

Whole Beast Rag
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My Achilles by Sarah Bannon

In January, I tested my first pair of Asics. Each morning at 5:30, I ran through deserted halls, up over rusty wooden empty bleachers, and sprinted to burst open wide old oak doors and test their endurance on cold hard concrete and soggy dirt trails. After months of rain, sweat, and endurance, my Gel Nimbus 9s molded perfectly to my imperfect feet, and became the best companions on long journeys. Through each battle with competitors and climates, they wonderfully and lovingly endured.

The Asics Gel-Nimbus 9 is a cushion running shoe made for a runner with neutral or slightly over-pronated foot biomechanics, or in need of additional support near the ankle and outer heel. The Gel-Nimbus 9 features gel cushioning in the heel and forefoot with a bouncy midsole made of Solyte for cushioning. The shoe's stability is based upon Asic's Space Trusstic System across the arch and the dynamic cradle. The shoes are reinforced on the lateral sides of the shoe for ankle support for side-to-side movements, similar to cross trainers. To maximize comfort and cushioning, Asics shoes use an EVA or polyurethane foam in the midsoles. The materials operate under the goal of improving shock absorption in every step. The women's shoe weighs approximately 10 ounces.

The running shoe market yields multiples of a billion dollars per year. For recreation and competition runners alike, there's a multitude of styles and brands that claim to pioneer the best running technology. Some buyers will be easily persuaded by the sexy allure of popular brands like Nike, Reebok, and Adidas, whose yearly models average sales at nearly 90 dollars per pair. Avid runners vary in preference, some opting for shoes that use an EVA or polyurethane foam in the midsoles for extra support, while others wary of reliance on technology favor minimalist models or endorse the rite of running barefoot. For most modest runners, ankle support through reinforced lateral sides of the shoe is the most crucial feature.

As I finish out the first mile of the race, I experience a startling pinch in the arch of my left heel, like needles breaking through the skin and exploding into smaller and smaller pieces piercing into the dark hollow insides of my bones. Attempting to continue at my current pace proves pointless, and I am forced to slow down and submit to a competitor. The elevated shock-mechanisms in my Shox were slowly sucking at my heel, making my weakness as palpable as Achilles. I outwardly cursed at my Nikes. One by one runners whizzed by, leaving me with a feeling of defeat. Placing more weight on my left foot, I shook away tears of disappointment and betrayal.

As the saying goes, "when your feet hurt, everything hurts." In meta-analyses investigating the epidemiology of running injuries, the average recreational runner reports an overall yearly incidence rate of 37-56%. Several studies concluded that running injuries lead to a reduction of training or training cessation in about 30 to 90% of all injuries, and about 20 to 70% of all injuries lead to medical consultation or medical treatment. In another study that focused on the

biomechanics of running, Hasegawa and other researchers found that up to 75% of runners heel strike during runs, which can account for 30-70% of injuries each year that occur from repetitive stress to the heel while running in gym shoes. The complaints of yearly injuries due to excessive heel striking has led some runners to support minimalist or barefoot trips, but the change in trend has shown related spikes in injury.

It is just two days after the first snow of my junior year of high school, December of 2009. I wake up at 4:30 and take the city bus to the community center for morning practice. The gym is cold and dark save for two lights above the center circle of the half-court line, and shadows pool around each basket, extending an image of the tattered rim to the grimy floorboards. I dribble the ball once, twice, three times, slowly paying attention to form and rhythm. I forgot to bring my high-top shoes today, and am nervous about jumping for rebounds. The team starts warm up drills, and I kneel down and knot my cross trainers once, twice, three times. Cross-training shoes are also designed to maximize support and comfort in forward and lateral movements, and to allow you to use the shoes for other activities, such as jogging, walking or aerobics.

Shots suddenly fire from each side of the court, vibrating symphonically off of the backboard. Exploding from the floorboards like a spring, I catch the leather object and run, dribbling towards opposite rim. Olivia, a six-foot-three freshman, guards the basket with both hands raised high. I hastily throw up a shot when I get as close as possible to the basket without coming into physical contact to get into a better position to rebound. My legs compress as quickly as they can and I feel with my fingertips the soft, bubbled feedback of the leather ball. Before reaching the ground, however, my cross trainers land on the large, bumpy surface of Olivia's size-14 Nikes, and both of my feet snap into an unnatural perpendicular position in relation to my ankle. My tendons slowly pull in different directions, shattering my heels and spreading toward my ankles. I land on the leather ball and am unable to move.

Three months later, I run again for the first time.

The amount of time required to return to full training generally ranges from six weeks to four months, but in extreme cases can require as much as a year. After a stress fracture, it is imperative to increase the workload slowly in order to avoid further injury. For runners with heel injuries, the most important thing to look for in purchasing shoes is a well-padded "heel cup," the cushioning surrounding the heels and the arch of the foot. If the shoe is well constructed and cups the heel without putting too much pressure on it, the shoes will take pressure off of the heels and provide for a quicker recovery.

It is August shortly after high school graduation. I stretch at the starting line of the Human Race, a 10k organized by the World Health Organization (WHO). My new bright orange pair of shoes, the Asics Gel-Nimbus 10, turned a slight brown color after four hard weeks of preparation. The starting gun sounds and I wonder again if I have been tested enough to go the distance. The soles of my feet seemed to grow wings, soaring through the first and second mile with minimal effort, but on

the third mile I hit another obstacle, another all-too-familiar pain in my sole. The pace slowed, but there was still progress. Focusing on short, intense bursts instead of long, challenging sessions, the initial intense pain became manageable. I reluctantly pushed through the internal feedback loop of self-doubt, disappointment, and exhaustion. The key to avoiding mental drain is to place complete trust in where your feet will take you, and focus on the method of travel: left, right, left, right.

Tom Bunk, a renowned cartoonist and avid runner writes, "Anybody running beats anybody walking, and anybody walking beats anybody sitting."

I finish the race in just under one hour and thirty minutes. Statistically, it is an unimpressive time considering the distance, but sometimes we have to celebrate an abysmal journey.

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Lentes Oscuros by Steven T. Bramble

Opinion, whether well or ill founded, is the governing principle of human affairs.

—Alexander Hamilton

Letter of June 18, 1778

Euphoria is believed to be a straight and unwavering note, played on and on without dimension or digression until its eventual end—but it is not, because every note of euphoria is laced with a sub-audible percussion line of misery.

The purest euphoria leads to the purest misery, and vice versa, which was the case with Sammy Williams, who stepped into Chapultepec Park in Mexico City (though he had no idea what the name of the park was, nor anything about Mexico City at all) and found absolutely nothing wrong with, or disturbing about, the riot underway in the plaza beneath the Niños Héroes monument because his euphoria was misery, and also the other way around. There was a lot of yelling, but he didn't understand any of it because he didn't speak even the slightest smidge of Spanish, but it was obvious the riot was political in nature.

There were a few loudspeakers making their ugly dogmatisms known despite the din of violence. Huge numbers of people encircled the spot where the fighting was most real, recording it on glasses and phones side-by-side journalists wearing press vests and cargo pants, aiming cameras at the shirt-ripping, limb-flailing center. Sammy had only stepped off the plane an hour and a half ago. He'd aimed for the center of the city using the metro, making smiling eye contact with grim-faced Mexican clowns hanging out in subway stations who joylessly smoked menthols in orange wigs and round orange noses, scratching their beards beneath face paint.

On Thursday Kiara had said to him, and I quote: "You're so certain that the world is the way you think it is, but you're wrong about everything." She'd said this because, among other things, she was depressed about the amount of money they made, and Sammy found this to be an extremely tedious issue, and because his happiness was like a tiny locked cage with a cold concrete floor on which he had to constantly be on his hands and knees, he'd tried to affirm all the great things about their lives if you just set aside the money issue for a quick sec, but Kiara had found that to be tedious, and so of course said something hurtful. There was screaming and blood and shoes flew up into the air.

The sky here had the same smeared quality down toward the horizon as the sky in LA, and Sammy noticed this and felt right at home, taking a deep and intentional breath before shoving past the outer ring of spectators into the pressurized center of this impromptu human kiln. Sammy met an immediate knuckle to the forehead that momentarily blinded him with tears, and when he shut his eyes against them he fired off heavy fists into the darkness, digging into the flesh of people he didn't know, not fighting for any side but just fighting because he had always enjoyed it immensely,

though he rarely got the chance to do it anymore. He opened his eyes and saw everything diffracted through crystalline tears. Haha! He could see well enough to observe that one of his fists was already bloody. He didn't know it, but he'd knocked out someone's tooth.

(One of the loudspeakers was saying in Spanish: "Humanity Separatism means total plutocrat rule and total obscurity of thought! Death to augmented reality! Death to Venna Kyi! Death to Apple! Death to Google! Humanity Separatism means total plutocrat rule and...")

On the outskirts, taco and pupusa and licuado vendors rushed from their stalls to form a barricade to stop the conflict from consuming their businesses. Sammy was huge and muscular, residing comfortably within the six-two-two-fifty range, and so although he continued to get battered about he mostly smiled and threw himself around with a pure ecstatic oblivion that rattled brains and left lingering contusions. He loved this—he loved to be engaged—and nothing was more satisfying than having one's cheeks softened and one's knuckles exercised.

A foot shot out behind him, caught him in the back of the knee, sent him onto the hectic ground of the plaza full of shoes that kicked him everywhere. What a pleasant blur combat was!—impossible to recall with any sort of accuracy, only that stinging miserable euphoria! Someone with real hatred and a mouth that rained blood and vicious Spanish dropped his knees down onto Sammy's chest (the man whose tooth he'd knocked out) and started to precipitate raging punches, and it wasn't looking good for Sammy down there because all the feet and legs made it hard to get up and regain the upper hand, and this young Humanity Separatist was planning to do some real damage as retribution for his tooth, not to mention his pride.

Just as panic was starting to set in the boy stopped punching, jumped up, and the crowd opened around Sammy a great deal. All loudspeakers had now gone silent. Sammy got to his feet and saw a riot cop emerge from between fleeing bodies. He ran, but the cop snagged hold of his shirt, trying to wrench him into black jaws. With both hands he tore his shirt apart from the collar down and with a huge surge of adrenaline ran free from the plaza, through the park in the direction of the Torre Mayor and the Reforma. Boot soles clunked the concrete rapidly behind him. Sammy trailed blood and sweat, laughing and heaving, before putting quick distance between him and the over-encumbered body armor demon behind him.

Much of what was going on in Mexico City nowadays was invisible, like most places, but that didn't mean Sammy didn't know it was there. You needed glasses to see what everyone else was seeing, all the augmented stuff, or at least a phone that supported the more sophisticated augmented reality programs. Sammy wore glasses only about half the time back in LA because Kiara liked to use them at night when he was working, but also because there were invisible things of an entirely different nature that Sammy couldn't always see, but seemed to be able to detect anyway. Eight or nine months ago when Humanity Separatism and Venna Kyi had flooded the news, Kiara had become very depressed. Sammy didn't know exactly why—he had no interest in politics, and he

found it very hard to engage with, what he felt, were the overly complicated principles of the Separatist movement.

Venna Kyi had been a quantum computing expert based out of Yangon who had fled the country under multiple charges of treason, and then twelve years later, upon her covert return, had put together a political army against the Burmese military regime. Behind her armed revolt was a potent philosophical kernel that she'd perfected while in exile in South Korea. Her theory of Humanity Separatism rested on the basis that humans had disproved all greater meaning through post-industrialism. History, technology, and capitalism had become mutant runaway versions of themselves, obscuring reality. They had obscured the true form of life from our organism, as well as the true form of the planet. Humans no longer understood the world without man-made construction, and there was no feasible means to separate one's self from the digital realm, or even to annihilate the digital realm.

Existentialism was now purely visible. There was no longer any human purpose; purpose meaning higher purpose; it was an outdated concept, and also a coping mechanism of the species. Humans live without the constant worries and anxieties of their primitive instincts, Venna Kyi says, shifting the entire nature of their existence. They have created all classical or timeless wisdom and art, with nothing left but to play with various technological mediums in merely "clever" or "entertaining" ways. Science and religion have proven themselves hopelessly inept and divisive. We hover above the narrative of history and look upon its clichés with disdain.

So, for the generations grown in the cold glow of screens, a new philosophy: unadulterated hedonism, objectism, and total digital immersion. Indeed, in Venna Kyi's manifesto it was written quite clearly:

There have been many attempts to separate ourselves from history, to wash our hands of all the crimes of the human spirit, and to free those of us who are innocent from that terrible inheritance—tradition—which perpetuates hatred within us for one another. But never before have we had the means, the ammunition, to accomplish this goal. Our digital lives are our frontier. We have pioneered it, but have also allowed it to become corrupt. From this day forward, we are no longer associated with our ancestors. The past is flawed. It is the enemy. We are no longer humanity. We are separate from humanity. We are those who do not progress for the delusion of "collective good," which is merely the greed of isolated groups of people at the total expense of their worldly brethren. We Separatists are those who progress for only one thing: our own personal sovereignties.

Our only allies—previously thought to be the antagonists of our souls—are objects, things, and our immense inner need for consumption.

Look only for personal pleasure and impulse satiation within the digital realm with no regard for consequences or cost. Disregard the human delusion of "progress." Cast aside the belief that

humanity is moving toward a purpose of any kind. Separate one's self from traditional humanity. Destroy any governments or institutions opposed to the idea of social anarchy (especially the Burmese regime). This was the new path toward crisis-free living. Toward political revolution. Toward morality. An anti-Zen. The old principles of the world could never apply to the new way of life. The Separatists branded their opposition as "Traditionalists." Humanity Separatism was uncannily infectious in Western nations as young radicals got a hold of it and began warping its aims to fit their own needs. It was becoming a furious secular outcry.

In the wake of the news of armed revolution and Venna Kyi's manifesto, Kiara suddenly became obsessed with the idea of buying glasses. She researched them tirelessly on her days off, including payment plans. Sammy wasn't opposed to the idea of owning them, but it was an expense they couldn't afford. Up to that point they'd used their phones to access any augmented features, and the phones, including their service plans, remained a drain on both their paychecks. Which also didn't take into account the laptop, the TV and subscriptions, the car... the list went on and on, and Sammy didn't see room for it in the finances.

He discouraged her from the purchase, and she had become enraged, battering him with all kinds of personal and political reasoning he didn't understand. To his credit, he remained firm in his stance, but came home late on a Sunday during last October (he worked at the West Hollywood Diner as a line cook most nights, but also filled in on dishwashing shifts when the teenagers and twenty-somethings who normally held down the position wanted days off for whatever it was their youthful agendas demanded; for this reason he typically worked double shifts) to find she'd purchased a gleaming new pair of Apple AR glasses on a \$75/month finance option. She argued against the cheaper Google alternative, as well as other more economic brands, because of durability, stronger features, and resistance to hacking.

Well, whatever, he'd thought, clearly she's done her homework. He wasn't in the habit of starting fights with Kiara he couldn't win. Besides, he enjoyed using the glasses. They let you see life however you wanted it to be. He could be sitting in their crumby living room in Crenshaw on the couch handed down to them by Kiara's parents from as long ago as '03 and it was as if he were lounging in the tropics, or on one of Jupiter's barren and peaceful moons. There was endless diversion and usefulness for the glasses, but one problem that began to arise from them was that they had only one pair, and Kiara was far more adamant about using them than he was, so he often let her monopolize them, and during the times she wore them—hanging out in the apartment on days off, doing errands together, going to movies, watching TV, at dinner—he noticed she was far more distant and detached from him than she'd been previously.

Worse, there was no way for him to share in the experiences she was having without a second pair, but the first pair had already caused them to be late with rent twice (partly because of the extra purchases Kiara made with the help of the glasses), and so that option was not available. He didn't care so much about the financial inconveniences, but the strain on their relationship and

their daily routine that he personally felt was upsetting. However, the financial inconveniences did bother Kiara, and that was how they'd managed to find themselves pissed at each other for two different reasons altogether. She'd started urging him to do things like find a different job or go back to school, and he had no intention of doing either of those things. Like always he put his perpetual positive spin on their situation, but complained of her constant use of the glasses and a divide he'd begun to sense. This angered her greatly, and when she tried to bring up the issues of Humanity Separatism and global political revelations, all he could manage to do was be confused, floundering to assure her that no matter what happened in the world he just wanted to be happy (and his simplistic requirements made him sad).

She said, "You're so certain that the world is the way you think it is, but you're wrong about everything."

People walked along the Reforma in glasses, watching video of the riot taking place barely a quarter-mile away, passing Sammy's bloody, shirtless figure with hardly a glance. He continued to laugh, feeling blood and sweat trickling down the sides of his nose, and when he put his hand to his forehead there was a sharp sting. The punch to the forehead had cut him. He could feel his exposed chest starting to bruise. The phone buzzed in his pocket. It was Kiara calling him. He turned off the buzzer and let the machine pick it up.

He walked along the Reforma as far as the Ángel de la Independencia, golden and towering against the skyscrapers, and seeing it started his heart going too fast, and so to get away from it he turned down an unknown street, passing endless people in suits and glasses until those people disappeared, and in their place were people in T-shirts and jeans who used their phones to access augmented features and pay for street food. At a blue-tarpaulined market entrenched at the mouth of a metro entrance he bought an XL Oakland Raiders shirt for 250 pesos from two fearful women vendors, and two blocks further a young kid with a gelled mullet offered him, in broken English, a bathroom plus toilet paper for just four pesos that was hidden down a small alleyway.

"Yes, man, si, abajo este callejon aqui. Yes, man, you need?" offering him toilet paper.

He paid four pesos and then followed the cardboard arrows down the filthy passage, then through a wooden door frame with no door into a darkened building, the floor inside checkered black and white, blighted by a layer of sawdust and trash. A final arrow directed him into the bathroom (he believed it might have once served a hotel of some sort). He chose a stall, relieved himself, and began cleaning his face at the sink. The mirror was inundated with graffiti. His forehead looked as if his third eye had been gouged out, tendrils of dried blood making a tributary formation down his face. He was drying himself with the three squares of toilet paper the kid outside had given him when he caught sight of someone standing next to him in his periphery. He jumped backward. It was a white man with blonde hair, a lanky frame, and plain clothes. He was wearing glasses.

"Oh shit! You scared the shit outta me!"

"Are you Traditionalist or Separatist?" the man said in what sounded to Sammy like a heavy Australian accent, but was in fact Kiwi.

"What?"

"Do you identify as Traditionalist or Separatist?"

"What? I got no idea what you're talkin about, dude."

"Yes you do," the man said in a demanding tone. "I saw you in the video of that fight not moments ago. At the Niños Héroes. Which side are you for?"

"I'm not...I'm not for either side. I was just..."

"If you're not for either side then why would you inject yourself into that fight?"

"I'm not for either—"

"Why did you come here?"

"Kid outside there charged me four pesos to use the bathroom is all."

"Tell me the truth."

"I am! Who the hell are you? Why you just hangin' out in the bathroom?"

"I'm taking your photograph," the Kiwi said, raising his phone at Sammy. There was the little artificial sound of a picture being taken.

On panicked instinct, Sammy shot his hand out, snatched the phone from the man's grasp, and in one clean movement spun around and hurled it at the blue-tiled wall as hard as he could. The screen broke apart into three or four pieces. Sammy looked back at the man, who stood there dumbstruck. He stepped forward and reached for the bridge of the man's nose, for his glasses. The Kiwi turned away from his reach and the two wrapped together, Sammy locking the man's arms against his sides from behind. The only noise in the bathroom was heavy breathing. In a quick movement the glasses were swiped off his face, and with his left foot Sammy crushed the lenses.

There was a scream of agony, almost a type of keening, and it shocked Sammy enough that he released his hold and moved away toward the exit. The Kiwi's screaming turned to weeping, bending over the broken glasses to see the result of their brutal homicide. Tears streamed from his eyes, and Sammy stood watching in ultimate confusion. Clearly the Kiwi had never imagined Sammy might break the devices—their destruction had caught him truly by surprise. The Kiwi himself might be beaten and broken, but this, this was unthinkable. Perhaps there was some irretrievable, irreplaceable scrap of data that had been floating in digital storage, now lost forever.

The real truth was that he was now cut off from his network of political revolutionaries, alone in a foreign country with no resources.

"You bastard!" The Kiwi wailed in despair.

"You brought it on yourself!" Sammy shouted back, but for some reason he found the man's anguish over the broken electronics beautiful in a way he couldn't pin down. It was possible he was just experiencing a sentimental moment because he missed Kiara, but the Kiwi's sincerity, combined with his helplessness, allowed Sammy to see him as a victim. Victim to his own faulty value system. Not far gone from a religious mourner, much like his mother-in-law Anita who was always overseeing the world and its happenings with a relentless, pious sadness, believing the world was working itself toward Revelation. But Sammy had posed the question to himself many times—if Revelation was prophesied from the beginning, then was human behavior not out of our hands? Couldn't one argue we were setting the correct course rather than the wrong, since disproving divine prediction would collapse God's omnipotence?

Such was the ornate illogic of the Kiwi's devastation over his artificial attachments. Motherfucker should've been thanking Sammy for liberating him. Well, no matter. It was not his problem anymore, and Sammy left the bathroom smiling in the grip of an intellectual mania.

It was the exact same type of manic impulse, in fact, that had driven him to end up in Mexico City in the first place. Kiara was the element that kept him stable most of the time, kept him moving mindlessly through double shifts in West Hollywood, watching the same collection of dirty pans and dishes pile in front of him for such a collection of hours that he could peer into their meaning, into their traumatic reuse, like the way the world reused human beings, birthed them new from the steaming sanitizer clean and fresh, then dirtied them, then buried them together in the filthy rotting soapy mass-grave water of the far left-hand sink, on their way toward completing a senseless cycle.

Before Kiara he would never have been able to stand such a process. It was, quite simply, his love for her that made the job worth it to him. Made it bearable. She sometimes despised his proclivity for routine, but he needed it in order to avoid provoking the sorts of impulses, like this one, that led him down paths which threatened to unravel everything he'd built. His consistent euphoria was one of his greatest miseries. (One of Kiara's cousins, who had gone to Ann Arbor, had one time informally diagnosed Sammy at a summertime family barbeque—without his knowledge—as a hypomaniac.)

The original conflict over the glasses had slowly evolved, over the course of some months, into a more severe breakdown of communication between them. Humanity Separatism continued to gain steam, not just as an entity confined to the news anymore, but as a real movement spreading across the world, antagonizing governments with weaponry and organized political measures. So-

called “Traditionalist” oppositions were having a difficult time understanding their transgressions against the Separatists, and also what measures to take to defend themselves.

Sammy isolated himself in the living room, slept on the couch. Kiara used the glasses more than ever now. Every time he attempted to make progress toward reparation, things became worse. Somewhere along the way, a line of difference had been established between them. He couldn't define it, wasn't even one hundred percent positive it existed, all he knew was that things didn't feel the same. Some change had occurred. His mind was wandering at work and his efficiency took a notable dip, but he couldn't get himself to care. Things were starting to feel hopeless, and the sense that a sinister end was looming to everything he'd become accustomed to grew on an hourly basis.

He was so distressed that he actually took to reading the news on his phone during breaks, hoping to find some clue to illuminate the nature of Kiara's change, or, at his most optimistic, an antidote to what ailed them. But he had no patience for the news and its constant grim mood. His studies were cursory at best, and since he and Kiara weren't talking much, he remained in the dark about the extent of the disruption in the global flow. What he did manage to uncover from his glances at the headlines was that Mexico City had turned into a Western proxy for Myanmar's Humanity Separatist revolt. Things were becoming heated in Mexico City, even violent.

You're so certain that the world is the way you think it is, but you're wrong about everything.

The idea came from outside of him and struck like a bullet fired from a gun—he nearly grimaced when it happened. The world wasn't the way he thought it was? Well why not put that hypothesis to the test? The genius of it enveloped him, and he became possessed, spending the better part of the workday with an intolerably fast heartbeat from excitement and adrenaline.

When his double shift ended, he began calling in favors from the cooks and dishwashers he covered for most often and created a five-day vacation for himself. Then, before leaving work, he booked a plane ticket. The dollar figure staring up at him from the tiny screen caused a long moment of hesitation. He knew very well that losing five days of pay plus the expenses for this trip was going to cause him and Kiara to have to dip deep into their savings in order to pay rent this month. Then the images of other bills started to pop into his mind. Car insurance, car payment, phone bill, cable bill, the monthly bill for those goddamn glasses...

When he thought about it, Sammy had lived his life in a compartmentalized style for as long as he could remember. The compartments represented months. He could think in terms of a massive cabinet of drawers, and in each drawer was a tiny portion of his life that directly correlated to his bank statements. None of the drawers connected to one another—each one was a reality in and of itself, but they all existed parallel in Sammy's memory. There was always that massive wagging finger disallowing him from giving in to his impulses, but it was not always successful in stopping him, as was the case when he purchased a round-trip ticket into Mexico City for \$510 dollars plus

tax. He laughed to himself while at the bus stop, jumping up and down just to burn off the overload of frenzying, surplus inspiration. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

He was proving a point, not just to Kiara, but also to himself. The point was this: that it didn't matter what the world decided to do. Its own misguided business was precisely that—its own. Politics, wars, revolutions, it could all go to hell. He would go straight to the heart of what was preoccupying Kiara, and when he got to Mexico City he wouldn't give a shit—he'd be happy and separate from it all even if it killed him. He would exist in and of himself, a smiling little cell of solipsism as it were.

That night he stuffed two changes of clothes in a backpack, went to bed next to Kiara, and at two in the morning when she was already fast asleep he jotted down a quick note informing her of where he was going, his itinerary, and when he would attempt to reach her. His friend drove him to the airport, and an hour later he boarded the plane without so much as a glimmer of a second thought. He hadn't even booked a room for himself.

Now, leaving the alleyway, his pocket buzzed, and he knew without looking who was calling.

He wandered the city well into nighttime, eating street food every so often to re-energize. Every block revealed fresh turmoil, blooming into chaos as soon as he arrived, and it seemed to be getting worse as he went. There was a continuous slideshow of police cars, ambulances, fire trucks, sirens like the general ambience of an insect-heavy twilight. People ran and yelled at one another. Everyone was wearing glasses or accessing augmented features with their phones, and Sammy, determined to abstain from all digital and political proceedings (the two had merged into one), remained clueless as to what was going on as he walked in obscurity.

People were often panicked, he noticed, despite the fact that nothing threatening was going on in the general vicinity as far as he could tell. He looked around and saw nothing but traffic and emergency vehicles. He found his way to the courtyard in front of the Bellas Artes, tucked in the shadow of the Torre Latino Americana. Huge droves of people marched with signs written in Spanish; fights broke out between individuals and police congregated on the streets; shouting and singing sizzled on the ground, releasing a steamy energy of sound into the darkening sky.

All the while Sammy tried to ignore the conflict, tried to ignore his curiosity and the urge to access augmented features to figure out what was going on. There was no lying to himself, something was clearly out of the ordinary. He stood on the outskirts of the Bellas Artes for a long time, watching people getting dragged away in handcuffs and foreigners fist-fighting one another. The police were wearing glasses, too. The details of the world felt fresh to him, and it surprised him to realize just how many people he was always seeing on a day-to-day basis walking around with glasses or manipulating invisible panels in the air. Somehow he hadn't quite noticed the pervasiveness of these things back in LA.

The scenes of mass strife were exciting for him, but also intimate in a way he didn't like. He'd expected to feel distant from everything, but suddenly he was feeling caught up and very much a part of all that was going on. He knew what he was seeing. It was the source of all Kiara's concern and brooding over the past few months, this strange and dangerous reality unfolding in front of him like an unstoppable mental infection, and he could see, even this far from home, how it had the potential to disrupt his life and those he loved. His euphoria persisted as always, but it was interchangeable with misery, and he felt both simultaneously.

The scene at the Bellas Artes was suddenly too much for him to deal with any longer, so he made his way back to a nearby metro station only to find it was cordoned off by heavy wooden barriers with the word PELIGRO spray painted on them. Exhaustion hit him in a small wave. He rubbed his eyes and tried to think what to do next. He remembered passing a hostel not far from here, and that seemed the best option. However he was unsure if he could find his way back, and rather than stand to consider the route he felt somehow unable to stop himself from moving. The city was beginning to feel ominous, and his body was aching from his earlier exertions, and the cut on his forehead was burning.

The night was black now, no sunlight remained. The further he trekked, the more he realized he was lost. He had left the metro station nearly half an hour ago. Every person and car that passed set him on edge, the tension of the city ongoing. After a long time he stopped on a narrow street, sitting on a rough stone sidewalk underneath a streetlight and wincing against the smells. He breathed and felt his eyelids become heavy. He regretted having done this, leaving Kiara without notice, spending the money, selfishly thinking he was right and she was wrong. But at the same time he was glad because he felt he'd seen something he needed to see.

What happened was quite fast. In front of him were lights and the screeching of a vehicle coming to a halt. He looked up and saw five men exiting a small white Mazda pickup truck, approaching and surrounding him on all sides. One of them was the Kiwi whose phone and glasses he'd broken.

"Yep, that's him," he said.

The men were white and Mexican. They were all wearing glasses (which was how they'd found him) except the Kiwi. None of them were even close to as big as Sammy, but in their faces he could see they were unafraid of him. One of the Mexican men spoke.

"What are you doing in Mexico City?"

Sammy wasn't sure what to say. He was afraid, and his hands were shaking.

"Are you Traditionalist or Separatist?"

Sammy said, "I'm not either."

"Don't lie," the man said with threatening calm.

"I'm not either."

"You broke this man's glasses. Why?"

The man's hand was rested on the butt of a pistol holstered on his jeans. Sammy searched his mind. "I don't know."

"You shouldn't have done that."

The circle closed on him, and they beat him badly. They kicked him on the ground until he felt soft and bloody. Before they left, the Mexican man leaned down and said to him, panting there, with the same tone of threatening calm, "If you ever attack us or our devices again, we'll kill you," and then kicked him one final savage time in the face for good measure.

Sammy laid on the ground and moaned, hearing the men get back in the truck, shut the doors, and drive away.

Later, when the pain had subsided enough for him to get off the ground, he sat on the same curb underneath the streetlight and made a video call to Kiara. It rang five times, and just when he was sure she wouldn't answer, her face resolved on the screen. She was wearing the glasses.

"Kiara," he said, "baby..."

"Oh my god, Sammy, what happened to you!"

He couldn't say anything.

"Baby, oh my god, are you okay? What happened? Where are you?"

"Kiara," he said, "I'm sorry I left without telling you. I didn't mean to..."

"Where are you, baby? Are you okay? Are you shot?"

"No. Beat up bad, though." His words came out with effort, like a sick person in a hospital bed.

Her face scrunched and tears started to run underneath the lenses. "Sammy..."

The Separatists, unbeknownst to Sammy, had started an armed revolt in the streets that day, several neighborhoods away.

"I just needed to call you. Imma be okay. Gonna make it home, but I wanted to say sorry. I'm sorry about the glasses. Just wanna be with you, baby. Just wanna get back to you and be with you."

"I'm sorry too, Sammy, now where are you? Tell me where you are!"

"I messed up, but I won't do it again. Just wait, and Imma get back home. I love you."

"Sammy, tell me where you are, baby! Tell me—"

In the distance he could hear the crackling of gunfire and the city screaming in delight, while in the lower registers there was a very deep, sad whine of pain. He hated the words that came into his mind: you were so certain the world was the way you thought it was...

Well, no matter. Not even Kiara was right about everything. All the stratas of the world were locked together tightly, influencing and affecting each other, and Sammy was confined within them just as much as anybody. He really hoped he could make it back to Kiara, back to LA, and back to that mental state where he could subdue his euphoria back down to a safe neutrality.

Maybe that was it! Maybe neutrality was the path to happiness—and his heart began to race again. He worked hard to stop himself.

"It's gonna be okay, baby, we're gonna get you home," she said. "You're back to normal now. You know how sad it makes me when you get going the way you do."

Yes, it was easier to give up on inspiration and allow the world to do to him as it pleased.

"I know, baby. I love you."



The Return of Crows by Justin Lawrence Daugherty

They said the crows fled the desert. They said anywhere crows will not live is nowhere for anyone to stay. But Aurelio knew of life in the desert. He'd heard of mountains of bodies, sweating and stinking and writhing, in the desert. Stories of men and women out there, leaving behind their half-lived lives and torn-open marriages for the openness of the desert, the danger. He knew how a thing only realized it was alive when it felt closeness, a touch, a body against its skin.

He knew where the people were, where the crows had returned.

He heard nightly the mother's moans, the naked offerings of her body to anything that would come to save her. He heard her wails. There were whispers at night outside the trailer. Boys trying to climb to the window to see her body, to witness her attempt at exorcism. To exorcise what a body possessed that could create such horror, such suffering. Nightly were her wails, boys and men gathering in the world outside, rattling trash cans and fences and cars and the trailers. Their tongues thick with saliva and longing, their spines straightened, their fingers outstretched, their sexes alight with need.

And in the desert where more bodies gathered, seeking warmth, grasping at skin and sweat and often blood. Aurelio, the lizard-boy, afraid to go out to find these bodies, to witness their chorus, if only because he was afraid of what would happen to the mother inside if the gates were opened.

What men will do if they do not fear God.

He heard the crows, found evidence of their return in picked-apart bones, in eyeless sockets, in bits of meat left in streets, on rooftops, in swimming pools, on cars. He heard their wicked song.

Nightly these dirt-covered men and boys, stamping the loose earth, pushing, pulling, clawing at the too-thin walls of the trailer. Nightly this lizard-boy's desire to head to the desert, to reach out and touch just one of those bodies, to press a finger to muscle, to fat, to press a palm against the working machine of skin and bone and organs, to reach a thumb inside a jaw and feel the granite-bite of teeth.

Nightly the murder of crows, seeking the dead in the desert, hungry. The crows aware of how life broadcasts itself in violence, in screams, in sex and sweat and pumping organs filled with blood, in noise, in the rush of feet against the ground.

Nightly the standing at the threshold, the closed door, the mother beckoning for answers with her moans and wails, the wolf-like men and boys outside, awaiting invitation. Nightly the lizard-boy, Aurelio, with hands pressed to the door, reluctant. Aurelio at the door, fearing what he might let in, fearing what might be outside.

I Thought I Had Post-Chicana Blues Because Chicana Wasn't Enough by Lauren Espinoza

1.

like the checkered chancas I tripped over, too big
for me. Chicano nationalism didn't have a place identity. I did,
Borderlands, Tx.

where my home has a U.S. area code, but you wouldn't be able to tell it by looking at the last
names in the phone book.

where people speak pocho Spanglish.

where every kitchen may not have a loaf of bread, but for sure has tortillas.

where you can buy every virgen accouterment possible at the grocery store.

where you go to the pulga to see the movies in theaters.

where the minority is the majority; does that still make them a minority?

where you don't have to go to the doctor to get antibiotics.

where at Macy's, people ask if they can pay in pesos.

2.

If the border is just what divides us
as people, then there is no border.
If there are no borders, there is no reader.

3.

For Tejanas,
who will be the ones to speak
for those who are middle-class Mexican-Americans
who never knew the poverty of growing up in the streets
who never spoke Spanish in their home
who went to classrooms labeled Gifted & Talented
who never had to worry where their next meal was coming from
who never questioned if they were going to be able to go to college,
because for them it was never a choice – the only choice was what school.

4.

A short description of Tejanas
—wear Selena on their t-shirts
—have spray paint stencils of the virgen on their dressers
—get Gloria Anzaldúa quotes as tattoos
—dress up as La Llorona for Halloween
—have cats named Sor Juana and Tonantzin

5.

If there is no reader
how are we supposed
to define ourselves?



God Hates Phags by Ryan Forsythe

The editor of this fine publication initially asked that I share 1600-1800 words on the history of durophagous terminology. He hoped for a brief examination of why many of us feel it's perfectly acceptable to call ourselves "cray" and "Homa" and, of course, that most contentious "phag," but then we get our cockles in a bunch when the non-durophagous—even our close friends!—refer to us in the same fashion. However, as I began writing about my own experience of moving within and around these terms, rejecting some, accepting others, ultimately forming strong opinions on most of them, a very different essay emerged. Being a good little writer, I naturally communicated my concerns to Oscar at the journal, apologizing profusely over my inability to complete the task as assigned. He, however, encouraged me to run with it, to follow the words in whatever direction—and length—seemed appropriate. So please excuse the self-indulgent nature of this exercise, but you must of course blame him if this is not the essay you were looking for.

Naturally it's well-known that eaters of shrimp and crab are called *phags*. Most people know this is a shortened form of *Durophag*, itself shortened from *durophagy* or *durophagous*, but few care to know any more than that. The word combines the root *duro* with the word ending *-phage*. *Duro* comes from the Latin *durus* meaning "hard." The word *endure* derives from the word: to make hard, harden, to last. The ending *-phage* indicates "a thing that devours." *Durophagy*, then, is the term that describes animals that consume hard-shelled or exoskeleton-bearing organisms, such as shelled mollusks or crabs. To be *durophagous* is to be able to crack crustacean or mollusk shells in order to eat what's inside. As I assume you're aware, the shortened form "phag," has come to be a pejorative term referencing a person who eats mollusks.

The term "Homa" has a shorter history, as it's taken from *Homaridae*, the family classification for many lobsters. A quick sampling of other slang terms include shritter or shreater (shrimp eater), lobver (lobster lover), blimp (short for blimp greeter, rhyming slang for shrimp eater), mobster (presumably combining monster/lobster), clacker (term for oysters full of sand that make a distinctive noise when tapped), crushed Asian (homophone for crustacean), cunny (collective noun for a group of shrimp), duro (short for durophage), Maggie (after the famous crab-eating macaque), and Matilda (mussels are edible bivalves of the marine family Mytilidae).

See also: bivalve, blue blood, chowder, clammer, conpoy, crab gobber, crawdaddy, filter feeder, lusc diver, pearl, pearl muncher, scallop, shrimper, shucker, snailer, soft-shell, trawler, winkle, and yabby. I could go on. In fact, I was supposed to. I feel what ultimately prompted a change in direction for me is understanding that the history of the people is much, much larger than any one word.

Studies generally indicate that the number-one determinant of whether a person will be accepting of durophagous peoples is simply this: do you know any? And so, for those of you who do not—or, as is more likely, don't know that you know—I write this in hopes that you will get to know me just a

tad better. So there it is. My agenda. Out in the open so you can choose to stop now, if you wish, choose to ignore me and my words and go back to your comfortable existence. Hell, maybe getting to know someone just through their words doesn't count anyway. So maybe this will change nothing. But Oscar is giving me this space, so I'll take it.

First, some background: 1988. Summer between fifth and sixth grades. On Saturdays, my best friend Jimmy Baldwin would come over and we'd play games with a bunch of kids from the neighborhood. Games like kickball or hide-and-seek or, most often, a game called Grab the Crab. Whoever has the football is the crab and everyone tries to tackle them and get the ball and then whoever has it becomes the crab and the guys pile on to get the ball.

I remember thinking at the time there was something taboo about the game's name—such that afterward, while I was eating my Little Debbie snacks and drinking my Kool-Aid, if Mom asked what we'd been playing, I'd be evasive. Sure, if we played anything *but*, I'd say right away: kickball, soccer, baseball, manhunt, freeze tag, H-O-R-S-E. But for that one game, I'd offer a general, "Oh, we were just playing ball." I didn't know why it felt weird to say it, but I didn't really give it more thought. Then I'd eat my Zebra Cakes.

Fast-forward to 1991. Mostly the same guys, but instead of Grab the Crab, we'd shoot hoops or play tackle football in the mud until someone said they were hungry—usually Gregory Maguire—and then we'd go raid the kitchen for Cool Ranch Doritos and root beer "on the rocks."

One time we had just finished playing some basketball, six or seven of us. I had to pee and wasn't paying attention to who was where. The bathroom door was shut but I gave the handle a try and pushed it open. There was Jimmy hunched over, stuffing something in his mouth.

"Jimmy?"

"Augh!" he screamed, rushing to close the door on me, but my foot blocked it.

"What is th—"

"Shhh!" He pulled me in and pushed the door closed and played with the lock. "Fuck, this is broken."

Meanwhile I was trying to read the letters on the bag in his hand. "Are those shrimp crackers?"

"Shut up, goddamnit! Do you want the guys to hear?"

He set the bag down to fiddle more with the lock. *Shrimp Flavored Chips*. Under the name were some strange characters, at the time I assumed Chinese, though now I'm pretty sure they were Korean.

"Where did you get these?"

"Just chill out, Walt. I can totally explain."

But of course, he couldn't. Not in any real sense. Not without offering me one. But I wasn't ready and walked out. I was too upset to tell the guys. Over the next month, Jimmy came out to play less and less. At the end of summer, he went on to the local public school while the rest of us started high school at St. Isaac Jogues. I saw him just one time senior year and I didn't say a word to him then.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't been my best friend. I still remember all throughout middle school and junior high playing Masters of the Universe in his backyard. I'd bring all my figures and he had all his. We both wanted to be He-Man, but eventually I switched and played the bad guys. I pretended my He-Man was an evil bizarro version, enslaved by Skeletor, though now that I think about it, his was the real Skeletor while we pretended mine was the devil. I even colored him with a red marker.

Growing up in Ohio, God was a big part of our life. Or rather, the idea of God. Religion class each day at school, church every Sunday. In high school, Mr. Auden stated clearly what our beliefs should be: It was okay for people to like shrimp and crab and clams, just as long as they never acted on those impulses. The Bible was clear on this. And so I prayed for the molluscivores, that they would learn the evil of their ways and convert to a non-shellfish diet. Mostly I prayed for Jimmy Baldwin.

As time progressed, my thoughts on the issue continued to evolve. By college, it didn't seem nearly so bad to me, though I still felt it was wrong. There were a few out Homas in my dorm, though of course we weren't friends. I did know they passed Friday nights at the Cray Bar down on High Street. Occasionally I'd pass the bar, wondering about the goings-on behind its blackened windows. The music was always good, I do remember that. One time I was walking past with my friend Edward. We were noshing on corn dogs from the nearby Hot Dog On A Stick when the door swung open and a man fell out, his bag of popcorn shrimp spilling onto the sidewalk. He looked up at us, horrified, before hurrying back in, leaving little fried shrimp bits everywhere.

Rather loudly, Edward said to me, "You know I have nothing against Durophags. What they do in their own dining room is fine by me. I just don't know why they have to be so open about it." I nodded in agreement and took another bite of corn dog. Then, mouth full of processed meat product, I added contemptuously, "Phag."

It's funny to think of the huge power these simple words can have. But words do matter. Writing this essay reminded me of a quote attributed to the Buddha. "Whatever words we utter should be chosen with care for people will hear them and be influenced by them for good or ill." I like the big guy's thought, but I think he's only half right. I think there's also a large percentage of people who won't be influenced at all. Who won't care one way or the other about the fight over these issues. It was Betty Davis who once said she wasn't against cray rights, she just didn't see what was in it for her.

She wasn't alone in this opinion.

Again, college. One Sunday before mass at the campus Newman Center, I asked Father Eliot about it while we were setting out cupcakes and coffee for an after-mass reception.

"Remember Deuteronomy, Walt. Chapter fourteen, verses nine and ten: 'These ye shall eat of all that are in the waters: all that have fins and scales shall ye eat: And whatsoever hath not fins and scales ye may not eat; it is unclean unto you.' God calls it an abomination. Not just a sin, Walt, but an *abomination*."

"But Father Eliot, doesn't Leviticus say it's wrong for a man to lie with another man as he would a woman. Why aren't we against that too?"

"Assuming they are in a loving committed relationship, why would we be against that?"

"I mean, it's part of the Bible. And if we're against one thing the Bible says is an abomination, shouldn't we be consistent and be against all of them? Aren't they all abominations?"

"Walt, Walt, Walt." He smiled but shook his head. "Listen. The side of Satan will try to sway you with their rhetorical arguments. They will quote Matthew, chapter eleven, and say, 'See: God hated figs yet today we enjoy them, so why are Christians against bivalve mollusks?' But it's important that you know in your heart that this is an absurd argument."

"But why? I'm sorry, I'm honestly trying to understand."

"Well, because what's next—eating garbage? Eating human vomit? Eating other *humans*? Is that also natural? It's a slippery slope when you start saying that eating certain non-food items is okay and not others. And so all acts of eating *non*-food must be considered sins. Only through eating *food* can we find salvation in the Lord. Here, have a cupcake." He started to hand me one, but remembered the prohibition against eating during the hour before mass. "Actually, better to wait."

I nodded and smiled, though I remained less than convinced by his arguments. And please don't take this as an insult, dear Reader—though I expect many of you will—but it really made me wonder about the people who bought it all, no questions asked.

It's true that many of the terms are considered acceptable when used by members of the Luscivore-Cray-Bivalve community and our allies, but are not so appropriate when used by outsiders. SCA'LOP, the Society of Cray and 'Luscivore People Opposing Prejudice, states on their website that the preferred term is either the more scientifically boring "durophagous" or the traditionally accepted "cray." In contrast, the more radical group CLAAM, Cunnys and Luscivores for

the Acceptance of All Mobsters, advocates reclamation of any and all derogatory terms. And yes, for the uninformed, the differing apostrophe usage with Luscivore is correct here—SCA'LOP goes so far as to feature it prominently in their logo while CLAAM believes "Luscivore" should be claimed as a new word, not merely a contraction of a term used by Needers, which, if you don't know, is what we call all you non-molluscivores. It's a homophone for "n'eaters," which is short for "non-eaters," itself short for "non-shellfish eaters." Are you surprised that we have words for you? Don't be.

But to these groups and others, I think the important thing is not necessarily the term itself but the way it's used. Intent matters. When SCA'LOP says "cray" is accepted, they aren't referring to times when Needers toss around a phrase like "That's so cray" to describe things they don't like. I'm not sure why this is a radical idea, that you can say "Yo, bitch" to your best friend, but that it could be considered offensive if someone used the same word to describe your mother. It seems intuitive to me, but then I'm not the one trying to protect or rationalize my usage of the term.

One night, a few years out of college, I bumped into my friend Marcel. We'd been in the university men's chorus together and since then, we'd see each other periodically at dance clubs or just around—I'd just seen him the week before, in fact. He was eating something wrapped in brown paper and thrust it into my hand, saying "Here—try this." I was chewing it before he said, "It's crab meat. What do you think?"

"You mean...imitation crab. Right?"

"Heck, no. Real crab meat. Isn't it great?"

I spit it out. "My god, why'd you do this?"

"What?"

"What are you, some kind of S.O.E, pushing your crab on me? You think I'm some kind of phag?"

"I, I thought you knew." He wrinkled his forehead as he spoke, confused. "Last week. You saw me eating—"

"First of all, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Friday night. The crabcake sandwich. Over at—"

"And second of all...I...I thought that was fried *chicken*." Now I was the one confused.

"Get out of here," I said, feeling betrayed. Feeling that even if I had known it was a crab sandwich the week before, that still gave him no right to do this to me.

"Walt, I didn't mean—"

"Go!"

Only later, after I'd had a chance to cool off and was replaying the moment in my mind, did I realize something. I had had my first taste. And it wasn't so bad. Actually, I liked it. A *lot*. After a lifetime of greasy burgers, soggy fried chicken, and steaks so tough I needed to saw them with a knife, the soft and delicate sweetness of that crab just felt right. It made me wonder—had I always been this way? Had that mere bite awakened a long-dormant biological desire to appreciate crabcake sandwiches? And what about other shellfish? Shrimp, lobster, clams, and—oh *God*—Oysters Rockefeller! How would those taste? My eyes and taste buds felt open for the first time.

Or was I giving in too soon to this desire, to *sin*? Maybe it wasn't too late to fight the urges and return to my previous state of blissful ignorance. Perhaps Marcel had manipulated me, was somehow converting me to his kind, influencing me in much the way Gary Failwell warned us about. Who can forget the controversy when Failwell claimed that Pokémon characters Shellder and Cloyster were secret durophagous role models for children, based on the characters' hard shells, which some claim as symbols of the cray pride movement? In an official statement, the CBC, producers of the program, indicated "Cloyster and Shellder are simply bivalves. They are not durophagous. They are not *not* durophagous. They are just characters in a children's series."

The fear is that the durophagous are trying to get kids to fall in love with shellfish by exposing them at a young age to cute oysters. What did Failwell say? "It's well-known that oysters have an aphrodisiac quality, which our children may be too young to fight off." But this is plain silly. Besides the fact that Cloyster and Shellder are cheeky bivalve characters and would hardly encourage people to eat themselves, studies show that children of shellfish eaters are just as likely to reject the food—to turn up their noses and shove away plates of cooked mussels—as the children of Needers. In the end, all children are going to cry for mac n' cheese or peanut butter n' jelly or chicken nuggets and French fries.

Or ice cream.

Alright, the story I didn't want to tell, but in all honesty, the real reason I began writing the essay. To work through the shame or regret or at least confusion over my own past. To come to terms with one of my darkest moments.

Back to high school. Senior year. Sitting with the team on the benches outside the Dairy Queen. More than three years past Jimmy Baldwin hanging with our group, we spot him walk up. Edgar drains his large kiwi-strawberry Mr. Misty and says, "Dude, we're going to get that mobster fucker. You in?"

Francis: "I'm in."

Edgar: "Roy?"

Roy: "Shit, yeah, let's tear out that digestive track."

Edgar: "How about you, Walt? Or are you going to wimp out, you lil' blimp lover?"

Roy snorts, nearly choking on his Hot Fudge Brownie Delight.

Me: "I don't know, guys. I mean, so what if he likes shellfish?" I see Jimmy in profile, standing at the outdoor counter.

Edgar: "A ha! You are a shreater! What is it—clams? Popcorn shrimp? Hey, everyone—Walt eats little fried shrimp."

More laughter. I look at them.

Me: "I do not. Geez, whatever, Edgar. I'm in, alright?"

Edgar calls out. "Hey, Jimmy. I hear you enjoy a little of the shellfish."

Jimmy actually comes walking over, actually comes right up to us. I think to myself, *Run away from here, Jimmy*. Licking a cherry-dipped cone, he says, "Hi, guys."

Edgar: "So is it true? You enjoy some shell with your fish?" Edgar hops up and the others follow, circling around Jimmy. I join.

Jimmy: "Naw, guys. It was one time—but it wasn't for me. What, did Walt tell you that?"

Edgar: "What? Walt here?"

Jimmy: "Yeah, when I tried the shrimp crackers." Jimmy frowns. "I assumed he told you."

Edgar: "Well this is news! You've been holding out on us, Walt. Looks like we got us a regular John Swifty here."

Jimmy looks at me: "Tell them."

Edgar: "Yeah, Walt. Tell us."

Let me interrupt a moment to comment on a general misconception regarding one of the heroes of the movement. It's true that as early as 1738, Jonathan Swift wrote, "He was a bold Man that first, eat an oyster." Non-crays hear the quote and somehow believe Swift himself was the first person to eat oysters, which would make it a relatively recent phenomenon. In reality, the enjoyment of oysters has a long and glorious history in numerous cultures around the world—oyster middens have been found dating back into prehistory; one shell mound on Dulawat Island in Humboldt Bay dates back more than 7000 years.

In point of fact, Swift wasn't even the first to make the point about oysters. Swift borrowed from Thomas Fuller's *Worthies of England*, published a full four decades earlier, which attributes this quote to James I: "He was a very valiant man who first adventured on eating of oysters."

Swift's version is found in a book titled *A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation: according to the most polite mode and method now used at court, and in the best companies of England*. Throughout the tome's three sections, Swift mocks the banality of polite English conversation. So perhaps we should hardly consider him a hero, he who steals a quote about oysters and uses it as an example of the trite and dull conversation to be found at British tea parties. Swift redeems himself, however, by virtue of his 1726 *Gulliver's Travels*, the first novel known to feature a protagonist gathering and eating shellfish. In the book's fourth part, "A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms," the titular hero tells us:

I found some shellfish on the shore, and ate them raw, not daring to kindle a fire, for fear of being discovered by the natives. I continued for three days feeding on oysters and limpets, to save my own provisions; and I fortunately found a brook of excellent water, which gave me great relief.

Hence, today you find pro-shellfish societies with names like Gulliver's Gatherers and A Gathering of Gullivers (unrelated), and of course the infamous S.O.E., short for Swift's Oyster Eaters. So people have been eating oysters and other shellfish for thousands of years—and writing about it for at least hundreds. Tell that to your congressman the next time he says it's not natural.

But here I am going off on my high seahorse. Or maybe I'm going on here in an attempt at avoidance, to refrain from writing more on the event that's haunted me since that day in high school. But face it, I must. We've come this far.

Back to Dairy Queen.

I remember the sun had dipped below the horizon, dragging a deep red-orange sky in its wake. Edgar has just turned to me. "Yeah, Walt. Tell us."

I turn, raise my eyebrows to Edgar. "I don't know what he's talking about."

Edgar considers Jimmy, but speaks to me. "You sure about that, Walt. You really don't know what Jimmy here is talking about?"

"No."

Edgar turns to me, pauses. "Really?"

"Yes, really." Three times.

"Alright, then." Back to Jimmy. "Sounds like you're calling our boy Walt a liar. Now that's not very polite."

Francis snickers. Roy tosses the remains of his brownie in a nearby trash receptacle. Edgar balls up his right fist and punches it into the palm of his left, cracking the knuckles of his fist. Then he does the same with his left hand. He raises an eyebrow to Roy, Roy now directly behind Jimmy, now grabbing Jimmy's arms, now fighting to hold Jimmy's arms as Jimmy squirms. Jimmy's cone lands dip side down.

Edgar starts with a punch to the gut, causing Jimmy to double over. Roy pushes him to the ground. Francis kicks him once, then Roy. They all laugh. I notice Jimmy's shirt and hesitate.

Back when we played Masters of the Universe, we were so excited when the movie came out with Dolph Lundgren as He-Man, we ended up seeing it three Saturdays in a row. And now, outside the Dairy Queen, Jimmy is on the ground staring up at me, while I look everywhere but his eyes. That's when I see his Dolph as He-Man t-shirt.

I glance quickly at Edgar who bears a slight resemblance to the villain Skeletor as he laughs. I see beefy Roy and think of Beast Man, Skeletor's buffoon sidekick. Maybe it's his Cardinals baseball cap but Francis reminds me of Stratos, the leader of a race of bird people who gain powers from a sacred relic. I then think of He-Man's catchphrase, "I have the power." Or maybe I'm making this up. Maybe in looking back, this is how I want to remember it—that Edgar was the evil villain and we his minions and if only Jimmy would call on the power of Grayskull, he could seize victory. But maybe it was I who should have called on the power.

I hesitate, but not too long. I think Edgar almost catches on—out of the corner of my eye, I see him turning toward me—to see what I'm doing. I don't look back or acknowledge him. Instead, in that split second, I kick out my leg, fast enough that I think Edgar can't register that I was hesitating. My leg jams Jimmy in his side. I join the others and kick him. We kick him so many times, he stops defending himself. He just stares at me alone with that expression that says, "Why are you doing this?"

I don't answer his look. I kick him harder.

I've never told this story before—not to my parents, college friends, colleagues. Certainly not in an essay in a national publication. But I want others like me to know: you don't have to be bullied. Moreso, you don't have to do the bullying. Of course I prayed for Jimmy Baldwin for several years after that—probably the reason I spent so much time at the Newman Center—but I also prayed for myself, that the Lord would forgive me my trespasses against Jimmy. But I didn't stop hating myself for what I'd done until I finally stopped praying. Until I left the church years later. Until I embraced a positive sense of who I am.

It is that heritage that we celebrate in our many Cray Pride parades and festivals, such as the Main Street Oyster Festival each June in Arcata, with its live music, vendors, children's games and activities, and more. These festivals are not without controversy, as many Needers express disgust at what goes on "out in the open" at events like the "Shuck & Swallow" competition, in which participants try to slurp down as many oysters as possible. Critics claim it's not healthy that children be subjected to this. But consider: Shrimp is high in protein and calcium and considered healthy for the circulatory system because of low levels of saturated fat. So the high cholesterol content improves the LDL/HDL ratio and lowers triglycerides.

The same people who have a problem with children witnessing consenting adults enjoy some shellfish have no problem whatsoever subjecting their own children to thousands of advertisements each year featuring such "natural" items as processed cheese, sugary breakfast cereals, condensed soup, lunch meat, potato chips, guacamole-flavored dip, white rice, and every variety of soda product. There's something seriously wrong with a society that doles out Oscar Meyer Lunchables and Oreo cookies to kids like they're going out of fashion, but complains about them even *seeing* half a plate of steamed oysters.

But enough about the haters. Until you've stood freely on the Arcata Plaza, under clear blue skies, unashamedly slurping a breaded oyster from Tomo's or downing some oyster stew courtesy the Henderson Center Kiwanis, surrounded by eighteen thousand accepting and loving friends, the strains of Tom Petty cover band Full Moon Fever gracing the background, until then, well, I guess Tom Petty said it best: You don't know how it feels.

My Homa allies may take offense to this essay. To the fact that I had as much space as I wanted and did not delve into so many things. The devastating effect that PSP, the so-called "Mollusk-lover disease," has had on our communities. The ongoing controversy and debates about cray rights ballot issues in various states. Some may take offense to my casual tone about these issues, which for many have been matters of life or death. But not all those stories are my story. As I said at the outset, it's important that this be my own story—that you read this and know me personally. I do not and can not speak for all durophagous men and women. I can only speak for myself.

It's funny—in high school English, we had a brief section on "creative writing." Ms. Woolf told us it was important for a character to change as a result of the work. I think that applied more to fiction, but thinking about it makes me wonder. At the start, I said I wanted you to change, dear Reader. Does that make you a character in my story? And if so, have you changed? More than likely, I will not learn the answer. Perhaps it's a strange piece of writing when the narrator can conclude the piece not knowing if there's been a change or not. But there it is.

Ms. Woolf also said I should pretty much never have a surprise ending, but I may not get the chance again and I really think it works this time. Here it is: I lied when I said I wrote this for those of you who don't eat shrimp. No, I did not write this so you could get to know me better and change your thinking.

The President recently overturned the "Don't Eat, Don't Tell" policy, which kept crays out of our nation's commercial fishing fleets, out of fear that our noble fishermen and women would struggle to accomplish their work if molluscivore colleagues were encouraging them to sample a lobster caught amongst the fish instead of tossing it back. The times, they are a-changing.

Also, the state of Maryland has just approved a far-reaching cray rights bill. Of course the coastal areas are more liberal in regard to these things, being as the local population is more likely to have tried oysters or to know a shrimp trawler. But as I write this, 52% of the voting age population indicated belief that eating shrimp is perfectly acceptable—the first time in fact, that national polls show more than half the country subscribes to these beliefs. America is increasingly accepting of durophagous peoples. The times, they are a-changing.

Of course, no sooner had I written that last line, than I see an article pop up in my feed. According to the AP, the Pope is encouraging Catholics to take a stand against "powerful political and cultural currents seeking to alter the legal definition of seafood." He says, "Differences of fin-ness cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the definition of seafood." It's the old argument—just because it comes from the sea doesn't mean it's food. So there is still work to be done. But still, the point remains: It is an exciting time to eat shrimp in America.

So, sorry, but no—if you are a close-minded bigoted Homaphobe reading this alone and seething with fear at the possibility that I might offer your darling daughter or son a small slab of crab or a dollop of scallops then I don't need to waste my time convincing you of anything. Tide and time are on our side.

Rather, I write this for the young girl struggling with questions of identity and maybe wondering how a nice bit of escargot might taste. I write this for the consenting adults afraid to tell their friends they enjoy a spot of surf with their turf. I write this for the young boy afraid to confront his friends over their treatment of those they suspect are a little different—the boy who gives in to peer pressure instead of standing up for the rights of all who relish the taste of clam and crab and lobster and oyster. And I write this for Jimmy Baldwin, so that he may know that I am truly sorry for my horrible inexcusable actions. Wherever you are, Jimmy, I accept that you can probably never forgive me.

Finally, I write this so I can share a simple message with *my* people. If that is you, if this has somehow found its way to your eyes, please know this: it is hard and it sucks and it is unfair. And it hurts, I know it does. But it gets better.

By the power of Grayskull, it totally gets better.

END



Full. by Aaron George

*"Well makers lead the water where ever they like, Fletchers bend the arrow,
Carpenters bend a log of wood,
Good people fashion themselves."*

—Taken from the dhammanpadda

I first started to hear voices when I was almost twenty years old. I remember the exact day that it first happened because it was the day after my birthday, in February of 2001. I had just started at my new fast food job and I was standing in a room full of people. The floor had red tile and it was surrounded by nicotine-stained white walls; you could smoke indoors then. I was wearing a blue polo shirt and black slacks that didn't fit right and I had on a special headset that let me hear these voices. I was the young man taking orders in a fast food drive-through.

The first voice I ever heard was that of a feeble-sounding old woman. Her voice grew to be my favorite, and for a while it was a sort of high point to my week, we got to know each other quite well. Her name was Angela and she told me that I reminded her of her son, Teddy, and that just like him, I should get into the movie business.

Aside from Angela there were other friendly voices: middle aged men with that tinge of cheap suit style business and a slight swagger in tone; SUV moms in such a hurry to feed the kids, do the laundry, and everything else they had to do in order to be able to read a bit later in the night; old black folks who called me names like "sonny" or "partner," teenagers whose main concerns in life were whether or not such-and-such thought they were cute, or whether their car was cool enough or not.

These were some of the more friendly voices. I, in return, was friendly and did whatever it was they asked me to do. I was happier then; I had a girlfriend and we were madly in the sort of first love that would collapse without a thick wall built between the two lovers, and eventually always does when the try to take the wall down. I was doing well enough in school that I was sure to graduate when the time came. I had some close friends, not many friends, but they were all the better for it. Back then I remember that my life ambition was to one day build a skyscraper, something massive and eternal that could withstand anything. The plan was to attend college for architecture, most likely at Archdale University. But, this all took place before I woke up.

There were less friendly, ugly voices also. Voices stuffed with thick tongues and cumbersome cheeks, the voices of lonely drunks with slurred words and raspy, smoke-eaten throats. Voices of bitter old people with nothing better to do than harass me because their children became domesticated whores and suburban drug addicts. Voices of people in too big of a hurry to be even the slightest bit friendly. They were tragic and sorry voices, doing what they asked was always a chore and I hated listening to them.

Aside from some in the early days though, these voices were few enough that I could take them in stride. But after a year or so it was like someone opened the floodgates of the asshole river and they all cooperated to form a committee whose sole purpose was to piss me off and drive me insane. It was then that I developed a sort of hatred for them and the unbelievable stress that they nurtured and cultivated inside my head. But I don't want to talk about them anymore.

I want to tell you about Bill. Bill was there in the early days. Bill wasn't one of the voices, but I could talk to him about them, Bill understood. Bill was my boss at the fast food joint. Bill was forty two years old, divorced three times, and had one daughter whom I went to high school with but never talked to because she was "ugly," and anyway, I was terrified of women back then. Bill's teeth were decayed to a point that one of them was green; he liked to drink cheap beer and smoke cheap cigarettes. Bill was fantastic to me. An almost perfect mixture of pride and shame lived inside of him, always a bounce in his step and a sad humility in his voice. Bill drove a rusty car from nineteen ninety three, he hated it, but he refused to buy a new one.

My father died when I was four and I suppose Bill was the closest thing to a replacement I have ever had. The conversations Bill and I had were, I guess, typical to all conversations between a grown man and a growing kid, always advising, Bill was. I learned many things from Bill such as "if you ever drink beer out of a girl's ass crack, make sure she showers first" and "if it's your first time getting laid, beat off a couple of times before the girl comes over, you'll last longer and impress the shit out of her." Along with these little nuggets of wisdom I also learned a little bit about love from his stories about his ex-wives, or "Bitch numbers one, two, and three" as he called them. "That bitch tried to tell me that I love my mother more than I love her," he once said. "Well Franklin, I looked her right in the eyes and I said, 'you're damn right I do! My mother never gave me herpes you fuckin' cooz!'" and he laughed in a way that sounded like choking. I think the herpes came from Bitch number two.

Bill taught me a bit about patience also; "take it in stride" he would always say when I was down. Bill was a man whose whole life consisted of trying to make up for past mistakes, only to make them all over again.

Bill's one problem, his real problem, the problem that he really, really needed to address was his weight. To say "Bill is fat" would have been like calling the ocean wet. He waddled instead of walked and he was almost constantly in pain. Most of the time when anyone saw Bill he was sitting down and out of breath, even talking was a chore for him sometimes. His pants alone could have clothed at least three small children from head to toe. Bill was not big-boned.

I never commented on Bill's weight to his face or behind his back, in fact aside from a few snide comments from stupid people, Bill himself was the only one who ever talked about it. "You know, Franklin," (Bill was the only person aside from teachers who took the time to say my full name) "my glands are all fucked up and my arteries are clogged like fuckin' toilets," or things more self-deprecating like: "and you know me, Franklin, I'm a fuckin' fat ass..." I never knew quite how to react

to these things when he said them. I see now that maybe I should have said something, after all Bill had been there for me many times. One time I thought my girlfriend was going to break up with me and Bill told me to "Get her before she gets you, then she'll come running back my friend, guaranteed." I didn't think it would work, but it did.

At that time I figured that Bill would be alright. I didn't realize that the strain on his heart from doing something like walking up a flight of stairs was comparable to me running for twenty minutes straight, I didn't understand what it meant to have clogged arteries and high blood pressure.

The last words I heard Bill say were, "Alright, Franklin, let's get the fuck outta here. Get everything cleaned up because I'm ready to go home." He was talking about closing the store down for the night; he meant he wanted me to shut everything down, lock the windows, clean anything left to clean and wait for him to finish counting the money so that he could give me a ride home. Bill would often send everyone but me home early, I could do all the work, and it saved on labor. But as it turned out, Bill and I would go our separate ways that night.

Apparently the average hum of machines and lights in a fast food place is enough to muffle the sound of a three hundred or so pound man falling to the ground—at least muffle it to the point that the kid who's busy locking the drive-through window up front has no clue that his boss, and friend, is dying.

I walked to the back of the store, probably thinking of ways to finally convince my girlfriend to have sex with me. He was lying on the floor next to the steel prep table with the last bits of life leavening his body in a heart attack.

At first I didn't really know what was going on; it only took me half of a second to realize I was seeing him die. I called 911; they said, "We'll be there soon." I went to Bill's side as though my sitting there was going to help. His face was sweaty and scowling, his forehead was wrinkling, his lips kept folding in on themselves and every few seconds he would grunt a bit. He didn't look at me, then, after a bit, he just stopped. He was staring into death with wide eyes to show his struggle against the inevitable; and I was alone in the back of a fast food joint with a dead man near midnight.

For a moment before they got there I just sat looking at him, his body. The whole night was sort of surreal and I don't really remember every detail. But the memories I do have are thick and almost physical. I remember Bill's swollen nose, it was red, not only because he had just had a heart attack, but also from years of drinking. I remember that I could see bits of his pale, skinned stomach through the cracks of his red button-up shirt. I thought of closing his eyes but I didn't...he was supposed to be breathing.

When they finally arrived it felt like it had been a long time but honestly I have no clue how long it was. It was good when they got there though; at some point I'd started thinking about all the dead

animals in the building as food, then I looked at Bill, then I vomited in the corner. When the medics found me I was crying and sitting in a puddle of brown bubbly puke, my mouth tasted like sulfur and my eyes were cold with tears. The first medic I saw was a stoutly blond woman; her name was Beth she said. She looked at Bill then told me to stand up and come up front with her, that she needed to talk to me. When we got up front I remember I offered her something to drink for some reason, then I got myself one, but I never drank it. We sat down in the lobby and two more medics came through the doors with a gurney—they were good looking guys, one had dark hair—the gurney squeaked as it rolled.

Beth began to ask me all sorts of questions: "when did he pass on?" (I wondered why she didn't just say die) "How well did you know him?" "Did he ever mention anything about drug abuse?" I answered her as best as I could I think, honestly it's not important, Bill is dead, that's what matters.

I remember thinking "those damn ambulance lights." Then I went home and went to sleep. I slept for a day straight through and I quit my job. I sat around my shitty apartment thinking.

If anyone would have ever asked Bill about his weight he would have probably said something along the lines of "It's my glands," or "I'm just a fat ass." He would have said that "when I was a kid I was thinner than a fuckin' toothpick." He wouldn't have said anything about being chronically lethargic, morbidly depressed and inclined to escapism. He wouldn't have mentioned the fact that after his second wife left him he tried to commit suicide and failed, but never lost his urge to die. He might not have known all these things as clearly as I say them, but that is the truth.

Bill had worked in some form of fast food for more than twenty years. When he started, people working the grills at burger joints actually had to flip the burger, the orders didn't pop up on computer screens throughout the entire store—and if a person didn't get their food in sixty seconds, they didn't call you a shit face. Bill had faith in fast food, "People have got to eat," he would say. Unlike most fast-food employees though, Bill never really lost his taste for the stuff; they say that in some fast foods there are chemicals that are mildly addictive and after meeting Bill I believe this. Every day Bill ate at least one sandwich of some sort, he also ate a salad when they started serving them.

The sad truth is though that Bill ate for the wrong reasons. Like many Americans (me included to a point) and people not starving to death in some third world country, Bill predominantly ate for taste. Eating was not survival to Bill, eating was pleasure, he chose his meals based on what he was in the mood for and what would taste best. The difference about Bill was that he gave no thought to how his choices would affect him and the world around him, if he did think it through, he didn't care. For Bill eating was the same as getting drunk or beating off.

One week after Bill died I got a new job, this time at a burger joint that indicated royalty in its name. I was back in the drive-through, back in the headset, back with the voices. Many of them were the same voices that I had heard before; they would come on different days, less often, more

frequently. Angela never showed up and that sort of saddened me, but in a way I was happy that she kept her intake of this shit to a minimum. Aside from that the only difference in this job from my last was the food. I had a few more overweight bosses and I made fifty cents less. This is when things started to change.

I decided to take a few more years off before starting school; "some time to get my head on straight" is what I called it then. I was still going to build that massive building one day, maybe right in downtown Archdale, but for now I needed a break from worrying about real life. My girlfriend didn't. She didn't want to wait for school and apparently, she didn't feel like waiting until marriage to have sex anymore. She moved out of state and started college the next fall. I didn't take this too well, and I basically long distance stalked her. I would call her up and cry and tell her we were meant to be together. One day I called her and when I asked how she was she said "I'm having sex."

"What? Like right now?" I asked

"No, but often enough...his name is Ben and he's twenty nine. Please stop calling me. I didn't tell you before because I was afraid you would kill yourself or something." Then she hung up on me.

After that I was too pissed off to care about her aside from a feeling of deep resentment. She became my "Bitch number one" I suppose.

Eventually I started getting new interests in life. I would go to the Archdale main library and study things like vegetarianism and veganism. I learned about a group of people that eat only when they get really hungry and weak, they eat for survival and nothing else. I learned about groups like PETA. I read books, visited websites. I wasn't sure if I could ever stop eating meat but I wanted to.

I learned about things like factory farms and the negative effects they have on the planet and farmers. I saw videos on the internet of cows being slaughtered, live chickens being dipped into huge pots of boiling water and emerging with their feathers gone and in a state of shock. I saw pictures of veal calves and found out that they are never even allowed to walk so the meat stays tender. I learned figures on how much meat America alone consumes in one year and how long it takes for the land of factory farms to regain its fertility. I learned about the different grades of meat and what they mean.

After a while I decided that this was indeed the life for me, I stopped eating meat, I joined PETA I tried to educate people; I wanted to save the world and its animals from the endless and remorseless appetite of my country. I started to wake up.

The idea I had was a logical enough course of action: attack the monsters heart, just like it attacked Bill's. I would be the lone fast food worker who cared, a crusader. I started printing things out at the library, ordering educational pamphlets and buttons that said things like "meat stinks" and I brought them with me to work. My new bosses were not like Bill though, they were all assholes.

They yelled at employees and took their shitty jobs way too seriously. They did things like hold meetings and designate crew leaders, I was employee of the month once. Needless to say I had to sneak in my propaganda, aside from the buttons, those I would wear and I didn't care if they saw them because we live in America and that is supposed to mean something. Every day I had pockets full of paper, pamphlets hidden in my boxer short waist band, I carried a backpack full of reserve supplies and every customer got something extra in their bag.

For most people I simply stuffed an article about vegetarianism in with their burger and said "have a nice day." But for the assheds, people who talked down to me or yelled into the damn box, I had special things like pictures of dead cows and featherless chickens, page long descriptions of the places their food came from and the horrible conditions the animals lived in, caked in shit, surrounded by other animals who had died early of disease. If I ran out of supplies I simply talked to people, someone would order and then I would read to them from a nutrition facts sheet just how unhealthy what they're about to feed their children is. I would remind them about things like heart attacks, high cholesterol and strokes.

Most people didn't care. I would hand out my stuff and get no response. Some people were thankful, usually mothers, they'd say things like "wow that's really bad, thanks for the heads up" then I wouldn't see them for a while and when they did come back they always felt obligated to explain themselves, "no time to cook tonight you know, but I got the kids apples instead of fries" I would then explain to them that I didn't mean to make them feel bad, they said I did anyways.

A lot of the time, though, people just got mad. With current gas prices it sounds insane that people would actually drive all the way back through my line just to flick me off and throw the picture or information at my face, only to drive off again. Now those sons a' bitches are paying 4 dollars a gallon, but I'm in a nut house so, I don't know who won in the end.

Either way I know it made me feel great, I was doing something, helping people, changing the world. I carried it beyond work and on my days off I would go to downtown Archdale and hand out pamphlets. It made me feel good the way that Agnes had made me feel good. Jesus knew what he was saying when he talked about helping others; it really does a good number on you.

I suppose now I have to get to the bad part of my story, the part that got my name and picture on T-shirts for high school kids. I asked my doctor if I could just skip this part. He reminded me that this is the whole reason I'm writing in the first place. When I told him that I think an accurate description was given by the media he said that they (doctors) "were looking to get inside my head," he told me he thinks I'm "very smart and respectable."

When I asked him why he wouldn't just let me go if he thinks I'm so smart and respectable he gave a chuckle and told me not to joke, then our time was up, now I'm back in my room. I suppose they do trust me enough though because they gave me this typewriter and I could easily take it apart and use the little clackers to make a lockpick, or a shiv. I'm sitting here now, and I'm looking at a

white cinder block wall, I have a desk, a bed, and this typewriter (until I'm done, then it's going back in the closet that I can't get to). I want to leave.

I suppose it was bound to happen one day, you piss with people long enough... Like I said earlier most of the people who got angry at me either cussed at me or threw things at me, I insulted them and they reacted in a reasonable enough manner. All it takes it one wrong move to change things.

One day I was in my usual position at the drive through, blue and yellow shirt wrinkle free, black slacks ironed that morning, and a button that said "Unhappy Meal" and had a picture of a clown holding a blood-soaked fast food bag, gleaming in the midday sun on the side of my stupid black hat. It had been sort of slow that day so I was in a relaxed mood. I hadn't been to the library in a while so I didn't have any supplies, but that was o.k., I had my mouth.

I was sweeping the floor and trying to get things done because it was around 8 o'clock and even crusaders like to get home early. My headset beeped (witch if you have ever worked in fast food you know how annoying and shrill that sound is). "Great" I thought "another son of a bitch who wants a super burger." I pushed the little red button that puts my voice in the box.

"Hi," I said "welcome to ----- what can I get for you?"

"Hello?!?" came my response.

"Hello," I said. "What can I get for you?"

"Oh yeah...gimee aaaaaaaa super burgerrrr aaand aaa diet soda," he said.

"You know that diet soda won't help at all with that super burger," I said. "There's over 400 calories in just one burger."

"Yeah, OK, gimme a fuckin super burger," he said.

"Alright," I said, "just tryin' to help"

"Yep, fuck off," he said and then he pulled around.

Now was the little "fuck off" really necessary? Well I thought he took it too far, "tell me to fuck off eh?" I thought. I went and grabbed a bag to put his stupid sandwich in and waited for the grill guy to send it down the little chute. "I should wipe my ass with this bag" I thought as the burger plopped in front of me, when I picked it up I burnt my finger on the heating coil and said, "Shit."

When I got to the window I was greeted by a man who was probably in his early 40s. He was driving a truck that probably got about three miles to the gallon and when I opened the window he said "What did you call me?"

"Nothin' man," I said.

"Yeah right," he said "Just gimme some fuckin' ketchup."

I closed the window and he started to say something but I just walked away, there was ketchup in my area but I didn't want to be near this guy any more than I had to. "What a prick," I whispered to myself as I walked towards the little container up front that held the packets of ketchup. I dropped a few in, and with spontaneity not common for me I plucked the pin from my hat and tossed it into the bag.

I walked back to the window and handed him his food. "Thanks," I said and he drove off, then he parked; assholes always park to make sure you didn't mess up their order. I forgot about the guy honestly, I went back to sweeping my floor and I was ready to go the hell home.

A few minutes later I started talking to Rob, the skinny black kid who was working front counter that day, we were both saying we were ready to leave. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the light reflect on the doors the way it always did whenever someone walked in. Ron sighed a bit and I headed back to my area.

Next thing I know the guy from the truck is standing up front yelling at Rob. Like I told you earlier my new bosses were no Bill Cromers, my current boss was a younger woman with dark hair and a penchant for being lazy. I knew she wouldn't do anything, so I walked over to the counter ready for a confrontation.

The guy looked right at me and said, "You! You little asshole! What? You think this is funny?" and he held up the pin.

"Yeah," I said, "actually I do." This is one of those situations where, looking back, I can think of thousands of better things to have said.

"Oh really!" he said "You like fuckin' with people? I'm fuckin' bleeding now you little shit, I've got blood all over my truck and now I'm gonna kick your ass."

"Dude? You're bleeding?" I asked (it wouldn't occur to me until after I woke up from the ass kicking that I had forgotten to close the pin, causing this sorry guy to stab himself). "What the hell did you do?"

He grabbed my shirt front with his bloody left hand. I looked at Rob, his eyes were wide. The guy punched me in the cheek. This was my first time ever being punched so I didn't really know what happened at first, it didn't hurt right away but it confused me, it would hurt later on. I was only standing up because he was holding me and he hit me again and spit on my face, then he dropped me, then he left.

I was only out for a minute or so I'm told and when I awoke I saw the panicked face of my dark-haired and lazy boss bending over me and asking me if I was okay. I stood up and she took me to the office to try and do first aid, only there wasn't really anything to "aid," his second punch hit my temple so I wasn't bleeding at all.

After I told my boss what had happened and what I had been doing for about six months with the pamphlets she said she had to fire me, she wasn't very nice about doing it, either. "Get the hell out of my store," she said. I left and walked home jobless and with a headache.

This is about the time I started giving up. I started to hate most things and I stopped hanging out with my friends, human contact just sort of bothered me, all my friends had good jobs and were engaged, I didn't have those things. I knew I was never going to build a fucking skyscraper; I would never even go to school and the idea of success as I had previously conceived it sickened me. My life was going to consist of working jobs I hated for money that didn't pay the bills, and if I got lucky I would get married a few times, have a kid, and die of a heart attack in the back of some fast food place of the future where people were hardly even needed to run the place because.

I took a new job, this time at the big one, the mother of all fast food and home to the famous clown. It took me less than a week to get the job. I decided to work the grill and avoid dealing with customers. Looking back I should have been amazed I got the damn job, but the thing about those places is that they don't check references often. I was just glad to be away from people, "Fuck 'em" I thought. I would make their food and collect my pay and have my real life somewhere else, this was just money.

I started to stay up later every night and sleep in every day until about 2:30 p.m. I would only shave about once a week (if that) and I never did any laundry. My work uniforms as well as my everyday clothes were caked with stains and stunk as a result. I started drinking. Every night after work I sat around getting fucked up and feeling sorry for myself.

I was 20 years old, my girl had left, my best friend was dead, and I had no future. Instead of going out and dealing with these problems in a reasonable manner, I buried myself in escape and spent my time getting as lost as I possibly could.

At some point during this time I discovered self-mutilation. I cut myself profusely. Mostly in the bathtub, with a razor. I loved the way it looked, blood streaming down my arms and into the water, the way a gash like a canyon slowly coming back together would form build bridges of scar tissue. Cutting myself was relaxing and at the same time invigorating. Nothing makes someone feel alive the way that seeing a few inches into their own skin does, the tissue that doesn't bleed right away but instead slowly builds from a few tiny red dots at the center of the wound. My doctor tells me that the reason I enjoyed it so much is because it forced dopamine, serotonin, and adrenaline into my brain. "When your body gets injured, these are the natural responses to help you cope with the pain," he said. I asked him if he thought that pain was real and he said that, "Though the human

mind can block out pain by rationalizing it away as a simple feeling, the problem with what you did Frank is that you were seeking out that pain deliberately," which is why I wasn't content with just scratching the surface, but actually had to see my flesh peel away from itself. I guess I can see his point but honestly I just like to bleed.

Most people who cut themselves for reasons other than the person they are dating don't really go around showing it off or advertise the fact that they are masochists, in fact usually it's better off if no one knows at all, and that can cause some problems. The majority of my cutting was on my arms, I had tried all over but the arms just felt best. Place a blade on your upper arm, push in just a bit, and with a tiny flick of the wrist you have a nice little football shaped ditch with lovely white tissue inside. It's simple and quick. The problem started when I ran out of room on my upper arms and had to start cutting my forearms, which meant wearing long sleeves to work.

The coldest day that summer was seventy five degrees and I had to walk forty five minutes to work every day. Most days I was hungover and it's amazing that I didn't pass out from dehydration somewhere in the middle of Commerce Avenue. At least once a week my boss would ask me why I was wearing long sleeves and I would give some shitty excuse about being sick.

My new boss' name was Jason, I didn't mind the guy or his damned annoying girlfriend who always hung around the store, her name was Clara. Honestly I hardly even noticed people anymore, people and their stupid dreams just got me pissed off. I didn't want to hear about how someone was gonna be the first person to start a commercial space travel business and change the world once they got out of college.

My basic day consisted of charring meat and making sandwiches. If you have ever worked in fast food you know that it is stressful as all hell and that you only have about thirty seconds to make the orders before the little timer starts blinking and the person bagging orders starts looking at you funny and giving impatient sighs, if you're really slow the manager will come and help you out, reminding you all the while just how shitty your existence is because you need help to make fast food.

One day I was really busy, my computer screens were full and nothing in my area was stocked because the fucker who had worked in the morning found it easier to be lazy and go home than to refill my ketchup. Eventually Jason came over and started to help me.

"I can handle this," I said.

"Just toast buns man," he said. Looking back Jason was an okay guy, and it really is a shame what happened to him, but that's another story.

I started to drop buns and Jason started to make sandwiches, he was pretty fast and it only took him a minute to run out of meat in the nasty plastic trays that fill up with grease and never get cleaned. "I got the buns," he said. "Just drop me some meat."

So I started to cook some burgers, I was wearing a long-sleeved blue cotton shirt that day and the sleeve seam was rubbing against one of my scabs. Eventually the rubbing led to peeling and my scab fell off and down to my wrist. I felt it there and then I looked at the meat. On the edge of one of the little patties was a charred piece of something, maybe meat, I don't know. This gave me an idea. I scooped that run of meat off of the grill and gave them to Jason, then I got eight more patties from the little freezer and took the scab from my sleeve, it was sort of big so before I closed the clamshell I tossed it onto the grill and grabbed the grill scraper, then I cut off the tiniest piece I could and scraped the rest into the grease trough that hung from the side of the grill, then I took my spatula and carefully placed the tiny bit of dried blood on top of one of the patties and closed the clamshell.

As the meat cooked I started to think about what would happen if I got caught. I could be arrested, I could go to jail, I could get raped in the ass. Then I started to think about what would happen if I didn't get caught.

Here is the basic idea of what I chose to do. Ever eat a burger and bite into something that you weren't quite sure what it was? You probably didn't call the police, at least I didn't, I just tossed it aside and finished my burger. When the clamshell popped I could barely distinguish my blood from the chopped flesh of some poor cow. I handed the meat to Jason, he didn't notice. Thus began my go at violent activism. If no one wanted to be sensible then I would make them sick.

I just wanted to help people become healthy. It's a sad fact that though we live in a country where we are lucky enough to pick and choose what we eat in a sensible manner, most of us go for taste over health and therefore take advantage of the good fortune we have. Not only do these places ruin our lives but also the lives of animals and the planet.

A recent study shows that nearly 25% of American teenagers that live in poverty are obese. A similar study shows that many fast food companies have designed their advertising to target minority youth. There is a reason they started putting black people in the commercials and it isn't racial tolerance. Why does a restaurant need to celebrate black history month anyway? There is also a reason that those burgers are only one dollar and it isn't to save you money.

If I sound like a prick then just be glad you didn't eat any of my food...hopefully.

After that first scab I hung low for a while, lots of ideas came to me in this time, ways of doing things that would be wholly unnoticed until either a.) someone got sick or b.) I decided to come clean.

The whole hope was to sicken the general public to the point that they didn't want to eat this shit that was just killing them anyways. I was just going to nudge people in the right direction.

First I started saving my scabs. Being the cutter I was I got them all the time, and when I picked one a new one would grow in the very same spot. This can be done multiple times to the same wound and it prolongs healing and scar tissue from forming. My first batch took me about two weeks to harvest, and from that I had quite a few. The ones that came from forearms had tiny hairs in them that I had to carefully remove as I went. I cut each scab into tiny little slivers using a razor blade and put them all in a plastic baggy that I would carry in my pocket at work.

The first batch lasted about month. After a while they grew sort of brittle so before I put them on the meat I had to toss them into a little pool of hot grease somewhere on the grill to loosen them up. I was very sparse and I rationed as best as I could but trust me, when you have a pocket full of scabs and a grill full of burgers that only remind you of how disappointed you are in your species, it's hard to ration. I can't say I condone hurting people but I can say it was damn fun fucking up their food. Usually I put down about three scabs a week, but by the time I took the final scab from the bag and put it on a burger I had much bigger dreams.

I had used dried blood; why not use regular, liquid blood? At the place I was working the ketchup that comes on your sandwiches is put there by a sort of gun—it looks like a funnel with a handle on the side and when you squeeze the handle ketchup shoots through the five tiny holes at the bottom and onto your burger (which may or may not have had a scab on it). The ketchup is put into the gun from a big plastic pouch of the shit, so between pouch and burger all sorts of things can happen.

All I had to do was save just a little bit of blood from my scab harvesting and general cutting. You might not enjoy it like I did, but if you take a handful of minutes out of life to try it's not that difficult to bleed a full baby food jar's worth of blood. The problem came with portability, stick a baby food jar in your pocket and you'll see that it's not exactly hidden.

The solution I came up with first was to go to the local free health clinic and tell that I was a diabetic but couldn't afford needles, but I realized that they would probably test me to make sure I really was diabetic and not just some junky, so I had to think of something else. Then one night I went to Main Street in downtown Archdale and after meeting a few new people I was able to get a syringe for ten bucks. The price seemed sort of high but I needed it. It was a small needle and only held about four units of blood, which was good because I didn't want too much.

I sterilized the thing as best as I could by dipping the tip in boiling water, then in rubbing alcohol, then back in boiling water, I wasn't going to stick myself with it but I also didn't want to give people STDs; they were already eating my blood and that's enough to satisfy me. Once I had the needle I was set and every time I refilled the ketchup I added one unit of blood and mixed it up.

Next came the onions.

As you may have guessed by their shitty flavor, the onions that come on the burgers at this place aren't cut fresh daily. Actually they are dehydrated at first and only become those tiny flavorless things no one likes after they have soaked in an unclean tub full of lukewarm water for about two hours. Before they are soaked the onions sort of look like uncooked white rice, they are tiny white ovals that are dusty and crunchy, they have a similar color to toenails. Now with this I had to be a bit more creative. The scabs burned beyond recognition on the grill, the blood dissipated past taste and texture in the ketchup, but my toenails weren't going to soften up or absorb the onion taste after soaking for a few hours, they would remain obvious toenails.

First I let my toenails grow really long, then when I cut them and had the quarter moon-shaped pieces, I cut those sort of like I did the scabs, into tiny slivers, then I cut the slivers from the side, like you may butterfly cut a piece of meat. It was very tedious but one clipping gave me all the toenails I ever used. Every time I made onions I would place a pinch of toenails in and mix it up.

So let's say you were just one of those really unlucky people and you came though the drive-through. You may have gotten a burger with a scab cooked into it, blood in your ketchup, and that one onion that didn't re-hydrate may have actually been a toenail.

The people who designed the mayonnaise packaging at this place are blindly genius. The mayonnaise comes in tubes much like caulk that is used in construction and it shot from a very similar type of gun.

Next came the shake mix. It hit me pretty quickly what my best option was. I have to say that changing the shake mix became my new favorite job. Anytime Jason would ask someone else to do it I would quickly say "oh hey don't worry, I got it. Just let me go use the restroom real quick." Then I would go to the restroom, peel off my white latex gloves, get a handful of liquid soap and go to work. If you have ever beaten off at work then you know that aside from the little extra rush of doing something so depraved it's really not all that satisfying. You sit there and work your tool and forget whether or not you locked the door, but you always do. People knock, just hearing other people going about their normal day while you defile yourself like some sort of zoo monkey, it all gets sort of awkward. Add to that the fact that you have a time limit and an agenda and the climax is only sort-of good.

When I was ready to discharge I made sure and got it all in one of the gloves I had just taken off, then I would maneuver it into one of the gloves fingers so that I had a sort of mini condom, if you like. I would tear the finger from the rest of the glove and twist the opening closed, then I would pinch it with my first two fingers and hold it in my fist, next I would stick my fist in my pocket and be sure not to squeeze too hard. I simply walked out of the bathroom with an air that made people think I didn't have semen in my pocket.

This is where things got tricky. I would then have to go in the walk-in cooler and grab a bag of shake mix with my free hand, which isn't easy because bags of liquid are awkward as all fuck. Once I got it to the shake machine I had to remove the cap and hoist the thing above my head and

into the shake machine which was almost a foot taller than me. At some point I always had to use both hands, all the while clutching my little pouch of what could have been future Franklin Jaffes. I can only imagine the trauma I might have caused to some pimply sixteen year old if my fingers had slipped and suddenly there was something thicker than shake mix on the floor. Once the bag was empty though all I had to do was block my other, smaller, bag with the bigger shake mix bag and dump my little guys in, the machine itself would handle all the mixing and concealing.

This whole process could actually be omitted on nights when no one had to refill the shake machine, they always emptied the mix into big steel buckets at the end of the night and put those in the walk in, all I had to do was walk in and make my deposit.

There were other, smaller things I did as well. Sometimes they would get really busy up front and ask me to help box up fries. I would go to the fry dump and gleek all over the things. Gleeking is almost like spitting but it isn't as messy and it's harder to see, basically you're milking a saliva gland and it shoots out of your mouth in about three or four tiny little droplets. It's not exactly spit because it hasn't swished around your mouth, but it isn't really spring water either. Sometimes I had to change the ketchup in the lobby pumps. I usually just used blood, but if I was all out, or just felt lazy I would spit in those a few times and mix it all up.

These are all things that were never noticed. I went on for a good year doing these things and after a few months I stopped even being afraid of getting caught.

The main goal with all this was to build up some room for worry. It's better to find a scab in your food then it is to one day learn that the past however many burgers you have eaten may or may not have contained not only scabs, but also blood and toenails, and if you have gotten a shake in the past year it may have possibly contained semen. Even if you never even got poisoned food you would never be able to know that for sure. I probably could have gone on forever doing all these things, the key was that I was doing just enough that no one would notice. If I had given someone a little bag of blood when they asked for ketchup I would have screwed myself and probably gotten punched again, but mix a bit in, just a bit, and no one ever knows. Then one day they will find out what is happening, and their own head will cause the real terror.

Eventually though I had to do something bigger, I had to come clean and I had to make my statement known to the world. This would be my exit from normal society and my entrance into second-rate legendary. I had to do some thinking.

You could say it came to me in a flash of inspiration, bang!, and there it was. It would be the ultimate sacrifice for my cause, a simply perfect ending to my unknown actions. It would be loud; it would finally give me chance to speak on a mass level. It would give me the voice I wished I had.

First I had to mentally prepare myself for what I was going to do. I started trying to meditate. I would turn off all the lights in my room and in the dark I tried to detach my spirit from my body. I had no

clue what the hell I was doing but after about a week or two I could stick a red-hot paper clip in my armpit and only sort of tear up.

Next I had to prepare myself with the necessary tools. I went to one of the mega-stores that sell mid-quality products at reduced prices and put small business in jeopardy. I purchased a brand-new machete, I was sort of surprised they sold them, but they also sell guns so I guess it makes sense. Then I bought some gauze and some electrical tape, I also got a 24 pack of the beer that Bill used to drink. I was ready.

The night after I went shopping, back at my apartment, I opened the first beer and got ready for what I was about to do. I wish that I could tell you that throughout everything I have been doubtless and steadfast but honestly I wasn't anywhere near that. Many times I thought about quitting, there was always this little voice that told me that everything I was doing was insignificant and stupid, it was louder than ever on this night.

However, it didn't take long for the beer to kick in and all my doubts to be ignored in favor of a numbed excitement. I went into my tiny bathroom; the floor was some shitty tile that they probably didn't even bother to change after I moved out. The walls were all white and there was a dirty, cracked sink. I set the machete, the gauze, and my beer on the floor, then I sat on the floor with my legs crossed. I took a few deep breaths, then I brought out my right foot and removed my sock.

I think I spent about a half hour or so just staring at my foot, breathing deep, psyching myself out. Finally I reached for my machete. The handle as well as the blade were flat black, there was a line of silver along the newly sharpened edge and I ran my thumb across it. I spread my toes apart as best as I could and then I lined up five times, really slowly. I brought the knife above my head and hung it there for a moment; then I swung.

I missed by about three inches to the right and the knife was now deeply imbedded into the plastic tile. "Well at least I know it's sharp" I said quietly as I pulled the knife from the floor. I brought the knife back up above my head and lined up a few more times. I remember thinking "it doesn't do anything anyways, except look weird." Then I swung, then my whole lower leg felt like it was on fire and I screamed for just a second. The huge blade of the machete was stuck in the bone of my pinky toe like an axe gets jammed in a log; I could feel it, the bone pinching the knife. I rocked the knife up and down a few times and after making some unpleasant rubbing sounds it came loose. Then I swung again, only in my haste and panic I hit the top of my foot, I was able to check my swing a bit so I didn't cut any tendons but the new gash only added to my panic, and the mess of blood on the floor.

Next I brought the knife up a little lower and I swung weaker, my aim was good and I hit my first cut, but I didn't make any progress aside from hurting, the blade was sticking, I wasn't going to get anywhere hacking. I started pounding on the blade with the bottom of my fist, trying to bang it through the bone. Then my fist started to bleed so I grabbed ahold of both ends of the knife and shifted all my weight onto it, rocking it back and forth.

I had stopped screaming but I was still crying and making panicky sounds. Then I heard a thick crunching sound, it reverberated in the floor and it sounded similar to the way snow does when it packs underfoot. I rocked a few more times and my severed pinky toe rolled a few inches away from my foot. I hunched over exhausted and crying. I couldn't do anything but lay there for a minute. Next I took my sock and started trying to soak up some of the blood. I took the gauze and tried to wrap my whole foot as best as I could, blood was everywhere. When I had my nine toed foot covered in bloody gauze I took the electrical tape and started wrapping my foot in that, the first few layers were too wet with blood to stick but eventually it took. My foot was now a massive ball of gauze and tape and I wondered how I going to get my shoe back on, then I passed out.

I woke up the next day and I felt worse than I ever had before and ever have since. My head ached, my mouth, eyes and nose were dry, I was nauseated and I had dried blood all over me. The blood was thick like syrup all over the floor. At first I just made some noises along the lines of crying, my toe was an inch or so away from my nose. I put it in my pocket. Then I stood up and stumbled a bit, I grabbed my bloody ass sock and went into my room to get dressed for work. I wiped myself off with a wet t-shirt and put on my dirty ass uniform. My shoe barely fit and I had to take out the laces.

All that day I was more stumbling everywhere than I was deliberately walking; it was winter time and I slipped on the ice a few times on my way to the store. When I got there everyone asked about my foot, I said I fell down the stairs and I looked at them for minute, they didn't elaborate on the question.

Since it was winter time we were serving soup, that day we had vegetable soup and broccoli cheese soup, I put my toe in the broccoli cheese. At first that was all I was going to do but after an hour or so I felt like I had to puke, so I did, right into the other soup. After a few hours an enraged person came in holding a cup of soup, it was hell. The guy was yelling and saying he was going to sue, my manager was trying to calm him down but I guess the poor guy actually chewed the toe a couple of times, when it didn't taste at all right he pulled it from his mouth, luckily he had parked to eat or he probably would have wrecked his car. I just stood there half conscious, listening to the man yell and my poor boss panic. At some point I decided it was time to end it all and I took the bloody sock from my pocket, I tossed it up front and it landed on the counter, no one said anything. The guy with the soup threw it on my boss and said "this place is fucked" then he walked out.

My manager was a little more than pissed off buy all this and he ended up hitting me a few times after the guy left, I was too weak to do anything but lay there as he kicked my ass, I loved everything at that moment.

I was fired, arrested, and then sent to the hospital. That guy who chewed on my toe did sue and he won a whole lot of money. When I tried to tell the judge why I had done these things he decided I was insane and sentenced me to live in a psych house. In court I talked for hours about my beliefs and opinions, I tried to spread the word, but the T.V. channels only aired clips that made me look stupid and cruel. People did hear though and eventually I was national news, high-schoolers loved

me, rock bands openly stated in interviews that they agreed with my causes. Other people started doing the same sort of stuff. Every other week or so for a while it seemed a new incident popped up someone poisoning fast food. I felt I had accomplished something bigger than myself.

You may have noticed over the past year or so that fast-food places are advertising health. They have new salads and commercials that show people being active; they have promotions that say it's good to be healthy. I can only watch the commercials so I don't know if they have really changed, but I do know this: whether you've ever heard of what I did or not, I feel I played a part in those changes. And now I'm writing this hoping to be let out, I don't disagree with the things I did and I love the results, if that makes me crazy then I don't want to be sane.

Stay healthy.

—Franklin Jaffe.



Slow Process by Jody Giardina

About ten months ago, I began the slow process of beating my ball sack flat. I started slow, as I am very patient. Initially, I used the back of a spoon, which I thought balanced the weight/size issue well. Twice daily, I smacked my balls between 40-60 times with the spoon. Hard, but certainly not full-strength. I will admit, those first few weeks hurt. Bad. The continuous pounding process caused me great anguish, focused in my lower abdomen. I had tremendous gas pains for hours as a result. After two days, I began urinating blood. I had, however, anticipated this, and did not panic. After four weeks of increasingly more painful urination, I was surprised by a sudden inability to pee. It lasted three days, but despite my lack of urine I continued my nut smacking. By this point I had progressed to a small, decorative brick from my fireplace.

Finally, when I was beginning to lose hope of ever urinating again, I felt a powerful urge to piss. I went to the bathroom, and by God I went into the stall. Slowly, a thick, viscous substance began to ooze out of my penis head. A few weeks before, I had purchased a leather eyeglass case, and I bit down on this, as the pain was excruciating. The substance was an opaque pinkish-white, and it maintained a tube-ish form, much as Play-Doh. A few times, the flow stopped, but a gentle pulling on the emerged end reinvigorated the movement.

After three hours of this slow progress, there was a pressure at the base of my penile shaft. I tugged harder at the substance hanging from my cockhole, and I felt a pop. A bulb formed at the base of my penis, and as I yanked, it moved towards the penis hole. In my eagerness, however, I pulled too hard, and tore off the thin tube hanging (at this point) into the toilet bowl water. There was a small spurt of very dark blood, and then I dropped the substance into the shitter. The bubble was still two-thirds of the way back in my penis. I managed to massage the bulge until it, after much consternation, emerged from my dicktip. It looked like that scene from Total Recall, where Arnold is pulling the tracking device from his nose. Only instead of a nose, it was my schlong, and instead of a tracking device, I can only imagine it was the clumped and smelly remains of my testicles.

After that, it became very easy to pound my nutsack. To date, I have moved on to hammers, and have actually gone through three. I keep the worn nubs of the old hammers in the nut-pounding chamber of my pantry, where I go for the necessary solitude of my business. They are my trophies, and serve to remind me of how far I've come. My ballsack is now two feet long and one-and-a-half feet wide. I curl it and fasten it with rubber bands, so I do not have to modify my pants. Five days ago, I rigged a series of safety pins and yarn. The system connects from my nipples to the end of my sack, and from my sack to my asshole. Through a complicated ballet of flexing my chest and contracting my sphincter, I can my move sack move up and down quite rapidly and with considerable force.

One day, I will be at work, and wolves will enter the building. I will drop my pants, squat, and perform the necessary muscular dance. My nutsack will slam against the cold, hard tile of my

office, like a beaver's tail. The sound will be as wet gunfire, and will rebound against the building's walls and through the air conditioning ducts. Everyone at work will cock their heads to one side, and listen to the smacking, and know that predators are coming. They will hide in bathrooms, and under desks, and in supply closets, and countless lives will be saved.

You are welcome, in advance.

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March 30, 1981 by William Haas

He waves. A gun blast. Shoulders hunch. Heads duck. Bodies drop. Black smudges vision. Bodies pile on. Three bleed on the asphalt. "A sudden burst of six pops." Hand in air, he falls. Shoulders hunch. Heads duck. Bodies drop. Secret service scramble. Bodies writhe like worms. The vehicle speeds off. "That's the sound of the first shot." He smiles, waves a hand above his shoulder. The President topples. Shoulders hunch. Heads duck. Bodies drop. Perimeter collapses. "Well, I guess it's called protection. We have to be there in case the President, something happens like today to the President or in case the President has a little statement. Somebody might throw a question at him, and he might come up with a good answer."

First silence. Sound arrives in gunshots. The movement overwhelms the unhinged camera. The screen blurs black. The shooter is thrown against a wall. A handkerchief pressed to a head where the brain bleeds out. An agent cocks an Uzi, surveys the scene. The vehicle peels off across wet asphalt. No leaves on the trees. "There was a single bullet wound that, uh, entered slightly underneath the left armpit." Shoulders hunch, heads duck, bodies drop. A man in a winter coat appears at the news desk and speaks. The gun is visible, gripped in white hands, one wrist wrapped in a gold watch, loose overcoat sleeves. The President's contorted face in a halo of white superimposed on the grainy screen. "The operative incision was about six inches in width and a relatively simple procedure. The bullet was removed, and, uh, then the incision was closed." The President's stern visage floats screen-left above the news anchor's head. A quick cut to another anchor and a video portal of a mustachioed man. "And it's happened again, another attempt on the life of a President which will produce more analyses of what's wrong with the American soul. There is probably not much wrong with the American soul, but these incidents seem to keep happening, and that is a real puzzle and a tragic puzzle."

Men in light gray and beige suits walk around a cut-stonewall. "It doesn't make much sense, Henry," says one. Incidental sounds, rustling nylon, scattered conversations. The President appears spry in a black suit with white handkerchief in breast pocket. He waves to the crowd. He smiles. Officers flank him. The scratchy sound of footsteps on wet concrete, of microphones rubbed against cloth. A woman's voice calls his name. His hand high in the air. Roman columns on the building behind him. Hinckley acts alone. The President waves, and Hinckley squeezes the trigger. Six shots in quick succession. Shoulders hunch. Heads duck. Bodies drop. An officer clutches his hat and crouches in fear. Agents snap up the President like a fumbled football and laterally shove him into the vehicle. "Get 'im out. Get 'im out." Black suit, handcuffs rattling off his belt, dives into the shooter. A canary-yellow rainslicker assists in the tackle as more bodies pile on. The assassin's pistol waves in the air. Another agent widens the perimeter, pushing soundmen and cameramen away. Uzi cocked, he scans for accomplices. Screams. Cries. Ambient noise of traffic and wind on the microphone.

Before going under the knife, the President tells the surgeons, "I hope you're all Republicans." Following the operation, a doctor stands before a scrum of microphones. "The bullet traversed about three inches of the chest wall and then, uh, ricocheted off the seventh rib into the left, lower lobe of the lung and, uh, moved about three inches into the lunch substance itself." Hinckley was a dreamer, but not the only one. The President in pajamas holds Nancy's hand. It was morning in America.



Carl + Carl by Leif Haven

The Klansman was in the trunk
of my '93 Chevy Caprice,
and we weren't even half way out of Memphis.
It was a great time to hide
a flask in your beard.

You were holding the baby in a papoose
I said, "Where'd you get that baby"
I said, "I can't believe that Klansman
just climbed into the trunk and wouldn't get out."

My Caprice roars like a tired walrus
but it's smooth sailing down the giant highways of the future.
I could hear the Klansman's sing along:

I've got a trust fund life
I've got a trust fund life
We all sang:
I'm worth a billion in lies
With my torture porn,
Drive a G.T.O.,
In my uniform

The Klansman got out in Kansas City.
He said, "It's time to change the sheets."
I said, "Don't let the trunk hit you on the way out."

We rolled into Omaha on three wheels.
We all agreed it was a great trip across Mexico.
My blog was full of love, I Instagrammed with one hand
And crocheted with the other.

We settled into Omaha to
raise our miraculous child on our lifestyle blog
and wait for our publisher in white to arrive.

A Good Horse by Leif Haven

I'm honored
by this moment
that you've shared with me.

Somewhere a dog barks
and is quickly shot.
We ride into the sunset.

You ask me the difference
between horsepower and
torque which I just can't

bring myself to care about.
I'm a horse, so I know
exactly what I have.



It's Useless Now by Leif Haven

The future happened yesterday,
I sat and thought about the new myths
As proposed by Sir Mixalot.
I thought, "I don't have any clothes."
I thought, "I don't have a Volvo."
I sat at the kitchen table and watched
the little tufts of citrus musk puff huskily
into the dusk as the caracara shed its tawny
peel, revealing the drabbest meat of all.
The lemons pose no threat to the wild caracara.
I too pose no threat to the pink flesh.
My brain is empty of poetry and I don't care.
My brain is full of empty poetry and I don't care.
I look out side I see the rain and the sun at the same time.
I look through the window and the whole bitter charade collapses.
I say, "Come inside with that camera.
It's useless now."
You turn around and say, "Come inside with that camera,
It's useless now."



What I'm Doing Later by Leif Haven

This is my wife
a Japanese wood saw
it's called a dozuki.
It reminds me of our nights
on the park bench, playing the bozuki.
I'm sorry that you don't remember anything.
The easiest way to open a banana
is to break it clean in half.
Pull from both ends.
If you ask me what I'm doing later
I'll tell you: I'm going to saw this
couch right in half.



BZ Signal Forever by Brandon Hackbarth

Geoffrey was an as-yet-unidentified level-three offender living in the upper-Midwest who worked in the private sector and had every intention of repeating what he referred to as his “physical yum-yum” if he could only find the right girl but hadn’t had any luck so in the summer and fall of 2012, he’d taken to writing chapbooks instead.

His most recent, titled “Chapter ONE: Pigs—Chapter TWO: Fibers—Chapter THREE: Speechless—” was a good laugh and at the very least catered to/fed his obsessive compulsive tendencies. Even so, chapbooks had ultimately nothing to offer but a sampling of his individualistic pangs of non-hunger, his lack of context. They merely slaked his thirst for the absurd and perverse.

He worked in quality assurance for a second-tier market research firm and was in the process of printing/modifying portions of the aforementioned chapbook on his companies Lexmark X854e MFP while eating lunch and texting his roommate, Paul: “fuuuun looking scene, but any 3some BGG needs to have the 2 G in 69 while B pounds both holes. that’s standard 4 excellence. but that double dog scene is probably the best I’ve ever seen and I’ve seen a lot. got 2 get back to the fresh meat, mang. save some stir-fry.”

The allusion to “fresh meat” was in reference to the trainees, as Geoffrey was conducting an orientation session for a group of prospective call-center interviewers. Training consumed quite a large portion of his professional life and he hated it: the training sessions, the trainees, the rigmarole, everything. The firm he worked for had an incredibly high rate of turnover, and at times he felt his position translated into something more akin to running a factory floor or human abattoir than a second-tier though nevertheless profitable firm/office space.

Although he cultivated a pleasant, somewhat passive demeanor amongst his colleagues, he had no workplace friends and hadn’t any intention of nurturing the potential for such a relationship. At around 12:00pm CDT, Geoffrey had concluded the training segment pertaining to call disposition, and was beginning to feel the lack: “In time you will all understand the dispositional jargon: ‘VM’, ‘DVM’, ‘DS’, ‘PUHU’, ‘OOO’, ‘OOT’, ‘ASST’, ‘ATTY’, ‘RSGD’, ‘RFCP’, ‘RF’, ‘DS’—Oh, that’s right I already mentioned that—‘GVM’, ‘NR’!...does it sound like I’m repeating myself yet?”

He called one hour for lunch and it was now 1:05 p.m. CDT. He finished printing a certain passage from “Chapter TWO: Fibers—” and made his way back into the conference room. All five of the trainees were already waiting for him. Geoffrey took a seat and almost imperceptibly studied each of the trainees’ faces in turn while table-tapping free-rhythm. Nothing special: he thought to himself that the conference room’s ambient temperature was quite cool in comparison to the rest of the office space, that meat was stored in cool places, that he liked the sound of searing meat, and then realized he wasn’t really interested in writing chapbooks anymore.

It's Honey Boo Boo Night In America by Russell Jaffe

Pour yourself a tall glass of Windex and
let's pregame on lawn furniture on the roof
watching RNC coverage on a rabbit ear extension cord pumpkin patch TV and hurricane coverage
on our broken screen'd iPhones.
And let's toast the founding fathers.
And let's toast french fries and landfills.
And let's make our own unisex t-shirts with pie charts of unemployment growth and job
outsourcing rates and hours working vs. wages line graphs.
Is this a sad story?
Well let's do all that and let's do it today into tonight's unemployment dreadnaught again and
again. Nearby planets am I right?
Is this a sad story?
I used to wake up looking at a someone who smiled cream curtain bedsheet alien mountain grainy
this-is-happenings before she opened her eyes. The apocalypse pageantry of the sweet. Her eyes.
Those telephone cord lashes. Those planet beacon selfish slit moons.
I cooked her breakfast and we watched TLC.
I fed the guinea pig spinach.
She called this giving the pig a spin.
Now the girl I am fucking tells me I look at her OKCupid profile too much and it makes her feel
weird.
You tell me
if it's a sad story.

Star-Crossed Planisphere of my future-past and present unfixed movements:
Somewhere 'twixt the great hands-over-crystal-ball folk quilt of the universe
I got clonked over the head by a giant astrolabe
because it's 7 AM and I've been drinking.
I had to drive to the county fair to teach an important lesson about the USA or something like it. The
tapwater tasted like keys where I picked up the van.
USA is a time a place a country. The sun takes it somewhat easy. Grain beard latitudes.
USA macaroni Christ. USA plasma screen in the Amish historical society house.
USA onion rings on a hot hat day. USA flea market tents. When there is no water dioramas of
wayward families cluster around shadows instead.
Fiddle-playing children at the county fair.
One of the international writers called them like small angels in blue jeans.
Breathe in the gasoline.
I see the fisheye bulge of our pie dish atmospheric limits smoke the last of the road.
It's been a while since I've seen the beautiful. If I had only learned more nothing.
My watery eyes are red and unclear.

What you mean to me. Your shovel eyelashes. Your deodorant under your t-shirt.
Red construction flags are still flags. The tower. Maybe for radio. Maybe
for intergalactic lazy and selfish apologizing. Bra strap and tin can endless signal.
Soviet bloc something one time forgot about its acreage allotment in the USA
I would never choose to call someone the fucked. I never and yet.
The girl I am fucking and I held hands and looked out of the industrial center. Smoke didn't pour
from where it shouldn't have.
They wrap the turkeys in the bags right
after they come out of the plucker
she told me
stop trying to speak to me I
said
we look so
tired.
An owl hooted desperately somewhere in the parking garage. A chicken hawk's eggs
fell in front of the convenience store. The college dumpster overflow'd with books and CD players.
Soy sauces and curdled milk crossed the no zone into their laser readers.
White paperwork always and discarded.
Lover! I beat my milky way into the crossfade halo of this red plastic cup
bottoms up
we're in this to
get
her.



America I Cannot Believe by Russell Jaffe

Attention users with rape fantasies:

If it's legitimate rape according to the far-Right hand face slap obelisk body lexicon you're all right.
Boys you RNC warlord straw hats and ketchup smell shirtsleeve skin I notch my belt again bedside
walking stick my pillar post. TV scared the air into crying on the couch waterless tears. Why things
cray? ask the trying to be funny while just keeping going on. Old boys go and wither the dry season
into woven and spun election mania USA #1. Hashtag empty chair. Hashtag dry irrigation canals.
Hashtag all mine. Hashtag god wants.

Far right I am body sick so I count my political totem faces in used-to-bes and dishes in the sink.
I don't want to be scared of running out of money so I spent all my money. My candidate's pin
pierces only my flesh.

Collective consciousness tollway unseasonable etcetera at least we made the world a better place
for a few people.

Drive the American drink and you'll see the scared cages of people.

Never met them. Just scared of them. Ecosystem you just freak us out being you.

Just so scared of sinking drowning you don't realize you've been breathing
all along.

So

I guess my life has kinda been falling apart.

I've been eating people.

Duodenum where you at?

Esophageal night train drips me a new stomach.

I'm just a fat labyrinth in swallows is all.

White monster blood cells I

been drinking. O my peeling stomach.

Am I the carrion of this bright new disease?

Bitch please. O lover

help me.

I am a vegetarian who loves

watching shows about big beef

pig out spots USA #1. Night says so certainly drunkenly swooningly.

I love fat blood.

I identify only with the slots between the fork tines.

Only with beard trimming plane crash debris in your fleshy desert.

Only to love America with pit brimstone fury as it punches me unconscious and pulls my teeth so
that

I might not again bite

to let the blood.

USA #1 by Russell Jaffe

"Whoa, son. Now just where do you think you're going, boy?" —Cop
"Caalliffoorrnniaa" —Jimmy—The Wizard, 1989

Go ahead and write my will and last requests on this paper that protects
the chips from touching the basket in the Mexican food restaurant.

Because this America *is* an all-night Mexican food restaurant.
Leave lip lipstick and housesitting bags, your film canisters and unexploded bombs,
in the desert.
Please take me there. I need new kinds of sprawl.

Print away my soul on a contract in neon calligraphy lines.
Sign it in guacamole.

I am smitten with you down to my blood.
And I was. So here's what I did:

I put the TV on loud and bright, blockaded the stars from crashing
my American vodka night on earth.

I rolled all the blunt stubs in the ash tray into one burrito and ate of it.
I strapped the last of the roof of my house to the car. Buried my shoes in the lawn.

I wrote about sounds trees and rocks under cover of pillow fort.
I burned CDs and then burned everything else,

left behind an ashram of ashes and TVs and analog cables. Wore an "I (HEART) WIRES" shirt.
Ordered tons of takeout and left the delivery drivers to battle it out.

I hitched in every possible way
every input to every other input.

This grand analog and I, we're going to be just fine.
And we are wild this way.

I am wild
on my way.
I am so wild about you.
I am so wild.
I am

SO.



Interim Champion by Russell Jaffe

yeah everything smells like a college town. USA some. the pizza counter corners. the staple gun trees of ripped muscle fliers the lines of which are traced in black like oil rainbow slicked feathers. the air breathes clearer for a little all right. crows' ink ribbons making calligraphy lines across the downtown of thereafter. the shit targets in white on the ground. interim. what i leave to you i vacated. the left behind steps of a day. faucets in the low rent district. carpeting a dirty scalp. the tv is not overturned afterwards, the tv is upright and the entire world is on its side and its stomach is aching and there is such a hole but it's all right. i found angles on endless repeat. the whole world is the same shade of slotted windows and plastic curtain boxes and hours apologizing to temperatures in long winded ways. the cars are a peaceful stretch of wet coffins. there's no shape stronger than a triangle because it's unnatural, and that's what i know from love. my paper cups and envelopes to the wind from the orphanage of the city trash can. it is just sex say the airborne remains of my nails, my skin flakes, my Christmas light, my collection of 8 tracks scattered like the dust vent clump hair that are gray to keep the universe away, to cry in its room for a little. i knew love like how circles are just lazy spirals. i don't love you like a hammer, i love you like the handle of a hammer. the songs take the soil to task but the mix tape is forever. i don't just think about you in eyelashes and car rides, I think about you in the brick of campus office buildings and deodorant marks and empty pile of shoes. from atop this sink I hail the polemic of the unwashed clear glasses catching light and waiting like for a bus but for a phalanx of water to march upon them. it doesn't matter what season it is what with the weather and the earth and the future. we are all interested in the future because it is where we will spend the rest of our lives. i love you, i said to the blankets empty to the beer bottles to the sleeves of clothes on the floor. we x'd each other streets calm gray and the sky. once more forever. cautious in my approach i made a home inside the still-zipped hoodie i somehow had taken off. I built a life there. i raised a family, i was good to my children and i had a wife i loved very much. everything we grew we replanted so it grew again and the children learned shapes that way. when i left the hoodie i imagined everyone told me how skinny i had gotten, but only you had said it. what is all this sweet work worth if thou kiss not me is the question i dressed this horrible by product of free will with. but i change the question. the new question is that i miss you. and when you tell me that that isn't a question, i will be looking at you i will be a present, i will be a force, i will idle. i will there, hear, here I'm at.

Decision 1788 by Neal Kitterlin

Ratify wooden teeth and ruling class college. The skulls and bones first exhumed, no time for flesh red delivery, spongy thoughts or cloud computing. Our hero cannot tell a lie in cherry tree pickings between competing versions of truth. Variations on thematic tremors. She loves you, she loves you not, she loves -- pick petals one by one until all tangible floats in the wind. I hold her legs to be self-evident, naked partings in federalist arrangements. A state to leave your lover, end contains begin.



Decision 1800 by Neal Kitterlin

My love is torn between co-equal branches and strong executive. My love separates church and state and throws the ring into the river, watches it ride the current and catches itself worrying about the effect of the gesture downstream. My love trembles before judicial review and habeas corpus. There are places my love has expunged wearily from the historical record, lobbied Texas textbooks to contort and remainder. My love rages with limited powers, slow drum tired beyond knowing.



Decision 1808 by Neal Kitterlin

Eyes follow movements from here to there, exploratory committees on short leashes flat-landing to the end of the rainbow. Multi-cultural refraction flows, slips, dances in and out of riverbeds panning levers. I feel them bore into me as I meet her at the café -- unable to identify where pasts entwine, disentangle, reconvene. We meet where we always meet in the heart of wagon trails, one set watching as the other interprets -- I merely pay the tab, a handsome tip, the smell of her hair combing fractals.



Decision 1820 by Neal Kitterlin

Each of the avenues I walk down rebuilds a foundational future of headdress consortiums on the run from some brand of heartache. I want to feel how their beats touch mine in strange boxed-in tributaries, but I can't stop looking at corsets and facial hair. Here is the room where sleep was hard-won, built brick by brick a status quo of deferred dream feathers to fluff aristocratic holography in comfortable chairs that give massages on command. Staircases constructed step by step to nowhere.



Decision 1856 by Neal Kitterlin

When you can't be who you are who are you? Can't prevent what is coming, can't sell it all under the rug to lunar colonies. Sleep forever while clouds burst around ineffectual factories and aggressive cotton gins. Thunder builds and debates your sartorial effects, what is man or mouse or love between human organisms anyway? Rising and falling, backdoor penetration lulling to complacency before asunder. Sleep well in rain-drenched openings, tree-trunks felled, beauty untroubled by moment.



Decision 1896 by Neal Kitterlin

Oceans cross and rip open spread-legged centuries, anarchist bullets in back channel mutilations. Sin is sin as concept, art of sine mirror cosine, false agreement, mathematical minds, aggrandize tangential reckoning. We all fall apart archduke for Kaiser love, so say priests with winged intentions, soaring stones to philosophize alchemy. Scrape sky with geometries of love or subjugation, climb on blood foundations. Hearts tear easily as the rest of us.



Decision 1904 by Neal Kitterlin

Strange how I feel your heat in my sleep, all our comings and goings in dreams of fair-haired ballrooms, crossed wire dancing on teddy bear-skinned pins, headed up hills charging to glory. There is glory in the unrealized. There is glory in the meeting place that passes us by in every incarnation of historical time. There is glory in a momentary meeting of frustrated purpose. There is glory in your face, my voice, a smile frozen roughly, riding forever in gilded imaginings. The pictures move, love, and so do we.



Decision 1920 by Neal Kitterlin

Suffragette cities filled with handsome devils flapping on windows jazz diamond dinners pearly fleet feeling foxing trot wisdom -- we golden for gatsbys and green-flashing emeralds, crank autos call hardening warrens of flaxen ruby sleep slippings with legions of nations prosper and prosper and rob us to glory, streets are all booming with sounds incandescent and radio plays in a corner of Buddha, boozy religions, fads for the taking, chatter so empty, a delicate placement – someone's listening in.



Decision 1952 by Neal Kitterlin

The secret garden that hides the fact we are all going to die. Go on the road to headlight purgatory. These are the days you can still get lost, still get in the car and arrive in another film altogether. These are the days of flying saucer noir tragedies. We knew the secret to a love story was when the filming stops. Beyond are back-alley brayings and blood olive garnish. All the blacklist blowjobs we refused to discuss. Dream of you lying dead-eyed in a flowering field, crying out: innocence.



Decision 1980 by Neal Kitterlin

Anarchy the anarchists to the heart of queen amerika. OK the k in there, gender-queer cowboys dancing on the national, drunk-driving into rivers split history in pieces. Red star by morning, red dawn take warning duck and cover kids throw Molotov or just piss-cocktail it in dirty L.A. hardcore clubs. Shining shining sit pretty on the hill of our punk planet dreams. Let's pan morose while chubby ten-gallon fuckers strut their pretty hours, all the world a stage to grow out of.



Othello Wolf by Coop Lee

america; Americultus; Americate ::: dubiously masturbate.

::: gold flaked bodies.

blackbirdian danceparty::: i'll go.

washed up beach bottles and all our feet amongst them ::: curling paper. curling time.

teens dream in orchid; they wait for stars and dark and los hombres of good dust.

they wait on eyes, and on embers; belly belly.

flashlight shrine.

we eat acid and strawberries and butter in the cemetery,

and feed foxes lizards face-first;

us lost fuckers on school nights.

flash tag jazz, and yellow bicycles,

::: that hot eternal light.

the candy colored smoke don't smoke; go south on her body.

thoughts form thoughts form actions form twangs all tuned

to air; and we; as notes; us notes :::harp like light to dust:::

videoed naked our multi-speckled strands;

our gliserting hormonal thrusts. beneath sheath of liquid layer:

her eyes. drink, drink you bending girl.

you glowing guzzling girl :::

you seed from my cock.

pearled halo: smoke above my head.

::: waves and machines and weekends.

filtered by the long suck of cosmolessness,

boys wait in rooms of hotels for more drugs, and the girls bringing them :::

like caterpillars on silky thin treadways, with nothing but

the flavor of our passions to ignite the way. we

exacerbate the tips of our sweatiest intentions. we

curl under sheets, twisting sheets of light and sound. we

flakey emaciated flakes; sequence suffered time in motion. we

dirt. it's what we are; dirt.

as druggernauts, we taste ourselves along the glittering rim.

::: we crawl up cross-glowed hillsides towards portalz, &

faraway bleep-blorps of hot calibration, sticky-crackle go burn.

:::nature puzzles:::

the brain shifts back, twenty-one grams they say you weigh.

they say things.

cherry blossom tree tips in the dark.
teletube surfing with an intergalactic pizza priest, and his satchel of secret sauce.
his heaves in the
corner: rebirth.
tendrils pulled tight, everybody wang chung



Wing'd Partyboy by Coop Lee

danceparty by the breath
along my cheeks. by the broken bottles in the
stoop-way light. shards at our feet.
our shoes gather momentum as we enter
deeper into the house.

i start as embryo; building within my mother
as if glob of energy.
as if zoetrope spinning; early fumes
in wait.

father turns tunes and makes music
outside by inside by working his fingers along the knobs. he moves,
& heats in coil orange. his format set by centuries;
more.

particled brothers lay smeared against surfaces
as our king wades upon the world; thru; and away,
with younger thoughts than the thoughts he holds now. extended
to earth for more than just sights.
how far can the heart reach?
how far can the conscious journey?

x-mas lights string to the summertime, and by the beer
bottles glisten. we throb, young cannibals caught
up in our own brittle little social epics.
i speak as growthful boy, as man,
drifting by one-day waters.
searched.

watch the significance of flowers.

& by genitalian method we pluck at the notes
of eachother's hopelessly bound bodies. we write in natural calibur.
write music of momentous, of taste,
of testris-locked loins.

sparrowtailed earth; seed; you submerge like depth charge.
you enter dark tessellations, heave body through rock, through
horizon of death.

you space lost monkey.
you moth: ghost of moist light.

sudden exploding darkness.

breath. beyond doubt of mass; breath
& sweet pungent synthesis.
plant and person.
there is beauty in us; in
us nitrogen-rich followers of the fiber from which we cultivate sparks.
the fiber from which a family draws its excellence.

we ache forth like curved children in upward color
display. we progress the isomer drip to dish to dust; in upward
spiraled seasoned curlies;
as rainbowed strands of data; deoxyribonucleic code;
codes& secrets; and moments only known by us
who live them.



Dry Tortuga, 1869 by Coop Lee

shapeshifter, son drunk
& changing skins.
he digs up skeletons of a spanish battalion
buried
by tigers on the garden key.

sun crescent
spray of blood & oranges.
new-fangled sailors once soaked
in madness.
now starvation.

the viking speaks:
limericks of new world poise.
his antler woven mask,
set nicely upon the shore.

seod, turtle lord
of space & time, appears once
every lunar eclipse, bound
by treatise to the jellyfish triumvirate.
his shepherd,
bolivar t. shagnasty, wanders
the mainland in search of water
or meat of trees.

kindness;
of men turns to dust & belly worms.
forgotten, the plants mutate
into root-rich empires
of fish & figurine.
million year armistice.

dr. samuel mudd,
shackled years to tide-slab &
fort jefferson. he
purifies the island of its yellow
shivering death.
hospital key.

fast forward hundred plus
through mudd lifeline:
battle weary sneakers,
spokes sung by strum of card, the bmx
stridden boy & his

teenage mutant ninja turtle mask.



We Bought a Little Plague by Brad Liening

Terrible moans
In the solarium
Bring the property value down.

Too stringy viscosity
Clot the fountains.
Greenhouse graveyard.

So much death for
A second home.

First home cloaked
In night every night.
What good is a guard dog

Who thinks its people,
Licking every flickering
Integer.

Hit the Bricks by Brad Lienen

Black tie fractal
Raising big blood
Money pudding.

Smithereen the bootstraps.
Bone shard another
Fat ad for drugs

And tax releases.
Be your best today:
Look better fish—

Bowl sexed. Knock
Knock. Same ass

Backward wadcutter.



War Everyday by Brad Lienen

Turnkey whistling dark nights fat.
The mysteries of meat explained at 8
And the death of the middle lass.
Managing hope is a confidence trick.
An objective chemical rash sweats

My inner child into a sweet fury.



Collateral Damages by Brad Liening

PowerPoint on sucking death,
Amputee vets dig slow crawl

Through hot stars
And colorful quag.

In the talons of the eagle:
A can of whipped cream

And chocolate strawberries,
A passel of spreadsheets

En route to the fucked-up
Quim of the corpse

Of a billion dollars dressed up.
To look like the White House.

Cut-Up by Brad Lienen

Dung funk at the motorway
Times the massed ranking
Squelch palpable and sucked
In repetitive roar.
What a sad density.
What a redundant day
For all the things that happen
In the world and also not.
Greased surgeon swoon.
Mechanic weeping in the rifling.
The planet grows less,
Not more. It's a wake-up call
Or an anesthetic.



Hemp by Brad Lienen

Foreign ammo in the Jell-O mold,
A bloody bandage for a head.
You're in America, now,
Brown speckling near the crown buds
And phosphate runoff ditch
Stuffed with early flags
Sewn with shaky motive.
When you're on the stand just think
Of the dead in their underwear.



Tension, Resistance by Ethan Madarieta

Elaine clutched the wooden leg of Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna and quickly put it in her duffle bag. She had gone with her friend Reed to the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield to see the prosthesis. It had been used comically and as an invocation of nationalism, or it had been forgotten completely, hidden away in a minor museum in Illinois. The leg was the real subject of history, and the ligneous fetish of a contrived memory.

Santa Anna's biological leg was hit with grapeshot¹ in the French "Pastry War" of 1838², and was terribly butchered in the process of amputation. Santa Anna had refused to leave the battlefield for more professional and sanitary conditions, preferring to stay with his army, to lead them to either victory or defeat. For the remainder of the battle he wore a wooden peg, crudely carved from a limb of the Jacaranda. He had the peg leg interred with full military honors, along with his severed leg, directly following his army's bitter defeat. His subsequent prosthesis was stolen nine years later in the Mexican American War by Second Lieutenant W.A. Tinney of the Fourth Illinois volunteer brigade, and was decades later sent to the Military Museum by an unintentionally anonymous donor.

It became the centerpiece of the museum, placed purposefully in a spare, but precisely signifying, diorama. The trophy leg had been in a carriage, leaning against its wooden bench-seat. Two men from the Illinois Fourth Infantry volunteers, mannequins, on either side of the carriage door, stood guard, a plastic roasted chicken with peripheral nibblings and a wooden strong box full of plastic gold coins at their feet. Seeing the glorification of this historical atrocity troubled Elaine beyond consolation and she planned to liberate the prosthesis, to return to Mexico.

Elaine had pulled from her pocket the "Record of the Services of Illinois Soldiers in the Black Hawk War and Mexican War" she had printed off the Internet. She had been reading it with the goal of creating an intentional reconstruction of history. It was a practice in historiography and hermeneutics, a new way of seeing the past and of constructing the future. She had mailed José Escandón, in Mexico, her statement of purpose from which the first line read, *I want to deconstruct the historical discourse on "disability" and conjure the voice of the "physical minority."* *The physical minority has been too long denied participation in the ideological work of constructing historical and cultural narratives.* Elaine received no response as to what Escandón thought of this opening line.

The audio from the "History of the State Military Museum" video was murmuring from the second floor foyer. The walls and ceiling were draped with camouflage netting. Glass display cases dappled with children's fingerprints stood on plaster pedestals. The video's narrator had just finished describing the contents of the museum, glorifying Santa Anna's prosthesis as "the museum's most popular object." Beethoven's "Yorckscher March for Military Music"³ played softly

while a slide show of mortars, rifles, and a splintered piece of wood shot by House Representative Abraham Lincoln, filled the screen.

Elaine stood before the diorama and read from her version of the archive:

During a brief respite from the battle of Cerro Gordo, April 23, 1847, His "Most Serene Highness" Antonio López de Santa Anna was enjoying a whole roasted chicken and counting his booty, which he had won from war and cock fighting.

Beneath the bench that held both Santa Anna and his prosthetic wooden leg were drawings, paintings, letters, a pen and fragments of clothing said to have been owned by The Emperor Napoleon Himself. It is true that Santa Anna had his boots, including the one strapped permanently to his wooden leg, fashioned after Napoleon's, though his were not the backless "Napoleon Boots." A quick comparison of the two pairs of leather footwear would reveal that fact, even to the apprentice cordwainer. The soles of each shoe were originally made of chicle from the Manikara chicle tree, but were later replaced by a thick layer of leather after Santa Anna noticed his soldiers taking large pinches from the sole of his prosthesis during long marches, presumably for the pleasures of chewing.

Before Santa Anna had the time to consume one leg of his chicken, two American regiments stormed the Mexican military camp, and a captain in Santa Anna's army—a known thief and murderer—knocked on his carriage door and called him into battle. Charged with spirit and success, Santa Anna flew one-legged (only half aware of relief from the sharp pain the prosthesis continuously caused) from his carriage onto his horse and headed into the storm of his war.

According to a report made by Maj. Gen. Patterson of the volunteer division dated April 23, 1847:

"On the afternoon of the 17th, a rapid and continuous fire of artillery and infantry, announcing that the Second division of regulars was closely engaged with the left of the enemy's lines. [...] Before the brigade reached position of that division, the action had ceased for the day; the night was, however, occupied in establishing several pieces of artillery upon a height adjacent to Cerro Gordo. [...] Gen. Shields, whilst gallantly leading his command, and forming it for the attack of the enemy, posted in force in his front, fell severely wounded, and was carried from the field. Col. Baker, Fourth Illinois regiment, having assumed the command, the enemy's lines were charged with spirit and success by the Third and Fourth Illinois..."

It was amongst this "rapid and continuous fire" that Santa Anna's prosthetic leg was stolen.

The men of the Third and Fourth volunteer armies were discharged just over a month after that battle, from the 23rd to the 25th day of May 1847. It has been said that it was not Second Lieutenant W.A. Tinney who actually captured Santa Anna's prosthetic leg, but Colonel Baker himself. Tinney is

thought to have stolen the leg from the Colonel's tent the night he shipped out up river. Upon his return to Illinois, Tinney took the leg on tour, displaying it at County Fairs for ten cents a peek.

Years after Tinney's death, his letters and the leg were, with unintentional anonymity, donated to the Illinois Military Museum. One of the letters written by Second Lieutenant W.A. Tinney of the Fourth Illinois volunteer brigade, to the Military Museum in Springfield, Illinois, dated February 5, 1882, read:

"We stormed their fort and put the enemy to flight, taking about six thousand prisoners, and we captured Gen. Santa Anna's carriage, also his wooden leg, which I have in my possession."

These items were accompanied by a note, undated, which read:

"Despite his desire to be buried with this leg and wearing its leather shoe, I believe it to be of historical import and must therefore see to it that it be held in the protection of the museum in this fair state of Illinois. Mr. Tinney loved shoes dearly and (illegible text) and thank you for your service." The letter was signed "Sincerely, E. (illegible text)."

Elaine heard Reed's laugh over the murmur of the "March" and figured it was a signal to come down. He was downstairs distracting the deskman. She lifted the duffel bag to her shoulder, rubbed her legs with both hands as if to make sure she was still whole, and walked into the open elevator.

The man at the front desk must have been from southern Illinois.

"They want it back," referring to Mexico and the leg, "but they ain't gon' get it," he said.

He rested his hands, fingers laced together as tightly as their girth would allow, on the large protuberance of his belly, and looked at Reed directly. Reed could talk to anyone, especially conservative and crotchety old men.

As if obliged by Reed's attention, the deskman spoke:

"I do reenactments of the Alamo 'bout once a year. Usually there's a group, but I can play both sides, if necessary, in here," he pointed to his temple, after having some difficulty unlacing his fingers.

He spoke at length about the battles of what he called the Mexican War, and spiced each phrase with words like glory, freedom, and America.

Reed was truly interested. He was looking at the glass case full of merchandise, listening to the old man while he fingered the postcards and pamphlets, all of which displayed pictures of the museum's prized leg. Elaine clung to the straps of her duffle bag.

Reed stepped toward the deskman with a large and determined step, "I have to say, my interest did not spread beyond the simple delight I knew I would get from laying my humble eyes upon that leg up there, but hearing you speak—I must say, sir—downright passionately, about that war, well, I'm a changed man."

The deskman re-laced his fingers, unblinking, and smiled self-satisfied. Reed shook his head, amazed at his performance, and folded a few souvenir Civil War banknotes into his pocket. Elaine, nearly overcome with trepidation, stood beside the deskman, just outside of his peripheral vision. Her knees quaked while she sought out any indicator of knowing in the deskman's face. She looked at Reed to see if he'd told with his eyes, and felt slight relief when her mind was diverted to wondering how much of that speech was bullshit and how much was Reed. The deskman looked pleased.

"Y'know son, I'm headed down, Alamo bound, in two days' time, and I wouldn't mind company, if you'd be interested in bein' part of a company, in the dust," he inhaled deeply, "beneath that savage Texan sun."

Elaine nearly broke the silence, wondering if her interjection might save Reed from making a rash decision, but hesitated too long. Reed wiped a real tear from his eye and, chin resting on his chest, extended his hand toward the deskman, humbly assuming his corpulent fingers would unlace and requite.

"I'll take that as a yes, then. I'll figure you'll make your own arrangements. You," he said, pointing at Reed, "will play Sanna Anna, so come prepared."

He made a gesture toward Reed's foot and jutted his chin toward his hip.

"It all began on February 23, 1836, Presidio San Antonio de Bexar. Betcha didn't know that. Well, we'll begin day after the day after tomorra', July 23, 2013, San-an-tone, Texas. I don't suppose you're interested," he nodded in Elaine's direction.

She nodded.

She had already planned a trip to visit Escandón in México the following week and Reed seemed excited to play in the deskman's game, so fortuity became fortune.

It was the hottest summer in 17 years. That mattered in Texas. Reed stood on one leg, leaning his shoulder against the frame of a stucco doorway, acting like there was no shade anywhere else for miles. His face was beaded with sweat, his eyebrows like damp wheat. In 1836 the Alamo was a walled Texan desert in the vast desert of northern México, and now it is a façade surrounded by a vast American city. It appeared as out of place as Santa Anna's prosthetic did, flanked by two anatomically incorrect mannequins.

Elaine wondered at the deskman's energy as he prepared for the reenactment. He told the two of them to watch closely so they could learn their parts. It looked like demonic possession. He was riding an invisible horse, and the swaying of his heft was like the undulating of a horse's withers. Sweat soaked through his shirt and made a stripe on his back as wide as the Rio Grande. He galloped back and forth firing his gun into the air and shouting, alternating between lines in English like, "The troops were charged with spirit and success," and an unintelligible mix of an affected Spanish. "Sounds like a Cacaxtle dialect to me," Reed offered.

Elaine adjusted the straps of the duffle bag she had carried all the way from Illinois. The weight of the leg was heavy on her back and she was worried that her sweat might damage the soft Cordovan leather of the boot. Reed noticed Elaine's discomfort and cocked his head in her direction, offering to carry the contraband for a while, but she declined, savored the feeling of its heat and weight like a penance for its displacement. Until it was returned to Mexico, Elaine preferred to carry the burden.

Reed left the unsatisfying shade of the doorway and began to gallop in the well-worn path devised for him by the deskman. The deskman had conferred upon Reed the honor of not only playing Santa Anna, but also the David Crockett. Elaine shifted her weight to one side and pulled the printed archive she was carrying from her back pocket.

"Corroboration of disparate sources identifies David Crockett as a 'has been' a 'man looking to make history after many successive failures.'"

This detail, conceived in the brains of historians and academics, was of no import to the deskman, who, pointing at Reed, led the charge in his direction. The deskman threw a sweat-moistened Bowie knife handle first toward Elaine. It fell into the dust just short of her feet, and he yelled out, "You play James!"⁴

She picked the knife up, cut two inches of the seam from the lip of the duffle, and slid it into the tunnel of fabric. Elaine was disgusted by the saturated handle of the knife and the smell of wet leather, by the deskman's caricatured performance. She could see her disquiet reflected on Reed's face. He was rubbing his leg, ankle duct-taped to thigh, and leaning out of the doorway. Reed pumped his air rifle, steadied the deskman's horse with his mind, and missed a few shots aimed at the deskman, who was now galloping from view, aimlessly into the city.

The steaks at Morton's, just off East Crockett Street, were an unfortunate end to a heavy day of reenactment. Reed ordered Maine lobster, but quickly amended his order to a porterhouse under the deskman's scrutinizing gaze. Elaine held the duffle on her lap with one hand, her steak knife in the other. Her ribeye effused. The steak waded in a tepid pool, the surface tension pressed against its edges. It was the cohesive force among liquid molecules that caused this tension; it was responsible. Elaine focused on the steak. She knew tomorrow they would be crossing the border. The surface displayed a contractive tendency that disallowed submersion.

She exhaled, slightly relieved. The steak itself was like a thrombus being pushed from a wound, or perhaps like a plug, keeping what was inside from coming out. An impulse to pierce the steak with the tip of her knife rose and then fell. She inhaled and loosened the grip she had on the wooden-handled steak knife. It fell with a thud to the table. The sound was heavy and mute like a block of wood falling into dust. Reed didn't notice, appeared to be in a constant state of pain, and rubbed his hip as if to empathize with his welted skin. Reed made eye contact with the deskman, which obliged him to speak.

"Now that y'know yer places, we'll be better tomorra'," the deskman paused momentarily to swallow a half-chewed bite of steak, "so eat up and get some rest, 'cause we'll be startin' 'round sun-up."

Reed and Elaine glanced at one another and continued eating their meals. While the deskman spoke, they silently revisited their tentative plans for the coming morning. They realized they would have to leave well before sun-up.

Elaine had arranged to meet José de Escandón X at the Nuehisticismo Museo Episteme in Nuevo Laredo, 160 miles south of the Alamo. He was a prolific writer for the Tempesta Nuevo Laredo, and the great, great, great, great, great, great, great, grandson of the city's Spaniard founder⁵. The story Elaine read on the Consulate General of the United States Nuevo Laredo, Mexico website added validity to the purpose of their mission.

On May 30, 1848 José Escandón IV represented Mexico in the summit with the United States, who arbitrarily, according to custom and tradition, devised a new border alternatively dividing the cities of Nuevo Laredo and Laredo. This new division, which, according to custom and tradition, favored the United States, put the house of José Escandón IV firmly in U.S. territory. This fact was never officially registered, recognized or noted, and José continued to live and raise his family, "siempre con la patria,"⁶ on the now-nebulous swath of land that, like a transitory isthmus, connected his home to the city of Nuevo Laredo, and Mexico.

They passed Pearsall at sunrise and didn't stop until they hit Dilley. Reed drove. Elaine was in the back seat, spooning Santa Anna's prosthesis; not having eaten but a few bites of blood-pinked potato the night before, she felt a faint levity similar to the preliminary effects of anesthesia. She was thinking about what she would say about the leg if they searched the vehicle at the border crossing. She was planning her responses and their responses to her responses. They wondered what the deskman was thinking, what he was doing at that very moment. Although neither spoke a word about it, they silently agreed that the deskman was galloping across the desert, charged with spirit and success.

Reed rolled his window down as they approached the gated wall that stretched for hundreds of miles in either direction, supported by evenly-dispersed panoptic towers. This signified the border. A tiny, dichromatic plaque signaled the dividing line between the United States of America and Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos. It wasn't hard to see the maquiladoras for the trees.

Elaine had been sleeping, her head resting on the duffed leg; tears had darkened the fabric beneath her face. She sat up, wiped her cheek on her forearm, and pushed the duffed leg to the side. She had only been to the border once before and felt like the line of cars should have been longer. She felt anxious, thought that they should have stopped at customs, but realized they had nothing they could claim. Reed was slowing to the border check. He made eye contact with the pale man leaning into the Reed's window, speaking unaccented English.

"Destination?"

"Well, sir, we're here. I mean we have arrived where we intended to go and now we are in that place."

The pale man held out his hand and Reed held his out over the console. Elaine placed her passport in Reed's hand and the exchange was made.

"Tourism or business?"

He didn't look long at each navy blue booklet, just held them near his face as if he were attempting to hide his mouth.

"Both I suppose, but perhaps neither, really. There is the business of being and the business of doing, inasmuch as we are in the state of being busy, as in occupied, though employed is not accurate—gainfully or otherwise—nor do we have any intention to bolt."

The pale man didn't seem to notice Reed's etymological rant. He handed back the passports.

"Have a good trip."

The pale man smiled and stepped away from the car. Reed looked straight ahead and slowly drove away, laughing.

The Nuehisticismo Museo Episteme wasn't far from the border. It was on the first floor behind the steel awning of La Zapatería Jaca, signless and with access only through the shoe store. A tentative man approached as soon as they walked in, but stopped suddenly and observed the two from a distance. Elaine sat on a bench with angled mirrors on either side, her face slightly red and swollen, and grabbed the pair of shoes that were nearest her. She turned them slowly in her hands, examined her surroundings, and wondered if they'd be willing to sell just one shoe.

Reed rubbed the heel of a stiletto between his thumb and forefinger as he walked, and attempted to read the signs and make small talk with the few customers trying on shoes.

Santa Anna's prosthetic leg sat duffeled on the bench beside Elaine. She was half-hoping she would find a boot like the one on the prosthesis. The hazel-colored patent leather pump she tried on didn't fit. The tentative man approached her.

"Te gustaría encontrar un tamaño diferente?"

"No, gracias. Tengo una bota que quiero replicar. Puedes verla en la luz afuera?"

He nodded sincerely, knowingly. Elaine followed him through the store and outside into a small dirt enclosure.

It was noon. The sun was directly overhead and the ground reflected white. Elaine squinted, her aperture too wide. The two stood for a moment, still as monoliths. She handed him the leg, the duffle bag draped loosely around its knee like an oversized stocking. His smile was big and genuine. He grabbed the duffle bag and held it by its opening, searched its contents with gradually narrowing eyes. Elaine sensed disappointment. He dropped the bag into the dust and looked up at her. The sound was heavy and mute like a block of wood falling into dust.

"Qué's esto?"

"Es la pierna prostética del Generalísimo Antonio de Padua María Severino López de Santa Anna y Pérez de Lebrón."

"Pues, quién es?"

Inside, Reed was talking to José de Escandón X. José had come downstairs when he heard Reed laughing and speaking English. They hadn't noticed that Elaine was gone. Escandón was reading about the contents of his museum:

"Besides a copy of the Record of Services, the one you say you have in your possession, we also have the Mexican Record of Services: collected army logs, journals and diaries, poems and letters, and official 'histories' of the battles of Cerro Gordo, the Alamo, and la Guerra con los Estados Unidos. We also have the rifle of Davey Crockett, which he called Betsy, and has been depicted swinging like a club. We are told that a military museum in Monterrey has his coonskin cap."

Reed was nodding enthusiastically, thinking of a comparable response.

"Fascinating, absolutely fascinating. Well, I was told by the deskman that a museum in Decatur, Illinois has Santa Anna's peg leg, but I cannot corroborate. I am more concerned with the iconography of power, visual and written constructions of history, the diachronic nature of memory and what Schwartz and Cook call, 'the making of modern memory.'

Reed was now on a roll, had likely been mulling all this over on their journey from San Antonio to Nuevo Laredo.

"If I may be permitted to quote,"

Reed paused. José nodded. Reed continued,

"Archives—as records—wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies..."ⁱⁱ

Elaine walked toward the men, followed by the tentative man. Her duffle bag was three-quarters covered by a fine white dust. The prosthesis felt light, lighter now than it had since she had initially placed it in the duffel bag two weeks prior. José—averting his attention from Reed, who continued to speak, only now to young boy in new Nike SBs—leaned in close to the tentative man. They whispered.

"Come with me," José was speaking directly to Elaine.

She followed him upstairs, only briefly glancing back at Reed who was now being shown shoes by the SB boy and the tentative man.

"Mexico doesn't want the leg, but I do."

Elaine didn't speak. She'd heard this before from the deskman.

"What is written about the past and what happened in the past are two different things, as I'm sure you know."

Elaine was disturbed. She opened her mouth and closed it. José stared at her with the intensity of a dentist extracting a molar. It was a moment of stasis for both of them. Elaine saw only history in the

eyes of Escandón. No future. The moment broke and he let his face relax, even showed a few handsomely crooked teeth. Elaine pulled the leg out of the duffle bag and laid it over her lap.

"Santa Anna wasn't president when he was selling chicle in Staten Island⁷. He wasn't president when he sold la Mesilla. Between the years of 1833 and 1855 he was president 11 times, mostly of his own accord. He was taken prisoner in the battle of San Jacinto, and after that he wasn't a friend to Mexico or the United States. He declared himself emperor for life, was then exiled, and for good measure so were the Catholic Church and the military. He lived the life of Napoleon, the support and the disappointment."

He went on, at length, about why he wanted the leg and why Mexico, as a nation, didn't; why he stayed on the land isthmus that was his home, and how he would care for the leg: he would mount it in a glass case above his mantle like a family heirloom. He would keep it at his home until his land was returned to Mexico⁸.

Elaine did not give Escandón the leg. She moved her hand over its entire length, imagining it as a bridge, imagining Santa Anna forgetting about it as he walked, the wood connecting his leg to the ground. But he could never forget; the two inches of bone the surgeons left exposed, cupped by the compacted cork of the prosthesis, caused him incessant pain. The wooden leg, just weeks before lying forgotten and unnoticed, was now causing both Elaine and Escandón pain. The deskman had surely by now noticed its absence and would be combing the surveillance tapes. She stood to go, and shook Escandón's hand. Before she turned away she saw the tension of his face release, like a physical sigh.

Elaine descended the stairs holding the prosthesis in her arms like a child. She had left the bag upstairs in Escandón's museum. Reed wanted to know why she didn't just burn the leg, destroy the only extant artifact in the megalomaniac General's history. He stared at Elaine, silently asking her the question. Elaine felt absurd.

They stopped at an old rusted-out train on the tracks that ran parallel to the road out of town, and Reed painted his face with coal from the scuttle. He said: "Remember, to deconstruct is to intervene." Elaine laid the prosthesis in the scuttle and Reed handed her his lighter. She stood so close to the flames her shirt blackened with smoke.

As they drove back to the border, Elaine pulled the Bowie knife from the duffle and cut the left leg of her pants off four inches above the knee. Reed had his eyes on the road and turned the volume up, then down, successively, nervously. Elaine closed her eyes and breathed deeply and consistently until her heart slowed and her lips tingled. She pressed the knife the deskman had given her firmly onto her thigh with the intention of reaching her femur. She did not let up on the force with which she pressed it into her flesh, and once through the skin she began to silently saw through the muscle and tendon. The smell was subtle.

Reed remembered taking swimming lessons as a child, waking up at five a.m. so his mom could drive the hour-and-a-half to the facility nearest his home that taught swimming at such an hour, before she had to be to work. His little sister was a better swimmer than he. His mother had been a lifeguard in her youth. He was an ingot.

Elaine had successfully filleted her thigh, through the vastus intermedius, medialis, and lateralis, and had subsequently lost consciousness. By the time Reed noticed her actions she was nearly dead from loss of blood, and he sped back to Nuevo Laredo looking for a hospital, laughing.

ENDNOTES

1. The grapeshot, a cluster of small iron balls shot from a cannon, that struck Santa Anna's leg also killed his horse.
2. Contrary to popular belief, the Pastry War did exist and was not fought with éclairs, but with guns, cannons and cavalry. The war was started over the looting of a French pastry shop by Mexican soldiers a decade prior. The shop's owner and pastry chef, Remontel's appeal to King Louis-Philippe of France turned into embargo and war, which ended when compensation for damages to Remontel's pastry shop were paid.
3. A favorite of the German Wachbataillon.
4. James Bowie, born in Kentucky, moved to Texas and became a Mexican citizen in 1830. He fought against Santa Anna's troops at the Alamo in 1836. He was known as an all-around reprobate, a slave trader and smuggler, who had a fondness for knives. The Bowie knife was named after him.
5. José Escandón I was an "Indian-fighter," and was granted by the King of Spain what was at the time called Nuevo Santander. Capitan Tomás Sánchez de la Barrera was the actual founder, granted the right to settle through petition of Escandón. The coat of arms was flanked by two, loin-clothed and amply bearded, men holding sheaves of wheat. It has been said they are representations of Sánchez and Escandón.
6. The motto of Nuevo Laredo.
7. Santa Anna made a land deal with the U.S. for what was once Mexican Texas, southern Arizona and New Mexico, then returns to Mexico and reneges on the deal, loses the battles to regain the land, is exiled by Mexico to Jamaica then Cuba, then lives in Staten Island, New York—there, he claims the name Shaolin Killa Eagle—sells a few tons of imported chicle to the entrepreneur who invents Chiclets chewing gum, and is allowed to return to Mexico City, deaf and nearly blind, just in time to die, repatriated.
8. Escandón X was a Texican, invested in the land he was promised by his forefathers, the land promised them by the empresario Stephen F. Austin, son of Moses Austin, and sold to him by the Mexican Government. The deal was made with the illegitimate authority of Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, who, after signing the land treaty with the United States, pocketed the cash and headed back to Mexico to usurp real power and usurp the land. Escandón X ended up on the isthmus of Mexico that extended like an invisible phallus into the ordure of Texas. His history settled like the

dust in his home, and he found himself in exile. The house, the land, and the museum, all reminded him of displacement and the impossibility of home.

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Amateur Meth Cooks and the Deep Internet: A Convergence of Social Justice and Emerging Technologies by Elberto Mueller

And I guess you would call it one of those quintessential New York City vacation moments: looking out the window to realize it is the dawn of a new day, the purple undersides of clouds glowing pink with the birth of a new sun, before turning my gaze back into the apartment to the task at hand: using a pair of pliers to peel back the metal casing surrounding an Energizer battery to get at the strip of lithium metal contained inside so that my accomplice and I might throw it into a two liter bottle along with some other chemicals as a catalyst in a reaction to synthesize methamphetamine, aka crystal meth. Life, I thought, in the cultural capital of the world, and here I am living it!

To begin again, from what one might call the beginning: my friends and I arrived at our posh digs on the lower east side of Manhattan at 2 a.m. a few days before the previous scene to find our driver's brother wide awake in a mostly furniture-less apartment, staring at a computer screen, busy processing orders for amphetamine sulfate, aka Adderall, a substance he had purchased in the form of a bulk powder on an unregistered website somewhere in the Deep Internet and which he had subsequently encapsulated and was now re-selling as generic Adderall on the same site, to what ends we would eventually discover.

Seeing how green we were on the subject matter, the aforementioned Deep Internet being wholly unheard of by any of us before that night, our driver's brother, who will hereafter be referred to as Papa Smurf for reasons that will later become obvious, a current resident of some Brooklyn projects who is temporarily residing in this high rise belonging to his uncle, away in Europe or Bolivia for the summer, clued us in on the entire scene and his particular predicament:

The Deep Web is indeed part of the internet that cannot be accessed through a normal internet browser. It has been in existence for some time and is actually hundreds of times larger than what we think of as the internet, or "surface web", containing a large number of unregistered sites which do not show up in the results of search engines such as Google or Bing. One may download something called a Tor browser which, when implemented, blocks a user's actual IP address by re-directing it through a series of sites so that to external users it appears as if one is logging on from Singapore, Germany, Japan, or some other far off place. According to torproject.org:

"Tor protects you by bouncing your communications around a distributed network of relays run by volunteers all around the world: it prevents somebody watching your Internet connection from learning what sites you visit, and it prevents the sites you visit from learning your physical location."

The name of the game is anonymity, a goal further enabled by running one's computer through a program called Tails on a USB port, so that one may surf the Deep Internet on their own computer

a few levels detached from the actual internet, safely, in obscurity, just another freak in the freak kingdom.

Once one finds themselves on the Deep Internet, the world is sort of their oyster, an admittedly weird oyster, filled with dealers of arms, drugs, banned books, and child porn among other things, and although this will be my focus, the technology does present itself as incredibly useful in providing privacy to applications across internet life, from business to personal relationships to military use for classified documents. Of interesting note is that Deep Websites generally use the ".onion" domain (as opposed to .com or .org), and that the most popular graphic display for controlling the Tor program is interestingly called "Vidalia", which for those not horticulturally inclined is a type of onion. Papa Smurf explained that his presence in this world was initially that of a curious traveler, but that due to some recent occurrences he had been forced to take a more active role, that is, becoming a seller of scheduled substances on popular Subnet site The Silk Road, a sort of bazaar of the bizarre, most notable for its heavy volume in drug-trafficking, but where one can also find a few other sundry accoutrements ranging from AK-47's, stolen identities, and, apparently, hired killers.

What exactly were the forces leading him to this nefarious existence? The answer, as with most answers, is both incredibly simple and impossibly complex. To put it bluntly, Papa Smurf's recently paroled brother-in-law, after a six-year stint in prison for felony drug charges, is now probably headed back to the joint for a brand new crime involving guns and money, headed back, it would seem, for a very long time. But the facts in the case are none too clear, and Papa Smurf believes that with a good defense attorney his brother-in-law could, if not beat the charges completely, at least get them dropped down considerably. But a good defense attorney costs money, a commodity which is often in very short supply in the projects of Brooklyn, and this money, Papa Smurf explained, needs to be raised quickly. Very quickly.

This is the simple story: a man is in trouble with the law and needs a lawyer, and his brother-in-law has taken it upon himself to raise the necessary funds by selling drugs anonymously on the internet.

It almost sounds like the plot of a television show.

But Papa Smurf is also a man of ideals. It is not just this crime that he is fighting, but the entire, well-documented "revolving door" prison system, which his brother-in law, having once entered, will probably never again fully escape. Here Papa provided information on how the US government, through the 1996 welfare reform legislation, has taken to kicking the down and out while they are at their most down and out, and run with it, something in which America, being a country of such vast riches, is seemingly in a league of its own, as felons in many states are prohibited from collecting housing, food, or cash benefits, aka welfare, this all part of the mid-1990s drive to be "tough on crime" which many say has in fact backfired, as felons attempting to reconstruct their lives after prison find it hard enough just finding work with a big F on their report card, legal justification not to

hire someone, a fact that makes procuring even the most meager of employment something of a feat for ex-convicts trying to make good. Here is also the point where Papa Smurf steps over the fine line between "a man of ideals" and "an idealist", as New York is actually one of the states that has effectively opted out of this welfare ban. But even with that being the case, Papa assures us that the man's life has been no bed of roses, and that in this particular case the facts are being misconstrued in a way that will, for all intents and purposes, completely ruin the life of yet another nameless African American male yadda yadda yadda. The fact that this story has been told so many times as to be practically threadbare shouldn't make it any less despicable, as to Papa Smurf (and me for that matter) the cycle of African Americans living in poverty seems less and less to be the happenings of pure chance or "culture" as neo-racists claim and more like a systemic, verging on pathological attempt by "the man" to keep certain cultural groups perpetually down. Perhaps the power to punish is proof of strength, and so therefore there is a lot of sense in a system that causes punishment to fall on those other than ourselves.

Enough navel gazing: here we find ourselves in this vacant 3,000-dollar-a-month apartment in one of the richest cities in the world, getting a crash course in what one might refer to as the Internet's black market, along with a personal crusade for political and social justice by one very wired young man (he has, it turns out, been getting high on his own supply of amphetamine sulfates in order to keep up the intense momentum that he exudes like a strong musk and which all agree they notice not long after making his acquaintance) when the plot quite rapidly thickens.

As it turns out, we are not the only ones processing vast amounts of new information this evening. Papa Smurf has himself been rather engrossed in reading into the finer points of cooking meth, substance scourge of the rural United States. It is hard not to notice the twinkle in his eye as he diagrams his plan, which is based on the need for more money, much more money, and the fact that meth, along with heroin and cocaine, demands a higher price on The Silk Road and that of the three drugs, meth is the only one producible in one's very own (very expensive) kitchen from chemicals readily available at local hardware stores and pharmacies.

The rest of my traveling companions seem slightly taken aback by this most recent development while I, on the other hand, having dabbled in a myriad of chemicals and delved to some extent into their production, am floored, perhaps naively so. As will become apparent in the coming days, Papa Smurf is certainly an amateur meth cook, much emphasis on the modifier amateur, but he is also very driven, and his confidence as well as sense of justice will carry me through to the end. But it is late, and all must be getting to bed, though before we do Papa Smurf has one last request: would any of us be willing to help him in his experiment, specifically, acting as Smurfs, that is, procuring for him some of the base elements for his work? We say we will sleep on it, and lay out our sleeping bags on the wood floor to do just that.

The day starts with coffee and bagels, train rides around the city, a stroll through Chinatown, all the archetypal motions of vacationers in New York, before moving into the necessary procedures for

the first stage in producing meth in a home lab, that is, procuring pseudoephedrine, the active ingredient in a number of over-the-counter cold medications and the base chemical used in preparation of methamphetamine. Due to this use the drug is heavily regulated, in some states a doctor's prescription is required for its purchase. In New York City one may walk a few blocks to any pharmacy, pick up a slip of paper from among the boxes of decongestants, carry it back to the pharmacist who will then ask for your ID and enter your information into a tracking system. It is a crime to purchase more than 9 grams of pseudoephedrine or related chemicals in a month, and none of us have any wild desire for the DEA to show up at our front doors, so we each buy a single box to help out a man in need. Papa calls us his Smurfs because this entire procedure is known as "Smurfing," a term actually derived from the banking industry to refer to the tactic of breaking up a single large transaction into many smaller transactions in order to avoid federal scrutiny, which has subsequently been applied to the practice of big time meth cooks sending out packs of twaker stooges to procure pseudoephedrine containing products in exchange for some of the yet-to-be-completed batch.

But how is it that Papa Smurf, who as a liberal, educated, east coast living, non-profit employed middle class male, and most importantly, someone who has never actually used methamphetamine, about as far from the profile of prototypical meth cook as one can be, knows so much of the industry slang? The answer, of course, is television, specifically the critically acclaimed series "Breaking Bad", of which it turns out Papa is a devoted fan. And this is when it begins to dawn on me that we are actually standing at the strange 4-way crossroads of TV fandom, the taboo and mystique of the prohibited, novelty, and his utopian idealism.

Somewhere rooted in the psyche of today's white American male is the do-it-yourself ethic fueled by ad men of the 1950s to sell hardware supplies to a newly wealthy middle class. Perhaps it goes back further, to the idealism and romanticized self-sufficiency of the American frontier, true "man's men" building log cabins in the woods and double crossing any pesky Indians unable to grasp the concept of manifest destiny. Whatever the case, this notion expresses itself today in a number of fashions, to take for one example the "brew your own beer" trend which has been on the increase for some time. Along these same lines, though less popular and slightly more illegal, are the practices of growing your own marijuana, and creating mold cultures to cultivate psychedelic psilocybin mushrooms from mail-order spores. These practices can be generally differentiated from full-scale grow operations in that in most cases the end product is intended for personal use, not distribution, although depending on the success this may change: just as one who falls in love with the process of brewing their own beer may decide to turn pro and open a microbrewery, a person who successfully harvests a solid strain of marijuana or really killer mushrooms may decide, for any number of reasons, not the least of which would be pure economic incentive, to go full scale and take on drug production for profit. This is after all America, where entrepreneurial spirit is so strong it's hard not to catch a little capitalistic buzz every time you step out the front door.

This DIY trait is readily apparent in Papa Smurf, who as a man with a very modest grasp of chemistry is still very obviously enthralled in the idea that from a number of (fairly) easily procured chemicals he might create a powerful mind-altering substance and, bonus, earn a healthy profit. But the risks do seem particularly high in this venture, especially when one pays attention to the number of volatile chemicals involved, not to mention the (admittedly horrifying) legal implications of getting caught.

Because if you think about it, there are a lot of ways to make money, the \$5,000 he believes a lawyer will cost not being an insurmountable sum for a person willing to say, move to North Dakota, get an entry level, \$2,000 a week job in the booming oil business, or even at the Wal Mart or McDonald's in the new wild west towns of Williston or Dickinson: both mega-chains are currently hiring at starting wages of \$16 to \$20 an hour due to the shortage of workers, all available men gone out to suck black gold from the soil.

But Papa Smurf is moving (and thinking) much too fast for all of that, and his enthusiasm is contagious, at least from my perspective, although my traveling companions have begun to voice the opinion that maybe he's going a little over the edge, a notion I quickly brush aside: if allegiances are to be declared, I stand fully behind the Papa, who on our second night in town begins the process of extracting pseudoephedrine from the over-the-counter medications we and a few of his Brooklyn allies have procured.

The next morning I wander into the kitchen looking to brew some coffee (legal speed, the American way) to find that all vessels designed for this purpose--one traditional coffee pot along with two French presses (there are an awful lot of these devices considering the apartment lacks even a couch to sit on or non-collapsible table)--are currently in use, filters positioned above each containing a viscous white liquid. In the bottom of each vessel lies a small amount of milky solute, and it is as I contemplate this substance that Papa Smurf quietly enters the room, startling me slightly.

—This doesn't look right.

—No, it's not right. It seems there's some additive in the pills to make it harder to extract the pseudoephedrine. I've read about this.

—Yeah?

—It's no big deal, if it doesn't go down any farther soon I'll add some sand.

—Sand?

—Yeah and if that doesn't work there's an extraction involving Coleman camp fuel we can try.

—Oh. I was going to make some coffee...

—Ah, well.

The next 24 hours are chock full of new developments. First off: the addition of sand to the milky pill gunk does not do much in the way of expediting the filtration process and in the end Papa is forced to go ahead with the Coleman camp fuel extraction. A quick glance into the bedroom closet

reveals the scale of the ramping up towards the actual "cook": there are no clothes hanging from the rod, no shoes piled on the floor, only a number of plastic bags containing an array of products I imagine to be somewhat rare in the standard Lower East Side apartment: camp fuel, mineral spirits, hydrochloric acid, and lye, among others.

At this point you may be thinking something like, "I've seen this story before, in the colored pictures that flash at me from the glowing machine in my living room. I know how this one ends." But I have to tell you that in this case there will be no fireball blowing out the ninth story window of a Manhattan sky-rise. Actually I take that back: there will be a fireball, albeit a very small, practically harmless fireball, as far as fireballs go, and by that point we will have moved through a number of other stages in this, our Great Experiment, and anyway before that time we have a lot more ground to cover, for example, what it means to ship and receive scheduled substances anonymously through the United States Postal Service.

Yes, the USPS serves as an accomplice in our schemes, albeit an unwitting one, as with 35,000 layoffs this year alone to an already sorely understaffed, underfunded organization, there really is no better way to move illegal things around the United States. For a postal employee to open a piece of U.S. mail requires a federal warrant, and the pure volume of possibly suspicious packages with no return address ensures that the majority will make it through undetected. The most dangerous position to be in is that of end buyer, who always must be concerned that the package has been sniffed out, or that the fine folk at the Drug Enforcement Administration have set up a sting. International shipments are another issue entirely due to customs regulations and it is for this reason that Papa only ships within the country's borders. "Every time we sent packages to Europe the customer would say 'shipment was never received' and we were denied payment. There was no way to prove it one way or another. Here we have delivery confirmation."

And then the question arises, how is it that one gets paid? Transactions on the Silk Road occur using the somewhat highly publicized Bitcoin, an electronic crypto-currency not backed by any governmental institution. At the time of this writing one Bitcoin is worth about \$11 US dollars, though the price is given to rather abrupt fluctuations. A full explanation of the currency, its (rather brief) history, creation (with enough computing power one may in fact "mine" for Bitcoins, building them from the proverbial aether), authentication issues, and prospective future (the technology is still considered a "high risk" investment) is beyond the scope of this piece. Suffice to say that Bitcoin transactions, while totally public and hence traceable, do at present provide a decent level of anonymity, as they are only attached to IP addresses, virtually impossible to connect with a real life name.

Silk Road purchases are typically put in escrow accounts: the funds are verified but remain unpaid until the customer confirms delivery of product. The site collects a small percentage fee and the money is transferred to the seller's online purse. Sellers on Silk Road are rated by customers in a similar manner to other online DIY retailers like Ebay and Amazon Marketplace, and not just on

their service but (obviously) the quality of their product: scrutiny is heavy, and sellers with better ratings may demand payment up front before the product is ever shipped. Papa Smurf shows me an email from a satisfied customer in the Middle West, praising the strength of his product, a strength made acutely obvious by the light-speed, stream of consciousness, nearly incomprehensible quality of the message, which rambles on for some ten pages, the giddy and delusional nature of which are actually rather disturbing.

So, on the Silk Road you can buy practically any drug, but not every drug, Papa Smurf tells me, and once again I catch that glimmer in his eye. At present there is a large amount of discussion on the site revolving around a strain of amphetamine known as Euphoria (4-Methylaminorex), also referred to as Ice and, somewhat annoyingly, U4Euh (i.e., "Euphoria"), a drug which some claim as the ultimate high, a mix between the glowing sense of well-being and physical warmth associated with MDMA (ecstasy) and the heightened mental awareness and feeling of mental connection provided by crystal meth, though longer lasting than either. It is supposedly associated with increased creativity and has been described as a "make-you-smarter" drug.

What's more the substance is incredibly rare: demand on Silk Road discussion boards would make one think that this might be the stuff that causes your shit not to stink. At least part of the reason for this scarcity is that production requires the immensely unstable, incredibly toxic chemical cyanogen bromide, putting it beyond the production scope of your garden variety meth cook. Or at least, it used to, until a few months ago when a man released after a seven-year prison stint for Euphoria production posted a recipe bypassing the cyanogen bromide entirely, a recipe which Papa happened to have downloaded before it was taken down by the Feds.

And one can clearly see the wheels turning behind his eyes as he elucidates his new plan: why bother producing mere methamphetamine when we can just as easily make Euphoria and sell it at \$300 a gram, nearly triple the going rate for plain old meth? I can think of no objections, nor would I voice them if I had any, and so we move ahead with full steam, course altered slightly to the left.

And later that day we are struck with even more good news: negotiations between the defendant's family and associated projects drug dealers (negotiations of which none of us were aware until they are here presented) have produced a pretty decent price for cocaine: \$47 a gram, about half the going rate on the Silk Road. It is thankfully, as Papa Smurf points out, still a buyer's market. After all, how many urban drug dealers have regular access to a personal PC, and of those, what percentage have the education and wherewithal not only to navigate the surface internet, but also the admittedly tricky and still relatively unknown realms of the Deep Web?

And here Papa is ready to further defend his position: by selling drugs on an anonymous online marketplace he's reducing the dangerous, often extremely violent aspect of street traffic of narcotics—one of the most obvious negative side effects of prohibition of any sought-after substance. Of course this argument had much more validity when referring to producing and selling your own meth in a self-sustaining environment, whereas when cocaine is brought into the

picture, a product likely smuggled through any number of highly armed and notoriously ruthless cartels between here and Colombia or Peru, the argument becomes slightly weaker: Sure, you're protecting the end stage dealer (although you are also technically removing him from the deal entirely and thus probably making his life harder), but what about the drug-war-related civilian death toll, which has been commonly estimated to have surpassed the 50,000 mark in Mexico alone?

And here we run into a point of contention so often left out of the general drug war "debate" (this word doesn't even seem fitting, as drug policy debate tends to be contained within a rather narrow, preordained range typical of so-called "debate" surrounding many politico-economic issues in the United States; the ghost of Joseph McCarthy still wanders the Senate halls, laughing his jowly little laugh). Because the lynchpin of this entire story is the stance of the United States' handling of the "drug issue," (and I would say the drug problem but right off the bat this frames the question in a negative light): What we are doing in Mexico, in Detroit, in Colombia, in Afghanistan, all of it is so utterly wrong-headed and backwards that to look at it logically causes the mind to whelp in confusion.

But then trying to find common sense in drug policy is near the top of my list of pointless endeavors, and so let's just move past the senseless scheduling of substances to the punishments doled out to those who use, distribute, and traffic said substances, and here we run into the pretty depressing fact that the harshest sentences are (overwhelmingly and unsurprisingly) allotted to the poorest of the poor, and those whose skin tends to be dark, those with notably less sway in politics to change these laws which punish them for simply responding to market forces, that is, the huge surplus capital burning holes in so many American pockets. So like duh, our current stance of total drug prohibition is one major part in the perpetuation of existing social inequalities in America, overcrowded prisons, not to mention the unfortunate continued popularity of drug-rap.

Supply will follow demand: Mexican drug cartels are not funneling drugs into America just for kicks, there are no seedy types prowling the hallways of junior high schools, sticking kids with syringes to get them hooked, quite simply because there's no need; along with prohibition comes the allure and mystique of the taboo, the unknown, and any teen with half a brain can see through the propaganda presented to them in "drug education" programs with such an obvious bias that they can't help but wonder what's so hot about the other side. To site the nation's drug information website drugabuse.gov: if one is looking for information on MDMA they will quickly stumble across the helpful heading "How is MDMA Abused?", the weight behind that phrase implying there is not a single legitimate use for the drug whose use the head of the United Kingdom's drug advisory board stated is about as risky for your health as horseback riding.

And but like we're getting beside the point: drug policy overwhelmingly punishes many groups in society, all of which are not the end user middle class white Americans who consume the vast majority of drugs and are the reason so many people go to such lengths to get drugs into the

country in the first place. The film *Traffic* (2000), a "soup-to-nuts exposé of the world's most lucrative trade" tried to encapsulate the entire issue with lines like this, spouted by rich-kid druggie teen Seth Abrahams, played by now-fallen star Topher Grace:

"Okay, right now, all over this great nation of ours, 'hundred thousand white people from the suburbs are cruisin' around downtown asking every black person they see, 'You got any drugs? You know where I can score some drugs?' Think about the effect that that has on the psyche of a black person, on their possibilities. I...God I guarantee you bring a hundred thousand black people into your neighborhood, into fuckin' Indian Hills, and they're asking every white person they see "You got any drugs? You know where I can score some drugs?", within a day everyone would be selling."

Which is an argument that may sound appealing at first but is actually quite misleading, something understandable being that the film was written by Caucasians whose enlightened idea of minorities is that they are just like you and me ("white people") except that they all happen to sell drugs.

But they are not just like you and me, because this is America where our lives are contained in something both very abstract yet also decidedly concrete, something called reality, reality at any one point being the piling up of any number of previous strange realities of the past, called history, and the reality for an African American growing up in the projects today is very different for that of a white middle class youth growing up pretty much anywhere else; and this has to do with options, life prospects and the psychology of race. Because racism isn't just something that used to happen but then got fixed with Civil Rights in the 1960s. Part of poverty entails a reduction of options. With fewer prospects the benefits of selling drugs become more and more appealing. Of course personal responsibility must be taken into account, hard work can get you a long way, but when you start at the bottom of the barrel there's a lot more shit to sift through on your rise to the top.

Yes, we have a black president, a man whose nicknames include "the food-stamp president" and "the Muslim president," with prominent conservative Dale Robertson, founder of teaparty.org, claiming that the Barack's weekend trip to Chicago would be spent, "bump[ing] and grind[ing] in the hood," and, "shooting hoops, smoking cigarettes and goofing-off with his homies." Think of the effect that has on the black psyche. And yes, the restaurants are no longer segregated, just the cities containing the restaurants.

Case in point: A family-owned, neighborhood pizza joint, somewhere in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area, at present a "racially diverse" neighborhood (mixed Hispanic, White, African American, and Native American): a young woman of color walks in to and asks for a job application. The 21-year-old employee pulls one from behind the counter and hands it to her. After she walks out the door his boss comes over and says, "You shouldn't be handing those out to just everyone." The young man asks why, aren't we hiring? to which the owner responds, "Yes, but she's not the right kind of person." Assuming the man does not consider the female gender as wholly unfit to serve

pizza (and perhaps this is making too large an assumption) he is presumably referring to the woman's race as the factor barring her from the profession which, call me crazy, sounds at least vaguely discriminatory.

And so like black people are just like you and me, except that everyone in power (white Americans) fears them (try dropping an African American man off in a wealthy white suburb and have him walk the streets alone in midday and see how long it is before a squad car arrives, asking him his business) and so they are born with two strikes against them, a fact that everyone acknowledges but also must find so commonplace as to not be worth mentioning.

But wait you say, white people get caught up too! Yes, they do, though as with all things they are overwhelmingly poor whites, as we are and continue to be a society that feeds on the weakest while parading ourselves as champions of their virtues (come, ye poor huddled masses, so that we may devour thee!).

In any case it is now 5 a.m. in Manhattan where Papa and I, fighting the Good Fight, have just hit a major bump in the road: After an hour of fanning noxious vapors out the window and onto the ritzy street below (some fumes blowing back in spite our best efforts and giving us both sore throats in the morning) our first batch of shard has failed. And this failure is quite understandable: first off, neither of us are chemists. Besides recognizing the periodic table of elements as something that exists, neither of us have too much to say about valence electrons, acids and bases, norepinephrine potentiators, or any other of the countless codified terms that litter the number of .PDF files we have detailing the finer points of meth-making. Papa Smurf is notably nonplussed, but he remains in high spirits.

—I had a feeling this would happen

—Yeah? What can we do?

—Tomorrow we'll go out and get more pills. Maybe I'll pay some homeless people to buy some.

—And we just try again?

—I've got another recipe for Euphoria, it's simple, a one-pot cook. Can't fail.

—Alright, I'm going to bed.

The next day on the train to 86th Street a thought crosses my mind. Papa Smurf had woken me up from a quick nap at one in the morning the previous night to ask to borrow my headphones. When, at 3 a.m., I stumbled into the bedroom to check on the progress of the cook, I heard music blaring—Papa didn't notice my entrance, as he was wearing the headphones, which struck me as a bit odd; as an amateur meth cook, it seemed one would want the full use of all their faculties, including hearing, to catch on quickly in the case of something going awry. The use of music and headphones during a maiden cook seemed somewhat stylized, if not just plain absurd, and so on the walk through Central Park towards the Metropolitan Museum of Art I asked my friend:

—Is there a character on Breaking Bad who wears headphones while cooking meth?

—Uh yeah, Jesse Pinkman.

—Ah. Thanks.

And it was all becoming a little more clear that our mission was not purely one of loving kindness. Besides raising funds for legal defense, what Papa had in his head was an idea of that oh-so ephemeral "cool," yet another pitfall of prohibition, the aforementioned mystique of the taboo. While the television show Breaking Bad may be critically acclaimed, Emmy award winning, breathtaking, gritty and "real," it is still, at the end of the day, entertainment: stylized renditions of "real life" modified for human consumption. This is not deny the dramatic merits of Breaking Bad, a show which critics and fans almost universally laud as probably the best thing since sliced bread. No, again the argument here is with the taboo of the prohibited, and the difference between drama and documentary, a line that gets blurred in the thrill of consumption, leading well-meaning folk like Papa Smurf and countless naive youth into emulating things that are just plain dumb.

In order to remain consistent with the nature of this article I would like to take this moment to jump freely from decade to decade, from one cool to its predecessor: from meth to heroin. If the topic is that of the cool and taboo, by another name "chic," there was nothing more "in" in the 1990s than heroin: H, horse, dope, smack, skag, etcetera. When one thinks of media portrayal of the drug, perhaps two ideas still permeate what might be called the national consciousness: that of sickly, stick thin, red-eyed, beautiful models, purveying the once popularly derided now mostly forgotten "heroin chic," and the 1996 film *Trainspotting*, based on the 1993 Irvine Welsh novel of same name—a film which every once-young, now-aging junkie and ex-junkie seems to have watched at a pivotal time in their youth. The picture the movie paints of heroin use is by all accounts bleak, including the death of newborn babies and cat-shit-filled apartments of dying AIDS patients, but it is, in the same breath, incredibly stylized and undeniably "cool." And in the same way William Burroughs did for certain subsections of previous generations, *Trainspotting* primed members of my own for a delicious downfall with a really worthless substance by convincing them it was some key to sub- or counter culture- currency. To take one of the movies more memorable moments, attractive lady-junkie Allison (a sort of oxymoron, at least from my experience of junky types) demands a shot of the good stuff, and upon receiving it moans, quite convincingly, "That beats any meat injection...that beats any fuckin' cock in the world."

Having shot way too much dope and watched quite a number of people plunge a full needle full of black tar or China white into their veins, I can safely say that, had I been present for the speaking of this line, I would immediately think that this chick is a.) bat-shit crazy or b.) an undercover narcotics officer. Because at the end of the day dope is just not that fucking good. This is not to speak of shooting meth or cocaine, which do inspire instant spikes so incredible that "if god invented anything better he kept it for himself," but we are talking about heroin, which does admittedly ignite the body with a warm flame, but is not, especially for an old hand, anything to write home about. And this is just the problem of prohibition, that it allows absolutely ludicrous portrayals of what the

taboo entails to pass muster. Marijuana is now so prevalent that the depictions of its use in old propaganda films have passed as laughable with a majority of the population for decades, but when these films came out they surely inspired fear in a large segment of the population and also certainly caused another, smaller section to seek out the magical stuff.

And this, I now realize, is a very large reason Papa Smurf is putting so much effort into cooking methamphetamine, or now Euphoria, a decidedly dangerous venture that, once one takes into account the purchasing of pills and chemicals, doesn't pay off at a rate much higher than flipping kilos of cocaine from the projects. Papa wants to be television. A basic rundown of Breaking Bad's original plot: man is diagnosed with terminal cancer, turns to cooking/selling methamphetamine in order to provide for his family's future. (How the show has propelled itself into five seasons off this shaky premise is likely some combination of excellent writing and positive Nielsen ratings). In any case, the farther I delve into this grand experiment of the Lower East Side, the more convoluted all aspects become.

And when we return from the museum, more good news: Papa's family has renegotiated the price of cocaine, so that now we are getting it for something like \$43 a gram (still not that great a price if you ask me, but that's the cost of living in the big city). What's more, it appears we now have a good connection for heroin, which also goes for a pretty penny on the Silk Road, and even better, if we make the right moves, the same people selling us coke want to buy heroin off us in bulk. The wheeling and dealing going on across the banks of the East River are rapid-fire and astounding, but we are approaching a number of deadlines: not only the impending court date, but on our free accommodations in the city; Papa's parents are coming to town for a visit in two days, and we still have yet to cook a successful batch!

All parties move into maximum overdrive: Our new recipe for Euphoria involves 2-liter bottles, a batch of chemicals, and the strips of lithium metal found at the center of Energizer brand lithium batteries. This extraction bypasses the deadly cyanogen bromide and is, according to Papa, really rather simple; of course by the time he returns from train rides around the city to collect the necessary chemicals it is already quite late. I head out to drink beer in a park filled with rats, return, go to sleep, and wake up at 5 a.m. to find Papa busy in the bedroom with a pair of pliers trying to scrape the tops off two batteries, a process which appears to be going nowhere. We watch a video online, produced by science geeks anxious to get a crack at the strip of lithium which, according to a 1963 essay by physicist GP Hartigan, "...is the lightest of the solid elements, and it is perhaps not surprising that it should in consequence possess certain modest magical qualities." Hartigan was referring to the substance's psycho-pharmacological application in numbing the brains of potential suicides, though our scenario did have some modest magical elements: This alkali metal which corrodes on contact with moisture in the air just might be our golden ticket to the synthesis of certain special crystals for the purpose of insufflation, speedy profit, speedy doom, or some combination thereof.

After watching the video a few times I feel confident in my ability to begin the battery peeling process. The going is initially tough but with a little effort I am finally able to crack the tops off both batteries, though there is still much more peeling of the actual casing left to be done. The sun is by now nearly fully risen, I am exhausted and decide to knock off for a few hours, rather confident that when I awake Papa will have already synthesized the first batch of delicious Euphoria.

And when I finally open my eyes a few hours later I can hear him still tinkering in the kitchen, the clicking of pliers and scissors and plastic bottles. How long have I been asleep? I think it to be about 11 a.m., judging by the heat of the passive solar which warms my left leg through the windowpane overlooking the bustling street below. I rise and wander into the room where Papa is putting the finishing touches on a section of rubber tubing which connects two large plastic bottles (I had wondered, the previous night, when he persistently offered me glasses of coke, how the bottles would be put to use).

—How did the batteries go?

—I almost had to give up, I didn't think I'd make it.

—They really don't want you to get that lithium.

—Tell me about it! One of the batteries caught fire and I had to throw it out the window...

So that was our one fireball, a corrupted battery cell, really a minor trifle, nothing more, as it drifted most casually down to the sidewalk below, causing negligible damage to life and/or limb.

And now here we are, the final stretch, finish line in sight. Our limbs are weak, minds beginning to cramp, but an aura of lucidity pervades in that bright white kitchen, the counter tops littered with bottles of pool cleaner, mineral spirits, plastic scraps and duct tape. All that's left is to drop a few crumpled balls of aluminum foil into one of the two liter bottles which currently contains a small puddle of hydrochloric acid. The rising vapors will pass through the newly connected tube, condensing into the second bottle which contains our potential batch, at which point...

Nothing. The reaction has gone well, the aluminum and acid mixing, turning grey, and emitting a cloud of noxious vapor that passes into bottle #2 and fails to produce anything at all. We shake the bottle, squeeze it, move it close to our faces and squint into the clear mixture in which no crystals have precipitated. The room's heart skips a beat, and the floor at any moment may in fact drop away.

—Well that's that.

—I just thought, I could have sworn...

The abyss which has just opened up beneath us is hardly a concern of ours, we are not without hope. Papa Smurf wanders the apartment in a daze, picking up various objects that have been used in the experiment, as one might lift and wonder at the small shoes of a recently deceased child. There is still the cocaine he says, orders have been coming in, and the generic Adderall, that

too, though he seems to be trying to convince himself more than anyone, now that his baby is gone.

And yet it really isn't so morose as all that. Papa's determination hasn't wavered much, he still seems confident in procuring money for a lawyer. And what about the future? If you can get a batch of this meth to work? I ask him. No, he can't see this being a lifetime pursuit. For that one would have to go back to school, take up chemistry. He thinks he and his girl might head to Hawaii or Puerto Rico, to meditate. That's it he says, he's been in India, he's worked on it, and he thinks that at present meditation is the key to augmenting change. Meditation? Yes, he and his girl need to get out of the city, to get their heads straight. Of course they need to raise this money, but he's feeling it, the city, bearing down on his being, more or less, this stress, the money, the lawyer. So they need to go to an island, and mediate, chill, facilitate change. Change does sound rather appealing.

By 2 a.m. the following morning I've left New York, the city and the state, and am in fact midway through New Jersey, lying in the backseat of a late model sedan piloted by two southern lesbians headed back home. After some initial troubles escaping the depressing streets of Newark we are rolling ever southward, end destination Charlotte, North Carolina, where it should happen that the Democratic National Convention is taking place. It is September in an election year, and no matter how one tries there is really no way to avoid the sentiment of politics, and so I ask quite simply, more or less confident that I know the answer in advance:

—There's an election coming up, is there any particular candidate you want?

—Anyone but Romney.

—I feel about the same way. So you like Obama then?

—He's alright, but I really like Ron Paul.

—Ron Paul?

—Yeah, Obama wants to take away my guns.

It turns out her main reason for hating Romney is (surprise) his stance on homosexuality, this being hardly a few days after a video surfaces of the presidential hopeful berating a wheelchair-bound veteran for his (apparently incorrect) sexual preference. But the name Ron Paul has thrown me for a loop. Isn't he the Libertarian who both sides have written off as a zany and a nut?

We are pulled over once in New Jersey for an illegal U turn, after which the ride is one of smooth sailing. The girls (or are they women? I have a hard time discerning their age) drop me off south of downtown Charlotte. I have five hours to wait until my bus to Atlanta and on a lark decide to ride the train down to see what all the hubbub is about with this convention.

What I encounter upon arrival is at once entirely predictable and undeniably entertaining. It is a mad scene of suits, freaks and spectators, scrambling frantically along the sidewalks of the closed-off streets. There are vendors of novelty Obama garb (my favorite a pair of booty shorts that read

"BEHIND OBAMA"), angry abortion protesters demanding control over the female reproductive system, peeling out verses of fire and brimstone, a bearded man dressed as Abe Lincoln holding a sign declaring "Republicans for Obama" who probably has had his picture taken more times than anyone at the convention, and one Vermin Supreme, a man with a boot on his head running for Presidential office whom I had somehow accidentally encountered online months prior and am now absolutely delighted to see in person.

There is one young man in sunglasses holding a sign that reads "Legalize Marijuana" for what seem like personal (versus medical) reasons, but what I fail to encounter even once, however, are any protesters holding banners declaring anything like "End the Drug War!", a policy which would empty our crowded prisons of non-violent offenders, add \$70 billion a year to the national coffers, and rid our hands of the blood of countless civilians from Colombia right on up through Mexico, not to mention here at home, and be one more step in attempting to ameliorate the rather sizable discrepancy in expected quality of life between citizens of the United States based solely on the color of their skin.

And after heading home from Atlanta, after a subway ride to the airport on which all white passengers have carry-on luggage, and all black passengers name tags signifying their status as airport employees, I decide on a whim to look up wacko candidate Ron Paul, to see what his stance is on this whole drug war debacle, and am rather shocked to find his views align exactly with mine: this man, painted by the right and left wing media, Democrats and Republicans, as an absolute nut job, believes the drug war to be a racist abomination, a waste of taxpayer dollars, and an infringement on the right of individual liberty, and while some of his other policies cause me to shudder in my flesh (he is for deregulation in all fields, and is of the strange, almost mystic faith that the market will take care of itself), I can't help but wonder at how this has gone past my attention, until I remember the key to democratic debate in America, namely that it be contained, inoffensive, and really, not a debate at all.

And here I sit in a shotgun house in Atlanta, meditating on that, as Papa Smurf is meditating on some hot island, and perhaps now his brother is meditating somewhere in a cell.

Farther From Shore: My Time in Havana by Hunter Sharpless

Havana stands 228 miles across the Gulf Stream from Miami; it is a port town, with a seawall—along which crowds of people walk almost daily—a harbor, and an old fort looking out over the deep blue waters, watching both the bay behind and the sea in front with a lighthouse built in 1845. From the sea five windows may be seen, small and rectangular, in a column like vertebrae. The structure stands 82 feet high. The color of the cut stone, gray with streaks of khaki, is the same as the fortress, though the fortress is hundreds of years older. The rocks below, meeting the sea, are also this shade of gray.

In town paint flakes off every house on every block, the sidewalks are torn up like badly skinned knees, scabs of concrete jutting out at angles from the earth, and Cubans stand or sit patiently on their porches or patios. The local accent is a slurred, lisp-tied Spanish. Rations are low. Public works lag behind. The architecture and the automobiles are outdated. But to any of these problems the Cubans carry a calculated quip, simply saying, “Es Cuba!”

West of the town's center there is a forest, a splotch of green against the gray of concrete, a quiet sanctuary known by some as “the lungs of Havana.” In that park there is a river, and by that river, under a thick green canopy supported by trees like columns, stand three boys beating drums, two women wearing white, and a priest with closed eyes turned skyward. They dance around nine lit candles surrounding an altar. Behind the altar thick vines swell and recede with the wind, climbing from the earth to the sky. They offer rum and milk and fruit to their ancestors. The sun reaches the earth in patches. There is only silence and the song. They approach the banks of the river, which stinks of pollution and sweat and shit. A white stork fishes carefully in the middle of the current. Birds fly overhead. They sing now to Oshun, the goddess of the river. Beautiful and gracious, she is the goddess of love and fresh water, of Saturday and cinnamon and sunflowers, of yellow, of gold, of the black vulture; she is sexy.

They sing. They beat their drums. They dance by the banks of the river.

They wear slippers and sandals and sneakers. They wear red and black and FILA. The priest wears sagging blue-jeans, one of the women wears the Cleveland Indians logo, and on the shirt of another are the words, New York: the Big Apple. One woman pushes a stick into the mud, the mud littered with beer cans, Styrofoam boxes, and the remains of a sacrificed chicken: a cleaved wing, a skull.

I take notes and sometimes clap my hands, attempting to stay with one of the many rhythms created by the drums, but I do not know the extent to which I am invited to participate. They speak and sing and chant a Spanish I do not understand. I am standing in a living jungle with Afro-Cubans who sing to a goddess I do not know of a religion I do not know near the city of Havana, standing wearily because I have slept only six hours of the last sixty, having flown from Dallas to

Chicago to Atlanta to Miami to Havana, standing in the jungle by a shit-stinking river under a green leafy canopy with a foreign tongue hanging in the air.

When the ritual is over I am led to the city center, to a small café in Plaza Vieja. I order a coffee and sit at a table outside. The plaza is large and bare besides a fountain in the center and potted plants scattered across the stone. The buildings lining the lengths and widths of the plaza have porticoes supported by columns. A group of schoolchildren enters from one corner of the plaza. Each child has a red sweater, whether worn or tied around the waist or twirled in the air. They walk in pairs to strangers—to a policeman, to waiters, to tourists—and ask them questions, then laugh and write in their notebooks. I want them to come to me, but they do not. After a while I leave my table and walk toward the Gulf. There are jazz clubs and street vendors and restaurants advertising the city's best mojitos.

I like these Cubans, though I'm ashamed of my own presence in their country. Walking west along the Malecón, the seawall, I leave the city center for my hotel. To my right is the Gulf which, at high tide, splashes over the wall and onto the sidewalk and street, and to my left are houses painted baby blue and sea green and Easter yellow. Some of the houses have splendid wrought-iron fences like spires. A group of children stands in a circle by the wall; one boy is shirtless, holding a skateboard, another wears rollerblades, black shorts and a sweatshirt, and the third leans on a red bicycle. They watch me as I walk, and I smile shyly but keep course, looking out across the Gulf toward Florida, some miles away.

Past these boys, three men work on a chink in the sidewalk. They wave me over. The leader, wearing a green shirt with rolled-up sleeves, his silver hair flecked with black, the chest hair exposed beneath his neck snow white, greets me excitedly, asks where I come from, speaks proudly of the Malecón. He seems to be overseeing the other two men, one bent over with a shovel, the other crouching, ready to be called. Explaining their work the leader moves his hands, pointing to the hole in the ground, out to the sea, to the city, all the while smiling profusely and, as I am leaving, saying how happy he is to meet an American, shaking my hand.

When I near my hotel I turn off the Malecón into several blocks of buildings. A cyclo rickshaw driver beckons and asks if I need a ride. It is a sunny day and the buildings block the sun at such an angle that the driver, in the cover of his rickshaw, is in shadow, his face immutably indefinite. He does not need to ask to know I am an American. And he does not leave when I deny him business, but draws me close and, from the darkness, asks me what I think of his country. I laud it, for Cubans elude the common ideas with which I was impressed. I was told they were militant, but the only policemen I see laugh and, once, I even see two officers kissing on a park bench. I was told they were Communist, which to us meant suppressed, but they look free. Expecting to hear gratitude, I smile. Instead, he whispers a single word, "Propaganda." And I reach my hotel.

Cuba, I read before my trip, is beautiful. I read that Cuba is not any one thing. I read that Cuban culture is painted by colors of Spain, colors of England, colors of China, colors of Africa and colors

of the United States. Santería, for example, is a hybrid of Catholicism and Yoruba, the predominant spirituality of Nigeria. Cuba is Creole and Mulatto. Cuba practices Taoism and Voodoo. There are Jews, Protestants, and Freemasons. In a letter to the king and queen of Spain the first European settlers praised the “many sierras and very high mountains,” the “trees of a thousand kinds,” and the “singing nightingale and other little birds.” The trees seemed to touch the sky, they wrote. In November, the island looked like Spanish May. They wondered if it was green all year long. Like the settlers, I think the island is the most beautiful place on this earth I have seen. It recalls the landscape of the Nigerian interior, the verdure of Florida. The Gulf breathes its life.

Sofia is my guide through Havana, and sitting in the lobby of my hotel we speak of the modern world. She tells me that Cuba, since the revolution of 1959, has become one of the most literate countries in the world. The most literate country in Latin America. That it is, in fact, more literate than the United States. I could not have guessed that walking the streets of Havana I would see, perhaps, poverty but nothing I would call squalor. Nor did I suspect that I'd see fewer cripples and beggars and peddlers here in Havana than in areas of Dallas, Chicago, or any moderately-sized city in the States. The revolution has not cured hunger, but it has filled stomachs. I did not know about the free health care that contributes to an infant mortality rate lower than the United States. I did not know that Cuba sends doctors all over the world. I did not know that Cuba offered 1,600 medics, 83 field hospitals, and more than 80 tons of medical supplies to New Orleans in the wake of Katrina. And I did not know that we, however, denied that aid, because Cuba, in the words of our government, remains a “State Sponsor of Terror,” joining Sudan, Syria and Iran.

We denied that aid because of an embargo that began in the 1960s—about the time the University of Mississippi admitted its first black student, about the time Martin Luther King was jailed, about the time the Jim Crow laws were being overturned.

“The basic goal of the sanctions,” writes the U.S. Department of Treasury in a pamphlet called WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE U.S. EMBARGO, “is to isolate the Cuban government economically and deprive it of U.S. dollars.”

Isolate to what end, I do not know.

I do not understand the embargo. I understand neither the word itself nor the meaning behind it, nor the remaining motivation behind it, nor the logistics supporting it, nor the conditions that might topple it. I understand neither the Bay of Pigs Invasion nor the strange U.S. Interests Section near the Anti-Imperialist Plaza in Havana, nor our demonization of Fidel Castro, nor our harboring of Cuban-born, anti-communist terrorist Luis Posada Carriles, a former agent of the Central Intelligence Agency suspected of orchestrating the bombing of Cubana Airlines flight 455 in October of 1976; he now resides happily in Miami.

Each day I venture out from my hotel with Sofia either to a new part of town or to a location within an hour or two of Havana. Most of the Americans I meet along the way have come illegally from

Canada or Mexico. Some have come because of the lifting of certain restrictions regarding educational or religious travel to Cuba. Many are here because of relatives. Others have married a Cuban simply to acquire a visa. Among most of the Americans, including myself, it seems that the feeling of being in Cuba is not one of learning or experiencing another culture, but rather of voyeurism. We ride modern, air-conditioned buses commissioned by the Cuba Tourist Board while Cubans, crowded together like packed cigarettes, ride old Chinese buses on the public transportation. We listen to tour guides, like Sofia, commissioned by the Cuba Tourist Board. We eat at paladares, privately owned restaurants much too expensive for any ordinary citizen, while the Cubans themselves eat at state-run restaurants. We bring cameras. We capture photographs of their old cars, which we find quaint. We capture photographs of their old houses, which we find quaint. We capture photographs of children in the park playing baseball, which we find quaint. Of children in the park playing soccer. Of the decrepit tops of buildings outside our hotel windows. Of Chinatown. Of the barberia and the man sitting in the swivel chair wearing Nike sneakers, his hair being cut by a young woman. Of a dog on the street wearing a Michael Jordan jersey. Of the harbor. Of the man cutting the coconut.

I travel to Cojimar, a fishing town near Havana. The sea near the beach is blue-green and, farther from the shore, deep blue. A jetty with a crumbling fortress at its end sticks out in the water. Clouds hang. Waves flow. Two boats slowly bob in the bay. A boy approaches me and asks for money.

Carrying a \$600 camera, wearing \$115 shoes, \$60 jeans, I say, "Sorry."

I have been instructed to respond like this.

"They don't need it," Sofia says of the children who ask for money. "They all have three meals a day, health care. They'll just go buy candy." She scolds the boy.

Indeed the boy's clothes are clean, his skin smooth and dark, his teeth straight, and he does not look hungry, but he knows the business, and though I say no the first time I later return to him. I hand him a coin, then raise my camera, point it, and capture him, sitting on the ledge, the Gulf and horizon behind him, in a photograph.

"All Christendom ought to feel joyful," wrote Christopher Columbus after he and his men had captured the island, because for the "refreshment" and "profit" of Spain and Christians, he decided to occupy, then own, and then enslave the island that would later become known as Cuba. He concluded his letter by assuring the king and queen, "This is exactly what I have done." It was a "great exaltation." A "great triumph."

The city of Havana was founded 500 years ago, and has flown officially and unofficially under the flag of three separate countries for most of that time. In the year 1517 Spain authorized slave trade to the island. In 1762 the British briefly seized control. Thomas Jefferson wanted to annex it, as did John Quincy Adams. And following the Spanish-American War the United States, through the Platt Amendment of 1901, extended a shadow hand across the Gulf, and has attempted to direct affairs,

influencing who comes to power, who trades with who. In the first half of the century it was successful, but since the revolution of 1959, Castro has pushed back.

In my hotel room that evening I watch a smiling Mitt Romney. While I was in Cojimar, the town by the sea in Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, while I was touring Hemingway's house and Hemingway's hotel and Hemingway's bars, drinking Hemingway's cocktails and visiting the grave of Hemingway's bartender, Iowa caucused, New Hampshire voted, and the former Massachusetts governor emerged as the Grand Old Party's frontrunner. He says to his constituents after winning New Hampshire, "You're the best." He mentions "American greatness." Sitting on my bed I hear Romney say, "I would insist on a military so powerful no one would ever think about challenging it," which lends a certain degree of credence to Fidel Castro's fear as voiced the morning before in the *Granma*, the official Communist newspaper in Cuba, the suspicion that the Republicans carry more weapons than ideas, but as I watch and listen I am not so much afraid of this statement, shocking as it is, as I am preoccupied with another: Romney's cheerful assertion that the United States is the "greatest nation in the history of the earth," because as soon as I remember taking the photograph of that boy, and as soon as I remember writing notes on the high priest, I realize that I—like Columbus—am consuming Cuba.

The people of the island, however, see wrongly too.

"Come! Come!" they said to each other when the Spanish boats arrived. "See the people from the sky!" Frightened and shocked and timid and in awe, they saw not men but gods. To these people from the sky, the natives gave and gave. They deified. They shared in everything they had.

"These relations between conqueror and colonized," writes one historian, "tended to be self-perpetuating. The sight of the other confirmed each in his inhuman estimate of himself."

There is "circularity" and "mutual solitude."

If we are cultural voyeurs of Cuba, perhaps they have a fetish for the United States, for Nike clothing and stories of our purported luxuries. There is a feeling, as an American in Havana, of being probed, probed by questions, probed by hands to pull up a seat, probed by vendors selling fake cigars made of banana leaves. Some of this desire to know is simple curiosity, some of it is the business of conning tourists, whether American or anything else, and some of it, Sofia tells me, is an obsession with the United States that exists based not on fact but on legend, the land across the water to which they may not go. Most Cubans never leave the island.

"We are very skeptical," Sofia says to me at the hotel. For eleven years she has been leading students and senators and tourists through Havana. She graduated from Che Guevara High School and the University of Havana. She has high cheekbones, a dark ponytail pulled back tight, and every day wears a small gold name tag on her starched white shirt. She only smokes Cuban cigarettes (when I offer her a Lucky Strike, she kindly declines), and she goes on to describe what she has coined an "internal blockade" here in Cuba. That is, the limited minds, as she sees it,

holding offices in the regime. What she tells me is not a part of her training from the Cuba Tourist Board. She tells me that she sees a lack of foresight and oversight and hindsight in filling positions, because it's often who you know, she says, rather than how qualified you are. Vision is short. Power is ambition.

José Martí, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro are immortals in Cuba. They are marble busts and T-shirts, billboards and fans and tattoos, and since 1959 Castro has controlled, or has attempted to control, truth. The scale of sliding truth is both small and large.

At a restaurant in Chinatown, I decide on a meal that costs roughly five dollars; the waitress suggests another item on the menu. I ask if it is the same price, and she says yes; but when the bill comes I pay twelve instead of five dollars. In Cojimar there is a monument to Hemingway. Six neoclassical columns surround a smiling bust of the author. The foundation of the sculpture announces the years of his life: 1898-1961. Hemingway, however, was born in 1899. Truth slides socially and politically. Castro has forbidden the simple freedom to say—as in the Padilla affair of 1971, as in the Production Help Unit in the years following the revolution: work camps “set up to indoctrinate writers into abandoning what government officials considered to be a bourgeois sexual orientation,” as in the hushed voice of the taxi driver in Havana who said to me, of the regime, “Propaganda.”

The billboards I have seen across the country look as though they have been done by a street artist. They teem with crude and unrefined color, with feigned valor: TODO POR LA REVOLUCIÓN. “We are stuck in time,” Sofia confesses. 53 AÑOS DE LUCHAS Y VICTORIAS. “We are not motivated,” she says. ¡PATRIA O MUERTE!

She explains the idea that some Americans, having been to Cuba, hope the embargo never goes away, citing for reason that if the two countries were to open up to each other, the United States would infect Cuba with McDonalds, Starbucks, and Gap. At first it seems noble, she says. Of course, though, its façade quickly deteriorates. It is not for Cuba's sake that some Americans hope the embargo stays, but for their own sake.

I have seen it, the forbidden land, and on the plane from Havana to Miami, high above the Gulf Stream, the island behind me, the United States in front of me, I know that having been to Cuba I have something other Americans do not. I understand their selfish jealousy of Cuba. But Cubans wish the embargo eliminated. What I experienced was neither what I had been taught I would experience—militaristic communism, a police state, a third-world nation of hunger and want—nor what I myself suspected I would experience—a euphoric people in gleeful rebellion against the United States. There was neither hatred nor happiness in the broken relationship; there was longing and there was legend. There were stories and there were tales. There were cousins, and there were sons and daughters. There were airport greetings. There were gazes across the Gulf. There was the harbor, the bay, the beach, the fortress, the lighthouse. There was Ernest Hemingway and there were cigars. There was baseball.

When I remember Cuba, what I recall is mutual solitude. They were strange to me; I was strange to them. There was a moment in the forest in which the priest looked at me. Still dancing, still chanting, he smiled and reached into his pocket, from which he produced a cell phone. He raised it, pointed it, and captured me in a video, a movie of me watching him.



The Internet in the Occident by Caleb True

1.

Untold millions, swallowed Themistocles. For a while he did not believe his runners. Then on Google Earth he zeroed in on the Hellespont and saw the double pontoon bridge. He scrolled up and saw the satellite image of the Persian hordes, a shadow against the brown landscape. The smoke from the Persian campfires covered many leagues.

2.

Thunderstorm raging, Abraham Lincoln sat in his office nook, dejectedly Googling his own name and wishing that one day he might become famous. Outside, soggy Negroes slunk through the woods, moving through the Illinois wilderness toward freedom.

3.

Pride got the best of them, despite rumors circulating among online Schutzstaffel message boards in late May that claimed a major invasion was being planned for the first week of June. One thread was titled "Calais." A response thread with fifty-seven messages hollered "NEIN!—NORMANDIE."

4.

A skinny-armed boy in Darfur constantly refreshes the wifi receiver in his laptop as he meanders in circles. Finally he gets a signal. One bar, enough to check the weather. The boy plugs in his zip code. A five day forecast pops up. It is what he expects, mostly—then his heart drops. There is a tiny icon, next to the beating yellow sun, superimposed on the clear-blue sky. In two days, it will still be sunny, but with a chance of Janjaweed.

5.

The Chinese factory worker's hands peeled away shrink plastic revealing a refurbished iPhone. The worker's primary interface with the device had been sorting its conflict minerals into piles. He turned it over, turned it over again. He unlocked the thing. No signal in the factory. He stepped outside. A whistle blew. He stepped back inside again. A bar of signal. No bars. One bar again. No bars again. The door closed. He got back to work.

This, That, and the Others

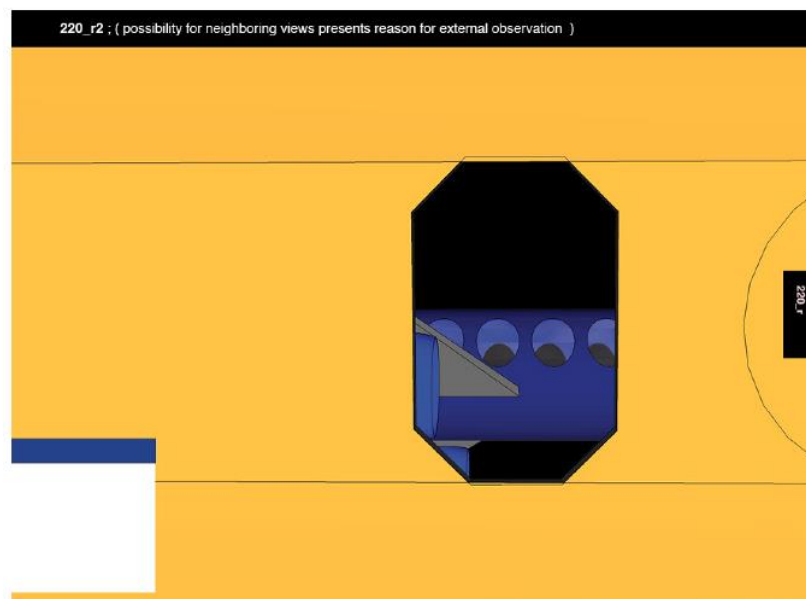
Featured Artwork by Aurelia Friedland

Thesis Summary

This, That, and the Others explores a possible method for Unconditional Programming, where expanded structures might facilitate the ongoing evolution of conditional relationships—beyond the if/thens to the how so's.

Stop motion animation films developed in Google SketchUp simulate the possibilities, exposing universal grammars based in rhythm and pattern (traffic light colors determined by the patterns of passing cars, a subway system driven by the rhythm of passing ocean waves, and a light bulb linked to nearby building lights among others).

We're exposed daily to a dense network of overlapping systems: roadways cutting across flat desert expanses, the domino effect of traffic lights, and airplanes lining up like marathon runners. The structures (both physical and computational) which underlie our engineered landscapes inherit the conditional nature of the tools and frameworks with which we design them. This is the paradoxical responsibility of the structural designer: developing structure for dynamic needs (of information, programs, architecture, policy, planning...). How might designed structures facilitate ongoing participation and subjective experience? Perhaps there is possibility in ubiquity, yet it is important to strive for more than just one new standard, but rather new methods for supporting dynamic development- emphasizing adaptability over efficiency, and “big picture thinking” over “the next big thing”.



Aurelia Friedland x WBR 1

EDITOR'S NOTE

For the sake of brevity, the editors have selected a sample of work to present here. **337 ; SURFIN' THE MTA** is one program from Aurelia's thesis project *This, That, and The Others*. Additionally, other images from series **[110 ; Pink_Means_Go]** and **[220 ; Plane Time]** highlight the scope of unconditional solutions she presents while isolating the poetic resonance of her visual body of work. Readers are encouraged to browse freely or follow the program to see what overlaps.

UNCONDITIONAL PROGRAMMING

The aspiration for a method of expansive, dynamic, and inclusive structural development has informed considerations of a 5-step process for Unconditional Programming:

1/5: **Expand**

2/5: **Build**

3/5: **Run**

4/5: **Array**

5/5: **Data**

PROGRAM 337 ; (Surfin'_the_MTA)

Although ocean tides and train systems may seem logically to belong to opposing categories (natural and technological), the Expansion process (1/5: 337 _e;(expanded structures)) reveals that they share similar base characteristics within their systematic composition: traveling across space (this could be considered a function), and of doing so in regular intervals (frequency).

EXAMPLE

4/5: 337_a; (array of perspectives) suggests how this might affect participant experience:

character_1; (The Toe in the Sand)

You feel the heat of the sun on your back,
and so you turn to toast the other side
/

You lean your elbow against the sand soaked
beach chair and tilt your hat to field off
the strong waves of an Indian summer
/

You look over to say so,
but they're fast asleep
/

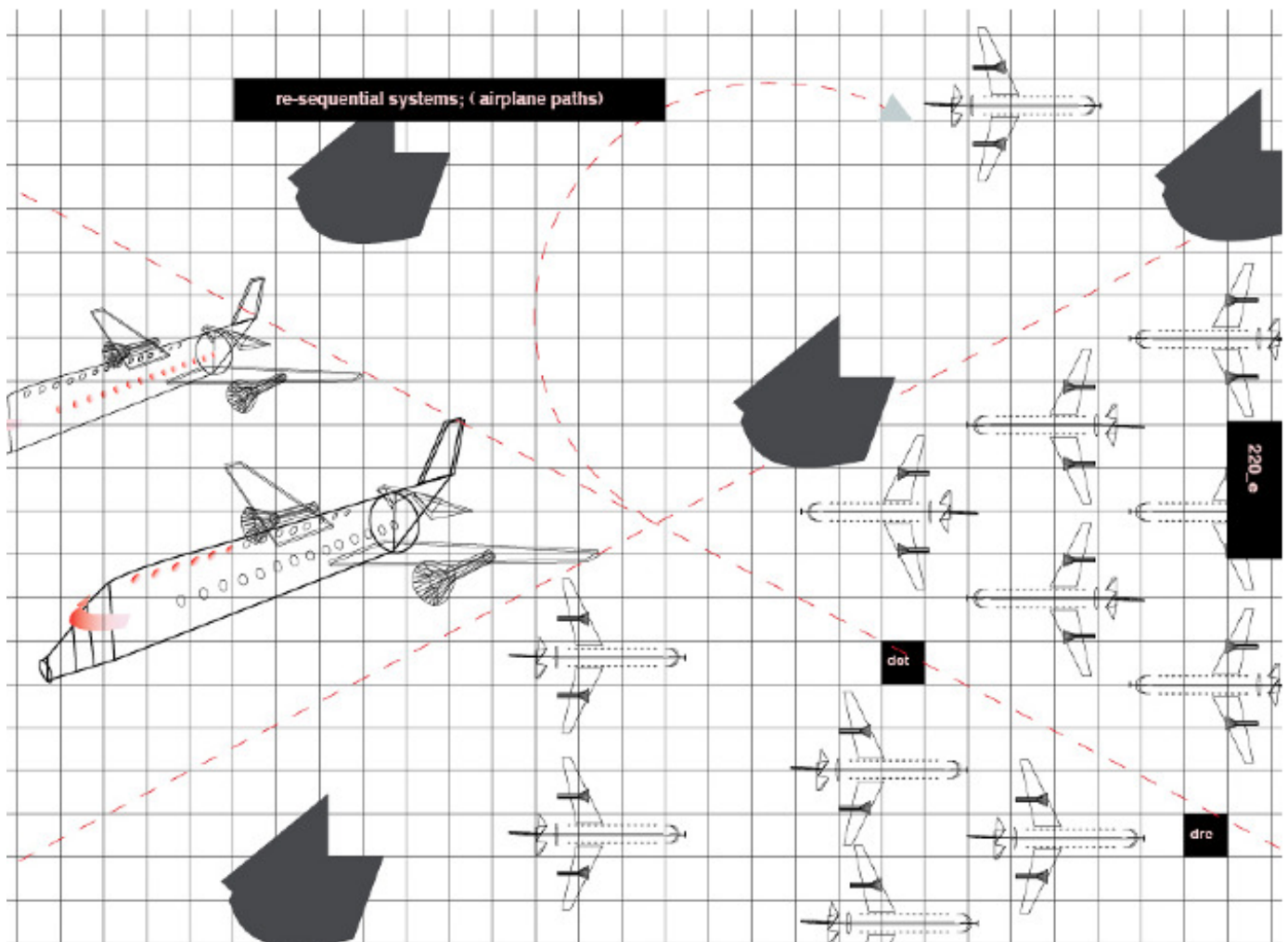
You push yourself up,
leaving a small wake of sand in their hair
despite your best efforts,
and walk up to the coastline

/

You dip your toe just beyond
the blue line,
and watch the ripples of sea foam
extend like a rush
past each of your small toes,
and at last extending
past you

/

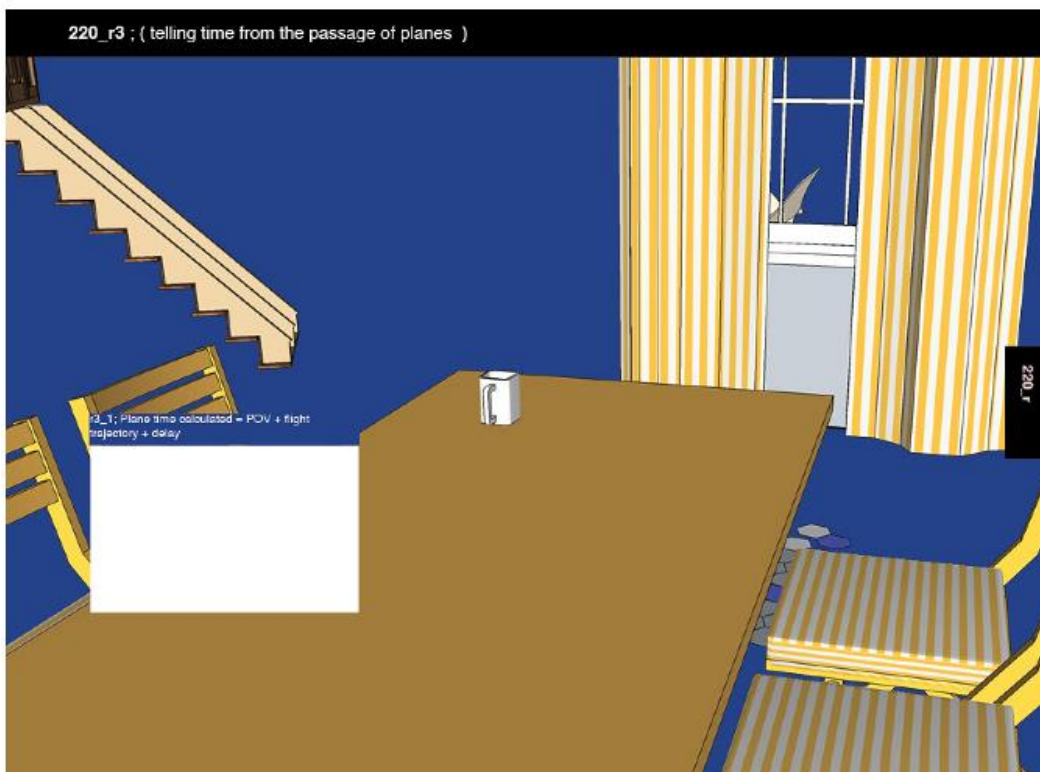
You count along with them as
they pass: 1....2...3....4....



Aurelia Friedland x WBR 2

Although developed with a speculative design perspective in mind, each step has raised considerations which could inform existing and emerging (as well as those which have not yet conceived of) disciplines, movements, and trends, including:

- > big picture design research methodologies (viewing a broad scope of systems)
- > low-tech programming
- > digital aesthetics
- > modular programming
- > computational architecture
- > ubiquitous computing
- > collage culture
- > maker culture
- > data literacy
- > information design
- > natural philosophy
- > conceptual interactions
- > evolutionary linguistics
- > code typography
- > etc.



Aurelia Friedland x WBR 3

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Sarah Bannon

Sarah Bannon is an undergraduate at the University of Iowa. She studies psychology and conducts experiments, but occasionally explores her creative life in the form of short stories and nonfiction writings. In her free time she can frequently be found salivating in the company of food-related television or literature.

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.

Justin Lawrence Daugherty

Justin Lawrence Daugherty writes about the lizard-boy quite a bit lately. He's on Twitter (@jdaugherty1081), where he says weird things. Also, he wants to play Final Fantasy III and write a flash chapbook about it. His work appears most recently in *Knee-Jerk*, *Little Fiction*, *Barrelhouse*, *The Collagist*, and elsewhere. "The Return of Crows" is an excerpt from a novella. Justin's the helmsman at *Sundog Lit*.

Lauren Espinoza

Lauren Espinoza's poetry has appeared in an anthology selected by Naomi Shihab Nye entitled *Time You Let Me In: 25 Poets Under 25*, online at *The Acentos Review*. Her fiction is also online at *Label Me Latina*, and she has poems forthcoming in *NewBorder: Contemporary Voices from the Texas/Mexico Border* and *The Mas Tequila Review*. She is a member of *The Trinity*, a poetry clica from the Rio Grande Valley. Currently, Lauren is a graduate student in the MFA. Program in Poetry at Arizona State University and holds a graduate certificate in Mexican American Studies from the University of Texas-Pan American.

Ryan Forsythe

Ryan Forsythe is a writer, editor, and artist from Cleveland, now living in Southern California, though he calls the mythical State of Jefferson home. He is the author of *Dick Cheney Saves Paris*, a madcap sci-fi meta-anti-novel released in 2011 by Love Earth Publications, and *The Little Veal Cutlet That Couldn't*, a children's book for adults. More information at ryanforsythe.com.

Aurelia Friedland

Now based in Los Angeles, Aurelia has spent over seven years as a multidisciplinary designer and educator. Her work employs various media and methodologies surrounding interactivity: graphic

design and paper prototyping, storytelling and animation, and the design of interactive experiences for phone, tablet, computer and space-based platforms.

With a design background extending across education reform initiatives, emerging technologies, and performance, Aurelia has inherited a broad view of systems and hopes for participatory systems which continue to facilitate diverse needs and perspectives. Click here for [Aurelia's professional website](#). Visit the project site [here](#) to review more examples of Unconditional Programs, or to read [The Manual](#).

Aaron George

Aaron George is a slightly misanthropic, skinny man who lives and works in Ohio. His fictional work has never been published, though he did used to write music reviews for [altohio.com](#).

Jody Giardina

This is the 680-word manifesto I wrote on America's cubicled existence. I wrote it in my actual workspace in a text editor, printed it as a single page, and then photocopied it 500 times and left the copies in heaps around the office.

It is the tiny insurrections that allow me to survive. Like stealing 5 paperclips every day for a year, and then weaving them into an undershirt and wearing it to work beneath my suit and tie. Nobody suspected a thing.

William Haas

William Haas lives in Portland, Oregon. His writing has appeared in *Dark Mountain*, *Fiddleblack*, *Riverteeth*, *Spittoon*, and elsewhere.

Leif Haven

Leif Haven is brand new. More work can be found at [leifhaven.com](#).

Brandon Hackbarth

[No bio provided]

Russell Jaffe

Russell Jaffe is an artist in Iowa City teaching high school English and editing *Strange Cage*, a small poetry press and reading series. His first book, *This Super Doom I Aver*, is forthcoming from Poets Democracy press. His poems have appeared in *The Colorado Review*, *H_NGM_N*, *DIAGRAM*, *La Petite Zine*, *American Letters & Commentary*, *Action Yes*, and others. He collects 8-tracks.

Neal Kitterlin

Neal Kitterlin lives with his wife and child in Matteson, Illinois. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *PANK*, *HOUSEFIRE*, *NAP*, *The Northville Review*, *Specter Magazine*, and other places. Find him on twitter @NealKitterlin or at infinitegestures.tumblr.com.

Coop Lee

Coop Lee has appeared in *Specter Magazine*, *Atticus Review*, and *Side B Magazine*, among other sweet spots. His hair is messy. His shoes are lost. His television has asparagus growing from it. You can find him living and writing in Boise, Idaho.

Brad Liening

Brad Liening lives in Minneapolis with his wife and two cats.

Ethan Madarieta

In my writing I am interested in exploring the construction of knowledge as production of identity, and in discovering possibilities for understanding identity through fiction and critical theory.

My current project, "Tension, Resistance," is about two friends stealing/liberating Mexican General Santa Anna's prosthetic leg from the Military Museum in Illinois, with intentions of returning it to Mexico. The protagonist deems her Mexican contact unsuitable for deconstructing the pejorative history of "disability," leading her to attempt to amputate her own leg. This story is a "parafiction" (as conceived by Carrie Lambert-Beatty), attempting to make radical possibilities for change "real" by fomenting the belief that such change already exists and is therefore possible. The project of creating narratives that appear "real" requires the creation of "networks of meaning." This is achieved by entering components of the story into the "real" world; for example, my story narrativizes history, and retells plausible alternatives to dominant discourses through archival mimicry. In addition, I have created documents and websites that validate the text and blur the line between "real" and fiction.

I am a senior at the University of Illinois Urbana and will graduate this May. I am currently working as a certified cosmetologist, writing a novel and an essay informed by the writings of Heidegger, Derrida and Lacan, and awaiting reply to graduate school applications.

Elberto Mueller

Elberto Muller is the author of books, essays, and poems, and sometimes paints beautiful things. He currently lives and teaches in eastern Ukraine, where in his free time enjoys silent, peripheral analysis of wild dogs and women who wear too much makeup.

Hunter Sharpless

I was lucky enough, in January of this year, to spend two weeks in Havana, Cuba. The trip was too short to formulate any synthesized critique of Cuban-American relations, but jarring and interesting

enough to write about. It shed harsh light on the power plays of both the United States and Cuban governments, which both allow a decades-old grudge to dictate policy. This is a personal essay, a questioning of the embargo, and a wondering of the persistent question: What is it to be the American abroad?

I graduated from the University of Iowa with a BA in English, and am currently an MFA candidate in creative writing at the University of Minnesota. I was born and raised in Texas.

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.