



Naked Grin

Incisive
tales
of love,
loss,
desire,
redemption

Krystofer PT

Dedication

Dedicated to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, or if all else fails, to my beloved wife, Karen.

Introduction

Naked Grin is a collection of stories chronicling not just what, where, when and how, but taking on the ultimate existential question, “why?”

There is an abandoned steel mill in Johnstown, PA, cast in the mien of the grand cathedrals of Europe. A housecat transcending any pretense of civility to be what it truly is, a trained assassin. The tragicomic paradox of two men unknown to each other, yet inextricably linked by the liminal space between life and reality. The breaking of a Florida retiree in the last moments of his deathbed re-assembly. The righteous intimacy of a wondrously wicked kind.

Unsparring conceptual fiction at the crossroads of bare-knuckle intellectuality and hot carnal realness, these works superimpose the seen upon the unseen, the known upon the uncharted, the grace of God upon the perversity of the human condition.

As the story “Moonstruck Jesus” concludes, “it is an inexorable reality that memories fade, until there are just a few essential images left hung on the wall of the mind’s eye. Hours and days and years pass as Willie and Jonathan each pursue a separate destiny. Yet, that night remains indelibly etched upon the fragile gray tissue behind both pairs of clear, resolute eyes locked safely together in the narrow salvation of everyday life.”

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

NAKED GRIN

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American Cathedral



An angelic flutter of wind holds court in the flowing Pennsylvania sun, melting moments into days, and days into years, like a half-sleeping cat. Same as yesterday and the day before, you can feel the curdling of a bygone time, a way of life lying motionless in the arms of a dying, seasonless dream.

Steeltown mill steeples still refract the light at the top, the way great cathedral glass does, filtered up through pastel earthen auras, like man from dust, or ageless heroes to brittle, parched mythology, as Jackson Karoly drives his ten-year-old Buick out to the mill gate on Saturday afternoon.

He is large, gawky and has come a long way from his sinewy adolescent frame. Jackson wears a Pittsburgh Steelers cap, frontways, its bill curved sharply in homage to the mystic limitlessness of a better era

He stops the Buick's nose just short of being snubbed by the curb outside the gate. He knows just where to fit it in. It's the same as the lines and valleys of his face he visits every morning when he drags the latest swivel-headed razor over his grizzled flesh, sensing the deepening gorge at the bottom of his chin and the fading of cheekbones into a more rounded, softly-voiced rendition of their original shape.

So, he turns now, without the skittish vulnerability of a younger, more territorial animal, but with the preternatural curiosity of an older breed. Gazing through the windshield, he sees a tall, thin man with short, cropped hair that looks like it was once red, but has now faded to a

burnished rust coming toward him. A camera and some equipment cases are strapped like ammunition canisters around the man's neck and over his shoulders.

Jackson waits until he is at the side of his car before speaking.

"Can I help you with something?" he asks, free of condescension or threat.

"No," the thin man replies, stranding the end vowel subtly, the way an unresolved musical chord can strand the listener.

"You know, the guard closes these gates at five-thirty, and he ain't back till Monday," Jackson tells him.

"Thanks," the thin man rejoins. "I'm doing a photo shoot."

Jackson says nothing. He is not sure what that is supposed to mean, so the inevitable questions arise. Where did the thin man come from? Who sent him? Why is he here, exactly? But as with most of life these days, there are no clean answers. The only thing Jackson can clearly see is that the thin man's hair is actually more rusted than he thought, and even salted with a trail of white that cuts as close to the skull as his own father's was.

The thin man turns away and it occurs to Jackson that maybe he is wearing too much of a younger man's clothes: bone-faded jeans, gray-flecked Army T, open-buttoned, untucked flannel shirt. But then again, it's hard to tell. Anybody wears anything these days, especially in places Jackson has never been. San Francisco. New York. Places

that live on the far side of the television screen, not in his living room with the soft canary walls that took the place of the yellowing wallpaper scraped off last year because it had been there since the kids were born and now, since they were halfway through high school and weren't there a lot, Marti noticed more. Not that she was complaining.

It all flashes through Jackson's mind like that as he cradles the bottom half of his broad Slav face in the mercenary sling between thumb and forefinger. Overriding a faint first impulse to call security or the police, he puts a hold on that thought because there is no malice in the thin man's bearing or attitude. Somehow, Jackson can always sense what lies just below the skin of another man.

"Careful," Jackson says, pulling the shifter on his steering column into drive. "Once the guard locks up, he don't come back." The thin man thanks him again and walks toward the building where a sliding doorway is nudged back to admit him to the high metal holies that stand in deafening silence before him.

You could pray here in this industrial sepulcher, the thin man thinks. You could worship this earthly building and its spawn, the train, the car, the airplane born from the womb of furnaces once roaring with the light of lights.

You could be grateful just to be allowed to stand here, imagining the dirty-faced acolytes of decades past, pouring the raging molten lava of all industrial creation into deep, birthing crucibles, harnessed and shaped to the contours of a world built upon such steely transcendence.

Like water into wine, their production once turned the unearthly fear of death and purposelessness into a faith founded on what you build in life rather than simply taking what you can get from it.

Yes, the thin man prays to himself as he stalks this vision like a wayward priest. This is his pilgrimage, more of a piece with who and what he is than he had imagined. Here in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, where beauty has just met circumstance, and there is no separation between church and fate for either the thin man or Jackson Karoly rolling back home listening to his favorite country station.

The winter is almost gone now, just as Jackson Karoly knows the thin man will be before five. But for him, Marti is at the house cooking, and two of the three kids will be there for dinner, while the third is most likely across town after having spent the night with her boyfriend. This is something they've already talked and fought about until there is nothing but the silent, elemental truth that there is no good resolution in it for anyone.

He wonders about the thin man. About what the thin man sees in his town, all the familiar buildings, the stores, mill, houses. Perhaps the way the thin man sees them is different from where he hails, their homespun resignation in this day and time, horrendously, humanly sobering. The way it is after he has made love to Marti and she has fallen asleep while he cannot.

Now, tonight, sleep for him is elusive, so he looks out into the quilt-like darkness through the small window at the side of the headboard to the spires of the mills in the

distance, tilted like the heads and necks of strangely distorted apostles in medieval museum paintings.

Thinking, so damnably thinking like that. But to what end? His mill is scheduled to be made into a museum. Old Hickner has been signed on to lead tours through its cathedral skeleton, picked over by the twin buzzards of time and relevance. Jackson hates the thin man because he knows that one is a harbinger of the inevitability of that time to come. He hates that the thin man has taken it on to see and photograph his town, and capture in those images, something that is already seeming to him like it never existed.

But what he hates most of all is what the thin man doesn't see. The way that Jackson Karoly's son, Paul, is a pitcher for the hometown team, like he was. The way that he's just seventeen but has a good, fast arm, and that's a lot of the reason they've jumped out six and one this year. The way Jackson sits on the first base line every game, like his father did for him, before he was carted off to the hospital and died there for no good reason he has ever figured out.

He wishes to God the thin man would come back for a little while and sit beside him there in the stands. To cheer. Clap. Laugh. Live and die there with him as slowly and inexorably as aging, his own breath rising, falling, rising, giving his heart and soul like a child's love to the beneficent shadow of the American cathedral that is his world. Reaching through the sleepless thievery of time to the bygone image of his daughter running, running toward him in her rolled up jeans and flappy tomboy sweater.

Running to him with the most open, trusting arms it is possible for any man to know. Running, and smiling like there is no tomorrow.

An Unclean Distance



Jerry and his cat, Toon, looked up at the clouds simultaneously like devout supplicants at nature's shrine.

Jerry was just a small boy then, inquiring, solitary, a tangled shock of auburn hair spilling over his forehead in a brooding wave. Toon was much larger in relative size. He was also of a different constitution, steelier, more stoically remote from any delicacy of thought or emotion.

Jerry carried a sturdy wooden sword his father had made from two boards fastened together with two stout bolts. Together, he and his feline sidekick made their way through the wooded area at the edge of Jerry's back yard.

This is where, suddenly disappearing from the smooth, smiley mien of outer suburbia, Jerry and Toon lived in midsummer idyllry. Where they stalked, ambushed and invaded, screaming in delicious assault upon small rises in terrain, then danced in spasms of triumph at the top as the birds and chipmunks and squirrels scurried like refugees before their advance.

Forsaking his own catness, Toon would sometimes stand on his hind legs in victorious salute, waving his front paws in the air while Jerry whirled with his sword swinging overhead and whooped in extraordinary joy at their imagined conquest. "J Rules" he once carved into the trunk of a tree with his penknife after a particularly audacious campaign, then went back to add "Toon 2" with a euphoric flourish. Because Jerry knew Toon was always with him and always would be, so he didn't need to look to make sure.

Toon slept with his head on Jerry's stomach at night, purring lightly, his breath swelling and retreating in a formal cadence. He was as complete an extension of Jerry's being as his sword, or the hand that wielded it.

They spent most of the summer that way, stringing their days together like beads on a seemingly endless necklace, the exploits of yesterday melding into finer, bolder visions of tomorrow.

Of course, it's surprising, isn't it, how selective memory becomes over time. How it is never so much those grand expressions of life, or those long vistas of hope and expectation stretching out ahead of us we remember as much as the precise, fulcrum moments upon which they turn. How surprising it is when Jerry finds himself, thirty-three years later, looking back to what was then, and that particular summer not as the same period of days and weeks and months, but as a single isolated instance.

It began with their usual swaggering entrance into the twelve-acre firmament the two of them had long since come to rule. Well into August, they moved out as usual to confront a wildlife no longer as interested in being chased as they once were, but still willing to give the boy and his cat their due because their game had become familiar enough to grant themselves that leeway.

It was early morning, skies were half-clouded over, sun only peeking though in fleeting shunts of light. The air was moist, beckoning, what Jerry would eventually think of as lover's breath, and it was this allure that made the boy and his cat advance the same way they always had into

their own untainted forever far simpler that it would ever be again.

Suddenly, their attention was drawn off by an unseemly blemish upon their omnipotence. Racoons. A whole family of them, newcomers, tittering and huddled together like immigrants without green cards or any legal form of identification.

Jerry instinctively raised his sword and Toon's back flashed with a raised line of fur as they rushed the little family, shrieking, wailing, pounding the earth with heavy-footed menace. The raccoons looked up with impossible naïvete, as if not willing to believe that what they were seeing could actually be happening.

The boy saw and understood. So he slowed. But Toon had no such internal calibration. He sprang to the center of the raccoons' rout a few beats ahead of their retreat and lunged his cable-strung body at the smallest, most vulnerable of them.

Jerry jerked back like a martinet with its strings abruptly yanked by an impatient puppeteer as Toon's teeth sunk into his prey's defenseless neck. "No," Jerry wanted to scream, but only the bristly snap of bones reverberated through their august sanctuary as Toon drove the creature to the ground and tore its life away with splintery inconsequence.

Afterwards, Toon waited in soldierly expectation for the triumphal dance they always did at the summit of a conquest. But that dance never came because Jerry did not know Toon at that moment. They were suddenly strangers,

two separate beings who needed to be introduced again to relieve the awkwardness of having had a part in what could no longer be sustained.

“Hello, Toon,” Jerry heard himself saying silently, “I am Jerry. You may not know this, but we’ve been best friends this whole summer.”

To which Toon silently replied, “yes, but what did you expect? That I would just keep on playing what we were playing at, that the game would not get real someday?”

Jerry offered no more of a response than he did twenty-seven years later. He simply watched Toon approach, a warrior to his king, to drop the dead offering, his fealty, at his feet. At which point, Jerry’s sword dropped with a deafening slowness and Toon turned with a glance backward that asked what no true warrior should ever have to ask, then retreated into the woods alone because he could no longer bear witness to Jerry’s infidelity.

But the next day, he stood ready as always. He had already forgiven Jerry, if that was something creatures like him actually do, and accepted the former day’s flaws by simply letting them go.

Jerry shuffled toward him while Toon maintained his place by the kitchen door, waiting with an infinite faith and inestimable love. But Jerry stopped just ahead of him and leaned his sword against the doorway. He no longer had the heart for their game. So, he left Toon to arch his back once or twice, then mew a tearless lament until there was

nothing left to do but exit the kitchen and retreat with a sinewy ripple.

Now, twenty-seven years later, remembering that moment of unclean distance, he still waits for the Toon of his boyhood to return, unmarked and unscathed by any deceit of penance. But he knows that is not going to happen. Toon's loyalty to himself will always be too perfect. His life always too complete.

Doublewide



Charlie Macke lives in a retirement park. In a high-end doublewide where a pile of magazines lie at the base of his soft naugahyde Barcalounger.

The Florida sun has set over the lake where alligators live, sometimes coming over the edge of the landfill and onto its grassy, well-kept lawns. Occasionally, grandparents living there take their grandkids out to see those alligators. They keep a tight hold on their hands because they are not at a zoo and the alligators, they are not in cages. They are dangerous creatures, with only a burgeoning population of rabbits to live off.

The rabbits were originally domestic stock, pets brought in generations ago and left behind like disposable toys. Some of the residents have since acquired small caliber rifles to keep them at bay. But the rabbits have the numbers and it is only right that the alligators are there to balance the scales.

Charlie has a lot of time to think, about this and many other things these days. He doesn't watch a lot of television anymore. He gave most of that up a while ago, having gotten so sucked into game shows, TV dramas and weather, it just wasn't worth it anymore. He'd also gotten tired of the Weather Channel telling him about the massive front of rain and thunderstorms threatening the Midwest or blizzards razing the Northeast.

He'd also gotten to the point where finding out the intense, square-jawed soap opera doctor was having a torrid affair with a second-year intern at another hospital lulled him into a hazy sleep. Of course, there were always the

procedurals with their endless stream of murderers, rapists and gangbangers.

The arthritis, wrinkles, melanomas and other strange skin growths were bad enough, but Charlie Macke hated to think this was his life had come to.

Sitting silently in his lonely throne early one morning, Charlie let a particular remembrance float back over him. It was something that came and went from time to time, featuring a certain room and a certain girl in it. Now it was happening again.

He remembered the girl's name. How could he forget? Lorne. Just Lorne. No middle, no last.

She lived in the desert a few hundred miles from Las Vegas, in a prime tan doublewide, like his now, only connected to two more, making up a suite of rooms where Lorne and a dozen girls like her worked. She'd flown in from Phoenix the night before for a two week shift, and he was her first client this time out.

So young, so sure in those high white stilettos making her muscular calves stand out. Even now, with so many years passing, it still brought a dull lumpish ache to his throat.

She had been the one he had selected from the line-up in the front lobby. Now, she led him down a maze of dimly-lit halls, asking along the way if he had ever done this before. He confessed that he hadn't, so she brought him into her room, sat them both down on the bed and put her hand on his thigh before negotiating a price. According to

her bedside clock with the oversized numerals, it was 11:00am, Sunday.

Charlie can still feel her thin, tensile closeness when he agrees to \$55 for a half hour of sex, thinking that on any other day, under any other circumstance, he might have driven right past the vintage bombshell stuck in the ground at the edge of a sandy ribbon of road leading to the brothel encampment. But for some reason, he'd never fully understand or could explain to himself, how he turned up that road until it brought him to the wrought-iron gates of Iris' Oriental House of Joy.

Parking with care on the gravel lot in front, he got out, walked to the door. Ringing the buzzer to the side, he waited until a parchment-skinned harridan with a high, auburn beehive, somewhere in her early 60s opened the door and let him in. From there, he'd gone on to the hastily summoned line-up where all available girls presented themselves for selection.

On any other day, under any other circumstance, Charlie would not have chosen Lorne with her short thatch of straight, unruly hair and sketchily-applied makeup. At first glance, he would have been inclined to go with the brassy blonde with D-cup breasts. Or the wannabe goth with ironic cadaver eyes.

Yes, thinking back on it now, they might have been his pick that day if this one hadn't reached and touched him in the kind of indefinable way the others didn't. Maybe it was the way she met his appraising gaze with her archly compact breasts, slim buttocks and underlying intelligence.

Christ, Charlie remembers, something indefinable made him want to ask where she came from right then and there. What town did she grow up in? What school did she go to? But he held his tongue because somehow he felt he would never get the answers he was looking for, just the stories behind them.

Charlie Macke did not put much stock in stories. He'd heard too many throughout his life to know they were rarely true and communicated little more than the literal passage of events. So now, head resting back against his Barcolounger's pliant cushion, he feels the firmness of her form, the steely power of her arms and legs beneath him as he rides body on body, flesh on flesh before sinking his cock into her wet, undulating cunt as desperately as any sin-soaked postulant can be.

Lorne gave good ballroom sex, letting his cock lead as she parried thrust with counterthrust in a calamitous rhythm, matching him stroke for stroke.

Her breath quickened with raspy exertion until she edged him to the brink of orgasm and he whispered "oh, God," at the climactic moment, his voice exultantly sad and infinite. She made a dark mewling sound as he withdrew his dick, crawled up over her, sat up straddling the neck and shoulders to shoot his wad over her face in implosive heaves that seemed like they would go on forever and ever, world without end.

When he was fully spent, Charlie bent down close to the fast and furious sperm splattered across Lorne's nose, cheek and eyebrow. She raised her hands to his face and

drew him down to kiss her on the lips where, for the first time, he tasted his own seed on a woman's face.

Which, for reasons never completely understood, that broke him. Over time, he would put the pieces of himself back together, but they would never fit the same again.

He does not regret or retreat from the smile that never fails to crease his face at the remembrance, either then or any time she has come to him since. It is always good to have Lorne return, if only to see her the way she was then, but never trying to imagine what she might be like now.

Where clear and crisp as a sunny fall day up north, he can feel her fingertips gliding slowly, carefully along his cheek like they have somehow been together the whole time.

That's why I never told anyone about you, he tells her wordlessly. Not Jamie, my ex-wife of seventeen years who died just eleven months ago. Not my children, Brenda, the vegetarian housewife, or Stephen, the social-climbing politician. They live far away in other states, other states of mind, Charlie laments. He knows his death is coming, like it does to every human being because God so loved the world, He sent his own son to show us all-how dying is really done.

Meanwhile, Charlie, in his mind, moves to the Florida dawn with his favorite rod, ready to fish like he often does from the little dock at the edge of the lake. Marveling at the way the purplish water surface lies stretched out before him, he imagines for a moment he can just stand up and walk out over it whenever he wants.

But for now, he decides not to. Instead, he falls deeper and easier to sleep than he ever has in his BarcaLounger's impermanent embrace, his body circling effortlessly above the grass and trees and lampposts and mailboxes decorated with all their stupid cranes and dolphins. Free from the incomplete treasures of this temporal existence, where Lorne is, and has always been, so patiently waiting.

"Hello, Lorne," Charlie says.

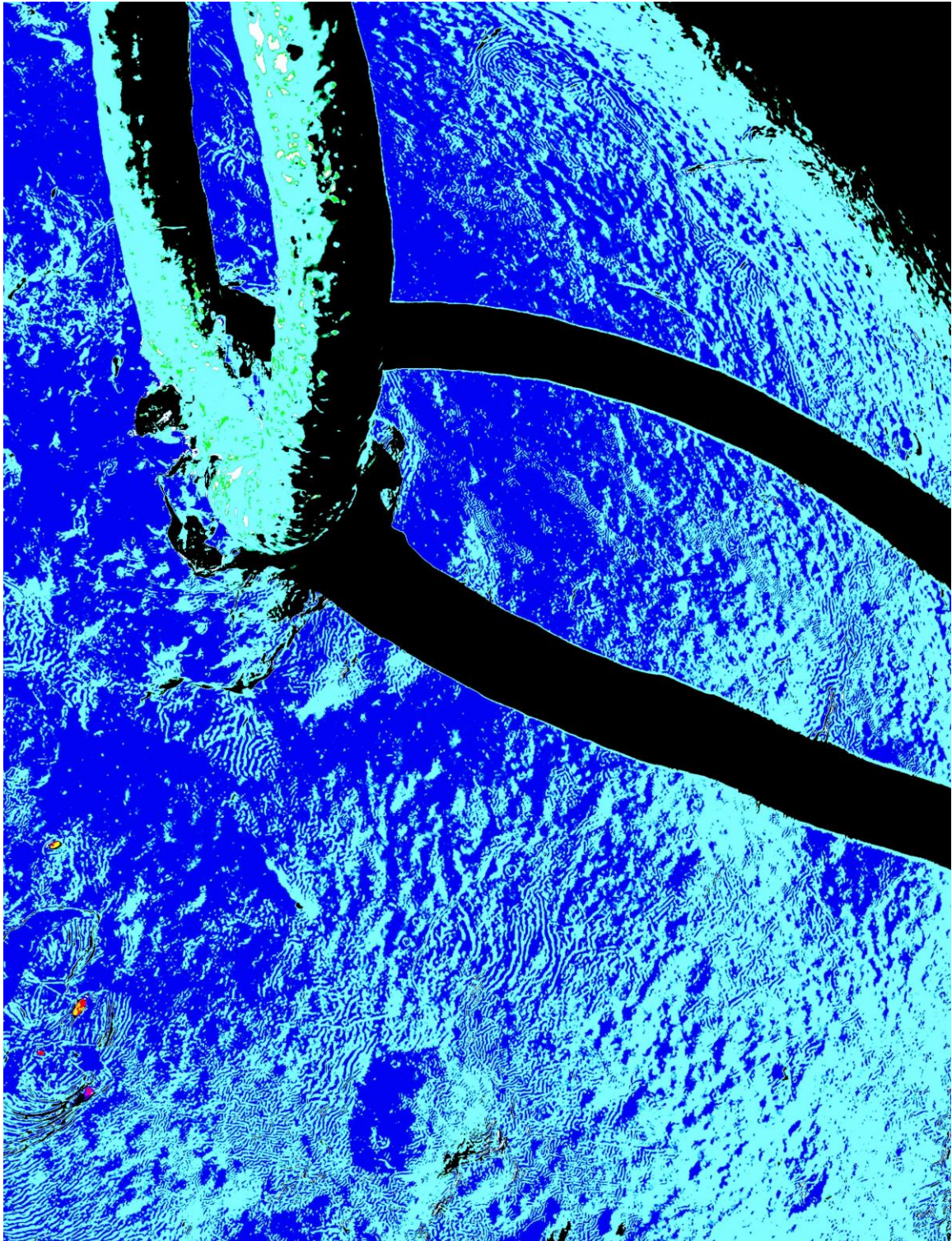
"Hello, Charlie," Lorne answers. Do you remember how I asked, 'where are you going' as you were leaving Iris' Oriental House of Joy that morning?"

"Yes, 'back to Las Vegas,'" I said.

"And how I said half-jokingly, "'take me with you.'"

"Yes I remember," Charlie answers in a way he could never have then, extending his arm with the most perfect devotion he has to offer, feeling the whole of himself re-assembled just beyond his thin doublewide walls into the lacy enfolding of her fingers.

Thin Human Remedy



Strong female hands press into his back as Daniel Jimmy lies on his belly, face down into the massage table headrest, facial towels wrapped loosely around the edges of the donut hole in the middle. The hands servicing him press down peremptorily, searching for the anomalies of his body in relation to the body chart on the wall, depicting the perfect human form, the one without flaws or knots or cancer, in cartoon-like animation.

The hands meld into Daniel's back, first scouting up along the ridge of his spine, then back slowly down, hesitating at a particular hardness, noting its presence.

He is uncomfortable, the pressure of his face against the headrest distracting. He wishes it was softer, that it felt more like air, or clouds, and drifts momentarily with the flow of that thought, feeling it come close, then slip away again, like a balloon gently lifted from his grip a hundred years ago when little Danny rides his bicycle to the asphalt schoolyard where the basketball players and older kids are standing together near the yellow-brick high school building. The fenced-in playground on the other side is for the little kids who are very aware of the speed of his passing.

The massaging hands draw down to Daniel's feet. They pull at his legs, stretching them to their full extension, the way a Thanksgiving turkey used to be pulled apart when his grandfather cut the string binding the drumsticks. Daniel's grandfather now comes into sharp relief, sitting magisterially at the head of the table in his starched white shirt and necktie slung back over his shoulder so that he

does not stain it as he carves the bird with irreducible efficiency and the adults exchange conversation for which all meaning and context has been long forgotten.

Daniel remembers the last time he saw his grandfather before that rainy funeral day in southern New Jersey. He remembers him holding the model airplane he'd built down on the parking lot asphalt with its high-pitched gas engine shrieking across the empty weekend space while he ran back to pick up the U-line control and signaled his grandfather to let it go. He wanted to show him how well he could fly it because he knew his grandfather was dying and would never be back to see this, or anything else of his life, ever again. Danny knew his grandfather would never be with him for another trip to the Hobby Shop, or listen to his store of knowledge about Hellcats and B-17s and Messerschmitt 109s.

Those massaging hands move upward to his buttocks, firm and unforgiving. Suddenly, he wants to cry, but he keeps the tears at bay, his emotions distant like the cool sanctuary of a country church in summer. He hears the organist in there practicing, weaving notes around a swirling theme, the notes cutting ritual swathes through the air like swords to lift life's deafening ordinariness up, up, up, far above the terrible losing of it all.

Cutting closer all the time to the final epiphany of Old 100, raising the curtain over the majesty of human existence like the purest of sexual stirrings, he looks up to the cross of the crucified Christ and sees the painted blood

dripping from His hands and feet like the essence of his own bodily fluids.

But as with the resurrection itself, those massaging hands keep moving on. Onward, Christian fingers, marching as if against some officious Nazi checkpoint along Daniel's lower vertebrae.

Like the platoon of black and white soldiers on television he used to watch, their studio bullets whipping up the dirt and laying waste to the clean, bloodless actors in their wake.

He remembers the grim American sergeant pinned down with his rougher, more bedraggled troops pinned down in a ditch somewhere on a Hollywood back lot made to look the French countryside as he yells for a fleeing civilian to get down, get down. Only it's too late. The inevitable shot rings out from the Gothic bell tower in the background and the old man arches back, arms extended to the sky, crumpling like a windless sail while the music swells and the next few moments are surrendered to a toothy message from the show's squeaky sponsor.

Tough massaging thumbs ignite his back like a bright coal and the pain reverberates throughout every nerve in his body with an agonizing brilliance. Burn bright, my precious star tonight. Let this little light of mine shine, shine, shine. There is no wrong, there is no right. Just this thin, human remedy for the invisible afflictions of this body and soul spawned by the toxic spasm of muscles seizing.

The hands, the hands, they spare him nothing, like the whiskey he remembers once drinking until he lapsed into

unconsciousness, the whole world spinning on its axis, swirling, plummeting, ripping away the very skin from his bones.

How easy it was in those moments to loathe the life into which he had fallen enough to want to die. And those massaging hands, they do not let him forget it. No, they do not let him forget the fumbling of his open mouth against a girl's whose name is forgotten, but not the clothes littering the floor where he takes her down, down, into a soft, irreconcilable darkness while a steady drip of water from the heating pipes overhead punctuates the rhythm of their exertions.

I lived like hell for a long time, Daniel agonizes. I did not have a job or anywhere on the face of the planet to go. Just a gallon of on-sale wine and a black and white television set grinding out King Syndicate reruns, and me, sitting pasted into a yellowing recliner barefoot, unshaven, downing glass after glass and feeling the toxic pitch of insanity rise and fall in its own fitful meter.

I wish, oh how I wished for anything, anything else than that bitterly tortured implosion of my being.

At last, the massaging hands come to a brief rest. How can that life have simply faded, Daniel wonders, until it was no longer there? But the answer must wait. The hands are on the move again, parading imperiously down the Main Street of his arm. His memory turns to the small town by the sea where his family spent their summer vacations in the early years.

He remembers the town's gingerbread houses, once freshly painted in candy-colored tones, but now going to seed and becoming encrusted with musty brine. He remembers running across the street in front of the gently decaying hotel where they were staying to the boardwalk and beach beyond. After dinner, when the sun dipped like fiery ice cream below the horizon, the sand was free of beach people and all their umbrellas, rubber rafts, radios and stupid sand toys.

Gone back to their rooms, their places, leaving only a few scraps of trash behind. Candy wrapper, plastic shovel, empty soda bottle. And once, a cheap souvenir bracelet with the name "Cindy" etched on it by the twenty-five cent engraving machine in the arcade.

Daniel Jimmy remembers examining it, rubbing its thin, transient surface between his thumb and forefinger, then letting it return from the palm of his hand to the sand below. Maybe "Cindy" would come back for it. Or maybe the sand sweeper would come and suck it up into its great bowel, where pennies and quarters and baseball cards and diamond rings and all the other little slivers of life ended up together.

Later, after the sun had fallen indelibly below the horizon, Danny walked out on a jetty jutting straight out into the ocean, the moon tracing a shimmering path from the jetty's last blackened rock to as far as the eye could see. Danny looked out over the calm, somnambulant water, thinking about the fish down there, roaming without purpose, just to eat and be eaten, the randomness of their

lives mirroring the waves washing in and out with the same unending inconsequence.

Those massaging hands, they come in for the final dig now, stabbing through the toxicity in his lower left shoulder. He remembers a quantum shiver sweeping through him out on the jetty, a shiver that threatened to capsize his senses with a vision of the natural order of things so profound and pure it ended up being the source of a great self-betrayal.

Because that purity, like the very best religion has to offer, is, was and ever shall be a living, breathing, sweating, loving thing stopped short at the outskirts of thirst and reason. He has not forgotten the impact of purity's terrible assault, the irreparable change it wrought in the stripping of him from himself completely enough to rebuild a finer, steelier version of the same artifact. Meanwhile, those hands, they do their best to worship his body the way paper dollars are wrapped around the Jesus throne at New York's yearly San Gennaro festival with the heat and fried dough and sausages weaving an ersatz absolution for which no human being is ever fully qualified.

Oh, how those hands are molding him in just the same way before coming to a complete rest while thin strains of a high wind instrument burble from the carefully calibrated speakers sequestered somewhere behind him, leaving him to mount up once again and ride the world outside like he always has, charged with the sheer animal pursuit of earthly reward.

Though, walking out the door, he still remembers his grandfather, bending down in the parking lot, holding the screaming airplane, looking, waiting for the signal to let it go, let it go, let it go. Twenty-seven years later, he wishes he had never let it go. Because in that moment, he is still stuck there, in the incessant struggle between pain and pleasure, helpless and safe and broken all at once in the lustrous ember of his grandfather's eyes.

Bubblehead



There are two parts to this story, one made up, the other real. It's about a man named Tim who lives on my block in New York's lower east side and has for the past eight years. That's the real side.

And this is where the made up part begins.

Tim came to live on that street of railroad tenement buildings over twenty years before. He worked at a small tailor's on the next block, taking in clothes from neighborhood customers and cleaning them, altering them, pressing them. He often took on mending work, putting a garment back together after it had been ripped or the seam frayed, or an alteration was needed to accommodate an expanding girth.

Tim had a wife, Amelia. She was pretty in a dewy, spirited way, full of enthusiasm and hope for the future. She was good for Tim, those who knew them often said, and he for her. They gave each other love, purpose and security, so that when he said goodbye to a lingering customer and locked up the shop, he knew she would be waiting there for him in their fifth-floor walk-up.

As with most happily married, longtime couples, they did things both knowingly and unknowingly at the same time. Like when he came in, she would greet him with, "hi, sweetheart, did you have a good day?" as if his re-appearance in her life had taken her slightly by surprise.

Like when she would kiss him on the lips and lead him to his favorite overstuffed chair. "Yes, good," he might reply. "Almost all coats. But no surprise. It's getting cold

out there. You know Mrs. Piorkowska,” he might go on, favoring his wife with a wry grin.

Later, he would read the paper as Amelia went about sundry household tasks, offering an occasional comment or observation that sometimes elicited a small acknowledging “mmm” or a chuckle.

There was time then to pass an evening in such quiet intimacy, set against the faint tinkle of jazz coming from a radio in the apartment below.

And this is where the second part of the story comes in.

It is different for Tim now. He is an old homeless man who wears a crazy turban-like bubble made of discarded newspaper, tattered cloth and remnants of plastic from shopping bags and kitchen wrap. He only speaks in his own flavor of tongues, random patterns of guttural sounds incomprehensible to anyone.

He crouches in the doorway of the building across the street as he does most nights, two buildings away from the largest Polish Catholic Church in America. Tonight, the streetlight far above his head reflects a bitter December rain pouring down in cruel driving sheets.

I stand at my window, watching the darkness settling and his huddled form taking such shelter as to be found. In the eight years I’ve lived here, I’ve met and conversed with a fair number of neighborhood residents. Several have said that my conjecture about Tim’s past based on what little I have heard is essentially true. He did have a wife and a small tailor shop at one time. But one day, no one really

knows why, she up and left him, never to return, and he never recovered from the loss.

Do I believe it? Sure, why wouldn't I?

About seven and a half years ago, shortly after I have moved in, my younger brother comes to visit, and happens to look out that same window overlooking the street that has been my living theater the whole time. Seeing Tim, "who's that?" he asks. I tell him I don't know exactly, but give him as much of the story as I have picked up.

After several pensive moments, my brother abruptly exclaims, "that's bubblehead," taking his cue, of course, from the paper-plastic hat and making us both break into the kind of rolling laughter about which there is nothing you can do but let it run its harum-scarum course. Because for that brief pause in time, we think it is one of the funniest things we've ever heard.

Until the next night, that is, after my brother has left, when eyes clamped shut against every mortal suffering and misfortune, all I can hear out there are the millions of unstoppable raindrops crying.

The Shoemaker



The door is open. This is not unusual. The door is always open during business hours in the little shop the shoemaker has on Manhattan's East Tenth Street between First and Second Avenue.

The shoemaker, like his shop, is very old. The skin on his face is dry and wrinkled, cut into deep furrows like those tilled on farms in spring. His hands are also wrinkled and they shake a little as he reaches out over the counter to take your shoes and ask what he might do for you today.

His eyes, though, are ageless. Clear, celestial, like diamonds sparkling in the summer sun.

You explain that you would like the soles and heels of the wing-tips you've brought replaced. His eyes let you know he understands implicitly, even though, after all these years, his English is still not very good, so he communicates with a simple nod of his head and, as always, the calm, directed train of his gaze.

You agree to come back two days from now, on Wednesday.

They will be ready then, yes?

Yes, they will be ready.

You walk out onto the warm, gray sidewalk smelling of moist, decaying garbage and somehow see a boy running, playing amidst the European ghetto he left so long ago.

The streets are bustling in the Warsaw of 1938 before the Nazis enter and begin the particular brand of atrocity that will be their legacy.

The boy runs down a ghetto side street with several friends. They laugh. Shove each other along the way. Jostle, as boys do when they are friends and running freely along the bustling streets of Chicago or Cleveland or New York City. Their voices rise through the dusky afternoon air with a heady blend of competition and companionship so strong and genuine it is the very essence of being alive.

But then, the scene changes in fast, rhythmic cuts, and now, the Nazis have arrived and they walk along those Warsaw streets in their efficient, arrogant manner.

“Halt,” one of them, tall, square and pale orders. The boy turns quizzically, gazing up into the vacuity of his zealot eyes. They frighten him because he doesn’t understand the kind of fervor he sees and senses is beyond any rationality he is familiar with, a fervor that rolls like thunder from the abruptly shaded sky.

He wants to continue running with his friends and not be frightened like that. Not have to be standing face to face, boy to man, man to boy, prey to predator, death to killer, killer to death.

But, as any master and slave are inextricably bound, so is he, too, to the Nazi trooper at that precise moment in history, each needing the other for them both to continue playing out who they are. For it is an immutable equation that without the slave, there is no master, and the obverse is also true.

A day later, the boy is transported to a concentration camp, where mere subhuman conditions would be a blessing compared to what awaits. Where life is a daily

routine of hunger, random, thoughtless violence and at least two bodies to a bunk, making sleep a dreamless impossibility. Where hard, forced labor cripples the mind and body and sends it into a numbness beyond the reality of mere physical pain. Where fathomless eyes remain vacant in an attempt to survive death's slow, grinding inevitability.

One day, amid interminable suffering, the boy falls from a line of wretched men hauling concrete blocks from one portion of ground to another, then back again, for no other reason than to work them to death. Miraculously, no one seems to notice as he sprawls face down in a small ditch to the side. No one disturbs him as he lies there in semi-conscious abandonment. The ranks of prisoners simply close around him, obstructing the view of the nearest capo who has somehow looked away at that perfectly inexplicable moment.

For him, there is just enough consciousness left in the boy's wasted, fragile form to inch forward upon his shriveled belly to a dank canal where he lies in hallucinatory limbo until night falls.

Whereupon he moves, agonizingly at first, then with more cogent hands clawing at dirt and rocks and weedy undergrowth, anything he can pull himself along with. His reptilian form slithers over the earth, fed by the cold intransigence of fear, moving inch by inch toward the outer perimeter fence festooned with flesh-eating razor wire, a piece of which draws a searing jagged line across his neck as he tries to wriggle under it. Stifling an exclamation, he

reaches up and feels the viscosity of his own blood streaming between his fingers.

He longs more than anything to scream and cry out into the terrifying stillness, but knows he cannot because there is no way back, knowing what they will do to him if he is caught and returned to the camp. With every passing moment, there is a greater and greater likelihood that his overlords will become aware of his absence, and at that point come to retrieve him with their guns and truncheons and slaving dogs trained to tear the skin from his arms, his neck, his face.

He has seen it himself. Those animals are very efficient. They do not fail their masters.

Cross-cut to another angle of the scene where one of those masters is patrolling the area to which you have been assigned. Your designation and uniform proclaim you to be Wehrmacht, but you are more. You have been detached to a special action group for some time now.

You are one of those nameless, faceless sentinels that will one day live on in anachronistic black and white newsreels flickering across the glittering silver screens of a morally complacent and ambiguous world.

But for now, you go to investigate a tiny perimeter noise. Getting closer, you extend the Schmeisser slung over your shoulder like an insect's antenna, a probe. Your hand tightens around the gun grip while the blood rushes through your veins, pulsating with hard, erogenous manhood on full alert until, suddenly, you see what it is you are searching for.

It's the small hapless form emerging from under a last barrier between itself and the very tangible exigencies of its freedom.

You actually smile in wonderment. Though you have seen it so many times before, it is so hard to believe how these awful wretches continue to persist in their pathetic attempts to escape, that any hope lingers in what is left of their festering, malnourished brains.

Stepping forward, you approach this thing with an incredulous resentment, as if you should not have to be put to so much trouble over such futile undertakings.

But darkness is eroding, and the dawn is lurking just below the horizon, so you draw nearer. Near enough to see his eyes as they catch sight of you for the first time. Near enough to register the hopelessness, the terror, the rapt despair.

You lower your machine gun slightly, so the barrel is pointed directly at his forehead, just above the thin, greasy, dirt-smeared face where the nose recedes into the skull, where cartilage ends and bone begins. Your finger tightens imperceptibly around the trigger and you feel it softly melding with the pressure of your warm, well cared for flesh.

Goddamn you, you filthy, defenseless bug, the maddened thought skitters through your mind. Goddamn you for ever having existed, for ever having been inserted into my otherwise untroubled night. I hate you. I hate everything about you. I want to eradicate you and all your kind from every corner of the earth. It is my duty, my

obligation to rid the world of its lice, its vermin, the eternal deformities in its bloodline contaminating all goodness and truth to which my life has been given in such utter wholeness.

But as you have the gun barrel trained on him, so his eyes are trained on you. As you hold him prisoner, so he holds you hostage in his unyielding gaze.

“Mister,” you hear the shoemaker saying from a far distance and touching your arm softly, giving you no choice but to withdraw from this scene in your mind and exit the world graphically imprinted in its frame. “Did you forget?”

Smiling, he hands you the part of the receipt necessary to reclaim your shoes. You turn and take it, saying goodbye and thank you, then move out onto the sidewalk, watching him remove your wing-tips from the counter and placing them carefully underneath.

Lookalike Noon (excerpt)



Partially veiled by low-hanging clouds, the morning sun rose late. Sleeping outside on open ground had roughed up Wendell Pearson's aching body.

Creaking upward, he pulled himself to his feet and wandered out into the auburn distance to relieve himself and see what the voluble wind gods he'd heard since moving to Nevada almost ten years ago might have to say. Gazing down at the reflective flecks from the fluid pouring out of him and the Pollack-esque pattern it represented, Pollack, he thought, chuckling disparately, this is your aesthetic, man. This would do you proud.

Zippering up his weathered jeans, he walked back toward the tent where Alex and Elizabeth, his two female consorts, etched a shadowy silhouette on the outer skin of the tent while they talked, but not loudly enough for him to distinguish their words. All he could hear was Alex's higher-pitched voice stretched out into a horsey guffaw. How easy it was to be horsey when you were young, he lamented.

Alex Montgomery had entered his life dumped on the concrete, beaten and broken in front of the gas station he had converted into a kind of lux sandhill living quarters shortly after his arrival. Discovering her unconscious corpus when he had come out just before the sun had fully risen, he'd taken her in, helped heal her wounds and shortly thereafter, followed her lead into a state of torrid carnality.

Then another woman, Elizabeth, a one-time associate of Alex's in the world's oldest profession, arrived at his

doorstep, bringing the three of them to the unholy triumvirate they were now.

Wind gods, help me, Wendell had prayed after his first union with Elizabeth, which Alex did not mind or take as anything more or less than the proper course of things. You were lucky there, he'd heard the wind gods whisper then. But you won't always be. Time waits for no man. At that moment Wendell realized nothing could be closer to the truth, feeling it, as he did, coming on harder, stronger, closer than ever before, like a horse's nostrils flaring and steaming with fierce inevitability.

But the wind gods, they did not leave it at that. They pressed on to the finish line with "life as you know it will no longer require you to be in it. And your luck will be returned to sender, because you have only been leasing it all along."

"Hey," Alex called, head poked out of the tent flap. "You want breakfast?"

"Sure," Wendell smiled, "do you have any?"

"No," Alex laughed, "but let's tear this thing down and go get some."

"Sounds good," Wendell ponied back, "I'm hungry."

After hitting a vintage desert diner to eat breakfast, they rolled out in Wendell's vintage 60s truck, its throaty engine still comfortable at eighty-three mph even though the pitted asphalt gave it a hard ride and they could feel the brokenness of the road bouncing up through its oldsome bones.

Once, the wheels smacked down into an unexpected pothole and the vehicle went airborne, making the three of them levitate momentarily in the cab before thumping back down into their seats with unceremonious force.

“Yeeeeee,” Elizabeth screeched in counterpoint to Alex’s huffing “fuuuuuck.” Holding onto the wheel with a determined grip, Wendell had no comment. All his effort was being put into not letting it get out of hand even as the truck swerved, jogging to the right, then back again like a drunk stumbling up and down an elusive curb.

“That was fun!” Alex whooped when things settled, clapping him on the back and crooking her arm around Elizabeth’s neck as “ride it, cowboy,” she squealed while Wendell let out a hoarse laugh that made Elizabeth’s face break into an excited shimmer.

Eventually, they left the more egregious bumps and bruises of the road behind, and continued onward, Alex and Elizabeth giggling beside him as the truck’s bounce softened.

Glancing over, he saw their faces in a flashing slice of clarity, like looking through a microscope at a razor-thin definition of what was and what might be. But you had to be careful, he cautioned himself. Predicating your worldview on the assumptions underlying the images the world set before you could be one of the foremost paths to perdition.

Taking in the skin molded along the lines of his two consorts’ faces, he reflected that each texture was different. Alex’s was smooth, taut, milky, while Elizabeth’s was of

an almond pistachio variety that hung looser on her bones. How much he loved both those skins the way he loved the variances of the sky, sun and all such phenomena under their dominion, he could not calculate. But there was a number there somewhere he had no intent of pursuing.

Roaring on, a small white steeple gradually nosed up along the horizon. What in God's name? Wendell chuckled to himself. It looked like the world's most lost and lonely church, congregation slightly above the town population of twelve. But he could see the womenfolk had other ideas. They wanted to stop.

Well, so be it. What did he have to lose? Bouncing over the dirt road that branched off the main asphalt, Wendell wove his way through cloud of dust to a small gravel parking area where a number of cars were lined in front of the bare, clapboard building.

Exiting the truck, they made their way to the entryway where an usher in a smooth worsted suit stood with a welcoming smile and an order of service handout.

Traveling warily up the side aisle, the trio took seats in a pew near the front. "Don't want to miss the action," Elizabeth quipped, nestling in between them and holding both their hands.

By outward measure, they seemed like a modestly churched family brought up on the same hardwood pews they were sitting on. After a few minutes, a big, shiny bald-headed man, the obvious Pastor, issued forth.

Bidding his congregation a hail and hearty morning, the assemblage lobbed a hail and hearty morning back.

“How’re y’all doing?” the Pastor called out.

“Fine.” “Alright.” “Great.” “Good.” “Hangin’ in,” a number of responses sprung forth.

“Excellent. Glad to hear it this fine Sunday morning,” he said, holding back for a second before sallying forth as if on practiced cue, adding, “at least for those answering in the affirmative.”

A small round of laughter serving as due applause, “today,” he continued brightly, “we’re gonna try something a little different. Gonna play a little game.”

From behind the whitewood altar, he brought a bucket three-quarter filled with water.

“As you can see, here we have a bucket ‘a plain ole water, right out of the tap,” he said, hoisting it to collar level. “But if any of y’all are wondering, no, it’s not for baptism.”

Another round of appreciative tittering rippled through the congregation.

“Out here, one thing we all know about is gambling,” the Pastor prefaced, “‘cause a hundred miles south of here, there’s a whole city of sin that makes its livin’ on it. So, this Sunday, while we don’t actually join that crowd, we do want to take a page outta their playbook.

“So, on the back of each pew three-by-five cards and pencils have been placed. Take a look around now and find yours.

Holding up an oversized paper cutout of a foot, “I’m gonna set this foot on top of the water in this bucket,” he continued.

That accomplished, he lifted a plastic storage container from the altar. “In here,” he went on, “there are a whole slew of paper clips.

“Now, what we’re going to do is have each of you come up here, take a paper clip and place it on top of the foot.

“But before we start, I want you to write down on your three-by-five card how many paper clips you think it will take to sink the foot. And here’s the kicker. The one who comes close without going over will get a free dinner with all the trimmings at the best restaurant in town, Howie’s Hobo Diner.

“Now, we all know the weight of our sins Jesus came to carry and still does to this day is more than us mere mortals can imagine. But the point here is to help us put that in perspective by thinking about the kind of weight you and I carry on our mortal journey together. Believe me, I’ve tried this myself at home with my wife and kids, and I can tell you it’s a whole lot more than you think.

“So, start writin’ down your numbers and get prepared to come on up and cast your lot.

“Do you want to go up?” Alex whispered to Wendell, just loud enough for Elizabeth to hear. Wendell calmly nodded his head and Elizabeth followed suit.

Of course, he had reservations. Who wouldn’t? But then, as far as he knew, his luck was still with him. The wind gods had not yet sent notice of his subscription being cancelled. So, if the women wanted to stay, who was he to

argue? It might be just good enough a proposition to put an innocent little wager on.

Naked Grin



You rest upon the cool depravity of disheveled sheets, wrists still bound with soft, nonabrasive cord to the thin, hospital-style bedposts.

“Please, cut me loose, Master,” you spent voice drifts. “Let me sleep.”

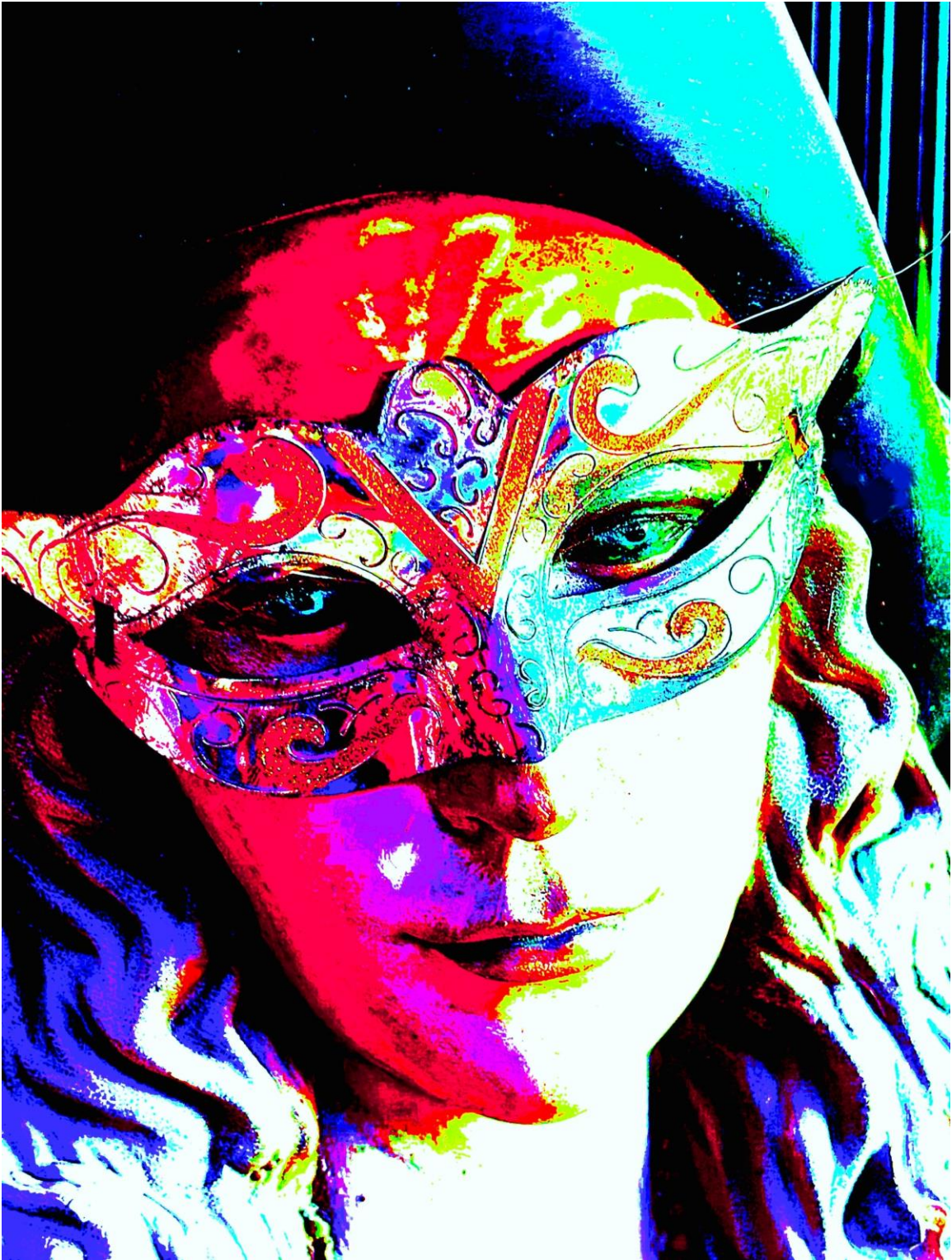
You are only too aware that, with the morning sun, desire’s heat will rise again and the Venetian blinds will paint their knife blade affirmation across your thighs. Freed, you will turn to me then, short, dusky hair entangled in insidious provocation.

And I will smack you hard across the ass the way I did earlier as a reward for your impetuosity, then quickened by reckless, unspoken need, fuck you to a savage exultation. After which, the vagrancy of the situation will leave your body laying indelicately twisted on the bed while I go and take up watch on our balcony’s single sagging rocker.

There, I will spy upon the ocean waves across the boardwalk as they repetitively strike the sand, until becoming aware that you are stalking barefoot from behind over the sandy, flat-wood floor, preparing to spring forward at any moment and wrap your arms around my neck with treacherous lips somehow always poised at the deadliest crosshairs of human sensation.

But, “halt,” I will command, “stay where you are, my sweet, evangelist slut. Hold perfectly still with your wrists crossed behind your back as you have been trained and wait until my tongue has had a chance to caress your slippery, naked grin.”

Brothel Art



In a dry desert hamlet called Crystal Springs, there is a local attraction called the Museum of Brothel Art. In that museum, a glass case stands next to an actual runway once used to showcase brothel girls for selection.

In that enclosure, there is a skeleton with eyeless sockets and a wide, lurid grin that tries to make me when I go up to get a closer look; as the exact fool I am for showing such morbid interest.

So, I move on to look over the walls covered from floor to ceiling with newspaper clippings about the cases, trials and judges surrounding the local brothels for the past fifty years. I forget about the skeleton for the moment because my concentration is taken up by an article detailing the rise and fall of a former prostitute now claiming to have been paid on numerous occasions for service rendered to defrocked televangelist Jimmy Swaggart. The story ends with an attractive brunette (pictured) leaving the life to earn her GED.

But that was over thirty years ago, and I wonder whatever became of her. Whether she found someone to marry, had children, or whether she went back to the life for a while, because there were no better offers on the table. Even with a GED, that and an anachronistic subway token will only take you so far.

Aware of my avoidance, the skeleton seems to reach out for me. But I wasn't born yesterday. So I saunter over to an oaken bar at the far end of the room where two aged desert-dwellers huddle over a newspaper, smoking

cigarettes. Both are bearded, but one is thin, flushed of substance, while the other is porcine, wetter.

I ask the wetter, “what’s that skeleton over there?”

Not like the question hasn’t been asked before, he raises his head, runs a stubby hand through his beard and smiles as if he were about to shoot something he didn’t much like.

“Well, there’s a story ‘bout that thing. That there used to be a whore who worked in the Lockspur house. Notice how she ain’t got no hands?”

No, I hadn’t exactly noticed, but looking back, even from across the room, I can see that he’s right. The skeleton has no hands. The lower arm bone just ends with nothing attached where the wrist, palm and digits extending from it should be. I turn back, suddenly swept into the story, and hearing the wetter’s ensuing words, living in the telling of it, like I was right there, at the Lockspur house almost a century ago.

I watch two different men now, one tall, wiry, well-dressed, with a pointed goatee, the other shorter, stumpier, more plainly outfitted, dragging a woman along in a worn white shift, hair running like sallow colored rain over the high-boned crevice of her cheeks. They are dragging her by the arm down a dim hallway, past a row of silent bedroom doors.

She is tall, dirt-blond. Her face is contorted, explosive, and she is yelling, “No, no, I didn’t. It wasn’t me, you lily bastards. I didn’t take it. Never! Never!

“Shut yer yap, missy,” the tall goateed one hisses, full of odious menace, dirty whiskers close enough to graze the side of her face. “What you done is steal from me, and that goes against the very grain of human decency.”

He shoves his hand heavily into the small of her back, making her wince with pain and cry out. “An what’s worse,” he continues, “we been through this all before. Now, damned if you don’t go right on and do it again.”

She twists in his hold, her free arm flailing out, but the stumpy man’s hand shoots out to grasp her forearm and twist it behind her back, as the seam of her shift separates, leaving a frayed opening beneath the armpit.

She wriggles with a futile urgency, a sheen of sweat blossoming from the pores of her flesh, casting a sweet, acrid scent which, in any other time and place, might have been marked as the base root of desire.

But these men, they are too far inured to her sex to take that bait. Truth to tell, they are only repelled by her as they continue dragging her back to the kitchen while she alternately shrieks, entreats, cajoles, threatens and finally begs before being weakened enough to let them to pull her forward and bend her over the broad food preparation table.

Just for the hell of it, the stumpy one swats her buttocks with the flat of his hand, causing her to think that maybe the dispensation of their justice will be to merely rape her, using the way she is used to being used.

That softening delusion washes over her, even as the tall one with the goatee pulls her arms forward, stretching them out over the table, holding them firmly against the

table's scarred wood. She will not die. They will not kill her. They will be content with merely forcing their foul organs into her, maybe beating her along the way and pushing her to the floor when they are done to kick her, spit on her, the way they did the time before. And with that, they will be satisfied by giving her to understand that she is a whore and nothing more, and for her kind, stealing is as stealing does. But she has her uses, so they will let her live to feed them all another day.

It is not until she twists her head up from where it lays sideways that the full extent of what lies in store forces her mouth open, but nothing comes out. Not a word, a sound, anything. The goateed one is removing a meat cleaver from its woodblock stand while the stumpy one holds her forearm down in place against the table's surface.

Without preamble, the goateed one raises the cleaver above his head and brings it down in one vicious arcing motion. The strike is clean and accurate, detaching her hand from her arm as cleanly as the head of a slaughtered chicken is separated from its body.

Time stands in perfect suspension as blood pumps feverishly from the severed arteries. A tidal scream overflows from the cavity of her open mouth, even as the stumpy one moves to secure the other arm and hold it in the same position while the goateed one's cleaver descends to deliver the second blow.

In another moment, both her hands lie severed, blood gushing from the second amputation as militantly as it did

the first, and her screams are swallowed into the night like a train fading into an infinite distance.

Her face shrivels like sunken cellophane because she is well on her way to becoming the skeleton that will end up in the display case decade upon decade after her time. But for now, her eyes bobble like wet marbles, her lips slackening with inanimate horror.

“You’ll steal n’a more missy,” the goateed one spits out, staring impassively at the blood still pumping from the motionless arm stumps in rhythmic spurts and running off the table onto the floor as stringy tendrils wave anomalously in the crimson flow.

The stumpy one moves around the table to join the goateed one in watching her consciousness recede in direct proportion to the loss of blood.

Near the end, she issues small, childish whimpers from a face twisted upward in a curious smile before she slides inexorably down from the table’s sullen mess without protest.

Oh, how easily she crumples to the floor, handleless arms dangling in glazed distraction. Which is how her killers leave her, half-sitting, half-lying against one of the table legs, staring at nothing and everything all at once while the parts of her left behind remain up there on the table, out of reach.

Her shift inundated with blood, she does not move or speak or breathe because she has become an abstraction, a dumb and cruel mockery of herself.

After a time, the two men pick her up and seal her in behind a brothel wall downstairs in the cellar where she will rest and rot for a few dozen years, only to be found and put on display here in the Museum of Brothel Art, Crystal Springs, Nevada, population 4,389, and counting.

But you know, the actual horror of it all isn't so much the abject brutality as the plain fact that you, me, anyone, can disappear into this desert wasteland just like that. Baker, beggar, alderman, thief, that dry, sumptuous lady of colors can kiss your feet with her tongue of sand at one moment, then pull your eyelids apart the next and sew them open to blind you with the searing pain of loneliness that lies within.

But that being said, I have told you all of what the porky barman who now turns back to his newspaper has told me. And I don't know whether it's true or not, but strongly suspect that it is, because it just tastes like hard and desolate desert irony, where mercy is as scarce as water and death just seems to flow from one narrow oasis of space and time to another.

Back in my car and on my way out, I almost hit a hare on the stick straight ribbon of road, which serves as the only exit. I stare straight ahead, pressing the brake pedal abruptly to the floorboard and making the car screech to a skidding halt.

But my intrusion does not cause the hare to move. He merely stares at me without fear or any understanding that death could so easily have reached out to claim him. So, I

wait until, in his own good time, he leaps with a great thrust of his haunches into the desert proper and is gone.

At which point, I pull to the side of the road.

Get out. Sit on the hood of the car.

And though I have no idea what I am doing, I start to pray. Pray not to escape the irreconcilable nature of this or any other existence, but merely to be delivered from whatever is left for scavengers like me to feed upon.

Moonstruck Jesus



Brooklyn night. Sweat. Summer stink. Everything surreal, like an animatronic stage set. A custom 57 Chevy, wheels screeching on the asphalt, holding the road in an uncertain grip, careens through empty back streets. Willie Burke raises a fifth of Johnnie Walk Red to his lips and throws his head back to take a long draught. Riding shotgun, Jonathan Ryder grabs the bottle from Willie and injects the fiery substance into his own body like a shot of NOS until he chokes and the whiskey runs in two small rivulets down his chin.

Both manchildren are cut, but Willie is the more muscular and darkly complected of the two, while Jonathan is wiry and pale, bordering on anemic by comparison. When it comes to matters intellectual, his is of the deeper, more analytical of mind. Sometimes too much so. He questions constantly, but the answers are elusive. Willie, on the other hand, is not a fan of either questions or answers. He just reaches out and takes what he needs.

Together, they are delirious with the rabid intensity that lifts them up to their best selves. The world is theirs for the taking. No stop signs, detours, responsibility, just the jagged, hard music from oversped speakers driving them headlong into the magical mystery tour of youthful invincibility.

Taking a narrow turn that almost flips the car on its back like a wounded seal, Willie and Jonathan both scream in murderous terror and exultation before Willie regains control and slams the pedal to the floor to pick up for the time they've lost in the mercurial spin.

Their bottle nearly finished, they slow to a stop in a vacant lot on the East River, where the Manhattan Bridge looms overhead, sparkling brightly in the translucent closeness of the city on the other side. Getting out of the car, they approach the river's edge without a word, like two lone birds separated from the flock and left to gather on their own until that mystical moment when they rise together in flight is divined.

Staring out over the charred remains of an abandoned pier, as if in a hypnotic trance, Willie takes a step forward and begins to scramble over what is left. He slinks along a thin, blackened plank, making his way to the nearest piling where he stands uncertainly, arms outstretched in some mad supplication. Under the shimmering sliver of moon, a wild, subterranean competition that has always underscored their friendship springs to the fore.

It takes the form of a game, one they both enjoy playing on the occasional excursion into the darker nature of their wayward breed. The challenge is to best each other in any anarchistic contest that presents itself, and in so doing, sanctify their manhood with the running of yet another self-imposed gauntlet.

Jonathan has no choice but to follow Willie's lead as he advances to the piling upon which Willie is cryptically rooted. The footing becomes increasingly treacherous. Apprehension and foreboding swirl like warning eddies of the river below through his brain and body. But it doesn't matter. The deal is you keep going, further and further out on the rickety structure, like your life depended on it.

Because, for Willie Burke and Jonathan Ryder, right then, right there, it does.

By all rights, that is when it should have ended. But there is no good end to this one. There are only planks left dangling too far out over the water to be trusted. True to their rightful bond, Willie calls out, “I’m gonna keep going. I can jump these things.”

Before Jonathan can reply, Willie leaps like an acrobat suspended between will and circumstance. Hanging precariously in mid-air, Jonathan is sure he will land on his feet exactly where he needs to plant them. But in the next shaving of an instant, he isn’t sure at all, leaving him at the edge of an invisible cataclysm beyond mitigation or control.

Then, the great unexplainable happens. He waverers, hits the piling with one foot and caroms back down the plank he used to get out there.

Safely on shore, Jonathan shoves his face up against Willie’s with a murderous intensity, like he is going to punch it blue and purple.

“Come on, tough guy,” Willie jibes. “Go ahead, hit me. Here, right in the face. Do it,” he growls with the desperate savagery of a wounded dog. The sound of his voice plays like a cheap old transistor radio as he mechanically raises his fists in front of his body, but leaving his head perniciously unguarded.

“My grandmother fights better than you,” Willie taunts. Jonathan’s hands ball up into tight, white-knuckle fists as the bile in his stomach roils like a storm-tossed sea.

Suddenly, one of his sure, rock-like punches explodes into the socket of Willie's left eye, turning him almost completely around before he staggers backward and goes down. Peering up at Jonathan through stained illusions of all they have been through, Willie wobbles like a roller coaster gone out of control as he tries to regain his footing.

He hates him more than anything he has ever hated before.

Surely, someone else is speaking when Jonathan hears himself hiss, "fuck you," as his bulging eyes roll up in maddened confusion. On his feet again, he lashes out, throwing punches wildly to hurt, punish, destroy. One or two connect before they both fall to the ground and Jonathan is on top of Willie, fist slamming into his cheekbone and cutting his knuckles badly splashing a freshet of blood that runs down onto Willie's face with such impunity it makes him want to do it again and again until he no longer has the strength or need to do it anymore.

From above, all Jonathan can see is Willie Burke's soiled, blood-stained face under him laughing, laughing, eyes gleaming like some moonstruck Jesus in a movie made too long ago to be real. He screams his friend's name to the high heavens and grasps at his wet, wrinkled shirt to pull him up.

Oh, God, why did you let me keep hurting you? he cries wordlessly. So that neither of us would know for sure in all the years to come who was stronger, braver, better? So that it could become a hidden measure of yourself self,

your own secret sacrifice to the time we were so close it sometimes made us want to kill each other?

Because to guard that distance with our lives is the only means of survival in that state of love and devotion?

Or perhaps it is an inexorable reality that memories fade until there are just a few essential images left hung on the wall of the mind's eye. Meanwhile, hours and days and years pass as Willie and Jonathan each pursue a separate destiny. Yet that night remains indelibly etched upon the fragile gray tissue behind both pairs of clear, resolute eyes locked safely together in the narrow salvation of everyday life.

Borderline Patrol



The eyes, the eyes. Like shiny gray marbles, they are immutable, inscrutable gems that dilate or contract with any change in light. He stands stock still in the hazy coolness of a rising autumn sun, carefully sorting and categorizing every infinitesimal movement or sound that greets his ears.

It's all part of the mission, the borderline patrol which runs along a line where low grass meets high. He was created for this purpose, just like some are created to be pilots, artists, or baseball players. He is an assassin. It is his identity, his life, and there is nothing any treatment to realign his psychic architecture can ever change. It is as much of him as the air he breathes, the water he drinks and the food he eats.

He is beyond scruples when it comes to what he does. He cares nothing about those upon whom he preys. Has no sentimental attachment to things of meaning and importance to the rest of us. He keeps no pictures of family, friends, or scenic vacation views. Garnishes his wallet with no photographs of brothers, sisters, mom and dad, nieces or nephews. He carries no visual evidence of where he's been or what he's done there.

He is a seasoned professional with all that implies. What the Marines would call one of the few good men, one of the best they have to offer. An excellent physical specimen with a strong muscular form and a cold, calculating brain locked in synch beneath a calm, unprepossessing exterior.

He is the consummate package, an exemplar of what can be achieved when trained to the most assiduous of standards. Like any experienced trooper, he has picked up his fair share of wounds along the way. Some might say he is lucky to still be alive, but he has always had the sense that that is what you make of it by how attuned you are to the mission at hand, how good you are and how much you commit to its success.

Waiting with a patience born of discipline and experience, his eyes, those deep, immutable, inscrutable gems fluctuate with every sound and movement, watching with the concentration of a child mesmerized by a circus parade. A sibilant breeze ruffles a long ridge of grass as he begins a slow route along that frontal perimeter, scanning the underbrush, stopping periodically, surveilling the terrain, then proceeding forward when he is satisfied nothing has escaped his notice.

Easing down to the bottom of the borderline, his body and mind are fused into one as he absorbs impressions, analyzes and processes that intelligence and translates it into practicable action.

He advances, his stride quickly taking on a more aggressive mien as the full range of his senses indicate he is coming close to an unverified target. Head rotating on a full X, Y, Z axis, he picks up the tempo without causing leaves or twigs to crackle, or brush to swish audibly against his lean, agile frame.

As always, he maintains complete control over every motion and focuses every movement, every fiber of his

being on the unsheathing of his weapons to strike, to rend, to execute with prejudice. He is the quintessential operative, the state-of-the art in sure and unsparing destruction.

Sensing a paring of proximity to the target, like the approach of evening with its dimming light and reduction of daytime activity, he gathers himself in final preparation for the inevitability of what is to come.

What has made him what he is? What drives him to do what he does? Does he ever allow himself to think about it? Does he have that capability? Or is he that hard, that steely-tempered, that he can best survive without it? Does it occur to him to question anything about himself, or the world he inhabits? Or is it just a foregone conclusion that it is simply is what it is?

Of course, these are not his, but my own questions, and a thousand more, like where he was born, what his parents were like, the kind of childhood he had, all the queries meant to get to the heart of pivotal matters, but never do. Thus, his past, present and future remain shrouded in impenetrable secrecy, for he is the least likely of his kind to divulge information of that nature.

If I let my thoughts stray, I might envision him in early childhood tearing the wings off of flies. But then again, I don't honestly think he has ever been consumed with that kind of sadism.

Given his highly disciplined nature, it's far more likely he grew up in a stable middle-class environment, where it wasn't so much a killer's vengeance that incited

him to murderous acts, but a disembodiment of empathy shielding him from life's inexorable breakage and dissolution.

These ruminations unravel, though, as I visualize him continuing on the borderline patrol, oblivious to everything but the target somewhere close at hand in the high grass. As strange as it seems, I find myself envying him. His life is simple and his needs, if not few, are at least consistent. Where mine, on the other hand, are anything but. I am not held to one overriding impulse, one unilateral claim on my attention.

My world is composed of a finer fabric because I have need of affection, kinship with others, especially those special to me, or if not special, at least a source of occasional solace and identification.

How often I wish it were not so, that I had the strength and surety to rise above the brutal commonness of modern pleasantries and live beyond our age's obsessive mandate for comfort and security.

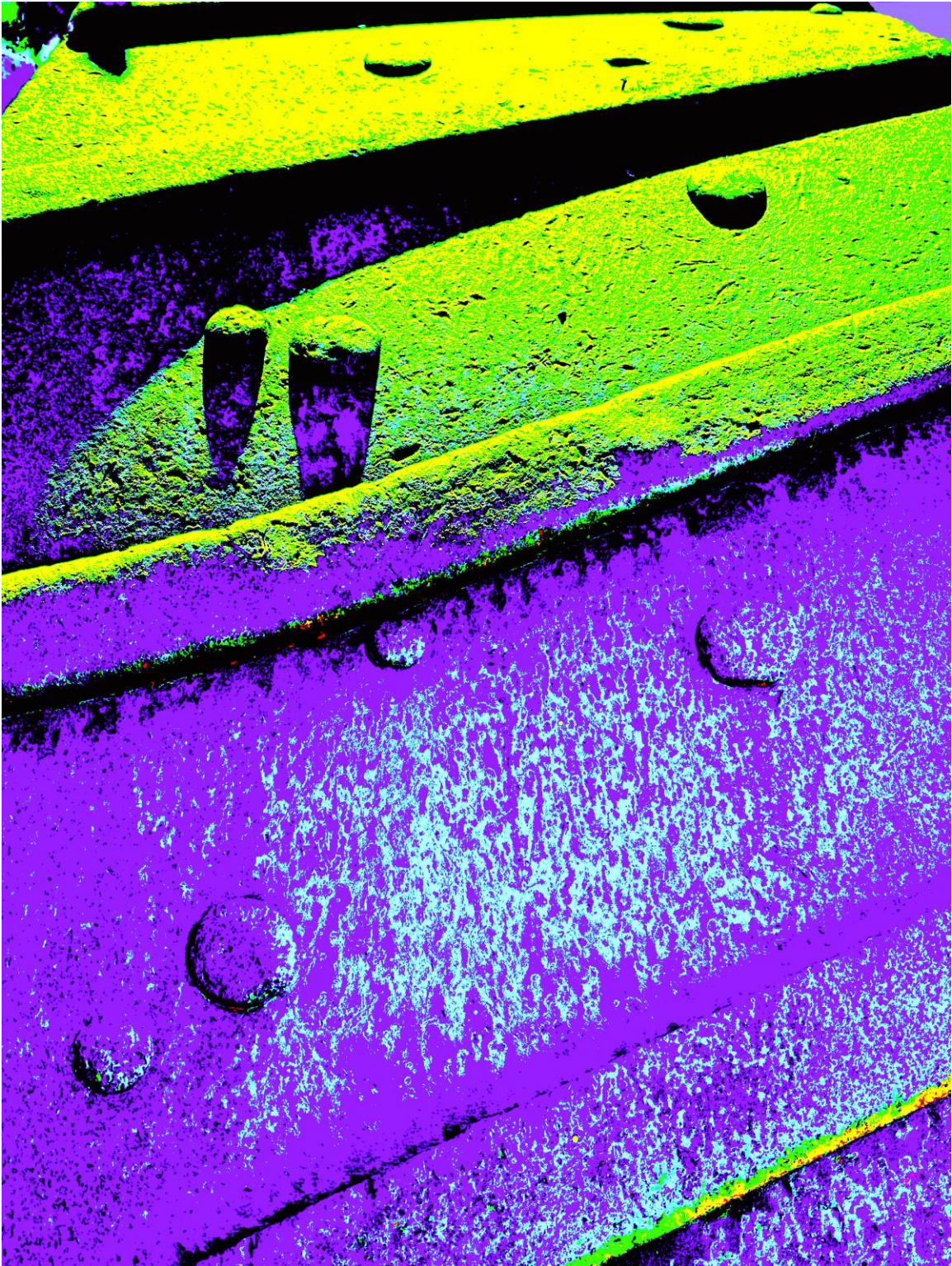
I wonder what it would be like to possess a contract warrior's unleashed efficacy rather than the latest designer wardrobe. To rise to a lethality that leaves nothing on the table rather than a summary elevation in corporate position and status. To transcend the half-truths, pretensions, cyclical boredom and thoughtless pursuit of novelty in which the whole of existence feels like it's just one long TV advertisement promising what can only be successfully promised to the covetous and soft-minded.

Lying in my bed as night settles in, I stare at the ceiling fan undulating in whimsical fancy, wondering what it would be like to go on his borderline patrol, day after day, hardened and tempered to something of such steely impenetrability as he is made. And, oh, yes, did he ever locate and identify today's target? Did he manage to take its life like his due harvest, with absolutely no regret, no remorse?

Feeling him jump from the floor onto the foot of my bed, I watch him stretch, yawn and make his way up toward my head, leading with those eyes, those eyes, glittering like the deep, gray-marbled, immutable, inscrutable gems they are, heralds of victory, pure and complete.

Curling up on my chest, legs tucked in, eyes narrowing until they are little more than glowing slits in the bluish fur covering his implacable feline form, I feel him purring against my ribcage. And I know beyond the shadow of any conceivable doubt, I love him. I truly do, beyond all measure. Yet I say nothing. Ask no questions. For even if I did, I am fully aware he would not care to answer.

Lamppost Emancipation



In winter, wanderers always took refuge in doorways, sometimes packed in like sardines in open tins. They weren't exactly people. More like an amalgamation of hands, feet, eyes, noses and terminally brittle hair.

Jonny Lynn knew all about it, the way he knew about and could quote certain phrases in the Bible, looking down and seeing the laid out bodies of those he'd been drinking with the night before. When he was desperate, he would stick his hand down inside their pants pockets and pick them clean with his canny scavenger claw.

He heard noises in his head that came more frequently now, but for the moment, they were quiet, like a concert hall emptied of people, performers and instruments, leaving just the slight crackle of his hands extracting a crumpled bill or two.

Stumbling away after he'd gotten his take, he almost fell against a crumbling wall, but to his surprise, it held him up as he laid his cheek against it, the wavy vision of a liquor store across the street swimming in his rheumy eyes. He remembered a book he'd read once. It was about fish swimming upstream against all odds toward their homing waters, and how most of them didn't make it. What did it matter? he chuckled brightly to no one in particular. Whether they made it or not, there were no heroes among the fish.

And you, you were no fish, Jonny reminded himself. You were a Marine. You still are a Marine. Once a Marine, always a Marine. Staggering to the end of the alleyway, he

lurched forward, bent over and vomited a thin stream of reddish bile that ran slowly down the concrete.

Semper Fi, asshole, he dimly recalled someone grunting as they kicked him in the stomach. From there, he'd retreated into the hallucination of swinging, swinging, swinging fists, swinging like the child he was on a swing again, each swing reaching further upward into the sky and arcing toward a heaven so despairingly out of reach.

Swing. My name is Jonny Lynn.

Swing. Serial number zero, nine, five ...

Swing. I only regret that I have but one life ...

Swing. I only regret ...

Swing ... another fat one landing, paralyzing his face with a steely sheet of pain.

Swing. Another and another, sending him back to a time alone in a room in a vacation house his family had rented where he'd spent the afternoon crushing over a hundred flies with swat after swat of a plastic flyswatter against the room's killing field of three wide windowpanes.

Now, it was down to the kicks. Kick. Kick. Another smashing against his nose and face and collarbone, beating him to an immobile heap.

Swing. A thin stream of sugary, familiar warmth splashed into his mouth, holding him in a few remaining moments of consciousness before, in the last few seconds, he felt himself being pissed on because he had come to know urine when he felt its acid warmth, smelled the acrid stench of it slithering down his neck and into the fetid flannel of his shirt like a big, fat slobbery kiss.

For a slippery, sliding moment, there was nothing but the illusion of the playground where the swing was and the pure, fine features of his mother's patrician face he had not seen for over thirty years.

"Ahhhhh," he heard someone who sounded an awful lot like himself cry out, thinking she was still there watching from beyond the grave, watching him once again grow up to be the Marine he had been trained to be, being yelled at by another Marine a few steps above his rank and paygrade. And him yelling back because he couldn't understand the words that the other Marine was saying.

"My orders. What are my orders?" Jonny Lynn howled into his own subconscious, listening without reason, hope against hope, for what he could not be sure.

"Christ," the reality crushed in on him, I have no orders. Only the murderous silence and gossamer transparency that any man could tear asunder.

Tears spilled over the dam of encrusted eyelids, but Jonny Lynn only felt like a fly, pinned against the windowpane. Though still, the world would not give him up.

A siren in the distance called out as he slowly sank into "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," humming under his breath, "Jesus loves me, yes, I know, because the Bible tells me so." Hell, yeah, Jesus was a fisherman who cast his net for me, knowing full well there are no goddamn heroes among us fish.

So, tell me, Jesus, Jonny taunts, are you gonna cut my new orders now? "Are you?" he audibly twitched. He

wanted to merge with the concrete, but he was held up by the memory of his childhood floor, where once upon a time, he'd lined a grand parade of toy cars along the embroidered edges of his parents' dark Oriental rug. Listening to the burbling of their voices in the background, he thought they sounded like they were underwater, swimming in his head and ears smooth and soothing as melted butter.

Jonny lurched forward. "I can't see. I can't see," he wailed, only to hear The Three Stooges's Moe snap back, "that's 'cause you got yer eyes closed." But it's true, it's true. I once sat on a wall. Now I've had a great fall, and nobody can put me back together again.

Maybe that was the surrender they had been talking about in the last AA meeting he'd wandered into a year or so ago. The one where he spent most of his time laughing to himself, thinking in another place, another time, it would not have been words, but bullets that did the talking, exploding from the business end of his M-16 like shooting pidgins off the fourth-story ledge of his old loft whenever he opened the window.

Well, since then, he'd gotten all the fucking pidgins he could handle. Like the shadowy figure in Saigon, riding a bicycle by the bar where he was drowning his profound regrets when a figure in native garb lifted its arm in a passing wave. But Jonny knew it was wrong. Nobody just waved hello out of the blue there like they were in some small shit town in Idaho.

And yes, he won that round. The upraised arm suddenly pitched something from the hand out through the wilting heat. Something dark, rounded, which landed in an earnest volcano so close to his feet it was a wonder his legs weren't blown off.

"Hey, Joe, wanna date?" That's what he heard being pitched backward, the only stupid fucking thing that came to him, the last measure of consciousness that registered before the comic book blast sending him up, up and away. To de moon, Alice. To de moon.

But he was one of the lucky ones who did come back down, at least physically whole. Wonderful how slow the thought dawned on him that if he could choose anything in the world in that moment it would be some sweet twist of a thing with lips of gold to wrap around his dick. But then, that vision danced right on out of his head in sputtering breathlessness.

"Time for you medication, Mister Lynn," he heard from a distance. Christ, he was still there. Legs. Check. Arms. Check. Face. A few bandages and patch over his eye, but shit, yeah, check. So, that was the story. His story. The old man's war story he had yet to tell a single soul.

Oh, holy Christ, how he hated those fucking war stories some assholes belched out.

If they didn't know, everybody dies. He'd found that out right away on his second patrol after a wayward round carved out a fist-size chunk of Sanchez's back, and he fired uselessly back somewhere in that general direction.

Crawling forward, he inched his way to what he knew he would find. Sanchez already gone, but eyes still sparkling clear as starlight, reddish saliva trickling out the side of his mouth.

Jonny knew the way he knew certain phrases of the Bible that Sanchez was not yet gone, but would never make it. So Jonny rose, reaching out to pick up Sanchez's gun and drive its butt down onto his head with bone-shattering force. Then he did the same, more times than he had to, more times than it took.

Up and down, up and down, do the hokey pokey all around, Jonny sang out loud to drown the deafening misery devouring him whole, working that gun until blood and grayish matter spewed openly over the ground. By that time, he no longer saw the thing he was grinding into broken pulp. Instead, his mind filled with images of cheerleaders twirling down some unnamed Main Street in a wildly surrealistic Thanksgiving Day Parade. God, he so loved their clean, sparkly sex and downy, puerile legs thrusting up and out and down in pornographic lockstep.

And there, he thought, he could see the nameless blonde he'd taken back to his car in the middle of a high school dance to ravage her puerile, Ohio-scented body.

Because as he wanted everyone in that whole fucking school to know, he wasn't no fucking queer. But he didn't know if that was true anymore, even feeling himself cum in the girl's mouth, filling it just as full and good as anyone. And her, taking it all like a real princess, not gagging or retching, but swallowing politely like it was an ice cream

sundae. Never complaining, just doing it with an endearing delicacy that made him cry so deeply and silently, it seemed like being torn apart limb by limb.

Christ, I wish she had become my wife, Jonny tortured himself. He'd never had a wife. Or children. Or owned a house.

He had spent his time on the sidelines, watching those that did. Walking along the hometown streets, sitting in the hometown restaurants. He had hated them all, the way they talked, joked, laughed, like they were all in some high school club with all their secret little handshakes and secret means of holding him at arm's length.

And in that lay the greatest obscenities of them all, the patting of a hand, draping of an arm around a shoulder, kissing of a cheek. But now, here he was, beat to shit in the anonymous alleyway a hundred years later, the unspeakable thing with Sanchez, his mortal enemy, still riding shotgun in his head.

Jonny's shoe hit a crack in the sidewalk, making him stagger forward and almost fall before managing to throw his arms around a lamppost to hold himself up.

Christ, I wish that little twist had become my wife, the thought returned, feeling her lips reaching down from on high to kiss the dry, frozen landscape of his face.

Christ, I wish I had her as my wife. To take me. To want me. To soothe me the way Mary Magdalene did Jesus, tucking him into his tomb for safekeeping without realizing there was nothing safe, nothing pure enough on this earth for any tomb to protect him from.

But like me, Jonny's mind rambled, he was just another fish and fish can't be held liable for anything. No, they just swim and swim and swim around in circles until they don't.

Like Jonny Lynn, as the night sucked the final shivers of life right out of him an hour or so before a passing patrol car found him holding onto his own private lamppost emancipation, arms frozen so tightly around it they had to break both of them just to get him down.

Sense of Urgency



Sitting on a dock at the edge of a small North Carolina fishing village, Adam Gentile senses her approach before seeing her.

When she comes more fully into view, it is the liquid candor with which she walks, the dance-like rhythm in it that gets him first. Then, it's the callous eyes aiming like a loaded gun directly at him that seal the deal.

With utter assurance, she takes his hand, holds it in hers, the pressure of her roughened skin saying everything that needs to be said. In silence, she draws him away, leads him to her vintage, weather-beaten Volkswagen and drives him to a deserted beach not too far away, but far enough to escape the village's houses, stores, boats, all the agencies of its remote, proscriptive life.

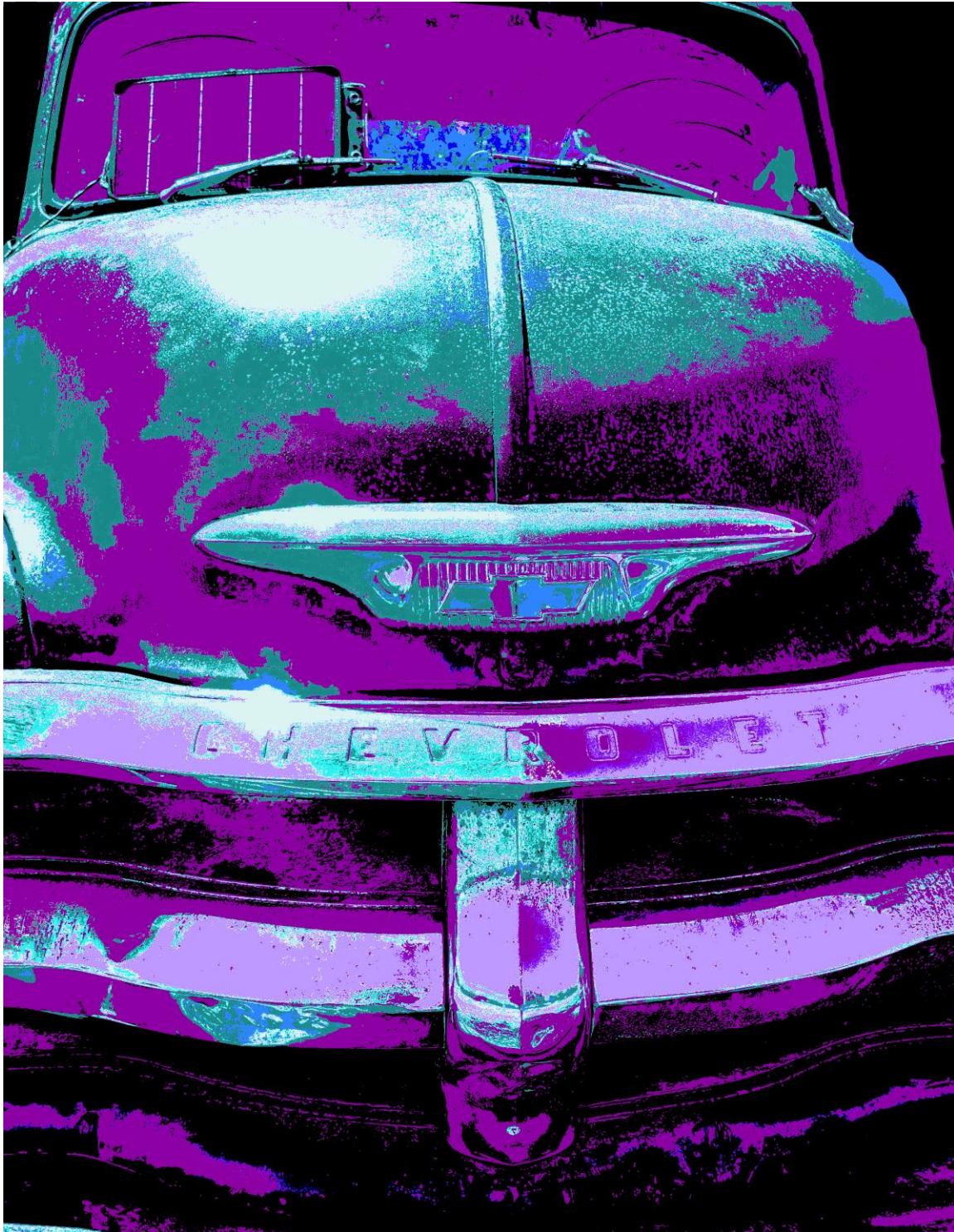
It is there she takes him down without hesitation or preamble in the dark-grained sand, where her body writhes against his, hungrily, greedily in its quest for dissolute sensation, taking him up into her and driving him to meet and match her sybarite intensity. Twisting in molten contortions on the wide open beach, they thrash in counterpoint to the waves crashing against the shore only a few feet away until, more exquisitely alone than Adam has ever been, he merges with her in a mystic union beyond all cause or caring.

But later, much later, long after he has assumed the mantle of a cultivated, well-heeled man, she sometimes makes her presence known to him with only the best of intention, to save the memory of their beautiful collusion

from sinking like a merciless sun beneath the horizon line of his mind's eye.

And there is always a terrible, blinding sense of urgency in that act, still untainted with falsehood or undue sentiment.

Shatterproof



In the far, far away ago, before the rule of the infamous Voodoo Video, the world was still lit just by candlelight and unblemished knights in shatterproof crystal armor who could ride anywhere they fucking wanted, free of charge and unchallenged. In warmer waters off the Coast, surfers' lithe forms cascaded down sparkling waterways of another day's indefinite vacation.

But by the side of small Southern rivers, wistful dreamers with old-skool fishing poles gazed around the bend for whatever might be on its way to the deliverance of visions grand, but undefined.

Those were the times when me and Sass and Lonnie Lee Blue rolled in vintage hot Hemi blown' heat down the sweet moonlit valley, heading for nowhere but to be doing whatever was fine and righteous enough for old school greasers like us. Because in that tasty warp, nothing was ever enough until you knew what it was and then had the nuts to make it wholly and unconditionally yours.

Looking down at my high-heeled sneakers, I knew I was way over-committed to the Uber lux of rockin' pneumonia and the boogie-woogie beat. For I was certain that nothing could subsume the existentially correct ethos of soft, rolled up jeans and tastiness of velvety-skinned girls who believed in innocuous, marginal virginity as the one, holy and apostolic theology.

So, come on, baby, I liked to exhort them in my head, don't just let it roll. Don't let the horde of unscheduled Zen practitioners shake your tree. Keep your own way of

talkin', your own way of walkin'. Don't let it be corrupted by some transitory fashion or other.

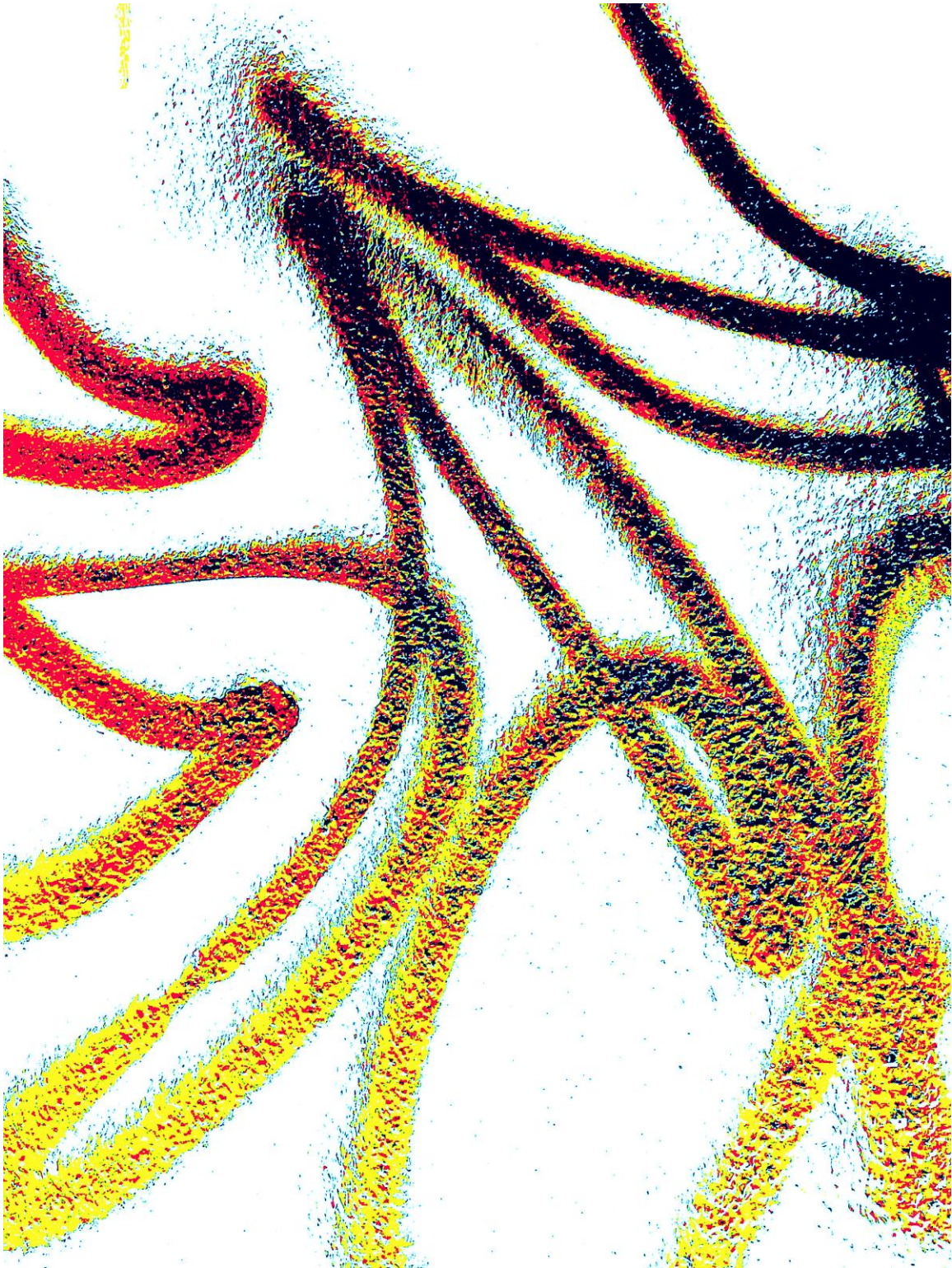
Late one night some blind-sided changes finally came home to roost when Lonnie Lee took on that high-rise supercharged Rat sitting in the opposite lane, jacked way up in the air like a Roman chariot with its fugly straight pipe fire. Calculatedly lounging in the catbird's shotgun seat, I saw, heard and felt our screamin' demon's NOx blood searing the walls of cylinder chambers when he dropped the clutch to torture the concrete with impassioned welts of sadomasochistic tread.

Then, it simply boiled down to finding that wide-open space in third and tearing down the asphalt beyond all semblance of measurable sanity. I was there, hearing, seeing, feeling a new generation coming on and eventually leaving these kinds of country roads abandoned to the daisies that, left untended, would climb their way up between the cracks in such hallowed ground.

But like I said, for us, that would be far in the distance, before our cherished knighthood could be had by anyone with enough coin. Before the infamous Video Voodoo made the world far more accessible than it was ever supposed to be. Before a time came when cartoon fulfillment would supplant reality with hopelessly pedestrian commercial comfort and convenience.

Meanwhile, my heartfelt eyes strained to catch a fading glimpse of an indelible past glittering in its immaculately clean, shatterproof surface.

Tombstones of Archangel



Cheers ripple out over the fall landscape of Archangel, New Hampshire. A football game is being played at the town high school.

Everyone can feel it. The cool autumn air. The sizeable crowd of children, teens, moms, dads. It's four dollars a head this year. They raised the price. They had to. Or make cuts in the program.

But that's only a matter for the living now. The ones here in the Archangel Church of Christ cemetery no longer have charge over such worldly affairs.

But even dead, they are not gone as a lot of people around these parts find it preferable to think. There's even a few who still take interest, as much or maybe even more so, than when they were there, above ground.

Tonight's game is a humdinger. Just now, a receiver at the edge of the far sideline has made a hail mary catch and there is a crazy energy surging through the stands as the cheerleading squad leaps into a pyramid formation with the town's smallest, prettiest, flaxen-haired siren perched on top like a bride and groom topper on a wickedly delicious wedding cake.

"Hey, Shirley Meiner," says Buford Price, unofficial overseer of the town's down under, "I hear you over there, cheering to yourself, like you were actually back there, living it all again. You were one of those cheerleaders, just like that little girl on top of the pyramid. And I was there, too, sixty-odd years ago."

Shirley chirps back, "yes, Buford, "you know I was that girl back in my own time. Pretty enough. More than. And the lightest of them all, so I got to be the star.

"Wanda, you were there. You saw," Buford says.

“Yes, Buford, I was. But you know how fat I was. Not to mention my goddamn acne. Didn’t have a boyfriend until college. Lord knows, I hated those Friday nights. Every week, Mother twisting the knife about my not being on the field with you, Shirley. As she used to say, ‘not everyone can be good at everything.’ Like she was talking about not everyone, meaning me, not being good at nuclear physics.”

“Yes, I know, dear,” Shirley chimes in. “But truth is, it was never your weight that was the problem. Or your acne. It was you, the way you walked around like you had a billboard on your head blinking on and off, on and off: I am fat. I have acne. Nobody likes me. Nobody wants me.”

Continuing unmercifully, “you know, I had a friend once,” Shirley says, “a fat girl like you whose face looked like it had been dug into with a backhoe. But she had more friends than God Himself and kept the boys coming like blue tick hounds on a T-bone steak.”

“Christ, Shirl,” Wanda retorts, your Pollyanna stories just make me tired, your sad, tired tales. Maybe you were just born that way, sad and tired.”

“Hey, ladies,” Buford interjects, “quit scratching at each other and just sniff this beautiful night air. It’s the best time of the year here. Fall. I still remember wanting to go back to school because I always felt there was so much history left to write there. Still pages and pages left, all just waiting for me to take pen to life’s paper and set it all down.”

“You always were a strange kind of dreamer, Buford,” Shirley remarks.

“Yes, Shirl, I suppose I was. But I’ve long since confessed that particular sin to the God of my limited understanding.”

“Did you receive forgiveness?” Wanda wafts out.

“Oh, yes. All my accounts on that score have been closed and paid for.”

“So, was it the dreaming that sent you to the bottle?” Shirley queries, “or was it the other way around?”

“Probably a bit of both, truth be told. Either way, my life never amounted to what it could have been. What I wanted it to be.”

“Well, high school was the high point for me, Mister Price,” Shirley says. “I might as well have died after graduation for all the good the rest of my life did me. Who knew I was going to make the biggest mistake of my life afterwards, marrying Harmon? Three kids, my last little girl dying, and Harmon running off, it broke me. Broke me, I tell ya.

“The worst of it was I never knew why. Why, after he left, I was left to spend the rest of my days trying to put food on the table and watching myself all the while turn the rusty color of fall leaves dropping to the ground.

“I tried not to let it cripple me. I even took a teenage friend of my boys up to my room to help me move some boxes. You know, that sad, awful saw. Taking him there to give him a glimpse of my legs going up the ladder to the attic. Not that I really wanted to, but I still had good enough legs to do it. Good, strong, sexy legs.

“That day, I showed him what strong, willing boys like him would eventually come to know in their own sweet ways. Holding onto his shoulder to steady myself, I

couldn't let that moment pass. So, I kissed him right there and then, full on the mouth. Surrendering everything I thought I believed in. Every sense of right and wrong I thought I ever had.

"And to all the goddamn hypocrites in every small wayside town like this there ever was or will be, I tell you true. I pulled that kid into bed with me listening to my two playing out there in the yard. Hearing my youngest shriek the way I forced myself not to, as I felt all that dewy wonderful youthfulness ram into me. Crazy, crazy, eager as a wild young animal can be. I wanted him and he wanted me and there was nothin' else for it.

"But thank God I was able to do then what I cannot do now, and never will. Spread my legs and heave and pant under him like a dog in its death throes."

"I would have traded places with you any day of the week, Shirl," Wanda snakes in.

"No, you wouldn't. But you go right ahead, honey, deny it if you want. But if there's one thing you would never have wanted is that boy turning his back afterwards so you couldn't see him covering himself. Or the terrible reflection of yourself in the fragmented uncertainty in his eyes.

"You're wrong, Shirl. I only wish I had the courage. You see, I envied you. Not just you, but the kind of girls boys went after because they wanted that body, that face, that silky flawless skin. And knew they had a chance of getting it.

"I hated them, Shirl. But I wanted them even more. Their stupid, dishonest willingness. Because that's

what it ultimately comes down to, doesn't it? How the greatest mistakes in life as we once knew it get made."

"My God, Wanda, how can you even talk like that?" Shirley Meiner explodes.

But Wanda is not fazed. "Yes, you're right. I chose to hide myself away, protect myself, to try to preserve what I had rather than turn it into anything more. I kept up with what was happening with you out there, getting dates, getting married, having and losing kids, finally Harmon running away like he did.

"Yes, I saw it all, Shirley. I saw the pain, the suffering, but living in my lonely wooden tower, I was spared all that. God, how did you ever do it when Anastasia committed suicide? How did it feel to find her unconscious on the bathroom floor, a bloodstained syringe littered under the toilet bowl? How did you manage to call 911 and sit there with her on the ride to the hospital without saying one blessed word? Because I know. I know that's exactly what you did."

"I know. I know," Shirley yells, "I just couldn't think of anything to say."

"You could have told her that at least."

"No, I couldn't. I thought she was going to live and there would be time enough for that to come."

"But it never did."

"No, Wanda, it didn't. In the end, they couldn't save her. I couldn't save her. No one could."

"But even before you got there, she was calling. Calling out for someone besides that no-account cowboy she up and married one day for no good goddamn reason."

“Jesus H. Christ, stop!” Buford Price bellows. “How many times do you two hens have to keep going over and over this same meaningless ground?”

Silence falls like a curtain for a long blessed minute.

“Hey, somebody’s coming,” Buford says.

“Yes, I see, Buford,” Wanda says, “down the alley on the side of the church. Who do you think he is?”

I answer, “don’t know, Wanda. Don’t remember seeing him before. In any case, he’s not stopping at any one stone. Not bending down to catch our names and dates. But passing slowly, like he’s looking for something more specific.”

“Maybe he’s coming out of the Friday night meeting you went to for years,” Wanda remarks. “The one that ended just about this time.”

“You could be right,” Buford lobs back. “But hey, look, he’s stopping.”

“Yes, I see him,” Shirley says. “He’s leaning down, looking straight at your stone, Wanda. Maybe it’s the one that got away and you didn’t know it.”

“Ha, ha, very funny, Shirl. Thank God it’s too late for anyone to have either of us now.”

“But what about Jackson? Wouldn’t you like to have him back?”

“Good God, no,” Wanda exhales. “One hot trot around the block was enough. It wasn’t love, or anything close. Just me suckin’, fuckin’ and strippin’ that poor bastard’s soul as clean as a desert carcass.”

“You missed your calling, Wanda. You could so easily have been a vampire.”

“Oh, shut up, Shirl. You could have been a human being.”

The air turns a nasty quiet.

“How about you, Buford? Nothing to say? You and your self-pity suddenly on hiatus? Be careful. Your stone is the one he’s looking at now.”

Slender moments pass before Buford takes up the mantle with, “listen, ladies. Another cheer.”

“Who’s winning?” Wanda asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Getting a little nippy out here,” Shirley follows on. “Look at our visitor pulling his jacket closer around himself.”

Wanda says, “he looks lost, doesn’t he?”

Buford answers, “he does, he does.”

“You know who he is?” Wanda chortles.

“Yes, I know him, sort of. He lives around here. Married, one daughter.”

Shirley chimes in, “I wonder what he’s looking at, Buford, what all he sees in us.”

“It’s hard to say,” Buford responds. “Maybe he’s wondering what it’s like for us now that our lives have run their course. When all our words have been said, our thoughts thought, and every sin, joy, success and failure consigned to history. When we are left to survive just as memories.

“That’s death, isn’t it?” Wanda pipes up, “at least it is to them.”

“They don’t know any better,” Shirley amplifies.

“No,” Wanda says, “they just have yet to learn the line in that old song, ‘everything is possible, but nothing is

real', is a dirty lie. Here, it's 'everything is real, but nothing is possible.'"

"Yep," Buford laughs, "bull's eye."

"Like when my mother died in a car wreck," she says, but my dad survived, and I hated them both for it."

"I know, Wanda. I know," Shirley issues an exasperated whine.

"God help me, I was glad," Wanda goes blindly on. "After all, she was the one who was so goddamn self-righteous about telling people they can't be good at everything. Well, seems you were right mom, you weren't all that good at staying alive, were you?"

"And you've carried that hatred beyond reproach ever since," Buford finishes.

"Well, you should talk, Buford Price. You have more baggage than a whole goddamned army."

"That may well be, Wanda. But what does it matter now? It's all idle chatter out here. We know the endings to all our stories. But tonight, we've been graced with a visitor whose story is still to be written. Let's give him some respect, shall we."

Rising as close to the surface of his grave as he can get, "hey, Mister," Buford calls out, "Mister Visitor."

Receiving no answer, "believe it or not, you can hear me if you try. Not my words, but their meaning, the essence of what I am trying to say."

"Go back to that meeting. The break is almost over. I know you haven't been coming long, but you're here now. Take advantage of it.

"Trust me. I've seen all that could be ahead of you. If you go back to that meeting, right here, right now, you will

one day have a daughter. I can see you watching her dance in a Little Mermaid costume. See your eyes gleam as she leaps and twirls like the whisper of dreams that will someday come to pass. The professional stage she will one day perform on, leaping and twirling through space and time like a magical whirlwind. Her wedding day moments before you walk her down the aisle, her looking up to you to be sure that what she is about to do is good and right.

“So, go, goddamn it. Go. Wanda, Shirley and me, we’ve had our times. James, William, Delilah over there next to us, they will tell you the same thing. Live the life you were brought to this earth to live. Or live forever to regret it.

Now get your ass back into that church hall. Go home and kiss your wife when you get there, and mean it. Make love to her like you’ve never made love before, and might not ever again.

“It’s the only way you’ll be at your daughter’s wedding when she is twenty-four. At her son’s graduation twenty years later.

“So, get out and go to the beach this weekend before it gets too cold. Dive in like hell before summer ends. Spend your days, don’t save them for another time. There is no other time. There are no other days. There is only now.

“So, walk your ass back into that room. Walk back into the life you have and the life to come. The faint cheering you hear in the background will fade, believe me. The players will always change, but the game will go on.”

“For you, for now, that is. Here, under these dark headstones, it’s just Shirley and Wanda and me, we’re just

here talking, that's all we have left to do. But none of it matters now."

Buford Price stops, short of breath as the visitor rises, seemingly on cue, as if he has heard him and is now going to finish the Friday night meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous at the Congregational Church in Archangel, New Hampshire.

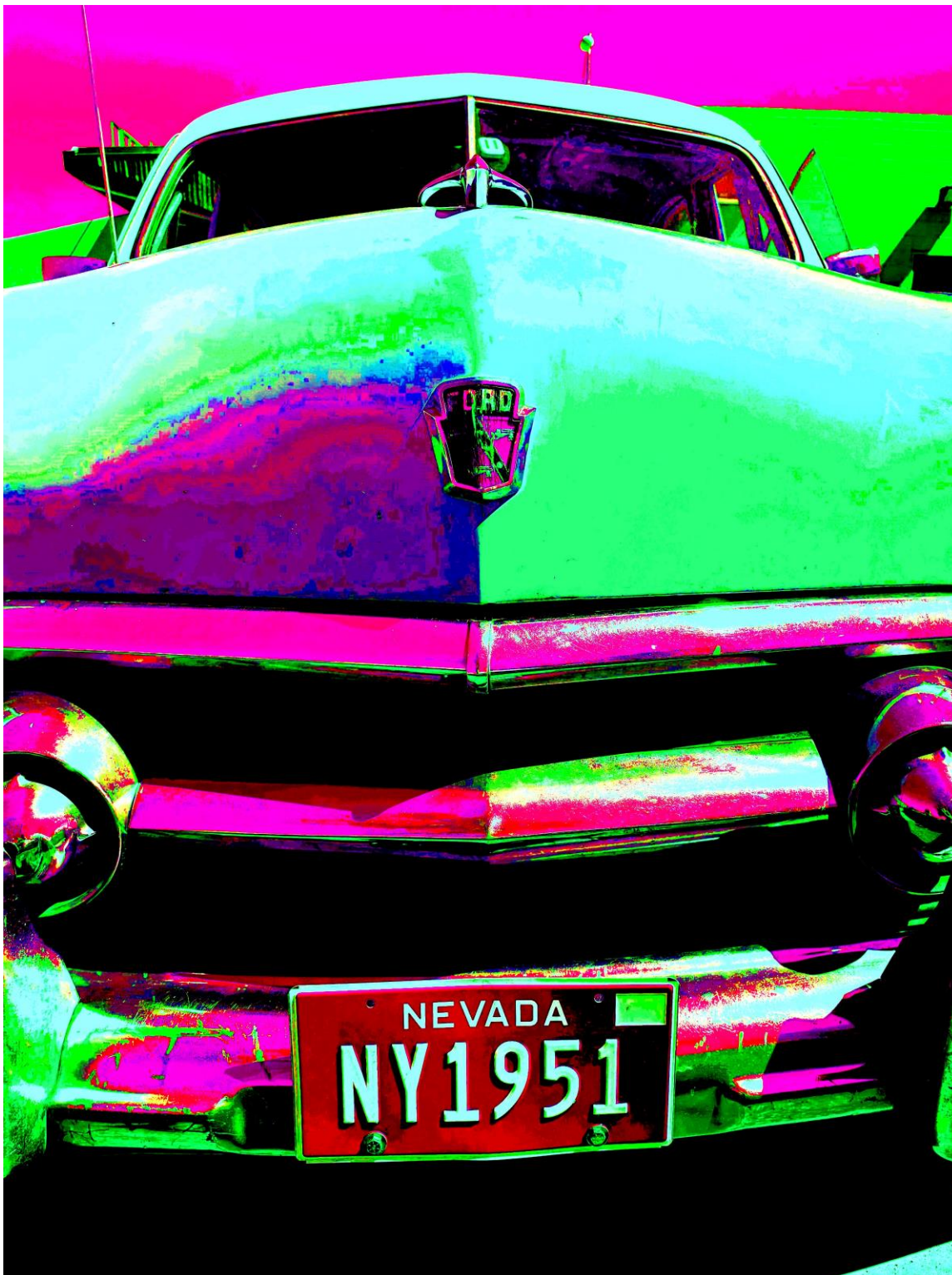
Oh God, what a miracle that is.

And yes, miracle heaped on miracle, our visitor goes home after the meeting, kisses his wife, makes love to her, which surprises them both.

In another ten years, he brings them both up to the football field where they play a little game of their own, his daughter and wife streaking across the field as he chases them laughing, calling out and finally falling to the ground in unfinished pursuit.

It is something that will stay with the visitor for as long as he may live. But unlike the old, familiar adage about not being able to take all that's of value in this world, he will, indeed, be able to take this with him to the next. It will be the only thing he will be allowed.

Getaway Car (lyric poem)



I gaze into you mirrored eyes
and see my reflection looking back
as the darkness swirls in circus lights
that race like one-eyed jacks
past neon stars and roadside bars
breeze screaming through your hair
crazy as sin and spun like dust
from wheels of reckless air

As I wind it up to suicide overdrive
'cause we've already gone too far
to leave undressed whatever dreams we've got left
in the backseat of the getaway car

I polish all your body chrome
and see my heart turn to mirrored rust
not from being all that I can be
but from being what I must
as I come as close to what I want most
when there's nothing left to feel
but the naked dance of desert wind
in every sweat-soaked kiss I steal

As I wind it up to suicide overdrive
'cause we've already gone too far
to leave undressed whatever dreams we've got left
in the backseat of the getaway car

I don't know where we're headed
but I know I once was there
in the midnight arms of America
making love like we didn't care
and keeping all the quarter photographs
showing what we looked like then
so we can get back to paradise
if we ever come this way again

As I wind it up to suicide overdrive
'cause we've already gone too far
to leave undressed whatever dreams we've got left
in the backseat of the getaway car

About The Author

Krystofer PT is a concept author with a compelling creative edge. He has journeyed from punk rock musician to creative brand executive, and most recently, to writer and digital concept artist.

The objective of his music, brand formation, writing and art is, and always has been, to create work that reaches beneath its exterior aesthetic to reveal the “reality within.”

Krystofer has an extensive body of fiction, editorial and visual content that has appeared in such publications as the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Black Mountain Press.

Naked Grin, his latest literary offering, is a collection of short, incisive tales of love, loss, desire and redemption, illustrated with photographic images from his portfolio of dolls with attitude, mechanized artifacts from the industrial age and abstracted graffiti.

Krystofer, his wife and son, make their home in the San Francisco Bay area.