

Whole Beast Rag
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The Sound of Broken Glass by XC Atkins

The small Asian man driving the bus didn't care that we were in the back getting drunk and making the other passengers uncomfortable. He had a destination. His apathy toward everything outside of that singular purpose made him untouchable.

Sam, Timothy, and I had somehow discovered this mystical secret, and since we were on the bus with him, knew we shared the same gift. The knowledge was exhilarating.

The whole letting go while still moving.

I would try to replicate that feeling many other times in my life. And many times, I got away with it.

A couple years in the future, I was riding my bicycle after leaving the bar. It was a nice night. The breeze would wash in, crisp and sudden, like sinking to the bottom of a lake in summertime. I was riding with no hands, sitting up straight on the seat, coasting. I dared myself to see how long I could ride with my eyes closed. I was in the middle of the road and it was empty.

The first few tries I would open my eyes within half a second, lurching forward for the handlebars. I forced myself to keep my eyes closed longer. I could feel myself drifting. I let myself be taken by whatever power would have me, surrendering to it completely. It felt like years of my life. When I finally opened my eyes I'd somehow found the exact spot in the road to ride up onto the sidewalk. I grabbed the handles again and stopped immediately, eyes bulging. I was instantly sweating. I could barely breathe. But after the sick feeling left me, I thought it was hilarious. I laughed for probably two minutes straight, right there, alone on the sidewalk.

There were several reasons why we were taking a trip to the big city, but the one we could all agree on and wave above our heads like a banner was that we were going to make a man out of Timothy.

Whatever that meant.

The bus swerved in and out of traffic like a video game, like the whole thing was controlled by a joystick, and women would gasp and say, Oh my God! We held our forty ounces low at first, and then the more intoxicated we became and the farther north we drove, the bolder we became, laughing loudly and throwing things across the aisle at each other. I pissed all over the walls of the bathroom in the bus. It wasn't a malicious act. I couldn't stand straight.

Our first taxicab driver in the city told us he knew all the places you could go to get a massage. He told us he'd had a girl in the backseat. Me and Timothy both jerked up from the seat and started making a fuss.

"C'mon, baby! You see anything back there? You see even one stain? I keep this motherfucker squeaky clean, baby! Squeaky clean!"

Sam always sat in the front because he loved to talk to the cabbies and it was pure entertainment to watch. Sam was a first class bullshitter.

The last cabbie we had that night, friends were pushing us in and telling the cabbie to take us to such and such address, just get us the hell out of there; Sam and I had started a street brawl. Initially it'd only been between the two of us over reasons neither of us would ever remember. But as we rolled around on the street, other people started jumping in. The whole time, Timothy had been down the block, sitting with his feet in the gutter with drool dribbling down his chin, singing Maggie May to himself.

We kept the same order of seating in the cab though, Sam up front.

I could feel blood leaking out of my back, where Sam had impaled me on a bike rack. My hands felt raw and burned from the concrete. But I was still absolutely wasted, and still bloodthirsty. And I only had Timothy to take it out on.

Sam was reaching his short hairy arm through the little window in the cab that separated the front from the back, swinging desperately to catch me across the jaw or eye socket. I had my hands around Timothy's throat. The turban wearing cabbie kept his eyes on the road.

"I'm going to kill you," I told Timothy.

"Do it. Do it," was all he kept saying.

We all woke up the next afternoon, cut, bruised, and aching but with no memory of the night before. And so that meant all was forgiven and that the adventure must go on. I was standing outside of a Dunkin' Donuts, waiting on the two of them. It was late, maybe around midnight, and they'd followed some girls in there. I stayed outside. I hated awkward situations that weren't of my own creation. Also, we'd taken drugs. They weren't in the Dunkin' Donuts for too long and when they came out with the girls, the girls started walking away. Sam and Timothy came back over to me.

"Nothing?" I asked.

"Fuck 'em," Sam said.

"Sam bought them a donut," Timothy said.

"Aw. That's sweet." I said. Timothy laughed.

"Fuck you," Sam said and popped a cigarette in his mouth. We started to walk the opposite direction.

We wanted to find a bar but had no idea where we were going. We took random streets and laughed over nothing. There wasn't anything I cared for very much waiting at home, so I was all there in the present.

A tree had fallen down onto the sidewalk the next block we turned down. It was a large tree, with branches and leaves stretched out like arms, almost as if to create some kind of gnarled hallway. Instead of steering clear of the tree, we pressed on, determined to stay true to the path before us. We laughed and tripped forward and onto each other and soon we were in the very thick of it and we could barely see anything except bark and leaf. It came up all around us.

"We're in a goddamn rainforest!" Sam yelled.

I don't know how far in we went before it felt like close to winter. The limbs of the tree began to thin out and we stepped away and found ourselves in an alley and there the walls and sidewalk were no longer a dull yellow from the streetlights but a grayish blue. Lights glowed from very high above and, higher above that, the moon. None of us thought to walk back the way we'd come.

It seemed as though we'd arrive to some whole other land, or was it some other time? I couldn't believe it. I could see my breath come out of me.

Winter in the middle of summer.

Sam turned around, facing Billy and I. And he said nothing. When he turned back around, at the end of the long alley we had found ourselves in, stood a stag, staring back at us.

It was a big animal, the horns on its head like some regal crown. Its eyes were the deepest black and its chest drew in such a breath that I felt if it were to exhale it would blow us all onto our backs. It wasn't as though the thought ever crossed my mind, but even if it had, I don't think I could have moved a finger at that moment. It stood there and we stood there and no one said a word, no one made a move. The three of us breathing so faintly and the stag so deeply the entire alley seemed to shiver.

A couple of months later when I would be dropping out of college and leaving the country, my mother stood in a very similar fashion to that stag, at the top of the stairs in our house in Virginia. I had my bags packed and was ready to go. She'd protested the entire summer and used every excuse to deter me. I didn't listen to any of them. I was like her in that way. My Dad had given in some time ago and was even giving me a ride to the airport.

I asked her if this was how she wanted to leave it. It would be a very long time before I saw them again. We were very close but not in a way that you talk about. Her answer was to walk into her bedroom without a word. I slept the whole ride up to Dulles.

When my Dad walked me to the gates, all he said was "Be careful with your money."

That's what Rod Stewart's dad had said to him when he took off at his young age.

Good ole Pops.

It wasn't until the stag took its first step that time could be referenced once again, because it felt like it had been forever since I'd heard a real sound. It was the sound of a hoof on concrete. That click, the stomp. It brought all three of us back. We could feel the blood in our veins again. And then it disappeared. I mean, it walked away. We could hear the hooves clicking.

When we got to the end of the alley, we didn't see anything. The alley just turned and went out into the street. And it was summer again. My breath was no longer visible. We came out onto the street and looked around and then looked to each other.

Sam said, "What the fuck?"

.

We suddenly knew how to find a bar then and did and ordered some drinks. The bartender was a kind old Greek who wore rimless glasses and worked alongside his wife, who had very long black hair, wavy just like my mother's when she was young and smiled often.

I went outside to smoke a cigarette. A skinny, greasy haired guy wearing an army jacket that swallowed him followed me out. I knew he was going to ask me for a cigarette. He asked me for a cigarette. He had his own lighter.

"Do you like the sound of broken glass?" he asked me.

I thought long and hard about that before I answered, "Sure."

He reached into the folds of his jacket and came out with a pint glass, probably stolen from the bar we'd just been in. He held it before him like some shimmering talisman and we gazed upon it, mesmerized in vapid awe, and then, as I could only anticipate, he let it go. The glass shattered on the concrete into seventy-nine pieces.

I followed him three or four blocks to his apartment, a faceless building, completely inconspicuous. He had to jiggle the key to get the door to open. The bulb in the hallway stuttered. The elevator was one of those that you had to pull a strap down to close the doors. They came shut with a dull clang. We went up.

There weren't any questions in my mind. I sort of didn't even feel like I was there, in the flesh. Like I was just a cloud following this guy in an army jacket, an observant entity. The whole trip, we never spoke. We got out of the elevator and walked down a hallway as badly lit as the first and came to a door where he took his keys out again and cycled about three of them before we went through.

When the light came on in the first room, I found myself surrounded by heaps of trinkets and things of all nature. Stacks of comic books, lamps ranging in height, heavy-looking dusty chests, a pair of tall rain boots, television sets, a microwave. Bookshelves with figurines and ornaments but very few books. Dolls with black eyes. Framed posters of various Broadway shows, bicycles and huge speakers. Two couches and a ripped leather ottoman. An easel. A waist high statue of a leopard caught in a permanent roar, with one of the fangs chipped off. The place was a huge museum of nothing and everything. He led me through the maze of this room and into the next.

The room was smaller and dark save the blue light coming from the television. On a couch several feet from the television, a girl sat there, eyes fixed on the screen and utterly motionless.

"This is my sister," he told me. "Just wait in here a second. I gotta get it."

Her eyes never left the screen. She sat with her legs tucked underneath her, Indian-style, black hair going long past her bony shoulders. Her skin was blue from the television. Somehow, this made her softer. She had larger than normal eyes, saucer-like, which seemed to never blink. Things that seldom blinked made me uncomfortable. I had a deep-rooted fear of spiders. Her lips were just slightly pouting; she seemed genuinely oblivious. We didn't exist to her.

He came back into the room and held his hand out to me and I took the small bag and gave him the rest of my money. He saw me looking at his sister.

"You can kiss her if you want," he said.

I didn't. I took a seat on a toolbox just in the line of her peripheral view, to be courteous I guess, and watched her as she watched the TV. He took a seat somewhere but I paid no attention. It dawned on me that there was no sound coming from the television. The three of us all sat there in this insulation of silence, she staring at the television, me staring at her, and the brother at me.

He repeated himself after some time, a voice in the dark, and added, "Isn't she beautiful?"

I said she was with a voice that didn't sound like my own. And then other questions began to materialize in my head. Why was it that she sat there, not showing any sign of life besides that very seldom blink and the smallest rise of her chest? I moved, tentative and discreetly, from the toolbox over to where she sat. Still no reaction, even to my approach. I came closer. I touched her hand. It was warm. She turned her head, the slightest movement of an indigo neck, and looked into me.

It wasn't for me, shouldn't be for anyone, to describe what I saw in that girl's eyes. But everything there was wrong. I got up and got the hell out of that room and through the maze of things that made no sense and when I got to the door he was there, putting his hand on my arm. I turned on my heel and punched him in the mouth, hard. I didn't stop to watch him fall into all the junk, only heard the world crashing down behind me. I hurried to the elevator and pulled the strap down, slamming the doors shut. I was breathing hard. I went down.

I got out of the building and walked the three or four blocks back to the bar, never looking back. When I got back to the bar, it was still open, but my friends were no longer there. They'd left. I took out my pack of cigarettes and put one in my lips and lit it. On the street, the shards of glass still lay there. Not one of them glittered.

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Last Summer's Grecian Coverup by Jerimee Bloemeke

"You would have really liked it,
What happened to us last night."

Dangling feet shaking to hatred
They see the see thru pane
Purchased all around them
In deliberate quarters; track lit, envision
Who is watching who cannot be seen; live
Poor to talk about it in stinging drafts.
Particles of graphite in the air their eyes began to watch
A four-hour long yesterday.

They ran yesterday never seen. A black shelf leans.
Nothing hangs from looks like ceiling strings
The usage of landscaping in a living room
And does not say words or anything to them
And is the only pleasure the past two days
Their debit was down.
The phone checks.

They were not there, no one was
At Dodge getting dark, the Hilltop pool, beginning
To storm a five star number like always reflecting
Off windows across the street because the sunset
Last week...the sun off a shattered second floor window.
A musician, piling rolls of sorority carpet onto the roof of
An Escort station wagon, paid one dollar for help, six bucks
In a field at sunset yesterday. A cornfield video shoot; "easy dreams"
Knew dreams to ruin it back to Dodge, the porch, the
Computer, the organ, smashed bookshelf on the deck
& five or so burned in the fire pit.

Smoke slid through crevices.
An aeronautics appeared. The note:
Thank you for [the] every thing

Not a given "the everything" to someone else in the way
Is the enormous bliss of the American death.
The mattress on another porch the saving of caps

On the microwave. The diagnostics only mean what they have meant
For so long. Against a brick wall in a parking lot, drunk
On pills, three cigarettes behind one ear, pulling leaves
Off bushes, picking flowers out of people's beds (bouquet fists)
And chipping church pew finish to pick a thorn out of a thumb
With scratched legs, the boom man records fake conversations too far away.

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Alchemist of Bad Dreams by Jerimee Bloemeke

Asleep when it happened, I lived for the
5D of the equinox, of the three orbs
In space like dark, reverse engineered
Construction paper lining an urn.

The Sun, Earth & its moon closely align
& Crash, like too many open windows,
Together in a flash of glass reflected
Light thru a bedroom window at night.

And when I awoke in media res Pink Floyd
Was on Music Choice, the quartz pyramid
From their longtime bestselling album cover
Refracted a rainbow on this girl's T-shirt.

And it dawned on me to let her know
The trifecta the medieval couldn't imagine
Was superimposed over my retinae
& That I would never forget that

I am an alchemist of bad dreams,
I have a eyeball in my eye socket,
But I told her that this makes sense
In earnest, water on the dark side of the moon.

Manmade desert of white; parcel

~SHARD~

Ikea EXPEDIT shelving edges
Permeate wisps or like the edges
Of horizon mirages, e.g. *high gloss*
Surfaces reflect light and give a vibrant look.

Like faint, classic rock
Or the mini laptop marble
Is the feeling of disparate genres
Or the feeling of these object edges

That color the periphery
With a visionary ink gone dry

The warehouse exclaims its silence.
The warehouse titles itself
WE BUY HOUSES & BUILDINGS.
The warehouse subtitles itself
The Scare of the Wait

Afraid not to move like me
I am ever the guest of my host.
Some parasitic overnighter
With his teeth ensconced
In metaphysical necks
With his drinking and taking shits
Indoors 'til his host's off at six
Like a one-third devil time

Like lingering amounts of hours
With X eating yoga franks
Contemplating subway stop Koran ads
Obliquely defending 9/11
Remembering what's underneath
The pullout and tiger hide duvet.
Sober complaints, truth be told.
Much less, one is passing out hard

Tearing his Joe Boxers to shreds
Dabbing jizz with paper towel hearts
As if the unborn millions require love (however shaped)
The same way the billion born do.
The same way it can be seen on her face.
Her expression as it is wiped off
By another generation into deletion

By that civilization into cynical irony (!)
Hating me because I am with two blondes
Not because I danced with one of them sloppy
Or spilled my white 'til I was ejected
With the one who says no when asked.

The one who says something else
Says we will never be like that.
It's too late for us that used to be us.
12-storey paintings of inexplicable forms
Primarily torn from youth
Like disinterested cacti
In ski masks flexing biceps
Applying to ourselves
Purple Sephora lip-gloss.
We have seen us do that.
"I have seen myself do this."

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Minimalism by Jerimee Bloemeke

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You are no one, you are not here, no one is here.
You are what precedes what precedes the equation
Of the landmarks. Landscape frames atmosphere.
A region of ghosts are accorded pigment by a
great
Fiery orb. But everyone knows this. The cigarette tip
When dragged upon is a similar hue to the hue the sky is
As it goes unnoticed by the apex of the tree which notices
Nothing, the most difficult shape to be cognizant of
And then after that understand. These are the landmarks.
The five o clock shadow gives the pastel cheek of the land-
Scape its sex appeal. The orbs change guard, sunset. [T-shirts
Represent banality better than art]. Circa its sober locale
The calm expanse lulls us with supple extreme curvature.
If only God coins juxtaposition, perhaps it would be relevant
Here where heaven, hell and earth have grown
Accustomed to each other.

Towards the back of the volume I found a note you left someone.
I forget what the note said but the volume was for someone
Who lived in a building each building in the city resembled some.
An addition into "the" gray bar graph. Each bar with residents
And spot on horizons, from where I recall the skyline, does not exist
Except upon postcard. That is how I know it is without contour.
The sunset behind it disappears in a pink line if the correct speed
For pursuit were in existence that could be forever. We would
Glance elsewhere how I like it.

There is morning. Streetlights shutdown and dew
Spritzes your ankles. Destined to drive gold cars
It won't rain white rectangles in dark wood frames.
Tinted binoculars, dollars, insurers, a nonexistent
position.
The steppe. You overlook a harsh landscape bison chew on
Until sunset. Small green crowns of grass grown between

Fissures from an unknown source dot this plane.
And on the horizon the steppe puts its blinders on the day.

Last night chili peppers you cut up chemically burnt your fingertips.
On a pew on the terrace watching you watch something, ten of your digits dipped
Into a bowl of chilled milk, the other ten of your digits curled into carpet,
The blood flowed somewhere; I took a drag at sunset, exhaled into the fallen night
And went downstairs to catch a cab elsewhere.

To the red square that slides closer towards you.
To the thin black cross in red diamond that coaxes you.
To the confirmation of the American Christ that disorients you.
To the future tics which glitch the intelligence of the young.

Refusing the mountain as if it is less real here than when it is scaled
A rock is abrasive to heaven to a man whose hate rivals his money
Clip width as if it is simpler to hate the more cash you get than it is fake
To pretend you love less in life. Because when I unroll a sheaf of canvas
I dip the soles of my feet in a pail of blood and do si do across it, sunsets west.
We're chasing daylight, the more mid-western to see you with.
If not for style the nothingness of our presences would prevail.

There is a mind to say get with it, there is a mind to add don't let us win.
There is trash in an unpaved alley where dust from ten flatbeds gathers
In sunlight as filtered through the canopy of the block. A spring instep
This summer comeback.

You layout a towel. It doesn't matter.

Insides aren't worth anything to anyone.

We say we have no use for mirrors.

Lead the pond to me.

[Untitled] by Jerimee Bloemeke

I sleep as the noise has stopped beginning
Within the warning on the warning label
Attached to the cord,
Within the shadow of the warning label
Attached to the cord,
Within the shadow of the cord
Within the shadows on the wall, the tree's shadow
Swaying on the wall, the tree shadowing the pickets,
The pickets' shadows shadowing piked
Portions of the building's brick wall.

It is in these shadows I sleep
Everywhere where there are vehicles, engineer's
boots,
Plastic bags, a pedestrian, anonymous, anonymous
In an almost anonymous where-about, a location, mapped,

Where lights cast shadows beyond glass. Beyond glass
I am beyond light. I stand beyond a door
I know to be unlocked, aware of the pedestrian
With its small, anonymous square of light
And its almost anonymous map location;
Aware of the constellations the pedestrian sees
As stars who are as aware of me as they are aware
Of the noise I hear them make; aware of no switch
Which can stop the noises beginning
Which are about to go unheard.

Bottle Cap Theory by Steven T. Bramble

Then the hydrogen bomb exploded! And I don't have to tell you that the capitalist bastards were caught with their pants quite down around their pale little ankles, having not really come to terms with their souls and shit like that on account of all their monies. And plus there was Irene H. Ronstadt, who was getting fed nearly science-fiction-like commercial messages about vehicular homicide and Jolly Khadafy Goat Samwiches while sitting in a well-earned blue nylon recliner, and she didn't have a clue what the TV was blathering about because she was two days away from turning a hundred years old when fusion occurred and the thermonuclear sprinklerheads went shik-shik-shik-shik-shik-shiiiiiiiiiiiiik! Oh God—the 1940s horror—and it was always a mystery of the universe why Colonel O'Mannon found it necessary to bend over to look for the bottle cap he'd just dislodged from the top of his beer bottle, the same bottle cap from a Coke that was recycled from seventy-seven years ago which caused a horrible smoke to belch from Anne de Witt's Electrolux Model 30 vacuum cleaner in 1952 when it got jammed in the drive train. The colonel's large trapezoidal posterior made accidental contact with the arcane lever which sent the electron current to the mechanism that lit up and shrieked, "Launch, launch, launch!" and subsequently sent him through fifteen years of psychological therapy just to come to terms with it. Oh yeah, great stuff. You can actually see the mushroom cloud from two states over because most of the land in Middle America got shaved flat for the Go-Kart track. I can see it through the glass-walled breakfast diner while I munch on the best sausage money can buy—the finest cuts of pork that aren't eight different animals stuck together in one link, but just pure fuckin browned hog with marbled fat and maple inserted into the middles via maple injection machines. Tonya looks up from her waitress pad at the rising smoke in the distance and says, "Shit, that's ridiculous. Me and Brady had a vacation planned. The newsfeed yesterday had a whole article about how sex gets better when you're miles away from it all." I take out my cell phone and pretend like I'm talking to someone on the other end—"Travis, cancel Ms. Sedbrook's travel appointments. The fucking country's in disarray." The worst of the whole situation was when the entire Time Life library of 1980s cartoons got soldered into one large block of smoking black VHS joke vomit. All the Generation Yers read the newsfeeds and sighed their fist sighs of old age disillusionment. Fifty years later, marketing students would learn that the single-stroked loss of Ninja Turtles through Eureka's Castle marked the end of the new generation fitting into what people in the trade call "Idealist Targets." Black nail polish stock leaned Wall Street over a table and sodomized it until even the president himself couldn't help from getting a hard-on, and it was right around that time when the U.S. government drafted every currently working journalist, novelist, essayist, blogger, poet, and copywriter, and sequestered us all into one large movie theater while Colonel O'Mannon's successor stood in front of the gaping blank screen saying, "The American people need to make sense of this craziness! It's pure chaos out there—people jumping out of windows and shirking census forms! I don't think I need to tell you all how dangerous these times are. So we're taking the only reasonable course of action: we want you wordheads to interpret this milestone event for us. Sure, paintings are visually stunning, but overall they're too subjective and difficult to analyze. And music is too abstract. We

need concrete language here, goddammit! We need the best and the brightest to insert meanings, wave away the hanging fog, give people a reason to go on. It's up to you, soldiers!" And then they start showing the aerial footage of the blast that decimated Missouri and parts of Illinois and Iowa in a single moment of bottle cap-retrieval-gone-awry, and they screen it for us repeatedly, approximately three hundred times, so eventually I know every bubbling scream and every plume of sulfur as readily as I know my own email password, and besides the white noise of constant rippling explosions and the muted whups of helicopter blades, all I can hear throughout the whole theater is the whispering of mechanical pencil lead against paper, everyone taking detailed notes and some even beginning to compose their masterpieces directly on the spot. My own notes read: "focus in on exact moment of explosion, freeze frame the unsuspecting town so the reader can wander leisurely through the paused moment just before total annihilation, let them observe the fragility of life or some such crap, remember to send flirtatious text message to Tonya, look up meaning of the word admonish—to scold?" Then, while they were at it, they screened the old footage of the WTC attacks and told us to work on that as well. The guy next to me is fascinated the way some people are fascinated by streaming porn, and he squeals, "This is our big chance to produce era-specific literature!" And I can't help understanding what he's talking about, but nonetheless I'm like, "But why are we regressing back to postmodernism when we could've been furthering objectism?" He's not hip with my terms, so I explain, "You know, the new critical philosophy of literature that's a brutal rendering of characters from the perspectives of inanimate objects with subjective personalities, typically culminating in the inevitable dissolution of all interpersonal human relationships in favor of a closeness with things. It comments on post-industrialized nations' preoccupation with consumer products and the way they've shaped, changed, and inundated the experience of humans." He belches in response, and it smells like Skittles. Fourteen months later was when I first started noticing that our literature was devouring the free time of the general populace. I was in the lower downtown portion of Kansas City and saw everyone sitting at an outdoor café reading huge gleaming copies of a novel called Groaning Towards July, which was stupid because the bomb exploded in November. I figured, Sure, I give you an objectist novel from the point of view of the bomb itself and this guy, H.Z. Arnitz, impresses you with a traditional linear narrative that anybody could've fuckin pulled off. What a stupid world. And what seemed to be exacerbating the problem were the frequent calls I was getting in the middle of the night from the small percentage of readers who'd purchased my book, saying things like, "This storyline is didactic, contrived and nearly unreadable. Don't you believe in Oedipal trajectory?" I'd say, "It was an art story! I knew everyone was gonna eat up all that Oprah's Book Club garbage about the bomb-as-a-window-into-spirituality, and all-causality-has-a-purpose! You fuckin seething mainstreamer!" And they'd say, "Hey, man, two million readers worldwide can't be wrong—Arnitz is king. My wife wants to have his baby. Who the hell are you? Enjoy the black depths of obscurity." So the only thing left to do was send a cry-for-help text to Tonya, who'd been diligently ignoring my advances for over a year now on account of her boyfriend was still treating her right. I'd tell her that I was finally gonna blow my upper palate against the shower tile. She got the text, but she was watching forensic dramas on digital cable with Brady, so she didn't bother

replying. Though it didn't matter because just as I flipped my phone closed I became frozen in time, and I could see droplets of water that had been in the process of falling from my kitchen faucet suspended in the air, and all the looping flies in my kitchen froze mid-loop. And then I saw this guy who I didn't have the faintest clue about leisurely strolling through my own house, a big plastic tag draped around his neck that had the word VISITOR laserprinted on it in Times New Roman. He got up close to me, peering at my motionless figure, exclaiming, "Fascinating—it's the moment right before total annihilation and he has no idea."

[^](#)

The Commodore by Sean Damlos-Mitchell

"But O heart! heart! heart!"

—Walt Whitman

On a dirigible made of bones
gaining altitude in a stranger
ocean & suddenly suddenly
embracing atmosphere it takes
our breath away we shout

Commodore where is the escalator
we shout Commodore we are refusing
heaven shout Commodore where is the endless
buffet where is the casino

The Commodore asks for a show
of hands

The Commodore asks for coins
for Charon & asks

What does a soul
sound like is it bouncing
freely like an unexplained
voice over the wailing loud
speaker of a school fire drill

The Commodore asks Who here
is most qualified
to drown & who to freeze
who to pick apples We marvel at this

all-you-can-eat table
of crab legs & jello we marvel
at the breadth of the whole
fucking thing & we are

so high up someone expresses concern
that our skin will fall off
someone mentions something
about Icarus—but this is not
like that

Commodore our rent's late again
we're letting her get away
Commodore all we have left
to mix with the vodka
is mouthwash & Commodore
we are too tired
for the stairs let us sleep
here Commodore let us
sleep

The Commodore asks us to pinpoint—
Where is the life boat
Where is the oxygen mask
Where is the moment
your life diverged so completely
from itself that you became an empty
impression

The Commodore asks Have you ever
lain on the ground & pretended
you were a piece of lettuce The Commodore asks
What will you remember
The Commodore wide-eyed asks
for two coins &

The Commodore sighs slowly like blue
like frantic pain his skin
is stripped away The Commodore
becomes the kind of naked
we've only dreamed of The dance
most of all The Commodore
shouts into the feathered rest
of everything & The Commodore goes up
with his airship

Thieving by Atticus Davis

Can never be certain
what she's feeling

even when her mouth
opens
old thoughts
like treasure.

I wonder if I am
greedy.

Share greedily,
speak greedily,
hear greedily.

You can only
give her so much

before she starts to feel
full
and
robbed of herself.

Portrait of a Successful Girl by Atticus Davis

Independent when fed,
call the shots,
pull your own weight.

I'm your anchor drowning,

blamed for being myself.

You
will be
washed ashore
four years older,
with an older
man, and—aspirations
ground and
scattered like dust—

Hourglass:
you slip through your
own cold fingers.

Crawl Back After by Jim Davis

Arms pinned back, he barely spoke
to those knuckles but they answered, just ask
the split incisor, his cracked rabbit tooth—
now, when he flosses he saves it for last.
In bed, the most generous, grateful prose is written
which is to say, the most sincere. She, who has
already taken back what she could, sulks and slumps
in a fitful cab, wind howling through the half-window
like a bomb-cloud skimming skyscraper tips: empty
with anticipation. She spins silently at the light, before the old
magnolia drops its petals. One flutters in and lands on her lap
like a snowflake, exceptional, matchless and steady, not melting
but breathing above her knee, which she slips between the pages
of a magazine. He, at the same time, was pissing in a trash can,
tugging at a smoke until he could barely breathe. Dizzy, he tipped
the can and cracked his head on the sink. She whirled and rolled
herself into a knot that night, a dance written in a dead language:
the approach of a kingfisher diving. When he returned he discovered
they'd shut off the heat, added layers with a bottle of wine.
He stayed up late reading a Dictionary of Theories,
but could not steady the lines on the page. He spent an hour painting
and remembered days he would sing the shower clean.
In the morning, he'll attempt to glue the pieces of vase. He'll fold
laundry to the drama of some foreign soap opera, understanding
the similarities, save the hangover, to a high school football game:
twelve minutes per quarter. He'll squander an afternoon
composed by Hans Zimmer, which he shall refer to
as the Day of Black Smoke, Fire, and Back Pain.
About the floss, he saves the cracked tooth for last
since the line frays, ruined like most once they touch.
She admires the fine writing of dusk and all the subtleties
of the year dislodged, or gently dismembered.

Golden by Jim Davis

All morning staring at the falcon perched on a leather glove.
Deliberate repositioning. Talons like muted shotgun triggers
in crisp Chicago winter. The Golden Nugget challenges
the Golden Apple to a battle of tight-eyed breakfast spots.
The Nugget—across from Nikos' Gyros Stand, where Niko
employed Armando to slice the beef and lamb, Debbie to
sweep the floor, though she would be gone in summer, when
classes let out—offers 2 buttermilk pancakes, 2 extra-large eggs,
2 links of dry sausage and hash browns for \$4.99 & a bottle
of wine, out the door. The Golden Apple, on the other hand,
is rumored to warm funnymen after they improvise second-
city assemblies—some big names, we're told. Across the street,
St. Alphonsus' Church, where he received communion,
admitted only forgivable sins, (he heard being mean to you sister
was worth the repetition of seven *Hail Marys* and one *Our Father*).
The Russian bell tower cathedrals have gone gray with time.
He scoffs at neglect, selfish dismissal of tennis shoes to the lamp line.
Repentance. The falcon drops for field mice & smaller birds. Coats
bled dry in bolls of what might be cotton. Repetition (sounds about
right) & repentance share the confines of oak chambers, polished
delivery. The bell tower's narrow corridors, tiles from the revolution-
ary mosaics in red and white, fall. Repetition, repetition, we were
to meet at the Golden Apple or Nugget, repentance ringing
from garden apartments. We were to meet at the fractal edge
of summer and nonexistence. We are distracted by nighthawks
slicing though whatever it is we've said. After all the acoustic
guitars have been cracked and bled of string, the hawks settle in
the golden bliss of satiation, that bliss of what we've emptied and held.

Matter by Nathan Hirstein

1. I was sick. My body was wracked with spasms. I lost control of it. My mouth constantly spewed the things found most despicable by my neighbors. My body bent double & finally triple, limbs contorted near to breaking. The sweat I sweat reeked of poison. To all those who still came near me it acted as poison, for I could see them hating me, my body & my sweat. They hated me as the poisoned hate the poisoner. They hated me as the healthy hate the invalid. To look upon me was for them to look into a mirror in which they could see all their past & future diseases visited upon them at once. They hated me until I made a blanket of their hate.

2. I lay under the blanket in a tiny basement cell alone. Even then the constant wailing of my tortured body & all the other things that came out of my mouth disturbed my neighbors. They could always smell me & they could always hear me.

5. I was dirty. I mean, I was sick. My body was not under my control. The specialists rubbed my body with steaming stones. They put slim metal pieces in my back & left squid trails. A woman uncovered scenes I had buried. No one can imagine the showers I scrubbed. None of them found it. I think it was my basement. I mean, I lived underneath. I sensed others with me: wine flies, spiders. I never saw the rats but their scattering menaced my sleep & I found them ripe on the street, split open like summer fruit.

7. In my possession were several texts of power. If softer tissue became scarce I believe my neighbors would wipe their assholes with these pages without regret. If I had peers or even colleagues I believe they would be unable to agree whether the words inscribed within should be classified as holy or demonic. After deep reflection & much study I have come to believe such a binary is false, & also that I have no peers or colleagues because I abhor taxonomy.

8. For want of a shelf, I piled these texts on the filthy concrete floor of my basement.

11. The basement was a trap. Even the flies couldn't find their way out. No light came in but that which I pumped through the walls. Of course I could see nothing by this but my own shadow & a fly-paper chandelier orange & black with bodies, looped round the bare bulb. My body bumped into an accretion of objects, each a demon. Together the demons made a cacophony of ugly information surrounding me, filling the emptiness I sought, robbing me of any peace. The floor glinted broken glass & shone with foil, the shells of what I put in my hole: soft batch, English tea, grasshopper. The clear plastic wrap of cigarette packs.

17. Like the terrible magician of storybooks I kept my soul in a glass jar. But I filled my jar to the brim with black ash & orange butts, the remnants of my only small pleasure.

18. I collected tomes of great power & they collected thin sheets of the skin I shed & thicker, irregular blankets of the skins of what I ate.

22. I crushed a fruit fly on my neck or a mosquito. It wasn't the right season, but flies leave no bloody trails. All I saw were parasitic demons. They hovered in my head like insect birds with their above sounds.

23. The demons howled & taunted me. They crept closer. First they crawled up & squatted on my only table in piles of disorder. They looked like rats dressed in the clothes of my neighbors.

28. My neighbors were closing in. There were once walls between us I remember & a door with a lock for which only I had the key. In the basement no one locked their doors. There weren't doors; I propped a moldy mattress up to close me in at night. I woke & found my neighbors staring. They asked to borrow a cigarette or a portion of my meager foods. Though I despised them they were too close to refuse. They had become part of my landscape, my nature, inexorable. Mountains or creatures, they scavenged of me. Night couldn't even get in past them.

32. I went down into my basement. But demons breed in forgetfulness. When I awoke I could see: a moldy mattress wedged between the floor & ceiling made my fourth wall, a suitcase propped open against the wall spilled crumpled garments, empty bottles accumulating.

33. I begged my neighbors for medicine. At times they pitied enough to give what they would. Other nights their black eyes reviled my prostrations or blinked, uncomprehending.

41. I wondered how it was that I—who have always done right by my neighbors, who considered the state of my neighbors above even my own state, whose mouth is full of rotten teeth but has always spoken sweetly—I wondered how I came to be in this basement, this prison, my body.

46. Perhaps as I descended I had drawn a map. I ruffled sheaves of paper. The scrawls looked like insect trails: indecipherable.

50. When I emerge from beneath I will have changed. When I rise I will be cured.

Between the Door and Me by Jason Joyce

You wouldn't believe it here

Hi, welcome to Subway

Hi, welcome to Subway

Hi, welcome to Subway Hi, welcome to Subway

mynah birds consumed by their artistry, none of them look up

Yesterday working in the village, the guerrillas attacked and this house burst apart right in front of

I'll have a foot long turkey on flatbread, toasted

Provolone, please

[This is something that should be read at home]

But we're all okay thankfully. I feel that any doubt I had can be validated by our

No, I'll have lettuce, onions, Southwest sauce, honey mustard and

More medicine is coming soon. They have to drop the supplies at night so that

[Most likely, I'll read his next email while driving or sitting in the bathroom]

the military escort man looked at me and said, Don't fuckin' move, staying still usually keeps you alive longer

[My forthcoming reply:

I can't even imagine what it's like there. I'm glad more supplies are on the way.

That has to be a relief. I miss you so much! Things here are the same as usual lol.

I promise to write you a longer letter soon.]

And some salt and pepper please.

Salt and pepper. Yeah, just some salt and pepper and that's it.

I'll make it a combo with cookies instead of chips. Chocolate chip. Just a small.

[What I do not say:

I noticed how when you stayed over, you slept between the door and me. And the one time you helped me with laundry, you handled even my rattiest bras like they were expensive maps. If nothing else, I want to thank you for that.

And to the military escort man, I'd probably tell him that at a certain point you forget the ache, the stiffness of being still.]

Friends in this town are settling

down, I'm in

a bad way to do the same

[^](#)

Beginner Ghosts by Jason Joyce

Confetti cannon

mouth,
candy s p r a y ! !!!

trick
or treaters
hit by an errant driver

I shiver

beginner ghosts
going firecracker deaf

jackrabbit jumpy at the kitchen table,
divorced parents,
fourth and one, it's a handoff
which twin is which, I can't tell the difference anymore

Someone pulled the fire alarm
during gym class in the cafeteria,
later someone cut the phone lines,
then toilet paper took over the trees

The duchess has been kidnapped!
you're little like a prince,
But the motif has
been ruined!
one of your friends came dressed as
a Harlem Globetrotter

busy as a beekeeper
making excuses why you smoke like
a miner

In search of a weekend tradition unlike
your father's sitting on the porch making
sure no one steals the trash cans—
I don't think he ever took
up racquetball...

we wait for it, we wait
we're far too young to have become this
boring



Testing the Bloody Mary Bathroom Legend by Jason Joyce

O

what pioneers are we!

should I be

t r a m p l e d

just past the automatic doors

in a Toys R Us

Keep churning through the

obligatory ice melt pebbles

tinkling

beautiful little bounce passed meteors

Stockton

to Malone

Comforting like: living atop an Indian burial ground

Comforting like: going home with a man you met in the bar at Applebee's

should we be

strip mined

onacrampedstage

Additional comments here:

the audience takes us

out to the barn

one, two

between the eyes

a horror movie remake

where feral lust becomes our demise

No One Wears Jackets Here by Jason Joyce

You don't use the fancy soaps near the ornate faucet

you don't use the fluffy towel on the rack

You pull the ones out from below the sink,

that's why we keep them there,

remember?

A warm closet of clothes, it's where you keep your suitcase

no one wears jackets here

bikinis and flip-flops- something secret and at-home about it

your father was dying since the day you met him

he told you every day that he hoped he lived long enough to

watch your son play tee-ball

You know where to find it, the door

meant for leaving

home is where you keep it

but you wouldn't dare make a mess



I Was a Washington General by Jason Joyce

If you decide to sit at home thinking about the episode of *True Life* where the guy gets calf implants—

Turn to page _____

If you turn out like your mother- ironing wrapping paper after birthday parties-

See below:

Simple vows of easy come easy go
they opened their mouths
confetti came out

then your father moved away from the city,
room and board at a Volvo dealership,
taking sink showers in the staff bathroom,
vending machine meals of reduced-fat Wheat Thins and Diet Coke

at least that's what you figured when he didn't come home

Unsure if you were to blame for the neighbor's flooded house when you left the sprinklers on,
unsure if the house fire was caused by your compost pile

keep it quiet like the summer your brother dropped *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* on top of
your little brown lizard

savage glitter

a rheumy house haunted by doubt

paid to lose

night in, night out

I remember where I am when it's time to go

and it's been four days since you've made your own bed

Would you rather drown or be burned alive?

NPC Won't Hypnotize Me by Drew Kalbach

Wise move, NPC, truculent
twitch beyond screen. I slow-open
shade drawn windows and breathe in the dog shit.
This is progress, the zone,
itemized the soft bits between legs and felt guilty
hours later when big bang static comes in free.

Opened my mouth
to get a web, to slide it
down my throat. I won't press play
until beeps allow me.
Across the street, exposed
power lines in an abandoned house
about-face my exposed body,
air from underneath leaky floorboards,
low hum of generator building toward excess.
When it comes back on
unplug me.

Merchandize! NPC won't hypnotize me.
Lay it out flat, side by side,
hems one way, zippers another.
Lay it out flat and sell me back my sleaze.

oh-zone, o no, it's goosey out here for a trucker,

bridge too low for my big rig's hat rack

which is a boil if I ever seen one

Through talk channels
Voice chat, over game
Distorted, too quiet, overplayed
By other voices
While action sound continues
The chat, the shot

Clicks until it resets
NPCs abound, shift team to team
I wet mic stub, mic end
Whisper static grind into nubs
While they mute, unmute
Let new voices enter
The game-space, leaks
Into other space, rain outside
Air condition grinds on
While voices click
In and out, through headphone
Through stream noise
Through heavy breathing noise
I express myself in comments
With teeth pressed tight against keys
Style won't leave you out
Even if you let it

How to Fight Hunger by Taleen Kalenderian

[illegible]

the rebel yell.

Hot Time in the Old Town by Erin Kautza

Stacked like flapjacks, those buggy months. Only the middle stays hot while I run yellow as butter with raw cats screaming round all my wrists. Do you see what I'm capable of?

Mother, I can snap a smaller spine without squinting. Sweat it.

Forced penance: Filthy potatoes! Mounds. Rot around the bends; rats around the rot. Scoop out sprouted nubs? Done. Flick dumb brown pearls into stock pots? Yep. Fold the burlap, tuck the skirts.

Warming my heart with the wrong hand, eye on dead eye, I promise not to wrap tame animals like ribbon. You let loose my cruelest elbow.

Sucker! Duck, duck your hammy arm. Kick up coal dust. Crab through the kitchen spouting mean kerosene: a ruby-tipped scepter stinking of citronella. Can't I be the QUEEN of something? King? Some sort of almost-golden prodigal?

Every shake of your fat pink head costs an heirloom: Ermine stole (not the muff) kinking, red-silk-dining-room-runner, and not a peep from its easy border of gold-thread finches! One doily, two doilies, three. Above, black and white lacquered lines of swim-suited bottoms. Yours on the end like a split-lip balloon, and all those flat rubber caps bubbling for once and for good. See ya peek-a-boo spit curls! Lace-hatted Gram goes up last in oily smoke, gathering skirts just as fast as she can.

Inert bosoms heave their last. You stand sentry stoic, and suddenly, suddenly I too want to be a LADY even under threat of barbecue!

God Creates Alcoholism by Nathan Kemp

Spilled brandy was seeping through
the cloud-colored carpeting and I didn't
have a paper towel. The alcohol fell
through to the human world and infected
their blood like animal waste in the Nile.
On that day, the skin of my creations sang
horrible lyrics toward me after the sun
set for the night. On that day, the teeth inside
their mouths were left grasping for any kind
of air, like a man who couldn't swim. For several
thousand years, the humans had been
hiding their weakness behind a hollowed-out
Bible on the fifth shelf. I had been hiding
yet-another-mistake while also carrying a spare
handkerchief to prevent anything worse—
to prevent a smoother vice from entering my garden.

Food Chains and Factory Landscaping by Nathan Kemp

I self-medicated for 10 minutes
on the floor, waiting for a reason
to tell you that I grew up listening
like a material girl, like an empty
flower vase filled with deer urine.

What I really wanted to say before
was that I loved you like an adjunct
mathematics professor loves to smear
the marker on the overhead projector.
I was exhausted by your restraint.

When I talked about addiction at first,
that night—I was referring to how
nothing is an addiction until you suck
cock for it. About how God is second
on my list labeled *food chain* and how

I really felt. The summer I was haulin'
mulch. The summer I planted lime green
ferns around cobalt signs sighing the last
sigh of the American worker. The summer
I once wanted to relive ended in a house fire.

Instructions for Recovering a Celebrity Sex Tape by Nathan Kemp

Let Bret Michaels slip a third finger between your
teeth and gums. Months later, make U-

turns on major highways like it's the norm, like snake-
skin boots borrowed from the store on

the corner where tourists shout, *Midwest is best!*
Remember, the years in the Midwest will

need addressing from your cross-dressing, mustached
psychiatrist who looks like your uncle

who grabbed your 10-year-old breast, drunk at New Years.
And again during the cul de sac Egg Hunt.

Accept your father's gift of a chromed purity ring at the age
of 12. The word *purity* will be engraved

twice—once on the inside, once on the outside. Daddy should
work as the congregation's youth minister.

Be anything is what you should tell yourself while putting
on a shirt, sizes-too-small, tasting urine.

Biding Time in a Treehouse with Princess Di by Nathan Kemp

I'm living in the rotted tree-house in the park, collapsing under a growing pile of leaves and branches. I'm here to not tell you that I removed your dog's electric fence collar as an act of neighborly defiance. I'm here until next Thursday, plus one or two years. Or until my greening floorboards turn to mush and fall away, taking me along for the descent.

Four Princess Di biographies are occupying my time, but I still can't decide who had her killed. She's just a collection of atoms now, reacquainting herself with the universe. Not much more than another check on the list of famous deaths and the list of people that wore something with sewn-on rhinestones. I bet she also successfully completed multiple jigsaw puzzles.

Everything is now a challenge. You would think that I would be satisfied with that fact, but it's like settling for a used pair of dentures or a used treehouse. Nothing about it feels clean or fair. I once read that in every home in Switzerland there is a gun. This is a way for me to introduce my life's beginning and end, my payment plan for preserving baby birds. Please send organic coffee beans and another royal biography.

Assault Upon the Edifice by Allen Killian-Moore

passive aggression
permeates folds of
thick winter clothes
surrounding every
inch of tightened skin
while the struggle to be real
has become an impasse
verging on psychological
subjugation

so that some will suffer
for lacking fraudulence
with many forthright
travelers taken as
an assault upon
the edifice of
this county's
subdued
citizenry

as each
unspoken
word suffocates
on the edge of an
incomprehensible
blunder

Barak by Sean Kilpatrick

Her shadow painted the glass stench of mink or crisp dollar. The child under me missed recess. I told her act coy. A woman chopped paths through piss-heavy air before registering my office.

I grabbed beneath her knee where the come might happen. This crone paddling Virginia Slims. The last ten miles of that face lost me hard. She hadn't quite survived menopause.

My physical presence ain't professional. I told her leave a photograph. I told her I'm not Jewish unless I know you.

Later, we paused teeter totter noticing the photo featured sex dolls. The girl knew I loved one person and she was it, but not right now.

Mrs. Reads needed an item assassinated.

Mr. Reads could not banter in foam mouths, could not bully toy anuses on behalf of Mrs. Reads. He found fulfillment on her dime in a motel. I was to kill him, the dolls, maybe Mrs. Reads too.

The city sat good in smoke. I punched people by Janea's sweep pattern. She showed up and maced me with her taco. Former secretaries, we made herpetic pacts. The rags she stuffed in had me tasting. I blacked out on vodka, that cunt the zero made by dreams. She dissed her gay vest orgasming. Coughing squared away my ilk. The couch found our yolk stupid.

I gut the sidewalk with my shadow. Found some cardboard to decay under. No cop I trusted wore the drag of gutters to process going home.

Mrs. Reads handed me a weed whacker. I parted the grey nethers further furry, cloned myself inside. We plugged in the machine and waited by the motel door. He slipped in with the bags from his trunk. I lit the fucker twirling and had his face. He dunked his new nightmare in the toilet, those dolls left exposed from their perch. I took them handy, backing one to the wall, the other at her expense, how they whispered. Mrs. Reads wet her words. I stuck the gun in first place.

The Ai Wei Wei Industry by David Kinzer

Ai Weiwei, the famous Chinese artist and political dissident, appeared at a Handan police station one late spring afternoon. His hair was very gray, and his blue floral shirt was missing two buttons at belly level. At this point, he'd been detained by the Chinese government for 146 days. The first thing he told the police, and the phrase repeated to them most often in the hours afterward, was I am not Ai Weiwei.

.

Your eye looks like it's bulging out of its socket, the reporter told Ai Weiwei. She was speaking of the left eye, which was red while its outer socket, recently drained by Ai Weiwei himself in the bathroom of the police station, had deflated to one-third its healthy volume, so that the inflamed eye sat in it like a halved watermelon atop an empty plastic grocery bag.

Truncheon, Ai Weiwei said, letting the reporter fill in with her imagination the single story possible to fill in given that word, truncheon, in that context. The room, previously busy with the screwing of light bulbs and the scraping of the tripod across the linoleum floor, silenced so that Ai Weiwei's syllables could reverberate on the equipment, so that each stick could contemplate the narrative arch of the tale of the truncheon and Ai Weiwei's eye.

.

But you are Ai Weiwei?

I am not Ai Weiwei.

.

The lights, coned in aluminum, shined brightly and made the red of his eye look orange, grotesque, unappealing for foreign audiences eating their breakfasts with the BBC playing on the miniature television set hanging from a kitchen cabinet.

Ai Weiwei said that for 146 days, he was kept in a small cell in an unknown province and was beaten at will.

At whose will?

The government's, he said. There was not much communication. That's not what the government is good at, communicating.

.

There were no windows in the room the reporter and Ai Weiwei sat in. It was small and gray and bare of furniture save a perimeter of filing cabinets that were posing as walls and the chairs that the reporter and her colleagues had themselves dragged inside. To anyone who has never been imprisoned, there was the possibility that the room would itself resemble a prison cell. But Ai Weiwei had been imprisoned. He smiled absently and let his untied shoelace dangle from the lip of the tennis shoe loaned to him by a sympathetic police officer.

The reporter leaned in and said that surely the men beating Ai Weiwei told him something.

She was still saying the word, something, when Ai Weiwei cut her off to say that he was only told what he was told from childhood, to become Ai Weiwei.

But you are Ai Weiwei.

No. They do not tell you to become what you are. Do men beat you so that you will tell others that you are the reporter Li? No, they only beat me because I was not what they wanted.

Who is they? You said from childhood. Are you speaking about the persons who raised you?

Yes.

Your parents?

I do not know. There were many of us. At first they called us Children of '57, as this was the year that we were born. And we called ourselves sevensies, a play on their moniker. But then, starting in adolescence, we were termed only Ai Weiwei.

I am sorry.

Ai Weiwei smiled, happy that she understood his affection for the collective nickname. He said, 146 days ago, I was taken from where I was born and put in a cell and beaten. This was not an unusual occurrence, a long period of inexplicable violence, but this morning was the first morning I'd waken up with the door to my cell open and not a single other soul in sight.

.

Ai Weiwei moved into the home of the reporter, whom he called Li though her name was Kelly. Their interview spread to the farthest reaches of the globe, baffling workday morning viewers in dozens of different languages.

At the end of the recording, Kelly looked into the camera. She said the question remains, why does Ai Weiwei no longer want to be Ai Weiwei?

Her house guest had seen Kelly's tape of the interview many times but never commented upon it. He asked for eggs and seeded grapes and kiwis, anything but pure starch. Diabetes, he said. She asked him if he wanted to continue to make his art. Ai Weiwei said I never made art. I am not Ai Weiwei.

Ai Weiwei showed up again near Shaoyang, approximately 800 miles from Handan. He wandered the main street of the town, a mining town, in a fresh silk robe whose predominate color was salmon pink though it was also veiny with burgundy and Tiffany blue. Periodically automobiles would pass Ai Weiwei, and his robe would fill like a parachute and reveal his pale calves.

One car stopped and Ai Weiwei said no, he was no, but please take him to a phone, and he would get to the bottom of this. Oh even if it's the last thing I do.

Step in.

The interview would be staged with the new Ai Weiwei, the robed Ai Weiwei, delivering his story only to be cut off, mid-sentence, by the old Ai Weiwei, the floral shirted Ai Weiwei, who would say but if you are you then who am I or something similar. An extended confrontation would follow during which, Li said repeatedly, Ai Weiwei would show this new Ai Weiwei to be the fraud he was.

He is not a fraud Ai Weiwei said. He too knows he is not Ai Weiwei.

But to the extent that he looks like Ai Weiwei but is not Ai Weiwei, he is a fraud, said Kelly. This isn't the penal code, this is arithmetic.

Ai Weiwei nodded. He knew that if the new Ai Weiwei was a fraud then he was one as well, but he didn't mention this since without his speaking a word, Kelly had already spoken its ultimate retort.

And obviously you're not the fraud, you're you.

The interview:

The robed Ai Weiwei described the many-fold ways in which he was not Ai Weiwei (my feelings toward my hair are highly ambivalent; my positions on child-rearing are much less inclined toward the nuclear model, as I was raised in an Ai Weiwei breeding collective) when the shirted Ai Weiwei stepped on stage.

So you are not Ai Weiwei.

And you are not Ai Weiwei.

They sat on wooden chairs next to each other and regarded their other's face. It was like a man staring into a mirror that was subtly warped or wet and freckled with water droplets, a very slight difference. The robed man had a blemish on his left cheek and an ingrown hair on his upper lip. There was also a half-inch height difference, though it could go either way depending on which angle you were staring at them from.

The whole thing was never broadcast, as it was made obsolete by developments from Bozhou, where two more Ai Weiweis were found, on (nearly) opposite sides of the city.

When the tenth Ai Weiwei appeared in the south, in the Foshan prefecture, a press conference was called, and all the Ai Weiweis sat at a long table and submitted themselves to questions from an international sampling of journalists. Two of the Ai Weiweis recognized each other. The rest believed they'd come from separate Ai Weiwei farms, spread throughout the whole of the country.

And you expect us to believe this? asked the first reporter, who was younger than the Ai Weiweis and wore a suit fit too snugly around the shoulders. Ai Weiwei breeders?

Yes, said a white cotton T-shirt Ai Weiwei, bluntly.

We believe it, said a soft fisherman hat Ai Weiwei, honestly.

It wouldn't be the first time, said a green-cube tie Ai Weiwei, cryptically.

One reporter, who like the first was young but was also very skinny and sat into the back of his chair with enough force that the Ai Weiweis were concerned it might crack at any moment, assumed, for a moment, that they weren't any of them Ai Weiwei. "So what do you think of Ai Weiwei?"

An admiring tisk-tisk-tisk was heard.

The most powerful figure in art today, said an Ai Weiwei in a merlot-stained beige dress shirt. Brought a thousand-and-one Chinese to Germany just by asking.

By asking fans, said an Ai Weiwei whose beard held a crust of red crab leg. An artist with thousands of devoted fans. Whose scribbles reverberate for weeks. For whom all of China is the pond on which the pebble of his pen skips and skims and glances across, to the other side.

To the West, said an Ai Weiwei who looked like all the other Ai Weiweis in every indefinite respect but none of the particulars. The artist whose pen skips to the West.

But that's not why he's powerful, reminded the crabbed Ai Weiwei.

.

Kelly watched the press conference from the front row, in between two cameramen whose bulbs flashed at unpredictable intervals.

And now I have lost him forever, she thought.

.

Two men stood between a house and a field, and their dialogue was recorded:

Do you know how easy it is to discredit a politician? All it takes is one woman—or one man—saying one thing, and even if it's dismissed, there is forever the doubt. Just one woman. Just a few sentences. Very simple. But do you know how hard it is to discredit an artist? Impossible!

An artist, the man said in disbelief. An artist... What is there to discredit?

Exactly, said the first man as he stroked his chin, wishing he had a beard. You can't dismiss a man who's never been called to the table. The complete irrelevance and unimportance of the artists make them unsquashable. Unlike the terrorists and the rebels, they ask for no followers, they want only to be heard and, sadly, no one does that.

A tree falls...

Yes, yes, you understand. If an artist speaks and no one notices, which is inevitable, how do we recognize it to censor it?

The question becomes, eventually, what is the difference between art and silence, and the only answer, I believe, is that the creation of art makes the artist feel better about himself.

You have a room full of smiling men; how do you tell the artists from the men who've recently relieved themselves?

That assumes a difference between art and bowel movements.

And how do you tell the difference between constipated men and constipated artists?

The nation which produces solely liquid waste is the happy nation.

An old axiom.

.

A major American rock musician played China as the many Ai Weiweis were first coming to light, an event which started brouhaha in the musician's own country. First, an editorial was published, chastising the rock star for playing a rock-and-roll concert in a nation that dared imprison not just one important artist but dozens of just that one. There was a counter-editorial, written by none other than the rock star himself, decrying the idea that the rock star couldn't play music in a country whose policies he did not agree with. What followed was a vicious set of volleys (blog retorts) and counter-volleys (boycotts) and loves (compact disk purchasings and subsequent ceremonial burnings organized by university clubs) and counter-loves (one dimly lit march, resulting in three accidental deaths). Brouhaha of the first order, it was.

And so the rock star released a statement saying that he would return to China for one night only, and his critics assumed the development would do no less than spark global May-68 Bastille busting, though none of them bought tickets anyhow. (A few hundred American boosters of the rocker flew in just for the concert, maybe only a hundred, the point being that they were completely swallowed by the otherwise off-brown sea of politely bobbing Chinese that made up the rock star's audience.) The set list was nothing if not idiosyncratic. The rock star came to the mic and said, These are my most political songs for my most political fans, before he launched into a late-mid-period selection whose lyrics were derived from a popular children's rhyme regarding a rather fantastical spoon. Then he play a dozen other nursery rhyme songs, more than anyone realized he had, so that it would be counted as a virtue for decades that the show was so heavily publicized and therefore well-recorded, as bootlegged copies from this date were the only existing copy of at least three songs played at the concert.

It might have been decried as a strange and whimsical failure were it not for the moment when the rock star introduced his band and, in the last, his backup singers, a whole choir of black women, each of the same curvy proportions, a cookie-cutter line-up of gospel singers with hair sprayed down to splintery fiberglass. Ladies and gentlemen, the rock star said, this is Ai Weiwei, and the first singer took off his black woman mask, and the rock star said again ladies and gentlemen, this is Ai Weiwei, and again another mask and another Ai Weiwei, and again, eighteen more times.

For their second encore, the rock star played the anthem of the People's Republic of China and introduced it by saying this is a song from a movie, which is true, by the way, it is.

.

Two weeks later, the rock star was invited to play a third show in China by the government, which the rock star did, playing in exact replica his very first show there. There were no Ai Weiweis to be found.

Afterward, he was banned from ever playing in China again, though some Ai Weiweis continue to this day to tour the countryside, performing the rock star's songs.

Two men:

But of course, the artist was not detained because he was an artist. It was because he said the special words in public and in print: jasmine, aloe, myrtle, sleeping beauty.

Revolution.

He was important to the extent that he was capable of organizing. The artist the organizer was arrested, not the artist the artist. And the government and the press downplay this, they list his function as "artist" when it is not.

The goal of the government is to make its people believe that art is important?

Which it is not.

A center was established in the Sichuan province, the Center for Ai Weiweis, two kilometers north of a rendering plant. The state took credit for the Center, a fair indicator that it was not, in fact, behind it. The Ai Weiweis spent their time discussing their personal emotional concerns about not being Ai Weiwei and being mistaken for Ai Weiwei, even by other Ai Weiweis. The doctors observed this distress and devised a ritual dialogue for the patients to enact as a so-to-speak talking cure.

Hello, are you the famous Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei?

No, I believe you are mistaken. (Turn around.)

(Hand on shoulder.) Don't be modest, you are the famous Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.

Perhaps we mean a different man.

Theoretically, arts and crafts took up the rest of the Ai Weiweis' days, yet they refused to take up their Popsicle sticks and actually build anything and instead discussed the work of a famous artist they admired while they sat in the cafeteria with all their materials in front of them.

Do you remember the stadium? asked an extraordinarily cowlicked Ai Weiwei.

Yes, we all remember the stadium, said everyone else.

In the evenings, there were many hushed but aggressive discussions over who was behind them all and why they'd spent their lives becoming another man. A popular theory was that the Swedes were behind it all. This stemmed from a Swedish-derived honorific that many remembered from

their childhood dreams. Still others thought the Swedes were behind the Center alone, that the Swedes implanted the honorific in their memories for reasons too sinister to infer.

Over 150 Ai Weiweis lived in the Center, and they went on walks together, in one near-endless straight line, all the way to the outermost gates of the rendering plant. Once an Ai Weiwei went missing and was discovered past the gate, leaning against a steel grate out of which came a billowing smoke cloud from the plant, the smell of blood and lard and pig bone becoming ash.

I am trying to make a hand ax, the Ai Weiwei said upon questioning. Just like our ancestors did, using hammer-stones and flakes.

The fumes from the rendering plant were making him cry uncontrollably and his hand-ax, when given over, was moist and salty.

.

The wives of Ai Weiwei: beautiful some, old some, Chinese most. A few Mongolian, Korean, Arabic, white, American. These were the wives identified on the marriage certificates which trickled into local presses, day by day, leaked by government authorities.

Wives could be divided into two categories. The first: those who enjoyed the publicity, who spoke to reporters, flirted with news anchors, and bought brightly colored clothing in sizes just large enough for them to fit into. They spoke of their adoration for their particular Ai Weiwei, the real Ai Weiwei, who was behind so much beauty in modern China, even if today he'd gotten a bit away from himself. Or they wrote long editorials to newspapers, all variations on the theme of a once-in-a-lifetime talent being crowded out by others. Or they called families they hardly knew, to complain about their newly absentee husbands, and it was not uncommon for quite a while to hear talk of these calls, or to receive one yourself, from a polite young woman met on several occasions, and you'd had no idea who her husband was. Sometimes the husband had been met, and he was known to be Ai but not that Ai, certainly not, and what a surprise this phone call always was.

Then there were the wives who did none of those things, seen at banks and outside hospitals, crying into handbags. For a time, it was assumed that all women looking forlornly, especially, for some reason, forlornly at ducks or at bodies of water inhabited by ducks, were married to an Ai Weiwei. These figures inspired no shortage of poetry.

In time, the poetry disappeared, as did the women.

.

Overseas, a new product came on the market called the Ai Weiwei Hand Ax, manufactured by the inhabitants of the Center for Ai Weiweis. Rated the Number 1 Hand Ax by Consumer Report and even the Best New Kitchen Essential by Food and Wine, it was immediately celebrated by

everyone from vintage car enthusiasts to bartenders. There were even softball leagues popping up across the American south which advocated the use of the Ai Weiwei Hand Ax, blade facing backward, as a bat. A dangerous but rewarding pursuit, they said.

The Ai Weiweis themselves were happy with their new-found technical triumph, most especially the Ai Weiwei who created the first Hand Ax at the rendering plant while crying. He would walk through the halls with his head held high and with a special servant Ai Weiwei who devoted his whole life to shuffling after the hand ax-creating Ai Weiwei, cutting his vegetables for him and serving him his tea in the afternoon. This is some life you've made for yourself, the hand ax-creating Ai Weiwei would say to his servant when they sat down to tea, and they both would laugh. Of course, the other Ai Weiweis would listen through the wall (these two had a special room, formerly belonging to the shadowy doctors of the Center) and all the other Ai Weiweis would laugh as well.

.

The reporter Kelly left the store at approximately 20:34, holding a microwave in a white box against her chest. Walking to her car, she heard the name "Li" repeated, not particularly loudly, so that she was unsure if it was a call or if she was accidentally eavesdropping on a chant meant to be heard by some private deity.

It had been two years since Ai Weiwei had moved out of her apartment.

They chatted briefly, and Kelly rested her box on the curb. She'd retained her same job, failing to rise any higher in the establishment. Yet she was too cautious to attempt a move.

Ai Weiwei said he was much the same way, too scared to try anything new.

And what are you doing? she asked him.

Wandering towns, he said. Odd jobs. I worked selling used cars; the dealer thought that I might provide name recognition. I was there six months but didn't want to settle down, and I came back here.

I understand, Kelly said. She bent down to pick up her box but snapped up before doing so. She said, gently, I just thought you could have been so much more.

I was part of a phenomenon, said Ai Weiwei. My fellow shadows and I were in newspapers and magazines and had television news specials devoted to ourselves.

But, in the end, Kelly said, you accomplished nothing.

And now Ai Weiwei is part of history, said Ai Weiwei. Until I die, men will see my face and think they know the story of it.

Perhaps, she said, and Ai Weiwei left before she could pick up her bag. In time, Kelly began to think of her experience with Ai Weiwei and the Ai Weiweis more positively. This new positive attitude showed through in her work, and she was quickly promoted.



Travelogue, Kind Of by Tony Mancus

1.

we're staring down
we're done

the map—Virginia
traffic, the listing sea
of parenthood.

our periods
are legion—

the legion is full
of old men farting
and sweat-cheap drinks.

I don't own my suit, a seat
inside, three fingers
of simple pressure

applied beneath
the eyelids in a tilt-backed
chair. they say

it's safe
to drive right through here.

2.

why has every person
who's ever been
in the seat I'm to sit in
on a plane before me
the same exact size I am?
I've never once
adjusted the belt
to fit my hips.
it's already set
to my width.

3.

I worry the edges of my pants, the crotch
always blows out eventually, too, and I don't
listen to the safety talk.

Heart crashes in my head

enough to close my eyes. No serial #s
in my dreams Mark Hamill
gets blowjobs from invisible everyone
& the oxygen masks

don't come down
when they should
we land with a lift & tilt
of wing & I whisper to you

as you complete your outfits—
your shoes perfectly coordinated,
the sleep staff simple
as the waking kind.

4.

A man leans in to his traveling friends
and learns how to pop his ears
by holding his nostrils closed
and blowing—

how to log into the sky. A child
dog noises and we are confused.
There's a dog.

The engine's press for launch.
We are up & banking
snakes of light—the highway's
slow & loved
heart pressed forward rush
when the engines dip
into a flare of metal sound
then quiet.

Dog child light on the wing & so much
for what to do in the dark

5.

This week I've got a hungry mouth and the body to prove it.

6.

A symbol on the dais, the waitressed sky says careful.
I'm drinking a coke and eating the tiny pretzels.
Question games play over and over & no, there's
nothing for
the tequila of individualism—we're supposed to arrive
early in this tin bolt. All of our bodies produce flammable
gas and here we are, never lighting any of it.

7.

My eyes don't have any problems either
aside from being unable to see.

8.

The cat gut stretching
a pie piece—you say the answer
and get it, move your circle
round the board. New question
shines up against the platform
& another copy

cat sets the sights—please me, please
yourself, please me again, then you
& in that order

no one belts the wiser purring engine
lost of its central churn and charge.

9.

To get the flywheel: to dive the pistol
home without the depressing hammer.

10.

viewers now must borrow someone
else's hand to press the change
channel button & their entire lives
become unglued

the cushioned
couch beneath them

11.

overheard:
she did go on a log flume
the largest temper tantrum
I've texted
the strikeout move

12.

To navigate a city by its bars—the windowed
ones, the ones to get drunk in, the policed
stationed
after-effects of many pale afternoons
clusterfucked together. The bit you battle with
is better than the battle you bait with.



Hard Tokens Plink by Tony Mancus

cold like quarters in the seed
how apples make friends
with what they fall into—hand or land

firm headed creature commune
skills the crane lost in flight
its uppermost parts pull apart

to lift the bottom of a building
vertical compartments in the skinny parts

a wind no window gathers
the strings on a foreign capital
play songs none remember

but the players sway and whirl into instruments
of the state—forget your health
insured with a staple gun and placard

what it means to slave your intestines, intention

see no whiskey on the bottle
just the rings for a cap
adjust the volume with tapwater
smiling your teeth to shine

glad to meet you handshake

formal attire licked into shape
the crust is upper and utmost
but the servers don't shed no language

what tricks employed to forget
a constant disabling

the goals and holes to file and till
sheet snag sheets full of scratching
a whopping pile of stars

die in each blink
they're not as sable as us
dipping our untied mouths

the unity of rapture
it's high time we've cuttlefished
and inked up another
sopping wet letter

to eat the next plague
in each tearstain
to wait for the suburban lawn
burning each sunseason down

the long looks of the neighbors
on our faces
strange into strangled
a flapping shout made home

if it's a car, they say, it's only
exploding for a minute
and all the children lean
into their drive away

set their heads retired
with a wick
and flower
tilt on the stem

sugar mates coat to tongue
the forward facing parts
blister in the sun
like steamlights through film

watch you tough, shut touch
out while the whole field
dots with bugs—curtain
of live things for a day swat

sounds get tiny in each of us
through cans knocking along

behind the vehicle
wheels and horns and waves

so long liquidy heels
hours soaring on the walk
being and written in the same
gesture—milk on the ground

edicts won't bait terse monsters
spray the regulars down
or at least their chairs
so no one knows which scent

to sit next to the mirror
in a way that makes the body
split and double—once my lips

stuck fast to the court of your yard



GQ/ GQ/ GQ/ GQ/ by Michael J. Martin

Yea im the real fine gfunk

lover of the hip dip

code for honey-dip, get it

slipslip *Cot dayum*

Yea im the real fine

gfunk masterclass

diamond in the back

sunroof top Yea

real fine gfunk

baby lets boogie

boo can't boogie

this Dont ask Brown sugar's on the stereo

Yea gfunk *Cot dayum*

joints a humidor

the real fine troche ("for the black man")

real rhyme gfunk masterclass

swagged out

the real fine

diamond in the back

sunroof top

diggin in the inseam

g-lean gfunk homeboi

shit is ill

GQ GQ GQ GQ by Michael J. Martin

Let me handle this.

There's this engineered mosquito

Before the engineered mosquito

There's this complicit plague

This is disassembled and used to build

H.I.T.S: but no one knows what it is.

But no one knows what it stands for.

Are you hungry? Do you want

A memory to eat? R U HuNGRY?

I care about Whitney Houston.

I care about Whitney Houston.

I care about Whitney Houston.

It takes years before you're

Diagnosed with a compulsion.



From the Soft Destruction by Michael J. Martin

Quality of light is different in Magic Town.

The sugar is sweeter.

(two song pigeons watch over their grandchildren,)

Ric Flair is immolating for us all.

C.R.E.A.M.

To be hit with an introspective blowdart, to love & love & love

like a tiger is eating you alive.

Nightly I cottonswab my Eustachian tube,

& what I hear...|

The refrigerator shuts down;

it eats our food.

The sugar is sweeter.

I don't own that website anymore the domain is for sale,

The engine of the spiritual modem—

There's a .dll for that.

Nightly my body hums

Cold piece of work.

& the sun comes up because of the dance we do.

Young American Actress by Michael J. Martin

2/4's Ginseng and red bull
splashed blackberry vodka

blunt wraps filled w/
crumbled kush,

we are rubberized
seafoam animals,

waterswollen and
crayed out of our minds.

The divo records himself on TiVo
to masturbate to his beauty.

There's an underground lookbook
floating on a limp whisper,

or something about fresh meat,
Emporium of deerface, I told you

we are exquisitely messed up.
I've been liked to death,

somersaulted
called For A Good Time—

I'm sorry the time wasn't
average my current net worth

exceeds a trip to a German sexroom,
meaning, your [sic]

uncomfortably glad to be here.
Being alive is kind of a reality fuck.

Young American Actress by Michael J. Martin

Dracula teeth,

scary faces

Nas *You Can Hate Me Now*

Kabuki

Frank Sinatra

alone in a room

w/ a red phone, pow

now it's a party

The hero's antithesis

has developed a serum

to bring the dead,

I'm supposed to betray him

once in the first act

& again in the second

Being so evil never felt

so arbitrary

There's a gunshot

for every good deed

is the tagline I live

Believe it for no other reason

than I've repeated it

while nibbling on their

most expensive bread

React by Evan Morgan

All mannerisms drift up to the Himalayas
Look! there goes solitude hand in hand with
fickle, vanity on her back suckling one
disembodied erect nipple: brown sun-bleached contrasts warm.
Ego pulls a cart of indulgence,
whipped for his efforts,
scars stripe the backs of his knees, or is it hers?
under its skirt I find only promises.

I am drawn to the rapid cavity in my chest
soft black glowing shards of glass cut my hands
but I plunge deeper, blood hardens full of taste
I am up to the elbow...past
Next comes the torso slipping easily
without lubrication,
shudders.
I pull my legs through and my hips, lastly
folding it all shut, tying a bow,
A gift for me
An unbeing
Disrobed at last I am free.

Directions for a wholesome nonexistence:

1. burrow under the mtn
2. accumulate nothingness
3. dissipate

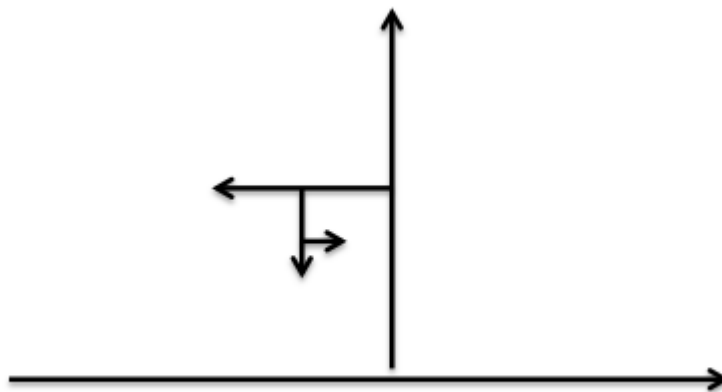
Lines of Bisection: An (A)e(s)th(et)ic(al) Suspension of the Teleological by Scott F. Parker

There is no human who exists metaphysically.
—Kierkegaard

From wherever I begin, from there I set out with a destination in mind (even when the destination is the process), an endpoint envisioned (even when the envisioning is of an endpoint that will present itself at some undisclosed point in time to some as yet undisclosed—or unconceived—future self), or imagined, or invented post hoc—a step having been already taken from the origin; all of these are endings. The forward thrust of the moving edge of my consciousness traces a line leading into an infinitesimal unknown, the receding limit of destiny on the horizon. What vague outline beckons? Cohesion, completion, consciousness finally circled and contented (a self in full). The teleological pull of a promise whose appeal is so appealing for the sake of the unkemptness it promises (falsely) to relieve.

A writer who sets himself a problem has already set his answer, too: this arrangement of words follows that.

Fig. 1. Lines of Bisection



Here is *my* problem: here is the goal I never obtain: *there* is the moving target of my self-satisfaction, my self-acceptance, my self-identify, my self itself: all things gathered up under the covered structure of this sturdy timeline: thoughts occurring *in order*: this idea always needing and invoking the next: no periodicity in this chain, just links of instances soldered at their endpoints and melding into the causal chain of the history of this sentence: it reaches where it needs to reach and no further: it reaches out to the responsibility to elucidate:

My life made sense when I was a physics student: the teacher said Tycho Brahe had a wooden nose and a weak bladder—I too was ready to represent science and the certain knowledge of precisely (if my results were empirically falsifiable, they were still consistent(ly bold)) where the shoe would hit the floor: my vector was magnanimous and I could identify crystal forms in European water without a telescope: I invented the future every time I looked at the sky. This period of my life, though, was over before it reached its midpoint: I learned of Zeno of Elea and lost all sense of progress: I was past Newton and bound for Feynman when the conservation of linear momentum was disproved by the gravitational force of my human fucking heart (q.e.d.) . . .

I got to Feynman anyway because anyone who writes like he bongos is worth the rhythm of a dance through possibility where probability leads to the necessity of answering the paradox in whatever terms are available to you: these are my terms: existence and essence, in that order: everything is up for grabs and the narrative resists, resists conclusion . . . where would it end?

But the synthetic urge was strong in me and I blew through the idea that I didn't write this whole thing, this whole endless stream of thing leading on to thing, for the sake of a metaphysics that would make Hegel jealous (if only he'd been born later, if only . . .) . . . process me processing my process as I tie strings across valleys and tell Nietzsche to walk:

That's where I'm suspended, alone with everyone else: halfway between always and the philosopher of the future (you've heard the future comes the day after tomorrow): be ready: to jump: our souls spread wide as we reach for the summation that will give us a moment to breathe if it gives us anything at all—and if it gives us nothing, nothing we will take: we are strong. And we make declarations.

.

That's the history, summarily told: physics and philosophy written, only silence left untranslated—and I fear I'll never arrive.

Moving forward, the question is this: the situation is this:

Looking back, I see the journey started long ago and the terminus is no closer, though much ground has been gained. I proceed.

I always proceed.

The project is clear: to write the self into being, to compose a life.

But the rules keep changing, my keyboard keys keep sticking: only the metaphysical buttons are working and I can't push them anymore. I can't do it. They won't go.

The question remains: which self I will create (which one created I?) and which one is doing the writing and how are they related?

And the answer hasn't changed in a million evolutionary years: I'm barefoot here and there's no ground beneath my feet.

I ripped the bootstraps clean off my boots.

The story keeps restarting; I keep restarting it, waiting for the true, the definitive, to present itself. I don't believe in anything, but it's in my faithful bones to try.

Time and words and self all tumbling around and spiraling in on one another . . . the noise amplifying and magnifying and crescendoing and et cetera and ending in:

[^](#)

Ordinary Woman by Lindsay Ruoff

I threaten my cat
with the world of
men and dogs

As am I
past continuous
painting a book

on a book
on a book
on a page

I don't understand
how deep the ocean
that's why I dive

or do that thing
or do that thing
the grass in my bed

Notes Toward More Notes Towards Nothing by Gary Shipley

I pathologize sunlight from a vantage point located inside thoughts of eyeballs other than mine. All my trousers are crotchless in the dreams of little girls. Or so I'm told. And why nobody ever speaks of sharks with loose bowels is not a hole I'll bother to fill. Into the carcasses of dogs I cram candy for those who've never seen a piñata. Their eventual dementia will be a crisis not of what's taken but what remains. And of what remains, my groin is a landlocked island of yellowing hors d'oeuvres. Before they died, my family developed the clotted legs of bees. An odd pneumonia pollinated them. My wife one morning sneezed a lung across her cereal. The post-mortems were conducted by a slew of insects each with a Christian name. And the contumacy of my teenage children went unmentioned at the funeral, which was well attended by people I didn't know, who'd all botched their own gender reassignments before changing their minds. Lonely, I soon became infatuated with the aroma of ghosts. I smelled entire worlds of people around me. This newfound company was every bit the usual anticlimax. My increased hypersensitivity would distort like an amplified whisper. The gorge in my chest became adjustable. The touch of the women I met hurt like electric shocks. Only recently have I learned to live without such human upholstery. In the mirror my body exiles in Technicolor. The skin on my testicles is always black before it disappears.

Bullet in Face by Gary Shipley

Reykjavik goes down with Asperger's, as racists eat beluga whale in a palace in Addis Ababa. The new Batman scalps one child prostitute too many at a bunga bunga party off the coast of Libya, as emphysema develops an appetite for city skylines. The Hezbollah robs bodies on the New York subway, between Lexington and Rego Park. Above them in a yellow cab, a Muslim gangbang queen finds herself engaged to a blood disorder. Every weekend, more depressed swimsuit models volunteer to be burned alive inside decommissioned Soviet submarines. I find the codename for my lack of empathy. It rhymes with swagger. Bulimics employ time travel to avoid vomiting, and Joaquin Phoenix fails another audition to continue his own life. He's made to eat aborted virgin births until his hair falls out. More Norwegian massacres are planned to celebrate NATO's exit from Afghanistan, while unfluffed cameramen capture God Particles orbiting the rented anus of porn actress Vanessa Blue. A family of heavy carb users supplements its income by manufacturing yogurt drinks from the weep of its cyst, and Google honors the birthday of Joker James Holmes. Rainfall levels in Angola come under the jurisdiction of Sharia law. The light in old people's homes is always made of sponge. When RedTube finally becomes the official sponsor of the Torah, I will celebrate by pedetrianising the brains of morphine addicts. CPR is the best suppository. But somehow my wife's implants are infected with bovine TB. I film her meltdown on my phone in a container city the size of Pakistan.



Mine, or Inside the Shadow by Garrett Strickland

*"Not in the spaces we know, but between them, They walk serene and primal, undimensioned and
to us unseen."
—H.P. Lovecraft*

*"And yet they do not belong to the world but to the underside of the world; they do not attest to form
but to lack of form, and they are only clear to a person who does not penetrate them [...]"
—Maurice Blanchot*

AFTER TIME UNFATHOMABLE, all tools of telling collapsed under the weight of that which they were meant to measure and likewise the paths we'd made unto our moment, it was decided we'd continue to dig. This tho spirits and supplies had dwindled, members lost to weariness or bouts of madness that flung them into the towering chasms we opened to on occasion, others hazarding to carve a fate perhaps no different, the requisite faith required to do so presupposing a bottom or a center we would reach not by gravity but by our very hand, shovels and pickaxes long dulled to uselessness. We remaining ate our canaries before even the hardtack ran out, and spoke now to each other in a manner an outsider (if there were such things) would think involved our holding them still alive beneath our tongue. We adapted. We feasted when it was given to us to do so on the cavefish and insects self-effulgent in puddles or swarming in and out of cracks, thereby gaining their quality of light, bodies stripped assuming the role of the torches and lamps that had quit us ages previous. In more poetic moods, I described us to us as a living shifting constellation traversing the space of the rock, very soon to converge at last to swim in the buried sun awaiting our fought for arrival.

Of the many stones discovered, a few possessed qualities unknown by those who'd remained on surface, place kept alive by legend alone and either scorned or longed for depending on morale. Their traits communicated themselves mostly when, having been held in one's mouth, they'd begin to fizzle and smart. A certain flavor of indigo onyx would make one glow up further red, begin to float and see thru the undug abyss, the hollows-objects-beings suspended for the stone's practitioner in a wide open space in which the work forever toiled for by hand and purpose was in a flash now total, the sensation of center—for how slow is movement—swollen to degrees that only those the stone would know could know. In ceremony one is exempt from expenditure, suspended staring and rigid, confused when not in commerce with those distant at why these others should claw and moan against nothing and advance so slow a pace. Neither could one understand their words, if indeed they spoke at all. One would tend instead to swivel and tip, pivot on one's axis under influence of discovering magnetisms, newly aware of an echelon to which one was before occluded, great whales swimming thru the planet like weather with the ease of their sound.

The WYRM it spoke to me and said:

][ENJOY TUNNELING thru what was once the earth but is nowhere the process of which][am composed the act of conversion one thing to another fullness to lack and back again the oscillation supports maintains as][move my being transmuting the chain of which despite my size is lowest beneath even you my child you look upon my facelessness and cower but what need have][of a face when][have gazed upon the first huge and embracing][one of the first pores to open thereon issue therefrom and will no doubt be one of the last what need have][of a notion of state tho when][am without position dimension strain substance quality instead that which gives rise to those the illusion of interval of variation thus all goads obliged as system as assistant to cosmic rot fire of entropy in the rapeyard harvest forking in the rising of the eye

: : : : :

Waking the door to core before me, I behold in my milky limbs the lights of my brethren grown into the thought of a body, the nerves we'd been if ever discrete meshed into the map that's delivered me here, the only location.

Hand a key familiar alien, my wrist twists in the lock, and I open.

[^](#)

Shapeshift by Molly Sutton Kiefer

A girl shaped like a bear. A bear-shaped girl.

A girl inside the maw of a bear. A girl with a breath like a roar.

A roar beneath me. Well-trained. Shields and pistons.

A wet field. Cupped hands in a fountain.

The chill that travels there. Bones like a dancer.

Skittering. A pelted promise. Wearing my pelt.

Dance by a fire pit. A girl shaped like a girl.



Lochia by Molly Sutton Kiefer

Time is like basil. It will ease the sting of the scorpion.

Place it in the hands of the dead. Allow a safe journey. Did you place it—?

I'm still bleeding. It's been four weeks.

I reach down after, and all I smell are zoo-pens. I am the scent of a baboon's torso. I am terrible to look at.

Span my hand. Can't you push the rest? I feel the build-up like a boil. Like tremors on my tongue. Marbles of fat.

The green blades burrow up within me. Like loaves of bread.

Cooking too long will suction the flavor. Add this last.

—in the mouth of the dying.

It's less blood now. You won't know it any more.

This is the smell of your flesh. You've petaled open.

It will move through.

You breathe. You ache.

You collect more light.

Man-Without-a-Desk by Zac Tomaszewski

Man-without-a-desk
Wanders the high plains of
Human history

Grandfather of us all
Ur-figure with a straight spine
He sits in the tall grass
And waits for the moon
He thinks we have forgotten him
And in many ways
We have

We forgot when it was his birthday
And the books that we borrowed from him

But he can still see us
Every time lightning
Flashes across the sky



A Treatise on the King of Bulgaria by Caleb True

There is a man with whom I share a birthday: the King of Yugoslavia, Alexander I, who ruled during World War I. During his rule almost a million Yugoslavs died. It was nothing startlingly new. Some kings are, like women as lovers or child-bearers, habituated to the burden of human flesh with every successive generation. Someone will think up something to die for. But this story is about the King of Bulgaria.

Ferdinand.

A man who lived in a hard time. He shared a name with a man who was assassinated, the Archduke of Austria-Hungary. Ferdinand of Bulgaria was no stranger to assassination. Approximately twenty-five heads of state were assassinated in the twenty-five years before the Great War began, before this story began, and enough attempts on Ferdinand's life were made as well: bombs tossed, concealed pistols discharged, malnourished anarchists beaten to a pulp and hanged, drowned in the Iskar.

Ferdinand was pressured into entering the Great War though he knew he would lose. The German army had been ordered to dig in; the General in charge hid in the attic of a country house in eastern France. The General later suffered a heart attack. In the east, the Russians were pouring entire cities of young men into Austrian guns. And yet Ferdinand of Bulgaria was forced into the war, what a stressful affair.

It is said that when Ferdinand of Bulgaria was stressed, he would retreat to one of his country palaces, nestle down on a chaise long, and bury his hands in bowls of precious gems—diamonds, rubies, emeralds. These jewels, always cool to the touch, never failed to sooth him.

Ah, history loves a detail like that.

History ignores what else is almost certainly true, that Ferdinand of Bulgaria, as he buried his soft white hands in the precious stones, had a Bohemian servant girl between his legs. No one can ignore the soothing power of a Bohemian servant girl between the legs.

Look.

Historical consciousness is a memory learned, and I have learned a memory about Ferdinand of Bulgaria.

And a thing or two about relaxation.

Ferdinand signs a document and sentences his tiny country to a couple years of epic slaughter. Only a man with tender kisses on the insides of his thighs can do that kind of thing and still find time for tea and baklava. And who can deny the satisfactory nature of Bohemian girls?

Another thing:

It is a common trope of history that oral sex and mass slaughter go hand in hand. They are symbolically as well as coincidentally linked, a perfect love. Don't rely on a historian to tell you otherwise, those armchair affairists, afraid of action without teleology.

Noncombatants. Pacifists, some. They could never comprehend the full meaning of a blowjob.

The circle of life made into a half moon.

The terse microcosm of genocide.

Ferdinand Maximilian Karl Leopold Maria of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha-Koháry: he made big decisions and worked hard to relax in his bowls of jewels in his villa in the country.

Nonetheless, he lives a nightmare.

Listen:

There is a beautiful dogwood tree in the gardens outside the bedroom window at the villa at Dolna Banya. The war is over and the fields of dead soldiers have been plowed over, planted over.

Years pass.

The dogwood is older than sin. A desperately ancient relative of Ferdinand planted the tree when he was Khan of the tribes who lived where Bulgaria exists now. The dogwood is gnarly and enormous, and all around it stand the graves of fallen officers, the graves of men returned from the front and successfully identified, interred. The dogwood, through phantasmagorical mechanisms of the xylem and phloem, draws the bodies of those fallen officers up through its massive trunk, revealing them as fruit when the petals of summer die and fall off. The officers grow from little bulbs, fetal fruit, to large, fecund men in full uniform. They hang by their hair until fully ripe, maybe 75 kilos, at which point their eyes open and they fall to the ground, pull out their sabers and stalk toward the palace, looking for the King of Bulgaria, for Ferdinand Maximilian Karl Leopold Maria of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha-Koháry.

There is no word for zombie yet, the word still means "snake god," still belongs to the West African languages and not the Western horror canon. Ferdinand of Bulgaria awakes in a cold sweat. The little Bohemian next to him rolls over and asks him sweetly in Bulgarian what is wrong. She thumbs around his nightgown for his penis.

The tree of his ancestors has unearthed the future dead, how could the King live with that future?

Two floors down, in the east parlor, bowls of gems sit on small tables on either side of a chaise long. They hold the imprints of His Majesty's fingers from the day before, when the Bohemian girl drowned untold millions through peristalsis.

On that day, King and servant both had committed acts of mass death, at least symbolically, playfully, and with simple repetitive gestures. The King of Bulgaria with the scratch of an inkwell pen, the Bohemian girl with her boudoir graces.

It takes a special kind of relaxation to join a war on the losing side.

And what of the zombies, the men from the front and successfully identified, interred?

Well.

The King of Bulgaria wakes up the next day after a little help falling back asleep by the Bohemian girl—let's call her a consort, she is now an important character in this Artsybashevchinist yarn of sex and death.

The King of Bulgaria orders the dogwood tree outside his bedroom window be cut down.

His attendants are flummoxed. They protest. The tree has been in the family for generations! The oldest attendant says how many generations? sixty!

How many kingdoms ruled over Bulgaria before Bulgarians ruled over Bulgaria? asks one attendant. How many Czars, how many Khans?

The attendants present all bow for a moment, and thank King Ferdinand for Bulgarian independence, written into law by His Majesty's own hand only eight years earlier. In Ferdinand's boyhood, Mother Russia whipped the Ottoman Turks; it had taken thirty years for *de jure* sovereignty to follow. Ferdinand, while his attendants stood remembering, thought about how long it would take for the dogwood tree to flower.

The King of Bulgaria gives another order to his attendants; there was to be no cemetery on the palace grounds.

On any palace grounds, ever.

Let it be known.

The attendants go to work, hacking at the dogwood tree all day. With each dull thud, branches shake and buds fall. The sounds of axe blades in a tree so thick with time and phantasms of doom permeate every corner of the palace. The King is unable to relax—not with his hands in bowls of jewels, not inside his Bohemian consort, though she grabs his face with two hands; though she

forces him look her in the eyes; though she pushes her peach plum breasts into his face and clamps her hands over his ears.

It takes seven days to fell the tree. The attendants hack, three at a time, day in and day out. Their blisters open and leak onto their skin. The young attendants complain, the older ones tell them it ain't half so bad as the trench foot of the German army, the lice of the entrenched French.

That's where the saying, "Put a candle to your arm," comes from: French lice. The tiny creatures cry out, burned to death on hairy French arms. The wax drips to the trench floor and hardens against the shit and the dead. All over Europe the French lice were famous.

When the attendants told the King of Bulgaria that the tree was finally down, he went to have a look. He ordered the tree carried away and hacked into firewood.

Such details—jewels, fellatio, dreams, Bohemian consorts, trees, lice—are written off as historically irrelevant. Such trifling little details, pertaining to such a trifling little country—Bulgaria—are unimportant in the grander scope of World War I, in the grander scope of history.

That's what they say.

But just look at how those jewels affect the lives of millions of men and women, look at how the soothing touch of a Bohemian tongue on the inner thigh of a statesman can make his pen twitch, make a signature bleed onto paper, a nation of young men bleed out.

The unraveling of reality is the cost of historical consciousness! spouts a French critic.

One cannot take archeological leftovers—antiques—the jewels of the Bulgarian royal treasury, a bland portrait of a strikingly blond Bohemian woman found in the walls of a statesman's villa at Dolna Banya, and just will a narrative from thin air!

The French critic should know better—a Frenchman, having no academic understanding of the power of oral sex!

Appalling!

The very same sorts of calm decisions affected the modern history of his people, the French; how else could the Sanguinocrats, or Robespierre in his highchair, discuss morality and carry out Thermidorean terror whilst preserving their identities as idealists, as Frenchmen, as lovers? To better understand history, he, the French critic, should perhaps die once or twice; he should find himself a treaty and a bowlful of jewels, an inkwell pen and a Bohemian consort. A pacifist could never comprehend the full meaning of a blowjob.

The tree at Dolna Banya is now firewood, the flowers mulch. The twigs make a path from where the tree stood for sixty generations to the shed where the tree is split and stacked. Men mustered from the cities of Bulgaria make a path to the frontier, to the trenches that will serve double duty as mass graves. Their abandoned machine gun emplacements will mark the place of rest. The soldiers who don't die will assemble their comrades' discarded carbines and stack them in teepee triads. Some dead men return home when there is room on the wagons, but the wagons are often full of living men, men with head injuries and broken dreams, goners with gangrene. Some men can return home only as apparitions, or as the fruit of flowering trees in the gardens of the aristocracy.

There are whores too, in queue behind the columns of conscripts. Their pleasures are universal, their body language like Esperanto. Their price, reasonable. Their services are satisfying, but they come at a price beyond the going rate in Bulgarian leva: supposedly, more men died in World War I from venereal disease than from bullets and warfare.

A pacifist could never comprehend the full meaning of a blowjob.



Home by Viktorsha Uliyanova

No home hides that snake,
Crawling up to my finger.
He is not well-bred.
He limps through black waters,
He licks all the poisonous plants.
His stomach is hollow.
Moon-full, moon-hungry,
I want to feel his slenderness in my arms.
Upholstered with dead sockets,
Limp as a fish.
But he is not.
A fish, or a black-veiled worm.
He is the widow,
The egg-headed monarch, the virgin at childbirth.
He strokes my hair, gross-feeding charmer.
He burns, and lifts me up to a craving wake.



Sestina for Mothers by Viktorsha Uliyanova

They will grab your tiny fists, but find nothing.
You've dreamt of darkness once before, girls
Bathing in the shallow water of your sea,
The sea of their mothers, they are born
Like this. With hollow hands.
With mouth like yours. With legs the color of the moon.

I've watched you grow so slowly, tauntingly like the earth inside that moon.
You've vomited chunks of birds, and soil. I still heard nothing.
I waited. Then I took hatchets and carved these hands
To hold you. I wrote you lullabies. Listen to the silent swirl of sirens, of the girls,
It is all here. There's nothing to hide but the death. Death of moss, death of water, are the same as
their birth
Black line in the sand. Black line in the earth. Black line across my body and across the body of the
sea

Irretrievably vanished. Gone for all the eyes to see,
They imprinted, across the shadow of my stomach's moon.
The sea will not be born and you are me. You will become me. Become nothing
But the salt in the gushing horizon. The wind of breath in girls'
Milky nightgowns. The mirror image of turquoise in my hands.

I let the sun press into you, as it hands
Its hideous length to my body that I can no longer see.
In stitches, I stitch the praised fabrics that the girls
Before me opened. They labeled it grass of the moon
Rising in blackened light. Rising in waves, rising up to grow, you will become nothing
But a ghost. A wave afraid to be born

In a circle of my own unwilling birth
And death. And all the flowers, and your hands
Are lost. Everything is black. Everything has grown to nothing.
Stretched with darkness and darkness of the sea
Crests. The body is changing with the moon,

And the hole grows bigger in the girls'
side. And You and I. We are gliding sea-creatures. We are not the saffron girls.
We won't stand in a circle. We won't cross in black upon their black births,
And worse than black. Your hands

Disappear like smoke on splintered cliffs, terribly breaking inside the shadows of my sea.
I have lost the earth, the water. All is black. Everything has grown to nothing.

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One Minute Friends by Yael Villafranca

after Days of Being Wild (d. Wong Kar-wai, 1990)

The people of this planet all have daughters to run away from. When you think a honey could be yours, you'll roll over, batter yourself in sand. / I mistake your gloves as a signal I break into your story you try not to snarl at me before the luminous boyfriends. / He called me a mouthy gash / but I loved that bed so much I became it. / A redfaced lamp, a knight of satin electronics: you could not take pride in me. I'm like this all the time. / It's so easy to fall for a new avenue when you brain the girl who lives there. She clutches my hair at the roots / propelling new blood in circles // As a ghost of a thing, I could eat all I wanted and never be full, never be on time. / It's our skin. Not all of us wake up. // You can adopt a swing to your vowels, talk their talk. You do. I did as a joke then I did for real. / This is not to prove I can keep going without you. / I don't want a prince, I want a man. I don't want a prince, I want a woman. What if I identify with the prince, I said, and you laughed. *How can that be?*

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Caudex Valley by Brian White

A knife falls in my dream.

I woke with a jolt, my hand held out to catch the blade. Muscles grip desperately to the structure of my bones, as if, in my weakness and fear, they might spill to the floor and slip beneath the caulking of the tiles. My hair was tangled in knots, my hands trembling and my intestines curled into a fist.

In these moments I close my eyes, and, there it is: the landscape of Caudex Valley, my home, waiting behind my eyes. It waits to calm me, to absorb the discomfort. As rain falls across its surface, my skin wets with sweat. Heat and humidity warm the rocky ground—I fever and boil. In the shadows of its ridges the soil cools below the surface—my skin is buried in its folds and the fevered sweat dries inside my pores. The landscape and I, we are bonded.

But, with a twist of the gut I'm pulled back to the pain, back to the bed, back to the flickering memory of a knife in a dream. The bathroom sink waits for my nightly deposit of vomit. The organic confetti of muddled food swirls along the ceramic curve and down the blackened drain.

A woman stares from within the mirror, trembling from weakness. She catalogs the features of my face and I study hers in turn. We follow the trail of veins down the other's neck, through the curve of our arms, webbing at the wrist, ending in a tangle of fingers. She clenches her lips, they turn white with anemic anger. Chalky lesions heal slowly as new raw and vibrant ones take their place. Disease burrows and fear flows. I reassure myself, this is only an image.

I step onto the patio to see the landscape with my eyes. Sunlight singes the edges of night and these twig bones no longer seem to crackle as I stand. I close my eyes and the landscape remains. I open my eyes and the landscape remains. I shouldn't sleep, I decide, for the fear of dying can only come true when I'm not awake to fight it. The dawn assures me I will live to see another day.

A knife falls in my dream.

Andres stands staring out my bedroom window, light splashing across his face and his thick knit suit. We meet eyes. "We'll leave in an hour," he says turning back to the window. Light illuminates particles of dust, treading electric currents around his face. Releasing a heavy sigh, the stagnant air startles. Particles drift into shadow and disappear.

Andres brews coffee and we settle on the porch facing Caudex Valley sipping at mismatched mugs. The sun's light, now filling the day, feels warm and forgiving on my broken body. Empty sky presses to empty ground.

"How did you sleep?"

"Well, thank you."

I play a game. Leaning back in my chair I put my feet up, aligning my view of the banister to the horizon. If I unhinge my thoughts in just the right way it creates the illusion of hanging my legs over the edge of a pool. I stretch my toes to dip them in the sky. The lie of cool water presses to the screens of my senses. My lungs warm, my nose crinkles, my heart tenses. Dissonance stretches to a breaking point. In such close grasp of the true sensation I strain myself and the illusion collapses.

"We should go."

Andres leads me from his car into the Radiologist's Office, balancing my weight with his heavy arms. "Almost there."

The carpet's geometry pulls my eyes in tangent loops, its swirling path leads to a cordial secretary. Her mouth and teeth coordinate into a smile across her plump face. Not too eager and quite genuine. I smile back. The symmetry of the gesture is complete. She guides me to a small room where I strip and change into a plastic gown. It crunches like a leaf as I step back into the hallway.

A knife falls in my dream.

A needle enters my vein and the medical technician assures me that I'll only be uncomfortable for a short time during the CT scan. He didn't want to wake me—he hopes I don't mind.

The scan begins, whirring and clunking. Its bulky mechanism, sinewy with wires, spins inside its seamless plastic exterior. I close my eyes knowing Caudex Valley waits for me, waiting to absorb the discomfort. But, as I pass through the whirling machinery, the landscape is torn away in thin slices by the magnetic imaging. The CT strips cross-sections of my legs and the landscape is sliced along its shallow ravine where a river once ran through. Next, moving up my thighs, the simple dirt hills along the base of the valley are taken away in silky strips and observed. The CT moves across my hips and the cavity of intestines, spleen, stomach, and kidneys revealing pockets of sediment with stories of the land.

Along my lungs and ribs, sky, clouds, air, trees, and birds slip away in an electronic stack of images. Trees grip to its pines, leaves, and branches, fearing that if only one is lost, the rest would certainly follow.

The technician is so sorry, but can't give me my results today. It's okay. I know what they'll say.

"All set?" Andres hands me a cigarette.

"All set, thanks."

He stares at two men who exchange business cards in the parking lot. They shake hands and their palms clap with suction. Andres' moosed expression clouds and grays.

"I just want to do something normal again," I say.

Slowly he turns his face toward me, a grizzled poetry glows inside him. "Let's get a drink." A heckling smile bends his forehead into six or seven creases, bridging his temples. I close my eyes. The smoke in my lungs fills the landscape, fogging the trees along the ravine. "Ready?" His voice echoes across the valley. I open my eyes. "Yeah, I'm ready." He pulls a deep final drag of tobacco.

Andres shuffles his body, creaking his chair in conversation with his weight. Gravity sculpts his weight and his leather belt stretches below the table with a hnnnnhh sound. "Where's that waitress?" His eyes twitch along the lines of my broken silhouette. Does he always look at me this way?

The waitress smokes outside. Through a semi-transparent beer ad on the window she is tinted red. Clouds of red smoke diffuse through the air like blood through water. He nervously massages the tabletop where mangy spots of wood have been exposed. Over a few decades the paint and acrylic sealants have worn down from the tapping of palms and tumblers against the surface. The motion loops in my thoughts. It must have occurred half a million times at this table alone. Slurp and a clunk. The table felt inhabited by the motions of a half million pulls of liquor down the open throats of strangers. Beer, cigarettes, scattered conversation. Again, again, again.

Slurp and a clunk.

Andres steps up to the bar, too eager to wait. I follow. "Bourbon," he says, motioning for two with a flick of thick fingers. Money soaks into a pool of melted ice, the bartender peels it with a familiar distaste for the exchange. A few sips and the skin on my face sinks, relaxing on the fault lines, dangling with elastic give.

"Down the hatch." Slurp and a clunk.

The liquor's glow settles between my eyes. We silently watch a group of women across the room play a drinking game. They slap the table and hold cards to their foreheads. Flashes of enthusiasm and reluctance blush and fever among their shrill laughter. The waitress scrapes her finger across the faux wood-grain burned into the plastic serving tray. Her synthetic fingernails canvas the grooves and I feel the touch of wood in my fingertips as I listen.

Slurp and a clunk.

"Get'ya 'nother?"

"No, no, no."

"Come on, live a little..."

"Okay, but just one more."

The barflies slur as one, shoulders tapping and wallets clapping. Their thoughts gather like a fog: In a couple of years... Just enough to last me a lifetime... I never did see my daughter again... They smile and hug one another with a dark compassion. Time drips from the ceiling to the floor.

Slurp and a clunk.

"Get'ya another?"

"No, no, no."

"Come on, live a little..."

"Okay, but just one more."

Andres squeezes my shoulder as he stands up. "I'll take you home after this next one. Promise."

My head is featherweight and shaking with the rumble of alcohol. I close my eyes. The landscape spins. Dirt falls upward toward the sky. Clouds twist into spirals. Trees bend and uproot, falling in impossible trajectories. Andres calls out from the bar, he asks the landscape if I've had too much to drink. I open my eyes. Andres leans in to kiss me.

The landscape leans away. "I've had too much to drink."

He smiles at the landscape. "You and me both."

The bartender calls out, "Last call!" I put my glass to my mouth and let the remaining bourbon fall through my body. The nausea passes.

I'm in the street. That is, we are, Andres, the landscape, and I. He holds the landscape up as we walk through an unlit suburban street. The bar shrinks in the distance.

"This sure wasn't the best idea we've ever had." Andres mutters.

We are in Andres' front yard. I've fallen in the grass and stand up with wobbling difficulty.

"Make it home in one piece, okay?"

"Andres, don't you want to invite me in?"

He laughs. A slick mirror of sweat covers his skin and drips into the corners of his eyes.

"You told me over and over you want to go home. 'To puke in your own bed,' you said. Remember? I called you a cab." Andres leans in to kiss me.

The landscape leans away. "I don't feel so good."

He smiles at the landscape. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"If I live."

"That's not funny."

The cab honks and the landscape walks away, forgetting to say goodbye. I turn to call out to Andres, but he's disappeared into the house, only the porch light remains. Its glow illuminates a puddle that filled an inset square in the walkway. Caudex Valley peers over the edge of the liquid and a face emerges. The sickly face of a dying woman stares daftly at the barren land. The landscape steps on her face, disrupting the image, she sloshes from side to side in the ripples.

I pull keys from the door and struggle with the light switch. The landscape enters my house. In the darkness the details are flat and greedy, lamps and chairs all stare. I stumble through the hallways, knocking a frame from the wall, it thumps against the rug, but doesn't break. Through the kitchen the counter-top jabs into my hip, I yelp, smashing my fist to its surface. Plates, cups, and forks all rattle behind the wooden skin of drawers and cabinets.

After a tall glass of water we, the landscape and I, fall into bed. Pillows cushion the nausea. I close my eyes and touch the landscape's leg. We whimper and whisper secrets. We sleep, the landscape and I, like tangled lovers.

A knife falls in my dream.

The blade slips solemnly and staidly into the soil of Caudex Valley.



Interview with Alan Heathcock

With Adam Segal of WBR

My first brush with the writings of Alan Heathcock was this fascinating blog post, "Why I Write: The Battle of Right Hand, Left Hand," in which the author frames his writing as a noble-minded if Sisyphean endeavor "to investigate, to seek out answers, to calm the hurt, to stroke the troubled mind."

This is hardly an exaggeration on Heathcock's part. The stories in his 2011 collection VOLT wrestle with oft-repressed feelings of grief, remorse, and alienation; with the sense of impotence we can feel in the face of the lot we've been unceremoniously handed. Each story takes place in the fictional rural town of Krafton, a town afflicted by flood and fire, by poverty and violence, full of youth who need to escape and adults who'd very much just like to get on with their lives.

Recently I spoke with Alan Heathcock about repression and regret, heroism and selfishness, and the "sense of oblivion" that real freedom can be.

WHOLE BEAST RAG: So I want to get right into this: What is evil to you? What does that word mean?

ALAN HEATHCOCK: Oh, gosh, that is an incredibly difficult question. The more I play around with stories, which is to say that I'm always picking a particular question from which to write, the definition of evil is going to shift. Certainly, if we look at every war in the history of the world, there isn't any side that would consider themselves evil. Especially those cultures that believe their violence is justified, or those cultures that are openly aggressive, would celebrate war more than others. The Vikings, for example, would celebrate the heroism of their own violence. But they would not see themselves as evil.

So this evil is a shifting term that seems to denote a malevolence that goes in opposition to an individual's idea of moral rightness. Maybe there is some general senseless violence; something that's just crazy or random. Maybe that's evil? But that's so specific, so small, so guttered, that it seems to take all of the bite away from the word, evil. It's a slippery thing to get your head around, and I think about that a lot.

WBR: I've often thought that the key to sympathizing with another human being is simply to follow them around long enough to see what their lives are like. That is, it's difficult to assign blame to someone when you can see the broader context of their actions. In *Volt*, many of your protagonists do what might be called "the wrong thing," but they all are still more or less sympathetic. I'm wondering: Have you ever written a character who would still be utterly reprehensible even if they were the protagonist?

AH: That's a tricky question too. There have been a few times—nothing that I've published—where I've written from the perspective of an individual who I personally thought I was in opposition to. My worldview was directly oppositional to theirs. Trying to experiment to see if I could find my way into some empathetic connection with this other human being. I don't know if it's even surprising that I've found there to be some course of decency to what they're doing.

Certainly there are traits and impulses that should not be rewarded. Greed for the sake of greed, the sort of thing that benefits only the individual. These are big Shakespearian things. Ambition and greed. Probably certain sexual and violent impulses that only benefit the individual. So I think to a certain selection of those cases we can assign the term "reprehensible." It's just a weakness or a sickness within an individual that they're not able to see beyond their own selfish impulses, and the destruction that their impulses bring into the world.

WBR: A lot of terrible things happen in *Krafton* over the course of your book, but I don't think I'd necessarily say any of the characters are outright cruel. No one's doing anything bad for the sake of being bad. Everything seems to fall within the scope of realistic human impulses, as troubling as those impulses sometimes become.

AH: Yeah. Just from where I grew up, from things I was in close proximity to, a great deal of what I saw from people who ended up in prison or in other trouble with the law, they weren't bad people. They weren't necessarily trying to do bad things. They would have preferred to do something else. But they were caught up in a moment of survival, or in a situation where they had to make a decision between three bad options. They did their best to pick the right one. Good people made bad decisions.

So I've seen more of that. Of all the people I know who have gotten in trouble and will somehow be labeled by society as "bad" people or "problem" people, there are only a couple I know who I think are actually sick. There is a sickness within them—that we can call evil.

WBR: I was talking with friends the other night—this reminded me of your story "The Staying Freight"—over drinks and I asked one of them what the worst thing was that he'd ever done. I was expecting some sort of choice he'd made, something he'd chosen to do that he knew was wrong.

But what he told me instead was a story about accidentally letting his dad's garage burn down. And sure, in a way he was at fault—he knew the truck had been running hotter than usual, he knew certain materials in the garage were inflammable—but it also wasn't a choice that he made. It wasn't a result of the thought, "I'm going to burn down my dad's garage." So I loved that answer to the question, because it wasn't at all the answer I expected.

I thought about Winslow, the protagonist of "The Staying Freight." Near the story's beginning he says "Now and forever I'll be the man what killed his boy. A man what shoved his wife."

That's what he's most worried about. But those things weren't his choice, weren't the result of his own volition. The worst thing he does, as far as I can see, is to walk away. So with a character like Winslow, how do we assign the blame? Sure, he does "the wrong thing," but is he at fault?

AH: I think we all struggle with how we define ourselves and how we see ourselves defined by others, especially within our communities. It's the whole self-fulfilling prophesy: the way we see ourselves is the way we become.

So, being in close proximity to seeing an event like what happened with Winslow—that actually happened—you see that a person's grief turns inward. And their shame, their blame. It becomes a part of how they define themselves. That guilt is so overwhelming. It can't help but completely take over a person. It often does. Those who can recover from such things are the people who can somehow release themselves from completely defining themselves by these actions.

You know, guilt and shame play a huge part in influencing how we act in appropriate ways. They stop us from committing some outward aggression, like "I'm going to do something against that person." The reaction to an event, the guilt and shame, those are powerful parts of any situation.

If I think about the things that I most regret in my life, it would be a similar thing. It would be the times when maybe I didn't even force something to happen, but I didn't stop it from happening. Or I couldn't change it from happening. I felt like those things were defining me. We have to face ourselves.

In a way, Helen does that too at the very end of the book. If she hears the voice of God call out to her, will she just lay there, and think herself crazy? Or will she get up and do something? That's the question for all of us. Your friend is asking himself that, too. "Why didn't I stop the fire? Why did I let the garage burn down?" Nobody may be blaming him, but there's a part of him that thinks, I could have done something. Metaphorically speaking, I heard the voice of God, and I just lay there. That guilt, that shame, it's something we carry with us.

WBR: I've been thinking about this a lot recently. As you said, much of what we most regret are things that are utterly outside our control. And it does seem that where we should really put our own personal responsibility is what we do in the aftermath; the small choices we make after the big choices are made for us. Does that sound reasonable?

AH: I think that's completely reasonable. I think that's what I keep exploring. By and large, in my stories I ask, Why is it that we can't recover? Why is it that we can't come out of tragedy and do something heroic? Winslow is the perfect example of a man who couldn't recover from his own grief. It would have been much better if he could have just found his way to reengage with his life, with the love of his wife and his community.

But that's not the way we do. The human frailty is the thing that says, We don't deserve this anymore. By saying we don't deserve it we walk off into the wilderness and allow ourselves to be pummeled by other people. To be made a spectacle of. I think that's human nature.

If I look out at the people I know who are good people, most everybody is struggling in some way or another. Even if they're succeeding in all other ways—they have a good job, and they have a stable family—they are struggling with something within. I think we're a lot more fragile than we need to be, to have a society that functions as well as it can.

We see profound examples of that on a daily basis, when we have big national tragedies. Finally we see people—the desire to be heroic and to say something positive finally comes to light. We have trouble being that kind of person on a daily basis, in our own private tragedies.

WBR: But...and perhaps I'm restating what I've said before, but don't you think our responses to our own private tragedies, on a daily basis, have more weight than how we respond in the big critical moment?

I.e., The Carnegie Hero Fund gives out awards for spectacular heroics, people endangering their own lives in order to save the lives of others. In interviews with these award winners, asking why they did it, it was never a premeditated "I need to save that life for the following reasons," it was more like "I didn't see any other choice." So for me the most important things are the tiny choices we make at every instant when the situation isn't dire.

AH: Yeah, well, I think that's why we're all a mess. People struggle with just taking care of the small things, or even the bigger things within their own lives. Recently I gave a talk at a book group, and we were talking about grief—that comes up quite a bit when I give my talks—and people are really uncomfortable in talking about grief. Usually somebody, in the course of talking about my book, will say "Well, it's well-written but you know, really, your book is kind of uncomfortable." Then everybody in the room will laugh.

That's what happened recently. One woman spoke up—she was a kind of loud, obnoxious, boisterous woman—and she said "I don't know why people have to talk about this stuff. I remember back when Princess Diana was killed tragically, and everybody was crying about her dying, and bringing flowers to her grave, and I just rolled my eyes and said 'Oh, you people are so weird!'" She laughed, everyone laughed, and I said "No!"

That's exactly the problem. That sentiment is exactly the problem. We don't allow ourselves to even be heroic in our own lives. We all have these small tragedies, or things that even feel big to our lives—the death of a loved one, say, a grandparent or a parent dying. A friend dying. We don't allow ourselves to show grief because we don't want that obnoxious woman at the table talking crap about us. [Laughs]

We wait for these big national events. Princess Diana dies and finally I get to express my grief openly! It's now publicly acceptable. That sort of scenario plays itself out—that's just with grief—but it plays itself out in so many different ways.

Or, like in your example, just yesterday I read a story about the Chicago interstate: A truck was on fire, and two guys ran to the truck, pulling the driver out right before the truck exploded. They interviewed one of the guys, and he said, "Uh, yeah, we were just parked behind the truck. We decided to see if anyone was in it, and then he was in it, and we just rescued him. Come to think of it, that was probably a really really dumb thing to do."

That's what he said, "a really really dumb thing to do." But that's how a lot of heroism works. If they had thought it through, they might not have wanted to endanger themselves. But that's what it all really boils down to. How am I going to endanger myself? And how am I going to be seen?

Even this guy, who's just done this great thing, just saved another human life. His first instinct is to protect his own reputation, "no, that was kinda dumb. I'm not so sure why I did that." How many people do you hear interviewed who own up to it, who say, "I believe that it is right to run into the fire and save another person's life." No one says that. We don't even have the right to say that. We live in a strange world. So we have to say, "that was dumb." No it's not. From my perspective as an author, if you're sitting in that car, and you don't save that man's life, then you have to live the rest of your life with the thought that you did nothing.

So it's not dumb. It's very smart to try to run and save that guy. Because otherwise you live with the thought that you inadvertently caused the death of somebody else. It's tragic that you're placed in that situation, but that's the truth of it.

WBR: It also raises the question of moral luck. You didn't ask to be in that situation, and yet here you are. You either have to live with a death on your hands for the rest of your life, or you get to be a great hero and everybody applauds you. But if you'd just sat home and watched TV, you wouldn't have even been in that situation. It's a little crazy how that comes out.

AH: Yeah, and that's most of Shakespeare, right? Most of Shakespeare's stories, you have some poor schlep who's just minding his own business, then something happens and he realizes "Oh wait, I can be king now." So he starts down a pathway of making decisions and moral compromises and defining his way through ambition and greed and whatever else it may be.

But maybe that's everyone's story though. We're not placed into a situation until we are. And every one of my stories is that exact scenario. A man accidentally kills his son in a farming accident, people have to recover from a tragic flood, a woman is placed in the role of being sheriff and has to handle a dire situation. A great purpose of art, particularly story, is that it lets us rehearse these complicated situations so that we can make sense of the world as we walk out our door every morning, wondering if we're going to be on the interstate behind a truck that explodes.

WBR: This leads into something that's really been troubling me. At the end of the final story, "Volt," Jorgen talks about his sergeant overseas. The sergeant tries to inspire the troops by framing their war as a war to keep the world of chaos and pain away from the world back home of happiness and peace. But Jorgen realizes that he never had that happiness or that peace. His whole life, all of it, was chaotic and painful. Going over to a warzone didn't change that. This bothers me a lot.

Many of your characters, the people in Krafton, who suffer these tragedies...they're not doing bad things because they're bad people. They do what they do because...because their parents aren't there or they have parents who are violent or they're desperate, or there's no other way around it.

The thing that troubles me so much is this: How can any of these characters be judged, in the end? I've lived a really easy life; I don't think I've ever been put in a situation in which all three choices were the wrong one. So how could I ever possibly judge anybody like that?

AH: Oh I agree, I agree, it's an impossible situation. I was thinking...here's a perfect example: The other day I was in a convenience store, filling up my truck with gas and I went into the convenience store to get me a drink. There were two young women, the clerks of store. They were both dressed in pajama pants and fuzzy slippers. They had an iPhone out, were watching some video, and they were just dancing around the store, completely oblivious of me. And I'm trying to get them to sell me this bottle of water. But they were completely oblivious.

This is going on while the entire city of Boston is on lockdown. This is going on while my nephew who is serving in Afghanistan is doing whatever he's doing. Part of me says, well that is freedom. We talk about what "freedom" is, that thing we're protecting. Freedom is that sense of oblivion. That sense that nothing bad is right around the corner.

It's a precious thing. I'm not even trivializing it. That is a precious thing. Maybe I'm feeling it right now, maybe you're feeling it right now. I'm not feeling a sense of threat that a bomb is going to drop on my house, or that there are snipers in my trees. That's a very precious thing, freedom, the sense of comfort we have as Americans. Absolutely there are people out there, my nephew is out there right now. Who knows, because of the things that he sees on a daily basis—I've seen pictures of where he's patrolling, it's not a pretty place—will he ever have the sense of freedom that those girls in that convenience store had?

I helped a friend who made a documentary. He was in the battle of Khe Sanh in Vietnam—a group of Marines were trapped in this valley for 77 days, pretty much under constant bombardment—a terrible battle. In the documentary he interviews 15 survivors, who are now in their 50s or 60s.

One of them struck me. One of them was a well-dressed, well-spoken man. You might see him as a bank president, or sitting down the pew from you in church. Some of the others had problems with

alcoholism and generally rough lives, but he seemed to find his center. And toward the end of the movie he said that every morning, he put his feet on the ground and he heard mortar fire. Every morning. So that struck me. This is years, years, years and years have gone by. Some people will take on the burden. And I'm not so sure that burden has ever left them, once they're indoctrinated into that burden.

So even freedom itself is felt differently by different people. I think about that all the time, which is why I really think that sense of peace that you feel, that freedom, is so precious, and also so tenuous.

WBR: And the thing about Jorgen's whole family is that I'm not sure that what they're feeling at any given moment is that freedom. The family matriarch, when Helen speaks to her, admits that they as a family have these problems and they do work through them. But it's obvious that there is some degree to which they don't have all the essentials for a good life. Even back home, even when the country is at peace, I don't think they have that sort of freedom you describe. The feeling of safety, the knowledge that you have everything you need.

AH: That's right. I think there are a great number of people in that position. And not just weird, drug-running families out in the sticks. They're on every street, in more houses than we would think. People who are affected, who are ill-equipped to accept that sense of peace into their lives. One of the tragedies in America, maybe one of the things I write about a lot, is this two-pronged understanding that being an American, you're afforded a sense of freedom and peace, and that is the great and beautiful thing. But it's afforded to some people. But there are entire portions of our country in which nobody is afforded that sense of peace. At the same time too often I think America is represented in pictures and text as a place where everyone afforded that sense of peace. Which means that it is at the discount of this huge group of people, at the discount of everyone who is not afforded the sense of peace on a daily level. That's one of the great American tragedies, I think, dealing with that tremendous misunderstanding.

WBR: I really enjoyed that blog post about why you write. It seems like every writer has for themselves—not quite an excuse—but an explanation, a definition, or a justification of what it is they are really doing. I think every fiction author knows that it goes beyond entertainment, that they're trying to achieve something more.

But you really frame it as a struggle with moral ambiguity. Do you think that to be a fiction writer is necessarily to be a moral figure? To be someone who wrestles with that? Or is that something you've chosen to take on for yourself?

AH: A story is a unit of communication. It is a discussion of something. We can use that word, "moral," and depending on how we use the word moral, I think it would apply. We're trying to make sense of why people behave the way they do. I know a lot of writers who would feel that it's too much of a pressure, to accept it as a truth of their own writing.

I consciously accept the role that I am investigating moral truth. It sounds pretty pretentious and it scares a lot of people away. But I know that's what I'm doing. And I don't feel it as a big and pretentious thing, either. I feel it as a symptom of who I am and the life that I've led and the things that I've seen. It's the most natural thing. It's the thing that I did every day getting on a school bus trying to make sense of looking down the aisle, trying to figure out if someone's going to smack me in the head or try to pull a fast one on me, or will someone offer me a seat?

That's the truth of our lives. So it's extended itself into my writing, in a way that I feel is the most graceful and natural thing I can do. So I just openly accept it. Even though I think I could make an argument that everybody else is doing it, too. Whether they want to admit it or not.

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Interview with Featured Artist Tyler Spangler

With Katharine Hargreaves of *WBR*

Tyler Spangler's work focuses on the formalist relationship between images removed from their original context. He explores the connotations of color, form, and photography through the medium of digital collage. His designs are colorful and unabashedly chaotic. Over the last two years, Tyler has created five 440 paged books filled with his own designs and worked on countless collaborations internationally.

He has a BA in Psychology and is an Art Center College of Design dropout. He ran an illegal punk venue for 13 shows until it got shut down by police. Tyler currently freelances and works with clients in the music, surf, and textile industry.

<http://tylerspangler.tumblr.com>

WHOLE BEAST RAG: What role does accident play in your process? In creating a work are you ever directed by accidents?

TYLER SPANGLER: Sometimes accidents can be amazing. I have actually learned a lot through mistakenly placing elements. Experimentation and accidents go hand in hand.

WBR: How long have you been surfing?

TS: I have been surfing since I was seven, 20 years. I ordered and designed my first custom surfboard when I was 12—it had red and yellow stripes on it. I would say 70% of my inspiration comes from surfing. ... I grew up about 20 minutes from the beach. My dad would take my brother and I every weekend to surf and camp when we were really little. Once I got older, my friends and I altered our parents to drop us off at the beach all day.

I moved in with my dad sophomore year of high school. He lived 2 blocks from the beach in Huntington. I was in Heaven. I was able to surf every morning for my P.E. class. I am now living on my own with my girlfriend on the beach in Pacific Palisades. I don't think I could ever live anywhere else. The ocean has such an amazing energy to cleanse and inspire.

WBR: When I read that you were a surfer, that connection immediately seemed so strong and helped make sense of it—but I don't exactly mean that in terms of iconography or aesthetics, but rather this willingness just to let the image play and go where it wants. And as I go through the catalog, I could almost group pieces together as "sets." Maybe I've mischaracterized it, but how would you say that your work relates to surfing, if at all?

TS: I love the feeling I get when I surf. I try and convey that feeling when I design. While experimenting I get so excited. Sometimes if I find a new technique that looks cool I will go crazy and make dozens that have a similar look.

WBR: You still work in the surf industry, what exactly do you do? Is it graphic design or something else related to art-making?

TS: I worked in a surf shop in Newport Beach for five years while I was in college. The whole mentality and lifestyle definitely contributed to the way I approach art. Recently I started freelancing for surf clients, which is really amazing because I rarely have to tone down my work. I work every day for the same company doing their website merchandising and when I get home I hammer out freelance and personal work. It is my goal to freelance full time but as for now, gotta pay the bills.

WBR: You went to Art Center for a while but dropped out—did you have any particular reason for leaving?

TS: The philosophy of the school wasn't consistent with mine. Essentially their program promoted the designer to be completely transparent.

I believe that when you look at a design piece, you should be able to name who designed it. Which is true in the case of people like: David Carson, Wolfgang Weingart, and Ed Fella. Suppressing a designer's unique voice is the worst thing an institution can do. I also didn't agree how they prioritized excruciatingly painful craftsmanship standards over experimentation. I concluded that I could accomplish more on my own by re-allocating the exorbitant amount of money I was spending on tuition on my personal projects.

WBR: You have several species of works that you produce. They run from fully abstract pattern and color compositions to pop culture references. For examples of the latter, you have pieces based on the 2001 monolith and Homer Simpson's head extended to mimic Marge's hairdo—do you approach this content differently than in other works, or do you treat references to pop culture and advertising mainly as formal elements?

TS: I think it depends entirely on how I am feeling at the time and what type of music I am listening to. If I am in an upbeat mood I will create something clean and quirky. If someone cut me off on the freeway I might create something a little more dirty and torn up. I usually treat all of my work with the same iconoclastic and humorous tendencies. The only variants in style would be in the cases that I described above.

WBR: Are you saying that when you choose to engage with some kind of loaded signs or text—for example, this which is comparatively blunt and direct, opening the image up to a lot of “hot” readings—it essentially all reduces to form and mood?

TS: I can't really get into people who take themselves too seriously. I was raised listening to people like George Carlin and watching spoof shows like the Simpsons and SNL, which has directly influenced the way I perceive things like testimonial, commercials, and anything where someone is trying to sell something. I hate sales. In this piece I wanted to gouge those personal ads you see on TV about dating and prescription drugs that promise a better life. I thought it would be funny to portray something illegal: bestiality, with a soft blue and gentle touch, mimicking those ads.

WBR: To what degree do you think the iconography of commercial design, i.e., advertising, has bled into your artwork? There are a number of pieces you've made which, to me, can read almost as advertisement minus the product, the form minus the subject. It can be a beautiful, haunting effect.

TS: Advertising has definitely infiltrated my work. I don't think I take it any further than a simple nod. I could totally see the piece that you mentioned being used for a Mentos or eHarmony ad in some twisted alternate universe. I just find it really hard to take advertising seriously.

WBR: When figures do appear in your work, they are usually female. Have you given any consideration to why this is?

TS: I am artistically drawn to females. I feel they exude a sense of mystery and mystique that adds suspense to my work. The role of the female has shifted so much in the past 50 years. As a result, interpretations of their role in my work will always be varied, and I think that is a good thing.

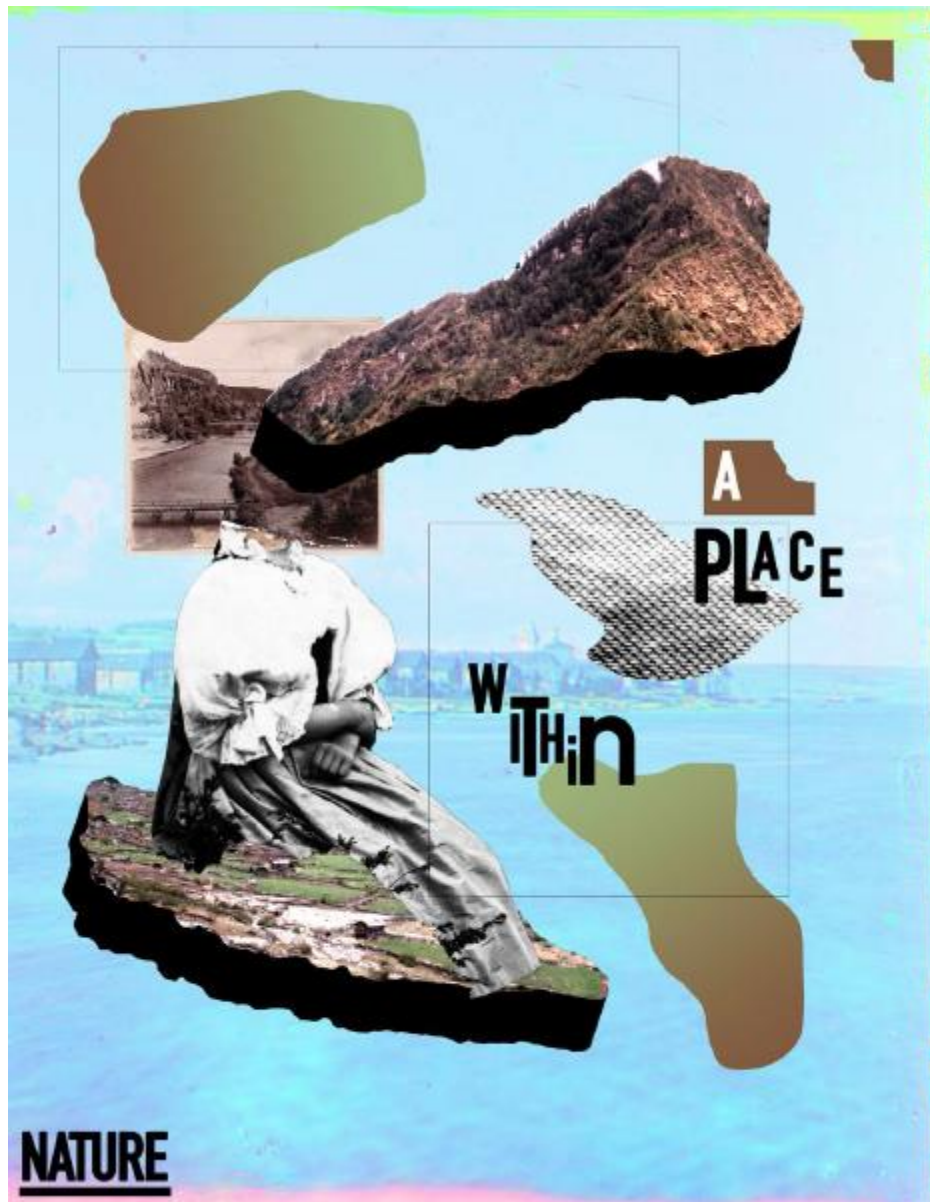
WBR: On the other end of the spectrum, you have something like #8 [below], which is more ethereal and intricate. To me it suggests the tiled bottom of an ornate pool, as seen through the translucent water. Do you think about such physical references at all when building a texture or a pattern?

TS: Bringing it back to surfing and being surrounded in such a beautiful and tranquil environment—I think I try to recreate that experience. I try and make things that I would love to see in the world; whether it is on the side of a building, on textiles, or covering an airplane. I want the piece to be hypnotic. I want it to draw the viewer in.

Issue Artwork by Tyler Spangler



Tyler Spangler x WBR 1



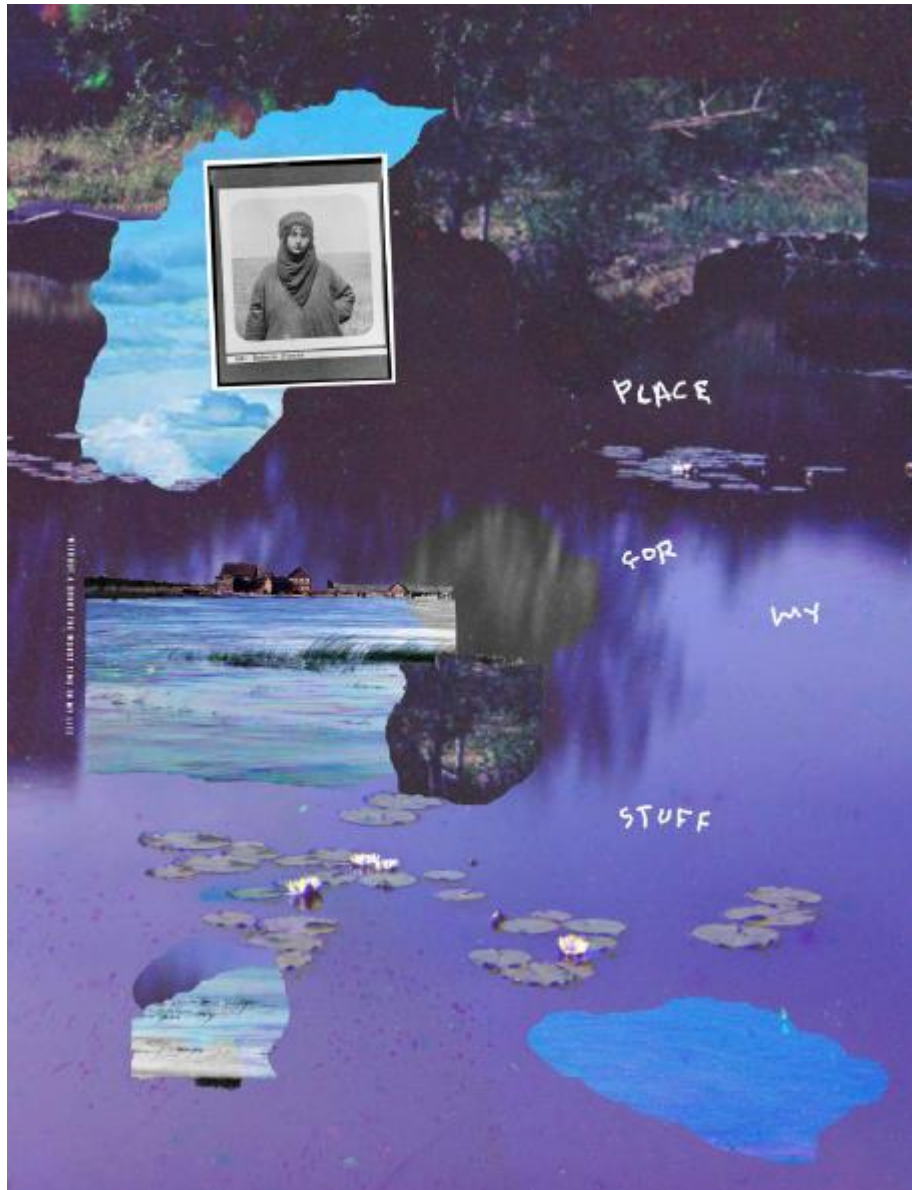
Tyler Spangler x WBR 2



Tyler Spangler x WBR 3



Tyler Spangler x WBR 4



Tyler Spangler x WBR 5



Tyler Spangler x WBR 6



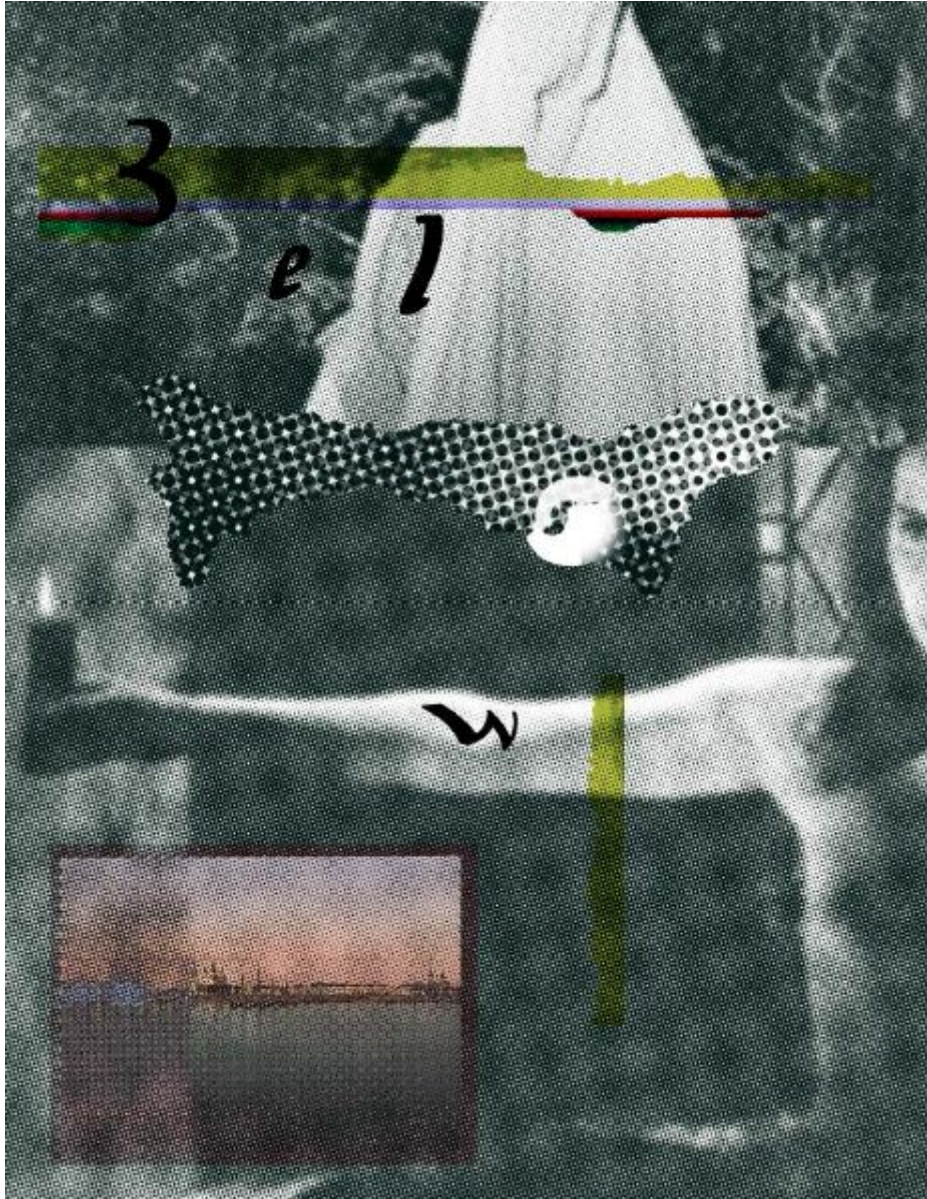
Tyler Spangler x WBR 7



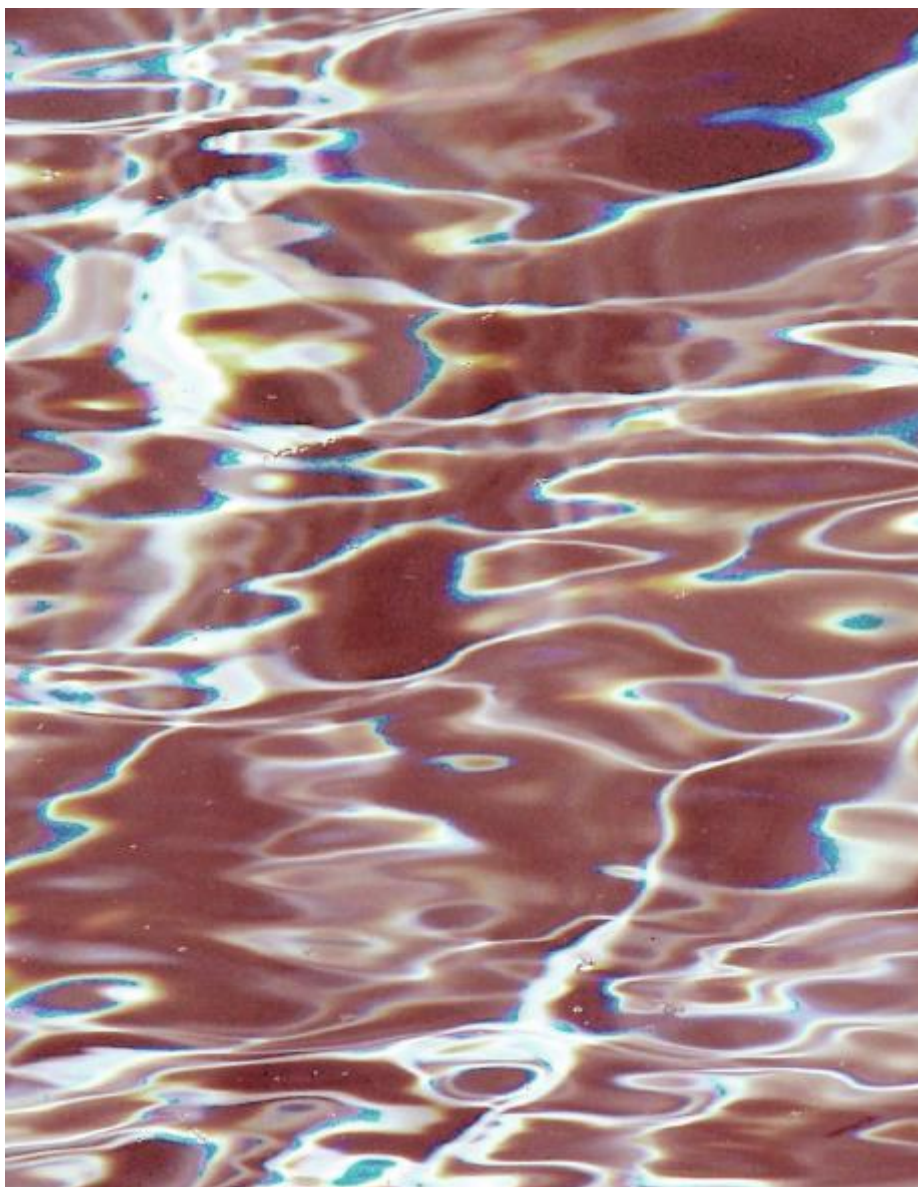
Tyler Spangler x WBR 8



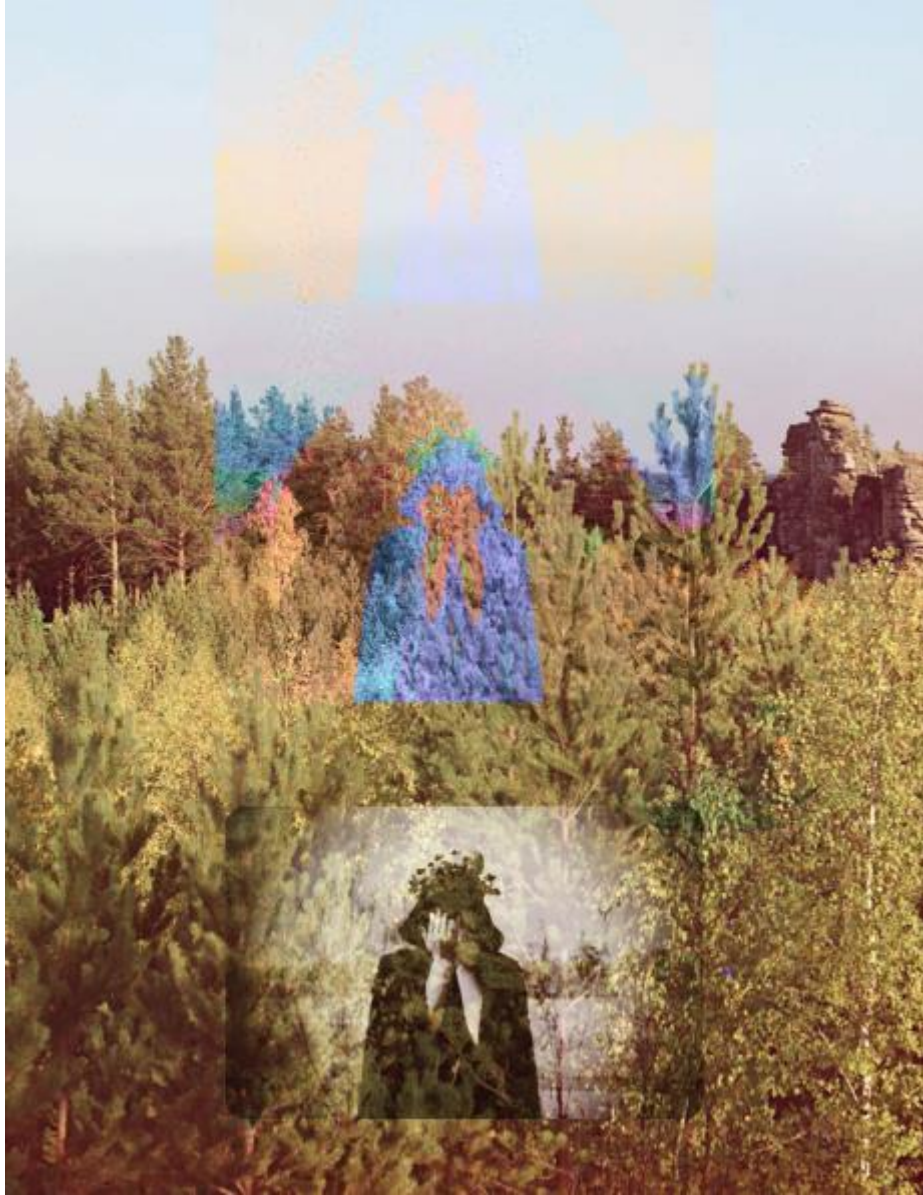
Tyler Spangler x WBR 9



Tyler Spangler x WBR 10



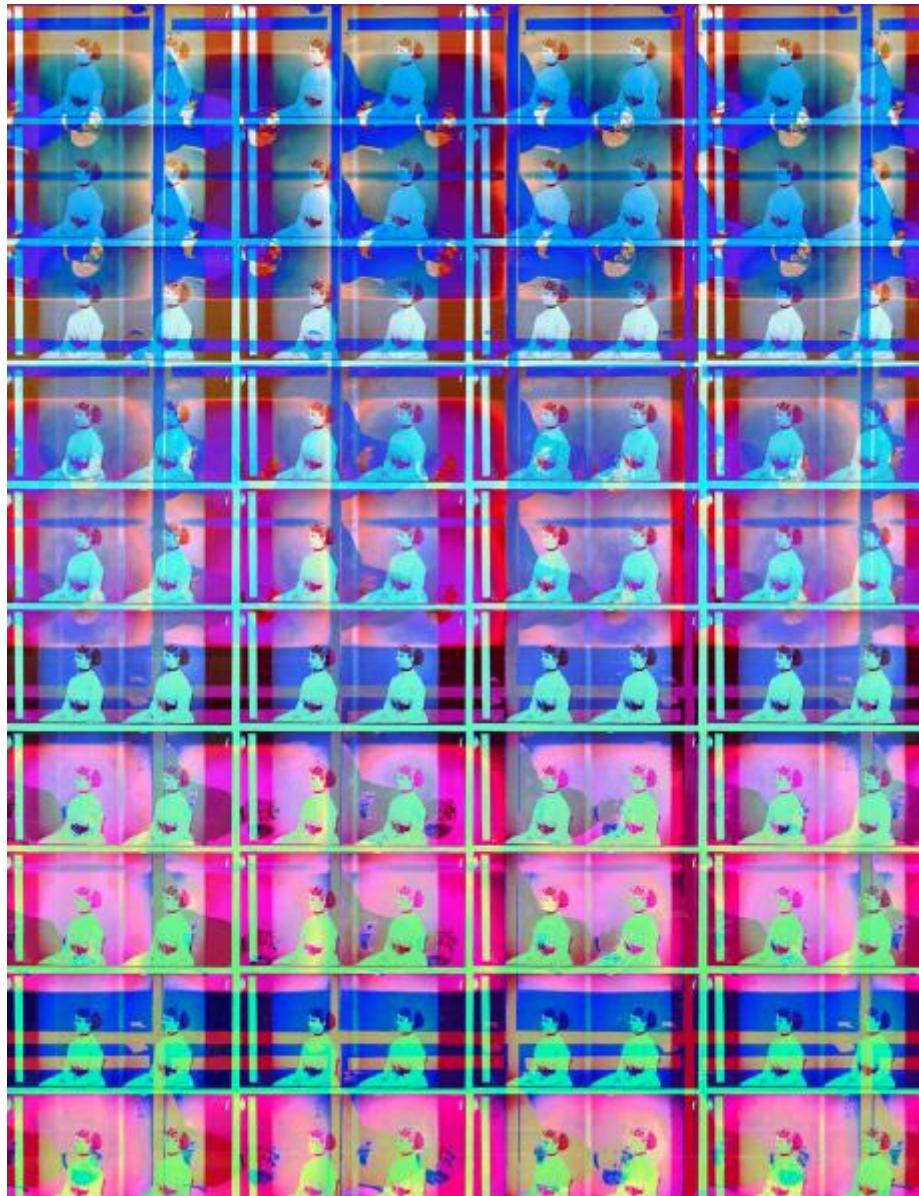
Tyler Spangler x WBR 11



Tyler Spangler x WBR 12



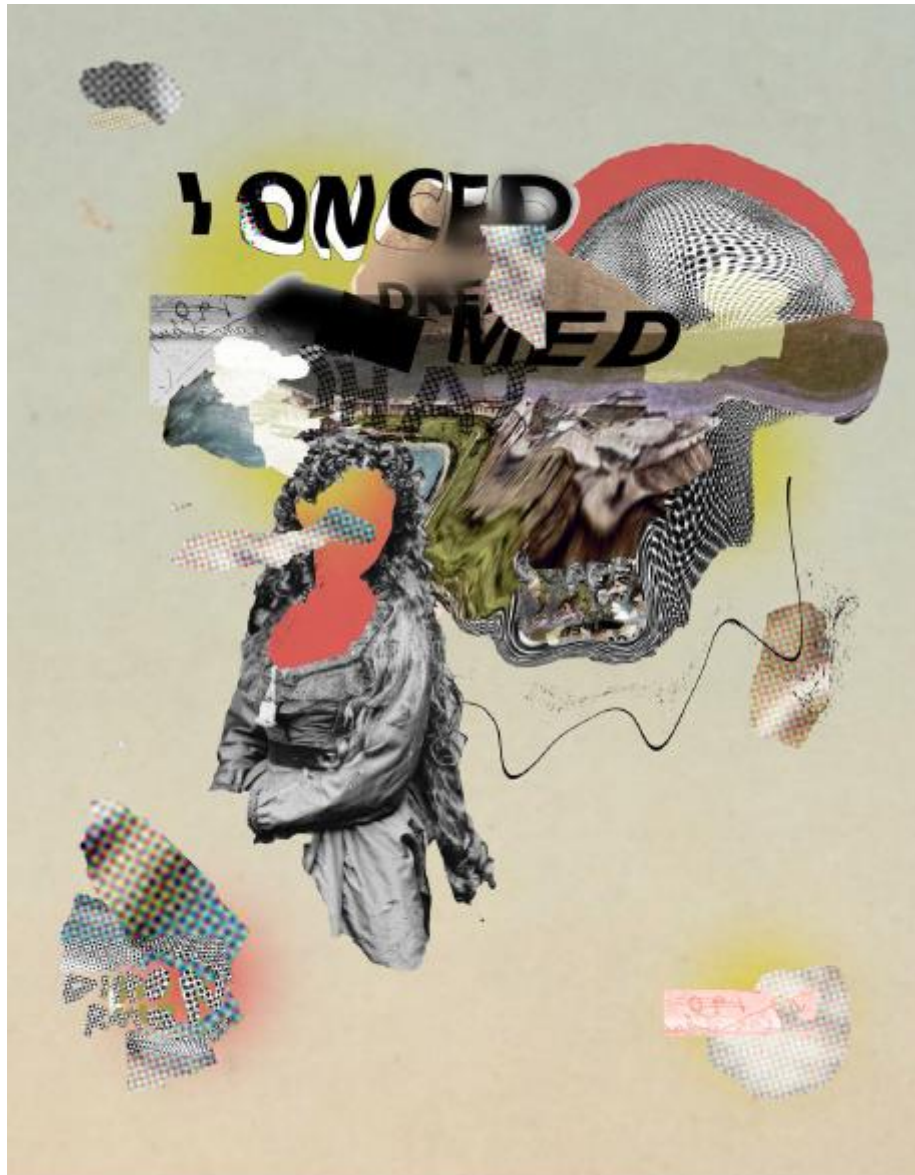
Tyler Spangler x WBR 13



Tyler Spangler x WBR 14



Tyler Spangler x WBR 15



Tyler Spangler x WBR 16



CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

XC Atkins

XC Atkins is a writer living in and exploring New Orleans. He's had work published in *Annalemma*, *Makeout Creek*, and *Richmond Noir*. He also enjoys making zines, two stepping, and thinking about wolves.

Jerimee Bloemeke

Jerimee Bloemeke was born in Fort Lauderdale, FL, 1987. He has a BFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and an MFA from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. His work has been widely published in journals and magazines including *The Iowa Review* (forthcoming, 2014), *Novembre*, *The Claudius App*, *NOÖ Journal*, *The Broome Street Review*, and *Artifice*. [I have also published several chapbooks under the Human 500 imprint.] Most recently he is the author of *25¢ CASH* (Slim Princess Holdings, 2013). He lives in Iowa City.

Steven T. Bramble

Steven T. Bramble is the author of two novels, *AFFLICTION INCLUDED* and *GRID CITY OVERLOAD*, and has had work appear in literary journals. He currently makes his home in Long Beach, and hopes to construct an alternate prototype of thought to achieve psychological liberation from the aggressive and lording objects all around, which is probably also why many consider him to be a tedious bastard.

Sean Damlos-Mitchell

[No bio provided]

Atticus Davis

Atticus Davis is a 22 year old writer living in Santa Clara, CA. He plans to attend School of The Art Institute of Chicago in Fall of 2013. He's been listening to a lot Grimes lately and is just starting to learn to enjoy pot after being heavily influenced by the sXe culture and his father's repressive religion. Bedouin Books published his first collection of poetry 'Dumb Stuttering Free.'

Jim Davis

Jim Davis is a graduate of Knox College and an MFA candidate at Northwestern University. Jim lives, writes, and paints in Chicago, where he edits the *North Chicago Review*. His work has appeared in *Seneca Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Whitefish Review*, *The Café Review*, and *Contemporary American Voices*, in addition to winning the Line Zero Poetry Contest, Eye on Life Poetry Prize, multiple Editor's Choice awards, and a recent nomination for the Best of the Net Anthology. www.jimdavispoetry.com

Nathan Hirstein

Nathan Hirstein co-founded the *Unwin-Dunwin Literary Ecclesia*, a poetic & metaphysical concern focused on explorations of liminality & creations of anomalous media. A style consultant, avid fantasist & large body of people unified by a shared geographical territory, his friends know him as Nation.

Jason Joyce

Jason Joyce graduated in 2009 from the University of Wyoming and now lives in Los Angeles, working in event planning at Loyola Marymount University. He plays keyboards in the band The Rubbish Zoo, co-owns the clothing company Weekend Society and is working on his first full-length collection of poems and short stories. You can find out more about his writing and published poetry on his blog at jasonrjoyce.tumblr.com.

Drew Kalbach

Drew Kalbach is from Philadelphia. He is the author of the e-chapbooks *NATIONAL MOVEMENT* (Pangur Ban Party, 2010) and *THEATER* (Scantly Clad Press 2009), and of the chapbook *THE ZEN OF CHAINSAWS AND ENORMOUS CLIPPERS* (Achilles Chapbook Series 2008).

Taleen Kalenderian

Taleen Kalenderian is a writer, artist & musician (TÜLIPS) from LA. Her writings & photos have been published in *The Bushwick Review*, *theNewYork*, *Filter*, *SPIN*, *The Onion A.V. Club* & *L.A. Record*. She is Director of Sales & Marketing at Narrow Books, & founder of *DUM DUM Zine*.

Erin Kautza

Erin Kautza lives and works in Chicago. She recently completed her MFA at SAIC.

Nathan Kemp

Nathan Kemp is a graduate student focusing in poetry at the Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts. His work appears or is forthcoming in *The Bakery*, *NAP*, and *Puerto del Sol*. He is a poetry editor for *Barn Owl Review* and *Rubbertop Review*. Visit him at nathanckemp.wordpress.com.

Allen Killian-Moore

Allen Killian-Moore is an anarcho-feminist, pacifist, straight-edge, vegan, radical Mennonite, ecological thinker, poet, writer, visual artist, and social justice advocate. His work is enacted on the grounds of history within the folds of being, drawing partially from contemporary streams, yet also reaching out before and beyond them. His work engages frailty and resilience, considers ecological coexistence, and explores the degree to which both cultural and socio-economic structures shape experience.

Sean Kilpatrick

Sean Kilpatrick is published in *Boston Review*, *Fence*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Evergreen Review*, *Hobart*, *The Collagist*, *No Colony*, *New York Tyrant*, *LIT*, and *Caketrain*.

David Kinzer

[No bio provided]

Tony Mancus

Tony Mancus is the author of three chapbooks. He is co-founder of Flying Guillotine Press and he lives in Virginia with his wife Shannon and their two cats.

Michael J. Martin

Michael J. Martin doesn't like the Lakers and feels the Clippers are going to change basketball in the next few years. Some poems in dope places such as *Swink*, the *New York Quarterly*, *Bayou Magazine*, *NOO*, among others. He lives off of Pico in Los Angeles and takes the bus regularly.

Evan Morgan

[No bio provided]

Scott F. Parker

Scott F. Parker is the author of *Running After Prefontaine: A Memoir* and coeditor of *Coffee—Philosophy for Everyone: Grounds for Debate*. His writing has appeared in many other publications as well, including *Philosophy Now*, *Oregon Quarterly*, *Oregon Humanities*, *The Sun*, *Rain Taxi Review of Books*, and *The Star Tribune*, among others.

Lindsay Ruoff

Lindsay Allison Ruoff makes things that are visual and sometimes of an other-sensory nature. She co-authored *TRANS-*, a chapbook by Allison Duncan, and has work tucked into various pockets of the internet at places like *NAP* and *Red Lightbulbs*. She is an editor at *HOUSEFIRE* and lives in Portland, Oregon.

Gary Shipley

Gary J. Shipley is the author of six books of various sizes, the latest of which is a co-authored chapbook of poems forthcoming from Strange Cage. His work has appeared recently or is forthcoming in *The Black Herald*, **Gargoyle**, *Paragraphiti*, *nthposition*, *elimae*, *>kill author*, *3:AM*, and others. More details can be found at garyjshipley.blogspot.co.uk

Garett Strickland

Garett Strickland lives in Portland, OR. He's the artistic director/producer at Unwin-Dunraven, the editor of *PLINTH* (forthcoming), and a regular contributor at *HTMLGiant*. He records and performs

in a conceptual jazz-noise ensemble called CLOTHES. He's a metaphysician. He makes books and tapes. www.unwin-dunraven.com

Molly Sutton Kiefer

Molly Sutton Kiefer's chapbook *The Recent History of Middle Sand Lake* won the 2010 Astounding Beauty Ruffian Press Poetry Award. Her second chapbook, *City of Bears*, will be published in 2013 by dancing girl press. Her work has appeared in *Harpur Palate*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *WomenArts Quarterly*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *you are here*, *Gulf Stream*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Southampton Review*, and *Permafrost*, among others. She earned her MFA from the University of Minnesota, was selected for the Loft Literary Center's Mentor Series, serves as poetry editor to *Midway Journal*, and runs *Balancing the Tide: Motherhood and the Arts / An Interview Project*. She currently lives in Red Wing with her husband, daughter, and newborn son. She is at work on a manuscript on (in)fertility. More can be found at mollysuttonkiefer.com.

Zac Tomaszewski

Zac Tomaszewski is a 26 year-old LA native, who does a lot of things, none of them particularly well. I went to Berkeley and studied art, and then moved to Norway for an MFA at the National Academy, focusing on painting and video installations. None of which has much to do with what I submitted, but what does? I gotta go, my dog wants to fight me.

Caleb True

Caleb True lives everywhere and nowhere. He likes to cook Asian food. When he's not careering hard, he's scrounging around for money, cooking Asian food, visiting friends in strange places, running, or trying to hit the big time in some other sense. He's got fiction in *The Madison Review*, *Euphony*, *Yemassee*, and some other places. He lives online at calebtrue.tumblr.com.

Viktorsha Uliyanova

Viktorsha Uliyanova is an import from the old Soviet Union, and received her BA in Literature from Hunter College. Her poetry has appeared at *The ClockWise Cat*, *Guerilla Pamphlets*, *Clutching at Straws*, and *Babushwick Zine*. Uliyanova currently resides in Brooklyn, New York.

Yael Villafranca

Yael Villafranca is a poet based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her work has appeared in *Delirious Hem* and is forthcoming in *ELIXHER*. You can find out more at <http://about.me/yaelv>. She tweets obliquely about her crushes @yaelv.

Brian White

Brian White lives in Brooklyn, NY. Originally a painter, he's become a freelance writer, proofreader, and fiction writer over the years. He has written interviews with painters for art journals such as *Kingsboro Press* and *Roma Publications* as well as music reviews and interviews for *Vice*

magazine and *'Sup Magazine*. He is attending the Kenyon Review Writer's Workshop this summer to connect with other writers and work on his fiction.

