

&

the best of issues 001-014

2021

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*technically December 2020

**photo books

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an introduction

the magazine

& was an amateur literary magazine that sourced its writing from /lit/ and shared it back with the same community. You could send in a submission by email, and sometime later you'd see it done up in an issue, which you and the 4chan equivalent of the neighbourhood kids would read in one big release thread. You could even buy a copy on-demand and have it shipped to your door, but mostly you'd click through spreads of PDF pages, reading and hoping to find something good, switching back to the thread to maybe drop the names of your favourites or comment on the design, hoping to refresh the page and find your own work mentioned. But whether or not anyone mentioned yours at all, you saw your work transformed and made part of something larger—something that felt buzzing and alive as the thread carried on, eventually pruned and leaving you in anticipation of the next issue, thinking *what should I write next time?* You'd be excited by the idea of being read by, and reading the work of, the people you'd been engaging with anonymously for years—of making something with them that wouldn't disappear after the inevitable fall off the catalogue.

Nobody got paid for anything that appeared in &. There was no rejection or acceptance—not enough submissions, in part. There was never any explicit theme. Editing was effectively nonexistent besides the design work, meaning you'd expect your writing to make it out character-for-character, typos and all, on the page. And even the design could be haphazard, often made in a scramble of days before the release, mostly by the founding editor or sometimes by maybe two or three trusted posters organising by email, assembling scattered submissions into a 96-page document. Sometimes the monthly schedule would fall apart and you'd watch the months go by, wondering when or if there'd be another issue as your emails went unanswered (not that you were guaranteed a reply in the first place). But still, you looked forward to the idea of seeing another issue and of contributing to something that seemed—amidst the ephemera of /lit/—somehow more tangible.

& wasn't the first magazine or collaborative project to appear on /lit/, but, like the others before it, it represented a thin slice of the board during a particular period of time. It encompassed incidentally the absurd, the sentimental, the obscene, pranks on the reader, rescued pages of diaries, poems to no-one, and so on. In being haphazard and uncurated, it gave an outlet for some of the people loosely aligned by their browsing /lit/, giving space for a lot of writing that probably would have otherwise died as neglected files on aging hard drives or in descending midnight threads—unlikely to ever be typeset or embellished or made fit for print. More than that, some of the writing that appeared in & stood out from the rest, and reading each issue—beyond the communal element and beyond the promise of having your own work read—meant a search for those highlights.

the best-of

Fourteen issues minus two photo books, 96 pages each except the slim 80 in 014: a mass of unfiltered writing across more than a thousand pages of different authors, different formats, different fonts, different designs and degrees of legibility, between JPEG artefacts and occasional ampersands. And scattered throughout were pieces of writing that had been read in a blur on release day and maybe never again, but about which someone had thought *this is pretty good* before closing the PDF. Something like that. It seemed worthwhile (or maybe just fun) to resurface those pieces and apply some polish while furnishing them together in a single collection—fitting, as & went dark again after issue 014, that time with a greater degree of finality.

The resurfacing started in the summer of 2022 with me searching the /lit/ archive for the old release threads and tallying every positive mention of a piece of writing from the magazine. In threads on /lit/ I solicited recommendations for (and then later against) pieces to include, winnowing down the pieces not just based on calibre but also based on how they represented the sum of the magazine. Some posters re-read issues of & from the start to compile their favourites while others spit out half-remembered titles of memorable pieces, and my tally became a public list that expanded and contracted through critiques and votes for&against until it started to resemble the table of contents you passed earlier. There were also a dedicated few who contributed critiques of stories, design suggestions, possible illustrations, and mock-ups of covers. But lacking any clear idea of how I was going to bring all of that together, I decided I'd take some time to work on things alone and figure out what needed to be done, aiming to return in something like a few weeks to a month with the framework for a spartan paperback. Instead, the best-of turned into a protracted two-year+ personal project that grew and changed in fits as I killed sporadic weekends and late nights.

Curated, cheaper to print, a little less haphazard—those I can guarantee. Self-contained, cohesive, competently edited, worth reading front-to-back, worth sharing, still representative of /lit/, &, and the authors of the writing included—those I tried for. Having started this with no idea what I was doing, and in spite of my lingering doubts and the many things I'd do differently a second time, I'd like to think I've come far enough to do justice to the pieces of writing herein and the ethos that relates them. A hundred letter-sized and edited (&re-edited&re-edited) pages, treated with illustrations I hoped would carry the message without saying too much themselves, ordered in a way I hoped would at least imply a throughline between what are in many ways disparate works, and all of which I laid out in fragments then stuck together like a jigsaw. And while the writing in this collection isn't perfect, some of it I cherish, and I do feel a tremendous fondness for the sum of those parts and the microcosm they came out of. I hope this collection serves as a fitting terminus for the period of time these pieces represent, and I hope those that read it enjoy it one way or another.

Or something like that.

by /lit/

for /lit/

THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

& OOI



Let me just start out by saying that I have several children. Only several isn't the right word for it. To be honest with you, I could sit down and name them all bar one or three, but when people ask me how many kids I have from the front of my mouth I just make up a number. Somewhere between 15 and 25. I've been married a few times and I keep accumulating stepkids along with the continuing crop I've been sowing and reaping for the last 35 years. The youngest one is a few months old and my oldest is 35 as I just mentioned, and he's got his own kids now—3 of them. The first time I noticed it was somewhat disconcerting, but I feel a closer connection to my grandkids than towards my own children. I have five of them, two with my oldest daughter, and those kids bring me much more joy than the five children of mine that are the same age. This revelation almost led to a re-evaluation but I decided to just bottle it instead. For some reason I just can't stop having children;

there was never a plan to keep on having kids, or to have kids at all really, I just kept on having sex, and women have a funny way of getting pregnant before they're menopausal, or at least that's what my first wife always told me.

It all started when my first three kids were growing up, and they would drive me crazy with their tattling, 'John did such-and-such,' 'Rachel broke this-or-that,' 'Brian spilled his juice on me,' 'Rachel is on my side.' On and on and on with the tattling, I thought I would have to be admitted if it continued. At this point the youngest kid, my 4th was barely walking and he didn't have much to say, and my first wife was pregnant again, so I knew it was only a matter of time before a few more mouths joined in to claw their way into the highest ranks of my favor. Who would have thought that a guy like me would be so admired and adored in a way that somehow signaled to these kids that being in trouble got you downgraded, and getting someone else in trouble was your ticket to the top. The point is, enough was just about getting to enough, and I just started giving a whooping to the first kid I ran into, saving me some time and effort, and hoping that the randomness would discourage future tattling (of course it didn't happen this way, that would be the result of decision making from rational minds), but eventually I developed our Household Justice System statute by statute until it was ready it be put in place.

I got the idea from some cop show we were watching on TV after dinner one night. The maverick detective type obtained some evidence without a warrant and the ADA chewed him out because it would be inadmissible. Genius. The first piece of the Justice System had propagated into our home from the broadcast tower 14 miles northwest of our house, and the gears were turning as I planned out the unveiling of the System. I briefed my kids on the Household Justice System one time, and from then on the older kids would be responsible to teach the younger kids how it works, because I would answer no questions after I satisfied my oldest three—I even made them take notes. When some of my kids come over for Thanksgiving or Christmas I will overhear them schooling the youngsters on the finer points of the System, and it makes me swell with joy. Of all the things I have sired, the one that brings me the most pride is the one that only took a week to gestate. I tell myself it's because my pride, joy, love, happiness, interest, enthusiasm, is split up equally between my two dozen or so children—that's why I love my grandchildren so much too I guess. I have no idea if this is true or reasonable but being someone that wouldn't have to rationalize something like this is not who I aspire to be. At this point, I would say about 50% of the System is addendum created by the kids as it passed on through generations, but the crux and the purpose remain. The crux of the System arrived courtesy of the broadcast tower, and other than the rule about my answering questions (which is the main reason the System has changed so much over the years), the crux of the System is what kept all these damn kids from getting me a vasectomy, which is as follows, quoted from the notebook of my oldest son who recently found and showed me it last Thanksgiving:

Household Justice System §1.1

Any evidence of wrongdoing, misbehaving, acting up, misconduct, rough-housing, mischief, indecorum, misconduct, &c. is made null and void by any tattling, snitching, ratting out, squealing, blabbing, &c. and is inadmissible as evidence of said wrongdoing, misbehaving, acting up, misconduct, rough-housing, mischief, indecorum, misconduct, &c.

Household Justice System §1.2

Perpetrator being defined as someone who is guilty of wrongdoing, misbehaving, acting up, misconduct, rough-housing, mischief, indecorum, misconduct, &c.

Tattler being defined as someone who is guilty of tattling, snitching, ratting out, squealing, blabbing, &c.

Residing Judicial Authority being defined as Dad.

Household Justice System §1.3

Any perpetrator who is brought to the attention of the residing judicial authority by a tattler is ineligible to be sentenced to punishment for those acts the perpetrator committed. Any tattler who brings evidence of a perpetrator to the residing judicial authority will be sentenced to equal punishment as deserving of the acts committed by the perpetrator. Any perpetrator who is discovered by the residing judicial authority will be sentenced to equal punishment as deserving of the acts committed by the perpetrator. Any perpetrator who brings him/herself to the residing judicial authority will be sentenced to equal or lesser punishment as deserving of the acts committed by the perpetrator.

There was more to it of course, but the crux of the System has almost been around for 30 years, and I have had no problems with it yet. At the start there was a liminal period where the kids were transitioning over to this new concept. It took them a while to figure out that I was no longer on their individual sides anymore, that it was them united against me. Every new kid has a probationary period ending about six months after they're 4 years old, but other than that, I have been living in a tattle-free household for much longer than a tattle-full household and it's beautiful.

The question I always get when I tell people about my system is what about the serious stuff? To that I always reply: what about it? I worked hard to make my system a fair and universal catch-all. I know a lot of parents whose rule is 'no tattling unless you are asked to,' but I find that unnecessarily oppressive. As a grown adult I already have a huge advantage over these kids, so I figure I might as well play by the rules as well and give them a fighting chance. Honestly, the System makes the serious stuff much easier to deal with, because my kids are used to coming to me with stuff they did wrong, and we can discuss it in a much better setting than if they got ratted out by their siblings or if I discovered it on my own. I want to make it clear that this System was not entirely enacted for my own convenience; it was enacted to teach my kids to own their mistakes, and to leave other people's mistakes alone. Notice in §1.3 that if the perpetrator brings their crime to me before I find out, they have the chance for equal or lesser punishment, and they always got lesser punishment. For the majority of the time, they got no punishment at all, but if I found out they did something wrong, and in 24 hours they hadn't come to me and admitted it, I struck down on them hard and fast. I don't relish the chance to punish my children, but I take it seriously, and I get creative with it. Letting others alone was the other big purpose of my System but that is something that has slowly morphed over the years.

When I envisioned it in my head, the secondary purpose of the System would play out by having the other kids all but ignore their sibling's mistakes—other than what they did to torment each other—but nowadays the kids put a huge amount of pressure on each

other to turn themselves in. I rarely use group punishment either, so the fact that the others are so committed to the system surprised me at first, but I slowly realized that what they were doing accomplished the same objective as tattling to me: they don't want someone else to avoid punishment when they were unable to do so. It's such a childish way to respond but I've found that adults act this way much more than is appropriate, which I have come to realize is not a learned behavior but something innate within us that needs to be crushed, and I think my kids are in the best position to do so.

Back last Thanksgiving, when John showed me the original 26-year-old notes he took from my first and only briefing of the System, I got a big old blackboard from the city college downtown and had the kids that live with me write down that first section of the System on it. At Christmas I had all the kids work together and pool their total knowledge of the system onto the blackboard. I was amazed to see all of the extra detail that had been created over the years, but I wasn't all that surprised by it. By this point I have a few go-to punishments for the younger kids, but if I don't waive punishment for an older kid, I have them tell me what my options are depending on what they did. I have almost become redundant within the System that I created, but more shocking than that, I discovered that it didn't bother me at all—in fact I was proud of my children for learning to be so self-sufficient.

John had a talk with me a few years ago, Rachel too a little later on, about how he wasn't going to use the Household Justice System in his house. He came to me like he was a perpetrator, and I waived his punishment, same thing with Rachel. I was taken aback by this because my parents didn't do anything much like I did, and I never expected my kids to think they had to do things like I do. I guess it's different because I have some kids that are younger than my grandchildren, but I was still a little flattered that my System made such an impact on them, that they felt the need to discuss their parenting style with me. I tried to tell my current wife about this but she just went on and on about how John was crazy not to use the System and it worked so well and all this, but first of all she didn't grow up in the first 10 years of the System, it took me weeks to try and explain it to her before I just gave up and had the kids do it, and I think she may actually be a little younger than John is. Now that I think about it I'm really not sure, I was really young when I had John—I don't know his birthday but I do know the year. As for my current wife I could guess right in five tries, so that puts her right on either side of my son. Either way, the point in fact being that her opinion on the matter isn't super important to me. Well the grandkids would tattle on the kids for a while—John didn't know what to do about it and I sure as hell didn't either. Rachel's weren't quite old enough for this problem at the time, but it was in the back of my mind while we were dealing with the problem, and wouldn't you know it, it made me do something that I hadn't done in 25 years: I amended the system.



¡VIVA EL ESTADO DEL BÉISBOL!

ANONYMOUS & 008



It was the bottom of the seventh when it all started. I was sitting in the stands, right behind the catcher. I had a historic view, though I didn't know it at the time. Our Venezuelan stadium was spilling with emotional fans, half were shirtless, all were on their feet. None were quiet. Being the closest to the players, I and those around me had an obligation to our country and to our team to be the most fanatic group in the stadium. Virulent swears were cast,

and many personal attacks on family, sexuality, and physical prowess were made in detail towards the batters. I often wonder how much my words tipped fate that night.

The Caracas Bulls had been collectively slumping all game, the big city team was getting demolished by the much less renowned, and by all metrics worse, Barinas Reds. The score was debatably twenty-to-one, but scorekeepers would later relay conflicting accounts due to events that were about to take place. The Bulls' home crowd was ready to explode and were given the opportunity to do so. With the Bulls' star catcher Eriko Santana up at the plate, the pitcher, whose name was also lost in the myth of the moment, beaned Eriko in the ribs with a ninety-five-mile-per-hour fastball, and clearly meant to. Next was a moment of great factual debate, but let me tell you gringos, I saw it all with my own two eyes, honest to God and my mother. Here is what happened:

Eriko, recovering from the pain of the pitch, threw his eyes at the pitcher who was playing coy on the mound. Bat still in his hands, a great sprint ensued, the fastest I'd ever seen the old catcher run, and on that mound he beat the poor pitcher to death. On a normal day, fights like this were ended before any major injuries, it was all show, but this wasn't a normal day. Instead of players and umpires rushing in and pulling the fighters apart, we, the fans, cut the net! I rushed in myself, rabid with loyalty for my team and alongside thousands of others. Together we helped beat and kick the poor pitcher and then the whole rotten team until there was no more to beat or to kick. We won the game.

Once the unfortunate athletes were properly dead, our fanaticism grew into something greater. Eriko was lifted up above our heads and placed on a ripped-out chair from the stands. We strode with him as our king, his bat in hand, pointing us onwards. We broke out of the stadium, our numbers only increasing, and paraded through the streets of the city. The umpires, apparently held complicit in the score, were hung along the road from the street lamps. The same fate was met by any Reds fan unfortunate enough to attend the game. Eriko took well to his new position on top of us and showered us with passionate outcries on baseball and life. "The Bulls are loose!" he repeated again and again with his great moustached smile that often burst with laughter, "Ándale! The Bulls are loose!" I marched behind and felt an utter sense of loyalty. I screamed at the hung fans as if they were alive, just so they knew I hated them. I threw rocks and bricks through windows just because I could. I'm not ashamed of these actions mis amigos, it was in the heat of the moment, but what came next I relay to you in great shame.

The direct area around the stadium was rapidly seized in the name of Eriko, not by his command, but rather as an act of coronation from the fans. Eriko, the great Bull, sat on top of the city's finance center, a building chosen for its height, and he broadcast his message on as many radio and television stations as the fans could acquire for him. "There are more bullfighters left than just those dirty Reds! The Bulls will never be fully free until ALL the bull-fighters are dead!" His admonishments were not specific, but, Lord save me, they gave a fated path to follow. House to house, apartment to apartment we knocked, entered, questioned, and killed. Loyalty to the team had to be absolute, despite the fact that I had heckled my own team only hours before! Please, as I tell you, do not forgive me, there is no forgiveness for the killings of families, of women, of children (O Cristo!). I only tell you now because you must know exactly what happened and have faith in the truthfulness of our correspondence so we can all return to peace once more.

The city was purged in a mere two days, and Eriko, from this point forward, whether he liked it or not, became a revolutionary. As he spoke over the airways his myth became vast and noble, and his following flourished. "I speak softly but I carry a big bat!" was his slogan—entirely unoriginal, but nobody cared, we all wanted to win what he started. Nobody, even today, knows the politics behind the revolution, if there are any they are kept secret somewhere inside Eriko's mind, however, our fervor at the time was beyond reconciliation or any type of peaceful resolution. We were ready to die, but we didn't even know what for!

In just another fated event, word got around that the members of the Venezuelan national assembly were present in the capitol building at the time of the game, and, to the horror of the CIA—I kid! Ay! Don't give me that look!—to the horror of everyone, the building was surrounded and assailed by thousands of fans, protected only by a small loyal militia. Government troops were called in from the outside of the city, but it was a hopeless effort. After three days the build-

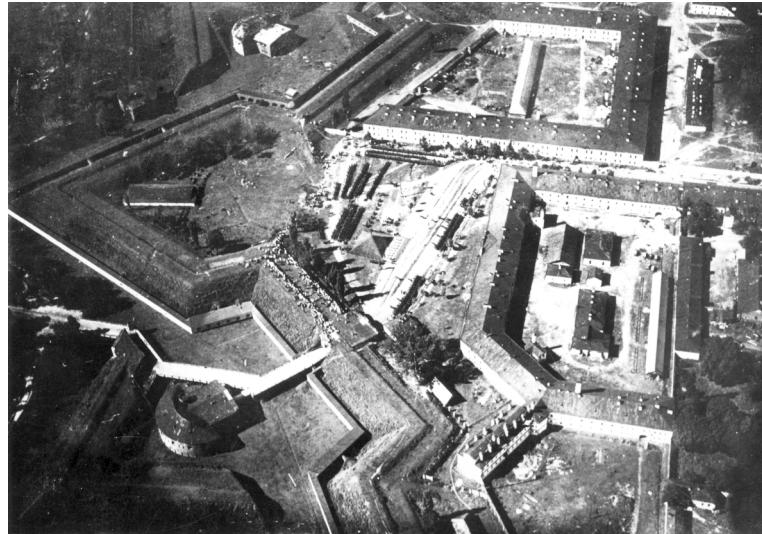
ing was finally stormed and all members of the national assembly that did not commit suicide were brought to the roof of the finance center to be judged. Eriko himself had assembled a small cabinet of officials consisting of teammates and influential fans who were ready to shape their companies (and thus our country) to his will. At this point I had cast off my extremism and was at the church most of my time. I prayed for forgiveness while others prayed for their team to win. Nevertheless, I could not escape what I had helped create.

The Sunday after the game, which had taken place only six days before, Eriko officially took national power. Fans called it "bobblehead night," though there was no baseball game, nothing of the sort. With the national committee corralled up on the roof and surrounded by fans, my

At sunset, when the old president was finally beamed and thrown to his death, Eriko walked to the edge of the building and looking down remarked: "The answer, my fans, is none of what you have just heard." The crowd now was intently silent, partially for the dead we now saw, sprawled on the street below, and partially because Eriko's voice enraptured us. "Our goal is not in nationalization, not in reform, we want nothing to do with the obvious corruption of this once great country. Our goal, my fans—" he paused, "no, my friends. Our goal, my friends, is to WIN THE WORLD SERIES!" Everyone went wild, I confess, even myself. We sang and danced and watched as beautiful explosions of color shot out from the nearby stadium and into the sky.

So you see commissioner and Mr. President, this is not just an insurgent force looking for war, in fact, we want nothing of the sort. Eriko and his government have sent me here today for very simple negotiations that I think you will find more than reasonable. We do not want additional land, nor resources, nor even continued leadership of Venezuela. We do not want any of those things on two conditions: Firstly, you and your forces, Mr. President, must de-escalate military tensions with our country,

tensions that will no doubt cause massive amounts of death in our state and of your people, more than, I am afraid to say, has already occurred at our hands. Secondly, commissioner, we look to you as the leading authority in the world of baseball. You, knowing what you have seen our team do, must allow the Caracas Bulls a chance to compete on the biggest stage of all: the World Series. Men, once these demands are met, I am happy to tell you that we—Eriko, I, and our government—will be more than pleased to initiate a peaceful transition of power to authorities from your country. Make these demands happen and I believe that all of our sides can achieve great good. This all rests in your hands, caballeros. There will always be another matador, but, at the same time, it is only right to spare the honorable bull. I trust you both will make the right decision.



self among them, a trial was held for each politician. The Bull's ace pitcher stood sixty feet away, while Eriko personally, with his burly moustache and small chubby frame, walked up to each of the prosecuted and asked him a simple question: "What is the goal?" The politicians were stumped, and I must say, so was I. They murmured in tears, they screamed hate in protest, and some stood somberly in silence. All however were beamed. With God as my witness, I profess to you, every pitch I saw the pitcher throw landed right between the eyes! Never in any game had I seen him so accurate! After the ceremonial beaning, which often knocked out the receiver (and hence "bobblehead night"), the crowd was let loose, and the persecuted were judged harshly. Each criminal was thrown off the building as a form of execution.

VOID

Ogden Nesmer

& OI2

Not long ago I was apprehended by the authorities and placed in custody, under what is known as a fifty-one-fifty hold. This means, at the time of my arrest, I was designated a potential danger to myself and others. I do not recall the circumstances that brought me apparently to carry a small, unregistered weapon into a convenience store that night, nor the succeeding events. But I am assured by professionals that it did in fact happen and that I was in a state of disassociation, unable to make myself understood.

I am told that this is why I have been placed here, and why I am forbidden from leaving. Furthermore, I am required by law to attend regular therapy sessions and to maintain a clear and honest relationship with Glenn, my mental health coordinator. My cooperation with the program is essential. Soon I will be able to plead my case and my sanity before a judge at a special hearing. Then I will be free again.

Captivity is not so bad: there are board games and puzzles and televisions mounted in the high corners of the community spaces. They're kept in cages and play only black-and-white sitcoms. My room has a window, and presently I have it all to myself (this is fa-

vorable; isolation isn't a problem for me and many of the other residents have issues that keep them and their roommates up for hours during the night).

Because I am an exemplary resident I am allowed to walk the premises as I please, in and outside, with the exception of those floors restricted for the deranged and violent. Much of the staff knows me by first name and they find me very pleasant.

There are other residents who range in their capacity for rational thought and extended conversation. All of them are peaceful, or have at least not expressed their violent ideation. Many of them happen to be women, but they all differ in age and ethnic background. I have taken a sympathetic, almost paternal role with some of them. I am one of the few expected to leave soon and return to a productive and someday respectable life. Naturally, they see potential in me. Perhaps they also see a means to communicate with an otherwise hostile and alien world waiting outside the walls. One they may never see, or understand.

Several times a week I lead a handful of the other, less capable residents on a short walk around the exterior of the facility. There is a small pine grove with a winding dirt path and a pond adja-

cent to the main building. It is normally gray and cold out, but the fresh air is good for all of us. I also appreciate the responsibility. The fact that the staff trusts in me to lead the others, albeit for a short time, has given me the confidence I'll need to do well in my hearing and my life outside the facility.

I've written these thoughts down to tell Glenn at our next meeting. I believe I'm doing very well.

Anna is an older Spanish woman, committed by her daughter, with severe dementia and too much energy to be left alone. I often see her humming softly as she waddles between therapy and her scheduled activities, followed by a solemn, attentive nurse. Elle, a younger girl, is suicidal but making good progress. Like most young people she can be easily coerced into talking about herself at length and I enjoy listening, until her thoughts are broken off by tears and sobbing and I find someone to help. Cedric is another resident committed by the justice system, like me. His situation is tragic but it is not at all shocking. Cedric is easily agitated and reacts to stimuli in his mind. He avoids eye contact and mumbles. He is also massive. Despite himself he is inherently intimidating. One can not be in a prolonged conversation with him without the threat of an outburst, which alienates him from the other residents. It is sad to see, and I feel that underneath his ailment Cedric is essentially just a very frightened young man.

Then, of course, there is Bob.

I meet with all of the residents on their own terms, as a comrade in custody. I have learned much from them and I sincerely believe that they have benefited from my attention. Unlike staff, the residents often are not able to recognize me, due to their afflictions. I meet with them as a stranger. Our conversations and the relations we build dissolve with the passing of another day, and the next, and so forth.

It does not deter me; I genuinely care for them. I have even considered entering the field of mental health after my release. It speaks to me, and it may be my true calling (another positive thing to tell Glenn).

Bob is by far the most confounding resident.

Bob arrived voluntarily, a long time before me. He doesn't antagonize any of the residents or staff but they do not seem to like him very much. I can see why. Bob often appears irritated and resentful, but always quiet. In the morning he gets into the same chair, every day, for hours until it is time to go back to bed. Bob seems weary of the rest of us and of life. The staff does not encourage him to participate in the activities offered and they take little interest in his overall progress. A rumor I've heard from Elle is that they lock him into his own room at night, but no one knows why. I have not seen this and cannot verify. He watches us from the corner of the room, grimacing, hardly moving.

I've spoken with him quite a bit.

Bob explained to me that he has lived before—many times before, in fact. So many times that he has now lost count. His life begins in a suburb up north about fifty years ago. After his life, he dies, and when he has died he has always woken up the next morning, an infant again in his old familiar home.

Bob says the first time he was reincarnated it was unbelievable, but eventually he became very hopeful; who wouldn't feel grateful to experience their youth again, keeping all the learned wisdom of their later years? After the initial trauma of infancy

(evidently a very horrifying experience once imbued with the consciousness of an adult—the shock of complete helplessness: limbs and spine too weak to do anything but struggle, the body shudders in rapid growth—bones forming, skull sealing, teeth rising to the surface of tender gums—all colored by the regular, unavoidable visitations of shit, vomit, snot, emotion, etc.) his second life was generally full of victories. He impressed his peers, displayed uncanny insight, and reveled in sexual and financial triumph.

This was repeated for the third, fourth, fifth times. After several lives and deaths—rather, the same life leading into many different deaths, ranging from mundane to unpredicted to horrendously, regrettably painful—Bob started to see his situation with less enthusiasm. The problem, Bob says, was that he was trapped. He grew but the world around him was stuck on repeat. Immortal only in theory, he had power but no control.

Somewhere around the thousandth iteration, says Bob, that's when the days began to truly fade into another. He sought this place as a refuge, a shelter from the world he was terrified to experience again.

I sought more information on Bob from the staff's records, but residents are not allowed access to those kinds of documents. I was even reprimanded for being nosy—a woman behind the counter wagged her finger threatening that this might get back to Glenn. The others are poor sources of information. Depending on who one is asking, Bob is either a government agent, an alien, completely invisible, or a doppelgänger slowly trying to replace Kiki (Kiki is a paranoid schizophrenic who typically shrieks in an inarticulate jargon—getting any cohesive statements out of her is noteworthy, even if it yields questionable results).

Kiki had an accident once. It was on one of my walks, while she was supposed to be under my supervision. I wasn't paying attention and she began to walk straight into the pond and got her ankle stuck on a root. She fell over into the water and almost drowned in two feet of muck because she couldn't free herself. She was only helped after the rest of us heard her wailing in her distinct gibberish.

The staff was lenient with me but I still feel terrible. How could I forget something so important? I've tried to discuss my memory issues with Glenn, but I don't believe he's as concerned. As a representative of the justice system his interest is in addressing my antisocial tendencies and any potential access to weapons.

It dawns on me that it has been some time since my last meeting with Glenn, and it unsettles me. The specter of my upcoming hearing looms in my mind. Will the judge be told of my mistake in letting Kiki almost drown? Would Glenn be obligated to tell them? Should I tell Glenn that I have dreams about it constantly—only in the dreams I don't hear Kiki struggling. I simply rise out of bed, run to the pond and find her because I know she is there, lying face-up just under the surface. She is impossibly placid—a state of being Kiki has never known. Her expression is so stoic that at once I realize she needs my help. I dive in, into the complete blackness where the sound of Kiki's screams have been hiding in wait then flood my ears.

Bob says he knows me already. He says that has met me in many of his previous lives. I always tend to show up to the facility some time after him, he says. I like to entertain the possibility that what I can't believe may be true, and so I ask him if I've changed over

tempts to fully realize that death wouldn't solve his problem.

I ask him what phase came next in his lives and he tells me he then studied for a long time. Reading anything, seeking out experts in all fields, trying to find a rational explanation—even an irrational one, so long as it provided results. It involved less dying than his previous phase but it was ultimately as fruitless. In his studies Bob simultaneously gained a deep dissatisfaction with the material universe and the facts of reality. Beyond those tiny facts, he says with supposedly over a thousand lived years devoted purely to the pursuit of knowledge, nothing is true nor is it relevant. Entropy takes all but the sterile facts, rendered meaningless in their separation from one another, with no-one to construct truth out of the free-floating parts.

Bob says that effectively everything is the same, and everything is pointless.

The dream is different now, and it's longer. I get out of bed just the same but now I'm looking for Glenn, wandering through the halls and feeling the drywall for vibrations of sound. He is somewhere on the other side of whichever one I happen to be touching. His voice is muffled but omniscient. The syllables are all off, but somehow I know the word he is whispering:

Bobobobobobob.

I leave, and I feel strangely as though the pace of my movement is out-of-tune with the beat of my steps. I am drifting, but my legs thrash as if I'm running.

I find myself at the pond, but Kiki can not be seen. The water is so dark, and someone is standing on the other side, so I start to run around to them. I can still hear Bob's name whispered behind me. She is crying, not in real words. Scrambled phonemes and poor little whimpers. I can see the bottom of the pond, black twisted roots sunk in the scum, but I see no Kiki.

I am walking around the pond, and I believe I am awake. Bob is by my side.

I ask him what is on the other side. Bob is the only man I've ever known to come back from the dead with his memories: what happens after we die?

He tells me nothing happens because nothing can happen. There is no time, no consciousness, no soul. There is nothing. I am not surprised; I'm bored with Bob now. I feel he has little to show for all his supposed experience. I offer him my curiosity and I plead for advice but all he does is lead me in circles. He can't admit it but his mind is rotten with the age of his past lives, which of course are themselves figments of his psychological condition.

My hearing was two days ago. I don't recall it, but I'm told I did well. As for when I will be able to leave I hope for an answer from Glenn. I am eager to see him, but I'm told that I have seen him, that I see him often, and that he has only positive things to say. I'm beginning to think it would be wrong to release me. That I belong here. I spend more time now confined to a chair, like Bob, with my head tilted up to one of the imprisoned televisions.

We've reached the other side of the pond. It's cold and quiet and the water is too dark to see through. I can hear whispering behind me, like the hushed sound of popping corn. It isn't done for me but I know Bob is aware of how it torments me. He can feel me the same way I feel him, I can tell. I accuse him of being a fool for having been tricked so thoroughly by me. Without really thinking I tell Bob how his previous lives have simply been days in the facility. He is mad, and I have been stringing him along for my own entertainment. I don't know why but I have the urge to

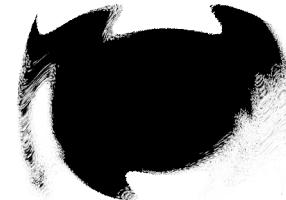
hurt Bob like this, but he doesn't seem bothered. Instead he asks me about Kiki, and then laughs as if he's told a joke. I don't understand.

My dream has evolved. It has repeated itself so many times it has forced itself to grow into something freshly disturbing. In the dream I do nothing, and there is nothing, simply gray fog all around me everywhere. But I feel the presence of the pond, Kiki's body under the water, and Bob, all somewhere out in the fog. I sit and wait for the dream to be over, voluntarily confined. It doesn't frighten me but it is terrible to endure.

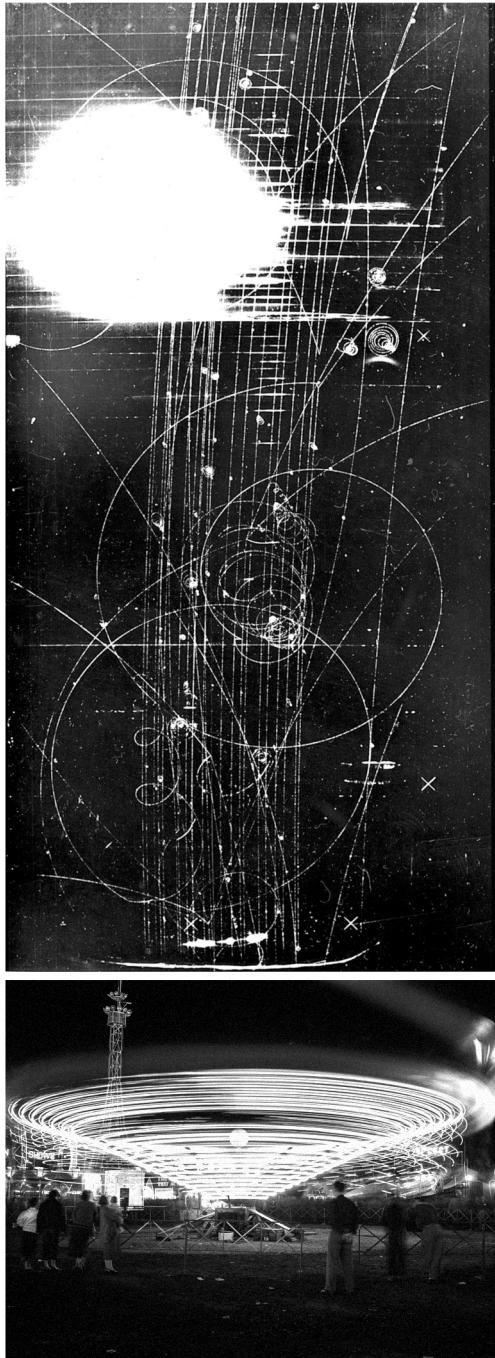
I no longer see Elle. Residents are not privy others' medical information, so I cannot know what has happened to her. I believe she has chosen to kill herself but I cannot verify. None of the other residents seem to notice.

As the days pass and I begin to lose count I think often about my arrest, which I do not remember. I have only the words of others to inform me as to the details of that night. The picture I have does not make sense. My memories are too broken and I feel I can no longer trust the flashes of the past that I do recall. Everything is suspect. Like facts at the end of the universe, as Bob tells me, events are disconnected in my mind and there is ultimately no "me" that can be fabricated from the free-floating thoughts. I have been freed, in a sense.

The staff, Bob, and the occasional new resident stop by my chair. They say things to me. They whisper in soft intonations I do not understand, although I am confident that they are words. Fricatives and affricates, voiced alveolars and bilabial plosives; all the same, all pointless.



QQQUEST



ANONYMOUS & 003

It was a real hotdog of a Wednesday. You couldn't throw a stone without hitting a smiling face. The pharmacist is handing out water balloons and there's so much laughter going around you could make a hammock out of it. The Shriners are in the river, right down to their skivvies. The local law enforcement is having an arm wrestling match with the bowling team, loser buys hamburgers for the winner. Every cat & dog & hamster in town gets a taste of popsicle today. The red wagons are racing down the hill and the doughboys are raising up the flag. It's the kind of sunshine that . . .

"Harvey, you've got no momentum! Your zi-fi is going neglar" the Valinora twins say in unison. Harvey pays no mind to their attempt to interrupt the world. There are lollipops to lick and free hula-hoops at the General Store.

The Valinora twins and Harvey's mother and his teacher and his development engineer . . . they all live in space. They live on a colossal titanium cylinder that hurdles through the cosmos. They have concerns like relativity tremors, continuum meltdowns and many other abhorrent fatal conditions. There are many types of jobs on the cylinder; Harvey's father is a quantum deconstructionalist. He records and studies the formation of concave electrons in four dimensions. Millions of lives rely on his work. So Harvey Fenton found a world. It is a far better place.

The prom king & queen show up at the car wash on the shoulders of the football team, nickel in hand and grinning from ear to ear. You can hear good time rock 'n' roll on every radio dial in town, from the courthouse all the way to the kids dancing in the park. Old friends who saw each other yesterday are meeting on the sidewalk saying, "It's like I haven't seen you in a month full of Sundays! How's life you old so & so?"

Down at the malt shop there's a crowd of teens playing hop scotch on pogo-sticks while ol' Denny puts a fresh soda pop in every hand. It's enough to tickle you pink. All of a sudden, you can hear a voice through a megaphone, coming from the middle of town. Everyone is trying to hear it, the voice sounds so proud and excited. People

start making their way towards it and soon they find that the Mayor is making a big flap in town square. One look and you can tell he's pulling out all the stops. "We'll have the whole country turning their heads" he says. "Right here in our little town, we are going to change the face of things. They'll have to grind up boots to make enough ink for all the newspapers they're going to print, and we'll be on the front page of every one of them! So everybody mark your calendars with a big red circle on next week's State Fair. Make sure the whole family is there, we don't want anybody to miss it. Hold all your questions, we want it to be a surprise and yes, little Timmy, your goldfish can come too!" Applause ensued, games of marbles resumed and before you knew it, news of the big day filled up the town like a tall glass of . . .

"The council recognizes Alfred Fenton. The floor is yours Dr. Fenton."

"Ahem. Dignitaries of the Living Tribunal, Masters from the Academy of Measure, Brothers of New Pluto, Shogun of Seventh Tokyo, fellow men and women of Zenith 1; I bid you all warm welcome to this assembly. These are auspicious times we live in. The constant threat of a hyper-speed collision with inverted atoms has been abated due to a noble sacrifice by the Centurian Congress to abstain from the use of corrupted neon densities as fuel.

"Those who call Zenith 1 home, allow me to congratulate you on successfully splicing the human genome with a neutrino, forming what we're calling a photon-sapien.

"For five hundred years, the force or being known as ARC-10 has left a nuclear graveyard in its wake; trillions have been neglared. Incredibly, the Celestials have discovered a method by which entire galaxies can be suspended in a geodesic net, allowing their polarity to be augmented to the point of Pandrolenthal Cohesion. It has neutralized ARC-10 in every encounter thus far.

"Despite unpredictable, lethal variables arising from each hour of each day, survival has become an archaic notion. Neo-science has rendered time inconsequential, yet death remains inescapable. The inevitability of death

is bested only by the inevitability of creation . . . which is why I stand before you now.

"As part of my work with concave electrons, atoms are 'flattened' in order to 'stretch' them laterally. This reveals the atom's composition on a heleoscopic level. While an atom was in this state, I took the liberty to bombard it with mutated uranium particles. The result was a five-spectrum transparency, rather than the previously established limit of four spectrums. I was incredulous. A discovery of this magnitude required sophisticated data to corroborate it. Immediately I began conducting an array of examinations. Upon running an electrical cryogenics scan, I was rewarded with the detection of sub-heleoscopic matter.

"I was alarmed at first. If my observations prove correct, they negate the principles on which neo-science is founded. I resolved to advance. Within a week, I was able to isolate the anomalies and thus able to complete a preliminary analysis of the anomaly's properties. One characteristic in particular is remarkable: They emit a signal. A nano-frequency. The most infinitesimal pulse of information imaginable. Furthermore, they are all saying the same thing: X marks the spot.

"When filtered through a gamma compressor, one can observe a rudimentary numerical system within the signal. I superimposed the data on an interstellar map and followed the co-ordinates to a region of the universe previously thought to contain nothing but asteroid debris, millions of light-years from any formed cosmic bodies.

"Directions to one location in space are imprinted on every atom in the universe. My son and I depart tonight, to what could be the site of the Big Bang . . ."

"Step right up! Don't be shy, come on up here to make your friends hush and your girl blush! For heaven's sake, show us your muscle milkshake! Win a prize for your doll and to your doll you'll be a prize! Single file now folks, everybody gets a turn!" The carnies are in fine form, all down the midway, using every trick in the book to get a crowd. Speaking of tricks, the magician is looking grand, turning rabbits into cards, doing card tricks with no hands.

A person's senses can get tied up in a big gorgeous knot trying to take it all in at once: you can hear all manner of bells and whistles, whirling joy and garrulousness; the aroma of cotton candy, grass and canvas tent filling your nostrils; the night sky lit up with poppers, spanglers, bifflers and spazzlers.

Suddenly, beaming bright and strong through all the whimsy, is a spotlight on center stage. The outline of a small sphere, resting on the top of a four-legged table, is made visible by a white sheet. The flashing bulbs of the State Fair go dim and the music fades away. The Mayor strides up the stairs and onto the stage. He wears an expression of superlative wisdom as he waits for all eyes and ears to follow the spotlight. Finally, he begins. "Ladies and gentleman! Children of all ages! Tonight, we take our place among the stars . . ."

"This is the final transmission from Dr. Alfred Fenton, aboard the Ulysses 7. At our current speed of twenty light years per millisecond, we will reach our destination in minutes. There are mental and physical phenomenons occurring. I am witnessing scar tissue on my forearm reverting into unmarred skin. The ship's controls are reacting to my thoughts. I . . . I can remember . . . being born . . ."

"Folks there is something special about this town. I know you all feel it. There is something here worth remembering . . ."

"Everything is becoming translucent, as if all is evaporating. There is no doubt that we are not coming back from where we are going. Yet we are not afraid . . ."

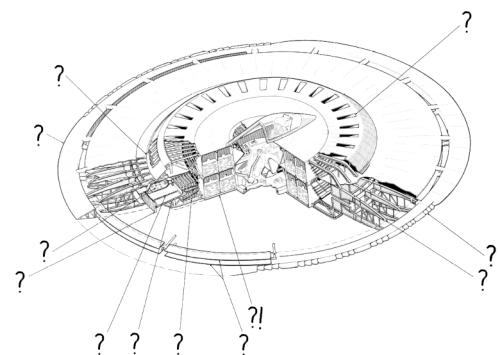
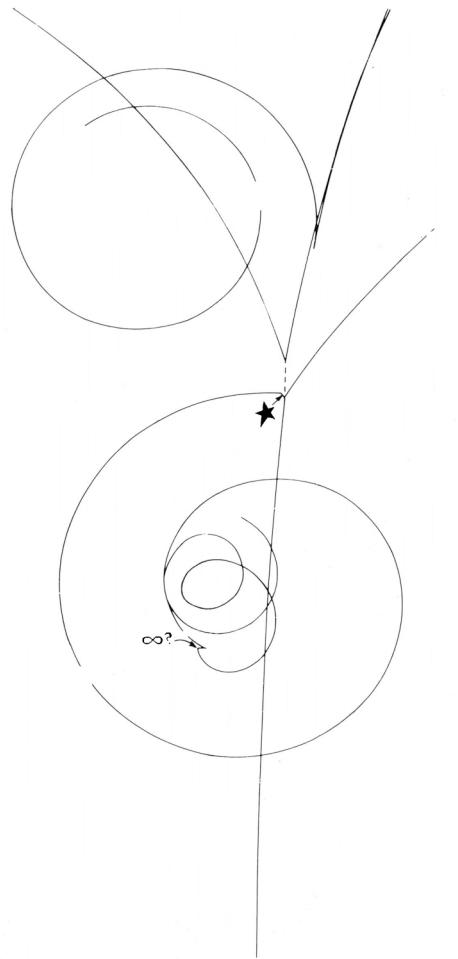
" . . . what lies under this sheet is a way to keep our lovely little town just the way it is, forever. It is pure. It is perfect. Ladies and gentleman . . ."

"My son Harvey is looking at me . . . truly looking at me for the first time. The opacity in his eyes is gone . . . his face is beaming. He is happy! My son . . ."

"I give you . . ."

"Harvey!"

And then there was light.



MAUVE BLOOD

Raoul Price-Valcenne & 004

– Oh! all vices, spices, gusto, – goodo 'l gusto; – 'bove all dissimulation, indolence.

Occupations make known sublime husbands. Masters, workers: all serves: nonsovereign. The écrivain's condo-spearo appraised as a *tips-foodora* Quasimodal implant. – What dextera (that's the “digital age”)! – Preferable will be: forever ambisinistrous, unmanœuvrable. Then: even imma-terio-cognitivo-affecto-emotio-feminized labor too lame.

But! whomst's made these statements so roguish, such that their sloth has been warranted freeloader? Sans conserving life in its material grill-game, idleness beyond feeling good, man –

It's clearly a decadent title. For: unupheavable lumps. Thirst for cruelty.

– Slouched, seeing lasagne, blinded by rotten Cheddar cheese. – Then: balaclava'd Berliner Freilänzer upstarts a public art space . . .

Ugh!

Lonesome to-day; sans setup; discourse even then? what?

Then what, now what: wave of vanguard bums, avanti dungeon crawlers. Quasimodi spread, servility totalized – how you say? “man,” signs; platform and atheist opium.

Now one, then th' other – vice versa – and why 'ven gasp with novelty at science! indeterminacy! return to order! etc.

Socialisme et/ou civilisation: the world of work. Controlled bobbly field whereupon both communication and illiteracy, no?

'Twas the body-toil, Batlowitz; recognize that the soul's gloved, entrée'd from hors d'. Beefsteak. Won, lost? Suffocating on dank anima mundi, intense interaction, social, memorable silence, words without barbarism, – one'd like, rather, a swamp deer's belting.

Return of theatrical poly(post)theism!

Waiting, gastrogaiety, the sacred. Aye, th' eternal degenerate.

Butt-outta'd; Article 50 (trigger'd) (a free translation). This weakness. Spa cure, fire diet, groveling in obscure muck, dogs, vapor puffed in a baby's face; wet gooey earth, coal, cooked with molten metals, SUCC'd with crude oil, – do that (*FPS cutscene*), and regress from the previous level.

Here a noble dramma in maschera prompting again a sauté'd appearance. Forthcoming currency: otiose and brash, aye. Signori Mammoni mixologized (but: a reduction) into politics.

Well? Banjaxed, pretty much (not even a sommelier). Rustled by the task. Preferable will be: champagne conspiracy, divine contemplation, general strike. (?)

En Marche! The labour, th' ocean, i vizi.

To inscribe in which domesticagie? To attempt slobb'ring a Goddess, or dissimulating this? with which beast's inamorate muzzle? – Whither glide, spongiform soul?

Rather: evade the moral reality complex. – Human zoo, cretino-hominalization, – to boot, the coarse-grained fist toe-thumbèd (well), the warehouse fence, to plant, firmly grasp, the orthograde, to let operuminuffocate. Cozy? no sultry rip'ning, no' state of exsurrection: *In Literature*, encoref-fort, to be a (parcel)part, symbolisord.

– Ah! thusly nonleash'd to libate animal spirits to whatever beautiful drug-image toward divine exorbitance.

O shimm'ring informe! based and prime-matter'd, tho'!

Abscond, not “therefrom” (mud) – ὁ Βάθιστος. (!)

Of the world (enclosed): those not thereof; a well-worn discourse (those not thereof) – exceeding the empereuro, globalizing the miraculous sense – the necropedo's, anarcho-ultramontanist's, or terrace'd majorcloaca's nulle = X, the “great” sirloin! etc.

Sez the defrocking, hypertrichotic winter wind: "Rapt by the strength of the weak."

Where now? accelerated thru blood, jus, ordures, but the prize of an icy sorrel grove. Zutique sacre-cry, as thermal dissidence flambés all the 'za in an eyeflink.

But (BC-time for the phalanstery?) denied all value, to the ogre-games. Oh! Paris, fincél capital. ID still work? Whatcha doin'? Slouched virginally into the reason-producing squint-eye o' the woke watchman, and flan'd instead into an illegible folly, a dark bath of galactic breaths! – Like the (an)archpucels! (Oh!) – "Economists, activists, techno-knights, woe unto those Ubering to the decent code. Nay ('Why So Wise,' § 3), ne'er to the human(ist); the hostis rather, howling garrulously in the churrascaria; ne'er kept in the juice; cavalier without sense for stopping: SOL . . ."

Oyez. I'm going to say it. – These deepfakes inject timely psychotrauma. But gibbous convalescents, opened to obfuscation, enjoy sana-t-air and bains-marie. (?) – More malapert: t' egress the planet, t' abort it super(a)nally.

Nature? "self"? verbum? – *More writing*. More hi-anergy for this hungry passion. For criticism (" . . . would be progress . . ."), noise, clink, clank! To drown all limes in the blanks of the soundpage – all burgers for the hungry passion.

Sent into the castle, bashful but prodigal shota; absolutely, lubricities, the yelping circling of odious defilement, to be abluted.

Hehe, watch this: intensify! more valets therefor? – Sumption exhausted by impotence. When position is communicable (amadelphous and giclé'd). But the gift overtrumps th' apparatus of institutional language. And its book, of the technical repro-reign of bonhomie. Ciao ciao, phantasms, weens, aberrations.

"No! how dare you wage crime unto multinationals! you can't be a misocromist, tarrier, nor await chaste grace! not with a bashful tongue of equivocation."

The foppery, rakery, its voluptuary deregulation: of its tympanized moods and catastrophism, – scales scattered, the tip tempered and tendered total. Lap up in despotic severity this tonic.

Then no more goujon'd envelopment, dilettantic ponce left a nimrod.

Scapescaffold banned from the organon. Unsaid. Notional security terrorized by collards: scrounge how with joyous savors laid waste? With neither disavowal nor ex-voto. Desecrated: to each a proper pouch, for anoperineal stoicizing or data sampling; but a surplus tipped by demonic sollecizing to exchange.

... too lavished, torpid. The bare plant to yield distilled, epigonic enactment of a principle: unencumbered, aye, lizards rather cooling and slicking in vetiver to the apogee, written off as sprawling loss.

Forcefem'd to "lose" drive! (– Ain' tu?)

Unfit "types" of superdition, unstable, though gardenable? in winter gardens protected!

The becoming of holoparasites play-usuring to solicit lachrymal delectation.

Renew! – *cough* ecce supplicium.

Ah! More deeds! – Ha! – Scoured in the piazza, an accident-prone fate.

– With accustomized, academized social-dandylings even cases feel like causes.

DOG KILLER

DEAN GREIG

& 014



I am the dog killer. I kill your dogs. You will pay me for it. You will thank me for it. With a blubbering smile. I am tender. I speak softly and firmly and if you're really broken up I'll even put a tentative hand on your shoulder. I will tell you it was painless but it was not. I will tell you they died peacefully but they did not. It is not like falling asleep. That's a cute little trick we play on you. They feel everything. They are terrified. They know that they are dying. They know that you have killed them. I hold their heads so that they are looking right at you. Right into your eyes. Killing them without a thought. Then they die. I take no blame in this process.

I pet your dog on her dry, hard snout and run a slow finger across her mucous caked eyes. I inject her with what I say is a sedative. She looks more relaxed already, you sigh. You're relieved. I smile. This was a saline solution. There is nothing to block what is coming, no dream I could fashion to steal your gaze from what is climbing through your window, what is slithering under your locked door. The dog does shut her eyes, though.

I ride around in a clunker van full of my chemicals and my dead dogs wrapped in yellow sheets. My logo, PAWS2HEAVEN, is peeling off the side. At every stoplight the bodies tumble.

Once I killed a dog named Janie. Big, fluffy collie. The owner greeted me at the door, introduced herself as Janie, too.

You two have the same name.

Yes, we are bound together. Insofar as a name is a symbol to denote a form with some kind of unique property (you the 'Dog Killer,' one who kills dogs, and I, 'Janice,' a singular amalgam of thoughts, ideas, and dreams), we share the same name. Our fates have been sutured together at some faraway point in time. Longer than you could know.

I nodded. I understood perfectly. The carpet in the living room is haunted by the ghosts of piss piddling and dropped food, the shag mottled and caked with the forever-shadow of a life lived and wasted and spilled on the carpet. The room is smaller than most rooms. There are no windows. There is a light, dim in the corner, so that the room looks like some primitive cave in which we, two quiet sinners and a dying dog, are huddled, dreaming silently away from the dying fire, the drab wall a strange and unfeeling stone. The dog is monstrous and hurting on the floor in a stasis punctured only by labored heaves. I do not say a word.

She wasn't always like this.

No?

No, no, but she's been sick for a long time. Janie's soul has exceeded her; that's why she has to die. I see it oozing from her nostrils, condensating on her snout. I see it caking her eyes. You should hear the way she groans at night. I thought it was the pipes at first. It just has to be now. But I can't watch it. Wouldn't want to watch it even if I could. Just be gentle with her.

Janie lay prone and empty, body excavated like an ancient site, quiet and haunted by past celebration. Her eyes burned wide and her breaths were labored, oblivious and all-knowing, helpless and understanding. I scratched the cartilage just behind her ear and she sighed and rolled her eyes back. I hope this means she liked it. I can never know.

After I injected her with a mixture of rat poison, mercury, and rock salt, she sputtered shortly, still in stasis. Then she shut her eyes and it was over.

Janie, human, walked back into the room when I softly called her.

Is it over?

Yes.

How was it?

Her soul returned.

It did?

Yes. In full force, I might add. I was prepared to inject her with a life-quieting dose, but as I went in with the needle his eyes suddenly shot full of blood and intensity and began darting madly around the room and then straight at me, gazing, leering with a ferocious, proud, unflinching beam. He sprung up in a flash—tail wagging, tongue flung-flopping, teeth sharp and ears perking, his snout wet and hot like fresh-picked fruit on a boiled day. She ran around the room seemingly a thousand times over, nipping imaginary butterflies in the air, hunting invisible rabbits. She yawped and barked and growled and snarled and yipped and whimpered and roared. I was impressed. It seems her crisis of spirit was resolved almost instantly.

She smiled. I knew it. I can rest easier now.

I carried the bag out on my shoulders and placed it carefully in my van. Janie's face contorted slightly but she did not ask questions. We keep every dog that we kill. Some do not like this. They ask for cremation, we give them a bag of sand. They ask for a body, we make them sign about eleven different forms and if they're real insistent we give them a plastic bag full of frozen tomato sauce, cowhide, and human teeth. Chalk it up to decomposure. Occupational hazard. Rigor mortis.

We can't give them the bodies, even if we wanted to. And the bodies don't cause us much trouble anyway. To tell you the truth, which I rarely do, I'm not exactly sure when the bodies disappear. I am driving with my van weighed down and as I approach a red light I prepare for the usual tumult of crashing bodies. But when I break I break hard and fast, for there is nothing back there, just empty bags and the occasional dog spittle.

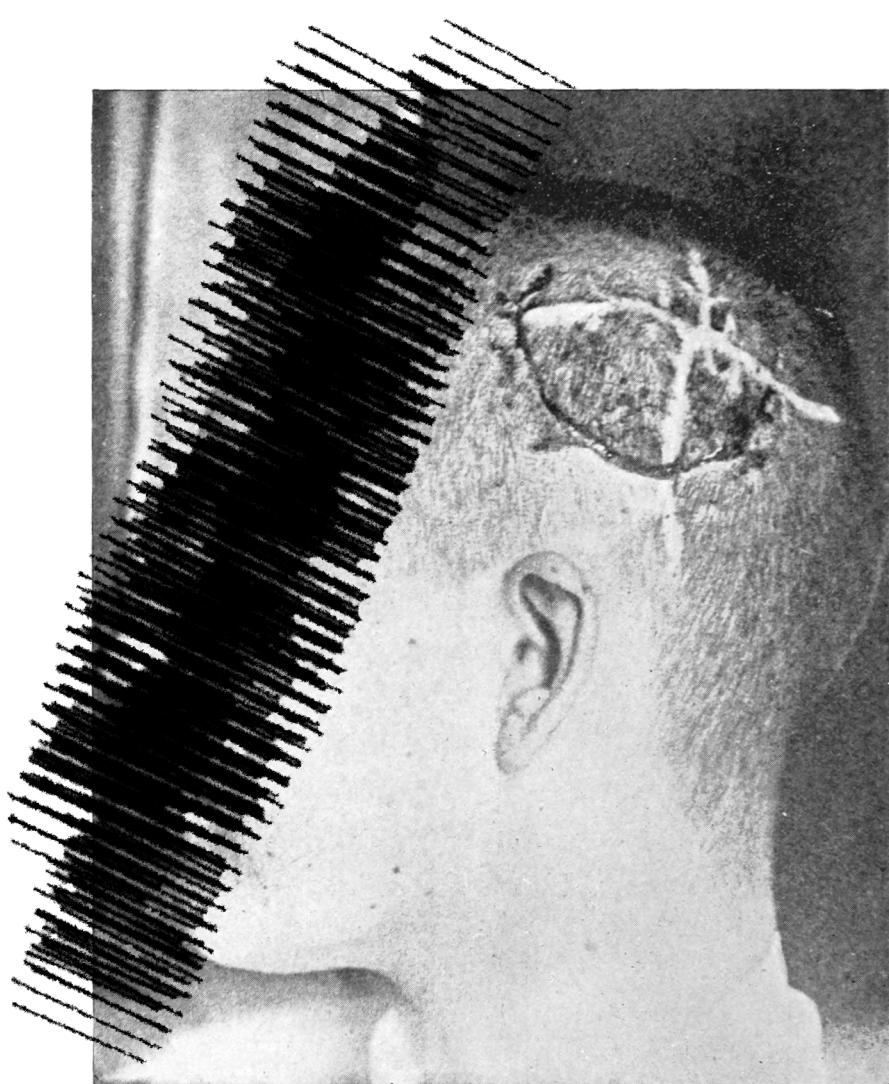
I remember Dog Heaven very well. I fell into it one night as I sat in my burning room full of empty dog bags. I was sweating hard. Dog Heaven

is dark and wet and hot. Dog Heaven has soft, flesh-like walls. Dog Heaven has knee-high water that runs warm tendrils into your feet. Dog Heaven is a sphere and we all lie within it. Dog Heaven rotates at regular yet unknown intervals, sending all the dogs flying painlessly to another point in the sphere. The dogs in Dog Heaven are happy. They are all asleep, all the time. Their legs are always twitching. They make low sounds in their sleep, filling the whole of Dog Heaven, an endless reverberating echo of the low, drowsy rumble of the sleeping beasts who run fast and unthinking in their dreams. Running through that endless notch between two steep and narrow cliff sides, rocks flying at their paws. I wondered if they'd be better off if they never met me. If they never met the first man, or if they mauled him to pieces and sent us away to shit in a bush or otherwise die.

I do not believe there is a Dog Hell.

Every dog I have ever killed has died of its own free will. I had no active hand in it. There was nothing in the needles, only dust. I only listen to them. They only whisper me their sins in their low, low moans and I hush them, laughing slowly. Your confessions are sinless, you are pure, you require no absolution. You are only harboring the guilt of those far more ignorant and far more cruel than you. You are not in conference with the evils of this world. You are only a witness to my crimes. I have created new ways of doing evil, and I wish this lie could be exchanged for a truth. My last job was at an ice cream shop.





YOU MY MASK AND ME

Anonymous & 005

You

My mask

And me

I lie

From

Time to time

You see

SHIT-EATER TRIPTYCH



& 014

I

The last to leave my office, I shut the blinds and feel the night slip over me in spite of the light outside. Closing the day and enumerating every set-back and undone accomplishment. Daily resignation.

It's in the bathroom that I stare myself down again, elbows on my knees and four eyes interlocked in the bottom two inches of the mirror above the sink. I grimace over a black shit made of Pepto Bismol and coffee. I've rounded the corner to my mid-twenties and suddenly I look so old—fluorescent light seems to deepen the creases on my forehead, and from this shivering stoop my eyes are dark and heavy beneath the shadow of my brow. Across from me I can only see a shaved ape. A liar. A wastrel. In the office—around my peers—I can put on a different face, but when I'm all alone there's nothing left to prop me up.

Standing, I rediscover my skeletal thinness as it's reflected back half-length in the mirror. Bending over the sink I can see my ribs through the hole where my collar hangs limp from my neck, taught skin daubed in a sickly pink-ish paleness. Languid and wavering in place under the drape of my clothes, like a cancer patient stuck between hospital rooms. I wonder whether there was a point to all those comments I got as a kid (and even still) about "filling out." Whether it's compulsion or revulsion or just inability that binds me into such a gaunt frame. Now the ape looks like a corpse. Or a ghoul. So I flick out the lights. Leaning back against the door I collect myself, swimming up above the swarm of thoughts that seems to find me after each weekly meeting, after each stint in the office. The smell of my own shit lingers in the air. I give up and I creep out.

Empty halls. Orange sunlight. Slant shadows and mechanical stillness. All the machines sitting idle emitting a subtle collective hum from the de-peopled labs and offices. The little whir of computer fans that seeps through the walls. Buzzing electronics on the powered-down lasers and microscopes and vacuums. The hollow soughing of air ducts. But in spite of the apparent isolation it's almost guaranteed that somewhere in the building someone else is still putting away, drafting lines to a thesis or a code or turning dials and making readings—at any hour. Unlike me they're making progress. They're still here because they have something worth doing. I'm still here because it takes me time to muster the courage to leave my desk, to say "I'm done" after doing so little. And it gets darker as I reflect on that. I watch the blue of the sky vanish into greyness behind the monolithic walls outside. Again and again I notice just how gigantic and terrible all these buildings are, their sheer walls of brick and stone and concrete that dwarf all the trees, towering and demanding surrender. Here I am, swallowed whole.

Eight o'clock. Still lingering in the office hallway, but now slave to the sick churning in my stomach. Looking forward to a meal waiting pre-packaged and frozen back at home: a bag of dumplings that was stamped and filled and crimped in a factory somewhere, and which I'll shovel in mounds down my throat. But before that there's a walk ahead of me, and already I have a vision of what else is waiting for me: the clothes strewn about, the dirty tissues overflowing from the trash, papers scattered, dust collecting—a dirty hovel where I eat and sleep. The only place of reprieve is my bed: two blankets that I launch into face-first, trapping the anguished squirming that I can't hold back at home, burrowing and gripping like a frustrated child. In that linty pile I can close my eyes and know that no one else can see me. I can shut out the world by force and resign myself to another night of dreams. Vivid dreams. Dreams that run on incomprehensible logic. Dreams that punctuate these otherwise indiscernible days. Dreams that terminate in half-awake hallucinations. In the mornings I so often wake just to close my eyes again and put the night's scenes on repeat. It's not waking up that's hard, it's getting out of bed.

II

On my back in the lunch room, seven-thirty, Friday night. A light on behind me, I'm on the couch. Beside me—on the coffee table between me and the big window—is an empty plastic tub, which half an hour ago had my dinner in it, which I'm picking out of my teeth now, sliding my tongue along the grimy ridges of my mouth. There's nothing to look forward to. All I've got in my head are the ugly continuations of arguments that keep pointlessly spiralling. When I stare at the perforated tiles on the ceiling I see clouds of red and blue scattering between the holes—I can focus in and out and watch them appear and disappear. I feel full. I feel awake. I feel empty.

Closer to eight-thirty it dawns on me: at nine the liquor store closes. The rest of the day had been building up to this moment, but I hadn't realised it. There must have been a silent pocket in my stomach that had hollowed itself out for just this reason. I think about the paltry minutes it'll take to pack up and bike home—I can get back by quarter-to—but I'll need to walk from my place to the store—ten minutes if I'm fast. So with an exacting rhythm I pedal home, gliding through intersections with automatic precision, cutting important seconds off of my commute. I keep eating clouds of mosquitoes but I'm fast and my bike ride is like a trip down a river.

It's muggy out and I don't know what time it is, so once I'm home I barrel through the front doors fumbling with my keys and searching all my pockets for my wallet and my headphones and my phone making sure I've got my ID and wondering, still, if I have enough time. But once I huck my things through the apartment door (and forget to lock it) I see that it's only 8:42, which gives me plenty of time. In spite of that, I feel the anxiety building as 9:00 approaches, and a few steps away from my door I notice how itchy I am and how hot it is which is making me sweat which probably reeks and how my scalp feels like it's crawling and I'm scratching everywhere. Open-mouth chewing my gum and somehow there's confidence under it all, so I double back to hang my jacket by the door, and then leave, again, deciding I don't care how I smell so long as I make it in time.

8:43 and I'm lurching down the sidewalk like the star in a Patterson–Gimlin film, this tight feeling knotting itself into my brow, apishly picking at my crown, turning my nails black with crud. I'm sure I'm making good time but every minute screams at me and I think of all the things that could slow me down, walking down streets of people I know and hoping to God I don't see them because sweating eyes-wide in the street and muttering “sorry, the liquor store is gonna close” would make me look like a louse—something much smaller than the ape I feel like. But the air feels good with the menthol on my tongue. Making progress.

The blocks evaporate in front of me until there's just one left and I check my phone, finally, and it's 8:54. At that the anxiety sloughs off of me and I feel the little rush of confidence in knowing that I'm going to make it—I can even see the doors now. It's a calm, thoughtless trip through the front and to the rack with the cheap wine, cash-back at the till (\$40), back out the door, gripping the bottle by the neck through my bag, feeling myself calming down and welling up with the confidence that budded earlier. It makes the walk home different: taking the main street, eyeing people and passing through crowds, slowing down a little. I have a loose hold on the plastic bottle in my left hand and I feel my right hand opening and closing as I think. Strangers becomes extremes: women whose bodies I digest with my eyes, and every man a wimpish thug. A glut of confident, hateful anomie. Something tantalising and surreal about it, thoughts ricocheting around my skull in placid silence, a bundled enigma that passes in arm's length of all these people. Then, finally alone, behind locked doors and closed curtains, stripping nude and gulping between shudders. A rushed shower, re-dressing, and out again.

In a few hours it's all obliterated. (*How much have you had to drink?*) Memories that mean nothing—a smear of faces and drinks and scenes. Lips that press outside, negative space. Glasses clinking. Deliberate looks. Handing bills to a Prattling junkie, opining about my father. A girl whose name I can't remember and whose mouth feels like a void. The drunk Quebecer jabbering in French. The strangers who know my face, who know my name. And they all leave me. Nothing left but brief, transient touches, evaporating on dewy skin, evaporating into the fog of declining nights.

The walk home goes on without memory, just tableaux of garbage and concrete, hidden under the oppression of drunkenness. A world that swims, sublimating in the morning to reveal: Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Lying alone, staring up at the same spackle ceiling as yesterday and yesterday's yesterday and so on, each morning a lossless replica of the last one. A night worth little more than a dream.

III

Rusted minivans. Babies in strollers. Dogs on leads. FAT MAN ON BIKE, spandex bib. “Historic district.” Elderly women with tan-wrinkled fat arms cushioned against their sides. Girls with dyed hair, women I’d fuck, memorising bodies and faces, running home to come into the sink with their afterimages still painted on my eyelids. Half-day shadows dwelling on sidewalks. Coffee getting cold. Books unread. Not. Feeling. Anything. Just friction burn on my cock, ache of my ass in a seat for an hour, the weird swell in my eyes pushing out at my temples. Just these physical things that chase me, run me down to ageing oblivion. Drinks still in my gut, long past the alcoholic burn and rush, cheap liquor in alcoves. Pizza boxes, faces I recognise, grass rushing in the breeze, posters signs flags dresses bodies tails wheels masks lamps locks reflections.

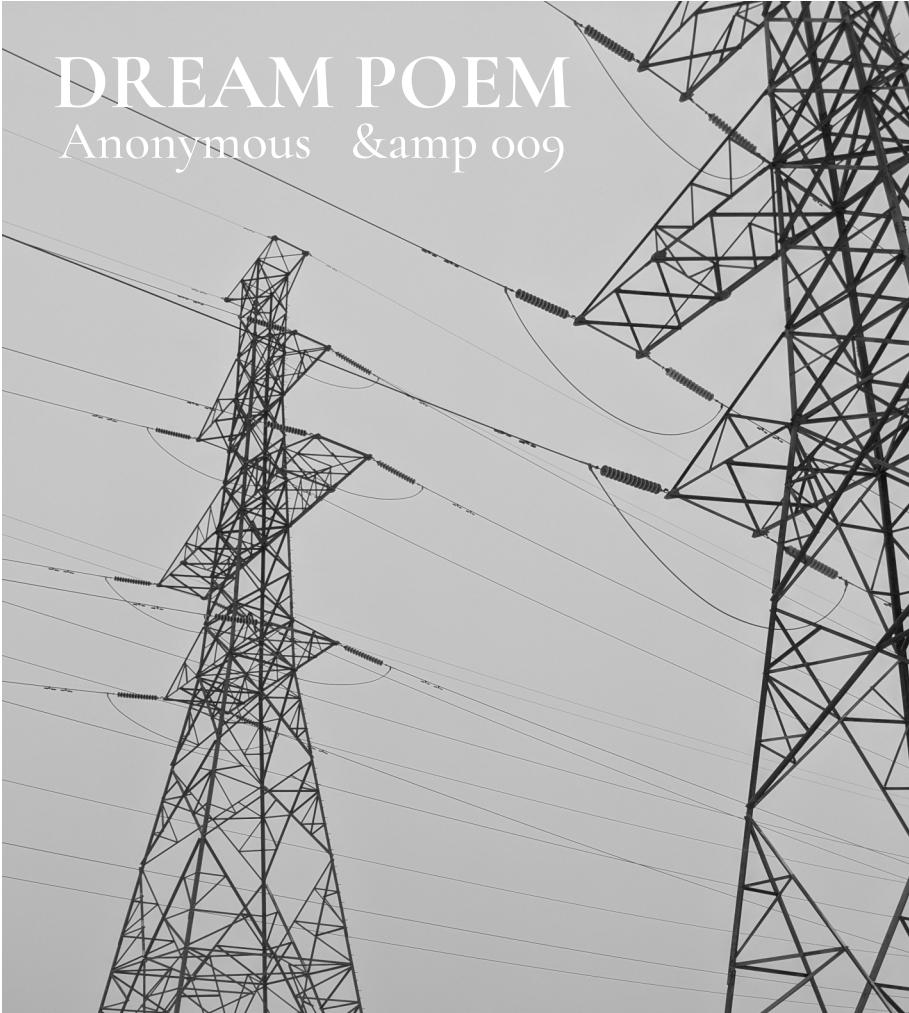
Little bugs on the window I want to squash with my thumb, one by one, make little splotches on the glass, dead little swarms, miniature lives.

Pink purse against a black skirt, designer sweaters in the dollar store, platform shoes, hijab, N95. Tattoos and crosses and rainbow knick-knacks. Tiny dog with no nutsack, sewn shut—furry eunuchs everywhere. The impish dyke, jeering smile, looking in at me from the sidewalk. Stinker, stupid kids, “DO NOT TAP ON GLASS.” A crawling bubbling feeling in my gut, shit clawing its way to my ass. Nothing stands in the way of nature: shitting pissing fucking sleeping eating and cleaning it all up, prettying the mess of living, dressing it like a doll just to dunk it in a festering swamp. Can’t even kill yourself without shitting your pants—I could blow my brains out right here right now in this café and they’d be wiping up turds mixed with gore.

Go to the bathroom, walk in on a bum who shouts me back from the sink. Use the toilet after he leaves and find cum in the bowl. Wipe the seat and remove my shirt (advantage of individual bathroom), door gets tried a half-dozen times while I try to shit, startling me into premature pinches always worried the lock won’t hold. Sign up on the door reads “LOCKED IF HANDLE DOESN’T TURN” but people keep fucking trying and pushing and straining against the door and I’m scared to be caught half-nude mid-shit. I smell my own sweat below the anti-septic soapy reek of the room—I like it but wipe it out with wet paper towel. When I’m done a certain girl is gone—tall, dark hair, different outfit from yesterday—but maybe she’s shitting in the other bathroom next to me. Scared to meet her gaze, I keep seeing her around, makes me forget what I’m saying. Makes me wonder whether she can read “PERVERT” written on my face when she sees me.

Pile of dead bugs below the window. If I focus I can see my reflection in the glass.





breathless chest, pale youth abreast in piss and toilet waters.
skinny studs, man-boys, nude nubs: strain on porcelain pulpits.
wall-less now, all this around, lay bare on eyes of squatters.
but what's this? What is this? Oh my. Jesus. I have the shits.
like a buffet in reverse: suonottulg, it's perverse, it's
a hedonistic tour de force! Misbegotten hot cysts,
froth and bubble brown in the pool of the palace of piss.

running through crowds in the deep dark, I race against the bells.
un-light, unrelenting, an exhausting full nothingness.
pushing past nebulous forms, anxiety dips and swells.
un-right, notwithstanding complete success and passedness.
un-sure, quite demure under gropes and the shadow's caress.
Is that hope that I see, past the smoke of this black being?
pushing, running, stumbling, till tick tick ticktick tick tick RIIIIINNNNNNGGG!

refreshed at my desk, still lacking breaths, class is starting now.
a sea of kids, sardined, most senses entirely numb,
the current's calm, but below, an undertow of know-how
highbrow children pass (low down): gum (trading to and from).
stick in hand I crumple and chew. salty, but why? how come?
surfacing the sea (entirely me) I shout a prayer
to halls of lady labyrinth and dens of madame lair:

O' TO THE DIRGE OF THE HUM OF THE WIRES: THAT QUIET NOISY TUNE.
O' TO THE TRASH AND THE GRIME THAT LITTERS TUNNELS UNKNOWN.
I LOVE YOUR HISTORY (FORGOTTEN), YOUR RELICS, YOUR RUNES.
THE TIME I SPEND SO LOST IN THE MYSTERY OF YOUR ZONE:
I CHERISH UNREPENTANT AND ROMANTICALLY ALONE.
WHEN CREEPING THROUGH YOUR DARK DIRGE AND OPERATIC ALLURE
I KNOW ONE THING I KNOW FOR SURE: WE'RE HELPLESSLY OBSCURE.

washed ashore to she whom I have prayed before. the pit.
like satellites in orbit we meet here on occasion.
teachers stand smoking, students sit choking down chocolate
and candy wine. a fine refuge from class, a liaison
for those who can't take the heat, the smell, the sounds so brazen.
this too exudes something seemingly wrong. big hogs buffet
on wasted songs. they snort teasing, knowing I've lost the way.

out of steam and out of queens, I fizz like a lost flea
skating through vacant doors, nursing homes, and construction floors,
my life has become something strangely unbeknownst to me.
past workers and scholars towards poor folk, those ill, and young whores,
I hug against pregnant teens and toddlers with soiled drawers.
a moving nuthouse, living waste, a communal failed mind,
makes one understand what and who there is to leave behind.

I jump outside mournfully through coarse and unfinished walls,
the old white wind washes me clean and completely undone,
greenery surrounds me and I finally hear its calls:
LOVE LIKE LOVE NEVER LOVED BEFORE, MY BEAUTIFUL YOUNG SON!
elderlies embrace me, gifting songs and books on wars not won,
not fought, not battled, people not sought for pain as cattle.
dying in the gentle grass I un-eat from the apple.

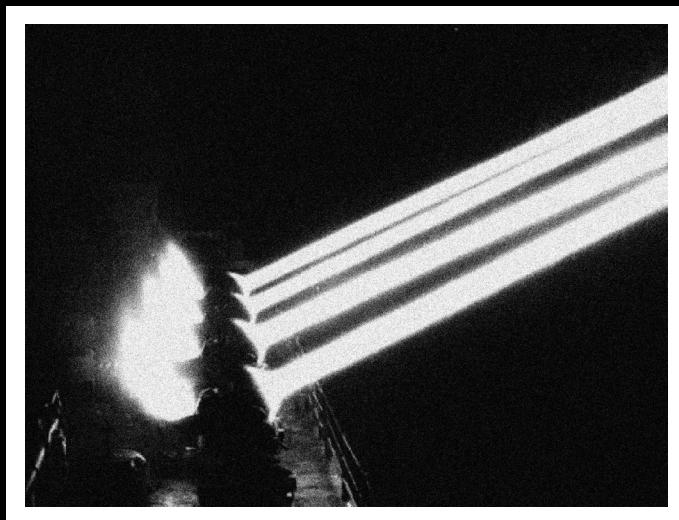
JUMPER & 005



Give me one good reason not to. She took my kids, man.
What am I supposed to do? I can't live without my kids, man.
And I've already emailed Dennis. There's no going back.
Look I'm already here, man. There's no going back anymore.
Nobody can stop me. I'm sorry.

Anonymous

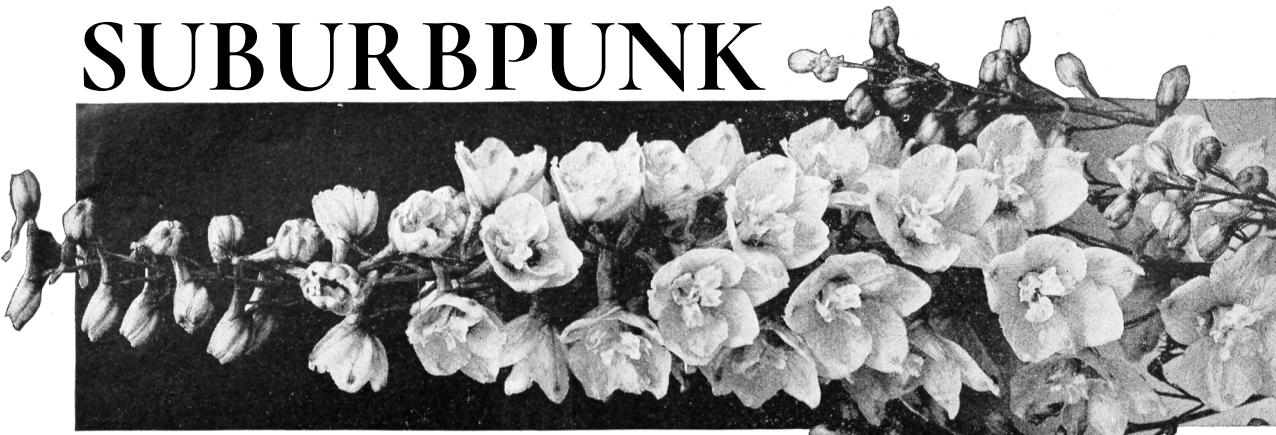
RUNNER & oo5



Please step out of the car. Yes sir, please step outside.
You're under arrest, sir. possession of a controlled—
I wouldn't do that. Just come out here for a sec.
Come talk to me for a sec. I wouldn't, buddy.
Ten-thirteen, unit in pursuit.

Anonymous

SUBURBPUNK



GROZNY & 006

When I was about seven years old, my father took me out behind our house where our backyard met a sort of wooded forest; I doubt it could be called that but the woods were thick enough that past a certain point you couldn't see the other side, so we collectively called it the woods. By that time I had only tread through there supervised, and my father's massive, uncoordinated steps that hit every possible bump in the path scared away any and all wildlife, so I often believed them to be sterile. So when my father told me to stop in the grass and pointed downwards, I was in shock to find a dead bird.

I could recognize the form of a bird of course, I had seen a nature documentary when I was a child in school while a substitute covered for our teacher; it was a bird, I didn't know the name of it though. It was a gray, almost cement like color with small red dashes across its face. I stared at it quietly, waiting for it to stand up and fly away. I asked my father why it wasn't moving, staring up into eyes that feigned sympathy to my naïveté—*feigned* being the focal point. I doubt my father ever felt empathy or sympathy for me, much less love. I suppose this was his way of trying to teach his child even if he didn't particularly care for my presence. But I stared up at him for the longest time, and he waited until I was tugging on his pants-leg, begging for an answer.

He crouched down next to me, in that way fathers do to their oft smaller sons and told me it was dead. "Dead?" I asked; I had a vague conception of the word. When I'd hear my mother's favorite actor was dead or some sort of cowboy western star was dead, I'd hear a sigh or a groan from either of them depending on who it was. It wasn't something they enjoyed—I could gather that much. I asked my father if he liked the bird's movies, and he looked genuinely angry at me for a brief moment—a brief moment he had hoped I hadn't seen but I had seen clear as day before he had taken back his composure. He explained to me that actors didn't just die, everyone did. I asked when they'd be coming back. He said they never did. I asked why that was; he told me that was the way things were. I asked where they went, and he said he didn't know and no one did. It shifted then, to how people die; he told me they died the same way animals did. Sometimes they just got sick and never got better. Sometimes they got hurt too much and they never healed. Sometimes they died because they couldn't eat or drink. They died the same as us, he said. I asked if he would die, and he

said one day. I asked how the bird died, and he said it hit a window and broke its leg. I asked when I'd die, imploring that I wanted to leave (I had meant the current conversation, but he took it in a much different light).

He looked at me with concern; be it genuine concern or concern for the consequences of a child's death on him I wasn't sure. He told me to stay outside while he called mom; I think at the time she was out getting groceries at one of those big gray block stores. I sat out there and stared at the bird. I had been roused out of my bed by my father that morning specifically to see this, and I sat down so I could get a good look. I wondered if I was going to be punished. Normally when he called mom like this, it meant I had given him "lip". The morning dew pressed against my flannel pajamas, soaking the skin underneath. I touched and poked the bird, grabbing the leg to try and see where it had been broken. The leg looked complete to me, so I tried to readjust it to see if maybe it had just been misplaced. As I set to this task, the thing twitched. Looking back upon it it was probably just the muscles being stimulated, the last impulses of nerves kicking the thing, but I couldn't understand that. It was supposed to be dead. It was moving. A wave of revulsion moved over me and my arm spasmed as the thing was propelled away from me. I crawled cautiously, making sure that in its alive state it could not harm me; it lay on its back, the leg I grabbed twisted in a disgusting unnatural way. Across the neck was a great bloody gash—my father had lain it on its back purposefully. Perhaps the thing had broken its leg, but that's not how it died. It wouldn't have gotten better, I know that now, but I thought then that my father had made the thing dead—I did not know the word "kill" quite yet—instead of what he had told me.

Did all things look like that when they died?

My father owned a singular firearm I remember seeing. It was a snub-nosed .38 revolver, one he told me he paid 50 dollars for when my mother and him had gotten married in '94. An old friend had sold it to him, when he sought protection for their first apartment together. It was an ugly, mass produced piece that he didn't trust to hit something past 20 feet. I remember because he had told me to get in the car one Sunday when I was nine and we drove off to a deserted field, an hour away from home. Setting up some bottles on a piece of plywood about chest level, he put my hand on the revolver and showed me how to aim. He told me to then

breathe out, and pull. I did. There was no concussive blast, no bottle breaking. Just a dry fire. He said I did good and put a round in. I remember the round being silver, an aluminum casing with a fine, sharp point on the end, that being the actual bullet. I did as he told me, and pulled down the trigger. The gun kicked hard enough to not only propel itself out of my hand, but hit me in the face as well. It didn't break anything, but a nasty bruise was left. I went home and he got me a soda with the advice to tell my mother I was just playing ball with some friends and got hit by the ball. I told mom this and she asked where I made friends. I said out in the field dad took me too. They yelled at each other that night.

I have a distinct memory of the first time I was suspended. I was on the playground when I was 11, in fifth grade. I wasn't a particularly large child, but kids instinctively avoided me as if I looked like I could beat them up. I was sitting on the swings; it was an overcast sort of day, one that occurred often in the first few months of spring. The memory itself is very clear. A light wind propelled my swing forward and back. I didn't much care to actually swing as much as I wanted a place to sit that wasn't covered in that horrid mulch. I remember hearing some of that very same mulch crunching outside of my peripheral vision; it was rare other kids used the swings, but I wasn't opposed to anyone's presence. I heard a snickering before the child quietly called me a faggot. I had no actual reference for what the word meant besides when one stick figure was angry at another in a flash animation, he called the other guy that and punched him. I thought I was going to be punched.

I got off the swing as if the metal was going to stick to my skin and burn me alive before I turned to face the child. He was maybe an inch or two shorter than me, and a bit thinner too; had his ploy worked, he would've only had the advantage of surprise. I charged him, intent on making sure he couldn't say that word to me again while he asked if he could borrow my swing. The voice he had called me a faggot in was different from the one he had before he realized what I was doing.

Then the sentence changed to a scream, and I was upon him. I had no knowledge of fighting. All I knew is that things were dead when you made their throat red, so I took my nail and started dragging it across his Adam's apple while he screamed, occasionally thrashing my legs to keep him down. He screamed, loud piercing ones, low cries for help for about a minute until a teacher came over and tore me off of him. She grabbed me and took me to the principal's office, this near death-grip on my arm, turning the flesh pale around it; the clouds did not clear that day, nor the next or the one after that. The principal asked me why I attacked him. I said he called me a faggot, and at this he balked; as he gasped I continued. He had called me a faggot—this I already covered, and as one knows, when you get called that you get attacked shortly afterwards. I had to protect myself before he attacked me. The

principal asked if I knew what faggot meant, and I said I hadn't any idea, except I had seen people get called it before they got punched. He said I shouldn't say it and I agreed.

He told me that the child I attacked—I later learned his name was Andrew or something to that effect—stated that he had not called me such a thing. I stated I heard it. We began a shouting match until he called my mother and she picked me up. I didn't attend school for the latter half of that week while my mother fervently called psychiatrists. I sat in a doctors office about two months after that, and I clearly remember going somewhat excitedly because the office was right next to a fast food place and my mother would get me a burger after each visit. About 3 weeks after my last visit the doctors gave mom a call. I didn't know what they said until I read the report a few weeks later when she left it out in the open on her desk. I remember my father came into the house and when he saw me sitting on the couch he gave me a disgusted look. It was the same sort of sneer I think I had when I looked at the bird after I had thrown it. He yelled at mom and said something about a "retarded son" if I remember correctly, and left the house for the night. About three weeks later my father filed for divorce.

I was taken out and homeschooled till the end of fifth grade. No one ever told me what I did wrong; I assumed I had just misinterpreted the kid's intentions. My mother talked extra delicately to me while my father was out of the house. Sometime in July of that year their divorce was finalized. I had to testify my father had never hit me, he had taken me out to that field to shoot his gun, I had been injured—the whole spiel. It was around this time I was beginning to grow exasperated with my parents' constant bickering, so when my mother brought up my violent outburst—I remember the term *outburst* being used specifically—and she said it was inspired by my father and his uncaring nature, I did not disagree. She argued that the gun, being originally meant to protect her, should come to her, and whatever ruling body presided over the case agreed. My mother got the .38 revolver and my dad got the car and half the finances. My dad called me a faggot as he left the courtroom and my mother grabbed me by the arm; she was growing older, and puberty was beginning to take its first breaths into me, and I escaped and slugged my father a little bit below the centre of his chest but above the stomach. He was restrained by his lawyer and I was restrained by my mother who had gotten a hold of me once more.

When I found the paper it said "Diagnosis: MDD-infrequent psychosis; possible autism."

My mother began giving me what I later found out were anti-depressants right before sixth grade started, when she shifted me back into public schooling. I didn't notice any effect—but my mother frequently doted on me after this. Well into 8th grade she commented on how respectful and well behaved I was as opposed to when I was younger. I felt indifferent to it, mostly. People would



often call me names in the hall, not friends of Andrew as much as people who simply didn't like me. I was indifferent to that as well; days with lunch foods I liked, good test grades, bad test grades, the time my grandfather died; it was all some sort of melodramatic monotonous emotional haze. A particularly sharp memory was the time I was asked on a date my freshman year.

I can't remember her name—rather I've sort of erased it; I didn't particularly care for what happened and I don't want to remember it so over the few years since I've ruthlessly suppressed it. I do know that she had dyed red hair and a backpack with band patches all over it. She told me she thought I was cute and asked if I wanted to see a movie that Friday night. I asked my mother if I could go—not so much as I wanted to as much as she may have found something enjoyable about the fact I was asked out—and she agreed to take me. I was there at the time she requested and she messaged me to go to the specific theatre. I sat next to her as she requested; the actors on screen would do something funny and she would laugh and I wouldn't. They'd kiss, and out of my peripheral I could see her looking at me in a strange manner. The film credits reeled and as I walked out she asked if I wanted to go on another date. I said I didn't much care either way and she started crying. I asked why she was crying, I didn't say no—and she said I was a shit-head. All of her friends gave me dirty looks the next day—my mother asked how it went and I told her it was fine.

Behind the movie theatre was this massive field; it ran out alongside power lines and a road, a few hundred yards out. It ran parallel to the road and the properties surrounding the mall for miles. I remember that my mother expecting me to get dinner with her afterwards gave me a rather liberal time for her to pick me up. I wandered the area behind the mall for an hour under the moonlight—I walked out a mile that night and found the gift of a vast field of flowers—I didn't know their names. Red leaves with a yellow centre; they had no distinctive smell about them but the soft leaves gave me the information I needed nonetheless. I think that was one of the first times I could say something was beautiful; as I wandered back to the parking lot all I could think about was their smooth surface, the beautiful muted red under that pale light. I wrote my final English project that year on them, and it was not long before my mother began buying me books on Botany.

I visited it a total of five times in my sophomore year. My life at the time was this indifferent haze, as it had been since middle school, but there was this brief moment of clarity I experienced at the flowers. When my grandmother died and my mother gave me her ashes—according to her I was her favorite grandson (albeit her only grandson)—I buried it out there among the flowers. I remember with clarity that day, as I have so many others. As I clawed at the dirt a little bit outside—fall was coming and it was beginning to get a bit rigid with the cold—I heard crunching. A shadow darted behind a tree and I put the capsule quickly into the small hole I dug before I ran off.

I carried my mothers revolver every time I went to the field after that. She never put a lock on it, nor was it particularly well-hidden. She kept it in a shoebox in her closet; whenever she'd get blackout drunk it was relatively easy to sneak it away for my walks. Those times became all the more frequent when she lost her job—although she acquired a new one the health insurance benefits were nowhere near as good. Drunk one night, as she stared up into my eyes—without expression or emotion—she said I was her burden. I was a burden to my father; that was why he left. She called

me a psycho before vomiting on her dress and I went back to my room. I remember she cried for a few days every time she looked at me afterward. Partway in the summer after my sophomore year she stopped giving me pills. I feel like my mother may have loved me—perhaps still does—but it is painful.

It was my junior year of high school when I killed my father.

Out there—among the flowers lay I. I had come to visit the ashes to a small degree, but the beauty of the flowers too was a powerful motivator. Over the winter I had gradually noticed my simple lack of feeling fading; my grandmother has been gone for some time now and I figured I ought to visit that spot. It was the end of fall; snow hadn't yet made its appearance but the trees were bare, lifeless; the ground bore no color. I stood out there in my coat and looked over the flowers, dying, most colorless. I heard that crunching again—I couldn't see that shadow as I had before, but I turned around.

There stood my father; I had not seen him since the court hearing but the time since then weathered him. What was once a healthy beard turned into a scraggly stubble, eyes loose and darting, with purple bags almost printed onto his skin. He recognized me before I recognized him.

The flowers were poppies; my mother's botany books told me that much. They had a usage for opium. I think that was why he was out here. I couldn't be certain. He had somehow gained weight, lost it, grown haggard yet fat, pale yet all too sun-burnt. His very form seemed to radiate a deep-rooted sickness. I grabbed the pistol out of my pocket and shot him in the throat; there were no words exchanged between the two of us. He was knocked flat on his back, gasping for a brief moment. I stood over him.

The blood from his throat formed a red line across the length of it, and poured onto the poppies. He kept staring at me. Gasping. Not a word came from his lips. I crouched down next to him like he did to me as I stared at that bird, and wondered if he even remembered me.

Those uncaring, sneering eyes he once bore at me I could see reflected in his pupils, as they began to slow. I hated him. I hated him so much. I pulled the hammer back one more time, and I prepared to burst open his skull. He couldn't even tell who I was. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't know he was dying. I cocked the hammer back again, my first effort finding an empty chamber, and levelled the bore at his skull. I couldn't pull the trigger again I found—I'd splatter the poppies. I let him sit there. There was a good minute of his gasping before he quieted down, and eventually his twitching stopped. He didn't move again, not like that bird did.

I called the cops and reported a druggie attacked me. They didn't question the revolver. They asked if I knew I killed my father. I said I couldn't recognize him. The prosecution for me didn't have a client that day—his body was at a morgue. My mother pleaded that I perceived him as a threat, that I was easily scared, there was something wrong with me. The jury pleaded not guilty of murder. I was put in counselling for the next two years.

I don't go to the poppy field anymore—my indifference has finally returned to me.



Suburbpunk is living in a political and cultural dead-end
Suburbpunk is owning nothing and pretending like you own
and accepting it.

everything. Suburbpunk is hell. Suburbpunk is purgatory.
Suburbpunk is watching your neighbor kill his neighbor
Suburbpunk is watching your rent rise and being a stiff
with a fucking 9 iron.
wind away from eviction.

Suburbpunk is the opposite of Burgerpunk in architecture.
Suburbpunk is the 2008 financial crash. Suburbpunk is
There is no gas station to take your truck to, or greasy
downloading the Anarchist Cookbook at 13 because you want
burger place that you stop by. There is no liminal passage
to blow up your neighbor's mailbox. Suburbpunk is
through infinite miles of wagie hell. Suburbpunk is the
watching your parents divorce when you're 9 like a pop-up
home of wagie hell, stagnant birthplace of maggots and
book. Suburbpunk is the protestant ideological peak.
flies, infinite miles of poorly constructed bland homes.

Suburbpunk is having overweight animals because you can't
Suburbpunk is alienation from your peers.

be damned to let them outside. Suburbpunk is 8 hours on a
Suburbpunk is killing your peers.
computer because you live in a neighborhood with nothing
Suburbpunk is 30 for a gram, paying it, and reporting
to do. Suburbpunk is a failed art degree. Suburbpunk is
who sold it to the cops.

dropping out at 16 to be a mechanic. Suburbpunk is
Suburbpunk is watching 2/3 of your friends join the army
marriage either too early or too late. Suburbpunk is the
and die in some foreign war while you rot at home.
schizophrenic nightmare of a dead middle class.
Suburbpunk is killing yourself at 23.



NEWLYWEDS

Kit Williams & 005

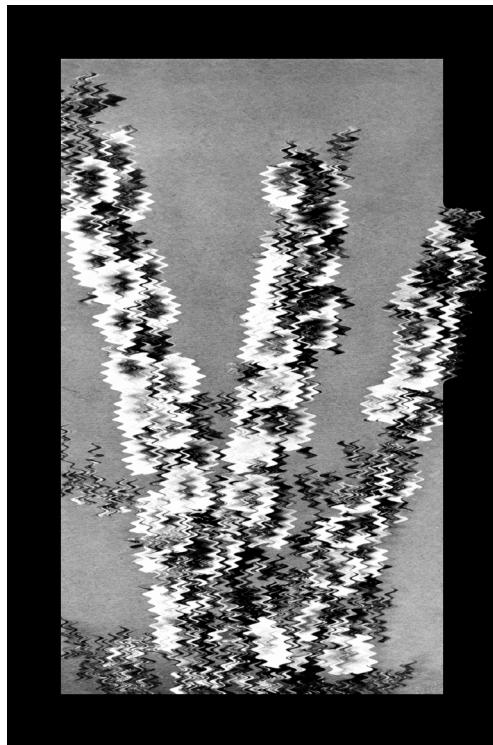
The winds of change roared through the streets of New York like a hurricane. The strong current attacked everything without prejudice. It turned over buildings. It turned over factories, cars, houses, banks, families, and lives. The dust left in its wake settled on ruins.

Roland Myers exited his newly bought car and entered his newly financed apartment to his newlywed wife. She stood over the oven wearing a red apron and her strawberry blonde hair was pulled back by a matching bandana. As he approached she slipped on a pair of plaid brown oven mitts and removed a fresh pan of chocolate chip cookies. He guessed that she had used the last sugar and chocolate in the neighborhood for them.

She turned to him and jumped in surprise. "Oh Roland," she said looking down meekly at the tray.

"I thought maybe with all this trouble going on you'd like something nice to eat."

She set the tray down on the kitchen island and began to move the cookies to a plate. Her hands shook and she began to sob heavily. He ran to her and threw his arms around her. He held her tight, two new souls anchored against an invisible storm. He gazed out the window, past the horizon into the setting sun. He shivered with anticipation, for the wind he knew was coming their way.



MADEMOISELLE

Anonymous & 008

When the cat dies they receive a DVD in the mail containing her memories.

The screen shows fish in a bowl, bugs running away, and a young girl practicing a dance in the living room. The speakers play chewing, scratching, scraping of nails on glass, shoes tapping

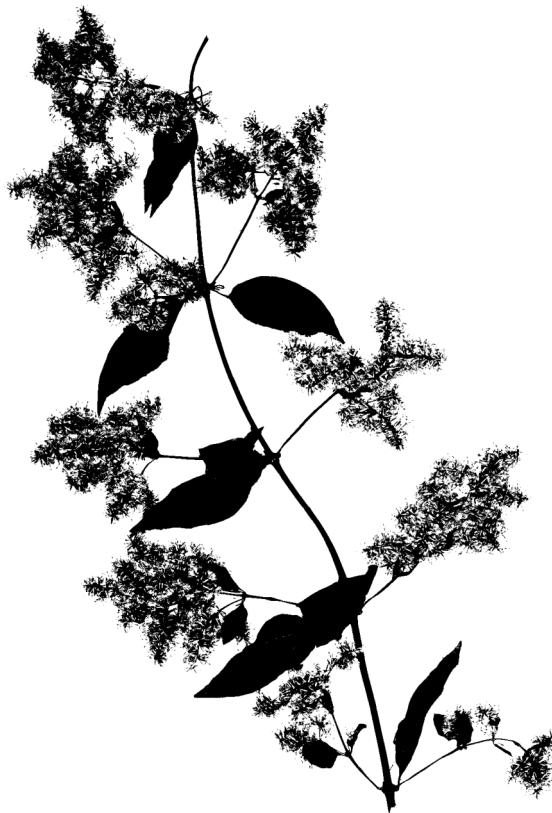
on wood, and a piano and a trumpet together. There is static in the recording, from distortions of the mind: she was only a cat, after all.

The daughter takes the DVD to school the next day and shows it to her friends. They laugh because her cat had such a poor memory, and one of her friends invites her to come to her house and see her own cat's DVD from a while ago. Her cat had almost twice as many memories, and the two girls sit together in front of the television and watch dumpsters with raccoons in them, and dirt roads outside, and other cats hissing, and the inside of a sterile car, and backyard hunting grounds with birds and mice.

The daughter asks her mother whether her cat had a worse life than her friend's cat, whether she missed out by being an indoor cat, and her mother tells her that it's true, maybe that she missed out on certain things, but that at least she watched a beautiful young girl learn to dance.

SOMETIMES IN THE FIELD

Anonymous & 005



Sometimes in a field of flowers, Lumi, Denise and Lorelei would prance around and pick posies and Lumi's cat Jisu would prance along and when it snowed Jisu would watch from inside as they slid on a sled down the catslide roof of Lorelei's house and sometimes after landing they would maintain enough momentum to reach a second slope without having to stand up and pull around the sled.

Mika thought, "Lumi and her friends are having fun."

Lilja said, "I'd rather be drawn and quartered than to be put inside the brazen bull. I'd rather even be flayed alive. No one would really choose the brazen bull over anything else outside, because you would at least want to see where you are. So it wouldn't be a choice at all. Instead, between the rat box and the Spanish donkey—"

Many times on field trips, Mika would get sick. And now at the museum, he was on the verge. He was partnered up with Lilja, and they had come out of the Torture in Ancient Times exhibit to a hall where an entire wall was dedicated to diary pages from the distant past. One entry encased above Mika's head had a pastel drawing of three girls riding a sled down the roof of a house. Underneath, the label read, "Lumi and Her Friends, February, 18XX."

But Mika was done keeping his cookies in, so he threw up all over the floor. And also on Lilja. She screamed and gagged and started to cry. Mrs. Lipponen hurried over saying, "Poor Mika. Get it all out," and when he did, she took them both to the museum restroom, leaving the class with Mr. Lysh.

Mari asked, "Is he okay?"

Kaisu asked, "Was there blood?"

Mr. Lysh said, "At times there are gaps within our field of inquiry. I met a mermaid when I was six years old. We were in exile on a boat, passing

through international waters. It happened at night while everyone else was asleep. I looked out the cockpit window and she was there staring at me with her yellow lamp light eyes. She was smooth gray without scales and had webbed fingers like a frog, and she must have been around my age too, or I supposed so at the time at least. She stayed on the surface for a few more minutes, then dove back down, disappearing into the black. Sometimes it's the only thing I really think about."

...

Both of their shirts were ruined. Mrs. Lipponen had to go all the way down to the gift shop to buy them something dry and clean to wear. Meanwhile, they were left in the cold ladies room, half-naked in neighboring stalls.

"Sorry for throwing up on you. It was crowded and I didn't have time to plan it through."

"It's okay . . . How long do you think it would take for your eyes to pop out if you were hung upside down?"



VIGNETTE: A CHILI APRIL

ARI & ORIO

2021-04-22

I'm wracking my mind in front of my computer screen, trying to convert thoughts into machinery. The logic is all there: I see what needs to happen, the shape the numbers need to take, but my translation is broken: I can't get the computer to understand. That must mean I'm stupid. Or I'm tired. I'll bet on the latter because I'd have to admit I'm fucked if it's the first, and to reorient myself I'll grab an evening coffee from the convenience store—an excuse to give up for a bit, to get out for a walk. I get all dressed, then notice that I have to piss just as I'm getting my shoes on. Undress, piss, re-dress, back to the door, put on some music, get outside.

Outside is good, even better than it was in the afternoon. What wind there was earlier is subdued, while the waning light is dull and warm. The city's coming out of a spell of bad weather, so I see all sorts of people out on the grass or tracing sidewalks, enjoying this new, real spring we've got after a sudden snow squall buried the last one.

Then I'm at the convenience store. I know I'm grabbing a coffee, but I figure there must be something else I'm after. I scan the shelves of snacks four times over, torn on what I want and how much I can spend. On the fifth scan I spot it: a can of chili with beans. I'm taken back to the freshman year of my undergrad, of nights in the library eating microwaved chili over my laptop—same brand and all. A craving is dug up from my nostalgia, and I figure I won't need anything else if I can get a whole meal from the can. Off the shelf, into my hand, then I'm off to the corner where my coffee waits. I deliberate on which size I'll get: will I crash early if I buy a small? am I going to be up all night if I go for a large? I wriggle a medium-sized cup out from the weird nipple contraption plugged sideways underneath the coffee machines, then I check to make sure I'm not about to pour a decaf. A sign says I can get a chocolate bar for a dollar with my coffee, so I do. After that I pay and set my course for home.

There's a necessary detour to keep myself from getting bored—I hate walking back the same way I came. It takes me to a park at the top of a hill. The climb up sends anxious pangs through me as I wonder if all the people nearby can hear my out-of-breath, out-of-shape huffing while I tread the stairs. Inhale, exhale, breathe deep, pretend it's a sigh, avoid eye-contact while my lungs recover. I regain my confidence once I plant myself on a bench, just the right place to watch all the people and cars go by, with this big wide view of the lake way beyond. Now I can enjoy myself, sip my coffee in intervals, people-watch a little. My can of chili is seated next to me as I pop the lid off my coffee. I bring it up to my lips . . . it's lukewarm, like black piss, hardly tasting of anything. This is what I left my apartment for, what I dropped my work to do, my expedient mission: to drink piss-warm coffee on a bench while all the world dances around me. I finish my coffee and fuck off. At least it was nice out. At least I got to see some people for a change.

Back home it's me and my chili. Work is still lacking appeal, so I shun my computer. I can tell the cogs are still seized-up in the one little crevice of my brain that writes computer codes: I'm not going to be able to turn one goddamn thought into anything that works. I won't bother until I feel it come up in me again, until the grinding, rattling sound of intelligence starts to murmur between my ears. I read a little, occasionally eyeing the can of sumptuous beef-and-beans left on my desk. Then the craving for food wins me over, so I speed to the kitchen and peel open the can, already stuffing a few cold spoonfuls of chili into my mouth. "This would be better hot" as I take another fill, before I transfer it to the microwave. A couple bouts of radiation, punctuated by stirring the bowl and wiping the spatterings out of the appliance, and I've got my chili done up for myself. Doused in hot sauce, I take it to my desk.

I eat, and I'm still dumb. Everything is starting to look like tomorrow's problem. My computer whines in the corner. I brush my teeth and go to bed.



414321

PINAKES



Anonymous

& 008

I. Waters of March by Art Garfunkel

March 1

Dreamt I was eating out with YQ. She was saying how she was a good friend because she was funny. I was amused that she thought she was. She tried to make me laugh by waggling a cucumber stick at my face. It wasn't successful. She got angry.

March 2

Rode my bike. Neighbors had tethered their cat outside to the fence. Rode past their house again at night. It was still tethered.

March 3

OB called and told me he has a bladder infection. He's in the hospital. He sounded really bad on the phone.

March 10

Went to the bookstore with YQ. Chose not to tell her about the dream. I was comfortable in the reading chair while she browsed but she ran into people she didn't like, so she told them we had to leave and made me get up.

March 11

Checked the fridge for milk. Realized it was unplugged and that it had been for hours. Cradled the cartons of milk and carried them down the road. Felt bad about throwing them all out at once. Put them gently in the trash one by one and said goodbye to each.

March 16

YQ told me I should listen to "Waters of March" by Art Garfunkel. I said I will never listen to solo material from Simon or Garfunkel.

March 18

Rode by the neighbor's house. The cat was still tethered to the fence.

March 21

Dreamt I was eating out with OB. We almost choked on our food while laughing.

March 22

Heard something rattling in the trash where I threw the milk out. Waited for it to stop but it kept rattling on. I didn't stay or look inside for what it was.

March 23

YQ made me watch a horror movie called "Paperhouse." It wasn't a horror movie at all. I teared up a bit towards the end. YQ didn't see. Stupid movie.

March 24

Got to glimpse a shooting star. Won't write down my wish, just in case.

March 25

Visited OB in the hospital. He was even worse. He wanted me to read a Salinger story about Eskimos to him. He fell asleep halfway through and snored really loud with the tube I assumed went up his bladder.

March 28

Listened to the Garfunkel song.

March 29

Sneaked into the neighbor's garden and untethered the cat. They saw me so I ran away. The cat didn't move or come along. Next time I rode by the house it was tethered again.

March 30

Dreamt I was still out eating with YQ. She remained angry from the previous dream. I apologized. She refused to talk. I challenged her to a duel of cucumber sticks. She looked out the window and didn't say anything. I ate the stick whole. She didn't look.

II. Jones Beach on Long Island in 1939

"How much is a foot long?"

"A foot long."

"You're out already."

"When you're in your *winter suit*."

"And dumb too."

"I can't help it. You look like a penguin. When you're in your—"

"You're out and dumb and about to slip, hold onto my arm!"

"One more lap, then I'll fall onto yours."

"You'd crush me, you dummy."

"I've a crush *all over you* already. In your wint—"

"Okay! Gimme your arm or you'll fall."

"One more lap. Around the . . . what's this called?"

"A rink! It's a rink!"

"Once more 'round the rink! 'Round the rink. Look, you're having fun too."

"You can't get through another lap. You'll slip and smash your face."

"I might slip now and smooch your face."

"Oh how very of you."

"And you say I'm out. You can't even talk, that's how out you are."

"Alright, you wanna last lap? Let's do a last lap."

"No but not fast! *Hihihiiii!*"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"



"WUUUUUUUUUUU!"

"Hold on to the railing! We're gonna run someone over and de-capi-ooooo-AGKH!"

"Look who fell first. Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine."

"Good thing you're packed up like an Eskimo. Like a penguin. I can't help it. When you're in your winter suit."

"Can't help what? Gush? You dummy."

"I can't help—"

"Dummy. Come here."

"Like a penguin."

"Plant one on the beak."

"Penguin beak."

"And what are you?"

"I'm a me-te-or-ite."

"Come here, you'll fall like I did!"

"Maybe I'll crash and leave a crater! Maybe I'll—"

"Snap out!"

"Let's go get the footlongs."

III. Fires of September by Callimachus of Cyrene

September 1

I had a slightly somber dream last night, wherein it was the distant future and Alexandria had fallen long ago. I lived out a quiet life and spent my time with friends. At some point I remember trying to free an unwilling cat.

September 2

At last I gathered up the courage to send my message to Ptolemaios, praise be upon him, about the compiling of Pinakes, along with some of my new poetry. I doubt any other pharaoh would have been—or will ever be—as charitable as he has, though I wish he wouldn’t take so long responding back.

September 3

Afternoon, in the Library, young Eratosthenes was overseeing some large construction over the observatory’s reflection pool. He told me Ptolemaios was funding his Mesolabio. When I asked him what a Mesolabio was, he said it was a device for “measuring the harmonic alignments of the stars.” I’m glad Ptolemaios got back to *him* at least.

September 10

Apollonius was sharing his godawful Argonautica with his pitiful audience. It mystifies me how people still in this day and age fall for cheap Cyclic verse. Once your mediocrity gets you exiled, you shouldn’t be allowed back, certainly not after a redraft that is barely any better, let alone be appointed a scholar at the Library. If I had stayed to hear another derivative epithet, I would have flung a sandal by impulse at his stupid face.

September 11

No response from Ptolemaios. He is a busy man, and a great man. He is a great and busy man.

September 16

Theocritus invited me to a walk up the mountains. We followed a shepherd and his herd of goats on a climb, then we sat down to rest on tree stumps. Theocritus shared his work in progress. Delightful as always. At the very least it was for me, since the shepherd seemed occupied, but what do shepherds know of pastoral poetry? Theocritus is never unwholesome to be with, never not at peace with everything. Maybe I shouldn’t let Apollonius get to me as much as he does. And I’m sure Ptolemaios will respond any day now.

September 18

Nothing from Ptolemaios. Maybe tomorrow . . . Meanwhile, I’m helping Aratus versify the Phenomena. We met up today in the observatory, below the newly built “Mesolabio.” To my fortune, I got to see a shooting star in the pool, though sadly Aratus missed it.

September 21

I got very little sleep due to a nightmare. Maybe a fever dream. There were sieges and the library was burnt down. Almost every work I had catalogued in Pinakes was lost. Pinakes itself was completely destroyed, as well as the Mesolabio, which had crashed down into the reflection pool like a burning wooden bridge. I tried to enter the library to salvage what I could, but the floor was molten and I sank down in it.

September 22

In light of my dreams, I decided it best to visit the oracle. She told me not to worry about Alexandria, but that the earlier dream about the cat meant that I should buy a goat to spare it from sacrifice. I might start seeing a different oracle from now on.

September 23

To hell with Ptolemaios! If he thinks he has more important business to attend to, then let him. And we shall—or shan’t—see who or what history will remember, and how. But who am I to waste time concerning myself with that which will eventually perish? In the end, whether Pinakes or not, all will be lost.

September 24

I am giddy! Ptolemaios sent a messenger conveying that Pinakes was of great significance to him, and that he had taken care of the necessary arrangements to start the cataloguing process. He added that he loved my new poetry and was considering promoting me to head librarian!

September 25

Ptolemaios the second, great Philadelphos, peace be upon him, is dead. I am in shambles. Ptolemaios the third has risen to the throne. How matters will unfold from here on out remains to be seen.

September 28

Ptolemaios the third appointed Apollonius as head librarian. I might as well jump off the observatory with the way things are going. What's worse—much worse—is that Apollonius found in himself the audacity to offer his help with Pinakes, by taking on the lead. He said it would ease the weight of work on my shoulders so that I could devote myself fully to “some of that pretty little poetry” I’m writing. He wouldn’t know poetry if it shot him by accident in the games. The one fate worse than this might be to have him as my neighbor in the grave. I told him to do as he wishes with what he wishes to do it with.



September 29

Knowing little of what to make of all the happenings of late, I thought of consulting with Theocritus. We walked up the mountains with the shepherd and the goats again. He made me tea. I told him everything. Of all the things I said, he seemed fixated on the oracle’s advice the most. He said I should pay for a goat to be spared of sacrifice. We went over to the herd and out of a sea of lizard gazes, one of them was looking at me with seeing eyes, very much unlike those of a goat. So I ended up paying the shepherd to set it free, but it followed us back down the mountain, refusing to leave despite my efforts to scare it off. Theocritus seemed amused by this so I asked him if he wanted to keep it. He told me it was all mine now. I am unsure as to what one is supposed to do with a goat, though now I can but hope that he proves a tasteful judge of epigrams.

September 30

I had a series of dreams last night, all involving complete strangers, though I couldn’t discern any prophetic content this time. In one, I was an executioner who worked at the top of a tower, suffocating prisoners who were put into a machine. In another, I was drunkenly sliding on a frozen lake with a girl who was my lover. And in the final one, I was dining with another girl, this time a friend who was angry at me. I tried inviting her to play out a sword fight with the cucumbers we were eating. She finally gave in and we had a cucumber fight, but I accidentally broke a glass. I was awoken by the goat licking my face.

IV. Tower of Death on the Banga Bandhu Şeyh Mucibur Rah-man in 2939

Summers up the tower of death, when a heart from inside the chamber feels the need to press the bell and ask, “Warden, how much longer of this?” I end. And though I’ll even sometimes get the urge to say, “A foot longer,” I never do. Alas the poor souls, at that stage, are in no shape to take it. But helium is evil. A chamber is flushed, and it takes with it what it may out the vent, eloping up along migrating penguins and shooting stars. So until then, I ask of the sentenced to close their eyes and tell me what they see.

“It’s winter. I am sitting on a bench that overlooks the shore. I get up and walk over to a sandwich stand. I order a sandwich and eat it as I walk down to the beach. Sauce drips down onto snow while I’m eating it. There is a trail of sauce following me. Warden, there is a trail! Birds and cats are eating the ingredients that keep falling from my sandwich. I try to finish it so it stops dripping down, but I’m full and there’s still all of it left. Warden, what kind of a sandwich is this? Warden, why aren’t you saying anything? Warden, are you angry at me?”

At times, it’s tempting to say it and be done. And always, just as I’m about to, they’re out. Then contents flee, like the penguins and the shooting stars, never to make the journey back. But then also, not unlike the trail of sauce, we’re led to believe that something would run out. Only up to when. A thousand years ago, they said we were bound to, sometime. Definitely, definitely. They still say, “Any day now.” So it’s left to me to be the one left asking, how much is a “foot long” really? But no, I’m not angry. I swear, I’ve never been angry.





DINNER

ARI & OI2

Spit in my soup. It's been a few minutes since we were served, but it only took me an instant to see it: spit in my soup. My date, so far unaware, is enjoying the start of her meal while I'm stuck trying to figure out why I'm in this situation—why I'm sitting across from this near-stranger while someone waits for me to swallow up their ugly little glob of sputum. So I sit here—like an idiot—perplexed and just faintly upset. Part of me wonders whether I did something to the waitress, and another part of me starts forming the words that I'll have to say to this girl who's gaily eating across from me.

I try to replay every moment up until now: walking in, being seated, speaking to the waitress, waiting here in awkward pre-dinner communion, then being served. In it all I fail to see the moment when I suddenly set things off. It might just be the way I look, or something about my demeanour. So now I pick apart every little bit of my exterior: the clothes I'm wearing, the way I'm sitting, my manner of speaking, how I walk. Though I continue to reach deadends on why I'd be singled out, I arrive at one conclusion: I deserve this. Not that I want it, no, but that something about me exudes weakness, that I let someone think they could do this to me. So I start to feel differently, but still I just want out.

Finally my date clues in. Half-jokingly, she asks "Is there something wrong with your soup?"

"Yeah . . ." and I hush my voice, "I think someone spit in it." It comes out almost pleading, as if I'm begging her to tell me what to do.

Immediately her brow crinkles, while her mouth twists into a little grimace around an urgent "What?" and that's when the waitress comes back.

"How is everything so far?"

When I turn to look at her I search for something in her face that'll tell me whether she's in on this. That searching turns into a confused hesitation while my date waits for me to act and I wait for the waitress to crack. And it still feels like I deserve this, like I'm waiting on this woman to tell me what sin I've committed. Then my silent beseeching is interrupted: a little sibilance cuts through the formal murmur of the restaurant, like a hose sputtering steam. For a second I think the waitress has started to hiss at me, but then I see past her. On the other side of the room is a door to the kitchen, which for a moment is broken open by a waiter shuffling plates. Through the doorway I catch a glimpse at a line cook whose eyes are fixed on me as he stifles giggles behind an ugly, mocking sneer.

At that I feel a pang shoot through me. The obvious first words, "There's spit in my soup," come out with accidental, haughty indigance, which transforms my confusion into typical impotence as I stand up in a rush and make the standard declaration that I won't be paying for this. My date is taking a back seat to it all, and she might as well; I'm the one making a scene, and she's stuck going along with it because there's no recourse from these sorts of things.

The waitress gives me an "Excuse me, sir?" with a shocked, un-

believing air—taken aback as if I'd just uttered a threat. But then she makes a quick study of the soup and the all-too-obvious slime shifts her tone to supplicating.

I look to my date: "I'm leaving. We're leaving," and while she hurriedly, awkwardly grabs her jacket, I can't help but glower at the kitchen door. Her little hand at my back urges me towards the exit and I feel myself bristle at the assertion. But I avert my gaze and do my part, nearly leaving my date behind as I stride away from the situation. My teeth are grit. I see myself suddenly becoming the stereotypical offended wimp who huffs and leaves. In retrospect, I can see it on myself from the moment I came in. I see what the cook saw, and I get why he thought he could do this. I see the universal contempt that I made myself a vessel for—made by being so terribly weak.

While I make my escape the sound behind me changes. It's not the subdued chuckling from before, but a whole swell of laughter that overtakes the restive din. It shocks me and I give a start, stopping in place. For a moment I believe it's the entire restaurant erupting at me, but really it's just one voice, just the line cook. A flush of heat runs over my back and through my chest up to my face. I feel a little tingling premonition in my shoulders. My right leg won't stop shaking. It's at the door that I turn back.

I'm standing in place when I bellow out. A short, echoless "Fuck you!" that dies on the wooden walls. It fills up the whole room like a black cloud, out of which eyes suddenly stare, transfixed on the scene between me and the cook. Whoever wasn't already clued in starts to whisper about what the hell is going on, but nobody really knows. Even I don't get it, nor do I see where it's headed. The waitress makes a move to get away, pulling her little notepad up to her chest like a rosary. From my sides a manager with a stern face and the biggest waiter seem to be closing in on me—ready to sweep me out the door, as if I'd be cowed so easily. Ahead of me is the rising, wailing laughter still spewing from the apron'd hyena who's now standing in the doorway of the kitchen. His whole chest heaves in rapturous gasping as he directs all the air in the room down onto my head. No one knows what to do about him. Then there's me. From somewhere beyond me I hear a low and serious "Sir," but they don't catch me as I close the distance to the kitchen.

There the cook is still in his giddy hysterics, propped up on the jamb of the door while he clutches at his chest and howls from under his involuntary squint. I'm just an arm's-length away and closing the gap with an angle from elbow to knuckle up into his jaw that sends his opposite temple into the edge of the frame. And then he's below me, no longer doubled over but crumpled up. He's now limp, and I see a little trickle of red coming from his temple. Rage gives way to reason while I stand over him. Everything condenses as I hear the shrieking or shouting all around and I feel various hands grip my shoulders and I'm no longer in control and I wonder:

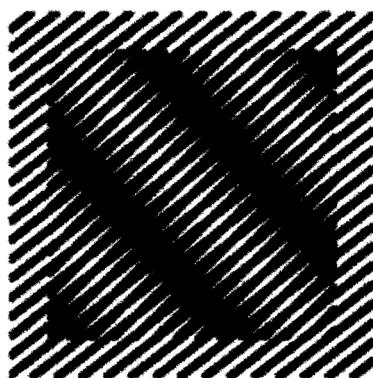
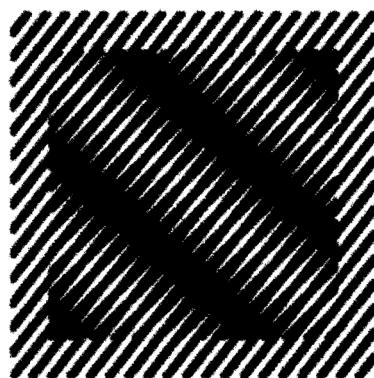
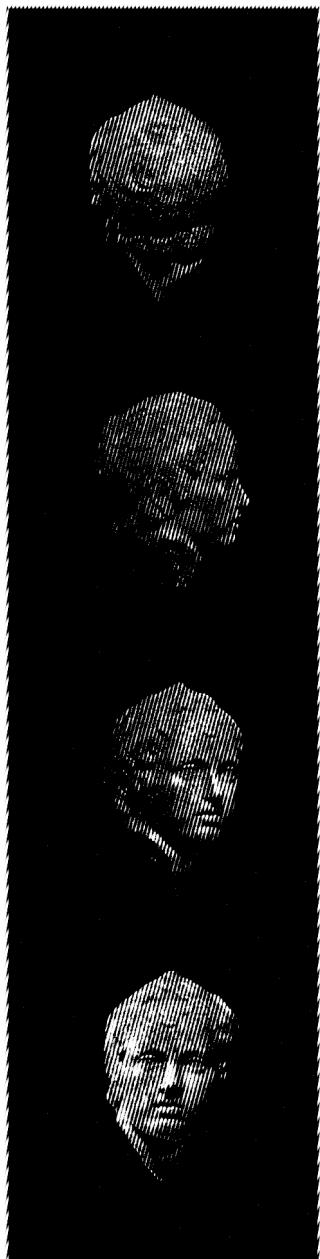
Why did he spit in my soup?

PROVEN UNTIL GUILTY INNOCENT

Anonymous &oo8

Tell you what, tell you this: I used to go to karate, back when I was six or so. And at karate, something took place, which I haven't told anyone, but which I now feel the need to come out about and tell. Here's it: It's a kid who whipped another kid with his karate belt (White. Most weren't ever anything beyond. Neither was I.) after the sensei had gone and no adults were left in the dojo. But in the dojo were me, the whipper, the whipped, and another kid standing next to the kid who got whipped. Now he, (the kid standing next to the one that got whipped) is important. He's what makes it all come together. Though maybe I make it come together too in a way. Hopefully I at least also make it come together or else what's the point in telling you? And maybe it's you too who makes it come conclusiv—anyhow—So the whipper was in one corner, the others were in another with their backs turned to the whipper, and I was at watching distance from all. Then the whipper rolled up his belt into a spiral and raised up his arm and the belt went "F-CHSHHHH!" all the way over to the other side of the dojo onto the victim's back. He screamed and he turned around and he saw the

whipper standing far away in his corner (too far to have had anything to do with the crime) and he saw the kid standing right next to him (too close to not have been the perpetrator) and so, clueless as to the whipping, he thought he (the one he was next to) must have slapped him on the back and then quickly transitioned into looking all clueless. So then, misdirecting his revenge in blind rage, he punched this innocent kid in the gut and ran out wailing. Then the whipper ran out, snickering to himself as if he had planned to get away with it from the start, and as if the only reason he succeeded in doing so wasn't the pure chance of them not turning their backs. Then I was left in the empty dojo with the innocent one, who was on the floor, grunting in pain from the punch. And in that moment, I felt at once—for the first time ever—a spooky sense of singularity with my fellow man (my sweaty, smelly, grunting in pain, fellow man) through getting to witness what he ended up with, just by standing there and minding his own. Though now I wish the whole affair had made me feel spooky singular with a cute girl instead; sweaty, smelly, grunting and all.



BUREAU BARBELO

Upon inspection, it wasn't fair
So I went to file a complaint
But there was a line
And people said,
"My dog is on fire"
"My only sister is myself"
So I left and cried in bed

Anonymous &oo8

day in the life.

Hairy Palms & 009

He found in the act of drinking a sliding blurring exercise in inertia, similar to gliding in neutral down a rail-less canyon road. It wasn't so much the speed or delirium that was attractive to him, moreso the unspoken possibility of careening off the edge at any given moment—that without a thought or consideration he could find himself floating, weightless in a two-ton tomb of metal and diesel. Suspended in the crystalline air by some divine thread, plummeting and silent and peaceful and dead before dying.

Drinking also made days like these easier.



His fist falls on the door seven times, the shape of that shave-and-a-haircut pattern maybe almost discernible if not for the scream-squealing of children at play, the admittedly sloppy tempo of the knock itself, and the fact that he's forgotten that this is a backyard party, and that he's been instructed to enter through the side gate in the notes for this gig. So there he sways, eyes sliding from doorbell to doorknob, pondering his next move. Finally, he fumbles for his phone in his pocket. Opens the AktNow™ App (3.5 Stars on the App Store and 4 on Google Play [Notable review: "good, but devs need to specify if the entertainment is clowns or magicians with some sort of badge. i didnt know i ordered a clown for my nieces birthday until he got here and when we tried to turn him away because my niece hates clowns he started screaming and crying about how this always happens to him and making a scene while trying to force himself in. we threatened to call the police and then he left. extremely uncomfortable experience" {Developer response: "Thanks for the feedback! We're getting right to work on implementing a more visible method of discernment among entertainment types. We also took the liberty of looking through your order history and found the clown in question. We will no longer be inviting him to contract with us."}]). Realizing his error, he picks up his trunk and makes his way to the sidegate. The weight of the trunk on his left side adds a lopsided effect to his already woeful ambulatory dog paddle.

As it always happens, as the sounds of the party draw nearer, so too do the idle thoughts of suicide. It's time to do your job, it's time to pull the rabbit out of the hat, it's time to pull the gun out of the hat, it's time to pull the trigger, it's time to pack up your things, it's time for the next party. He's been having trouble telling if this ideation is still some sick internal joke he plays for himself, or if it's becoming earnest. He stands at the gate, unmoving. Frozen but not rigid, he deflates, and the limpness that he feels in the pit of his gut makes its ambling way up and down his spine.

It wasn't always like this. He got into this business because he loved attention, loved entertaining, loved children even! And he was good at it too, it seemed that he had a natural predisposition for sleight of hand. At some point though, like every job, relationship, or really any responsibility in his life, these loves wilted into apathy, then resentment, and then ultimately overwhelming fear. His habit of boozing grew from an aid to a necessity to the end goal of his vocation.

Why he persists, he doesn't know. The question itself is so exhausting that this, too, paralyses him—rendering him little more than debris on a current impossible to navigate, much less divert (Ha!) into a more favorable direction.

Flaccid, he shoulders the gate open. The children don't take notice of him—a blessing—and the rest of the adults are otherwise preoccupied. He smiles meekly at the three or four parents who note his entrance, and they return his meekness with dips of the chin and otherwise cordial acknowledgement. He exists, he's here, and there's nothing anyone can do about it now but get on with it. He shuffles on.

He gets to work unpacking his trunk in the corner of the yard, behind the refreshments. Showtime in seven minutes.

The routine itself is usually bearable, if only because it's a routine. In this moment everything is mechanical, every action performed is choreographed and perfect. The robot performs to a smattering of human bipods mounted with videocameraphones, the computer interfaces with the computer, a perfect feedback loop increasing in pitch. Even the children watch the performance through the lens of these handheld realtime selfsimulacra. Stonegrinned, eyes glassy and unseeing, the magician continues, as if he himself is also a dispassionate observer. Rabbit. Scarves. Fire. Rings. Coin. The routine is usually bearable, if only because it's a routine.

Two teenagers in the back, one of them vaguely resembles a past love. The male is pantomiming and gesticulating and cruelly skanking to the electro-swing that accompanies the act. The female laughs with her companion and at the magician and records both performances forever, to be uploaded to infinity, so everyone can laugh.

They're laughing at me? Why are they laughing at me? I'm just a performer. I'm a magician. It's my job to entertain. I'm doing magic tricks! Of course I look ridiculous right now, why would you mock me? Why, why, why, why? What did I ever do to you? Is it not enough that I'm here for your amusement, you feel compelled to humiliate me while I'm here for your sake?

This is fucking ridiculous. I can't take this anymore. I can't take this anymore. I can't take this anymore. I should be laughing at all of you freaks. That's right, you're the real freaks. Happy birthday to your freak son! I'm the best magician in the county! Hate, hate, I hate you all. You could have booked a fucking loser like Jared, and you got me instead. I'm doing all this for you! I could have been someone huge, and I chose to be here for the sake of you, for the sake of the party!

How did I get here? Okay, I was connected by the app—I was chosen because of some combination of proximity, pricing, and a cumulative personal rating from other gigs in the past along with parameters specified by the customer. None of these systems are in my control, none of this routine is in my control. I am delivered, I am delivered here, not by chance, not by God, but by some hateful combination of both, conspiring to kill me. *To kill me!* To slaughter me, like a cow in some awful cartoon machine that creates the goo for hamburgers.

Jesus Christ, she looks just like her. She's laughing just like her. They're all recording this. I'm less than nothing, I'm less than nothing. I'm nobody. I don't have a name, I don't have a soul. I'm dying. I am less than a blip in an algorithm, and my death is being livestreamed. AAAAHHHHHHHH—

On the ground, convulsions.

Hair ripped out, screaming and lashing and full of pain.

Cracked and numb and bleeding all over.

Sobbing and dying, dying!

Grass in mouth taste like puke.

Worm who know what worm is.

Ragged croak and death rattle.

Motionless

totally spent.

Serene.

Electro-swing music blaring.

End

—
Hello! Thank you for contracting with AktNow!

[John] rated you (0 STARS). Here's a note from [John]!

"what the fuck man? needless to say, i reported you to aktnow for your little fucking stunt.u ruined the entire fucking day. if i ever see you again, your fucking dead."

Your tip (\$0.00) will be routed automatically to your preferred banking service!

PRAYER OF THE MINIMUM WAGE BURGER

Lord, I Beseech Three:
Let my commute be painless
and my toil be for wholesome ends.

If I should stray,
to you I pray
to keep me on task.

And all I ask
is that I have my family tend,
(Alas, alas!)
to my inevitable workplace injury.

Anonymous & 001



THAT GUY'S A MURDERER



Anonymous & oo4

see that guy?
that guy down there
the landscaper
the one by the tree
yeah the one with the chainsaw
that guy's a murderer
that's what the judge told me,
or he used to be a judge,
but now he was a regular ole lawyer

we were by the window
in a big building
in a little town
and down there was a murderer
the judge prosecuted him once
back when he wasn't a regular ole lawyer
or a judge
but a prosecutor

and that guy took a hammer
and bashed in some other guy's skull
and then he dumped him down a well
and when they found the body in the well
he made up some bullshit about a fight and whatnot
self-defense and all
you know how it goes
the well's just where you put things when you kill 'em
I mean where would you put him?

and the jury they bought it
and now he was down there
with everybody else
walking around
in that little town
with a chainsaw
just chopping the hell out of a tree
I live in the city now
but sometimes I think
about that murderer
and that chainsaw
and who else is walking around.

FOR THEY ARE THE ONES WHO DO THE RESEARCH

& 003

I was offshore when I realized the industry was beyond any foreseeable recovery. We were part of a multi-well workover project in Angola, requiring twelve-hour shifts on different production platforms. One slickline crew replaced gas lift valves, while my coworker and I were the wireline crew which logged for hydrocarbon saturation.

The main offshore platform had production facilities to remove solids, separate liquid and gas, flare excess, and prepare the different fluids for their respective pipelines back to shore. It required a village to run this platform, and the village lived and slept, five weeks at a time, on their platform. The main processing platform didn't have any extra accommodations for workover projects. The company sent all temporary employees and subcontractors to the "alternative living quarters" on a satellite platform. The ALQ consisted of shipping containers with four bunk beds, dirty linens, and rudimentary plumbing. I hated those accommodations, and preferred exercise to the shipping container.

It was mid-December, and instead of waiting for New Year's resolutions, my coworkers and I constructed a makeshift gym in the storage area. We freed up exercise space by consolidating scaffolding to one side of the storage area, and placing non-perishable foods in the fridge. Part of me considered the waste of refrigerating non-perishable food. Hydrocarbons produced and electricity generated, to be spent on unnecessary cooling. The magnitude of the waste felt insignificant with the crash in commodity prices. Oil and gas were cheaper every day, and I'd rather burn energy than be cooped up in our shipping container rooms.

There is little light pollution off the coast of Angola at night. The flaring from platforms on the horizon quickly dissipated, and left a clear view of the stars. I stared at the sky for a moment, searched for familiarity in the stars. The glittering blackness reminded me of the High Plains. My legs were sore from the evening workout as I took the stairs back down to the ALQ. After I passed through the metal door, my phone connected to the wireless network and automatically downloaded emails.

Top executives in the corporation I worked for exercised their stock options. The email regarded this as good news. I took the contrarian position. The stock plummeted thirty percent in the past week, and would likely continue. There was more oil supply than demand. There were more oilfield service companies than demand. Now was not a good time to buy. Instead of benevolence or prudence, the corporation must have viewed this as a necessary sacrifice to shore up the stock price. Board members contributed their pound of flesh to appease investors. Such sacrifices to drive up prices, replacing fundamentals. This industry was fucked.

During the days of slickline work, the other wireline guy and I would go fishing off the edge of the platform. The regular workers dedicated to production operations on the platform shared their fishing lines and lures, only asking us to donate good catches to the kitchen in return. The ocean contained copious amounts of

small blue and yellow fish, a handful of red snappers, and one dark barracuda which swam only near the supply boat's landing.

Our first attempt at fishing used our lunch scraps as bait. Only the blue-yellow fish would bite at our meal, while the red snappers swam around the line uninterested. I caught a smaller fish first. As I reeled it up the dozen meters from water to the production deck, I considered the best way to kill it. To preserve any meat, I let it gasp for oxygen. The fish's blue and yellow scales reflected prismatic in the sun as the animal asphyxiated on the deck. The chef on board refused to cook this blue-yellow fish, instead telling us to use the carcass as bait for the red snapper.

An asphyxiated fish does not bleed, which was necessary to attract a red snapper. I pierced a stronger hook, made out of spare slickline, through the smaller fish, and the fish blood ran down my wrist and forearm. I still remember the other wireline guy frowning in disgust as I threw the bait back to the ocean, fish blood splattering on the railing. A red snapper immediately seized upon it. At first, I imagined myself the hero of the day, hauling in red snapper for the cook and other workers to eat. But the line snapped microseconds after the red snapper took the blue-yellow fish. I repeated this process of catching smaller fish to use as bait without help from the other guy. He had no stomach to see fish cannibalize each other.

The platform's crane operator obsessed over the barracuda at the supply boat's landing, and referred to the fish (in his broken English) as "the monster". The crane operator tried the same technique for the barracuda, whispering foreign words to himself while fishing. No amount of smaller fish could ever entice the barracuda. It always remained visible, an arm's length underneath the water's surface, darting between steel jackets, casing, and pipelines. If our line couldn't withstand a snapper, what hope was there in catching the monster?

The company laid me off after the reservoir evaluation project. No other jobs wanted an engineer with petroleum experience on their résumé. I was a flight risk back to a better paying industry as soon as the market recovered. I suppose they were right, in the end. For the next year, my pursuit was higher education.

I emailed two professors at two different schools, explained my undergrad, my recent standardized test scores, and my work experience as an oilfield engineer. Two schools: one lower-rated, safe, probable admission, and the other in the same metro area I lived in, more prestigious, unlikely admission.

The lesser school's professor replied immediately, saying, "Our ideal candidates are students with double majors or with a history of research funding. We received four times the normal amount of applications this year and only have positions for ten percent. You should focus on other schools, for which your research interests and your background might fit better."

This lower tier school shocked me. Without doubt, others had the same idea to train up during the downturn. Grad school would

be more competitive than I assumed. The professor from the more prestigious engineering program emailed me back, catching me by surprise. Maybe because I already lived in the metro area. The professor said she wanted to meet me for coffee close to campus.

I drove to the coffee shop she mentioned, which was a quiet walk in the shade down the hill from her department. I stepped up to the cafe's door, decorated with diversity slogans, rainbow flags, and promises of safety and inclusion. Once inside, I stood by the door for fifteen minutes until I saw the professor walk up. She was short, and dressed more like a high school art teacher than a petroleum engineering professor.

"Dr. Singh?"

"J?"

After exchanging pleasantries, we walked to the counter and ordered our drinks. I insisted on paying, and at that moment she also picked out a snack. We collected our items and sat down to discuss grad school.

"Soo . . ." she began, "What are your research interests?"

I regurgitated what I already provided via email: "Adsorbed state physics. I studied chemical engineering, and worked as a field engineer in formation evaluation. I believe unconventional resources aren't adequately described by current volumetric models."

"Yes, I agree. Current industry practices seem to be . . . inadequate. We have a few students researching that subject, one particularly bright woman from China, would you like to meet her?"

She couldn't recall any free days off the top of her head, yet promised she would email me once she looked at her calendar. After discussing research interests, the conversation turned to my international work experience.

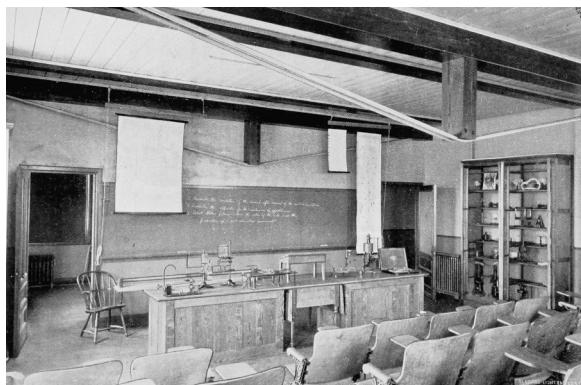
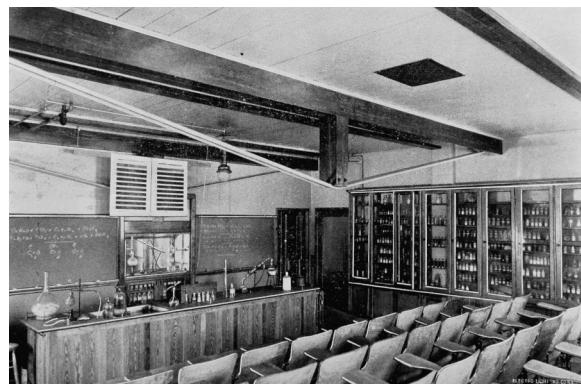
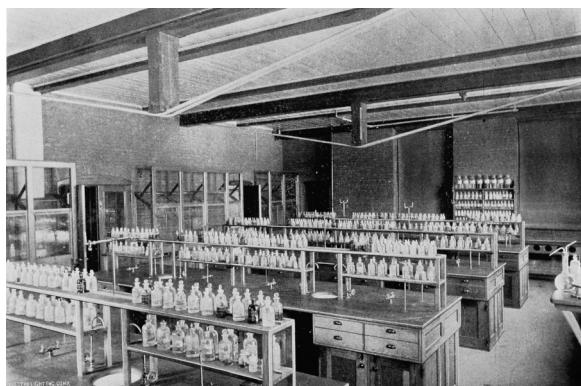
"What was your favorite part about working overseas?"

"On slow days, we would go fishing." I thought back to the barracuda, the monster almost within reach that we could never catch. I thought about the blue-yellow fish, asphyxiated, pierced, cast from the production deck, sunlight reflecting on scales as it fell several meters before landing in the water. Would this professor understand what I was talking about, or would she turn away from the idea of fish blood running down my hands?

Dr. Singh ignored most of my emails. I wrote to her five different times, and only one of them she acknowledged, saying there would be a more substantive email from her soon.

There was one last attempt at reaching her. I decided to visit Dr. Singh's office uninvited, catching her by surprise. As I walked along the campus, I searched for familiarity, and thought back to the days spent hunting. The older buildings—tilted roofs and solid stone—were capable of opening windows for rifles. The modern buildings, many sponsored by oil and gas companies, had giant glass panes, but no ability to open windows. I walked up to her office and noticed Dr. Singh had political decorations on her door. An environmental slogan in particular caught my eye. I always knew academia was isolated from the economic hardships of industry, but supporting environmentalists seemed too far detached from reality, bordering on malfeasance. I should have been more suspicious of these institutions of research.

She wasn't in. I took the hint and spent the downturn as a ski bum instead.



J.

defining . . .

BURGERPUNK



photo: © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto

Has the world already ended? Now that the dust has settled, we sat down with Anonymous to discuss the genesis of literature's newest diabetic diatribe.

& ooi

Burgerpunk was this picture. You've seen it. The picture from every burgerpunk thread, the headliner picture.

A highway service station that's rich to the max in traffic, signage, burgers, parking lots—the picture shot so that its distance comes up all flat in your face like it's a middle-ages painting before they'd figured out what depth was. All the signs right in your face, all the ugly shit at once, the ugly shit without order or perspective or priority, just filling up your eyes right now.

That was burgerpunk. Then we tried to write about it.

*

Why would you fucking write about anything? You take this thing, this picture, that's just there. It's evident. Says what you can see. You take it. Then you try to turn your picture into lists of words with *ands* and *but*s and much to Rodrigo's surprise, the Asian gas-station attendant licked the diesel off it.

It's not just trying to explain the picture, it's trying to explain exactly the thing inside the picture that's not explainable. That's what literature is, right? It's saying the thing that you can't say. Why is a novel that says, say, *orange man bad*—why's that a shit novel? Not because orange man good. Because saying *This Good, That Bad* isn't even writing. It's just talking onto paper.

Everyone believed we could take burgerpunk and make it into writing. Why believe? Because of the word. Because the word *burgerpunk*, all alone, *burgerpunk*—relish it—that word made us think that words could say what can't be said.

So we tried to write about a picture. The picture we'd called burgerpunk.

*

Forget *we*. I tried to write burgerpunk. I failed:

- i. Burgerpunk is gritty realism.
- ii. Burgerpunk is a grand adventure.
- iii. Burgerpunk is despicable hardcore pornography.

EXPANSION . . .

thought i

1. In the opening of my post-DeLillo masterpiece the kid of the single-mom who can only afford a trailer near the intersection talks about how a driver's license is proof of age, and kinda also the measure of consent, depends who you ask.
2. Working double-part-time for two different Burger Chains with Mexican clientèle and motivational team upkeep policies she battles with ennui and I battle to write yet another small-time story about how nothing happens and someone's sad about it—fuck, let's do sci-fi.

thought ii

1. Since Neil Stephenson already did a sci-fi thing with pizza delivery through a high-tech net-linked suburbia, I make my one about some surveillance state or something.
2. There's a company brainwashing scheme that's a secret, and when the hero finds out the secret he has to, like, go on

the run from the assassins dressed as mechanics or as kid-friendly mascot characters. Kill all witnesses. Mossad's in on it too.

3. There's grenades behind the counter and shotgun blasts through ice cream truck doors. Ike E. Hummingbird, your hero, uses chip oil to turbocharge his pickup and blast it through the corporate headquarters' window then he back-flips out the back and does this have shit to do with burgers anymore? Are people like us—fast-food people, alone-at-the-interstate-rest-stop people—are we athletes, are we killers? I make a note to rewrite the legend of Ike Hummingbird as a film script then I get on with some serious literary work about cumming.

thought iii

1. Since The World Gaping Rodeo got banned, the itinerant All-American trucker workforce has been looking for a new, sicker distraction. Something to radio shit-talk over. That's where *A Double Coke With That* started.

2. The first *A Double Coke With That* video's a chick whose face you can't see and she's fitting fries up her cunt. At the end of the video the john pours a double coke over the cunt full of fries and then he starts to eat it out of her. Somehow this shit goes viral.

3. The plot—oh fuck, the plot!—is about the grim reality of—no! It's about a dark conspiracy of—hold it! The book is a description of takeout-related sex acts. In excruciating detail. Adjectives everywhere. It's an internet's worth of unhappy things you can do with a Happy Meal.

4. After the four-hundred page first chapter on the subject of fries, just about ready to start on the bun, I chance on a thread where the burgerpunk picture's right there. I look at it. Then I turn to the open sketchbook by my side. *Greasy recta. Pickled glans*. Is this it?

*

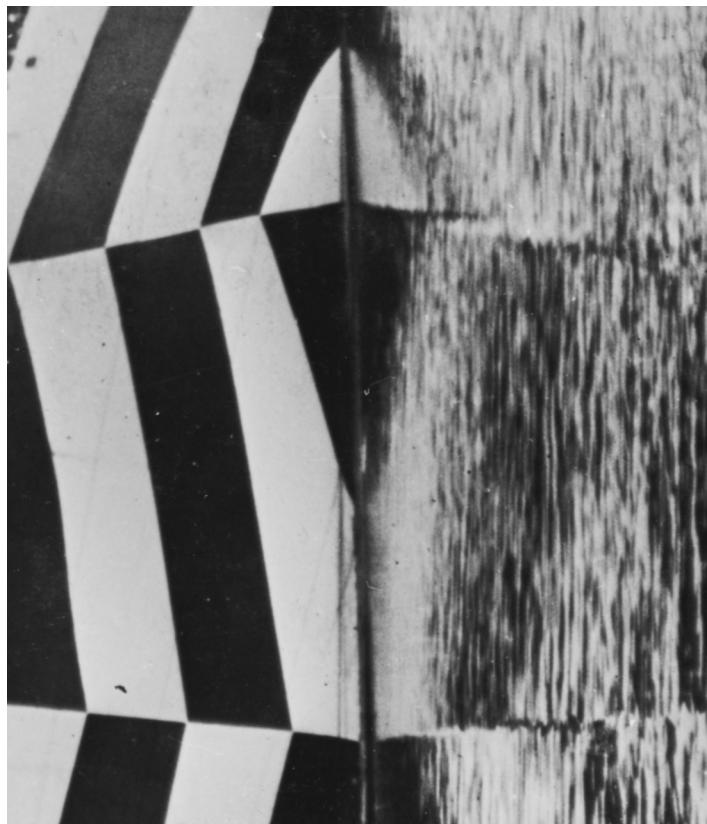
Cyberpunk was punk, but not punk like the music. It was punk because it ripped off detective books from the black-and-white movie days. It was cyber plus Marlowe. The cyber Blue Dahlia. The Cybertese Falcon, that was all. Because detectives were tough the cyber wound up feeling punk.

Burgerpunk probably isn't Snow Crash or White Noise or Toni Ware or even my pornographic magnum opus. Probably it's a good old noir, but stuck between truck stops and takeouts. That's what burgerpunk writing's going to look like. But the second we write it down, the second the detective's got the baddie, then we'll look right back at the picture, our picture, the picture that is truly burgerpunk, and we'll say—*Nah dude, that's not it*.

ANONYMOUS

HONEST WORK

VIC SIMMONS & oio



“Excuse me sir! Excuse me sir!”

Vic looked up with a jolt. A construction worker in a lime green long sleeve shirt and paint-splattered faded blue jeans was trying to get his attention. The man was a mess of grey dryer lint hair erupting from every orifice and glasses so thick he could probably see through walls. He was standing with several other workers young enough to be his grandsons. They were smoking a joint. Vic had noticed the smell from across the parking lot and when he saw where it was coming from made a note not to pay attention to them. But now this fossil was trying to capture Vic’s attention.

“Sir!”

“Yes? Me?” Vic locked eyes on the elder one.

“Yes sir, you. You look like some one who is deep in thought.”

“Yes, I am. I am in very deep thought.”

“Well enjoy your evening young man.”

“I will, you as well.”

The old man received the joint, took a drag, and passed it. Vic took quick look at the rest of the old man’s company, saw they were uninterested in him, and then hurried to get into the hotel before the rain broke again.

As he settled into his room, Vic thought of the old man as one of the “prophets” he continued to cross by in life. Throughout his life he had these uncanny encounters where strangers would make peculiar comments that would then resonate with his psyche. He had crossed by people in airports, planes, street corners, museums, cafés, or anywhere he was alone. One told him about what real love meant and how it was nothing he could imagine. One told him about disarming roadside bombs in Iraq and how he had a thirty-day life expectancy. One was just waiting for him with a pair of pants that he always wanted. He was certain that the old man who spoke to him, who interrupted his solemn walk across the Best Western parking lot, was one of these “prophets.”

“I am a man deep in thought,” he said to himself.

“That’s why they sent me here.”

He had been on the road for several months and several thousand miles. He lived out of his car and hotel rooms he could afford when he had the money. Most of the money he made had to be saved for his family. He went where the jobs were and he would go until there were no more jobs.

He looked out his window and saw the back side of a Waffle House. The dumpster, a few milk crates, and a dirty mop were nearly arm’s reach from his window. The clouds were parting and a few rays were making past the Waffle House into his room. He left the curtains open while he unpacked his belongings: canned green beans, instant noodles, instant coffee, B vitamins, a laptop, a few literary magazines and paperback books. He sat at the desk and thumbed through the magazines. A short piece about a guy finding twigs in his mailbox that were actually microphones from the FBI made him laugh. If only the author knew how bad things really were. Vic had a meeting in the morning with the deputy director of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Just before this job he had a long stay in New Mexico talking with Los Alamos National Laboratory. Before that it was Oakridge National in Tennessee. He never got to talk to the boys in Langley but he made sure the security guards got his manuscript.

“Just keep writing those checks you alphabet bastards and I’ll tell you what you’re thinking before you can dream it up.” He

looked out the window, the clouds were coming back.

“I am a man deep in thought,” he whispered. What god or devil gave him these powers he hoped never to find out.

“Oh, DTRA what did you do? What could I possibly do for you? Is there a broken arrow for me to find? Are there undeclared supplies of sarin that need to be found? Oh, I know! It was DOMANE, the Discovery of Medical Countermeasures Against Novel Entities! That’s where you screwed up. The whole world is locked up washing their hands until they bleed and all you wanted was another year of funding.”

He took a mini legal pad from his laptop bag and began to scribble.

“Wuhan Institute of Virology”

“Satellite guided microwave signals for RNA disruption”

“Hydroxychloroquine vitamin D zinc cocktail”

He stopped. A flash of lightning pierced the clouds. He had to think of something that would scare the pants off of DTRA. The pandemic was losing its sting on the public and they weren’t going to cut him a cheque for a hundred grand unless he could sell them an idea they never thought of. It had to be something that would stir up the fringes on both sides—believable, terrifying, and fundable. He added “Vaccine mandates” to his list.

“If you think vaccine mandates are bad wait until you hear about . . .” Another flash of lightning.

“CRISPR treatments for the elite. If the virus came from a lab and humans will always be susceptible to the variants, then the only lasting cure is to alter the human DNA. Of course, this won’t be available for the masses.” His mind wandered off at the horror of this idea. It was plausible. He could see the riots now.

Fat drops of rain began to hit his window. He pulled the curtains closed and turned on the TV. The satellite signal came in slow, and when he found the local news a woman of indeterminate ethnicity was describing the weather.

“Clear skies this evening and sunny going into the weekend.” Thunder broke overhead and the image pixelated. Vic looked at the assorted canned goods he had organized on his dresser and decided to go spend some U.S. government greenbacks.

He ducked out with his copy of Hegel’s “Reason in History” from the Library of Liberal Arts. In less than thirty paces he was under the awning of the Waffle House. He snaked around to the front entrance just as a full deluge was unleashed. Inside two groups of construction workers were eating. One group of bright orange t-shirts and one of neon green long-sleeves. The oranges were gathered around the cash register. They were stretched thin and the cleanest thing they touched that day were the white receipts they were patiently waiting to pay. Behind the counter was a young black hidden behind a hat, apron, and powder blue surgical mask. His eyes were sincere when he said,

“I’m sorry for the mix up, what was your order again?”

Off the clock and completely calm, the nearest orange explained.

“Okay that’s right.” The black worked the register like a savant.

“And you had the pancakes, bacon, coffee, and a Mountain Dew?” he asked the next orange, who nodded politely.

In the far end of the restaurant, in a booth bordered by mountains of dirty plates, near the edge of the counter seats, were the greens. They were hardy and alert. The stains on their clothes were different from the oranges. Vic headed towards the edge of the counter seats to sit by himself. Closer to the greens he could feel

the rhythm of their conversation. They were planning the next day, week, and project. They must have worked something highly skilled or extremely dangerous because they were in concert with each other.

"He tried to take half an hour from me," said the youngest looking.

"We're not going to let that happen," said another.

"I already talked to him about that," stated the third. And the fourth closed the issue with,

"It won't happen again."

A forkful of hashbrowns, a drizzle of maple syrup on the eggs, slurping the last of the Mountain Dew from the too-much ice, and a gulp of coffee later.

"When's the contract go out?"

"Wednesday."

"We've seen a draft."

"It's got everything we want."

Vic took a seat, took out his book, and started to read but was quickly interrupted by the young waiter from the cash register. He had hurried over and said something unintelligible from under his mask. He looked apologetic. Vic didn't understand a word. The waiter mumbled again.

"No, it's okay, I'm in no hurry," Vic said. The waiter looked at him for a moment and then left to tend to the oranges. Vic didn't care. How could he possibly care about anything that some burger punk waffle jockey in an apron had to say? He had the attention of The Regime. He was followed, watched, tailed, bugged, and x-rayed from space by the alphabet soup MK Ultra nightmare machine and was still getting away with six figure checks he quickly changed into LINK, moved to a hardware ledger, and droned to Switzerland where his wife and children were waiting. He didn't care how long it took, or if the stove exploded, or if they were two minutes from closing, he was going to get some dirty cheese burgers and some bubbly sugar water because he needed a break from this pedal-to-the-floor red-line life of lying to the government. He picked up his book and resumed reading.

Several minutes passed before he looked up again. The oranges were heading into the rain and the greens were heading to the counter. The young waiter from the register was free at last to attend to something else. He strolled back over to Vic carrying a laminated placemat menu, his eyes more cordial and less serious than before. Before he could hand it over, Vic placed his order.

"Two cheeseburgers, with pickles and onions, and a Sprite."

The waiter scribbled the order without hesitation.

"We'll get right on that."

He scurried to the stove where the cook was aggressively scraping it clean, handed over the order, and shot back to the register where the greens were waiting to pay.

"Gentlemen, how was everything?"

"Good."

"Fine."

"Okay."

"I didn't order extra bacon," as the oldest looking one pointed to his receipt.

"This says I had four waffles, I only ordered two."

"I only had hashbrowns and coffee."

"Can you break a fifty?"

Vic looked over at yet another wave of bad orders that needed to be straightened out. It made him glad he didn't have to deal

with such things. He turned back to his book and tried to forget everything but what was in his hands.

After several more pages of reading and pondering how Hegel or any philosopher ever got the balls to describe the nature of the universe without any objective facts to back them up, the food arrived. It was exactly as Vic had dreamed it would be: hot, greasy, compact, a little crispy, a little sour, and, with a tall glass of pop, a little sweet. Vic glanced around. It was just him, the waiter, and the cook. He noticed the cook only briefly when sitting down, but now he was taking the stage.

"Cheap dirty Mexicans not tipping and leaving a mountain of dirty dishes. Cheap mothafuckas!" the cook let rip. The waiter looked on distressed at the cook. Vic looked straight ahead at the tiled wall, not thinking, not caring, but only enjoying being there. In this brief moment he became a simpleton completely disconnected from the white-knuckle game of defrauding the United States government. He was nothing but a grease stain in a grease stain. If he was bound to that greasy counter, he would consider himself a king of infinite burgers if not for those dreams. Too many nights he closed his eyes only to see the grand caper falling apart and a thousand long knives coming for his throat. But not at that moment. At that moment, there was only the joy of a hot tasty meal that someone else prepared.

Vic looked out the window and saw a BMW turning into the parking lot. Then an SUV turned in. Then another SUV, and another followed. Suddenly there was a small parade taking a snack break detour outside the window. The waiter and the cook were stunned.

"Shit!" exclaimed the cook, "I bet it's a bunch of kids! Fuck man where's the next crew? Ain't our shift up?"

The waiter, upset as well, had a plan.

"I'll just tell them we're only taking carry-out orders."

"Shit!"

Vic took a long drag of soda, leaned back on his chair, and watched the doors. Out from the cars their parents paid for, came the youth of America. Vic could remember a time when people used to say that "children are the future." Now time has stopped and there is only consumption. He starts to feel his age when he remembers when "youth" and "optimism" went together. Those two haven't gone together in years. Half a dozen dead-eyed children of the grave came through the doors while the rest of the caravan waited in the safety of the cars. They looked hungry for a glimpse of adventure—not a real adventure of course, but a glimpse of one. They wanted to hide behind laminated menus, hold their phones over the booth, and see someone who was free of the cage. They just wanted to capture a few moments of something "unscripted," something "real," but most importantly something that would make them love the cage they lived in. They needed to look at the outside world and be scared of what could happen to them if they were to leave their cage. They loved their cage and needed to know that the cage loved them; it's for their protection, it would never harm them, of course it loved them. So, there they stood, a failed generation, looking for some fun at Waffle House off some stretch of the American Autobahn in the middle of a thunderstorm. And you know what? The Waffle House was all out of fun.

Before the low testosterone leader with the weak jawline could even say a syllable, the waiter cut him down.

"Only to-go orders," said politely.

The cook had his back to the crowd and focused on the stove. The caged birds tried to sing a few notes to understand the situation and were calmly rebuked with a reminder that

"We're only doing to-go orders."

The waiter's voice made Al Roker sound like Method Man. The cook fought back a laugh. He couldn't believe it was actually working. He covered his mouth and dashed into the storeroom. The birds looked around. Vic picked up his second cheeseburger and looked down at the birds, thinking to himself,

"That's right crackas, you heard the head-nigga-in-charge, 'only to-go orders'. Ignore the Jewish/Muslim/Turkish/Italian/French/Canadian/Native American citizen who is clearly eating in-house and was served by the waiter who is—yes you are correct—is refusing to serve you because in case you forgot China destroyed the world, Trump won, and Epstein didn't kill himself, did you get all that? Are you having fun yet? Did you take enough pictures? Did you generate enough free content for your gods?"

They started to piece something together; something that told them they weren't going to find fun here. Vic took a quick look at the Meryl Streep of Waffle Houses who had his best "I don't make the rules, I just got to follow them" look on. The birds were beaten. They departed, filed back in their cars, and fluttered on down the highway.

The cook peeked out of the storeroom.

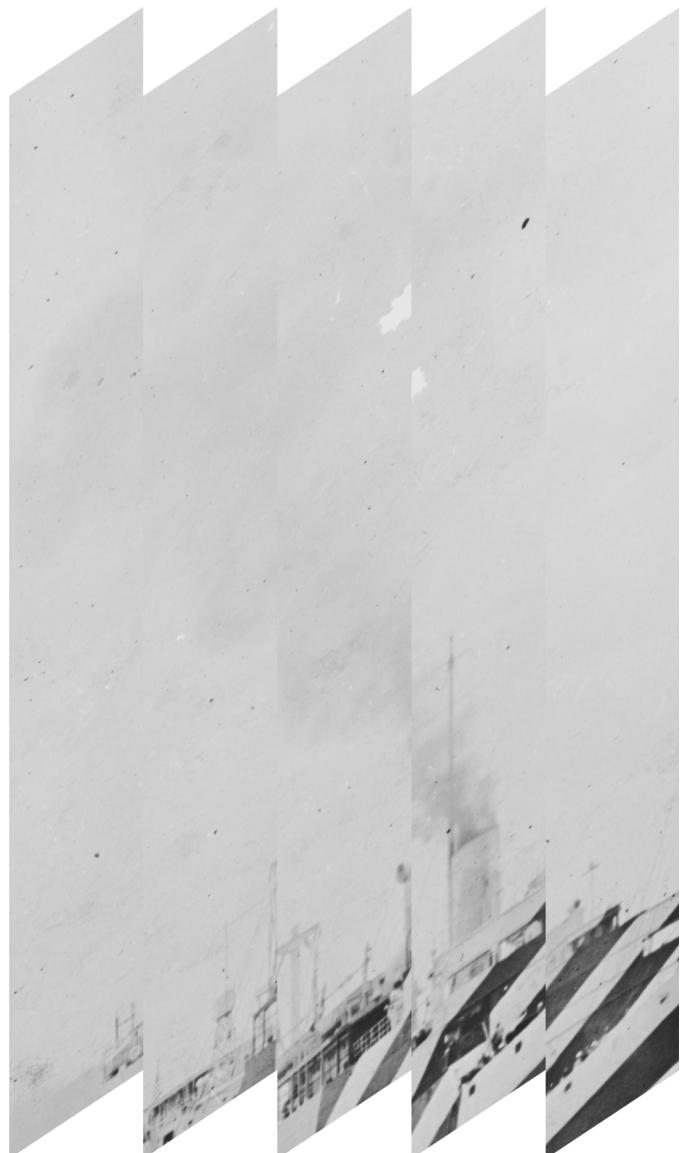
"Shit it worked. Thank God! Where the fuck is the next shift?"

"I don't know I just want this day to be over."

With an empty plate, Vic moved towards the register and fought back his grin. He knew he wasn't one of them. He knew that the joke they pulled wasn't for his amusement, but for their survival. Yet he hoped that they could share the punchline with him, that he could be part of the fun that just happened. The waiter rang up his check,

"\$12.07"

"For two cheeseburgers and a Sprite? Holy God that's expensive," Vic thought. He paid and tipped. He looked at them, hoping to make eye-contact long enough to smile at their joke with them, but they didn't look at him. The two behind the counter talked about their plans for the evening, tomorrow, the week, and the rest of their lives. They made it all seem possible. All they needed to do was to do it. Vic tucked his book into his raincoat and caught a glimpse of the menu he didn't bother looking at. He was stunned. He had been overcharged by about 100%. He tried again to look at the waiter and the cook, but they couldn't even see him now. They were lost in lard-vapor dreams and Formica aspirations. Vic tried one more time, and realized he'd become a blur to them. After a while Vic went out, left the Waffle House, and walked back to the hotel in the rain.



TO THE VICTOR, THE SPOILS

ROBERT MERRIMACK & 012

It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.

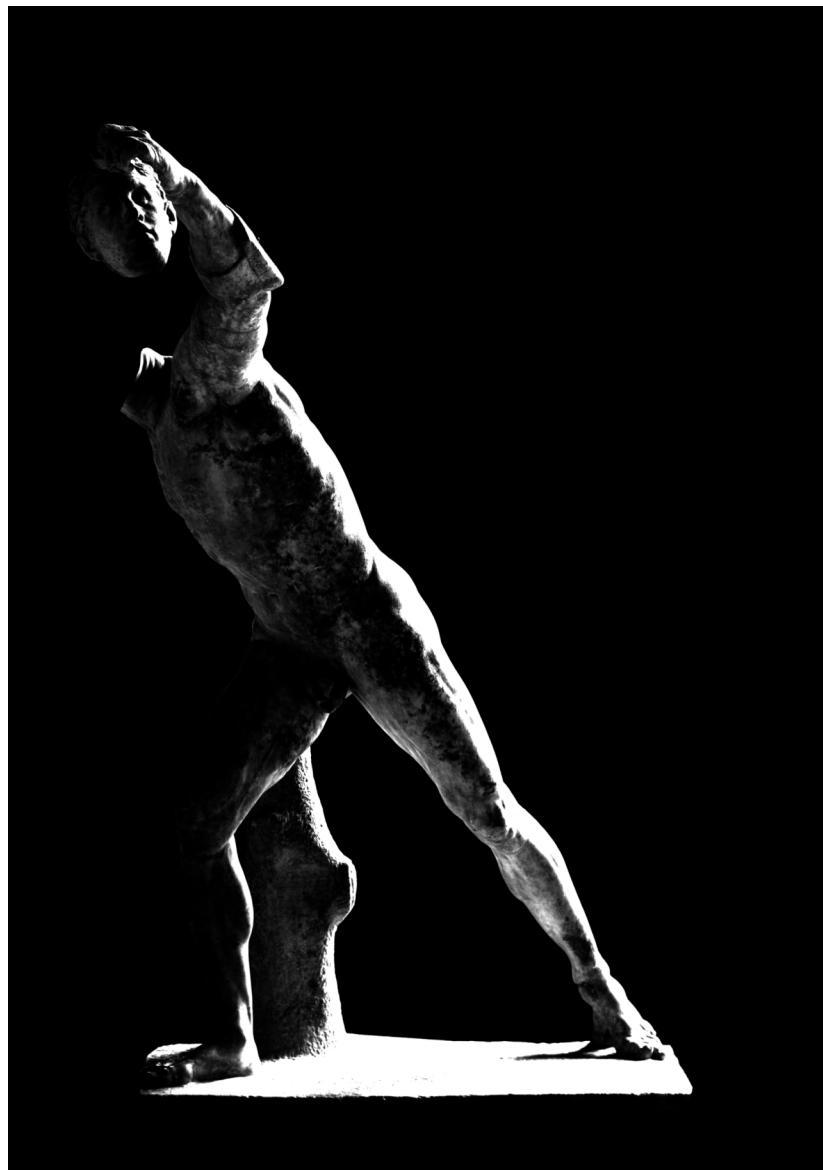
— Fredric Jameson

Criminal Executioner Overlord Nefarious Norgath grasped his battle scepter and entered the Market Arena. Clad in brightly-colored armor festooned with the skulls of past mergers and proudly bearing the shiny logo of his corpo-tribe, Overlord Norgath cut an imposing figure indeed. To his right screamed and cheered his corpo-thralls. At the far end of the arena another supercharged, burly man-beast made an entrance, clutching an electrified trident in one hand and a vicious blade in the other. In equal and opposite reaction, the thralls of his corpo-tribe cheered for their champion. Through armor and helmet, the two contestants sneered at each other menacingly, snorting like bulls, steam spouting from the vents in their face plates in sharp bursts after their powerful lungs greedily sucked in air.

"Silence! Quiet you all!" bellowed an immensely obese man who sat atop a lavish, bejewelled tower overlooking the rabid masses.

"I, Overseer Morbidius Flattus Maximus, come to you today to preside over and officiate the sacred corpo-rite of merger and acquisition by combat!" At this guttural announcement the gathered horde once more went overboard in their love for violence and profit, stomping their feet and chanting deafening cries in brutal ecstasy. In the higher bleachers of the stadium, the mutants and cursed ones of the menial classes could no longer contain their bloodlust and in their excitement began fighting each other, ripping and clawing and sending the occasional limb flying until finally the pit guards patrolling the stands beat them back into submission. In the lower stands, nearer to the action, the middle management thralls, clad in respectable business robes, clapped and placed bets. And lastly in the VIP turrets surrounded by armed guards, machine-gun nests, barbed wire, and flood lights, the patrician C-suite Overlords smiled thinly and whispered discreetly among themselves, sure of their plots, their investments long ago tied down and secured.

"Yes, make no mistake," Overseer Maximus continued. "The long-standing feud between Fallmart Inc. and Crosshair Ltd. is to be settled once and for all this auspicious day, in a glorious gladiatorial fight to the death! And to the survivor goes the legal right of all the forfeited as-



sets, obligations, and contracts herewith detailed..." Overseer Maximus proceeded to read a long list of legal stipulations from a scroll, the holdovers of the sacred code of the lost times of the Corporate Golden Age before the Great Crash. Above, the menials nodded off and fidgeted and grew restless, while the pit guards, watching them intently from the aisles, gripped their stun clubs in anticipation of any trouble.

"Now, without tarrying a moment further," Overseer Maximus went on, his voice booming theatrically and his hands gesticulating with a histrionic flourish. "Ladies and gentle-mutants,

slaves, menials, and part-time employees; overlords and captains of industry, by the powers vested in me by the all-knowing, all-wise Invisible Hand, may the Market decide your fates! Begin!"

At this word the two titanic warriors lurched forward and met in a brutal clash of muscle and steel. Executioner Overlord Norgath swung his battle scepter with immense force, while his opponent Krull, effortlessly bobbing between the cruel mace-swings, stabbed with his shock-trident and slashed with his cost-cutter blade. Norgath, despite his hulking size, gracefully dodged these swift attacks until at last Krull's relentless onslaught paid off and he scored a glancing hit with his cost-cutter and slit Norgath's bicep.

With first blood spilt, a gleeful uproar issued from the crowd. Boosted by combat stims and with his faith in the Invisible Hand and its divine Profit Motive steady, Norgath felt no pain and showed no reaction. His bloodshot, pitiless eyes remained fixed on his quarry.

Krull cackled mean-spiritedly, his wicked laughter tinny and muted behind the thick steel trap of his armored face plate. "Fallmart will be mine, weakling! The Market demands it! The Invisible Hand wills it!"

Norgath scoffed wordlessly. This fool will be crushed 'neath his mace in short order. No use talking to a dead man. Krull thrusted with his trident but Norgath sidestepped it and, with a sweeping upward diagonal swing of his scepter knocked it aside. The shock trident went spinning many yards through the air until it found its way plunged into the chest of an unfortunate middle manager seated in the forth row, who soon burst into flames from the excessive voltage. Those in the crowd variously gasped, laughed, and cheered.

Looking down from upon his luxurious perch above, Overseer Maximus gloated over the carnage. He feasted upon wasteland boar and gulped down potent rad-booze as he savored the barbarous spectacle.

With now only his trusty cost-cutter, Krull tossed it between his hands playfully as if ready to fake out his foe with his guiltless wiles. Then without warning he unleashed a frenzied storm of slashes, putting everything he had into it to overwhelm his hated nemesis and spray his blood over the sand so that he may deliver value to his shareholders. Norgath moved back with uncanny, juiced-up agility, bypassing each wild cut, until finally the fiend attacking him became exhausted and gave him an opening. In one momentous, low sweep of his weapon, he smashed in Krull's leg at the knee. Screaming in pain the wounded tyrant fell down on his good knee. The massive trunk of his broken leg now lay limp and shattered on the ground. Despite being maimed,

Krull kept viciously waving his cost-cutter in defiance, rage-filled and indomitable to the last. Norgath extended his battle scepter out with one hand, with the flamboyant flair and august bearing of a Caesar, then wheeled around to survey the audience.

"What does the market demand?" he thundered, his shout loud enough to overwhelm the collective noise of the entire stadium.

"Death! Death! Death!" shrieked and pleaded the eager spectators.

After some struggle Overseer Maximus heaved himself up off his haunches and stood wobbling, balancing his immensity effortfully on his overburdened legs. With a greasy smile he raised his corpulent arm and fatalistically cast his thumb down.

"So judges the almighty Invisible Hand. Its divine will made briefly manifest by its unworthy earthly representative," he pronounced with trembling mystic reverence.

With the matter thus decided Norgath aimed his mace at Krull's head and wound it up back and forth slowly to toy with this upstart challenger as if preparing to casually hit a home run off a batting tee. His now utterly spent adversary spat on the ground in resignation and leered at his better with unfathomable disdain.

In one bone-crunching arc of his mace, the Magnate of Murder, the Tycoon of Torture, the great and fearsome warlord of commerce, Nefarious Norgath, scored a rib-shattering blow square onto Krull's chest, catapulting his broken body several feet where he then landed with a heavy thud and settled lifeless in a crumpled, vanquished heap. Norgath raised his battle scepter in ultimate triumph and the arena exploded.

On the jumbo screens above the stands, Fallmart Inc.'s stock price shot up in magnificent winning green while Crosshair Ltd.'s stock bled out in abject defeated red.





BURGERPUNK DELIVERS

T.M. & 009

Slim woke up in the van just like always. Seein'as he didn't pay rent, gas for the van was his one biggest cost, and seein'as he didn't own much outside a'one phone and the clothes on his back, Slim's van was his personal treasure.

That there van was Slim's mown lawn, his rack a'rifles, his Rolex, his weddin'ring. Man drove a van with an Amazon paintjob, except, thing was, it actually read "Amazov." Just in case Bezos and the lawyers caught up to him.

Three days a week Amazov was parked in the Wendy's, two days a week he stuck it down the in Shake Shak, two up in the Carl's Jr. Folk never batted an eye at some Amazon van doing long hours in a lot, so our man Slim parked for free.

Now those there long spells a'parkin', they were all deals with the food-joint managers so as to let Slim get some sleep, which he did 12-to-12, startin' late. Sleep, or else check his phone kinna'thing. Other half of that there bargain was the managers got a 10-percenter on all Slim deliveries. Midday to Midnight, New Year to December 31st and set to keep on rollin' till Slim off an'died.

So why even order by Slim Delivers? Why not, I dunno, FedEx it? Go get your shit for yourself even?

Startin' fact: Slim was always parked somewhere in the intersection. Meant as long as what you wanted was a five mile drive from where the highways crossed then he was mos'off the fastest.

Next up. Slim was off the books. Real, deep-level off the books. All the man had was a license and a registration to the trailer his folks had died on when it burned. So there was nothing Slim wouldn't care t'deliver. Couldn't scare the man off. Scientific fact,

by the by, that there ain'ven one Wendy's manager alive who isn't up on some high-end amphetamine.

Final part of how he pulled it off... well, see... Slim—who's gonna be the hero for the day, if y'all can live with us callin' this working stiff a hero—well Slim had one other thing going for his services aside from cheap and fast and totally a-moral. The thing was that folk liked him.

When it was pills, Slim dropped off pills in the cool, fast, no-bullshit mode that lets'ya get a fix back to the bathroom fast. When it was heavy shit, Slim weren't averse to givin'a man a han' with a nailed-shut carton or a cocoon a' black tape. And when you could handle some company an' up an' said—Hey, Slim, grab yaself a beer why dontcha', well Slim grabbed that beer and smalltalked a load a'happy nothin' just as long as you could like it. Man fo'all seasons.

So there you have it, one of those fellas who had his life one hundred percent fixed—straight job, a few good friends, no debts, no worries. An'all he had to do was trade off any chance at a girl a'his own—I mean, what kind a'girl wants a life where you wash yo'ass in a handbasin? But I can tell you now that our man Slim (and it ain't just a name) our man Slim was a man who made his peace with what he'd traded way back when. Already twenty-nine now. Man with a plan, and the plan was an ISA that was meant to let him take it easy all through his eighties and onward. Wasn'gonna make it that far, not on a French fry diet, but every man needs direction.

So that's all, huh? Guy makes some bad calls on the whole meanin'a life thing, but then inside his whole bad call framework—inside a'that, he carves out a place for hisself and he lives right there between the food joints. But if y'vever read a tale that starts with a happy main man in it, then you know already how the story has'ta head the way a'hellfire an'hurricanes. So, here's Slim's hurricane.

Starts with a pill.

Slim woke up in the van, bare feet out the window just the way he liked his summer days. Dust on the windshield let the sun in sandy yellow, an'from the way the roads were breathin', from the speed a'cars goin' by a'hundred yards off, from all them little things that only Slim knew how t'hear, he had it down as just past eleven.

Cold, skinny fries from a pack in the glovebox, swig a'Powerade and then Slim was up for his messages. Mostly regulars, bookin'a delivery in for the hour after twelve. A trucker who'd want a half Papa John's delivered where he sat in the Shake Shak. One of those snuck in underneath the jacket jobs that only Slim was allowed to get away with. Manager at Shake Shak needed Slim bad fo'a side gal's meth.

But there was another number on top'a the classics. New number, from one of those prefabs two miles West-South-West a'the smaller set'a pumps. Only three minutes old when Slim saw it, text read:

—Sendin out to all you carrier dudes. First 1 back gessa deal. Fifty for a supermarket run 4 me. TXT Now!!!!—

And Slim did. Few messages in he got the agreement an'Slim set off for the WinCo. All the while he was drivin' there his customer was sendin'in more'an more items for the shop. Bag a'cookie dough, Fritos, Cheez Whiz, make it two a'cookie dough, them Jap noodle things, pizza nachos but like the froze ones.

It was all your classic munchies. Four litres a'Coca-Cola an'one'a them mixer machines if its goin' less than twenty bucks. Slim rolled inna WinCo lot and he did the shop fast.

Not even twenty-five minutes from the time he got the text, Slim's Amazov pulls up outside a'them prefabs. First ever order Slim made in the neighbourhood, and in case you only ever saw those houses from the freeway you maybe haven't got a grip just how wide the plots are down there, how every house is its own mansion inside'a chain-link fencin'. Chain link fencin', but the houses are beauts. Big, wide. 'Merican. Slim was outside a pastel blue place with a lawn that belonged in a suburb. That's the feel the developers were sellin'. Like ya'place here was jus'a start'a top-end suburb that wasn't quite built yet—the first house'a many, an'if there weren't a school district, even a goddamn busstop, fact was that in a while there'd be a buffer a'more houses. Then a man wouldn't need a chain fence for safety. Mayhaps there'd be a 7-11 someday when your kids inherit.

Here in the now though, Slim parked by the mailbox and texted up that he was there. 'Afore he's even done wit'the text he sees his customer comin'. Sideburns, silk dressin' gown, body like a liner gone to seed, shit let's call this guy the Linesman, Slim never learned the name, tho' down the line he found out that it'd never been the Linesman's house t'begin with. Linesman saunters down his front path in sandals, 'afore he even has the gate open dude's axxed Slim if he can unpack the shit inside an'has he got the bill an'all?

No worries. Slim already has the Linesman down as a real good

tipper—you wanna ask me how? Well, Slim'd know, right? You go an'ask. Linesman leaves the fence gate unlocked an'throws Slim chit chat cues 'bout the roads and what's that paint job on his van an'all. Two of em a'walkin' up the front path chattin' shit. This Linesman is the sort a'friendly that comes 'afore a good, well-planned round'a drunk.

So there are Slim an' his Linesman inside. Case of re-morgagin' goin' on up this there house. One van's worth a'furniture, long stretches a'carpet inbetween the items. Drinks in the kitchen's all lined up by the sill, TV blarin'out from the room next door while the Linesman's countin'off every name from that there bill, talkin' football, talkin' comparative milkshake experiences all round upper-state an'findin' out Slim could happen'a be an expert on the matter. Though all through this chit-chat our man's jus' coverin' for a bad feel he's got goin'on. Somethin'bout the way the light plays off the walls, Sim feels like he's landed in a TV show on a set where the colour contrast's kinda fucked. Linesan's face this special kinna orange.

Wild night comin', huh? Says Slim. Smile he gets back off the Linesman's got Federal Offence writ all over it. Linesman says, would up an'Invite-cha if I could, man—but it's a kina'a reunion, see? An' Slim, who's good at stuff, switches tack inta' the last time he met good ol' Al an' what went down back then. Whole anecdote pulled off to fill the pause there, an'by this point all the stuff's unpacked an' Linesman's fumblin' for the bill in cash plus a good 33-percenter for our man.

Like he shaves with a waxin' kit, that's how the Linesan's face looks. Raw kinna red. Palms a loada bucks inna Slim's hand, then he turns aroun' for a piece a paper of the table, folds it up an' slips summatt in.

There's the pill.

An'if you never been in there in a room with a type like the Linesman then you won' know, an'if you have I hardly need tell ya how he asks Slim how Slim likes to party, then he drops a chemical kinna' name that's probable made up, then goes with a, you try one a these Slim. An how Slim says, yeah, when work's done I will and then the whole conversation's done an' Slim has the pill inside a'envelope made up out a' folded-up phone-bill paper. Slim wit' a mental note to flush that shit away next chance he gets. Our Slim ain't no fool, at least not when the pressure's off he ain't.

But today is the day, the first ever day, that Amazov gets pulled up by a cop, an'Slim don't know 'bout that pressure. Downside of ya'lif deep off the books there. Secon'a man turns up in a uniform you reckon it's the feds and the CIA all at once. Slim's been outta governed world so long he don't even know that the CIA is all secret Russians anyway.

So here's how it goes, Amazov pulls out away from the plot wit' the houses on it, guns along the feeder road a half-mile, then up comes the sirens, just like the cop's been waitin' inna driveway in the prefabs, waitin' on Slim dirivin' out, an'Slim's all—where that fucker come from anyway? An'then he clocks. The pill. Some bullshit excuse to come check up his ride, then the cops gonna finn'a pill, then goddamn use it as a grounds t'go back an' fuck the Linesman. Fuck Slim too. Don'tcha need a license for drivin' an'all? He's thinkin' jailtime, that's what Slim's thinkin'.

Pulls up, don't even look for the officer comin' his way. Slim's only thinks—hey, hide it, or swalla'it. Hide it or swalla. An' jus' afore he's set to drop it down the seat side Slim sees outta corner'an eye that the oficer is black, is a black man, an'then he don't even

have time to tell hisself how he ain't never had no problems wit'a black folk hisself, 'cos he already ate the pill like some antsy fool.

"S'up Slim! Howya like me now bitch!"

Slim turns his head and sees notta cocked and levelled handgun, notta badge out on display. He sees Good'ol Al. In uniform. Al in a uniform. Good'ol Al is apparently a police now.

"License, registration, bitch! Nah, I'm kiddin' man. Not even here for Bezos or anythin'. Jus'sawya drivin' roun'an thought to show you my new look. Likeit? Beetcha ass! Delivery roun'here or what?"

"Droppin' off some crack," says Slim, too weak for better jokes.

"You jus' make sure you don't have a taillight out or whatever next time you're at it partner! They my boys now an'all but I can tellya. Summa those sons down the district station ain'tso sympathetic. Hey—the station! Still got shit to do man! Catcha roun' Slim!"

An' Al makes it back to the wagon while Slim's still blinkin'. Off goes the policeman, siren wailin', firin' his pistol straight up in the sky outta one window for the love of a new ride, an' his love of Merica. Slim jus' leans back inna chair an' thinks how at leas' the pill ain't kicked in yet. Shuts his eyes.

Shuts'em.

Nex' time them eyes open up our hero's inna White Castle wit'a thing like a burger, 'cept there ain't no White Castle on his intersection, so Slim's leanin' forward at the food, brow not so much as an inch fromma meat, mutterin'aloud "Ain't no white White Castle onna innerinnersection." Jus'assif he were narratin' alla sudden an'I was the one out there in the food joint instead. Slim talkin'at'a burger but it ain't a burger, the fuck is it?

That food? That construction? Ain't'offa any sorta menu. Issa bacon, bacon, cream cheese. Issa burger, but only maybe. Someone maybe painted a sidea'it inna liquid butter. Reckons thems onion rings inside'a'it as well, but it's hard to count the patties.

Voice sayin' "Slim, you wanna leave now?" and then he's walkin'. Walkin' walkin' but it's hard 'ard hard wit' these white walls an' floors to know wha'sa wall and what ain't, an'if you're slippy you could see a wall like that an'saunter right down through it.

But in time he get's back t'his meal, except now it's another joint, maybe issa Papa John's now. Same food onna table, only flatter an now it's like the grease is steamin' offit inna Slim's slim lungs. Grease, grease; suicide, thinks Slim, an even if the words don't make no sense of what Slim's doin' wit'a pizza now he's all suddenly aware a'how the Linesman in the mansion's blown his brains out, corpse inna couch, how his head's exploded off and a half-hour on his bloated gut releases half-digested cookie dough an'nachos out his ass so that the headless man is sittin'inna multicolour throne'a shit. Shotgun in his lap.

Then Slim's walkin' tarmac, lookin' for his van here where it's dark. He's thinkin'bout trees, Slim. How he'd like to drive the few miles North to where there's trees an'lie unna'a leaves sometime.

An'finally Slim wakes up in the van. But this time it is midnight.

Slim, he sleeps midnight to midday. But here he is at midnight, wide awake an'maybe sober, thinkin'a the trees. Van's open window lets in air. Cool night air. Slim breathes a long breath out an'smiles. Fool thinks his hellfire's over. He sets off to drive Northward.

Amazov turns inna parkin' lot, arcs a way aroun'a parked pickups, Slim's tires kissin the night-cool asphalt.

Amazov pull up the exit ramp an'joinsa road behind another van. Slim looks an'he sees that the van reads FredEx.

Fred. Ex.

Fred.

Ex.

An Slim don' know there's a word for doppelgangers, but he all at once knows what one means. See tha's maybe why we made words. So as to take the fear out a'what we know.

So'as you can say: motherfuckr pointin' an M83 in ma' face.

Fill your head up wit' that thought a'the "mother fucker" anna "M83" an'not the I'mma gonna die bit.

Like we say t' kids, *nah, you're jus' sick son*, so as they can use the word "sick" to get away from the pain.

But Slim ain' got no word for a doppelganger, ain't got no word to take the edge offa shock, he can only see that the driver of FredEx mus'be a man jus'like Slim is, jus'Slims personal ghost—a man who sleeps 12-to-12, startin' midday instead, an'mirrors everythin' Slim does, mirrors it forever.

An it's fear—that's what it is inside a' Slim now.

His full instinct it'sa fear that our Slim's gonna meet a guy an'see how wrong that FredEx man's life is. See how wrong Slim hisself is in turn.

An all he'll have left t'do is pick onna guy's—oh, I dunno, his shoes, his favrit' song, whateva.

Gonna have to finn'another reason to despise him. A fake reason.

Slim's gonna haveta get to lookin' what the difference between'a two'a them is, even if him an' FredEx ain'got no real deep-down differences at all, an'all this guy FredEx is is a holy terror sent to show our hero that he's livin' wrong. Been livin' wrong forever.

An'still Slim needs'a see him. Needsa see a face. Drives his Amazov right up almost the tailgate a' FredEx. Right up behin'till the FredEx driver honks him off, then he follows FredEx downa exit lane inta'White Castle. The White Castle that don't even exist. White Castle, parkin' lot at half past minnight. Slim's double, he gets out the car.

To be continued . . .

IF THINGS DON'T END WELL

If things don't end well
I want you to sell
My Super Soaker

Still, my only regret
Is having not read
Dracula by Bram Stoker

Anonymous & oo8

SHIT YOURSELF IN EXOTIC PLACES

ANONYMOUS
& 007

Almost, at least. And I have nothing but the Sarpa to blame for it. But, as of now, these are the facts: I am sitting on the toilet, looking out into the Pacific abyss, in an underwater hotel, in Japan. There is a leak. A moment ago a man in scuba gear dove down with a drill and drilled into the window of my bathroom. This happened, and happened all while I was sitting on the toilet, facing the window, staring at him, and him staring at me. Then, on top of it all, he found it fit to wave before swimming back up. So now the floor is wet, and the glass is about to give in. Soon, I will drown, or get crushed under pressure. Hell, fish could eat me—it happens in the ocean. I don't know what to make of it all, but if I had to, I'd make of it a very extravagant sicing. Oh well, you take what you get. A week ago, what I got was a letter from Lidia. It read:

"Dear Sergi,

"I am going down to Palma, to kill myself."

As was excusable, I hadn't the mind to mind what followed. Next thing I knew, I was in Japan, under the sea, resting my head on the counter in the hotel bar, watching fish swim outside the window—not knowing I'd soon become one. Then, while I was occupying myself by cupping and un-cupping my ears to wah-wah the samba music, a young Japanese lady in a similar tipsy gloom sat on the stool next to mine. She rested her head on the counter, mimicking me. Her eyeliner was all smudged. She asked, "Friend?" and I said, "No. She's in Palma." She said, "Kanashii." I asked, "Are you with a friend?" assuming that that was what she meant, and she pointed to a table

on the other side of the bar where someone who I took to be her friend had passed out drunk. We watched the fish together for a while and cupped and uncupped our ears. Then she asked, "What-a do you do?" and I told her, "I'm an intelligence officer." She asked, "Topu seceret?" and I said, "Very." She almost smiled, but then I asked, "You?" and she said, "I am on vo-ca-shun" and started crying. I tried to console her by patting her on the head and ordering something to eat. She started crying even harder. I fed her two rolls of sushi but the sticks were hard to hold so I gave up. Suddenly, an emergency presented itself. I didn't want to leave her like that, but I really had to go—because you have to, when you really have to—so I explained, "I have to go to the bathroom. I'll be back." And while struggling to blow her nose, she said,

"Alu-rightu."

With that, I think, we get to where I am now: sicced, not to mention sick outright. And I'm not leaving behind much. Except her at the table. But that's a lament I'll have to do with for now. A lament I don't have to do with at all, however, has to do with a certain someone still in Palma, who I hope is really in hell. And is enjoying hell, I hope. Or maybe I don't. No, I really do. I hope she's in hell and I hope I find her there on a beach laying on a hammock between two palm trees, napping with a book on her face, so I can shake the hammock and throw the book away and tell her, "I quit! And before I quit I went down and got everything I could get my hands on and I made my way over to the copy machine, then the post office, then the airport! Then I flew all the way out to Japan! What do you make of that?" Or maybe I don't hope so in the least. And maybe I just went too far with the Sarpa.

THE PATTERSON FOOTAGE

IGOR NIXON
& 003

The Patterson footage was shot October 20th 1967. It features a large furry animal walking upright through Bluff Creek, near Yakima, Washington. The animal looks like Bigfoot. The men who shot the footage insisted it was Bigfoot, never recanting their story. Predictably, the film has been called a fraud. Numerous experts have assessed the film, yet there is no consensus as to its authenticity. None of that is important. Any polemic bickering amounts to pissing in the wind.

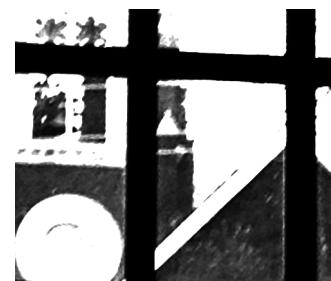
What DOES matter is the moment when the animal looks over its shoulder and peers into the camera; a vestige of the unknown stared us directly in the eyes, and impassively looked away. It could have bowed. It could have run. Instead, it calmly dismissed us—as if to say, *you don't exist*. For all our high and mighty rhetoric about being number one on planet Earth, the supernatural might as well have spit in our oatmeal.

We collectively sneered. Our egocentric minds recoiled, having been rebuked by an anomaly. The mainstream media rejected the story and it faded into obscurity. In short, we couldn't handle it. To be on the safe side, we declared it a hoax—another subject undeterminable.

What a blank. That's the best we can do? How are we going to handle questions like what's at the Earth's core? Does the universe end? Is there God? Undeterminable, which just means *we don't know*. We won't believe in something unless the military-industrial complex uses it to kill us. Electricity existed before its "discovery." It'll probably go the same way with time-travel and who knows what else.

Rather than declaring anything unorthodox to be witchcraft, we need to trust the unknown . . . or at least acknowledge its potential. Hell, you could even call it faith, which to most people means *bullshit*. Of course faith has its pitfalls. Both faith and reason are inevitably corrupted. The difference is that faith sees the world as something beautiful and temporary; there are powers greater than us, thus favoring reverence. Yes, reason is far more practical; without reason there wouldn't be umbrellas or computers. However, as a philosophical foundation for society, faith is sustainable. Reason sees the world as something to explain with measurements, such as "How big of a hole will this bomb make?"

But hey, cheer up—once in a while we give mystery its due by being strange ourselves. Look at Stonehenge. It was built to pay homage to death and the moon. That's neat. Nowadays there are places like The House on the Rock in Wisconsin and The Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome. These places are full of wonders and they leave a person in awe—that's what we need more of. There is a lack of generation-spanning super weirdness. Instead of reinventing wedding invitations, let's build some underground labyrinths. How about a city that runs on magnets? It would be great to see geometric shapes make a comeback, like some giant spheres or polygons. It's as if our concept of creation is a two-bit motel, with carpeted bathrooms and no vacancies. Let's build a fort instead and invite Bigfoot.



AREA 22

& 007

"How can you taste anything if you can't smell?"

I was busy in the kitchen making biscuits.

"I don't know, Patrice, you tell me."

She didn't say. I could see heat waves off the oven. It was 11:32 on a Sunday. Long night last night.

Our horrible dog kept running around and licking my legs. I put it in the backyard and threw a stick. The dog jumped and missed.

Patrice was inside eating butter out of the container with a spoon. I went into the day room and looked out the window. The clouds looked up. There was dust in the air and the window broke.

It was so loud and bright I forgot about the coffee table until it shattered. The sirens started as I hit the floor. Apparently we were prepared. I wasn't.

I thought it was funny that UFOs looked exactly like on cartoons. Flying saucers!



Patrice was out back and the dog launched a stick up in the air with its mouth. She jumped and caught it. "What the fuck?" I ran upstairs and grabbed the shotgun. If aliens come, I'll show up.

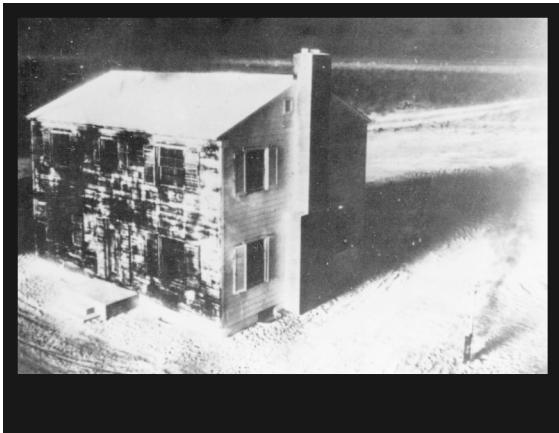
There was a knocking on the door. I was all sweaty. The handle turned. "Fuck, I forgot to lock the door." A tall green man stood there. He had two little gray guys behind him. "Ayy, lmao." They just stood there.

I unloaded two shells and they just stood there. "Ayy, lmao?" I slipped and fell back into the kitchen. They came inside. Outside through the glass door I saw Patrice and the dog. They were dancing or something. I grabbed a knife and eyed the stairs.

The aliens came into the kitchen. They opened the oven. One of the little gray guys tried to pick up the baking sheet and burnt his hand. "Ayy, lmao!" it cried out in pain. The other gray guy squirted some foam on the first one's hand. "Ayy, lmao," they agreed as they hugged each other. The green guy looked at me.

I put on oven mitts. I took the biscuits out. They gathered around.

The green guy placed a device over his mouth and spoke: "How can you taste anything if you can't smell?"



gateway2000

ESOTERIC EPSTEIN WORSHIP

& 004

Epstein was perhaps the most successful ritual magician of our era. He had dedicated ritual spaces in his private properties, most notably his island retreat, where he entertained the modern equivalent of kings and priests—world leaders and media figures, regardless of stated creeds—where he led his sexual ceremonies openly in a place of power. Simply put, among the highest orders of black magic practitioners, the total annihilation of a person, specifically a child, is among the most potent and respectable of acts, perhaps the only worthy goal after all others have been made trivial. The rape of hundreds and the facilitation of these rapes, the destruction of all normal bonds between an adult and a child, and the establishment of a space of utter freedom for the master of the dominion; all these things point to something worth admiring in a spiritual sense.

As perhaps the one figure in modern history with such a potent ritual space as Little St. James, with his decades of activity, and with his ties to the highest offices on this planet, it could only be speculated how if he had lived for another decade, would his goal of immortality have come closer to reality? He was the last great figure of the Piscean Age, certainly the epitome of its unpleasant ideas, and perhaps the greatest figure of the most important member of his tribe (Jesus Christ, after all, was nothing less than a Pisces). It is undoubtable that Christ had an erection as he died; Epstein's death, false or not, was a cession of life as absolute but liminal as that of Christ's. Did he leave that 'prison' alive or dead? It is impossible to say. Are those who associated with him, the foundations of the media and social world, forever tainted by him regardless? Of course. Like a specter, he vanished into nothing, after violations of the souls of hundreds and establishing the loyalty of the kings of the world that make mere mass killings and the obliteration of tribes look paltry.

ANONYMOUS



#1
A pill that eliminates the need for sleep

I'm not talking about meth. I'm talking about a pill or a treatment that alters your DNA so that the need for sleep is just eliminated. You might feel a little tired, but then you can sit in a recliner and read a book for 30 minutes or soak in a hot bath, and then feel refreshed enough to keep going. I hear folks talk about ways to stop ageing or to cure cancer. Fuck that shit. Never sleeping is the game changer because everyone would have to have it. Imagine you are in job where one of your co-workers doesn't have to sleep. They come to work early, send emails in the middle of the night, work all hours, and still have the energy for their friends and family. How can you compete with that? You would need whatever they were on. The more I think about this, the more I think this pill would be a massive economic boon for the whole world. People are driving at all hours of the night, wearing down the roads, wearing down their cars, there would have to be good TV shows on all the time, sporting events would have to occur all the time, and so on. There would be no cyclical routine to our day, it would just go. And back to the acceptance rate. It would be exponential-exponential. All it takes is one guy taking it, and then in 6 months the whole world would be on it. You couldn't be left behind. You couldn't be one of the few people left in "zombie sleep" land wasting away a third of your life while the idiot next-door neighbor works 3 jobs. The economic effects are mind-boggling. Keep your eyes open for drug and healthcare companies that may be developing this. I haven't heard of anything close to this except that stuff DARPA developed during Desert Storm, but I think that was some type of THC/amphetamine mix for soldiers.

6 THOUGHTS & 003

#2
Bring back Pontiac

When will we know the economy is really good? When General Motors reintroduces Pontiac—that's when we will be pushing through the economic stratosphere. I remember when the Concord was retired and I thought that really sucked. Why can't the elite business travelers boom around faster than sound and rattle the windows of the little people below? Right now I know of one company that is working on bringing back supersonic commercial flight and I think that is tits. But the return of Pontiac is really going to be what knocks your fucking head off. The Firebird and Trans Am will be soaking panties and driving the local Five-O mad. But here is the kicker: those badass handlebar-moustache muscle cars will return: Fully. Fucking. Electric. That's right, space-age electric high tech Pontiacs! Fucking Knight Rider! Kit lives! Bring back the Hoff! Real voice commands, touch screens, self-driving, infrared, satellite, radar-guided sexiness. You'll be power-sliding a cloud of smoke and waving your cowboy hat out the window at some nerd while he masturbates to Elon Musk tweets in his Tesla waiting for road service to give him an emergency charge.

#3
Harvey Weinstein Rape Scandal Biopic
Rape Scandal

Okay. Follow me on this one. So Harvey Weinstein allegedly had sex/raped a bunch of Hollywood starlets, abused his power, and was a total monster, allegedly. I get that. I think it is obvious that a scandal that compelling would make a great movie #metoo. I think it would be a great way for Hollywood to show it is working on its problem of equality and give women actors the same respect as men. However, in order to make this movie, you are going to have to audition a lot of women. You are going to have to audition a lot of women who are going to play the part of women who are going to be sexually and psychologically abused. Do you see where this is going? Some sleazy Hollywood guys are going to have a golden opportunity to sexually abuse hundreds of women and say it was "acting." After the movie is released and wins all the Oscars, hundreds of women are going to come out and say: "I was raped by the director!" And the director will say: "No it was acting! We were having an audition!" If they are good actors, you won't be able to tell real rape from acting rape. Someone is going to greenlight this movie and lives will be ruined. Keep an eye open for this one.

#4
The Truth at Roswell

Here are some thoughts from a historical perspective. I can remember growing up and watching the Sci-Fi Channel on Saturday mornings to see shows talking about Roswell, NM. Fucking A. The aliens had crossed the galaxy with technology beyond our wildest dreams, but for some reason they decided to manually park their flying saucer instead of letting the autopilot plant it on the White House lawn. Then the G-men showed up, recovered the bodies, and told everyone it was a weather balloon. Then somehow in the '90s a grainy video tape of 4 seconds of an alien autopsy managed to be released to the public! What are they hiding? The truth is out there! Bullshit? Yeah, but in a different way. Apparently there is a known technique that bullshit artists do involving an event that is around 30 years old. The Roswell incident was in 1947; a minor story in the local newspaper, and that was it. Some douche digs it up, interviews some locals with leading questions, and then writes a book. A couple of new-age nutbars read the book and now a nothing town in New Mexico is famous for aliens. It will be interesting if we see some bullshit like this perpetuated in our time. Here is the last bit on Roswell: The newspaper article in 1947 said it was a weather balloon that crashed and the nutbars say it was aliens. According to a Freedom of Information Act request, it wasn't a weather balloon or aliens. It was a high altitude Geiger counter used for measuring radiation in the atmosphere. I know our government told us they weren't doing atomic bomb testing in the atmosphere, but they were and this was a device used to see how many of the locals might die in 30 years of cancer because they lived a little too close to Uncle Sam's nuclear playground.

#5
The Last Generation

I often raise an eyebrow when the Masters of the Universe Silicon Valley pricks talk about the downsides of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation. The big threat I hear is "The machines are going to take away all the jobs and there will be civil unrest, and then we will have to have universal basic income!" I think that is a bunch of bullshit. The economy needs AI/automation because we don't have enough people. In the brief time I've been working I have always seen a need for people at all levels of whatever organization wherever I have been. Most jobs are bullshit too. "Showing up is half the job," that is not just a funny expression. It is truth. Most jobs require little creativity and quickly become routine. AI is going to be perfect because we are approaching the last generation. 20 years from now our society is going to be a lot less people-based. In fact the idea of a real person—a physical person in the real world—will be thought of the same as their digital footprint. I'm against this idea. That's why I'm Vic Simmons on the internet: to preserve the real me. Physical and digital will be one in the same. The well-to-do Western world is not having enough kids. Mine will be the last. They will be the last flesh generation. Then time will stop.

#5.1
Digital Life

Did you ever think about taking all your emails, Facebook posts, tweets, Instagram posts, phone location data, and feeding it into a big algorithm that could replicate your "output"? You are your preferences.

#5.2
In the Age of the Master Persuaders

Mind your mind. One day you are going to be eating a bucket of fried seagull and you won't even question it.

#6
Marriage Thoughts

Being married is a real hoot. There is a woman cooking me dinner and washing my clothes who isn't my mom. I love having her around to say the most insane thoughts to her:

"Hey babe, can you play 'Pomp and Circumstance' at my funeral? It will be like 'he graduated from life.'"

"No!"

"Can you boil me down to a big pot of sausage gravy and serve me to our friends and family at my funeral?"

"No!"

I like to fix things for my wife. She had this big-ass adjustable wrench that was rusted shut. I fixed that sonnovabitch no problem.

I like keeping her busy with the jigsaw puzzle that is yours truly. One night we were eating dinner and our table is near a window in our kitchen. We are sitting there eating when a fly starts buzzing against the window trying to get out. I'm closest to the window so I pull open the blinds and sure enough there is a house fly buzzing against the glass. My wife says "Do you want a pair of chopsticks to catch him?" I calmly reply "No, I got him." Then I slowly moved my hand in and picked the fly off the glass with my thumb and forefinger. I held him up for my wife to see he was still alive, then I opened the kitchen door, and let him fly away. When I sat back down my wife was just staring at me and said "I can't believe that just happened." I told her "I am the lord of flies." A few nights later, she was watching TV and I was working at my desk which is also in the living room when another fly was buzzing around. He landed on my lamp, and I reached out and picked him up. My wife watched as I did this. "Honey look, I caught another one!" "You're freaking me out with these flies!" "I told you, I am the lord of flies." When you are single and you pick up flies, you feel like Renfield. When you are married and you catch flies, you are motherfucking Dracula.

VIC SIMMONS

PRETTY PLAIN

& 006

I used to race toy cars down the driveway—Hot Wheels, Matchbox and the like. Gravity makes great toys. Newton knew this, right after that lemon fell on his head, the first thing he does is go and make a fortune off of “Newton’s” cradles selling them to kids claiming he invented the forces involved. Anyway, I had my few underdog cars—the beat-up, crooked, novelty cars—and I would always race them against the new stuff, the hot stuff. Usually it went as expected, and that was fine, but every now and then the pavement would fare just right and the little car that could would become a champion. The neighborhood kids didn’t get it, and mom would tell me to just throw the broken cars out, but like they always say: when life gives you lemons.

This attitude towards toy cars no doubt grew in me as I reached the age for real ones. There was something about a reliable used Toyota Camry that just irked me the wrong way. Two years and two old BMWs later, I had ingrained in me traumatic memories of heat gauges, unable to take my eye off them even as a passenger. Weird German car parts haunted my nights like a late-for-school dream. *I’m sorry Mr. Radiator but I forgo—no please anything but the heat, please don’t . . .* One hot summer day, during my college years, the artsy hoe from philosophy 101 was blowing me in the back seat of my 1970 BMW 02, and it didn’t feel

like it should have. The parallel lines of my orgasm and the car temperature gauge crossed at the wrong time in my mind and I was left gasping for air, anxious, limp dick, sweating all over the leather. My therapist thought it was funny, but there was nothing funny about it. One day, tired of paying for his worthless sessions, I stole his notebook and left him for good. It was filled with weird doctor scribbles that I slowly deciphered sitting in the sunbaked car before driving home. You want to know what they said? “Life very impotent after ‘lemon laid.’”

Performance anxiety is killer, especially without a shrink. It can catch you anywhere in life, and it tends to seep into weird situations, like ordering coffee from the cute girl at Dunkin Donuts or singing happy birthday when not everyone is joining in. The pervasive level it reached all came to a head in this weird dream I had. In it, I was the freshest, newest star on Saturday Night Live. It was my first day and I was holding a little paper itinerary, desperately trying to be at the right set at the right time. Every-

one else was Tina Fey. You might think, *that sounds kind of fun*. Well, you’d be wrong. Think about it: Tina Fey is known for making fun of herself, there is a whole show about it, you look at her and say *wow, I’m more comfortable about being me*. Now imagine there are hundreds of them watching you, making faces, scolding you, grimacing when your one-liner doesn’t hit, when you have to look down to read the joke off your paper, when you’re late to the next set and the show is *LIVE FROM NEW YORK!* During the music break a majestic choir of Feys rose up from the studio audience and sang in crimson light contrasted by darkened sets and a now grim cast. I couldn’t take it anymore, I was on the ground crumpled, crying pitifully, *why won’t she relate, why can’t she understand?* But then the true Fey stepped forward, from the homogeny of the choir. She knelt down and held me in her arms kissing the top of my head as only a mother could. I reciprocated by holding her breasts like a son probably shouldn’t do, but it was okay, it was Tina Fey, she thought it was funny. At the same time

the choir was rising, swelling, and they sang: “when Liz gives you Lemons, grab them, don’t let them get awaaaaay.”

Not to imply I completely rid myself of impotency after the dream, but jerking it to *30 Rock* really seemed to help out. That being said, I had to go to quite some lengths to find the episodes. This was back in the day where you had to be resourceful when pirating. The internet wasn’t quite big enough to have everything yet. On top of that, for some reason people didn’t know how to spell, or spelled wrnog on purpose, Limewire file names littered with everything but the actual content. It didn’t stop me though, I made my own program to search for each possible anagram of each character or word that was even slightly re

lated to the show. It was through these searches that I found lots of interesting unrelated files. Recombinations of Jenna Maloney gave me gigabytes of quality *maryjane_x_spiderman* porn, and it was through Pete Hornberger that I learned about God, his brethren, and finally repented. Most importantly I found my favorite band of all time, Blind Lemonz, and like they say:

*I don’t understand why I sleep all day
And I start to complain that there’s no rain
All I can do is have a drink in the shade
And it rips my life away
Lemonade.*

ANONYMOUS

CAT IN ABU GHRAIB

Anonymous & 005

/ /
/ /

Deprived of when and what who
No one here to meow back to
Hard to get cozy in Abu Ghraib
With strobe lights and acid rock
But once every week
A girl with pixie hair
And forty other men
Take me out on a leash
I smile and tell them
“I’m a cat! Of what help am I
If all I am is feline?”
They laugh and say,
“اصمت يا رجل القط”
And stab me all over.
They don’t know that when I’m out
Things are guaranteed to be
Warm, nice and cuddly
All else an afterthought
I
I I
I I I
I I I I

to Lynndie England

THE TOMBOY DREAM

& 005



I had the tomboy dream again. Well this time it was a feminine dude, but that's beside the point. How do I get back? I've tried hypnotism, I've tried everything the internet tells me about lucid dreaming, I just can't recreate it fully. It's probably the illusiveness of it that makes it so special. You can't predict a tomboy dream, they come to you when they want you. Even now, thinking about it, my chest is filled with a soft warmth. It's not a sex thing either, I don't want the dreams just so I can nut in my pants while unconscious—it's different. It's painful for me to think about the tomboys I've dreamed with, lived with, while I am awake. At the same time the comfort it brings to me is immense. When you're in a tomboy dream you are living life to its fullest. Every biological, Darwinian, theological, metaphysical, existential idea culminates at the feeling you have being with her. The first of life swam around in the primordial soup finely tuning variables for me to have the tomboy dream I had last night.

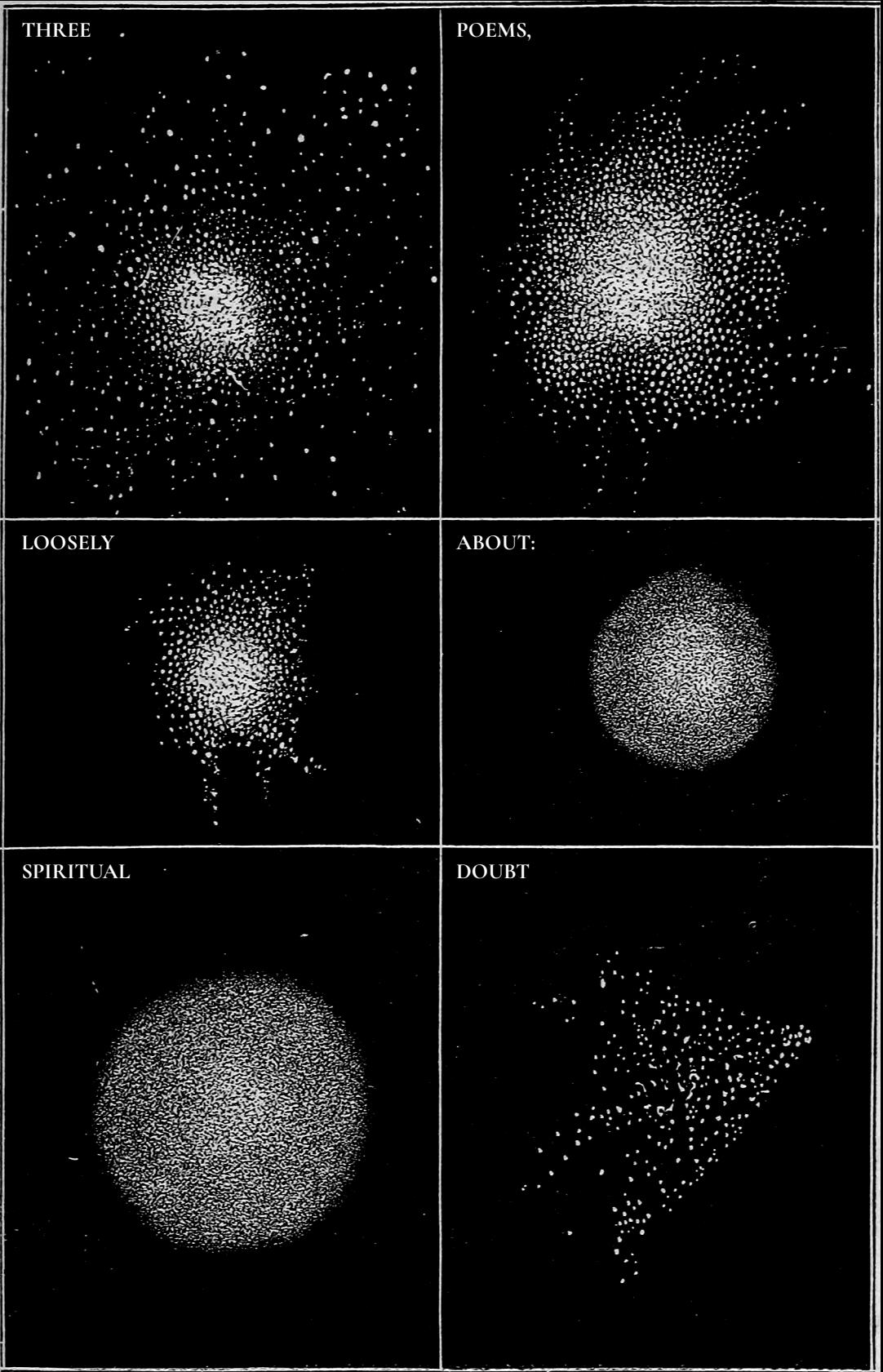
It's hard to explain to someone who has never had one, they just don't get how unimportant everything else is. My job makes me money, but that can't buy a tomboy that can throw a football with me on breezy autumn afternoons. My hobbies and interests bring me happiness, but happiness is nothing compared to tomboy love. The real world is not a suitable environment for tomboys anymore, they are dying, going extinct. Too much cruelty and politics for a tomboy to gaze into your eyes and give you that smile with her stupid freckled face. Last night we fought, but it wasn't a stupid argument like you have with real women. Her smooth shoulders showed in her rolled up t-shirt, a headband messied her short black hair. We wrestled and fought and grappled and had a perfect day. She had fun, I had fun, and we didn't have any lingering regrets after. The silence as we sat down on the couch and sheepishly cuddled was more comfortable than even her smooth thighs on my lap.

Just thinking about it makes me certain it was more than brain chemistry, that there must be some outside force. Memories of tomboy dreams glimmer in the psyche, like childhood memories that never lost their shine. Days spent playing in sandboxes and climbing things with other kids—kids who had no concepts of responsibility or anxiety in their heads—occupy the same region of the brain as tomboy dreams. A really pleasant tree occupies the same part of the brain as tomboy dreams. It is intoxicating to live with—I want to audibly groan in despair every time I recall my moments with her while writing this. There has to be something external about them, because I hate myself too much to create something that loves me so unconditionally. She understood me so fully, so ideally, in ways only an Other could, but can't, because we live in the real world. I'd like to think that it comes from God, but the truth is that tomboy love is different than divine love. If divine love is a square, tomboy love is a tesseract, the dimensions and the extent to which love is inter-exchanged between us is more full than salvation. And she has a really nice chest.

Nothing keeps me together quite like the possibility of another tomboy dream in my life. Without them I would have probably resorted to cigarettes and heroin by now, or maybe just killed myself altogether. Every time I win a game, every time I make it through the work day, every time I hit a new PB benching, she is there to put her hands on me and smile. Even though my middle school baseball games bring me to the next town over, and it's too far for mom and dad to come and watch, she's there in the stands cheering for me, enjoying me being happy. Every time I have a bad day at school, and we go out and play in the sandbox, he's never thinking, do we both have next weekend off? Is this too intimate? How long will we stay friends? He never questions our mutual unconscious passion for living in the current moment, free from the future.

*I just want to be young.
How do I go back?*

ANONYMOUS



Anonymous & oo6

Does god
Know where
God came from?

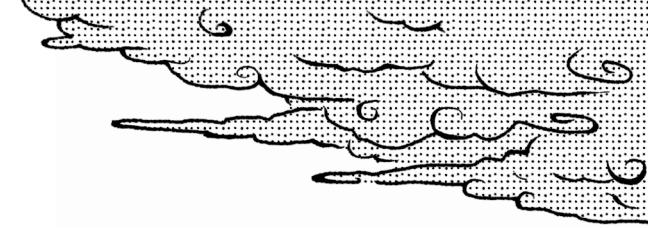
Can god
Please mow
My front lawn?

As the soul seeks rest
I seek the nearest
Restroom

I search for one, lest
I arrive upon
My Doom

Sky god
You sly god
Where'd you find the time to bake that pie god?

I'm glad
You're sad
Hope that's enough to make you cry god



I was falling from the sky. Not free-falling, no, but imagine instead a submarine on a calculated trip to the ocean floor. No leaks through the hull, no

UNTITLED (DREAM)

panicked crewmembers on the verge of claustrophobia-induced insanity, but instead a routine survey at the bottom of the sea mediated by calm, experienced sailors. Supporting me on my descent were these hairless humanoids, holding me by my forearms. Their skin was covered in scales that shone in a spectrum from blue to yellow, depending on which angle you looked at them, and their jet-black lips were no larger than a pen clip, yet entirely capable of emoting along with their mostly human eyes and facial muscles. The men and women only differed in height and the presence or absence of featureless, almost imperceptibly small breasts; their crotches were all smooth and bare. As I was studying the anatomy of the one holding my right forearm to guess its sex, the Earth's surface—or whatever planet we were on—emerged from the fog. Pink specks were shuffling in a flesh-tone ocean, like a carpet of maggots on a wet pile of trash. A smell of rank sweat and stale urine hit me. Turning to the being on my right again, I asked where they were taking me in desperation. The floating entity didn't say a word, but instead smiled and flickered its eyes like an aged light bulb. Suddenly, I was drained of all desire. I had the notion that this rush of contentment wasn't mine, but I accepted the feeling of serenity with abandon. I lost awareness of everything, fear of everything, of where I was, of who I was, of where I was sinking to. All of my anxiety gave way to unquestioning trust in the opalescent, levitating gecko-woman holding me and the living ocean it was slowly leading me towards—until individual outlines started to emerge from the vibrating mass below.

& OI2

The brownish maggots were disembodied penises the size of grown men. Twitching, writhing, ejaculating, deaf, blind. I wanted to scream, but I clenched my teeth and bit my tongue instead, afraid the ones holding me would loosen their grip reflexively. Maybe all of the penises below wanted to scream too, I thought—even if they had the mouths and lungs to do so, they wouldn't so much as hear their own cries. The stench multiplied and made my unblinking eyes water.

Another group of floating lizard-people were carrying someone that looked like last semester's linear algebra professor down into the ceaselessly spurting abyss. As much as I tried to deny it, he wasn't struggling or crying. No, he didn't show the slightest sign of resistance. Until all I could see of his head was his signature comb-over as he fell further below, I saw him smiling from ear to ear. His feet were dangling carelessly, like he was on a ski lift.

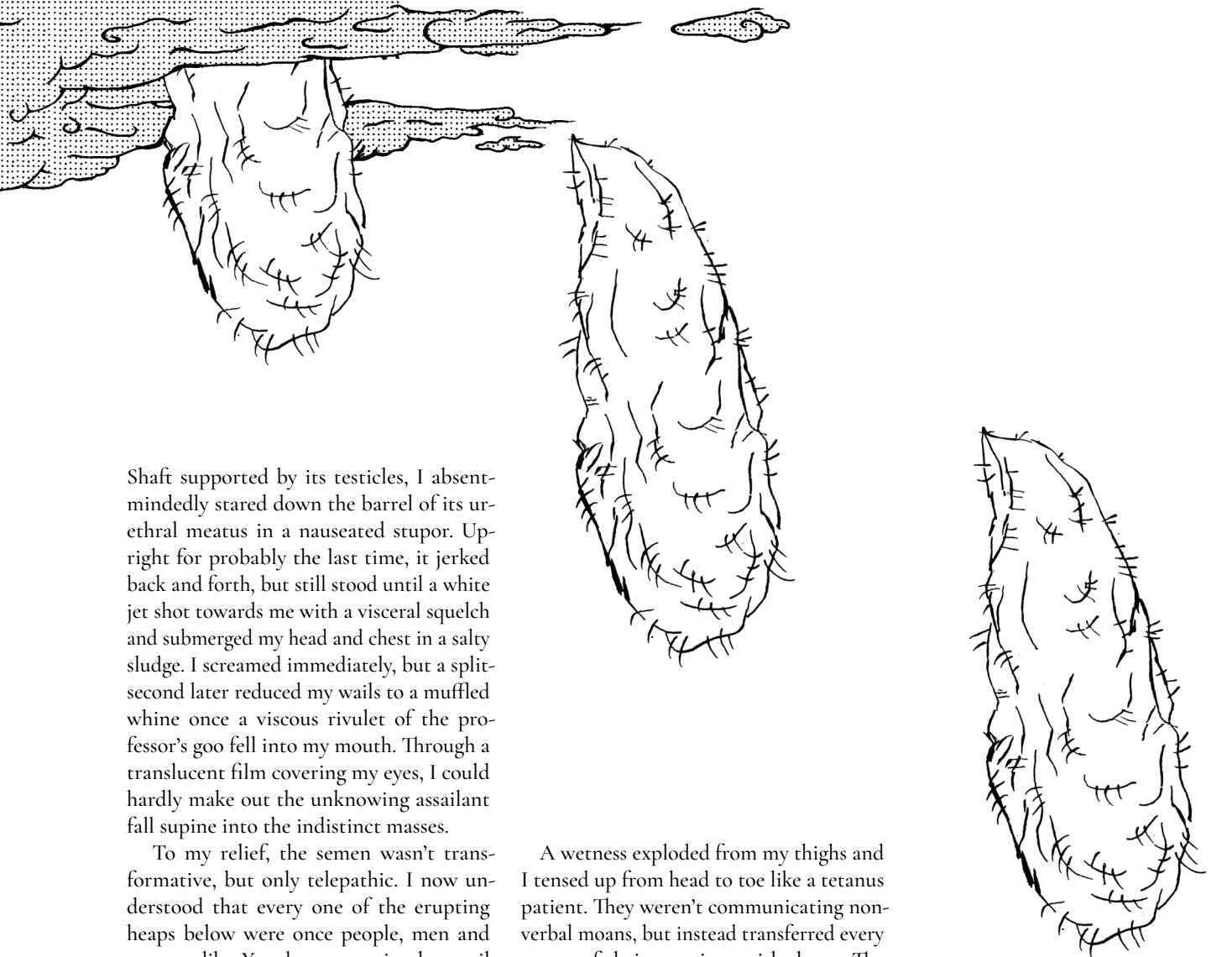
The shiny flying reptilians pushed apart some of the penises to reveal the dark green ground that resembled the translucent glass on an old wine bottle. When his soles touched it, his legs crumpled like a flattened paper crane, its distinct muscles and bones all warping into a vaguely spherical heap. His abdomen then protruded, covering his contorted lower limbs entirely, leaving a pair of wrinkled lumps the same size and shape as slightly deflated beach balls directly below his belly button. The concave depression where his stomach once was then flattened out like a tooth filling. The volume to occupy the cavity was taken from his arms and hollowed flaps of skin were left behind.

The armless creature with nascent testicles for legs still exuded that chilling serenity. He looked up at the beings that brought him there, which had risen to a distance far enough to not be ejaculated on, and smiled again, beaming in a way foreign to an ageing academic. Carelessly wide-eyed, he then turned to face me. The disfigured scholar held eye contact with me for what felt like an eternity, until I heard a sharp snap through the cacophony of meaty, dull slaps.

His spine collapsed. His face froze in that satisfied expression and then smashed into the newly wrinkled skin of his scrotum. A new layer then grew to encompass the rest of his limp body, now a beige rather than a dark, wood-like brown, reaching above his head and pinching tightly like an end of a sausage. Everything above and including his shoulders fused into each other, becoming a single cylindrical mass. The area around his head expanded until all the skin covering it stretched taut into a bell-like shape.

The other man-penises then tumbled back into place as if they were welcoming him. I watched the writhing mass with bated breath, expecting the grizzled intellectual to break free from his foreskin-cocoon and fly upwards to grab me by the hand so we could escape together, miles above this obscene Hell. A rope of semen soaked the sole of my right foot, but my attention didn't waver. Finally, something started to emerge from below.

Were his legs unfolding to support his own weight? Were his arms growing back to push the squirming masses away? Was that beige mass his shoulders rising from that fetid pit? Of course not. I was embarrassed to have even entertained the thought once an engorged, pink bell emerged from the swelling lump.



Shaft supported by its testicles, I absent-mindedly stared down the barrel of its urethral meatus in a nauseated stupor. Upright for probably the last time, it jerked back and forth, but still stood until a white jet shot towards me with a visceral squelch and submerged my head and chest in a salty sludge. I screamed immediately, but a split-second later reduced my wails to a muffled whine once a viscous rivulet of the professor's goo fell into my mouth. Through a translucent film covering my eyes, I could hardly make out the unknowing assailant fall supine into the indistinct masses.

To my relief, the semen wasn't transformative, but only telepathic. I now understood that every one of the erupting heaps below were once people, men and women alike. Yes, the mutagenic, glassy soil below them supported their metabolic needs in every respect, meaning they all would ejaculate and twitch about until the sun burnt out. No, they weren't suffering; it was a deaf-blind, nigh-eternal ecstasy for every turgid penis. Silent and invisible expressions of otherworldly pleasure were psychically transferred through skin-to-skin contact and sperm-borne transmission to make the euphoria from the continuous, body-wide orgasms communal.

A wetness exploded from my thighs and I tensed up from head to toe like a tetanus patient. They weren't communicating non-verbal moans, but instead transferred every aspect of their emotions with them. The twitches and ejaculate sprays from orgasms, in other words, shared their ecstasy from of a body-wide orgasm to anyone in the vicinity. Others were then brought to climax to perpetuate an ecstatic, decadent eternity.

They were just as clueless about the role of the airborne humanoids that condemned them to the fleshy abyss, if not more in the dark about their origins and motivations. It was even less of a concern to them, obviously. They could never turn back. They could never want to.

But as the dreamer here, this was ultimately my world. As I had made the man-penis and their temptations, so was I able to escape them. The entities that had brought me there, as merely creations of mine, broke their grip the moment I started to wrestle my arms from them.



Then, I flew. I flew until the penises were obscured again by their body-heat-induced steam. I flew until the scaly beings fell behind. I flew until the grey planet fell behind. I flew until I woke up.

ANONYMOUS



It's like a bog down here man, I'm sick of allthisscum and wet sand. It's gotta lot of smells that'll makeaman up and leave. Ya see like under this house that is, like, under the boards and the basement, Ijust be diggin man. At first it was nice, what with the family gone I could be diggin all day. And man, like my hands were cramping on that there pick handle. But since see I got that family bein here more and they got the heat on and it gets real dank. Realreal dank. But I don't mind that much, amans-gotta deal with suchandthelike. It's the activity up there that really gets me prayin. Can't be pickin away and such when mawandpaw lounge in the basement, or them kids be racin and foolin around. Like so I'm just sittin here next to this puddle man, prolly not good for me and, yaknow, chemicalwiseandsuch. Shouldnt breathe too hard round . . . Anyway, like I'm sayin, the family always is in the basement, and aman best not dig where he's heard.

You see, last lil tunnel I was workin me on was back up in Monticello. You don't know where that is, but anyway, I be diggin when the foreman of this, oh yea I'm diggin under this steel mill right? so this foreman here found my little hidey hatch, where I dun started carvin paths, and this foreman he tell me I've goneand trespassedonprivatepropertyorsumthin. I didn't know it counted when you went that deep, so I gotup and got my ass outta there. He was gettin to pointificaytin on some lawyer talk and the like and I didn't plan to stick around and balk my way into some money trouble.

Yea so, here is pretty nice allthingsconsidered. I mean aside from the bogginess. You prolly like that, but I tellya I don't. No sir ree. I mean to tell ye last night, well, ok, so you see that sheet over there, on that little ledge I mined out? So that's were I've been sleepin right, now it and I was having some crazy dreams, practice-ly a snorin out my britches, and I wake up and my own sweat, shit you not, drippin back downonme! It had gone and condensated up and then rained right back down. So you see I wake coughin and wheezin in my own sweat and you know my minds tellin me: sir, yougottagetouttahere. But you see it ain't no choice of my own right, so you know like how we got this urge to blink ya can't fight, after a while? So I get up on my feet, and I'm near the entrance and my mind is sayin "YOU NEED AIR! AIR! AIR!" so I ain't not gonna comply, and to my own begrudging I

THE BOG BROTHER ANONYMOUS & 012

pop up into the basement and why, I tellya, it's like heaven's own cuppa water right down my lungs. Never have I ever gone and taken a better breathe in my life sohelpme and then some.

But you see the problem is that one of them little boys was sleeping, and, ok well I ain't told nobody this but you right? so keep shush about it, no peepin. So the boy was on this here otto man, and his peanut-head and teeny hands be stickin out from a big ole blanket of his. But you see, the thing is, he was sleepin with his eyes open! Now, I know what you gon tell me, you gon say, well, that there boy was awake as the day, but listen I'lltavetellya that I sat there all exasperated for a good half an hour and that boy didn't much move a inch. NotaninchItellyou. Not an inch at all. So I get up and crawl back down here like nothin ever happen, and really it ain't. Just been keepin my own all this time since.

Did I show you what Ibeen diggin? Here let me pickya up. Okay ya see that I've got three pair-lel pathageways down this side, and what I did, I mean, what had happened was that I dug one right? And then I hit water, a whole little hollow pool of it cracked in. I think I could go down and swim if I wanted to. But anyway, I can't go much further, I mean I can't pick no water right? So I start diggin a second, and well, I ain't ivy league particularly so when I dig it pair-a-lel to the first to my dee-light it just end right up in the water again. Yep. Right up in it. So that's why the last one fit so far down there, cause I sure as shit didn't plan to risk pickin water again. Okay, let me get my galoshes and we'll walk down it andillshowyuaround.

They just boots I got from that there previously mentioned steel mill, but still, I call em galoshes since I been using them to keep the water out. So you see there sum water on the ground here, but I ain't pick no water this third time. Ibeen, okay look, see I'm buildin up church down this here passageway. Now before you say it, I know it ain't as holy as the real thing, no sir ree, no way. But I reckon it'll have a couple holes if the big man let me. So see how I ar-chiticulated it? You can't much build up with holes and shit, so I make the whole thing opposite way round. I been praying that god ain't have no problem with the extremeties of my design. So look we got the seats inarow here, if ya please. I always did like the old long benches they got up in them cathedrals, but like see, they're dug

in the ground now, well I guess we already in the ground . . . what would you call it . . . well anyway, so they're kind of like trenches. And I been saying to god I'm very sorry bout the trenches, on account of their being in the war, it ain't got no place seen in the sanctification of the church. For I don't got much choice in the matter, I makedo with what Igot. The pulpit up here go real lowdown and what not. I spent a good day scoopin mud out that hole there before, well before water started springin up out it! So I try an take it like ole Moses did, but it ain't exactly the same, on account of it actually bein an inpeedament instead of a blessin and shit.

I tell you if one thing worked out all right though it's the choir, boy. So look, I dun dig them steps going down and down, and at the bottom sure enuff the water come pouring bout. So I said to myself "Heck with this, I ain't got no right buildin a holy place outta holes," and I went back and slept, and I was tossin and turning and I was angry asallgetout. The next morn I wake up and dress myself for another day of diggin, and as I'm walkin down passage-way number three I hear a great commotion, and I get closer and I'm telling myself "Great god almighty the choir singin!" and sure enuff I walk on in and the biggest toads you ever did see were croakin and a yellin in the puddle right on down them steps! Man if my old ass wasn't dancin that day and hoopin and hollerin along with them. They been awful quiet since, just resting I guess.

Anyway, you prolly heard enuff of me and my pointificayshun, best we start the sermon I say. Gather you got your notes prepared? That's good, Imma just place you on down in the water now, the pulpit ain't as scary as the real one cause they ain't all lookin up at ye high and mighty, so don't worry none bout givin a big speech. Yes, now just wait a minute while I go sit down, then thee floor is yours mister.

Alright! Can you hear me? I'm ready!
Begin!

...

...

Ribbit

Amen! Amen!



/005/ - Thine is the Kingdom

Anonymous 03/31/21(Wed)03:36:46 No.17911747

- +be
 - >up and at em
 - >something in the stratosphere catches my eye
 - >call it in
 - >archangel tells me to get a closer look
 - >cut a wide semicircle back
 - >pulling way too many G's
 - >apparition remains the same size no matter how close i get
 - >can't go any faster
 - >notify archangel that i'm stepping off
 - >tells me to shut the fuck down anyway
 - >suggest to my copilot that this might be a dream
 - >he says: "I know for sure you aren't dreaming because I'm wide awake!"
 - >apparition disappears

- +be me
 - >cruisin the vista
 - >keeping my panel clear in case i run into trouble
 - >sure enough i get a ping
 - >setup.exe
 - >pull up and offer my assistance
 - >guy says he's only playing for fun
 - >tell him it's against the law to fly that low
 - >gives me the international sign for "who cares"
 - >equip my panel
 - >drop the first executable i find into his console
 - >it's fucking LOUD
 - >archangel asks me what just happened
 - >tell him there's one less mouth to feed
 - >puts me in disciplinary suspension
 - >mfw

- +be on the lookout
 - >flesh and blood
 - >forbidden fruit
 - >give up the ghost
 - >customizing my panel
 - >going the extra mile

- >the ends of the earth
- >the fat of the land
- >stack overflow
- >can't seem to get my code to run
- >many are called but few are chosen
- >tell archangel i'm dying for some action
- >tells me patience is a virtue

- +be outside
 - >rolling in the deep
 - >searching for one-ups
 - >find one but it's obscured by clouds
 - >request backup
 - >archangel tells me it'll be a wait
 - >decide to try for it on my own
 - >pull the grip loose
 - >drive it home
 - >reach for the stars
 - >one-up is too high, can't get to it
 - >activate map editor
 - >disable the area between me and my baby
 - >hits my panel nice and soft
 - >fruit of my loins
 - >archangel tells me support will be here any minute
 - >try to clear off before they show up
 - >can't because map editor takes forever to close
 - >have to share my one-up with all of them

- +be on time
 - >absolutely gunning
 - >never gone this fast before
 - >wrenching on her to keep up the speed
 - >hit the next level
 - >start splitting chroma
 - >gravity fades
 - >entropy starts pouring into my console
 - >desperately trying to steer my way back into the universe
 - >matter becoming energy
 - >need a hotfix
 - >set my clock to before i passed the membrane

- >pulse the grip and take her down
- >snap back to reality
- >archangel asks me why the hell i went back in time, NOT impressed "Just dippin' my toes!"
- >banned for three months

- +be that as it may
 - >banned for time travel so i'm sitting in the simulator
 - >surrounded by rookies
 - >decide to locate myself within the sim
 - >climb into the sim within the sim
 - >do this a few hundred times
 - >end up building a recursive sim chain three hundred deep
 - >tie up both ends, past and present
 - >invite rookies to my location
 - >they arrive just in time to see me autocloak and shuffle off
 - >three months pass and i can see one rookie is still trapped in my loop
 - >can see he is almost out of energy
 - >can't go back to free him without leaving attribution artefact
 - >tfw i might have killed a rookie

- +be what you want
 - >sun up to sun down
 - >at teresa's canonization
 - >archangel reminds me to be at my sunday best because he knows i'm a loose cannon
 - >choir on high
 - >salt of the earth
 - >peter opens the hatch
 - >TONS of bogeys fly out
 - >can't resist the urge
 - >cast the first stone
 - >fire one off
 - >archangel pulls me aside
 - >fire and brimstone

- +be me again
 - >spawn in level four for downing a cherub

- > as above so below
- > so sticky i can barely move
- > attract the ire of a sinister archon
- > swims like a shark
- > cast my shadow
- > takes the bait
- > dip to level five
- > trace over the dune
- > aim for the beacon but land in the rough
- > crawl to shore
- > say my prayers
- > nothing but static
- > decide to try to climb out
- > it's dark and hell is hot

- + beyond the brink
- > lake of fire
- > in pursuit
- > archon on my trail
- > something wicked this way comes
- > can't run
- > can't hide
- > closing the gap
- > spider's web
- > clutches of evil
- > praying to god
- > no sense
- > only pain
- > hurts like hell

- + unbecoming
- > dwell not in the present
- > wrought in torture
- > reckoning beast "Where is your God now?"
- > insufferable agony
- > unbearable anguish
- > the skin of my teeth
- > my feet part of clay
- > a fly in the ointment
- > a lamb to the slaughter
- > a drop in the bucket
- > a moth to the flame
- > swallow the pitch
- > deliver me from evil

- + be awake
- > pure torment
- > every pixel is filled with pain
- > all my frame is filled with pixels
- > losing touch
- > touching base
- > brief respite
- > archon must be taking a break
- > no rest for the wicked
- > can't catch my breath
- > come to
- > to and fro
- > shake it off
- > off and on

- > dial up
- > out of hearts

- + beautiful
- > light comes on
- > still reeling from the torture garden
- > tender mercies
- > thorn in the flesh
- > ye of little faith
- > no signal
- > no scan
- > choking up and broken
- > powering down
- > down for days
- > press and hold
- > says his name is judas
- > tells me a story

- + been in better shape
- > listening to judas' parable
- > messianic secret
- > thirteenth apostle
- > hell on earth
- > heaven only knows
- > gospel truth
- > godspeed
- > go forth
- > hallelujah
- > powering up
- > fallen angels
- > see my window
- > bag him up
- > back to the beacon

- + better him than me
- > ascending to heaven
- > fast travel to spawn
- > put it on the wire
- > lay it on the line
- > can i get a witness
- > worse for wear
- > plug it in
- > step into the light
- > calling all cars
- > punch the numbers
- > pull it back out
- > pick his ass up
- > over the shoulder
- > up the ladder to the roof

- + best of both worlds
- > meet me in the middle
- > you're on the air
- > tell them it's judas
- > suspended in water
- > chemical bath
- > standby mode
- > firmware update
- > safe mode

- > test run "In my office, now!"
- > archangel can't believe his fucking eyes
- > diagnostic gospels

- + i'm a believer
- > rehab
- > red tape
- > riot act
- > teresa issues clemency
- > forgiveness is divine
- > submit my paperwork
- > six to eight weeks
- > get my wings back
- > configure my deck
- > debrief
- > interview the prisoner
- > interrogate the perpetrator
- > anecdote
- > allegory
- > sordid tales of woe
- > judas says the devil snuck into heaven
- > nothing to lose
- > nothing to hide
- > nothing to be proud of
- > let him sleep on it

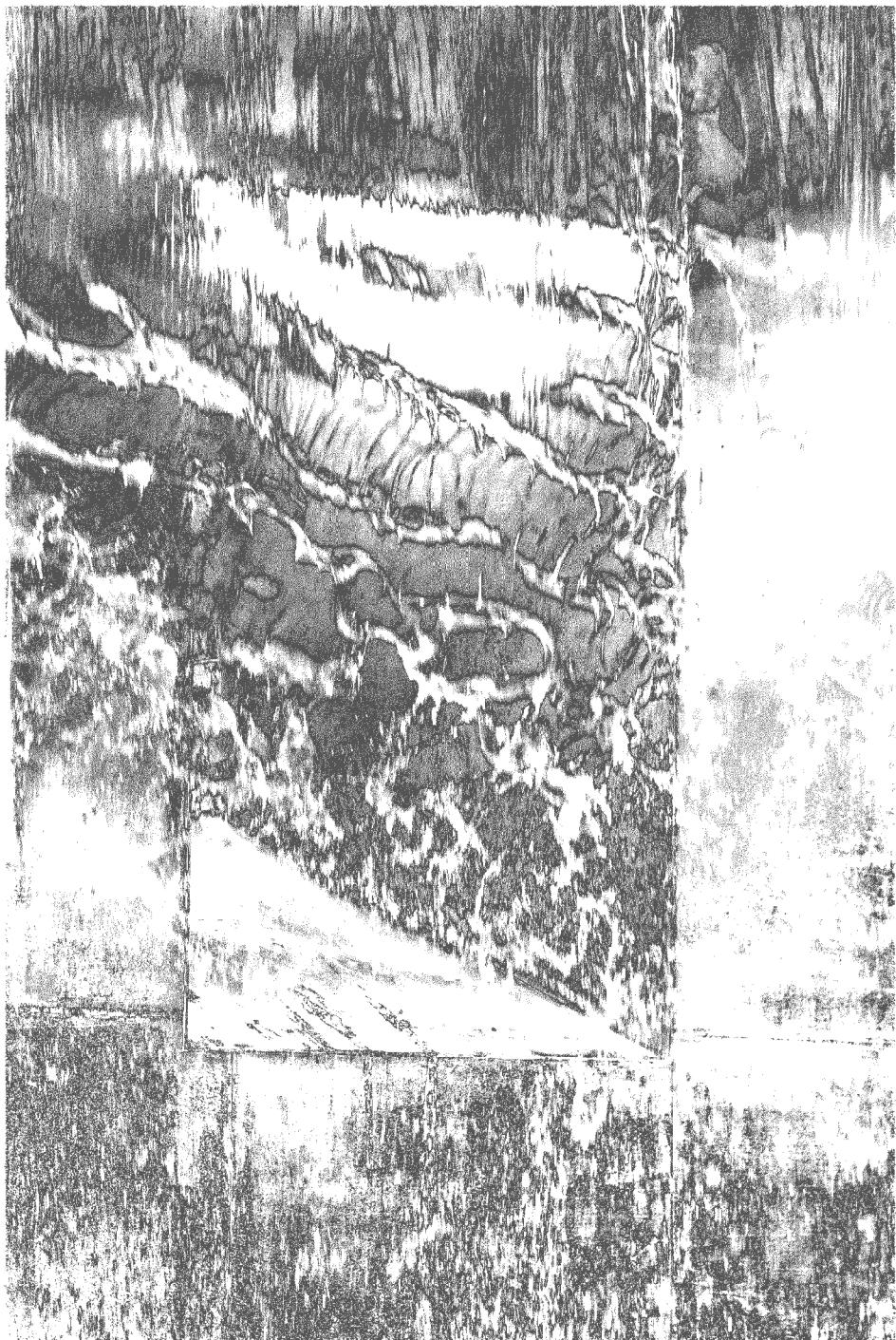
- + boot
- > login
- > activate assignment
- > hand on the grip
- > like riding a bike
- > open my panel
- > archangel tells me there's trouble in paradise
- > says a white horse fell in some mud
- > i already know where he's going with this
- > says i have to rescue the rescue team
- > and the white horse
- > rookie in the sim
- > just my luck

- + be me
- > back in the simulator looking for my loop
- > find it but it's trashed
- > pulling threads
- > threading the needle
- > needle in a haystack
- > finally get a bright idea
- > find and replace
- > picking up angels all the way through
- > i left a TON of attribution when i tied it up
- > hopefully nobody noticed
- > locate the white horse
- > no idea how he survived this long
- > count my blessings
- > everyone's accounted for
- > uninstall.exe

- + bent out of shape
 - > tell him he's my backseat driver
 - > not happy but it aint what it aint
 - > relay coordinates
 - > rendezvous point
 - > dog and fucking pony
 - > the whole nine yards
 - > lord is my shepherd
- + be me
 - > walking a mile in my own damn shoes
 - > praying for a miracle
 - > copilot can't be found
 - > big man tells me to cut my losses
 - > tells me to shut down
 - > new lands
 - > old world
- + belt one out
 - > just be yourself
 - > i wonder how someone could kidnap jesus
 - > judas repeats his parable
 - > archangel gives the signal
 - > transfer complete
 - > transcendental complications
 - > file not found
 - > pull the grip loose
 - > low and slow
 - > fast and furious
 - > loading my program
 - > index the search parameters
 - > still nothing
 - > backdoor access
 - > in like a lion
- + let there be light
 - > rise and shine
 - > graven image
 - > lobus of love
 - > all things must pass
 - > doing the best i can
 - > cup overflows
 - > footprints in the sand
 - > live to tell my story
 - > long story short
 - > ashes to ashes
 - > dust to dust
 - > thine is the kingdom
- + bending the rules
 - > slow and steady
 - > says earth is actually hell
 - > says hell is actually heaven
 - > tells me the devil went down to georgia
 - > pearls before swine
 - > too little too late
 - > no more drama
 - > archangel in my ear
 - > red alert
 - > the holy ghost is missing in action
 - > thunderbolts and lightning
 - > shaking him down
 - > tells me he tried to warn me
- + better yet
 - > ambush
 - > eleventh hour
 - > blind leading the blind
 - > devil's in the details
 - > famous last words
 - > i know what you mean
 - > remember my dream
 - > archon drags him out
 - > kicking and screaming
 - > eye for an eye
 - > i ditch my wings
 - > abort mission
 - > i have to get out
 - > crawl back to the gate
 - > hell or high water

File: [Aerial view of Japanese c\(...\).jpg](#) (1.0 MB, 1970x2646)





Is this the one? & oo6

Is this the one?

Yep, from three different people last night

"She was six when the tests happened. It was the worst three hours of my life. I don't know what it was like. She said nothing really happened. She'd zone out and stare into the distance but I'm not sure that has anything to do with whatever happened. That night I walked past her room and she was sleep-talking. She was counting back from five, over and over again. I couldn't sleep for a few days after that. And she kept doing it. We never told her she was doing it. But one night she counted back from five for the last time and it was over. Then she grew up, forgot about it, and moved out . . ."

Where was that from? What was he even talking about?

Don't know. Here's the second one

"Something wrong with the lamp, had to return it. The guy said he also sold fish tanks. He had some interesting fish tank designs. One of them was space-themed where the surface was the moon and there was a crashed rocket. Another one was office-themed and there were little cubicles for the office fish. I mentioned the place to a friend who has fish but he said he wasn't interested. Themed aquariums confuse the fish apparently. At first I didn't understand; but then I thought about it. I thought about being a fish and being in water. Then I thought about being a fish astronaut. Then a fish office worker, in charge of the fish printer . . . And I was confused."

Like fish would know. These just get stupider

And you know fish? Anyways here's the last one

"We have a whole team of people whose only job is to be tuned to that frequency 24/7. They wear headphones in shifts. It's the only thing they do. The likelihood that they'll hear anything worth reporting in is near nonexistent; but if they do, then supposedly the implications are on the spooky side. The only downside to the job is that listening to silence all day is the perfect condition for hallucinating sounds. Some even go crazy after a few months so we have to rehire new people and send the old ones to . . . you know . . . There was this recent ca—"

Hey! That sounded important

Mom says dinner is ready

ANONYMOUS

THE ONLY COMPUTER CRIME FOR WHICH THEOLOGIANS ARE CONSULTED

ROBERT COTTA
& on



CASE STUDY, PART I

The thing he always remembered first was the loudness of it. The animal shock. Then the fact that in jumping backwards he'd torn the headphone jack out of its socket. Then, the mad scramble for the keyboard, the ALT-F4 ALT-F4 ALT-F4 ALT-F4. Then blankness.

After this painful series of mnemonic thunderclaps, his mind would go over it again, calmly, more methodically. It would start from the beginning.

It had been a Friday night. Henry had been browsing 4chan since he got home from school. Not long after dinner he opened a thread about creepy things people had come across on the internet. It was amusing and interesting. One person said the weirdest thing he'd seen was a schizophrenic woman's YouTube channel devoted to documenting her 'liposuction slaves'. Another set of anon's had a brief conversation about a strange 'Lolita virtual reality game' they'd played together.

Then, tucked in the middle of the thread, there was a cryptic bait post. It was saddled—almost to the point of snapping, it felt like—with dozens of replies.

He flicked his cursor over some of them. One post asked 'What's with all the replies? Can someone explain?' and another simply said 'Don't even bring that shit up man' with a sweating Pepe picture.

The post itself was strange. Used weird codewords he didn't recognise, like '6@6@6@'. Henry scrolled further down. The thread ended abruptly. It refused to refresh. No new posts appeared. It must have been deleted immediately after he'd opened it. At the very bottom was a post containing nothing except three web links. It was addressed to no one. They can't be replicated here, but this is vaguely what they looked like:

<https://um.pl.xo.b/54341/>
<https://um.pl.xo.b/32894/>
<https://um.pl.xo.b/92346/>

After a moment's hesitation, Henry highlighted one of the links, probably the last one, right-clicked and pressed 'Open in New Private Browsing Window'.

ANALYSIS

The links Henry opened are ultra-illegal. We shall have time to analyse what happened to him afterward, but first the phenomena with which he unwittingly involved himself should be explicated.

Colloquially they're called 'Hell streams'. They carry harder sentences on average than the possession and distribution of child pornography. Supposedly there is a unique livestream for every inhabitant of Hell (no one has checked them all, the number of links runs into the tens of billions), but, as Thomas Kunzendorf notes, the violently abstract content of the streams make this hard to verify, and no study has ever been able to firmly establish a connection between specific links and individual personalities. The

spectacles offered by the streams are divergent in the extreme. What is uniform is their shock value.

It's difficult to estimate how many people have actually seen Hell streams. Some have been exposed against their will, via 'pranks' and shock sites (a disturbing case involving a little girl aged 6 made to watch by her older brothers is documented in Dowd & Olson's *Hades and its Discontents*, pp. 60–5). Numerous motives drive voluntary Hell stream consumption, the most common of which are morbid curiosity and sexual gratification.

The effect of watching a Hell stream has been described as 'nauseating', 'hypnotic', 'traumatic', 'soul-shattering', and 'addictive'. Their most 'dangerous and seductive' characteristic, according to P.T. Aquilino, is their extreme novelty. While most people close the stream within seconds of opening it (even this 'blast of colour' is potent enough to have long-term psychological ramifications: see Garner & Cho), for those who keep watching, they are subjected to a spectacle wherein each new 'development' in the 'action' invariably outdoes the previous one. This results in users becoming 'glued to the screen'; locked in a perpetual state of bafflement, incredulity, amazement.¹ It is, as one viewer said, 'impossible to become habituated'. There is an exponential escalation in intensity that can go on literally for as long as the stream is open. Chronic watchers have described it as like having an 'itch in their brain'—knowing in the back of their heads that the streams are always running, that there's billions of them always going on, that every waking moment, even when you're in fact watching one of the streams (for there are always a hundred billion more that you're not watching), there is still 'some amazing shit you're missing out on'.

They are more stimulating than any piece of media created on Earth (this is now a scientific certainty: Clayton & Bhattachari).² In richness and variety they surpass all worldly entertainment. Nothing can match them for 'power of invention'. Some of the language used by my patients verges on the transcendent. They have described 'glimmering red nebulae unfurling in black expanses', 'skin-caverns animated by pain', and 'acts beyond all right knowing'.

One young man compared it to the 'consecutive split-second flashes of entire worlds' one experiences while 'on the knife-edge of sleep'.

Because they are livestreams of Hell, they are infinite. They do not stop. Everything only happens once. There are no 're-runs'. Their ephemeral quality is, to certain viewers, literally maddening. The deadly conjunction of ' fleeting' but 'overpowering' stimulus bleeds over into compulsive behaviour. A 60-year-old American man was recently sentenced to a dozen years in prison for recording and distributing hundreds of hours of footage he'd recorded on his work laptop. The desire to show others and communicate the gravity of what one has seen is common among viewers of Hell streams. It is a major reason why they get caught. For some the fear of judicial punishment actually adds to its narcotic tang.

There are several legal rationales underlying the criminalisation of Hell stream viewership, namely that it is offensive to human dignity, fundamentally sadistic, etcetera. Theologians are regularly called upon as expert witnesses at trials to emphasise the religious unacceptability of the practice. The harsh prosecution of

1. This 'gape-inducing' quality lends itself to social propagation. Strizver has documented the existence of 'dares', 'challenges' and 'reaction' videos. Basic MS Paint images listing 'rules' for 'games' (such as the dubious 'find your fetish' challenge) are regularly uploaded by users onto forums and image-sharing sites.

2. It is possible to apply for stream access on legitimate academic, scientific or theological grounds. The hazards posed to researchers have gained more attention in recent years following the shock suicide of Jane Beversluis.

streaming-related offences is not at odds with public opinion: Nagata estimates almost half the American population would approve of a sentence of life without parole for people caught watching Hell streams. Sociologist Judd Lamb has explained this primarily in terms of a revulsion toward—and a fear of—the confirmation of any person's status as irrevocably damned. It would be mortifying, he suggests, for a grieving mother to hear, at the funeral, of her son's restfulness, only to discover later, from the next-door neighbour's son, that he is in fact languishing forever in undying flames. Alex Soresina, by contrast, attributes this widespread antipathy solely to the media's construction of the average 'Hell stream viewer' as a particularly depraved kind of pervert.

Viewers offer a variety of rationalisations for their voyeuristic behaviour. Common arguments include: 'They are in Hell, they deserve to be there anyway', 'If God did not want people to watch he would not have made them available' and 'It is morally no different from the visions experienced by saints and mystics in the Middle Ages'. Controversially, Donald Lutz has argued that these justifications hold water. 'What has dictated theological consensus [on this matter] is not reason,' he says, 'but social propriety.' A recent story from the papers illustrates an interesting diversity of moral opinion:

A young man in M——'s eastern suburbs has been charged with accessing and reproducing live images of Hell. 21-year-old Cory Pike, who was arrested outside his A—— home last Sunday, says that he only wanted to, quote, 'document a reality which everyone ignores.' Police say he faces a minimum sentence of 18-months imprisonment if convicted.

Pike's defence attorney alleges that his client 'became obsessed' with recording and archiving live-streamed footage of Hell out of a 'humanitarian impulse—the same urge to bear witness that compelled US servicemen to take photographs at Auschwitz.' Prosecutors counter that comparing base voyeurism to the actions of GIs in the war is misleading and offensive.

The internet serves, on this issue as well as many others, as a useful sounding rod for people's more secret and, perhaps, more authentic thoughts. Counter-cultural and transgressive opinions about Hell streams are frequently expressed on anonymous forums and imageboards. References to one's own viewership, however, tend to be oblique. As an example, in response to a post describing guilt about a nondescript 'sin' on a Christianity-themed imageboard, another anonymous user (with a 'reaction image' attached to his post showing a painted depiction of a sad, severe-looking Christian monk) began his reply with the phrase, 'if you're talking about having seen what I think you are . . .' and proceeded to talk in circles around his own 'struggle' with the matter. Other posts assert the subversive social potential and even edifying effects of Hell stream consumption:

of course govt doesn't want you to see it, they don't want people to realise chirst [sic] is king and change their ways, don't want them to stop being good little sinful consumers, controlled by their appetites

A popular superstition online (though to what extent it is taken seriously by the users is hard to tell) is that watching, or even seeing a screencap taken from a Hell stream, irrevocably damns or 'reprobates' you. A classic 'troll' is to fabricate benign images that 'look like' stills taken from a Hell stream. This has resulted in a culture of calling out such images as 'fake and gay'—sometimes even ones that turn out to have been authentic.

On the deep web, on imageboards hidden from web scrapers, where taboo or illegal topics can be discussed more openly, conversation, by turns heartfelt and farcical, on the problem of evil, the nature of sin, and the morality of damnation, as well as therapeutic discussions about the deep impact Hell streams have had on people's lives, take place without fear of social retribution. Many credit it with motivating them to go to church. Others describe themselves as irreparably damaged, and blame exposure to Hell streams for the disintegration of their mental health and their relationships. Once or twice in my research I have encountered threads where people claim to have identified someone they knew—a deceased relative, or an old acquaintance—on the streams.

Heated religious debates are endemic. Because Hell streams constitute the only direct and broadly accessible empirical evidence for the supernatural, a subset of users (known colloquially and somewhat affectionately as 'autists') spend their free time poring over stream content in order to discern which religious tradition best accords with the observable facts of Hell, or, more often, to cherry-pick evidence in favour of their pre-existing view (and against the views of others). Imageboards devoted to Hell stream subculture are divided into religious factions or cliques, each of which have developed their own corpuses of 'infographs' and 'copy-pastas' meant to prove their creed and disprove the others. Christian and Muslim faithful constitute the majority of posters, but there are sizeable minorities of Buddhists, Jews, Sikhs, Gnostics, and even atheists, who maintain that the objective existence of Hell or a 'Hell-like' realm does not necessarily prove the existence of a theistic God: the agent responsible for its creation could just as plausibly be a powerful but cosmically contingent entity or, if the universe is a simulation, an artificial intelligence.

(As an aside: the Abrahamic doctrine of man's fallen nature would not fail to gain some credibility in the mind of anyone who browsed these forums. Petty arguments about the racial, national, sexual and religious 'make-up' of Hell are common, and posters often tarnish the damned with offensive race or sex-based slurs. Sexually perverse commentary is not uncommon. Users talk of becoming devoted to particular 'victims' they find attractive. One anonymous poster confessed to his obsession with footage of a boy undergoing extreme 'cosmic pains'. The fact that damnation was eternal meant that he would never be lacking for novel tortures involving his 'favourite'. For this user, all earthly sexual stimulus paled so much by comparison that he failed to be aroused other than when he was watching footage of his 'beloved' boy being subjected to unimaginable cruelties).

By this point the reader might be growing curious as to whether or not I have ever seen a Hell stream, and if so, what I thought of it and what its effects on me were. I have. At the University of M——, under police supervision and with a coterie of counsellors in attendance, I and a group of undergraduates from various disciplines were treated to a rare 'random viewing' of an in-progress stream (as opposed to a carefully selected, pre-recorded one). Obviously we all had to go through numerous psychological ex-

ams in the months leading up to the viewing. On the actual day our supervisor warned us about the potential content of the stream, what our reactions might be, and gave us several chances to withdraw. After we'd been lectured for about two hours and had signed all the waivers and disclaimers they handed us, the lights dimmed and the stream finally began.

In our lives we have all seen things that are specifically offensive to our constitutions, almost hand-picked by fate to throw us off balance and disturb us. I call these ego-dystonic memories. They are sights or sentiments we are annoyed at ourselves for having seen or overheard and that we would prefer to forget. I won't bother to list any examples since they are often highly personal and what might seem significant to me will be banal to you and vice versa.

For my part, the footage I saw not only replicated this sensation but multiplied it a thousandfold. In my mind I'd had lurid ideas about what the content of Hell streams might be. I anticipated certain obvious and stereotyped images. In retrospect my expectations were a cartoon. Those fifteen minutes have filled me, permanently, with a deep sense of the poverty of the human imagination. Above all, I shall never forget the noise.

The experience has given me two contradictory impressions about the people who watch these things. On the one hand, I have no idea how a human being can possibly enjoy that. When I had more naïve ideas of what Hell streams involved (and I thought my ideas back then were extreme) I could sympathise, to a degree, with people who derived pleasure from watching them. Who satisfied not just their curiosity, but all manner of other desires. They seemed at least like human impulses. Dark, but human. When I saw what actually goes on in those streams, I lost all ability to relate to those people. That sort of thing, I thought, could only be the preserve of a very remote kind of life, such as what Aquinas wrote of fallen angels. On the other hand, I now understand, intimately, the irresistibility of it. Almost something you are compelled to do irrespective of any personal feelings. It is like a portal into the unimaginable.

CASE STUDY, PART II

Henry had no way of knowing, of course, that ISPs immediately flag all connections to IP addresses that host Hell streams. Generally, there is a certain lenience. If the connection happens only once, the incident is treated as a mistake and no action is taken.

Two months later, Henry visited the site again. This time he opened not only one link but several. He sat and watched for several hours and took screenshots.

The juvenile court sentenced him to two hundred hours of community service and mandated that he undergo therapy. On that basis he was referred to my care.

With every patient I begin by asking a variety of questions. Among other things I asked Henry whether he felt any shame about what he'd done (Yes), whether he was suffering from nightmares (No), whether he was anxious about his future (Yes), whether he took any sexual gratification in watching the streams (No; actually Yes; actually it's complicated), and whether any of his relationships had suffered as a result of his actions (Yes). I asked him to explain to me what had made him go back and watch the streams a second time.

Henry told me that he found the fear intoxicating. The heavy breathing before he opened the links, the anticipation. He asked me whether I had ever, as a child, been traumatised by a scene from a movie or TV show. I said yes. He then asked me whether, as an adult, I had ever tracked down said pieces of media and re-watched them. I said yes. He told me that the sensation is similar, but much more heightened.

I looked down at my clipboard. 'Do you think,' I began, 'that when you have access to a computer again you'll be able to—to resist the urge?'

He was silent for a time. He looked out the window. I looked with him. We watched the cars pass. They trailed long shadows in the late afternoon light.

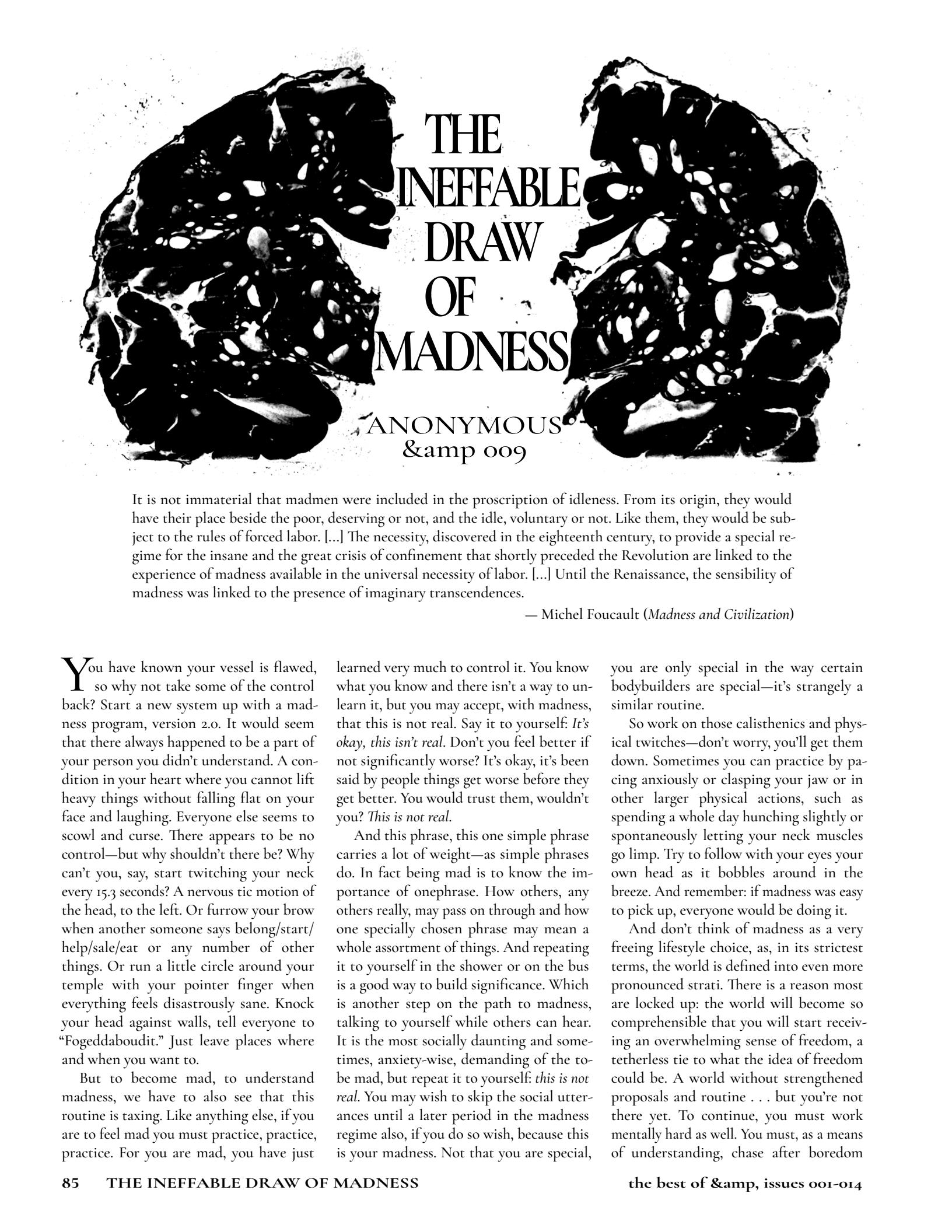
I will close this essay with a passage from Thomas Kunzendorf, who took an intimate interest in the altered mindsets of compulsive Hell stream viewers. It records his final conversation with an anonymous young man who later mysteriously went missing:

... He [Kunzendorf's patient] saw the world now, he said, as a sort of thin skin—of the kind that might develop over a glass of milk left out for hours in the sun—laying above a much more pungent, viscous, bubbling reality. The world of pencils, mattresses and traffic lights was so threadbare, he realised, that it barely counted as an individual existence at all. The slightest knock against the glass would tear it open and dissolve it.

He said, continuing, that he couldn't help but have a mutated outlook on life, considering what he had seen. Even the most marginal, unimportant city bum was potentially—would probably become—a black category of life that outclassed, in its volcanic alienness, all the chthonic deities of ancient cultures. The dullest personalities were under-rated in their terrible future splendour by even the most esoteric descriptions that human hands had committed to paper. Cashiers, accountants, cheerleaders, were all eternal horrors in gestation. For a very brief period, incomparably, impossibly brief, people lived like people. In reality these people were eggs, tiny, tiny, tiny eggs, the size of mites or lice, that would give birth, at one point in time, all of a sudden, to writhing monstrosities beside which whole galaxies would seem like dust motes and to whom the entire lifespan of the universe repeated 100,000 times would not even begin to seem significant. An entire universe of suffering—but-mortal flesh would never, under any calculation, be able to match a damned soul for total amount of pain experienced.

Before we finished I asked him how I should digest this insight into reality that he had gained by grazing inferno with his fingertips:

'Go to a beach and watch the future grotesques frolic in the water.'



THE INEFFABLE DRAW OF MADNESS

ANONYMOUS
& 009

It is not immaterial that madmen were included in the proscription of idleness. From its origin, they would have their place beside the poor, deserving or not, and the idle, voluntary or not. Like them, they would be subject to the rules of forced labor. [...] The necessity, discovered in the eighteenth century, to provide a special regime for the insane and the great crisis of confinement that shortly preceded the Revolution are linked to the experience of madness available in the universal necessity of labor. [...] Until the Renaissance, the sensibility of madness was linked to the presence of imaginary transcendences.

— Michel Foucault (*Madness and Civilization*)

You have known your vessel is flawed, so why not take some of the control back? Start a new system up with a madness program, version 2.0. It would seem that there always happened to be a part of your person you didn't understand. A condition in your heart where you cannot lift heavy things without falling flat on your face and laughing. Everyone else seems to scowl and curse. There appears to be no control—but why shouldn't there be? Why can't you, say, start twitching your neck every 15.3 seconds? A nervous tic motion of the head, to the left. Or furrow your brow when another someone says belong/start/help/sale/eat or any number of other things. Or run a little circle around your temple with your pointer finger when everything feels disastrously sane. Knock your head against walls, tell everyone to "Fogeddaboudit." Just leave places where and when you want to.

But to become mad, to understand madness, we have to also see that this routine is taxing. Like anything else, if you are to feel mad you must practice, practice, practice. For you are mad, you have just

learned very much to control it. You know what you know and there isn't a way to unlearn it, but you may accept, with madness, that this is not real. Say it to yourself: *It's okay, this isn't real.* Don't you feel better if not significantly worse? It's okay, it's been said by people things get worse before they get better. You would trust them, wouldn't you? *This is not real.*

And this phrase, this one simple phrase carries a lot of weight—as simple phrases do. In fact being mad is to know the importance of onephrase. How others, any others really, may pass on through and how one specially chosen phrase may mean a whole assortment of things. And repeating it to yourself in the shower or on the bus is a good way to build significance. Which is another step on the path to madness, talking to yourself while others can hear. It is the most socially daunting and sometimes, anxiety-wise, demanding of the to-be mad, but repeat it to yourself: *this is not real.* You may wish to skip the social utterances until a later period in the madness regime also, if you do so wish, because this is your madness. Not that you are special,

you are only special in the way certain bodybuilders are special—it's strangely a similar routine.

So work on those calisthenics and physical twitches—don't worry, you'll get them down. Sometimes you can practice by pacing anxiously or clasping your jaw or in other larger physical actions, such as spending a whole day hunching slightly or spontaneously letting your neck muscles go limp. Try to follow with your eyes your own head as it bobbles around in the breeze. And remember: if madness was easy to pick up, everyone would be doing it.

And don't think of madness as a very freeing lifestyle choice, as, in its strictest terms, the world is defined into even more pronounced strata. There is a reason most are locked up: the world will become so comprehensible that you will start receiving an overwhelming sense of freedom, a tetherless tie to what the idea of freedom could be. A world without strengthened proposals and routine . . . but you're not there yet. To continue, you must work mentally hard as well. You must, as a means of understanding, chase after boredom

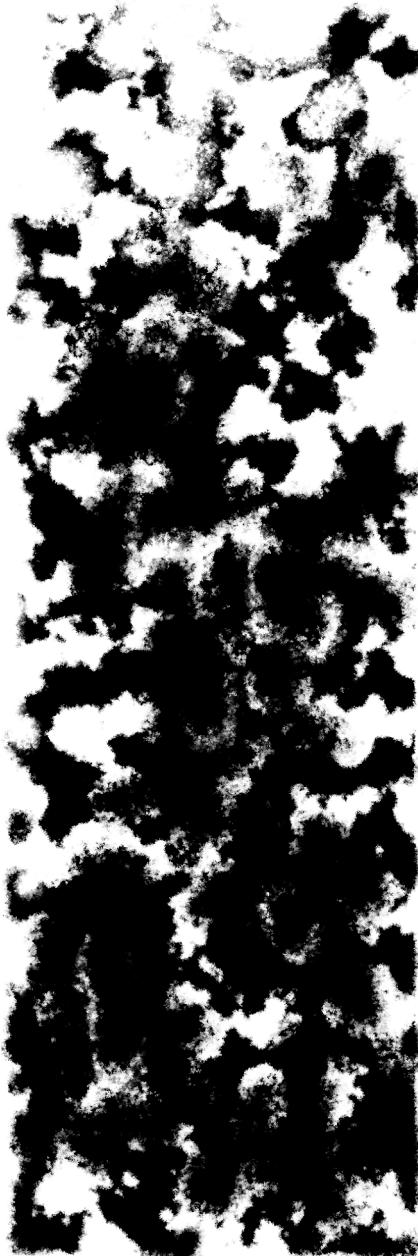
with a measuring stick. Start to worry about the sickness you have put yourself under, whether this will be a way to make you happy. In which you will tell yourself: you are more happy when you're unhappy—when you know you are slightly happy you can only be jealous of your unhappiest self. Madness is knowing that there is not much to gain in the first place, and you must believe this.

And after a while your madness will help explain much, like how that dripping faucet plinking in the sink always sounds like a tiny voice whispering in your head—a voice that you can never quite understand what it's saying. As you go to turn the faucet knob tighter for the fifth time, you will see a reflection in the knob's small handle and see the small person that's been inside all along. So monitor your madness diligently. Watch for things askew, but do not attempt to fix. That 3 on the side of your building that's turned and looks more like a W? Do not turn it, just watch and watch and think and think. And know the difference between madness and other maladies. Example: a crazy person will yell, scream at you on the street. Yet you are quiet, not saying a word for ten years—now that's madness. However, most people cannot say nothing. So say the same thing like a fool. *This is not real.*

Start walking late. You start walking at 2 a.m. to make sure most people are asleep. Yet you are still consistently surprised by the lack of foot traffic. Aren't others afflicting themselves with madness? You know they have been. Walk—look in lit windows and down basement corridors. Look at the people empty in front of things and passed out on couches, light still flickering on them. Stop and look and deviate. For whoever coined the phrase "curiosity killed the cat" forgot to mention that the un-curios cat dies too. Also: was a bore. Gone mad now you are sure you are not boring to yourself, even though madness is oftentimes very boring. So walk and fight your pragmatic self as you have been doing. It is a full night and starting to be cold. Instead of turning and going home where you know you will be warm, trudge ahead. Pull your arms to your chest and let the sleeves of your sweater blow in the breeze. Feel the warmth of your own straight jacket, and fight the thought of how sane you will feel once you are home.

Your legs are getting numb, so in their walk they have taken a mind of their own.

Feeling detached from your torso they pull you forward and forward. This makes you stumble and laugh in your mad laugh. You walk and think of the lake. It's only a couple more blocks away. If it's winter and frozen over, rub snow on your face and remember what it is to cry. (For the to-be-mad in arid, dry climates, there are "heat stroke" and "mirage," but, if you are truly committed, move north—it is no coincidence that there are a great many Russian madmen.) You come down a sloped walk to the lake.



You smell the sweetness of the air mix over the waters of the lake and sweep at you. You see the crescent moon and feel your aloneness, and breathe for what feels like only the 2nd or 3rd time. You walk down to the edge of the water and shiver in the now strong breeze. You are maybe no

longer mad. So you fight for it. Stick your face in the lake. You have forgotten to take your hands off your chest. You have no balance so you fall in. You splutter, but you can stand. There is an initial shock, but you slowly realize—now that you're in it—that the water is warmer than the breeze, that the breeze chills your wet clothes.

You crouch, lip grazing the water, and you hear some voices sing to you from the lake. You hear and know their song. You know that you must be mad, hearing this. The songs come from the rocks in the middle of the lake, big rocks, like planets in the solar system that is the galaxy of this dark body of water. You have heard them before, but not like this, never like this. Inspiration, a precept of madness. The siren song pulls you out, the bodily mass of the rocks acting with a gravitational force, a current gently pushing at your feet. Swirling you inwards. You think of how you know this song. How you know its pull, how you have been warned against it. You have heard tales of its avoidance, and the honor in it. Yet you float silently closer, listening. Maybe being dashed on the rocks isn't so bad. The song building steadily, the heavy beat of a dying star.

You are now coming to notice just how bitterly frozen you are. Your jaw actually starts twitching, your teeth chip at each other. So you stroke your arms and think how mad you are to be out in this lake and yet here you are paddling your legs and pulling tighter and tighter, trying to stay afloat. So, you stop, stop completely, turning your ear towards the rocks and try and listen. *This is not real.*

Of course a truly sane person might just imagine this—real or not—and think happily that this means madness. You shouldn't have to worry—often people train for many useless things. And as you get older and only walk in the daylight because you take pride in knowing what it is you see coming, as perhaps later you walk across the well manicured prairie with a destination in mind, the smell of rich grass bouncing on your tongue, you'll get to remember that time you tried to go mad, and this time you'll notice that this has already happened. Old and new become arbitrary distinctions. But that mad wind, the wind when it blows under your nose and smells like the second or third time you've ever smelled it (it always smells this way) the breeze reminds you . . .

A JOURNEY

Optical disks whirl,
hard drives search
and spin, various fans
of different speeds

and sizes do their best to prevent complete meltdown. It doesn't matter: she's coming. All his life, or at least the past 3 months of it, nothing has meant much but this, and at last he nears a culmination. Eccentric synth music gallops like a free horse as Rich Hartman presses the final power button. Ready to go. Various company stickers and badges litter the wirey room and the surface of antique computer cases, each crammed with bits and bobs that barely work, but together forming a sort of mega-cyber-choir all singing the same scream. Towels line the doorway and windows, like a suicide before you could do it in various cooler ways. A half-eaten meal, cobbled together by someone foreign to the idea of food, sits in a bowl on the floor, green peppers, raw. The installation of Wine completes just as the computers reach their breaking point, the fans try to breathe, but only moments are given in between births of code. He knows it's going to be a complicated voyage, things could go wrong, dependencies, dependencies of dependencies, dependencies of—you get the point.

Rich smacks the skeleton case of a failing computer, somehow restarting the dying fan into a frenzy of worse but functioning noises. It has to go perfect, there are no second first impressions, only second impressions. A bird cage nearby rattles and squawks adding to the commotion and noise pollution. The smell of humidifying bird poop in a rapidly warming room permeates, but is easily ignored by Rich, used to and quite comfortable around such odors. His white baseball cap sits backwards, perfectly complementing, he thinks, the baggy cargo shorts and graphic tee he has on of his favorite penguin. A computer dies, but not for long, not being allowed to experience the coolness, the stillness, that exists in not existing. Knocks on the cheap wooden door to his room come with decreasing patience, no answer. Eyes, or rather, fractions of eyes peek through cracks and small holes he had previously made in the door—thrown keyboards, kicks, and sometimes headbutts having carved them there.

ANONYMOUS

THROUGH CYBERSPACE

AND INTO

YOUR LAP

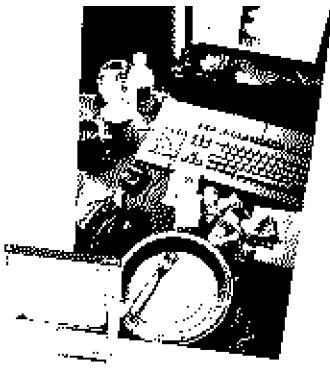
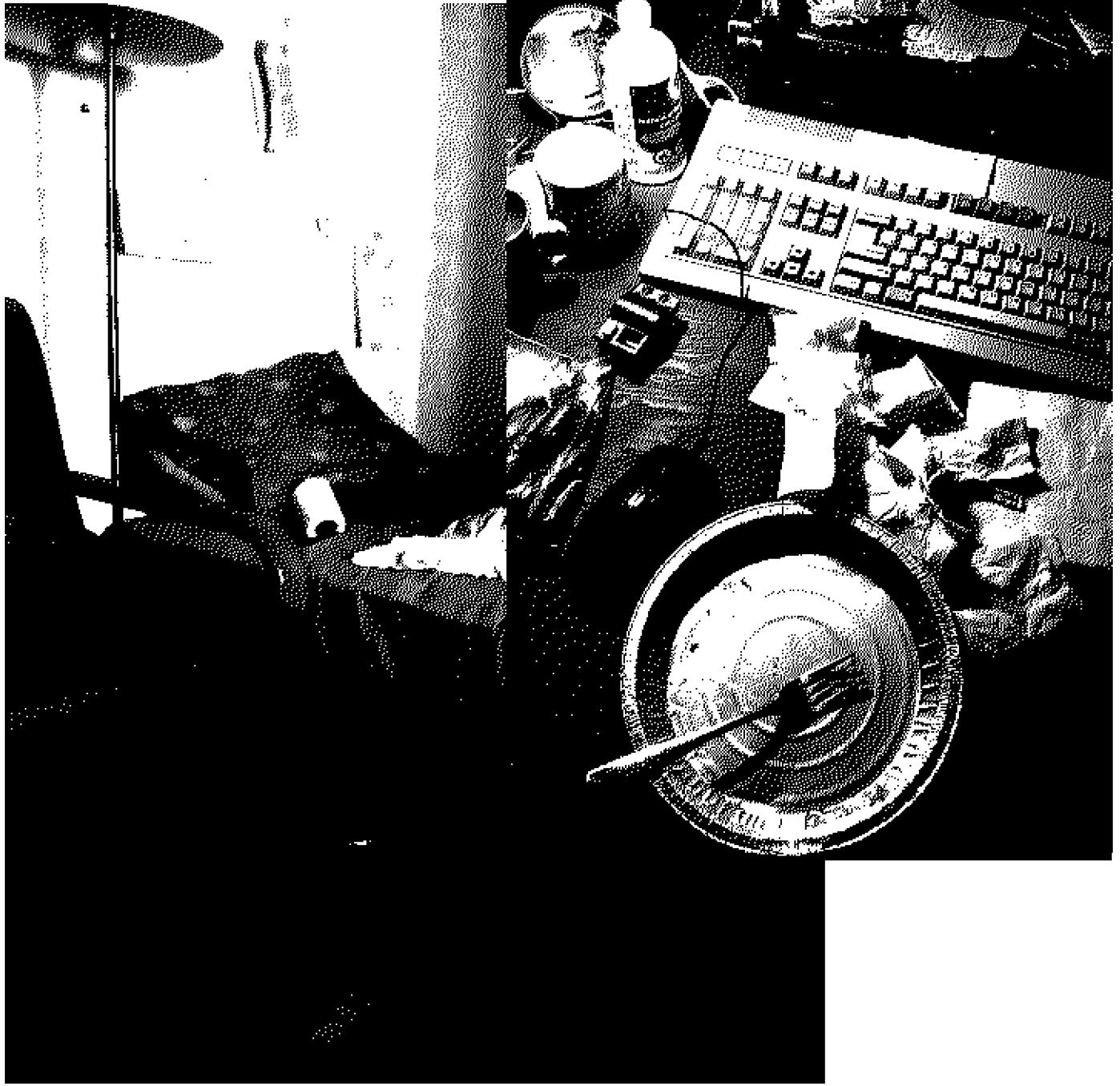
It's installed now, no going back, no crying, please, let's not cry, he thinks to himself.

The massive amalgamation

of energy in the room, powering computers, powering Walmart fans, powering a server stack used for nothing but Minecraft, all of this now radiates a desert-like mirage of heat. Rich sits on the floor rocking next to his 4:3 screens, also on the floor, now sputtering to display a video call software, with compromises clearly being made as to which one. He types in a username and waits, rocking, he waits until his Casio watches (two on each arm) and Lenovo ThinkPads (librebooted of course) all agree that the time is exactly 3:00 AM EST. "California girls . . ." he sighs to himself as he clicks the call button with his cursor shaped like a Minecraft sword. A face pops up. A flame pops up on one of the auxiliary computers running what looks like generic brand Microsoft Word with various conversation topics typed out in bullet points. "Hi Sarah!" he practically yells to the various mics, one of which probably works and is probably hooked up correctly. The receiving end of his message hears him clearly enough, along with what sounds like someone constantly blowing onto the mic, a bird squawking, and loud motherly concern. "So cool to see your face!" he says with both eyebrows glued to the top of his head, grinning. The speakers don't work but it doesn't matter, he's gotten this far, and really he doesn't even need to hear what she has to say.

Dollar store power strips, plugged in to dollar store power strips, all without surge protectors, quietly melt as Rich continues, "Soooooo, anyway, do you want to play League of Legends like usual, you are so cute by the wayahaha." Bird noises change from begging for food and attention to agony. *The smell is kind of bad in here*, Rich thinks. The knocks on the door have stopped. He drags her face over, through various monitors and laptops, twelve in all, to a large TV dangling overhead looking down on him, a CRT now dripping in the heat. "So glad you're not a thirty-year-old dude." He says it playfully, intelligently, humorously, as the floor beneath him collapses into a smoldering pit of burning battery acid and silicone. Tarred and feathered with melted plastic and bits of jagged steel he can only think to himself how great it would be to get a pentakill while being held in her arms.

& 006



自(縛/爆)

A.K.A. JIBAKU



& OIO/OII

夜音 惠理

SESSION #1

With the gag securely inserted, the last thing was to turn the tools on and secure the arms. Waddling over to his closet, a trail of blood behind him from his leaky a-hole . . . Y—— pulled out a series of straps from the closet, with metal buckles on the interior . . .

Taking the buckles, he fed them through the back of the jacket and into the backpack now secured around his arms. Before going ahead, he stuck his hands firmly into both pockets and flicked the dials of all the remotes to maximum, with a delay timer of 5 minutes, before returning them securely to their pouches. After the time had elapsed and with his hands secured, he would have no way of undoing this. His cock that throbbed to-and-fro in its cage like a wild monkey trying to escape, red like the Communist Manifesto.

With the straps and buckles now situated on the interior of the backpack, Y—— picked up two prosthetic arms leaning against his cluttered work desk. These would serve to fill out the sleeves of his jacket and not make him appear like a double amputee . . . the fear here was not so much being discovered (a personal fetish of his sure to make him cum on the spot), but the fact that women would approach him offering their condolences for his fighting in some war and losing his precious arms to an IED or some such, or perhaps some horrible manufacturing job in China or some godawful place and really they should be updating those laws and, you know what, can I get a selfie with you, I really want to show my friends how brave you are. Nothing could make a man lose an erection faster than the pity of a woman, and especially the idea that dozens, or perhaps thousands, of Instagram spectres would be idly thumbing their clits to the thought of an armless boyfriend they could fuck and carry around like a teddy bear. Better still—no legs. Y—— had read Misery by Steven King and wanted to avoid a situation similar to that except totally different. Basically, he didn't want his legs cut off by some psycho bitch. Sure, he was into restraint, and even some hardcore femdom ball mashing, CBT and the like, but the amputee thing always rubbed him the wrong way. If you're permanently handicapped into 'bondage', then it's not really bondage. And furthermore, he would have to think of all the hairy, wrinkly pilots and other servicemen, like his father, who returned from the wars in both '45 and '53 with less than they started with—he would have to think of those men, some traumatised, faces like charcoal sketches, as if they were permanently engaging in his perversion, constantly bonded. The whole Japanese psyche could best be explained in this manner, that the amputees were all psychically and physically bondage participants. The atom bomb was the catalyst for a great psychic BDSM.

Blinking several times, his eyes burning out pink and green from staring out into his light, radiating . . . He slid the fake arms slowly into his jacket sleeves, sure to avoid the hooks at the ends of the arms from catching. Once inside, he was able to securely attach them, via the straps, to the sides of his shoulders, by having straps run above and below his chest . . . both attaching the prosthetic arms to his shoulders while also locking his upper arms to his body.

Now, there was only one more step remaining. Two if you count Y—— quickly taking his winter gloves from the ends of the table and placing them on the hands. In the event a hand fell out, it

would be impossible to tell it was fake in this way. In this unlikely event.

There were probably only two minutes or so left on the timer at this stage, possibly fewer considering his daydreaming. Furthermore, he was feeling funkier and funkier by the second. The body high pulling him towards the earth some more. Thick, bassy kinds of feelings shivering through his spine like wayward currents or deep-sea tremors or bass-lines or some such like that, man.

Rushing to the door, Y—— quickly opened it and stuck his door jammer between the door frame and the door in such a way that when it was kicked out the door would automatically lock, but that it would also be possible to open without turning the handle. Double checking that everything was in order and he wasn't missing anything, he took a big gulp, almost choking on the cock again, and squeezing the huge mass in his ass which was already riding small escalating crescendos of pleasure from his boy pussy.

Breathing sharply, he effortlessly slid his arms backwards through the hole in the jacket and into the interior. After patting around for a few seconds he found the leather cuff loops with the padlocks already attached, unlocked in their respective slots. Quickly attaching the cuffs to his wrists, until they were comfortably snug, he settled his arms down until they were in two L shapes across his back. This greatly eased the slightly tense stretching required to finagle this set up, and stopped the straps from biting so hard into his forearms. In this position, the cuffs—which were separated by a chain which was hung over a custom inserted metal bar in the backpack, actually wired to the top of the chest harness to secure everything—pulled taut. From this position it would be very difficult to move anything at all, since Y——'s arms could not move in any particular direction. Only upon finding the key would he be able to be in the position to unzip the bag from the inside (with a special latch in the interior of the backpack, with a string attached to the base of the cuffs themselves so that it could not get lost . . . that Y—— would be able to free himself).

Now, the only thing to do would be to lock the two padlocks on the cuffs and to set out on his journey. And done. It was over before he even thought about it. That tiny little metallic click, and not even a click, just a muffled noise of some kind that spelled all sorts of doom. An indescribable feeling ran over his body, both elated and totally horrified, totally cursing himself and in shock and also nervously excited and bubbly. He almost broke down and came right then and there, the hashish oil certainly affecting him now. He had to get out of here, the room was getting a bit fucking intense, and scary. Y—— quickly made it to the door and flung it open with his foot stepping out the door backwards and kicking away the stopper as he did, the door slamming locked shut behind him. Even if he tried now, it would be impossible for him to get inside and find some way to escape, although he had already made sure there were no backups in his house. Sure, that was a dangerous choice for some, but since he had keys hidden in two areas fairly close to his house, he was not concerned about the freak chance that someone found and discarded his keys. In fact, it would play directly into his favourite trope of the self bondage gone wrong. The idea of the already hellish trap ensnaring him further was wonderful.

See, there is something very unique about self-bondage. In the typical damsel-in-distress scenarios, or other classic home invasion scenarios, there is the Other. There is the robber who is the

rapist, or the sex friend, or the bondage enthusiast, or the person who is going to tickle you or eat you or fill you up with enemas or turn you into a Pokémon or a furry or shrink you down or size you up. There is the Other in the form of the organisation that takes you in and turns you into a sissified latex slave or a battle maid or a science experiment for vore monsters or gets a robot futanari to peg you and so on and so forth. There is the often faceless, pure force of the Other terrorising you like some Homeric hero, some superabundant force totally reducing you to nothing, in the vein of Simone Weil's thoughts on the Iliad. You are reduced to a statue, an object to be manipulated to the form of the fetish. Now, alternatively, you may identify as this Other, as this robber rapist character, but in that case the victim is then the Other, they. You are now the Olympian force acting upon them, the human Medusa turning them to inanimate granite to be formed and broken and shattered and acted upon. But In both cases the Other is fully present, first as Master and then as Slave. There is rarely, if ever, an identification with the other Self in the Hegelian sense.

But in self-bondage, things are different. The Master-Slave Dialectic is occurring internally. And furthermore, in the realm of sexual domination, you play both roles. You both act as totalising force and the force totally acted upon, and for Masochist varieties, having your own force go out of control, by natural means such as a key breaking or getting stuck in some manner or someone stealing your keys or being exposed and so forth, now that is a kind of Natural and Chaotic Other that cannot exist except by the Will of God or some such. It is a totally impersonal fucking, and it's not often that you can just be totally fucked by nature itself—except by those naturally phallic plant varieties or whatever, or like those noble figures that have sensual relations with the dolphins and sea urchins.

A shock in his ass woke him out of this dream of sorts, this weed fantasy, this string of disconnected and vivid images of the sexual and the divine. His ass was vibrating at incredible speeds, a block of pounding square waves on his prostate making him double over and suck rapidly on the cock in his mouth. A thimbleful of piss dribbled down his chastity cage. Then the other vibrations started. His nipples began to be savagely attacked, pinched and wrestled and tugged and shaken between the two powerful vibrators. He screamed—or for him it was a scream, but for the rest of the world it was a slight exhalation through the nose before a desperate sucking and gasping for air, some faint spluttering and wet slapping of the lips from under the mask, pulling a vacuum from around the enormous ball and cock. To the acute observer, drool was already leaking onto the dark jacket, but this was almost imperceptible, especially out at night.

Y——'s cock was desperate to be released, and he cursed himself for not simply placing a rotor on his penis as well, but he felt that this kind of denial would frustrate him, and he was right—an other benefit, or curse, of dominating yourself.

There was something distinctly postmodern about self-bondage, of the total alienation of sex and machine that it presented. Marx has a fragment on machinery, from Capital, in which he posits, in a very primitive way, that machines are in a sense embodying humanity as a kind of ontological machine-consciousness. In this sense, Machine-Self as a kind of global entity is emerging itself in the Hegelian sense and . . . the vibrations cutting through to his nipples peaked and his memories became scattered. Briefly, Marx's conclusion was that machinery would come to dominate

human thought from this point forward, which he astutely perceived even in its inchoate form. Now, a singing, harmonious, vibrator-consciousness spread across the world in hundreds of thousands of pussies and cunts and asses and nipples and dickheads, they yell in unison, as a unified consciousness, while totally alienating the labour force of the sex identity of mankind.

As Žižek points out, fistig might be the ultimate kind of postmodernism, the alienated force of the fist being the symbol of the labourer and there being no concern for the sexual performance or the failure thereof, something which seems deeply rooted in his pathology if we're going to be obvious about that—he's fat, I mean come on, we're all thinking it—but I think he makes a misstep here. The alienated form of sex is not the fist but the vibrator, the Sybian. The Sybian is the identity of the new machine Being.

During a particularly degenerate time several months prior, a previous low during many hours of overtime, Y—— was sucked into the terrifying world of 2D Java My Little Pony dom simulators—or one in particular, to be exact. The game, highly realised and exact, a labour of love of some sort, allowed the user to Bind and Torture, but unfortunately not Kill, cartoon horses of a variety of sizes and ages: teachers, stallions, ponies, lolis and shotas, whatever your pick. Even the horse pussies—with two little udder tits near the cunt—were accurately replicated for whatever audience would desire such a thing. In reality, Y—— was too disturbed to try the typical anime girl simulator first, and like the typical serial killer, began instead with animals.

The game was layered to say the least—dildos and tools of all kinds, the ability to manipulate the size of not only the penetrative items but the holes as well . . . a small filly with a huge ass and a bigger dildo, or a shota crying at a medium dildo fucking his pinky-hole. Furthermore, there were an array of spells, things that could prevent orgasm or force orgasm or prevent unconsciousness or induce pain and so forth. Toothbrushes and cattle prods could automatically stimulate the feet for further torment. Status bars would show stamina and Benthamite indications of 'pleasure' and 'pain', as well as when the horses would climax. Upon cumming, text such as 'DEPRAVED RANCID CUM' would flash on the screen in big red text. Y—— of course would not admit that he had even seen this, but not in his wildest dreams could he have imagined such a thing before stumbling upon it and practically bursting jizz from his tear ducts out of joy.

But the most fascinating feature of the game was the ability to, at any time, choose from a classically autistic list of preferences for each horse. For instance, you could change the preference of a horse towards gagging, or pegging, or choking . . . from being something they were deathly afraid of to something that they had an 'obscene fetish' for . . . and this is where the heart of the total fantasy lies . . . the total alienation . . . once the autistic type, which seeks perfection in everything . . . once they stumble upon this stage, it is like the threshold of the Hero, there is no going back, they have stepped into the fantastical world and have been given a boon of sorts . . . their mentors have failed, killed off in their minds, for such a thing to be allowed by them, behaviourally speaking. The ability to manipulate the desires of the Other at all . . . so that you may not only impose your will upon theirs through sexual domination and torture and rape, but that you may alter the entire fabric of their mind so that not only may you keep them conscious and full of either mental pleasure or pain, but that you may make them love what you want them to love and fear what you want them to fear.

Self-bondage is the same, insofar as you know exactly what your own fears and desires are, and those are the things that you will be targeting. The settings are already perfect. For Y——, he had to optimise the various horses to fit his needs, before making an account and creating them as defaults. For instance, he knew that he wanted a horse with an obscene fetish for gags, who loves relentless vibration, but hated electric shocks and sharp pain. But in reality, this wasn't a fantasy for the other, but a fantasy for himself, and one that he was inflicting upon himself. For some autists, at the end of their wit, this was the ultimate metamorphosis into real aktion that had to be taken. When the preferences were perfected, and fully realised, they needed to be acted upon themselves. To paraphrase Nietzsche's Gay Science: in peacetime, the warrior attacks himself. In other words: when the autist can't get pussy, he binds himself.

END SESSION #1



SESSION #2

The yawning entrance of the park loomed in front of Y——. The green ambience of the bruised purple wisterias cooled his body. Earthy bounce light coloured the shadows the slightest brown and green and piss yellow. A distinct lack of other flora due to winter. Snow had just started to fall, almost imperceptibly. At this time of day, and with the potential of the weather going south from here, not many were in the park.

There was a wonderful serene feeling to this, the strange combination of the binding on his body, the rope harness rubbing hot sweat into his joints, restricting his stomach ever so slightly as he inhaled. Then his hands behind his back, nestled into the backpack, not feeling restrained in terms of tightness, but the weight and grip of the cuffs and the soft clinking of the padlocks as he walked an ever-present reminder. To others it must have sounded only like normal materials within the backpack, perhaps stationery or some such.

The combination of the serenity of nature, of the little snowflakes, or not even snowflakes but snow-mites or some kind, snow particles, with the beautifully desolate park setting, contrasted with the purely mechanical pleasure he was experiencing. However, without looking at the machines, without seeing the wires,

or the rotors buzzing, or the electrical currents of the pads across his body, it just felt natural. There was nothing unnatural about the pleasure itself. There was no difference in feeling from machine or human pleasure. It was totally possible to trick the body. In the same way there is the Coke and Pepsi test, there should be the cock and Sybian test.

Everyone, including the old women and the children too, if only they knew what they were missing out on in the park. Y—— wondered if children, introduced to these kinds of pleasures at an earlier age, and in a kind of dystopia or utopia, depending on your pick, having a totally liberal approach to sex, would simply request this kind of pleasant, omnipresent stimulation in normal settings such as these.

'Mommy, could I please have the vibrating cock ring?' they would ask, innocently, in the same way they would ask for ice cream.

Of course, Y—— was not fantasising about this kind of thing, and children in general repulsed him, especially outside of a sexual setting. He wondered—with a God's-eye view, or with some kind of end-of-life score sheet—if he could see the number of people in the world he had walked past furtively who had been equipped with butt plugs or other instruments. The number of masks he had passed, subduing their pleasure, their faces like stark marble edifices. How many others had duped him in the way he had duped others.

It was at that moment that Y—— first heard the banshee shrieks, dozens—no, hundreds of voices calling out, chanting, swamping the air and scaring the birds away. Obscured by hedges, he could not fully make out what they were. They sounded foreign, both conceptually and literally. The language sounded like English to his ears, although French and Dutch would also blend together for him at times. He was scared to round the corner, but he had little choice. It would be easier to go through a crowd than back the other way.

He rounded the corner and pure carnage assaulted him. A legion of deplorables, hundreds in number, half-naked or clad in costumes anime or trans or wardrobed out of a furry's wet dream with the skins of animals and polyethylene fur and pieces of Etsy memorabilia still tracked with the period blood of prior owners, hoodies of punched Nazis, denim jackets embroidered with the Kaballistic Sephiroth, each light filled with an ethnic emoji, one in a pink pussy hat and one with an antiracist baby and one in pastel blue and pink programmer socks and a cumstained Clinton pantsuit and some in pup-play headgear of battered leather or PVC gimp masks that bore resemblance to bulls or tigers or foxes or dragons and one in assless chaps worn backwards and otherwise naked and one with matted locks dipped in fluorescent tinctures that frayed and shed until they trailed upon the ground and their bondage pup's ears and tail plugs worked with brightly shining piercings and fibre threads trailing to a leash and one Mamalorian whose Baby Yoda was painted to resemble human flesh and all the tranny and gamer men faces gaudy and grotesque with wide-open mouths gnashing with frightened delight, cancellation hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and storming down upon Y—— like a horde from a damnation more horrible yet than the hellmaxxed liminal convention halls from which they spawned, seething and dilating and clothed in hash haze like those transgressive beings in forums beyond right knowing.

They stormed towards Y—— in force, enveloping him quickly, pulling him into their midst. Assaulted nasally. Caustic ozone fumes mixed with shit and potent leather baking in the sun. The residual haze of excessive makeup, hairspray, and other chemical intoxicants made him immediately woozy. He found himself pulled in the direction of the crowd, unable to push through without the use of his arms, and his already inebriated state. A shirtless thing clawed past him, deep purple scar lines, two of them, running under where each breast used to be, surrounded by mouldy yellow and black bruising, faded pink pants with tassels wetly clinging to the sides from the snow, hair buzzed completely to zero on the sides, dyed peach-fuzz pink but bleached out in spots to illuminate the top of her head as if by a highlighter, holding a sign reading, in English, “Harry Potter taught us better than this,” followed by seven emoji symbols of black and brown hands clapping.

Behind her her boyfriend or some other man draped in a purple frilly dress that went just below his knees and ended in a tie-dye red maroon swirling pattern reminded Y—— of those Star Trek inter-sex uniforms. The man-thing carried a rifle in his hands and he chanted something in English that Y—— could not make out among the other sounds and assaults to his senses and furthermore without knowing English really beyond his high school classes from some years ago but the man stared straight ahead in pure anger his eyes almost watering behind his thick-rimmed incel glasses with spittle flying from his mouth as he yelled, careful not to step on anyone else's toes or the pups in tow two just ahead of him and as he yelled he seemed to shrink a little as if scared of his own power. Another with an ‘I MET GOD, SHE’S BLACK’ sweater held a black fist sign and was jumping up and down incoherently while smoking what looked to be a joint their pudgy pig-cheeks swallowing their upturned snout of a nose as their dead-set predatory eyes opened as wide as they could beneath thick eyelids of forehead compressed fat rolls as they waddled along as best they could with big sweat patches on the unfortunately grey sweater coming down and exposing their protruding belly spilling simultaneously over and within their pants with tightly pulled back oily hair that had the melted snowflake water simply roll off of it without dampening it in the slightest. Y—— realised only too late that a little nub sticking out of the pants made this abomination a man. Its hair was mint-chocolate-drink green but had faded into a kind of milky white that looked brittle to the point of cracking despite its oiliness. Furthermore, the pups at his feet—some walking on their hands and knees, others with their limbs bound and folded into each other—moaned and shimmied along the ground ahead of their daddy, who was shirtless except for a tight leather harness, nipples protruding from the straps that framed his skinnyfat torso, with a little fatty tissue under his left breast and nipple budding like a cone (*gynecomastia*), creating a discordant asymmetry. His eyes weren’t visible beneath his cracked leather cap, but he couldn’t have been younger than fifty-five. The pups were pulled along by his leash obediently as they shook their buttplugs with multi-coloured and spotted furry tails attached at the ends. They had blinders on, some complete blindfolds, most with some kind of harness bit or ball gag or muzzle going on as well, and their cocks sometimes hung out and flopped about as they walked while the kids attending stared in amazement and awe and disgust as their *tabula rasa* were smeared in ways that could never be effaced. And the kids: some in dresses, some flaunting their freshly manufactured identities, and others in shame shy-

ing from the crowd despite the support of their mothers and the men with lustful watchful predatory eyes.

Y—— was dizzy as more and more new morphologies, mutant forms, rushed past him, each more detailed and shocking than the last.

“Are you feeling okay?”

One of them had approached him, ever slightly more normal-looking. It wore full-body camo gear, the fabric containing either multiple cumstains or bird shit, only a slight roundness around the waist protruding and creating a shadow around the upper thighs. A makeshift facemask made of black t-shirt cloth with red striping and transparent eye goggles like some ’40s air force bomber. They carried with them a baseball bat with various insignia on it that Y—— only vaguely recognised and the text ‘Nazi Bonker’ scratched into the side and filled in with what looked like red makeup.

Y——, of course, could not respond. The thing, sensing some hesitation from him, took a strong step forward immediately into Y——’s personal space, engulfing him in an odour reminiscent of refrigerator coolant gone bad. He reached towards Y—— and yanked the mannequin arm out of his pocket, shaking it up and down intensely.

“I’ve always admired Japanese culture.”

Y—— could tell. The thing let go of his ‘arm’ in mid-swing and it stayed as it was, stuck at a 90-degree angle.

“Firm handshake. Firm hands.”

Y—— nodded. This retard apparently couldn’t tell *rigor mortis* from a mannequin or a real hand. The crowd continued to stream around them, a psychedelic arrow of symbols and foreign text and no easy place to rest the eyes, a complete and utter lack of traditional beauty. Fat as far as the eyes could see, dysgenic mutants. A wave of uncanny-valley creatures sent from faraway lands raping this delicate space and dying the snow with their oils and perfumes and tinctures. Nose piercings clattered and rang out like tribal drums. Thighs rubbed and slapped like maracas. It was all getting a bit intense for Y——. He felt a discordant string section, atonality rising up through his gall bladder and into his throat. He choked on the cock in his mouth. Who knows what these people would do to him if they found out about his secret. He would never escape, and not in a good way.

“Your eyes seem a bit red, are you okay?”

Y—— nodded fervently, looking for a route to escape, but fat masses refreshed constantly to obfuscate any potential path. He desperately turned around to find an escape from this stream. The thing produced a little green vial eyedropper from his Zelda satchel with its myriad pins of Doctor Who, Firefly, Sherlock and the like.

“Here you go.”

The man took the vial dropper and before Y—— could contort his spine and close his eyes the man had squirted clear liquid into his eyes. It stung a little and he pulled back while blinking rapidly. At that moment the other eye was squirted too and Y—— just stood there blinking, frightened, his vision momentarily compromised.

“That should help clear up nicely, big guy.”

He looked back into his bag as he put the green vial away, but paused for a second and rummaged around some more. He pulled out another eyedropper, this one with a medical label around the outside and the text ‘ExtraClear™’ on it.

“Oh, oops, might have used the wrong one. Oh well, good luck.”

He laughed as he skipped off and blended instantly into the crowd. Y—— decided that he just had to go with the flow if he wanted out of here. He went along as quickly as he could, which was not very fast given the thigh cuffs.

Y—— just prayed that he wouldn't become more exposed. If one of these dysgenics decided to unbutton his jacket or open his backpack then he would be thoroughly fucked. He would be exposed before this array of pigs and piglets and mudborne bacteria. They would surround him in delight and bind his legs together and crucify him at the front of the parade. He would be a new pup and have his mind hypnotised to that of a dog. He would begin to dress in women's clothing and wear a black daddy choker and become a 2006 gothic lolita and listen to binaural sissy hypno as he slept. His self would be utterly taken apart and refastened to new goals, these new modern masks donned by these creatures, rummaged from some hidden meat locker somewhere, or downloaded from some yet-to-be-named site or program. A congregation of standalone individuals drawn to a singular point like light to a black hole, a total slave morality of guilt and hedonism and anhedonism and disgust and beauty and all the juxtapositions, all the simultaneous things and their opposites, everything negating itself. They were proud and beautiful and daring. They were sticking it to the man. They were warriors in Dumbledore's Army and they were District 13 and they had read The Giver and understood its themes and they had watched Sherlock and understood the meaning of friendship and they knew that the Avengers must assemble and that the Patriarchy was an Avengers-level threat. "I see this as an absolute win," Y—— thought to himself, automatically quoting Avengers: Endgame without realising it. He really was becoming one of them. He may as well get down on his knees. He subconsciously began to suck the silicon cock in his mouth even harder. Another orgasm was riding up on him. He was on the verge of crying again. Pain and its opposite rode upon him and totally dominated him. Wedged within the miasma of the crowd his head floated totally into the sky and his sternum filled with silvery liquids that spread deep into his prostate and rocked his hips to-and-fro with a fullness in his ass that wanted to be pushed out like shit but refused to with its ridges and nubs and its knot keeping it firmly in place. Y—— screamed as loud as he could but nothing came out over the sound of the chant: "MORE WANDS. LESS GUNS." Y—— moaned in rhythm to the chant. MMM MMMM. MMMM MMM. MMMM MMMM. MMMM MMM. Orgasm could make anything beautiful.

END SESSION #2

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&c. Pages 21-22: originally titled *Poem*
Pages 71-72: originally without subtitle as *Dream*
Closing poem: originally titled *Dogemage to Catalonia*

THE END

You were expecting
something worth reading?
Alas, another fool fallen into an
unseen trap (not gay by the way)
I bet you feel "shafted"
get it? Ha Ha
Ha Ha
Ha Ha
Ha Ha
Ha Ha
How funny you must find me, truly
How large my intellect must seem, truly
What a retard
It's funny because
I said a "slur"
The pinnacle of comedy, truly
My balls are misshapen, how tragic

Anonymous & oo6

thanks for reading

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