get to her. Cool your jets. We'll get to her.

We kept doing that routine even after school got going again. By the end of October, two months before I flunked out for good, the routine had got sort of boring. I was still coming along, mostly for the cheap beer, and also to see the kinds of girls they brought. This one night, Jimmy and Steve found these Villa Park girls slumming it in Van Nuys. So they picked them up and we drove over in the Chevelle, Jimmy in the driver's seat with

his girl basically sitting on his lap and Steve in the back with his girl on one side and me in the other corner. She had big wobbly tits, Steve's did, and she was wearing this really low cut swimsuit, the kind Honey Ryder wore in Dr. No. It tied up right in the center and you'd just about kill yourself trying to imagine what it'd be like to--

Okay, too far, maybe--we've got all this You Too, Me Too, Me Three mumbo-jumbo and you can't even spitball a little man-to-man if it's the slightest bit sexual.

Anyway, this girl wasn't very personable to me, kind of giving me the stink-eye and the clenched teeth all night--you know that face Orange gals make when they think they're better than you. Maybe you don't. Either way, the swimsuit more than made up for it.

So we get into the Bluffs and as soon as we're parked, the girls get out of the car and start running down to the water like they're burning alive. And of course Jimmy and Steve yank off of their jeans and t-shirts and

run down there after them. They take the beer. So I'm alone in the Chev-elle with my only company being the can I'd cracked just up the road. It was getting cool outside so I rolled up the window and drank. The radio was still on, and "96 Tears" was playing, just like it had been all summer. As I drank that beer, it occurred to me that 96 is pretty much the opposite of 69.

When my beer was finished I got out, pulled down my sleeves, then walked over to the beach. Jimmy and Steve were rolling around in the sand with their girls. Both couples were pretty much clamped together and as they rolled around they picked up sand like putting sprinkles on a long john. I peeled off another beer and sat down at one of the picnic tables they had out there. The wind was up and the surf was standoffish. The waves made it so you could barely hear the horn-dog quartet all giggling and cooing. Steve had his girl's bikini top off, but there was so much sand you could barely see anything. I was less than halfway through that beer

when I came to the conclusion that I had no reason to be here, and maybe I never would. As long as I kept coming, I'd always be the fifth wheel. Maybe they could get someone else to buy their beer from now on. I went back to the car and waited for them to get it on and get it over with.

They came back to the Chevelle and you could see their hair all bristled and their skin full of gooseflesh in the breeze. They got in the car complaining about how cold the water was. Steve's girl mumbled something about me, how I was a "real stick in the mud" or something like that, but I just ignored it. We pulled out of the Bluffs and headed north up Malibu Canyon Road back to Simi. That takes you right through the Santa Monica mountains and you know how there's lots of tunnels through the rock. I was kind of getting dozy because it was really late and I'd checked out, and then we came around to this one tunnel and I look up and see the most beautiful thing that I have ever seen.

It was this woman, seventy or eighty feet tall, completely naked, big

massive breasts and a perfect-shaped face, her hair dark and flowing behind her, and for a split-second, she's running across the top of the tunnel entrance.

No, no, no, nothing like that! Only a couple beers, remember? She was a drawing, Chad. Graffiti, some might call it, but there was nothing wrong with what was up there, at least not to my mind. But it was like she was running. She had flowers in her hands and her hair was flowing in the wind. Maybe it was the play of the headlights that made it look like that, I don't know, but either way it was like she was moving. She moved right through me.

And all at once, a wave of calm washed over me, picked me up and poured out all the rejection and the hurt. I'd heard a little bit about those people who went out of body or had a vision of the Virgin in their Corn Pops, and it was like now I could kind of see it from their angle. I felt welcome. I was in love. I told Jimmy to stop the car and he was like "why

would I wanna do that?” And then he saw it, really took it in--so did the rest of them, too. Jimmy pulled the car over and we all got out and looked. I wanted to climb up there and see it. We didn't know what it was. We didn't really even try to figure it out. We just stared up at her. Pretty soon there were other people parked beside us too. Everyone was just marveling at her. You could see the people in the other cars. They were silenced by her. The only one who wasn't so impressed was Steve Hall's girlfriend, go figure. She said it was sexist or something like that, and she's the one with her milk wagons hanging out of her top like bagged wolverines. But I could hardly hear her. I heard myself telling Jimmy that I was gonna climb up there and see it up close. I was out of shape and wearing work-boots, but I wanted to touch her, trace her out, you know? Jimmy said no, though. He had to get home. It was pretty far out, he kept saying, but he had to get the girls home. I could only guess why.

You know, I dreamed about her that night. I don't remember the spe-

cifics, and you probably wouldn't want to hear about them if I could, but I do remember one thing crystal clear: she was running to me with flowers--bright pink peonies. Imagine that--a girl giving you flowers. Her feet were kicking up the surf, and she had this look on her face like she really wanted to show me something, give me something, take me all along the beach to someplace better. What could be better than that? I woke up with a smile on my face, something I hadn't done a lot before that, or after for that matter.

I went back there the next day. My parents were gone and I took the car. I could've got into a lot of shit, not just with dad and mom, but with the cops, too. But I did it anyway. I had to see her again. She absolutely glowed in the daytime, you know. Her skin was bubble-gum pink, like a cat's tongue. No carrot-colored tan, fake or otherwise. And there were people lined up all along the highway looking at her. Most everyone who didn't stop at least slowed down.

You know, that's a good question right there. In all honestly, I asked it myself after I sort of came out of my swoon. The newspaper explained it all. There was this artist lady who snuck up there and drew it. She got pissed off about all the other graffiti that was up there, or something like that, all the people writing "eat shit" and "suck a fuck" and whatnot. I can't say I blame her. This was something that meant something. But you know, to some people everything's graffiti, especially if it shows bare titty.

Next time my parents were out, like a couple days after, I took the car for another little joyride. But when I got there there were these county workers up on tow-ropes painting over her with spraypaint cans. Dull brown to match the rocks she'd been painted on. A lot of people say that she was sandblasted off, but in truth they painted right over her. I saw it myself. I wish I hadn't, you know, had to see something I loved being basically blotted out right in front of me. But on the other hand I'm glad I was there. Not seeing it would have been worse--not knowing what hap-

pened to her, or whether she was ever really there at all. That's how I know I really loved her. It was a fucking crime what they did. They said she was distracting motorists, but really it was making them happy, brightening their day like she had brightened my whole outlook on life. It would have cost a lot less just to leave her up.

Yeah. It was a good thing that I saw her wiped off the face of the earth--literally, I guess. Because the outline of that paint burnt itself into my mind. The brown they were putting on was just a little too dull, just a little bit off.

And you know what? When I came home, my parents were back and my mom, your grandma, she screamed at me. My dad took off his belt. Seventeen years old and here he is threatening to strap my ass again. I don't remember much of that. I was already too sandblasted to really feel anything else.

It was no big deal, Chad. It wasn't out of the ordinary. That's what a lot

of parents did back then. I got my skinny ass belted more times than I can remember and I turned out fine.

Hey, you know that if you take this next right you'll get on the Malibu Canyon Road, northbound. I can show you the Pink Lady. That's what they called her, you know, because of that beautiful skin. Yeah, I know you've got work tomorrow, but come on. This is love we're talking about, and you claim to know so much about it. It's only like fifteen minutes out of your way, tops. And I might never get back this way again. Come on. Come on. For your old uncle.

Yeah, it's this one right here.

There you go! I knew you'd come around.

This takes me back, right here. Thanks a lot, Chad. I really appreciate you doing this for me. I really do owe you one now.

Yeah, the brown was just a little bit off, and you could see the outline of where she'd been, where she was, if you looked close. My eyes can't

see for shit, but I could always see it plain as day. And I kept coming back there. The parents never let me use their car again so I'd hitch. You could do that back then and not get murdered. Then I saved up a little scratch and bought my own set of wheels, a rustbucket, piece-of-shit Strato-Chief that didn't even cost me a hundred. Fixing it was something to keep my hands busy. I'd drive up to the tunnel, park on the shoulder of the road and just stare at that place where the brown was a little bit off. Less and less each time, but I could still see it. And it was like she was in that car with me, moving through me. It was like what a date should feel like.

I guess it is a little more than fifteen minutes. So sue me.

Okay, here it is coming up. You can pull over right there where it's gravel. Keep the lights on. Right there. You smell that? A lot better than that mutilated LA air, huh? You hear that whispering wind? Now look up there, right over the tunnel. That's where she is. You can see where the color of the rocks are just a little bit off? Don't tell me you can't see it. It's

pretty obvious.

Well, hello again! Long time no see, Emmeline.

They always called her the Pink Lady, but I call her Emmeline. I always wanted to take out a girl named that. I should be so lucky, right? I never ever did meet a girl named Emmeline in Simi, let alone date one. But it always sounded nice to me. So I'd sit in the gravel and on the hood and sometimes I'd even talk to her. I'm serious, Chad, I would. I'd tell her about teachers who kept busting my balls or how your grandpa was giving me shit again. That whisper the wind made coming through the tunnel was like she was talking back. It made me feel like someone was listening, you know? Chad?

I'm not drunk. Haven't touched the stuff for more than a year now. I'm not talking too loud! Can't you hear that breeze coming through?

C'mon now, why are you getting back in the car? Why would you do a thing like that? You know it's shit like this why we only see each other at

weddings and funerals!

Fine, spin your fucking wheels! Leave me out here alone! I'll actually have someone worth talking to!

You don't know fuck-all about love.

He'll be back. I don't know what the hell's wrong with him. Stressed out a bit, I think. Been busy with a wedding. He was the best man, believe it or not. He's got a wedding of his own right around the corner. Orange girls are a dime a dozen. They live by the beach and they still have fake tans. You know how it is. I probably won't get an invitation.

But God, Emmy, it's been a long time. How've you been?

That's good. And I'm doing good myself, to tell you the honest to God truth. Better now that I'm seeing you. Have I ever lied to you, Emmy?

At Azorean Café

JAMES CROAL JACKSON

The party behind me laughs
in my sadness. The blue walls hang
hook in me. Even the painted violets—
islands. How can a restaurant make
my table larger? I am spreading out—
a tendonless goo— and still, the
server checks on me. I swear she says
have the Portuguese custard carcass.

I Can Feel it Ending

JAMES CROAL JACKSON

In your dream I fuck
your sister; in the morning
you say *I don't love you*.
Because we showed
a broken mirror to the world
and hate the jagged edges
of the trees. The barren
branches.
Sun-sharp bottle shards
glistening atop one bridge
in a city of a hundred bridges.

To Rich (From Irie)

JAMES CROAL JACKSON

Bananas everywhere make me hungry.
The doormat, the neon sign, the sticker

on your Apple— I can't help it. My
cuteness doesn't preclude that I am part

wolf. A ruthless hunter. When I run
across the rug to your room I want you

to throw fruit on the floor just to bite off
the peels. I've had my eyes on inedible Ethel

the Christmas Chicken when I learned she's
still a chicken. For once I want a sandwich.

Put me in your cart with a potato gun
at Sam's and we'll hold that whole

place up. As you ransack the banana stand,
I'll loot the deli and meet you in the middle.

Danny Ruben's Terror Threat Level System for How Fucked We Are

BRIAN ABBEY

Daniel Ruben, a 29-year-old screenwriter in Santa Monica, has a new terror level threat based on his personal experience and also peanut butter.

Stage 1: Low - *Everything is completely fine*

During this threat level, you will receive daily calls from your mother to discuss the latest disturbing news and what batshit antics the president pulled. This is baseline. You'll have hour-long conversations with mom without her mentioning you moving back to New York or your niece and nephew, who she used to lament as the only grandchildren she will ever have *because you and your girlfriend, Kate, chose to be selfish*. On each call, your dad will pick up the phone and ask whether you've considered his

offer of getting in on the ground floor of an invest-in-gold scheme he learned about after paying \$20 for an online seminar. Life is normal and once the markets bounce back, your pantry contains enough pasta to open your own osteria. Financial planning solved.

Stage 2: Guarded - *Remain alert*

Trader Joe's is completely out of peanut butter. You didn't need any peanut butter but you still find this strange. You ask your girlfriend if she remembers the store having peanut butter five days ago because you're certain they had peanut butter then. You stop a store worker, who gives you a very nasty look for touching his arm, to ask about peanut butter. He sighs and rolls his eyes without answering, which you

take as a bad sign. On the shelf where the peanut butter should have been, there is only Nutella, *lots* of Nutella. This must mean something.

On the car ride home, Kate tells you to ‘*shut up about the fucking peanut butter*’ as you surreptitiously log onto Yummy and order three jars.

The risk level is slightly up. You should be on your guard for anything looking suspicious.

Stage 3: Elevated - *Things might be worse than we thought*

Starbucks announces they are bringing back red holiday cups and pumpkin spice lattes to boost public morale. This strikes you as odd since it is June. Are pumpkins even available in June? You think it must be a hoax so you head to the Starbucks on Lincoln and order a pumpkin spice latte in a red holiday cup at the drive-thru. They say ‘*okay*.’ Okay?!? To make certain you aren’t imagining things, you also

order a shamrock frappuccino and the perky barista at the other end of the speaker says ‘*No problem*.’ What is this insanity? You’re too worried to consume holiday cheer so instead of stopping at the window, you slowly drive past it as a bewildered barista stares at you with a green frappuccino in his hand. You have to tell your parents about this when they call. Also, you should check how much peanut butter you have left.

Stage 4: High - *Danger is imminent*

Humongous purple glowing portals open in the skies over Los Angeles, New York, Tokyo, Berlin, and Mumbai. The oblong disks pulsate and simultaneously emit a low-pitched, reverberating buzz every 89 minutes. Nothing else occurs with the portals and thus far they are unresponsive to our aircraft and attempts to make contact. You load up your Netflix queue with documentaries on Area 51 and the Ancient Aliens show

with the guy with the hair. You spend ten hours a day watching UFO stuff while eating straight out of the peanut butter jar and attempting to ignore Kate who keeps walking into the room and telling you to get your shit together. You promise her you'll shower after you talk to your dad and get more details on the gold investment opportunity.

Stage 5: Severe - *Panic and also death*

You Zoom with your buddy Alex in Silver Lake to see how things are east of the 405. You're enjoying a banana, peanut butter, and rum smoothie while laughing about all the craziness when Alex tells you he talked to Brad and Brad skipped leg day this week. *What?!?* Did he just say Brad skipped leg day? Brad is a personal trainer you've known for seven years and he's religious about leg day. You close Zoom without saying goodbye to Alex and see a notification from your news app. The

headline reads, '*Large Interdimensional Creature with Squid-like Tentacles on its Face Emerges from Portal Over Tokyo.*' You immediately log onto Yummy to order more peanut butter but they are out. A scream erupts from a dark, primal place within you.

Kate runs in asking what's wrong and she's holding a *Starbucks Midnight Chocolate Frapp-BOO-Ccino* with a candy ghost on top. She has green tea whipped cream on her upper lip and is holding a spooky mummy cookie. It's *June!* You point an accusatory finger at her and yell, "What the actual fuck, Kate?"

Before she has time to answer, you grab your cell phone and call your parents. When mom answers, you choke back a sob and ask to speak to dad. She yells at your dad to pick up the phone.

Mom asks you what happened and you begin blubbering about Brad skipping leg day, which he never does, when your dad gets on the phone

and says, “Pull yourself together, Danny. You’re a grown man with an MFA from Northwestern, which isn’t Columbia, but is still good.”

You calm down enough to tell him you want in on the gold scheme. He’s thrilled and says he’ll email you the paperwork and hangs up. Your mom then tells you that you’re her special boy and you end the call by saying, “You deserved better, mommy,” which you haven’t called her since you were eleven.

Kate is still standing in the doorway, wide-eyed, drinking her Frapp-BOO-Ccino. She lowers her cup and her green tea whipped cream-covered lip quivers. You both jump when your phone buzzes.

It’s a message from Alex:

My bad. Brad skipped core strength, not leg day.

Relief. Relief fills your chest, followed by joy. You look at Kate. Even with green tea whipped cream on her lip, she’s beautiful. You smile and

tell her, “We’re going to be okay.”

“We are?” she asks as she wipes her lip.

You nod, “Yeah, we are. You wanna go to The Grove?”

Tears flood Kate’s green eyes as she says *yes*. Her smile continues as our constructs of space and time collapse and an interdimensional being with a squid face absorbs all the consciousness in the universe...

Jupiter

MARINA RUBIN

He stood on the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Highland, a young man of thirty or thirty-five, in this town already middle-aged. He had a train of earrings in his eyebrows, nostrils and lips, a bushy beard, a shaved head and a rusted chain around his neck that could have come from a fighting dog, or someone's bicycle. A Gothic hobo. He was holding a large cardboard sign, *Shitty Advice \$1*.

“Give it to me,” I said.

“Pay up first,” he grunted.

“Come on, I just landed, I don't have any local currency.” “Where did you come from?” he asked.

“New York.”

“That's still in America and they pay with dollars, too.”

“Oh shucks,” I hissed, fumbling through my bag, “here is a quarter for you and another quarter, two dimes, one nickel, oh a marble. Will that work?”

“Keep looking,” he commanded.

I fished out a handful of pennies and trickled them into his palm.

“Alright, starlet, what do you want to know? Will you be famous, will you be rich, is there an Oscar in your future?” he recited like Simon Says.

“Just because I arrived in LA doesn't make me some actress-wanna-be. I am a writer.”

“Same shit,” he chuckled rubbing clumpy sunscreen on his face that looked like homemade oatmeal.

“What’s your question?”

“Oh, you know,” I stared dreamily into the distance. “This love thing...what the hell?” “Love?”

The way he said *love*, rolling the ‘l’ and prolonging the ‘o’ like a yawn, made it seem like I asked about some mystical, out-of-this-world occurrence, Jupiter descending upon us, traveling at a speed of a million miles per second, a giant plate looming over the horizon then splashing into some kid’s aquarium, as diminutive and smooth as a glass marble.

“Love, pfff.”

“Yes love. Should I look for it?” I asked. “Make it my God when I find it and carry it around like a flag, or should I give it up completely, like sugar?”

“Hmm,” he tapped his forehead with his fingers as if he was playing the piano.

“Well?” I held my breath.

“Run away with me...and become my street wife.”

“What? That’s terrible advice.”

He shrugged his shoulders and pointed to his sign *Shitty Advice \$1*, a proud vendor on the street of stars and handprints, a businessman who always stands by the quality of his product.

His and Her Maphrodites Don't Walk No Lonesome Highway

GERARD SARNAT

Having just read bout Lowly Worm
in Richard Scarry's Busy World,
Liav is still pretty plumb scared
of all the little red-blue wiggles
packaged so that each insect
is one complete package of
him/ her him/ her him/her.
Slipping all on sheets of white paper
near a doorway where they always
appear after winter torrents 'cause
of poor plumbing, we carefully
put them out on the deck
under canvas awnings
where none'll get wet.

Ode to Genesis

JOHNSMITH "BUGHOUSE" DAVIS

After the affair of the barricade had concluded, Gross Jacque determined that it was time to visit his ancient father, in the banlieu.

When Gross Jacque was 14, his father had already been old and hunchbacked, and too poor to support him. So his father signed Jacque up as cabin boy on a cargo ship.

"But Father, I'm afraid of those men!" Jacque had lamented at the time.

"Naw, ships is good!" his father had said. "I served on the seven seas starting when I was only 19, and I never regretted it. It's a good start in life for a young lad like you!"

Now, a great many years later, Gross Jacque walked to the rusty seaside port neighborhood that had been his birthplace. To his

surprise, his father was still alive, except that now Gross Jacque was tall and fat, like a huge terrifying ogre, and his father was as small and hunchbacked as ever, except now he was shriveled like a grape, and, if possible, even smaller.

"Son!" said his father, sitting him down on the old couch with him in front of the broken television. His father wore a sailor's cap and held a corncob pipe in his mouth. "Tell me, what's happened to you in life?"

"I was...I was...used for a pegboy, father!" sobbed Gross Jacque, collapsing on his father's shoulder.

"By Gomorrah!" exclaimed Old Pap, leaping from the couch and casting down his pipe in what Balzac called a 'sin against tobacco.' He jumped up and down, like an angry red raisin.

He rubbed Jacque's shoulder. "We'll tell the King, by Gal! He absolutely hates child molesters on the high seas! He'll hang those nefarious scapegraces!"

In short order, the executive branch identified, prosecuted and convicted the guilty. Jacque and his father received notice that the hanging was to occur on Wednesday at 9:45 AM. Hangman's square was actually an empty concrete space on the water by the old harbor. The authorities brought out the gallows, and a large crowd assembled, because that Wednesday was the day set aside for hanging sex criminals. Jacque and his father attended, along with Cleland and Isabel, the son and daughter of Jacque's cousin Florence.

One by one, the marshal called the names of the victims, who were privileged to come into the first row, to see justice done up close.

"Gross Jacque!" called the marshal.

Jacque found it easy, given his immense size, to clear a path for his father and the two children, in a reasonably gentle manner.

A group of protesters had gathered. The crowd grew quiet, as the deputy marshals ushered a human-sized seahorse onto the gallows platform.

"What th'-," said Old Pap.

"Shh, I'll explain later," whispered Jacque.

The seahorse was gasping silently as the hangman looped the rope about his neck. It looked around the crowd uncomprehendingly, until its eyes came to rest on Gross Jacque; then its entire body went slack, and it rolled its eyes toward heaven.

A minister approached him momentarily. The seahorse glanced at him, nodded, then turned away. The minister stepped down from the gallows.

"Haw!" bellowed the hangman, and as he pulled a giant lever, the

floor opened, and the seahorse descended, urinating.

But the seahorse uncoiled! The crowd gasped as its bottom struck the concrete ground beneath the gallows.

“Why, this is an unmitigated disaster!” shouted the chief marshal.

The crowd began muttering in anxiety as the junior marshals struggled to wrap firehoses around the condemned. Finally, they shoved him back up through the trap door, where it gasped on the gallows floor, in obviously excruciating pain.

The hangman lifted the seahorse, and leaned it upright against a ladder. Fluid emerged from its eyes and nostrils as the reeling executee wobbled, but the seahorse was still breathing.

Suddenly, another wave of muttering went through the crowd as a horse rode up. The protesters began to play the Leadbelly version of ‘Swinging from a Gallows Pole.’ An official messenger from the Royal State Department climbed down from his horse and ascended the

scaffold. Holding a document, he whispered to the hangman.

“They’re going to commute his sentence, it looks like,” muttered Old Pap. “Blamnation! To come all the way out here for this.”

“The hell you say!” shouted Gros Jacque angrily. He leaped onto the scaffold, and with one immense wave of his bear-sized hand, knocked the official and the hangman into the harbor. He rolled up his sleeves, and began to throttle the villain with all his might. The faces of both Jacques and the condemned seahorse turned cranberry purple, but still the seahorse squirmed.

‘Just remember to crush the cartilage in his throat, and he’ll be dead in moments,’ Gross Jacque remembered an old friend, Gounod, as having said in his childhood.

Taking a deep breath, Jacque readjusted his grip and gritted his teeth. After a few seconds, he cast his abuser’s lifeless corpse onto the gallows floor.

“Glad to see justice served,” said an old woman in the crowd wearing a bonnet, nodding to Jacque as she turned away from the gallows and departed.

Jacque, his father, and the two children, Cleland and Isabel, when to ‘Antonio’s’ for an oyster breakfast.

“The thing I still don’t understand, is how did that odd-looking fellow manage to ass-fuck you? I mean how did he hold onto you, with no arms and all?” said Old Pap.

“First of all, father, he didn’t ass-fuck me, he skull-fucked me through the ear,” said Jacque, using a knife to apply horseradish to an oyster. “Secondly, the reason that perverse and depraved gentleman was able to overpower me was because I was unconscious at the time.”

“How’s that again?” said Pap.

“When you left me at the dock, father, I never actually boarded that merchant vessel. The truth is, I never went to sea.”

“Never went to sea,” repeated Pap almost inaudibly. He began clucking softly.

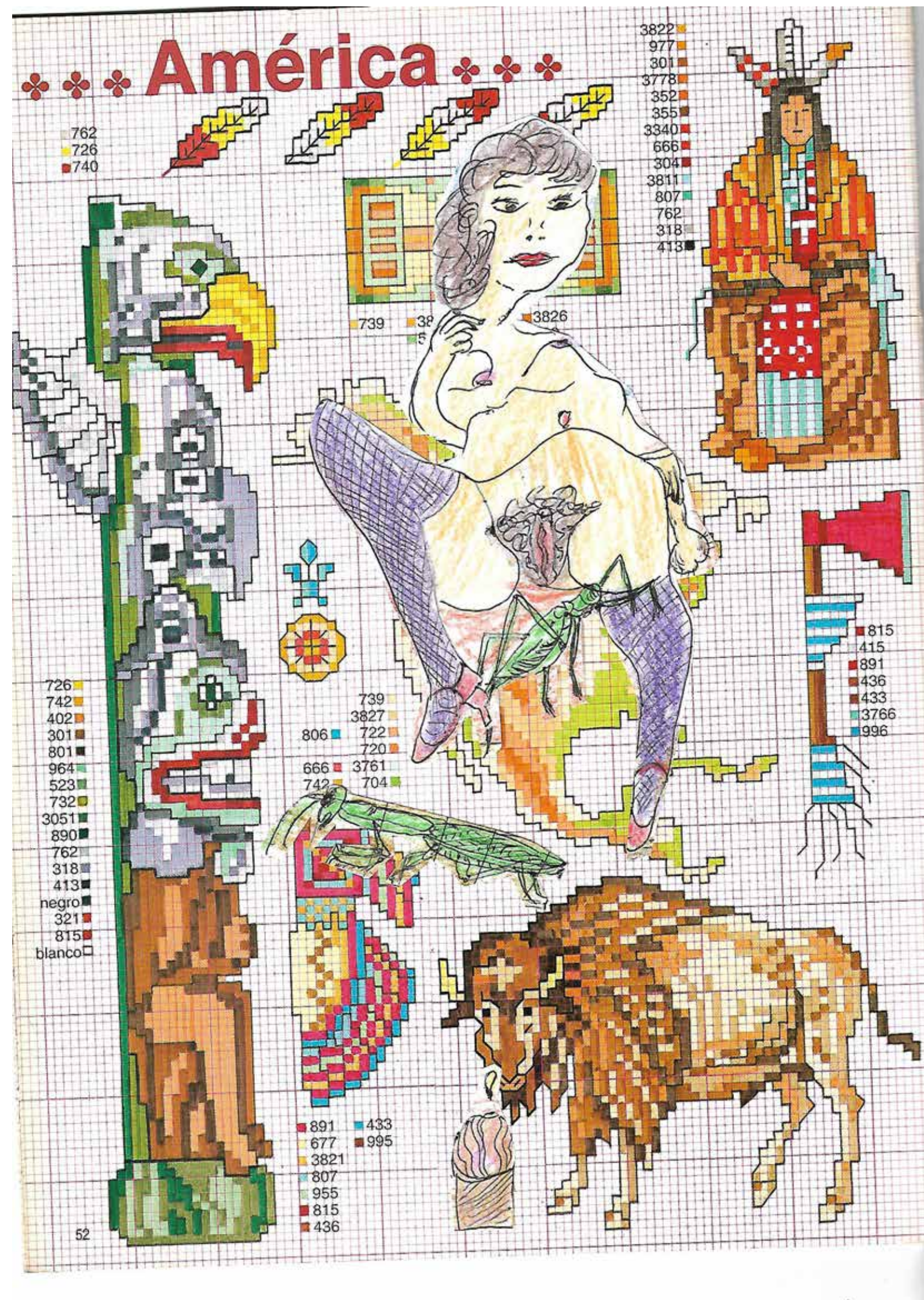
“No. Instead, I spent my teenage years as a rag-and-bone man and a dumpster diver, and a bit of a rascal. Many years later, I was living in an abandoned fraternity house on Montmartre, when my roommate started a quarrel with me. It was over a cat who liked to sleep with me, but the lunatic thought the cat was a transsexual teenage pickpocket, and he became violently jealous. So I tried to kill him with a barrel of lard on the rooftop, but I accidentally threw myself off the old building, and fell to the bottom of the Seine, where I spent 30 years unconscious. It was there, in that state, that the crass bastard took advantage of me. -So, you can see, I suppose the sea got its revenge against me anyway.”

“Well, of all the unlikeliest stories, son, this one is really the worst. I’m afraid I don’t believe you.”

“Truth is stranger than fiction, father.”

“Son, I’m ashamed of you. You have used the mystery of the inexhaustibly wondrous nature of existence as the scapegoat for a shaggy dog story. And you never even went to sea at all. Let’s go.” Old Pap and Cleland and Isabel rose silently, walked inside the café, then returned to the sidewalk through the front door. Grosse Jacque watched them amble away without looking back as he sat alone on the patio of the oyster café, his father hunchbacked, the children poking at trees and fire hydrants with a stick.

Jacque never saw his estranged father again. Eventually, he picked up, and resumed his life as a dumpster diver, making his way eventually back to the Rue Maxwell. Years later, when he received word through the newspaper that Old Pap had died, Jacques did not even deign to pay his last respects to his intolerant and unimaginative elderly father.



America
DANIEL DE CULLA

Monedas

DANIEL DE CULLA



Slaughterhouses of Love

ARJA KUMAR

i.
the rain falls hard on this humdrum town
and the people are bored inside of their small
white houses with their television souls and
cocaine laughs, flipping the channel back and forth
between NETFLIX, THE NEWS, and STATIC-C-C-C
C-C
until they fall asleep without praying. it doesn't matter anyways
the rain blocks away all the noise and god doesn't hear
a thing these days because it's all noise in this town
in the cities
in the emptiest spaces of this earth
the universe
and the rain falls hard on this humdrum town
and i'm the only melancholic
here.
i can't stop listening to THE SMITHS
and i think i'm on the verge of another existential crisis

so i pack up my toothpaste, shower cap, body wash,
some old maps from the time of C. Columbus, and some
other trash. i don't think i need insurance anyways
because there are so many people who'd rather evaporate
than spend their last pennies on CPR. it'd be better to ascend
to the gods choking on some gas station nachos, yeah,
the weird kind with cheese
as gorgeous yellow as the sun.
there was one day like this before, rainy and the gloomiest
of all your existences you could ever imagine. it was a Midwest night,
driving to Dairy Queen. and i was
spaced out
beyond belief
probably from all the opium i drowned in
in my past life
when i was a peasant or a king
stretched over the velvet silk of a golden lover
it makes no sense
why i'm overly sober

in this life.
so sober
that

everybody

left

me.

now i'm on the outskirts
with the ghost of C. Bukowski
smoking my conscience and
guzzling the darkest whiskey
over the coldness of a
lonely 2am city

in much wisdom is much grief
Ecclesiastes 1:18
down these streets the sewer puddles
bounce and swallow me and i retreat deep
into my psyche to utter silence
where the record player is always banging

that same old Smiths gong
HOW SOON IS NOW? AND OTHER SAD ROCK SONGS

the volcanoes burn, fury of nature unleash
sprawl of my soul over purple lightning
i sing the body electric
for the rest of the American dream
no matter how many times it shatters or
seems
brok/en

self-portrait in the sewer puddle
weary Narcissus, waiting metamorphosis
i melted
my existence
to the simplest parts
and lowered myself
to the beggars
and it was there i laid flowers
at the grave of my
nuclear nostalgia
death of an illusion
so lethal
it almost killed me

while the lovely people continued living life
beautifully
on their best behavior.

ii.

oh, please excuse me!
i'm late for my weekly video chat with God
get out of the way! get out of the way!
but it's more rational and electric to say that i was
overworked, overworried like a busted machine,
clockwork orange
can this elevator get any more crowded?
in the pulpiest gross flesh. human
spirit crushed to the thinnest juices.
where was i? where was i?
dear flickering lamplights,
is this really a cold morality?
it really smells like fart and feet
in here.
move people! move!
it's easier to say things in these ways.
easier for doctors to write down on scratchy notepads
and type into sterile lit computer screens
that smell like

rubbing alcohol, Lysol, dopamine.
screens
that file faces like old birthday cards
pAtIeNt is pOsSiBLY DELUSIONAL.
dOeSn'T bElIEve iNsOcIaLmEdIa, oNlinEdAtiNG,
oRaNyeLecTriClOvEfoR the mATTer.
pAtIeNtiS a sELf-pRoCLaiMed "aNimAL"
aNd "uNaPoLoGeTicALLyhUmAN."
hallucinating as a result of ??????????????????
we don't know...so we'll just blame it on
NERVOUSNESS. because there is nothing else
no one else
to blame. so
NERVOUSNESS.
WHY IS EVERYBODY SO NERVOUS?
w e l c o m e
we have arrived at the Age of Anxiety
ping! ping! the elevator doors swing open
there are more shaking men and women in the
waiting room, reeking of dog, sweat, cheap perfume
and they sit there with the poverty spilling out of their pockets
sit there waiting for recompense
some, punks and delinquents, some just
sick and tired of living in a house where there's no

rent, clean water
to rinse out the gutter, the suffer, the outsider
out of their mouth
out of the south comes a nurse in red
masque of death
out she breathes more dirty breath,
stuffs them all in a black garbage bag,
to a bed on the roof she drags more
wilting bodies to be doped up
on white pellets or whatever
silences the pains of this...
terrible weather.

iii.

men and women
mud and desolation
drowning under streetlamps of downtown
the fog shrouds them like Turin
the gin
the blood and sorrow stains of Jesus
are sipped on under beautiful lights
by beautiful people and the people
don't care, don't weep
they laugh and laugh

dance on each other until
they fall asleep
in the fireplaces burn pages of Dante's Divine Comedy
why ponder life's complexities
when everything is already so charming?
good sweet love
like existence—
damning
and somewhat eternal.
keep on dancing in that ugly nightclub
where there's music spilling from the cemetery bell
Chuck Berry *c'est la vie* say the old folks
you never can tell
love like a dog from hell,
i deject it and mystify myself
in white air and smoke
from the highest unknown.
the good boys really don't love me no more.
mama please don't cry,
it's ok
i never wanted utopia anyways.
but here we are living in a safety zone
would you please stop holding onto me?
look up into these clouds that shroud reality.

here we are, living from eye to eye,
roll it like a vanilla cigarillo
the death of the ancient soul.

iv.
in the little white house
the husband does not love the wife, and the wife not the husband
and they watch more television in locked bathrooms
order separate pizzas for dinner
and the children keep watching more YouTube

look at the faces
what do you see?
look at the faces
what do you see?

ugh. nothing.

MOMMMMM! the TV isn't working againnnnn!
oh honey! don't worry, you didn't miss anything!
the headline tonight was just the same thing:
PAIN AND ANGER ACROSS AMERICA
the TV cuts in and out
P-P-PAIN

A-A-ND
ANGER
ACROSS
AMERICAAAAAAAAA

we pop some more pills
and go to sleep

the leader of the free world rushes to
the opera house and makes his way to the stage
screaming *i'm late! i'm late! MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY!*
the symphony starts and the tragedy begins
the crowds sit down, the clocks strike twelve again
there is silence so still. echoes of dogs barking from hell
the dinosaurs are dead. dawn of a new age
one bible in hand. oh jesus crisis,
look at that social sage!

the TV still flickering
I HAVE A DREAM
I HAVE
I HAVE A-A-A
DREAMMMM-M-M-M

v.

in my isolation house

i hide

and wobble huddled in a blanket to

the end of the night

where i take one look outside

at the universe so still and silent

so still and silent, the moths settle on me

and the stars blink their dead breath like

a burnt-out lamplight

and the rest was rust and sawdust

it was a flip dark chill winter night

i go back inside and turn off all the lights

lock all the doors, shut all the blinds

it is so silent

it is boring and i need distraction

so i take out the computer and wipe that foggy screen

where i type in my username and password

ANONYMOUS

ANONYMOUS

i type in my desire, longing,

like an exhaled breath

WELCOME TO THE INTERNET

TALK TO STRANGERS

hello?

hello.

who are you?

anonymous anonymous.

naked as a savage.

me too.

cool.

smells like teen spirit up in here.

nirvana.

ugh.

does teen angst ever go away?

no.

no.

i feel stupid.

entertain us.

a mosquito.

my libido.

do you want to love me?

i'm sad.

do you suffer?

maybe.
live, laugh, love?
idk.
how's the weather?
...
are you happy?
idk.
do you know anything?
idk.
who are you?
hoot hoot.
why are you like this?
kiss kiss.
are you a bot or a human?
idk.
guess.

vi.
hello? darling?
can you hear me in there alright?
please, it's getting very late at night.
stop staring at that TV
i know you are thinking about the tragedies of
modern society

but the lawn you mowed this morning looks so
beautiful and green
don't you want to marry me?
let us go dancing in abandoned ballrooms
or do you want to go to that old farm
that you grew up on
that is nothing now
but dead trees and grass
like an always November
hello? darling?
i've got two tickets to paradise.
why are you so goddam paralyzed?
can you hear me? can you hear m-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e?

why are everybody's last words
i.
love.
you.

who is who and
who is you? shall we sit down for some tea,
pretend to talk about philosophy?
and comprehend reality in prestigious Harvard notions
or simply the sound and motion

that travel through you
that travel through me
these streets
against the darkest blue skies on a midsummer's night
let us go, you and i
into the stillness of time
where there is that last dance
forever drunken and melancholy like
the nevereth time

you were so innocent when you came to me
worn out shoes and a hand of flowers
at 12 o'clock, you were lying nude in cheap blue shadows
i folded up your socks, your pillow clothes
and left the AmericInn motel with the door closed
never once to touch or obscure your good soul
like a god's piece painting, pleated in suns of gold
the tarot lovers make so much vulgar noise
in these gardens
good Nature sewn you so pure and hidden
and i left you that way, locked from all the train stations
crowds of ogling eyes with bad intentions
you, lying poor and nude
me, starving in a half famine

in a train boxcar
heart half broken,
crumpled Mapquest directions to Heaven
the lovers laugh at us when they stop for cherry slushies
at 7-Eleven

there is that brok/en reoccurring dream
where i am laying naked in the middle of some stairs
and a crowd ogles at me like a science experiment
or bad painting
and i lay there for lifetimes piled upon lifetimes
waiting for you
rotting in my own stench
until they come to take my bones
mummify me and let me evaporate under the hottest
Egyptian sun to a ghost

unrealistic
overoptimistic
too idealistic
is it just a bad habit?

vii.
beautiful girls

with big eyelashes and
Indian tans
searching 4 love
posting quotes about love
yearning 4 love
over a 4th of July party
mountain white seltzer
and mini skirts
looking for their soulmate
young suburban boys
who do what their mamas say
booking restaurant tables
date night after night
to find a lover or wife
for the rest of their life.
and you go to the mall, the movies, the bars
the wedding cake is gorgeous, you learn how to play guitar.

i am tired of looking at their pictures
on these computer screens
they're so beautiful
they're boring

house

VICTORY
children
VICTORY
9 to 5 job
VICTORY
love
VICTORY
pursuit of happiness
VICTORY VICTORYVICTORY
and all the boxes are checked

oh, dear...
what a way to live.

viii.
the tigers bloom
out of giant flowers in
the middle of the room
where women and glory, war
come and go, men waving
wine bottles and bladders all
over the place
and i'm in love with your Internet persona
1001 Arabian nights

blue eyed soul and Coca-Cola
electric Sodom and purple Gomorrah

all the statues have frozen in time
the bones have been buried since Adam
dost thou think these bones shall live?
shall these
dusty bones live?

pull out another rib from the clay
30,000 A.D. light miles away
VY CanisMajoris
the headline today:
the red hypergiant star has exploded
largest supernova the galaxy has ever seen
the monkeys screech
the eggs are laid

mashallah!
hallelujah!
miracle of life!
oogaooga

baptism time

i can't find my virtual Torah
just gimme one sec i'll call God on my
cell phone menorah
a-ha! Virtual Jesus
oh so convenient!
oops, c-c-can't think
w-wrong number
i meant to dial
1-800-ALIEN MESSIAH
too much coffee, migraine aura

i feel the wrath of the gods
on these conjugal beds
the trees uprooted by their upper hand
and i will be flipped over
into outer space's golden sunbeams
to dust
to nothing

buti still dream.

revolutionaries swing our flags in foggy air
and the high bells are ringing
the horses run back home over the hills

and the women come with Greek vases and love
stringing roses round our necks in wreaths of garlands
their Roman noses turned up
and the flames have blown down to a perfect peace
beautiful mankind
the choirs of seraphs are singing
We Are The Champions

life lurches by and tramps around

and
i'm just a f-f-fool.

ix.

smell of carcass
the angels come in the morning
in shrouds, cloaked mystery,
to pick the best meats,
sell to the black or white
market
god and
the devil
are the greatest buyers.
one gnaws the bone

to finger-licked perfection
with BBQ sauce
the other
makes the sign of the cross
kisses the dead eyes
to eternal
violet sleep.

the beheaded
the fallen
their mummified
organs
slowly swing on the noose
breath stuck between
doom | salvation.

i watch these slaughterhouses of love
and reminisce

the jails and madhouses are full
to their brims
and the hands reach out grasping
for the pills
the bottles

yellowed picture of a swimsuit model
the next Smiths song
a silent god

don't good things come to those who wait?
so why do i sit frozen before this silver dinner plate?

i call Virtual Jesus with a panic inquisition
but i call the wrong number,
brain fog derision.
the hologram of Mick Jagger picks up

*hello, kiddo? what's up? i'm in the jacuzzi.
what's the problem, bub?*

*hello?? hello??? can i please just have my Instant Salvation??
cool it kiddo, there's a few left at the drive thru station.*

...

*hello??? hello??? these are just keys to the International Space Station??!?
sorry, kid. looks like i ran out of Instant Gratification.*

Peter's denial,
Judas's kisses
the greatest betrayal

the dinner tables are full
the restaurant is in riches

the bones of Cain are framed
O these slaughterhouses of love!

the crowds march in all their genius
over wet cement
and goddam i just spent
my last pennies on a stupid
SpaceX mission
where we will sip thrice cleansed tequila
watch the landscapes burn
hang up new paintings in our outer space houses
like pueblos
with the sun so silent
waiting for the next generation.

x.

i emerged from The Cave after eternities of meditation
and rose from devastation to levitation
oogaoogayugayuga
om shanti shanti
om shanti shanti

it was beautiful outside in the morning
the dogs were pissing on the roses
and the sun came out bright and heavy
i picked some wildflowers, daffodils
and wandered as lonely as a cloud
over my sky blue fate
i treaded reality, ate the illusion
and became the mystère
a maybe revolution
revelation, evolution
absolution
remember remember we were all once fish in the ocean
my reincarnation, resurrection
megalomania, mafioso,
sewer puddle reflection
was i the martyr or mystic?
or just a wrong direction?

o the rain is failing me
falling so very wetly
the muck of this 2am city
and the insomniacs are roaming hungry
for paradise and a few spare loaves

of bread

the blood in your veins makes that intense journey
travelling to and fro
your dreams and your ankles
to your desire
sprained by the convention of a humdrum town
a modern affair of société
pathetic pathetic
these storm clouds outside are prophetic
and i hear the leaves of grass speaking in tongues
the poetry of motion
overrides the humdrum
illusion of everyday truth and drama

if there was just one moment
i could come face to face
Gautama and Jesus just divine freezes away
if there was just one moment
i was not a woman or man
or color or stance
bread of life
ennui
poverty, war, crime, mankind

the blood meter running, still ticking inside

two enormous turds waiting on a silver platter
that is the meaning of life

gun-trigger eternity, pale fire
absolute desire
the bullet has struck
o god
freedom never comes without a price.

xi.

in a crowded bar
lonely bar
the people talk to glass, computer screens,
virtual enigmas,
and bottoms of the rum
leaving a stench of tranquilizer
where their lips stain the blessed cup
chalices of online fate waiting
for a hollow heartbeat to come along
and stop the tracks
the train of time
infinities in love

eternities in love
time makes love to space
and space makes love to time
i walk in
the door jingles
with my
footsteps **heavy**

like

LEAD

jingle jangle
in this rodeo
smelling of women like fish and
men like monkey.
everybody feeling hairy
drugged
and alone.
i sit down
and feel the heaviest loneliness
in the world.

drink to me with thine eyes
the thirst that from the soul doth rise
doth mine eyes deceive me?
doth mine eyes

doth mine

doth

deceive

me?

xii.

in the morning, a flight leaves
my sectoral heterochromia
shines in the 6am light
the airport is wonderful and laden
with magazines, umbrellas, coffee,
smell of leftover cavemen,
bagels and pretzels, pillows, yellow armadillos. yawning
souls that smell of hotel soap,
red pens and hot printer paper,
busy business people, so-called important
people with things to say and places to be

and things to do.

my baggage gets denied at the counter

for violation of common sense and whatever the hell ever

i'm labelled as TRESPASSER

MISS I TOLD YOU, NO TIGERS ALLOWED ON THE PLANE.

i say, *what kind of nonsense is this.*

tigers are living too

breathing too.

do you have a problem with either?

because if you're alive,

you obviously don't.

she looks at me with the red on her lipstick mouth

crayoning to a *HUFF! PUFF! FINE!*

c'merec'mere pretty boy

good boy

let's get on that flight to Neptune

we're going to be late, Rocketman

i promise we'll stop at the McDonald's on the moon.

i think i'm going to miss the Earth,

it'll be cold as hell in space.

but somebody needs to go.

if everybody's busy loving,

how are we going to make it big?

don't you wanna see

H U M A N C I V I L I Z A T I O N

flashing in big neon red letters

on Mars?

shining, glittering, splendid

like Hollywood

like Vegas

Paris.

and now here we are

floating motionless in this zero gravity

where existence is effortless.

don't look back down at earth

there's more to this universe

than just our humble blue dot

let the beautiful people laugh, let them have one last drink

i don't think they know a thing.

if it's too much of a moonage daydream,

just keep your electric eye on me

and we will fly over these

slaughterhouses of love

until

transcendence.

The Bad Samaritan

B. LAWRENCE

I'm out here drinking because apparently "Samaritans" don't help people anymore. In the dim light, you can see how the ivy is wrapping and creeping its way up the trunk. I've been chopping that damn ivy with a hacksaw for a week, but it will not let go of that tree. Can't even yank the roots loose with my hands. Ivy as difficult to get rid of as a yeast infection. Wet rain gone hard is left, hanging from the tree where the trunk meets the washing line. Raindrops frozen mid-fall. Been standing out here for a while, watching the sky turn from grapefruit pink to muddy grey. Watching another sun go down through the frozen Spider webs. It is the 31st of December and I am trying not to go mad again.

(You look worse than usual)

Yeah yeah yeah

(You're never going to sleep again)

You can't die from lack of sleep

(You look dead already mate)

Cheers

(Where are you with the terrible story?)

I haven't even started it, you're worse than that 1975 video

Are you going to mention the whole Snowman attempted murder thing?

Look, who's to say that ever even happened, you're a voice in my head, nothing about this scream's "reliable narrator"

(Whatever, just finish it before we throw up already)

I bought the booze from the late-night newsagents on Perry Road. The one that's always getting robbed. Every week they get held up, but the owners never change. Our local paper doesn't even cover it anymore. The girl who works there kept looking behind me. Some stupid kid was making a scene holding up the whole cue. The child, working itself into a cry, with a woman, probably it's Mum. The woman shouted at the child that it had set her phone on fire yesterday, so it could just shut the fuck up for once. When she pulled it away from the counter, it fell in a clump at her legs, pounding at the floor. I looked in the woman's shopping basket. The only thing in it was a bottle of vodka and a pregnancy test... Parenthood might not be such a good thing.

Walking out, I passed two hoods leaning against a skip. One was missing

a tooth, shivering as he propped up a cardboard sign. He was wiry and had the bottom row of his teeth knocked out. On the cardboard were the words: MERRY CHRISTMAS in smudged dirt. The Y had been largely worn away, so it just read MERR Christmas. At his feet; a plastic cup with four pence in it. The other guy looked young.

“Sir- could you spare some change?”

Sir, he called me Sir. Hate when someone calls me that. There were two coins in my pocket. Rolling the metal over a few times, before deciding not to risk it. I was about to walk away when the young guy shouted to me.

“Hey mate”

“... What?”

Already a few paces between us.

“Mate!”

I took another step back.

“Er- yeah?”

“...Do you wanna have a look in my house?”

His face broke into a smile pointing at the sleeping bag between the skip and the wall. I stepped forward and gave him the coins.

The quickest way back to mine is to cut through Mapperley Park. Away from the shops into the quiet alleyways. Snow was starting to fall but it died on the rich paving slabs, slick with hedge-funded grit. Soon it will just be grey sludge, decorated by some Range Rover’s tyre tracks. A row of houses with the curtains drawn. High fences and security cameras of people who actually have something to lose. And outside, a bunch of Christmas lights like a bad joke. Enough money on those lawns; you could not haul it all away in one night with ten men. The last house on the left was shinier than any other. Lights screaming hot, covering the

gate and the driveway. The lights with flashing bulbs tied over wicker. That same wicker, covered in hot bulbs, with a coat nicer than mine, and a carrot stick nose. Arms with pointed fingers starting to move. A man made of snow. I walked away, when he started to wave.

(Wtf!? Why are you crying?)

No, I’m not

(Yes, you are)

The Snow Man, it was like that film with Aled Jones again

(The kid’s film? Seriously you are such a loser)

It was his only friend! His only friend in the world is made of Snow and it melts, at the end of the film it melts

(... you’re such a prick)

I'm walking in the air

(You ain't walking anywhere mate, you're in a yard)

(High pitched) I'm walking in the air!

(No, you're not, you're seeing them again, you're going mad)

No, I'm not

(Yes, you are, the pills didn't work, nothing will work...)

Yeah well you can just, well that's just your...Just shut up okay

(Nice comeback)

Shut up

(You suck)

Shut up

(We're better off dead)

Shut up shut up shut up shut up!

(It's either dead or getting thrown in a padded cell, that's what will happen when people know you're crying about Snowmen... Snowmen that don't exist. You want that to happen, do you? A padded cell with no sunlight, food slipped under a tray with forced injections while they pin you down like an animal. It won't be some safe middle-class mental hospital, with art therapy and a feelings circle. It will be some sketchy hellhole, where the walls are covered in shit and the nurses steal from you. That's all you can afford, someplace that got investigated on Panorama)

Me and the Snowman are practically old friends

(Just finish the story idiot)

This morning, it took me a while to open my eyes. Gradually the dark left and the silhouette of light seeped through my exposed windows. Getting up, pulling a coat over my stained Pyjamas, I walked downstairs. Out the door, then outside. Walking half a dozen steps, before realizing

there were no shoes on my feet. Back inside, the nearest pair of shoes were walking boots with a dozen black holes. The laces were broken knots, where I had attempted to tie two pieces of broken lace back together. Most of the frost was slush under my boots but, I still slipped once or twice on the black ice. One time going down on my hands. My palms and wrists, coming up painful bloody, indented with tiny stones. After Mapperley Park, I got to the Samaritans Building.

On the Samaritans' website, it said they would help anyone who turned up and give them reasons to carry on living or whatever. I rang the bell four times before someone answered. It was painful cold in the fingertips, so I stuck my thumbs into the sleeves where the fabric was ripped to make poor man's gloves. Someone with small glasses and a large forehead appeared out of the open window.

“Yes?!”

“Er, what?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“I was, I mean, can I talk to someone?”

“Sorry we're understaffed right now”

“....”

“We've had our budget cut;I shouldn't even be answering the door”

“....”

I'm on my Lunch buddy”

“.....”

“Look (exhales)just call the number okay”

“...What?”

“Call the number, it's on the side of the building”

The window slammed shut. On the side of the building was a number

painted on a Green sign. Rubbing my hands in the cold, it looked so warm inside. I took a few moments to watch... He was playing on his phone. He kept swiping with his finger, so It might have been *Temple Run*. He caught me watching and pulled down the blinds. I walked back the same way, stopping at the newsagents, and well, you know the rest. All the crap in my stomach is churning like clothes in a washing machine. With sick, there is always the terrible moment when you realize it can't be stopped. The horrible surrendering of control. In a way, it would be good for it to come out. The own brand vodka, the own brand cider, the fruit shoots, the Kinder eggs, the toy from a Kinder egg, the thumbtacks, half a veggie sub, a cheese string, a Cyanide filling that turned out to be a Bitcoin scam, used chewing gum, and fifty-five stomach rattling tablets of Citalopram. They put me on some new meds when I got back after the last batch made me want to kill myself. On the brightside, they are running a new reward card thing

at my local Surgery, so if I have another mental breakdown before the year is out, my Doctor will give me a stamp for a free cup of coffee. Even the thought of free coffee is making me retch, but its dry. I'm gagging, sweating, bent double with nothing coming out. From the perspective of God, this must look like the saddest porno ever. One time at University, I was lugging home a Rugby Fresher who lived in my dorm. No taxi would take him unless he threw up first and one bastard even told me to stick my fingers down his throat. He had downed a bottle of wine before we were even in the club and everyone else was in favour of leaving his head in the road. At pre drinks he had bragged that his hair gel cost £160 a month to penniless me, laughing at my charity shop Winters coat. Slurring that global warming was a conspiracy created by feminists. Through gulps of wine, telling us that when you were with a girl no really meant yes, and yes really meant anal. Telling us that he was going to drop out of Uni when the Winter was through,

so his father could make him an Officer in the Navy. God bless this country.

The cold was only getting colder, and no taxi would take him. I'd already ran through his wallet, taking a twenty and stealing his Waitrose rewards card. After a while, dropping him in the street, having a look where we were. We were in Oadby, I could tell because the houses had started to look expensive and I felt a little out of place. It had the country kind of feel where all the pubs are racist, and shops leave honesty boxes and complain when people steal from them. In front of us was a beautifully decorated house in all the ways I don't have the critical vocabulary to describe. Not red brick or new build, like old money and everything that goes with it. A sycamore tree stood in their front yard, decorated with Christmas lights, blinking spasmodically in the darkness. And a huge pile of snow, the biggest I've ever seen, bigger than a house, bigger than God. Next to the snow was Land Rover with a Snow Clearer strapped

to the front.

What happened next didn't happen in words. I kicked him in the ribs, then tossed him in the Snow Pile, burying him the best I could, before flattening the pile down into hard ice under my palms, tearing off branches from the Sycamore tree to make arms, and pebbles from the street for eyes. Stepping out of the driveway, sticking my thumb into the dark next to the Snowman, until a taxi stopped.

Orders from the Mothership

TIM FRANK

Ridley's mum handed him his high visibility jacket and rested her hands on his shoulders.

She said, "I know it's Friday but stay at home tonight. Please. You don't seem yourself lately."

The whites of his eyes were threaded with blood vessels and as he straightened his baseball cap, he looked through the mirror before him, peering into its frozen darkness. He feared he would be endlessly captivated by its allure, but his mum's fussing pulled him out of his trance.

"We'll see," he said.

"At least pick up when I call you, OK?"

"Yes, yes. OK, mum."

On his way to work he allowed the background voices in his mind to take centre stage and he tuned into the Mothership's frequency. He stood in the middle of the road as cars whizzed by.irate drivers wound their windows down and lobbed insults at him, but Ridley was in another world altogether. He pressed his finger to his ear. There was a rotating, squealing noise and he said, "Come in, come in, Ridley Snyder here."

"We communicate you," Ridley heard, as a series of robotic voices chimed in his ear - not quite - but almost, in unison.

"Super weapon aimed at earth," said the voices. "Goal: complete annihilation. Send final report then prepare for judgment, tonighmare."

"Understood. But I will show you what this world is worth. It's as great

as another sun. I am one man, with many streets to walk and many humans to meet. Planet must spin on, like rolling dice.”

Despite the Mothership communicating with Ridley for a few weeks now, it was only today that its voice had become fully developed in his mind, and in turn pressuring him to act.

He started his shift in his role as a garbage man and began to relay his experiences to the aliens who he imagined were hovering in their spaceship like a buoy on a lake just beyond the hemisphere.

He sparked a high-powered thought off into the sky in an attempt to explain his work, hoping they could find beauty in the process, “Giant black balls of lost things thrown into moving cave. Eating.”

The aliens said, “Hungry cave?”

Ridley said, “Hungry every sunrise, like ancient monsters.”

“Aren’t they strange, these road beasts?”

“No, they are magical.”

“Why should animals feeding animals be allowed?”

“Well. I can’t answer that,” Ridley said, defeated, “Just trying to show you bold life, real life.”

“Ok, we will study your findings.”

Ridley finished work for the day and after what must have been several hours of lost time, Ridley came to his senses and found himself in a pub in central London. He figured he had gone there unconsciously to meet his drinking buddy, Joel, like he did every Friday night. While he waited, he casually knocked back a pint of bitter and inspected the rotten gunk lining his nails. No matter how hard he tried he couldn’t get the stains off.

In the bar were men in leather jackets hunched over pints, eyes glued to the football match playing on the roll down screen by the carvery. A dour mood pervaded the establishment but it was cut through by the playful

shrieks of a baby in its pram - drool and snot spread everywhere in globs.

Ridley's mum called; "You're still out."

"Right, yeah, I've been hanging out with Joel all day," he lied (or maybe it wasn't a lie). "Will stay at his tonight. Everything's fine."

"Come home, you're not well."

"You're interfering with my mission," he snapped. He hung up and immediately the cell lit up with another call from his mum. He felt its warmth and light as he muted it and placed it in his pocket.

"Location, please," said the aliens.

"A pub. A room to transform brains. For laughter."

"Explain laughter."

"A burst of noise. No fences. No barriers. Joy."

"Not much joy in this area. Except little human."

"Yes," Ridley said, sensing an opportunity, "babies are part of the ocean

of light."

"Ocean. Good. Noted."

Ridley felt this was progress, but he had so much more to prove.

Joel met Ridley in the beer garden in the back of the bar. Leather flower vines and honeysuckle vines competed for space along the surrounding walls. Joel drew on a cigarette like an asthma inhaler then gave machine gun coughs. He tried to form a sentence.

"You – you..." he spluttered, analysing Ridley's eyes, "look different. Want some acid?"

Ridley shook his head. Joel licked a tiny square of paper from his index finger - a yellow spaceship imprinted on the front - and it dissolved on his tongue. Joel gave a goofy smile.

"Status update," said the aliens.

"I need time," said Ridley, "please."

“Whut’s dat?” Joel said. “You losing it? What you on? Don’t worry, I’ll look after you, I’ve seen it all.”

“Three hours we set countdown to extinction,” said the Mothership, “Gather all evidence by then. YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FATE OF THE PLANET AND THERE IS NO TURNING BACK.”

The aliens’ voices then regressed to the back of Ridley’s mind and he had a moment to breathe. A blanket had been wrapped around his jagged thoughts.

They’d moved on and Joel was scrambling up Nelson’s column in Trafalgar Square with a bottle of beer and a falafel wrap in either hand - garlic mayonnaise splattered against his shirt cuff. It began to rain and his foot slipped and he cracked his chin, chipping a tooth. Blood slid out of the sides of his mouth. He let out a raucous laugh.

It was nearly time for the showdown between Ridley and his alien over-

lords. Recently, because giant stretches of time had slipped from his mind, he was concerned whether there was enough information to report, but now, standing on the ledge of Westminster Bridge, looking down at the rolling grey water, memories came rushing to the surface. But they worried him. He saw homeless people sleeping on cardboard with dogs in alleyways, business women with thousand-yard stares, teenagers texting porn on buses, kids brawling in school playgrounds, police patrolling run-down neighbourhoods, harassing the impoverished and on and on until he felt he had collated an overview of the city - gauged its beating heart. Then the memories converged into one block of wet concrete sludge. How could he relay any of this evidence to the aliens without confirming the wretchedness of this planet? Were there any pockets in his mind to secretly hide the damning thoughts?

His mother called. He decided to take it.

“I’ve had enough now,” she said. “I’ve talked to the doctor. He can help you if you let him.”

“I love you mum, good luck in the next one.”

Ridley held his arm out and dangled the phone over the river. He could hear his mum’s desperate voice echo out of the speaker. He allowed the mobile to steadily slip out of his sweaty palm and plunge into the water.

Words reverberated from the river. The surface of the water was a sound system, projecting the voices of the aliens. The river said, “Ready for final report. Show us truth of life on your world.”

“No more lies. You already know my mind, let the globe burn.”

So, Ridley waited for destruction. And waited and waited. There was the crack of thunder rocking the city but Ridley was convinced the storm wasn’t connected to the aliens, who remained strangely silent. He couldn’t bear the tension and was terrified of being propelled into a giant fireball.

Before he could jump in the river, Joel rugby tackled Ridley to the pavement and said, “You’re my hero, man, you push boundaries, without compromise. You’re pure flex.”

“I can’t save us,” Ridley said, tearfully, “and I don’t know how to live with that. Please forgive me.”

“Man,” said Joel, cradling Ridley’s head, “you’re forgiven.” And he slipped a pill inside Ridley’s mouth. It wasn’t long before Ridley was soaring. The onslaught of otherworldly forces was banished and the Mothership dissolved back to its region of reality, where everything was chemical.

The blue green earth would remain pulsating with life, like larvae in their host. As Ridley and Joel rambled down the central backstreets Ridley could laugh, play and howl into the swollen London skyline provoking the universe of infinite beings, knowing he had done everything he could and that he was beyond them all now.

Joel secretly led Ridley back home so Ridley could face his mum, the doctors and his true reflection, like it or not. It was the first steps to building a new world.



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