

PARAPHILIA X



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Submissions

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R.I.P. Peter Christopherson

27 February 1955 – 24 November 2010

PARAPHILIA ISSUE TEN 12/01/2010

**PARAPHILIA
MAGAZINE**



INTERESTING TIMES: FREEDOM

By Andrew Maben

FRIDAY 29th JULY
SMALL FACES - SPENCER DAVIS
THE GOOD ACENTS - MARK BERRY
GREG WASHINGTON and the
RAM JAM BAND
8.00-11.00 TICKETS 10/-

SATURDAY 30th JULY
CHRIS BARBER - ALEX WELSH
COLIN KINGWILLER JAZZ BAND LTD
MID-WINTER RASTAFI BAND
Headed by Direct from NEW ORLEANS
LOUIS NELSON (U.S.A.)
2.30-5.00 TICKETS 5/-

THE WHO - THE YARDBIRDS
CHRIS PARLOWE and the
THUNDERBIRDS - THE MOVE
DAY PARK & THE COCKERS
THE SUMMER SET
JULIAN COVEY and
his SOULERS
JIMMY JAMES and
THE VAGABONDS
1.00-1.30 TICKETS 10/-
ALL DAY TICKET 12/6

SUNDAY 31st JULY
DICK MORRISSEY - STAN TRACEY
Carter and Big Band with KENNY BAKER
BONNIE SCOTT - KEITH CHRISTIE
BOBBY WILLIAMS ETC.
ERNESTINE ANDERSON (U.S.A.)
1.30-3.30 TICKETS 5/-

GEORGE FAME - THE ACTION
DAMI & TRACY - THE ALAN SIMON SET
THE HARRY SMITH ORCHESTRA featuring
TERRY MOVER - BLUEGEOLOGY
THE BLUE FLAMES
ERIC CLAPTON - JACK BRUCE
DINORA BAKER
7.00-11.30 TICKETS 10/-
ALL DAY TICKET 12/6

WEEKEND TICKETS 20/-
IN ADVANCE ONLY

TRAVEL
By Rail - Windsor Station
By Road - Windsor Bus Station
By Car - Windsor Station

SPECIAL LATE

JULY 29 30 31

No rerieved prisoner could have felt greater joy and relief than I as I walked out of the front door for the last time and made my way to the station. I took off my tie, that throttling symbol of all the repression of the last twelve years, and stuffed it into a pocket. On the train I sat alone and silent, my heart bursting with freedom and the possibilities that finally were open to me. The whole world would be my playground now. It would be a summer of stretching my wings, exploration and modest adventure, at last I could begin to live.

My first destination was a celebratory farewell to my Royal Air Force fantasy - I had signed up for a glider training course to be held at an RAF base in Essex. The freedom of flight opposed the constraint of my cadet uniform, which I would wear for the week and then never again. It seemed a fitting symbol of my new beginning...

At our orientation lecture the instructor informed us that gliding is safer than being at home. He then went on to say that a student had died the previous week, hardly confidence inspiring, but went on to say that the boy suffered from epilepsy and hadn't bothered to tell anyone.

The planes were WWII vintage two-seater trainers, heavy and unwieldy, and it was my luck to be assigned a somewhat overweight instructor. The first flight was nonetheless exhilarating. A tow cable was attached at the nose and a high-speed winch pulled us down the grass strip. As we gained speed the craft reluctantly left the

ground and seconds later my instructor pulled back on the stick and we began to climb. My fear of heights had me gritting my teeth and clenching my fists as the ground fell away below us at an alarming speed. And then there was a loud click as he released the tow, a jerk, and a peaceful quiet, the only sound the gentle soughing of air in the wires. With the release of that attachment to the ground, my fear dissolved, replaced with a gentle exultation.

After the requisite number of training flights, I was deemed ready for the first of two solos that would earn me my certification.

"Don't go too high, and don't go too far," my instructor told me. "Good luck!"

I gave my thumbs-up, the ground crew signaled the winch, and I was on my way. The plane became airborne it seemed almost instantly, and when I pulled back the stick bounded upwards like a rocket. In no time I'd reached the prescribed height, but had scarcely covered half the usual distance. Just a bit higher, I told myself. And somehow, before I'd even traveled as far as the usual point at which we were used to releasing, I had reached almost

twice the elevation I was supposed to be at. Oops! I pulled the release. The plane seemed to jump for joy, as did my heart. An utterly sublime feeling of freedom swept over me. The plane seemed as light as a feather under my hand. It was a glorious sunny day, a few small puffy white clouds cast their dappled shadows on the earth that lay outstretched beneath me. Those moments were perhaps as close to unalloyed joy as I had ever come to in my life. I flew on, long past the boundary of the airfield before finally banking to make the turn back. I still had a lot of height to lose before I could make my landing and so I went into a fairly steep dive. The airspeed rose and I pulled up, exulting in the power and freedom...

I must have been drunk on the euphoria, because I find my memories of that summer are even more fragmentary than usual. I have clear pictures of some events, hazy recollections of others, and frankly almost no memory whatever of my state of mind beyond that initial rush of excitement and anticipation, so all I can offer are a couple of vignettes surrounded by a rosy haze.

The last weekend of July brought the Windsor Jazz and Blues

Festival. I must have met some people during the course of two days, surely? I've no idea... I took my little tent and sleeping bag and found a spot in the campground, where I surely had neighbors.

The line-up was extraordinary, with many bands I had long wanted to see live: the Yardbirds; Cream, in what was billed as their first major show; Geno Washington; the Move; Spencer Davis; the Small Faces; the Who...

Honestly the only thing I recall with any clarity is the end of the Who's set. They launched into My Generation, after a brief introduction by Roger Daltrey in which he claimed that after tonight there would be no more orgies of destruction. They blasted through the song. Daltrey moved to the footlights and glanced down. He casually kicked out one of the lights. Cheers from the crowd. He made his way systematically along the row of lights, carefully extinguishing each one. Townsend drove the neck of his guitar through the front of a speaker cabinet. Banshee feedback. Howls of approval from the crowd. Moon's drumming became an assault. Daltrey smashing his microphone

into the stage, into the cymbals. Townsend monomaniacally smashing his guitar repeatedly on the stage floor. Moon kicking pieces of drum kit off his platform. At last there was not a single piece of equipment on the stage that was not almost utterly destroyed. The band walked off, leaving only a high pitched squeal from a single amplifier. And a crowd whose earlier cacophonous approbation had by now subsided into stunned silence...

I know I went to Rock to see that summer refuge one last time, and I must have slept on the beach as I certainly had nowhere else, but again memory is overwhelmed. I do recall a party in the dunes where I earned my beer by opening bottles with my teeth...

I did all my traveling by hitchhiking, and on my way from Rock to visit Uncle Reg in Weymouth I had a rather remarkable encounter. Dropped at a lonely hilltop crossroads somewhere in Dorset in the early evening my prospects were not looking good. There was almost no traffic, and none of the drivers showed the least inclination to stop. Time passed. I waited. I enjoyed the balmy summer evening. I waited. A big black antique Rolls Royce appeared,

drew closer. I eagerly extended my arm, thumb extended, hopeful. The car slowed a little and my heart leapt in anticipation. For nothing, the Rolls rolled past. In the rear window, two girls turned around to wave. Yeah, I thought, ha fucking ha... I stepped into the road and gave them the V sign. The car suddenly braked and stopped, began to reverse towards me. Once again my heart leapt, but this time in fear, as I took stock of my isolation. I pictured the driver beating me up and leaving me to spend the night in the ditch. The car stopped a few feet away, the driver jumped out and I steeled myself for a drubbing. But he picked up my bag and, grinning, told me to hop in. After he put my bag in the boot, we both got in.

"Hello", a beautiful girl, somehow looking familiar, and her tone suggests I should know her. I'm drawing a complete blank, and I'm too embarrassed, as usual, to admit my failure to recognize her. And why is she so caked in makeup, in contrast to her simple peasant dress?

"Hello", I answered, with an attempt at a confident smile that I may have imagined would signal my recognition.

"Where are you going?"

"Weymouth."

"Great! We can take you all the way. How's it been going?"

"Well, I left Cornwall this morning, so pretty well."

"Oh, I used to hitch everywhere with my boyfriend, but I just can't anymore. I miss those days..." Another dazzling smile.

I turned back to the front. Gosh, she's so beautiful, and friendly. I decided that when we got to Weymouth, I'd ask her out for a drink.

Meanwhile the girls were having a somewhat odd conversation.

"What a day."

"Yes, I wish they didn't have to do it."

"I know."

"It seems so cruel, running all those sheep over the edge like that."

I could make no sense of it whatever...

And so we arrived in Weymouth.

“We’ll just drop you off in front of the hotel. We’ll be there in a moment.”

I nerved myself to ask her out. But then we were there, in front of the Grand Hotel. There was a crowd on the pavement outside, spilling into the street, holidaymakers and photographers. I turned to the back to ask her. And that’s when the penny dropped and I lost my nerve. Finally I recognized Julie Christie.

Abashed, embarrassed, chastened I retrieved my bag from the boot, offered my thanks and slid away into the crowd. It was a long walk to Reg’s, and I berated myself. How could I have not recognized one of my icons of beauty? Why could I not have had the courage to ask her out anyway? She was so natural and friendly, and from the sounds of it she may have welcomed the chance to get away for a while... Much later I realized that she must have been on location for *Far From The Madding Crowd*, and the remarks about sheep at last made sense.

Reg had invented a revolutionary new sail, and had build a small boat to try it out. He had some hopes that the new rig might be

considered for the Olympics. Essentially the sail dispensed with the bottom of a conventional Bermuda sail, tapering to the mast both up and downwards from a point a little below half-height. His claim was that the part he had cut away contributed mostly drag and so the new sail would be far more efficient. He proudly showed me his article in a yachting magazine that explained his invention. The main drawback was that the boom had to be at the broadest part of the sail, meaning it had to comprise two curving parts, one on each side, and the mechanism for running the rigging was a little cumbersome. Nevertheless the little craft was extraordinarily fast and manoeuvrable. Alas, his Olympic hopes were never realized. A few years later though, the sail showed up in a new configuration: as the rigging of windsurfers...

And so finally back to Eastbourne and the eagerly anticipated start of my first Art School term. But also to face living at home. At home with the parents who had abandoned me to the prisons of boarding school for so many years. Now they wanted to keep me under their watchful eyes, just when I was beginning to taste the possibility of freedom.

SPOOK HOUSE

By Kate MacDonald

It is then that the great house starts to move, rattling forward, a body stricken with delirium tremens, pockets of dust shaken loose as our anchors are raised and we experience the thrill of momentum building, slow a while and then picking up a little speed, picking itself up, floating like a spirit above the road. The old haunted house with its leprechaun of a host, his costume folded around him, leaves of a head of lettuce turning brown.

"Welcome aboard one and all," he cries.

"Take care to stay well back
From the edge and keep a lookout
For as it flies
The house plays games
with weary eyes."

We've not been here in years, have we? Have we been here then at all?
Us together, as we are now?

I would swear we have, watching the same astounded faces on other people asking how the house knows where to go.

It does seem I have heard those voices, their uneasy murmur betraying that underlying fear

that this is no trick at all, that the place is really bewitched. No festival ride could be so real, could fool all senses

to believing that it hovered, that it shuddered along a path that held no real design, nothing could feel like that

and not be singed with evil. And so they whisper furtively, their fear ripening above the rows of sagging seats that have seen too many like them.

I know I have been here, because I know how everything will unfold. I know that the woman in the brown jacket will fold herself inside her husband's arm for the first time in many months and that he will hold her with the perplexed

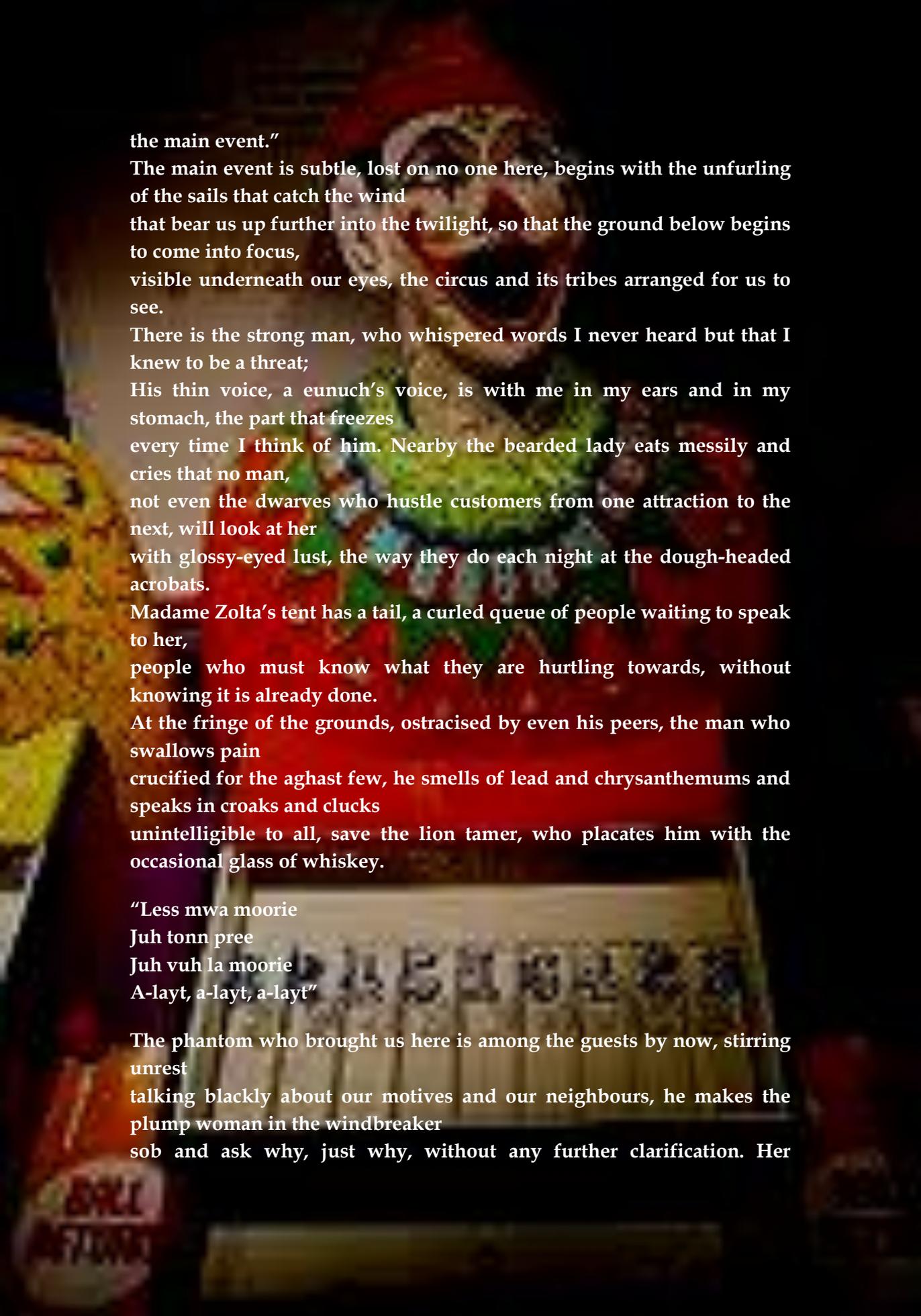
face of one who has not felt compelled to act this role in many months. The ride affects each one differently, but I can guess them all. In the absence of memory, this knowing is a sort of psychic's trick. I should be back in the tent with Madame Zolta, telling the crowds the small gestures that will form the foundation of their future.

"You have no plans to marry
You say
And indeed it is a bachelor
You will stay
And die a young man"

That boy asked his girlfriend to marry him on the way out of the tent, I believe; she turned him down and left him to the wild of life and he died three weeks hence, besotted, falling under the wheels of a train. It matters not to Madame Zolta, who tells a bald businessman in a trenchcoat that his son is not his own and laughs when he thinks she speaks in metaphor. I like to think she got her powers riding on the roof of the haunted house as I do, remarking how things are ever the same and learning that all shall pass here again, without remembering. I like to think that we are alike, her and I. She probably knows and finds it funny, that I would envy her her little power and her place among the scamps and oddities whose peripatetic lives we cross through, looking for entertainment.

Now and again it shakes, this ancient house, as it sails forward into the darkening sky, carbon over steel, limp fingers of gelled rain slapping at our faces, loosening the dirt on our untended vessel; and with each shudder growing in intensity, the voice of the house rising to a miner's cough, we sense the real magic is about to start.

"For God's sake hush!"
Our ugly guide insists.
"You'll babble without pause
and miss



the main event."

The main event is subtle, lost on no one here, begins with the unfurling of the sails that catch the wind that bear us up further into the twilight, so that the ground below begins to come into focus, visible underneath our eyes, the circus and its tribes arranged for us to see.

There is the strong man, who whispered words I never heard but that I knew to be a threat;

His thin voice, a eunuch's voice, is with me in my ears and in my stomach, the part that freezes

every time I think of him. Nearby the bearded lady eats messily and cries that no man,

not even the dwarves who hustle customers from one attraction to the next, will look at her

with glossy-eyed lust, the way they do each night at the dough-headed acrobats.

Madame Zolta's tent has a tail, a curled queue of people waiting to speak to her,

people who must know what they are hurtling towards, without knowing it is already done.

At the fringe of the grounds, ostracised by even his peers, the man who swallows pain

crucified for the aghast few, he smells of lead and chrysanthemums and speaks in croaks and clucks

unintelligible to all, save the lion tamer, who placates him with the occasional glass of whiskey.

"Less mwa moorie

Juh tonn pree

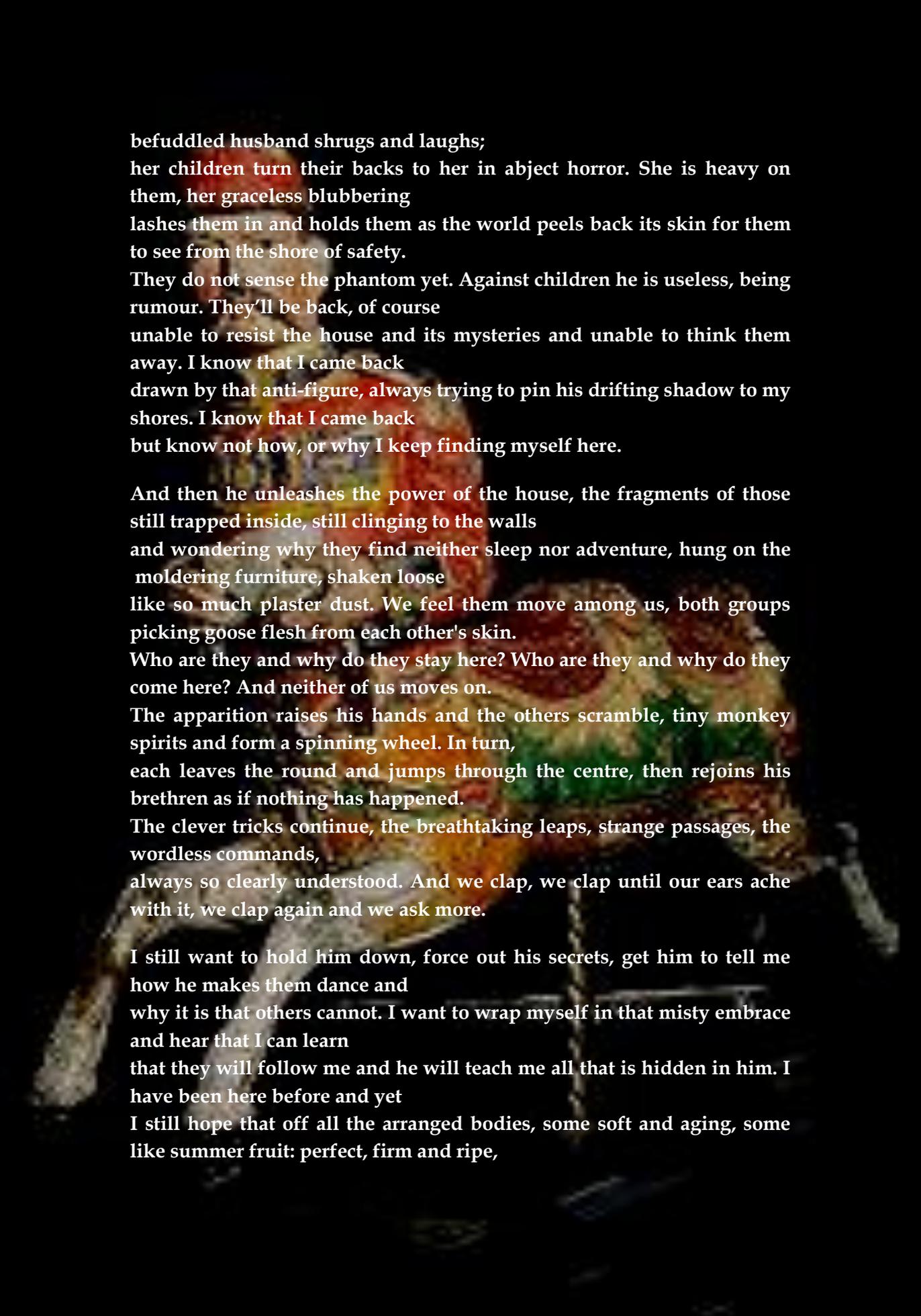
Juh vuh la moorie

A-layt, a-layt, a-layt"

The phantom who brought us here is among the guests by now, stirring unrest

talking blackly about our motives and our neighbours, he makes the plump woman in the windbreaker

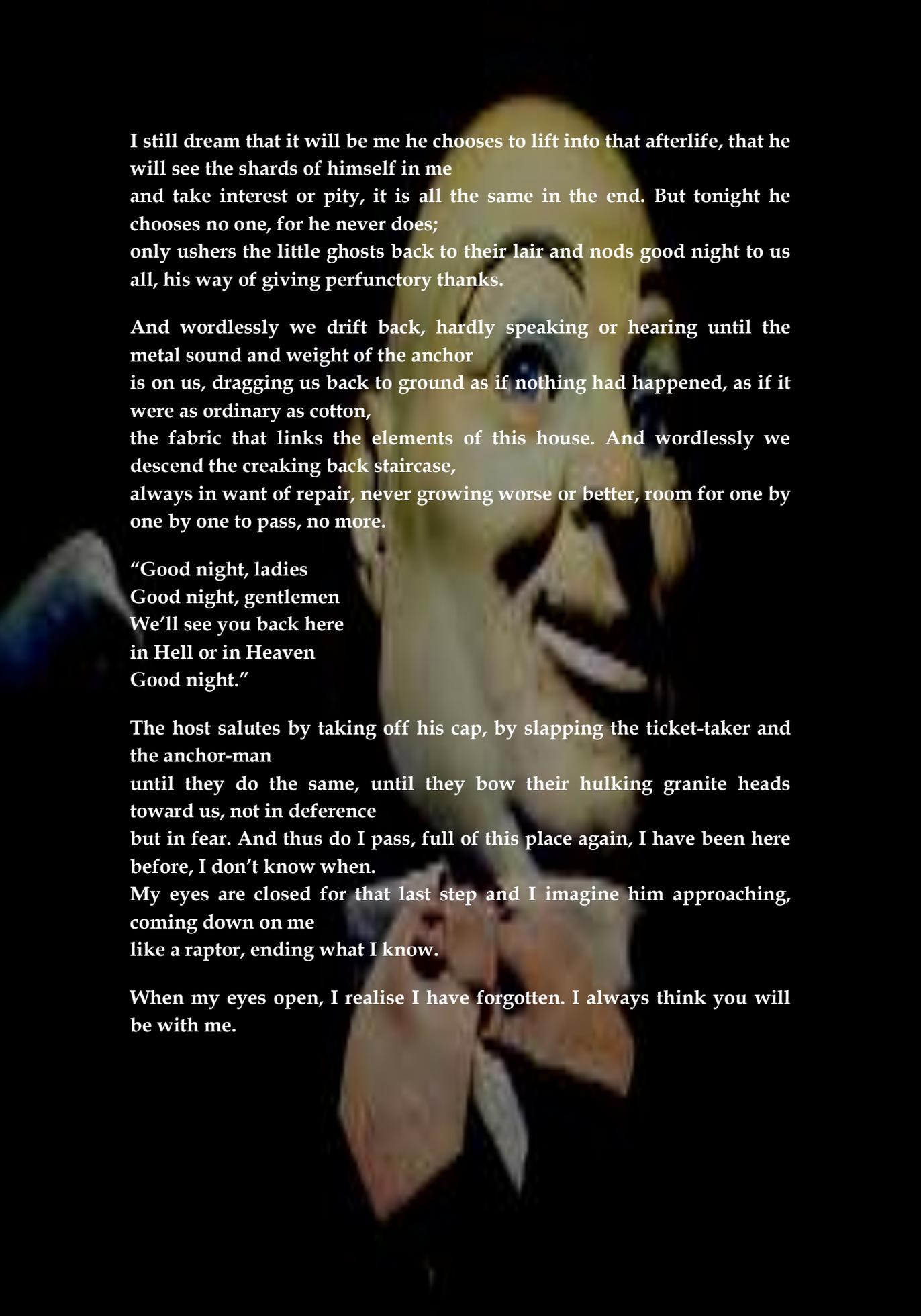
sob and ask why, just why, without any further clarification. Her



befuddled husband shrugs and laughs;
her children turn their backs to her in abject horror. She is heavy on
them, her graceless blubbering
lashes them in and holds them as the world peels back its skin for them
to see from the shore of safety.
They do not sense the phantom yet. Against children he is useless, being
rumour. They'll be back, of course
unable to resist the house and its mysteries and unable to think them
away. I know that I came back
drawn by that anti-figure, always trying to pin his drifting shadow to my
shores. I know that I came back
but know not how, or why I keep finding myself here.

And then he unleashes the power of the house, the fragments of those
still trapped inside, still clinging to the walls
and wondering why they find neither sleep nor adventure, hung on the
moldering furniture, shaken loose
like so much plaster dust. We feel them move among us, both groups
picking goose flesh from each other's skin.
Who are they and why do they stay here? Who are they and why do they
come here? And neither of us moves on.
The apparition raises his hands and the others scramble, tiny monkey
spirits and form a spinning wheel. In turn,
each leaves the round and jumps through the centre, then rejoins his
brethren as if nothing has happened.
The clever tricks continue, the breathtaking leaps, strange passages, the
wordless commands,
always so clearly understood. And we clap, we clap until our ears ache
with it, we clap again and we ask more.

I still want to hold him down, force out his secrets, get him to tell me
how he makes them dance and
why it is that others cannot. I want to wrap myself in that misty embrace
and hear that I can learn
that they will follow me and he will teach me all that is hidden in him. I
have been here before and yet
I still hope that off all the arranged bodies, some soft and aging, some
like summer fruit: perfect, firm and ripe,



I still dream that it will be me he chooses to lift into that afterlife, that he will see the shards of himself in me and take interest or pity, it is all the same in the end. But tonight he chooses no one, for he never does; only ushers the little ghosts back to their lair and nods good night to us all, his way of giving perfunctory thanks.

And wordlessly we drift back, hardly speaking or hearing until the metal sound and weight of the anchor is on us, dragging us back to ground as if nothing had happened, as if it were as ordinary as cotton, the fabric that links the elements of this house. And wordlessly we descend the creaking back staircase, always in want of repair, never growing worse or better, room for one by one by one to pass, no more.

“Good night, ladies
Good night, gentlemen
We’ll see you back here
in Hell or in Heaven
Good night.”

The host salutes by taking off his cap, by slapping the ticket-taker and the anchor-man until they do the same, until they bow their hulking granite heads toward us, not in deference but in fear. And thus do I pass, full of this place again, I have been here before, I don’t know when. My eyes are closed for that last step and I imagine him approaching, coming down on me like a raptor, ending what I know.

When my eyes open, I realise I have forgotten. I always think you will be with me.

PROMPTED BY MATHEWS

By Chris Madoch

James Mann smiles his *I'm ok* smile.

He's quite cute for a man's man and is cutest by far when he smiles ambivalently.

When James Mann smiles his large eyes twinkle. He is mouse haired, blue eyed, of average height and overweight.

It doesn't matter a jot that he's fat.

Big can be alluring. Large, with the distinctive elegance of the large, he is attractive in the way that all aliens are. Strangely imposing.

He definitely has something about him. Nothing quite focuses, there is no certainty to put one's finger on, nothing definite. The 'g' word having been posted on him endlessly has somehow never stuck.

James is finished with the outside for the night.

The outside can do what it wants, be what the hell it wants to be, he's out of it.

The car is garaged.

James Mann's overcoat is off.

The German electric kettle is on.

James is successful. Jim has a right-on life. He has a job, a house, a car. He has a warm overcoat and an automatic, hands free, mirror chrome electric kettle.

James has a means of shutting the dark night out, a facility for putting the cloying reach of the outside firmly behind him.

Jim is so clever. He is so adept at survival in this age of capitalist acme that the kitchen table is laden with overflowing carrier bags. Rewards.

Spilling their entrails these guts applaud him.

That was good, that last hunting trip, stimulating.

He'd parked the car hurriedly, stealthily he thought, his mind on the thrill of the chase. About to exit the car, his head filled with the unravelling routine of coin, trolley and revolving door, he'd heard an

'Oi!' shouted, followed by an 'Oi! You!' shouted even louder.

He'd looked up then, furtive at first, and then with increasing fear, like an unarmed native

parting tall grasses and being surprised by a Panther.

Advancing towards him at that time, shouting, snarling, waving black polished boots and a smart clip board was a neo Security Guard wearing a black uniform and a black peaked cap that inanely announced his provenance with both the name of the supermarket and its logo. You know precisely the type.

I say *neo* because nobody in their right minds believes that these are true Security Guards. These fucking neos are not what it says on the fucking packet, they are *Mickey Mousers*.

Everybody knows that true Security Guards, have been anally raped, carry real guns and emotional scars from extremely violent mercenary service in West Africa.

You know the sort of service, service where Landrovers are decorated with victims' limbs, where heads are decapitated and stuck on poles at village boundaries, service where white mercenaries appear on camera blacked out, their voices sounding like they are on triple x Prozac.

They are, all of them, sick as dicks-on-sticks fuckers!

Everybody knows that true Security Guards have real

criminal records other than ones for petty thieving and parking violations and pissing in public places. Everybody knows that true Security Guards are proper psychotic cunts.

This particular fucking pants Panther with designs on ripping into James Mann's face was someone he'd vaguely remembered from his teaching days. Or somewhere else. Or both.

This was not a proper kippered cunt.

This was a young man whose baby features used to shine on Friday afternoons in a remove class double-plus designed as a dustbin for bored fifteen year old illiterates, wasted kids too thick to see the sense in bunking off.

These were giggling kids still excited by the underwear pages of Home Shopping Catalogues, wankers not yet graduated to real fucking or crime or shooting up.

Mathews always was a clean boy.

Meticulous Mathews.

You could always rely on Mathews to have a clean handkerchief [spunk-rag] in his trousers' pocket. Mathews was the kind of boy that really did wash his hands after using the urinal.

'Sir.' Mathews had said to his ex-teacher, the dim light of recognition barely registering, 'Sir.' He'd repeated. He was pointing to the yellow lettering that filled the adjoining parking bay.

'Disabled Parking only!' Mathews had spouted, his voice a mite too high on account of his excitement. He'd cleared his throat. Checked his fly. 'Are you disabled now?'

Now this was a glorious question because Jim very often felt disabled. He would regularly look at his monthly bank statements and feel uncommonly fucking disabled. He would try weaving his way up the high street through a minefield of pushchairs and shopping trolleys and lovers arm in arm or down each other's throats and he would feel overwhelmingly enfeebled. And there had been vast tracts of his life to date through which he had not walked or run but very definitely limped quite definitely impaired. But, at that moment, faced with Mathews in a fancy dress uniform and heavens knows how many old schooldays' axes waiting to grind, he knew he'd appeared rather too well, rosy almost, indeed a touch over perky.

'No.' He'd said, enjoying the authoritative brevity of his reply.

There was one of those silences.

Anything could have happened.

It was then he remembered the awkward occasion he had stumbled upon him, left school and on dangerous ground, and had exacted a little more than lip service.

Mathews could have been an evolving serial killer, at the very least a severely disturbed person.

This minor contretemps with an ex teacher might well have been the secret subconscious trigger to have unleashed a knife attack of startling ferocity.

James could have been eviscerated, spread all over the car park and the following days' tabloids.

It was not to be.

James saw that it was not to be and James Mann saw that the game was up. He wanted to scream *fuck off* at the little upstart but he opted to be charismatically pleasant.

'Don't I know you?' he'd asked, locking the car and turning on his accuser, 'Yes. I know now. You're Mathews. Well. Well. Haven't we done well.'

A uniform. Delicious. You always said you wanted one of those.'

Mathews had at once backed off, confusion finally giving way to recognition. The two men then walked towards a tangle of silvery trolleys lost in mutual reminiscence, a long jump injury on Sports Day, a 'B' for First Aid. An unpleasant cheap zip-fly entrapment.

There was a snug Security Guards' Station- a hut providing more than sufficient privacy.

Jim smiles to himself, content that he got so fluidly out of it and the rest. He sets about moving the kills from his plastic hunting pouches to his stashing places; dead chocolate covered digestive biscuits, comatose pre-prepared vegetables, tins of dead things, cans of dead things, cartons of dead things.

Jim switches on the portable TV.

More dead things.

That Mathews, he's thinking to himself, that too clean, too kind, far too neat and ironed Mathews, he was cleared of aggravated rape of a fellow scout at sixteen.

He was up for rape and his nickname was Spam on account of the sparsity of his pubic hair.

Hadn't it been evident for all to see that the boy was not

biologically prepared for extreme penetration?

The police never knew though, did they? They never knew what had gone on in the April of his fifteenth year. Few people knew the truth of that.

Jim then catches the tail of a broadcast, a public information insert between the national and the local news. It is a new concept, the two minute feature, something developed from the runaway success of music videos and advertising, something for the promotion of community awareness.

It is blatant propaganda.

There is a doorway in the film and animated in the doorway are three persons determined to prevent the entry of a fourth. They are screaming, these three, washed but dowdy, one of them a man who keeps touching his crotch with one hand and waving a wooden crucifix with the other.

'Don't wake him! Don't bloody wake him!' they scream.

'Pray for him to come. Yes. Pray for him to come again.

But don't wake him! No. Never, never wake him.

This is good here, as it is.

Saved!

Whatever gave you the idea that we want to be saved?

Bugger off! Go on. Get the fuck out of it!

Mann watches as the one who was turned away goes, she has not lost her smiling face. She is not sloping away. She has not lost her dignity.

There is a caption. It reads- One person's Jesus is another person's Satan.

He switches the telly off.

Another dead thing fit only for transmitting shit.

James finds it much more difficult to switch off his memory of the spurned but dignified woman with the constantly smiling face. But that's the whole point of it. Then, in a sudden rush of what he perceives to be insight, he announces to himself-perpetual benevolence!

Constant benevolence, he decides- that's it!

She has usurped her *natural* fear of fucking death with the entirely *unnatural* monster of constant fucking benevolence.

He confirms it, yes, she was a woman of constant benevolence, retaining her dignity but nevertheless electing to be spurned.

Why?

The question stumped him.

She wore a plaid skirt, pleated, and a bland cardigan beneath a fawn plastic mac. She appeared childless. She was fiftyish and her hair was mousy and her tights were thick and she had held aloft her good book against the rain of abuse.

She deserved her spurning.

She'd bloody earned it.

She had gone, unarmed, protected with nothing more than her beliefs and her plainness, out there amongst the perils of the heathen outside world to win a fucking good spurning.

It did her proud.

It did her proud and home knitted back a deal of good to be lashed raw by mass insult. Abused repeatedly as a child I shouldn't wonder, he told himself.

Marvellous, isn't it, that you almost never hear of anyone who was abused just the once.

Yes. Abused and abused again she was, *because* of her bully of a faith? We've all met the type, a mouse in the supermarket, a lion on the doorstep.

And, repeatedly abused she becomes the abuser flogging the dead horse of unquestionably dead remedies.

Well, there was her personal war Lord hidden in her fucked up head versus their opposing war Lord hiding behind the closed door.

It was always going to be an impasse, the one faith cancelling out the other and the resulting void inviting faithlessness, lawlessness, mayhem.

How fucking stupid the whole thing was.

The sick god botherer fucks.

Didn't they know it was little more than an ancient *drug* culture designed to ease the pain of knowing that we're going to die?

She's on sleepers and Sherry.

Spiritual ecstasies, that's what it is.

Medieval 'Es' to guard against nature's old heave ho!

Hadn't they noticed how *forever* had died?

Didn't they know that time is always running out?

But it was only on film.

The film was only part of the celluloid dream that James refused to dream. The dream goes- if it moves, shoot it to fuck on video. If it sells, celebrate by throwing a party. If it doesn't, stay at home and call it fucking art.

James made Assam tea for himself.

He is very domestic.

He likes his creature comforts.

His surroundings say as much.

The small house is spacious, airy. Afraid to lose this feeling of space James has let it remain sparsely furnished. Minimalist. A sofa. A lamp. Some art.

You get the picture.

This style has many benefits to recommend it.

What you would spend on more, you spend on less, so you can afford quality. James liked that.

Guests seldom stay long. You pays your money and you generally get what you pay for. No more complicated than that. Rent a body.

There is much less to dust.

Decorative objects have to be chosen with great care. The western world is already overstuffed with carelessly chosen decorative objects. It is a sickness. A wasting disease. A disease of wasting valuable resources.

It's invasive.

Invading sick as fuck products appealing to sick as fuck minds or sheep or white trash with money to incinerate, floods the

shopping malls like so much
effluent.

Turds disguised as pottery
figures.

Things to sit on the telly.

Dead things.

James has a lacquered brass
Buddha.

With such comfortable
starkness colour becomes
increasingly significant. A
Parchment as distinct from A
Cream. A Magenta. A
Delphinium. A Violet. It can
become quite a worry.

Eau de nil is extraordinarily
good for stress.

Monotone is as good a solution
as any.

James likes black leather.
Waistcoats. Chaps.

He took the black tea and the
chocolate covered digestives into
the lounging space. Putting the
tray on the polished floorboards,
he sat on the black leather sofa.
Leaned back. Thought about
some music.

Thought.

Yes.

The hunt *was* good today.

Delicious.

It had turned up anysexual
Mathews, Mathews *and* rabid

Caroline Pikenard. Both of them
carrying a juggernaut's worth of
secrets and lies.

There was always a certain in
the pants frisson to meeting
Carrie Pike, even fleetingly. This
was because Carrie Pikenard was
openly false, which was
refreshingly erotic in itself, but
also because she was generally
credited with putting synthetic
finger nails into the pornographic
film industry.

Carrie went through life
wearing a noticeable signature
taint, the scent, almost, of having
been there during the shooting,
when the big guns swung over
well oiled abdomens and shot
their implausible load creating
gobsmacking strings of pearls.

God!

How we envied her balls!

She really was the bollocks.
She'd done everything there was
to do in the sex industry. We
reckoned she'd even shagged
Alsations. Donkeys.

How we gossiped about her
Californian Silicone. How we
surfed the late night cable
channels for her old movies.

We all saw her tits.

We saw her pleased raw wet
bits.

We were there!

James saw her fearlessness.

Of all of the people he had met on his journey she was the one most able to live in the moment and bugger all the consequences.

She was not a child, though she was capable of wilful childishness. She was an adult who could forget, for most of the time, her own mortality. Her inevitable death rarely if ever got a look in.

Not even in the rush hour.

Not even in a crack house.

Consequently, for almost all of the time, she had no use for religion or belief systems or rules and regulations of any kind.

James thought her impossible, easily the gentlest of all possible sociopaths. In debt to a degree that you just would not believe and a fine cook, she took to throwing lavish dinner parties on supplementary benefit. She was the first full blown spiritual anarchist he had ever met.

He had, of course, and quite ridiculously, fallen in love with the idea of the circus of her at once. The Big Top. The tumbling intercourse. Trapeze sex. Tightrope cunnilingus. But, for some unfathomable reason he had never quite managed to be the ringmaster and fuck the arse off her.

Was he liable to become unbalanced?

Without a catch net, would he ultimately break his neck?

The act of holding her in awe, he had decided, was the most likely culprit. For men at least, there is nothing less like an aphrodisiac than the phenomenon of holding a woman in awe.

Carrie suspected he was gay anyway.

As yet undecided, although it was all a matter of linguistic juggling, James Mann, was almost there. Almost ready to agree as much about himself, at least in part. That is to say in respect of the only part that matters to a man.

His head was arguably hetero but his dick was decidedly homo. It happens. Mathews knew.

This situation was a magnet for farcical relationships and made reciprocal oral sex a very hit and miss affair.

No matter.

She was unreal, a wraith, after all. Disembodied flesh displayed splayed, widescreen, open crotch in macro close-up, the very epitome of a cat with its throat cut.

Caroline Pikenard was nothing much more than prettily arranged ectoplasm.

And suddenly there she had been, the huntress in mid-hunt, hovering like an angel between gondolas of cat food and dogwood, visibly debating the diet of her furry familiars. She had swamped him in smiles and heady perfume and she'd printed Revlon lips in lipstick on his hunter's cheek and he had asked her something, probing in that incorrigibly gossipy way of his.

It was-

'Are you still with your cameraman?'

She'd looked a little sulky when she told him.

'Yes.'

Crumbs from the crumbling biscuits littered the pale grey floor boarding. He was undecided about the music. He was unhappy about the thought of a book. He was out of sorts with the home cinema.

Thought. Still caught.

On still days, he was remembering, you could follow the pale smoke sky-writing as it rose silent from the crematorium, its chimney stacks hidden from the playing fields by a long line of tall Poplars. This wall of trees would usually funnel up and away all of that unwelcome breath of the burning dead with

its reek of urine soaked winceyette and cigarette singed moustache.

On warm, Spring days with just a light breeze it was different. On days like that James could sit there, on his school lunch break, marking pitiful essays and breathing the dead in, poetically ingesting an air soup composed of the various remains from the local hospices and the bagged up offal from the ER morgue. He once wrote a poem about it.

When this poem was written he ripped it into tiny pieces and floated them on the beck that was the boundary between two Counties.

And on Sundays these fun-for-the-community acres, adjacent to the Crem' rails, would come alive with boot and ball, with screaming profanities and steaming wind.

There was always a battle of the colours.

The blue army with the yellow feathers would attack the goal to the right. The red army with beads and shells would oppose them.

In the middle, on the centre spot there would sit a head, its hair matted and its eye sockets empty. Some mercenary's

memento from Angola I shouldn't wonder.

It was The Security Guards First Eleven versus The Surrey Clerks Of Court Eleven.

They will cancel each other out, James had said to himself once, and into the void will thunder cuntung madness.

One such Sunday, at what would have been half-time, though the pitches were empty of anything but crows, James was on a recreational across the war zone to the farmland beyond.

There was a small coppice beside the beck, a deep shelterbelt of Hawthorn, Bramble and Silver Birch through which a Celtic knot of pathways had been driven by both Deer and determined boys on bicycles.

You stepped out of the jaundiced, urban light and into the mossy illumination of leafworld, a place of mystery and magic where dwelt the greater and the lesser hidden forces such as elfin folk and higher selves.

Two strides in, James stopped in the dank *doorway*, his dark jacket mottled by the dust of catkins, his nose assailed with the scents of moist soil and rotting leaf.

This was not a new place.

Oh fuck! Mighty fuck. He had been here before.

He had been here before and the memory of it was mounting an attack on him. He felt an old shame make a sudden attempt to swamp him, it was like a moist cloth pressing against his face, at once blinding then, at the same time, stifling.

He knew this sensation.

It was weakness.

Weakness, with its sudden sneering presence always had him fumbling for his Asthma inhaler, always had him feeling that he shouldn't be discovered with the pump in his mouth, his breath held and his eyes as wide as a creature who's just smelled the slaughter house.

What he wanted was to be away from that place. It's a cinch in virtual reality.

What he wanted was to be at home, alone, safe in *his* bed, *his* hand at *his* groin, *his* length stiffening and *his* eyes closing, the daylight beautifully dulled by the pale curtaining.

You get what you want in virtual reality.

How good it always was to be in isolation, with God, and doing something with your genitals that feels that good.

Carrie...now what was the TV channel that your legs were once wide open on?

They could have been great friends, the alien *messiah* and the celluloid whore. Indeed there was no one else more capable of hearing his confession.

She never heard this confession.

How, one day, when the chalk and talk had finally dried up, *nothing* came. That was the day when nothing had come out to play in a very big way.

How, one day, when a great improbable chasm opened where a class of thirty two disinterested faces had just been, he- to all intents and purposes, calmly downed his pencil and walked away never to return.

He'd remembered a distant friend, a city desk journalist, who'd been on his way home on the five fifteen out of Waterloo when, shortly before Woking, he had looked down to discover what was itching his feet, only to find that everything below his knees, trousers, socks, shoes, the lot, had disappeared, vanished from view.

It was a stress induced illusion.
But it was fucking convincing!

He had stifled the scream and broken out into a sweat so great that people in his vicinity began showing signs of urgent self-interest.

Shortly before arriving at Winchester, the tips of his brogues had reappeared.

He walked home. Sober. Legless.

You see, it is true, some of us have it in us to be very brave, even artists. And not so very long after this bravery, he had the courage to quit his job in the city. No more prostitution. Just exquisitely attractive art for art's sake- spiritual riches homelessness and bankruptcy.

James had remembered that.

Materialist suicide.

That day, in that moment he had remembered the *in-therapy* look on the man's face when he'd told him the story.

It was one of those looks that said- *what happened was tragic but also very funny but please don't laugh because that's what everybody wants to do and I want you to be exceptional. I want you to be the one person that I know who is not afraid.*

Well, James was not afraid.

James knew how playful the mind could be, whimsical even. There seemed to be no limit to its creative potential.

The fledgling Mathews was flying.

Mother Carrie was fearless.

James, *the son of God*, was not afraid of the fucking school anymore.

He watched the school pencil roll- HB, blank, HB, blank, HB, bloody blank. It rolled extremely slowly as if there was all the time in the world for it to travel across the grey Formica. There was nothing to impede its painful progress. No apple. No gum. No string. James was not an obsessive confiscator.

Eventually it reached the sharp edge of the grey Formica then stopped. It stopped as if commanded by some cosmic intelligence that had suddenly shown mercy.

That grey Formica extremity is, more often than not, as far as any of us are prepared to go. That is to say- we *will* do it, we'll embrace the drama of it up to the precipice, right up to the very lip and then lie still, going absolutely no farther.

We generally cop out.

We mostly opt in to seven days of psychiatric care- sleepers, drugs, waitress service.

Most of us, in any case, are pretty much summed up by the legend- All talk and no action.

He looked at the class. They were unmoved or unmoving, though he couldn't decide which, and they were very definitely silent. No talk. No action. It didn't compute.

As you might imagine, the pervasive silence of a roomful of adolescents was very strange. It disturbed his equilibrium.

I am unsteady, he told himself, I am unsteady and unsure of whether or not I am ready. There was nothing for him to hold on to.

This was not life. This was not death.

This was a prelude to real change.

This was the last and the first breath.

He left the room in the way one leaves a cinema halfway through an unsatisfactory offering from Hollywood, the brain-dead tutting, the swing doors clapping. James imagined it was applause, the kind of welcome that a star receives even before they've done anything.

He passed the Deputy Head's office with its door wide open so as to suggest an invitation or that nothing untoward could ever happen there.

That was crap. He'd told him as much.

Teaching is not a skill. He'd said so.

Teaching is not a science. He'd gone on, once.

It is an art.

The best teachers are gifted artists.

They have the artistry to nourish the natural gifts of children.

At best this school was a disgraceful farm, a bloody disgraceful production line of sheep that all looked suspiciously the same.

At worst it was a fucking abattoir.

How fucking neat it was to engineer a liberal open door policy as a smokescreen for a whole shopping basket of child abuse. That was how it was.

Tidy cruelty.

Fabulous masks of benevolence masking faces of persisting fascism.

Are we really surprised? It always was in our nature to be something other than what we seem.

Like one boy whose smell was like a cry for help.

There was this one boy whose odour fell on deaf ears. He

collected his faeces and kept them in his desk- it always raised a laugh amongst the staff.

I mean you've got to be congenitally daft haven't you to be buggered by your blind father? We'd run away, they said, anyone with half a brain would. We'd hear the tapping of that fucking stick and leg it!

Like one boy whose genitals had waved goodbye to childhood.

This coal black fifth former was an eye opener.

'God!' they'd exclaim, the men with *Toy Town* degrees in Physical Education, 'Some poor girl's going to be injured by that.

That.

One look at that and wham, it's enough to make lesbians of the lot of them. It's wicked man. A real life- *Welcome to Barbados I hope you enjoy your stay.* I mean, truly massive. Majorly memorable.'

A bookies book was opened and bets were duly laid. James remembered. Eleven inches was odds on. How could you possibly forget.

Sir- that is Mr Mann, English and Art, he always believed that he was firmly in the front line. He was.

He believed he was the last true teacher to be given a full contract in the whole of the United Kingdom.

This was, very likely, true.

Almost immediately he'd been heavily under fire from right wing revisionists. They were led by balding cunts in tweed jackets with leather patched elbows. They were pipe smoking vegetable growers of bloody straight rows of spring greens and bloody straight canes of string beans.

What was there fucking problem?

Fear of prostrate cancer, that's what their fucking problem was. That and jealousy. Fucking prostrate cancer, jealousy and loneliness.

It's the truth.

Like all of the boys spared by peace, Mann was at war, allied and marked.

And the unarmed boys were hit by anything to hand.

It was like a drug.

They were pure white.

They were like cartridge paper before the point of the pencil kissed it.

Then the pencil kissed them, covering the blank canvas of their faces in a scribble of lies that

went by the name of Christian moral responsibility.

And they were hit by hands engorged by rage and loathing and middle-aged frustration. They were routinely beaten, bended and upended into a shape that somehow resembled conscripts.

These were boys who'd never volunteer.

These were boys who'd never pass exams no matter how many times you moved the goal posts.

These were boys expecting to be unemployed for years.

These were candidates *needing* to be raped.

These were children trapped by a system eager to unzip its flies and do the fucking lewd business.

Once upon a time, Mathews, who now knows all there is to know about disabled parking, had it in for Kipper Clarkson. Kipper, two years his junior, had the kind of urchin face that did well in advertisements for charities. He had freckles and wiry unkempt hair and River Phoenix eyes. It meant that he did less well in the school playground than he did in the classroom.

Kipper Clarkson had put it about that Mathews was a girl, a

freak of nature. This was not altogether surprising since at the end of the Christmas term of Mathews' fourth year he played a dame in the school pantomime- cast largely because of his paleness and the fact that his voice had not yet broken.

Meanwhile, his various winter excursions into the school showers had earned him the nickname *Spam* on account of the hairlessness of the puppy fat that covered his pubic bone and the distinctive, luncheon meat pinkness of the diminutive features that hung there for all to see.

These bare facts, five whispers distant and downloaded into the cavity of Kipper's second year's skull, resulted in the ball-game that was to lead to both boys' demise. The teasing little rhyme went- *Mathews is a girlie, no girlfriend of mine, he sticks 'is curly wurly where the sun don't shine.* This ditty was, as you can imagine, accompanied by obscene gestures. Then there was that later occurrence- the police never knew though, did they?

They never knew what had gone on in the April of his fifteenth year. Few people knew the truth of that.

That poor fat sap.

It's not difficult to get very pissed off.

What do we expect to find at every turn?

Apologetics? Saints? Fair-minded folk? Women in scarves with gloves and a glut of homespun goodness? These days it's relatively easy to get *very* very pissed off. It's a breeze. But Mathews in a half-baked uniform- there's a queer thing. Prompting.

Jim suddenly started one of his little spasms- in fact a full blown attack.

He could smell death lurking in the room- an uncommonly enticing cocktail of skat, spunk and fermented urine. He confidently smirked. James was blessed with miracle tablets for these life-threatening occasions and they usually worked.

**...barely missing on a frozen plain to nowhere...
(or how I exploded my own ticket)**

By A. Razor

...the drive was all night, in some places so cold it felt like piss might freeze in the wind. We left Minneapolis and descended toward Lawrence after some rounds of houses and bars, not for anything important, just because there seemed to be some mystery to the trip I was now a part of.

Grant was going to take us to see a great genius that he needed to see, but for some reason he didn't want to go alone, so he had conscripted a guitar player, Kevin, myself to play bass, and a kid named Zack, that idolized Grant, to play drums. Grant had played drums in a band before, but didn't like to do it anymore. Bob, his old guitar player in the previous band, had "ruined it (playing the drums?) for him," he said. I was in a fog, so to speak, drinking constantly, sadly missing LA, SF and NY simultaneously, trying not to do too many drugs (yet these were the worst dope fiends in town, so I was obviously frustrating my efforts).

So, not really understanding or caring why Grant had to show up to see his "old friend" with a band, I agreed to leave with them, under cover of darkness, in a '72 Buick Electra on a freezing November night in the late 80s. I guess we were going to play a song or two for William S. Burroughs, at his hacienda in Lawrence, KS, which seemed reasonable for some reason I could never really put my finger on. Mainly I wanted to just move down the road for a minute and get away from myself. Grant seemed to be acting as if he was doing me a favor, which is always annoying when a junkie does that for some reason. It's like they are trying to build some weird credit for a later date for something that would have happened anyway.

I think Grant is an alright guy, but he is also kinda creepy when he's loaded, which I don't have any room to judge anybody on, but he was being extra strange and kept offering me pills and coke, which I refused graciously. Pills would just irritate me into craving something stronger and

from what I had seen there was not enough coke in that bag to even begin to scratch my itch that starts with a taste of that shit. Plus, I had to do some of the driving and coke is not my favorite driving indulgence. I had a little less than a gram of speed, a few tabs of mescaline, a bag of Alaskan Thunderfuck and a fifth of Old Log Cabin Straight Bourbon Whiskey to keep me warm, as the Buick had a malfunctioned heater. I knew it was a myth that booze would keep me warm, but it at least would keep me numb to the cold. I had to admit I was interested in seeing what Burroughs would be like, his book *Naked Lunch* was proving to be as prophetic in clearer terms than anything Nostradamus had ever written and I was certain that the end of the world was near, so I was hoping to see if he would make some special sense of the Mayan Campbellistic spiritual cut-up rhetoric and shed some light on what he knew about this coming apocalyptic end game.

We drove through the night and played music and when I wasn't driving I was in the back watching the desolation of the cold pains go by. There had been some slight snow that had melted

away, but the last few days were well below freezing across the midwest and there were traces of ice and snow every so often, as well as barren tree branches which gave the world a sinister and cataclysmic tone.

The sun was coming up over the rise as we pulled down the long drive way that seemed to turn to a dirt road and crack like ice under the balding tires. I was sure we would be waking the old dooper up at this time, but he was wide awake and ready to receive us. Hot tea, a Moroccan blend of course, with honey and biscuits. After we shared a joint outside between Kevin, Zack and myself, we came back inside and had at some tea and chewed a little on the biscuits in the massive farm style kitchen. The guys had done blow, I was on the crank, so the biscuits were more of an accessory to dab honey on than an actual breakfast treat. Finally Grant and "Uncle Bill", as he introduced himself to us, taking a keener interest in young Zack, emerged from the hall with a pair of breech loading shotguns.

"I am currently creating my art for a show in New York City, I invite you all to participate out in the back forty, where my amigo,

Soliz, will be preparing my materials for this undertaking. I hope the refreshments were suitable, if even necessary." Uncle Bill announced, with perfunctory annunciation.

I begin to remember the story I heard of this guy being on the run in Mexico and shooting his old lady in the head while they were playing a game of William Tell. I tried to quell my internal angst. I liked to be the only one with the gun. This kook might shoot somebody accidentally on purpose again. Worse, I might have to shoot him. I will drop this geezer, literary merit or not, before I let him shoot me with a 12 gauge and have his Mexican houseboy bury me in the frozen wasteland of Kansas.

"So I wonder which one of you is the most proficient with a shotgun. I need you to be a damn good shot because, upon missing, the work I have previously done will be obliterated." He looked at each one of us in the eyes as if he was sizing us up for something. I began to feel like I was in the wrong part of the prison. Kevin had brought his acoustic guitar out and was beginning to range over some classical scales in a way that let on to me that at some

point in the last 10 minutes while I thought he was bringing in his gear from the car, he had procured a good shot of dope. It couldn't have been the crap they scored in Minneapolis, because after they obtained that overpriced bindle we all took a hit of it off the foil and it had the after taste of burnt sugar with aspirin instead of Persian brown heroin that Walter, the guy whose basement we were in, proclaimed it to be. I was disgusted and revolted from the taste. It was probably a good thing I didn't know where to get good dope in Minneapolis.

While I was lost in all that dizzying thought, Zack had begun regaling the old man with tales of varmint hunting up on the Iron Range since he was a real little kid and professed to be the best shot in the world, which I was always told is bad form, because now everyone knows who to shoot first. That's just how I was raised about shooting. The old man was really taking an interest in the kid and Grant was beaming as if he had brought a Rhodes Scholar to a retard convention.

"Young man, I might be calling upon you for more than your

musical skill on this day. I hope you are up to the task at hand." Uncle Bill's pausing and phrasing were not foreign to me, it was classic junky sleight of word drama diversion, only with a Harvard backwash and a St. Louis upper crust wrapper that was his trademark. It was so exact to how his words jumped off the page I was remembering little phrases and storylines from his work. Bukowski had once told me, "The best writers will speak exactly how they write, but beware us, our heads are full of snakes that are biting us on the inside, you see, and whenever we open our minds near you, they will bite the shit out of you, too." I reached into my army field jacket pocket and pulled out the 5th of whiskey, uncapped it, took a pull, capped it and returned it to my pocket. I did it in one smooth, slow gesture and no one noticed enough to ask for a hit. I was very fucking pleased with myself.

Old Log Cabin was a Bourbon whiskey that was not made in Bourbon County and was the only one I knew of that was not. It was made by a guy named Booz since 1840 in Pennsylvania. I had found this fifth in an old liquor store on Lyndale and 22nd

in Minneapolis on the previous night. I was in there with Grant and he was telling me I could have a fifth of whatever I wanted. I was about to have a look at the Elvis decanter collection, that was gathering dust (a good sign for a whiskey freak like me) on a shelf high above the cash register, when I noticed a strangely shaped bottle sticking up from behind one of the Elvis'. I was an expert at casing the areas of old liquor stores to find that neglected bottle that had aged long enough to have the true spirit of consummate distillery inside its glass walls.

Whiskey ages very gracefully, it usually will be 4 years old, at least, when it hits the shelf, if it is Bourbon. If you can find a bottle that, for some reason or another, has been neglected then you have the equivalent of a score as infinite in its blessing as a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Elvis decanters are notorious for shelf life in some stores and are my usual target, but today this old bottle's edge catches my eye and I ask the man behind the counter if I can see it. "See it or buy it?" the liquor clerk answers in his best "you betcha" tone. Grant intervenes, "Fuck it, man, how much for it?" he says as he

furtively searches for his cash, the last thing a dope fiend ever wants to do in a liquor store or anywhere else for that matter. "Why, I imagine 20 dollars'll do for it." as he cracks an knowing smile and his eyes narrow a little behind his horn rimmed glasses. Grant looks at me and says, "You can't just have a Jack or Jim or something easy, you gotta make shit hard on everyone."

"I know what I want, you asked me what I want. Simple as that." I keep my emotions level before the old codger thinks I really want the potential golden goodness in that bottle that will quench my egotistical sensation that I am being put upon by Grant and I deserve a reward for the intrusion on my alleged serenity.

Now I am not Grant's first choice for bass player, but I am a good choice in that I am non-judgmental about what other's are doing and I don't mind weirdness, so he was plying me with a 5th of whiskey because he didn't want to bring anyone that might be a problem on this trip. There was some inner sanctum that he and Burroughs seemed to share and I was pretty sure I didn't want to even know what it

was, but I did want the whiskey and I did want the secrets that the old man might spill and I figured some impromptu jam session in a Kansas barn while some old beatnik geezer painted something was worth the price of admission. Hell, it was the golden ticket in the candy bar at this point, but I was determined to be outwardly put upon in appearance, because that was the best way to deal with these kind of prima donna junkies.

"Beware of whores who say they don't want any money. What it means is that they want more money. Lots more. Beware of religious sons of bitches. Make sure you get an agreement from them in writing."

-William S. Burroughs

"You want some Cola to mix that in with. I have some from Mexico that is still made with cane sugar. Soliz, bring some of those bottles of Cola for everyone, as the teapot has been exhausted!" he shouts down the hall. I clear my throat before I reply, "I don't want to mix this with any Cola, but I will take a Cola to drink out of the bottle." For some reason I felt like being offered a drink in this house at this time it was imperative that I state my disdain

for shenanigans. I never let anyone mix me anything, anywhere, anytime. And I definitely don't mix 50 year old bourbon in Cola. Soliz enters from down the hall with a case of Coca-Cola bottles and fixes the host a glass of Stolichnaya, Cola and something from a small brown vial. I am confident I spoke at the right moment on my behalf. None of those shenanigans for me. He says something in Burroughs ear and then disappears back down the hallway.

Suddenly, a man appears who greets Grant with a knowing handshake. He is wary of me from across the room, and he is even more wary of Zack's presence. Kevin has been "tuning" his guitar all this time and is oblivious to everything. I am now positive there is some high grade dope in my midst. The man makes his way over to me and introduces himself, "Jim Holtz" he says as he extends a firm handshake that I return with my best sneersmile. "Razor," I say calmly. He is almost giggles. "Did your mom name you that?" he asks.

"She named me what she named me, but you can call me Razor

like everybody else." I replied quickly as I half-laughed. The speed still pumping me outward, ready to anticipate anything. "Alright then, Razor it is." He walked back over to "Uncle Bill's" side of the room and kept a side glance at the kid, who was still regaling Burroughs with some half-assed story about killing something small with a shotgun. Personally, I would have rather heard a good "human getting killed with the perfect caliber" story than the "furry critter getting blasted with too much firepower by a dumb kid with no regret or sense" story. I had always liked it best when Bugs Bunny jacked up Elmer Fudd when I was a kid. On the other hand, I kinda always wished that the coyote would eat that little fucking annoying roadrunner for a change. It was then I realized that there were only two people here that definitely had good murder stories like that to tell. And neither of us were showing any signs of talking about it right now. Since mine had never inspired books or poems, I figured there was only one story in the room that I wanted to hear. My fast paced speed drone was slowing enough to the point where I would now realize that

some marijuana would be the ticket to some random conversation.

Evidently, I was not the only one who was thinking cannabis. "Uncle Bill" went to a roll top desk and unlocked it. He rolled up the top and the loud sound stole the thunder to the kid's uninteresting story. He pulled out a red rectangle about the size of two sticks of butter. It was a satin material that wrapped what appeared to be a brick of hash. "This is something that an old friend bestowed upon me recently and I am prepared to share some of its intoxicating effects with you..." the old man began, "...it is Hashish that comes with a golden seal of crossed scimitars and an Arabic poem that is recited, quite thoughtfully, before making art, love or war." Everyone's attention was on the old man, and I had to admit it aroused a hint of jealousy inside me. To have "friends" that would smuggle me top notch hashish while I ambled around my house and drew in visitors to regale with stories, this was the life. I doubted very much I would ever know it from his perspective, but I felt it must be the pinnacle to reach for, regardless of its impossibilities. "Oooh, are we

gonna hot knife some of that?" Grant asked our host, who moved slow and meticulous to unwrap and reveal to all of us the brick of hash in all its glory. "Well, I usually have it rolled into a cigarette with some tobacco and low grade pot that Soliz gets from some of his amigos, but, I suppose..." I had to interrupt at this point, my weed was burning a hole in my pocket, so to speak, "I have some high grade weed, some Alaskan Thunderfuck, I could roll some of it up with the hash. It would only take me a second." The old man's mouth was agape and everyone looked at me as though I had spoken out of turn, but I didn't care. I was determined to call this shot.

"Alaskan Thunderfuck..." Burroughs pronounced every syllable with his sing song gravel tone perfunction, "...that sounds like an amazing manifestation of agricultural pursuits." It was all I needed for a green light. I paced over to the table, pulled out my baggie with the sticky buds inside it, and sat down ready to begin rolling the grass and the hash together. Grant was a little put off, but I knew what his hustle was. He wanted to steer it toward smoking some H. I was pretty sure that there was some

top drawer heroin in the midst that Grant and Kevin had already had a taste of. Standing around doing knife hits of hash is easily transformed into to a dragon chasing expedition. But, I didn't want to go that route just yet. I like the open kitchen space and the conversational promise it held. The rest of the house seemed darker and strewn with books, art and memorabilia. I liked the sparseness of the kitchen. I was also still tweaked and didn't want to get any more closed in than this. Burroughs moved over and placed the whole brick to my left as I was tearing the sticky bud down to its calyx. When I had a decent pile of it, I turned to the brick and picked it up. It was everything he said it was, except Golden Seal Hash. This was Bekaa Valley hashish from Lebanon. I knew the markings and the consistency and the odor immediately as I ran a lighter along its edge. It crumbled nicely, but had an oily texture. It was opiated with essence of raw opium, most likely harvested from poppies that grew near the hash plants. This was arms dealer grade contraband. I had obtained some of this in a bar in the East Village of NYC called Downtown Beirut. I got it from a Druze mercenary

who was holding some of the best Persian brown I had ever done as well. He was trying to unload a bunch of Czech "Scorpion" machine pistols. I walked away from the whole deal, but I never forgot the stories of the hash fields he told me about. Or the way that shit got me so damn wasted. I wondered why the old man would pass this for Gold Seal. It didn't make sense. I figured I would hold my mud on it for now. The opiate content would at least settle Grant down. I also figured it would do me some good as well. Stories were already being told without words being uttered. I like this kind of magic. The hash joint I rolled looked like a mini Louisville slugger. It was time for everyone to step up to the plate.

I notice my new friend, Jim, only took one turn on the J. Normally, that would not mean anything, but for the fact that he kept taking it as if he would hit it, pausing, playing it off while appearing to be distracted by whoever was talking, then passing it without ever taking his turn. This was potent stuff, but why the act? I was grateful that I had the foresight to bring my .45 and my back-up piece. I mean, this was going to be weird, I

knew, but I actually felt like there was many levels of charade and illusive behavior at work here, more so than the usual junkies jockeying for position on a race to the big spoon in the sky. There was an equation I had not put together completely. I wanted to call back up to Minneapolis and invite some friends down to the party here in Lawrence that we would be playing music at tomorrow night. I just needed some familiar faces. That had me feeling a little more self-assured as the effects of the joint began to wash through the tweak. Everything was going to be all right. Nobody was really conspiring to do anything. I was just a little edgy from driving through the cold night on tweak. I felt better already. Fuck Jim for not partaking, he seemed like a real stick up the ass, anyway. He was affectionate towards Burroughs in a way that meant to send a message to all of us. He was the protectorate, he was watching us when we weren't looking at him. I had developed a sense for this over the years. Still, Burroughs was the one with a shotgun near his person. I could flip the table and shoot them both dead in a heartbeat, if I had to. I might have to hunt the Mexican down. Nah, it won't come to that.

I got to shake the craziness. Maybe I could use a nap before we go blast guns in the back 40. At least some cold water in the face.

"James, I will require that you go to the store and procure more 12 gauge shells. The double ought buck shot will be sufficient. Also, some 9mm for the broom handle, which Soliz is cleaning and reassembling as we speak. Are there any other requests from the store?" Uncle Bill asks the room. "I would like some beer and some dark chocolate." says Grant. I rustle from my stupor to interject, without thinking, "I would like five 20 round boxes of .45 ACP Black Talons, or Hydro-Shock if the Black Talons are not available." Everyone is noticeably taken aback. I try to recover, "I did not bring any extra ammo, and it seems we will be shooting, so since you will be buying some bullets, if you get some for me, I would appreciate it." My tongue is thick and I am a little angry about the difficulty I have with speech, which helps my pronunciation somewhat, but gives the air that I am angry or in pain, I suppose. "You brought a gun with you?" Grant asks in a way that almost cracks his voice like an adolescent, "Fuck, what

were you thinking? What if we got pulled over?" "I was not thinking I would get pulled over, and I didn't. Don't bust my balls, Grant, we are here now, if you don't want me driving back up with you, I got no problem with that, but don't fucking bust my balls right now. It's not necessary." Grant was probably thinking he could find another bass player somewhere in this college town, but then, not one who would be willing to go along with this scenario without a lot of prodding. Grant liked to boss his band mates around if he could, but I was not one of them. I was just a utility player. And I didn't need any prodding. And I didn't have any opinion regarding his penchant for strange behavior. If it was about to get as strange as it seemed to me through my mental haze, I needed ammo, and when in doubt a hundred rounds always seemed reasonable. "What type of hand gun have you brought with you, as uninvited as it might be, my son?" Burroughs asked with his head raised, looking down his nose at me. "It's a Colt Gold Cup .45, I have had it worked on a little." I reply, figuring at least the quality of my firearm will earn me some respect. "Come on, Grant, you know he always has a

piece on him. You knew that when you asked him to come." Kevin interjects after he breaks out of his nodding guitar play long enough. "Fuck, man, why do you always carry a gun?" asks Zack. "Fucking people from L.A., that's why, Zack." Grant says to the kid, as if to shut him down, then continues at me, "Yes, I want you to find another way back. I don't want you coming back with us armed." Grant was doing his best to be all put out, but, it was like Kevin said, he knew when he asked me. I didn't give a fuck. I was going to play the gig, collect what was due, hang with the old beat daddy and get my head twisted. Nobody was going to stop it. Not now anyway. "So, can I get the bullets then?"

I had not noticed it until now, but Jim was red in the face angry, like he wanted to come at me and have a slapping fight or something. Burroughs looked at him and spoke real calm, "Should he write down the specifications for the cartridges, James, or can you remember them?" The old man's voice breaks Jim out of his angry clench. "Well, maybe it would be best if he wrote them down, if just any ones won't do, maybe you should just go with

me." A chance at fresh air on a midwest winter's morning. That was just the ticket to shake off the chilling night drive. "Fine by me, does your car have a heater?" I come back. "It is a truck, and it most certainly does." says Jim. "Lead the way, then." I say as I get up from the table and a bit of warm dizziness hits me. A little movement will be good for my soul.

The pick-up truck is a classic, an old Apache. I climb in and he starts it. I sit there in a blissful silence for a moment. The engine is really cold, but I can hear every chug of the intake, ignition, exhaust cycle. I can listen to engines make music as they warm up. The oil lubricating more and more from the top down as its viscosity rapidly changes with each profound increase in temperature. The mixture of the air and the fuel as the carburetor adjusts its jets. The valves in the heads getting less sticky and more fluid with every counter-balanced turn of the crankshaft. This engine has an exhaust leak that is the song it sings this morning.

It is now morning in full effect. The cold air is like a glass lens bringing everything into a sharp

focus. Frost on everything. Patches of ice and snow like a pattern on a jersey cow that rolls off into the distance to the point of the horizon where the sunlight is compressed into a sharp glint that swallows contrasting flocks of birds with its glaring burst. There is still so much that can happen on this trip, but for the moment there is a peace and a chance to catch my breath as the truck rumbles down the winter roads of Kansas.

The gun store in the distance pulls me nearer like a moth to a lamp and a certain fate. I am woozy by the time we get there and the morning sunlight is not blocked by enough cloud cover at this point. Even with sunglasses I look conspicuous and tweaked, so I try to imagine that this is the gun store back in San Berdoo and it makes it seem like it's all right. My buddy, Jim, has gone looking around for some things and I figure I should just go straight to the back where the ammo is obviously maintained behind a counter that is manned by a dirty blonde mid-twenties girl with a serious expression and a far away stare, like she was lost in a lament about something that missed her or passed her by.

“Excuse me, I am looking for some 45 ACP ammo. Specifically, Black Talon or Hydro-Shock.” I figure get to the point and then maybe ask what’s missing from her life. What the hell, I have been talking to dudes all night and all morning and a feminine perspective might go with some good ballistics real well about now. “Well, you must have a real pesky boar infestation to sort out or you are on your way to Kansas City to shoot some long pig.” She says as she cracks a grin. It is a nice snappy comeback that is eerily on the same wavelength as myself. I immediately feel relaxed and a very interested in hearing some more. “I am out to target practice with some liquid filled containers and I need ordnance that cavitates well for the optimum outcome.”

“Sounds like an over-dramatic outcome, if you ask me. I’ll check on the Black Talon, I know I have the Hydro-Shock. Gold Saber is good, as well, for that.” She turns and moves to the shelves behind her and searches for my request. “I will admit that dramatic is one of the goals that I aiming for. I am going to shoot some cans of paint and I want it to make a big splatter. It is for an art project.” I am noticing some of the more

redneck customers have stopped moving and are closely paying attention. I am actually bolstered by this somewhat. I figure they must see some freaks out this way from time to time due to the likes of Burroughs and his cohorts that populate the area.

“I think I have heard of the art project you are taking part in. Old Man Burroughs is shooting a bunch of shit up out at his place quite a bit these days. You some hired gun from some strange place?” She asks while sizing me up as she brings some boxes to the counter for my inspection. “Yes, you have heard of the work out there then?” I ask as I look at the three types of boxes she sets in front of me. I am in a habit of never touching bullets with bare fingers, so I look, but don’t move my hands near the boxes. “Can you open the Gold Saber and show it to me, please?”

She looks a little awkward at first, then she realizes what my hesitation must mean and she begins to open and display each box of ammo, taking one round out of each and laying on its side on the rubber mat that is in front of her on the counter. I notice that the Gold Saber comes in 50 per box, while the Black Talon and

the Hydro-Shock is 20 rounds per box. I don't want to waste her time. I know the abilities of each round and it seems that the "variety is the spice of life" rule comes into play here. Especially since Uncle Bill's guy is footing the bill. "Give me three boxes of Black Talon and the three boxes of Hydro-Shock and a box of the Gold Saber." I say with confidence and here a few muffled responses from the store behind me. I make out two different "Jesus's" and at least one "Mother Fucker."

She bagged the boxes and said, "I'll take these up to the other counter where they will check you out and you can pay there, they don't trust me with a register of my own." She giggled a demonic little smile at me that made my heart a bit lighter than it had been before.

"You up for a shooting contest? I am more than handy with a .45 myself. I'll bring my own ammo." I see a bit of fire in her eyes that I had missed before. She was either on some substance similar to mine or she was batshit crazy and entrusted to a wall of gunpowder and lead. Either one was a fascinating enough possibility and the offhand chance that both

might be the case was the most interesting thing I had contemplated in awhile.

"If you are willing to give me your number I will call you after checking with my host. I am playing in a band for a party tomorrow night, so I do have some free time. If he is reticent about you coming out to his property, would you still want to hang out?" I spun it all together in a smooth, but tweaked, delivery that hit her quick and straight. She immediately grabbed a pen and a slip of paper and scrawled so quickly I thought she might put the pen through the rubber mat. "Here, I get off her at 3, call me around 3:30."

She handed me the slip of paper and smiled. She had a snaggletooth that was cute as an alligator in heat and a tomboy attitude that had my complete attention. Self-sufficient women that have struck a vein of independent happiness always seem to raise my spirits higher than anything else possibly can. Now I really had something to look forward to and I could care less about any of the politics back at the pad. It seemed like the stakes had been raised and an

even more exceptional experience was to be had. However, every silver lining has a cloud that covers it. When I got to the register counter Jim was there and he seemed a little disgruntled.

"You can't just invite anyone you meet over to the compound. And that is a bit more ammo than was asked for. It's not like Burroughs is made of money." Jim was on a bit of a tear. I had to chuckle at him though. "What's so funny?" he snapped. "Look, man, I did not tell her she could come. I said I would ask and I would call her. I don't fuck with people like that. I also appreciate that Mr. Burroughs is not made of money, but I feel that is a more adequate selection of ammunition and I hope that I am not impeding on anything that might rock the boat. I just want to have a good time and I was told it was not going to be a problem." I didn't really expect the reaction I got back from Ol' Jim Boy, but nobody seemed to be behaving how I expected around this camp.

"I hope I didn't come off as rude right now. You are a guest and an artist in your own right. I just try my best to have Bill's interest at

heart always. I am not trying to make a problem. I just didn't expect you to offer that crazy dagger an invite to our place." Jim came back with a softer voice and approach so fast, I was very taken aback. I was also stumbling a little on his estimation of the girl as a "dagger." Then I realized that he came here all the time and I got the picture. Catfight Royale. These two had words in the past and Jim was covering up a bit of a latent hostility toward her. I looked down at the scrap of paper. "Tilly" was the name above the number. I am quickly falling in love with my new friend Tilly. An unconditional and platonic love, of course. A man who never touches bullets with bare fingers has to be careful everywhere.

"I understand, Jim, and rest assured I would not want to wear my welcome out or mistake a kindness for a weakness. I have the same expectation of others in my own home." I said as plain as could be, continuing, "I did, however, forget the nine milli rounds, so if you get those brought up, I need to use the little boys room." I asked the clerk at the register the bathroom whereabouts and he pointed over to the camping gear section of the

store. I walked away from Jim and his weird flip-flop vibe. I was drained from all the strange energy. I needed a pick me up. When I got into the closet sized bathroom that doubled as a mop sink area, I pulled out my coin bag of crystal and poured some on the bit of skin where my

thumb and forefinger met. I did the blast and turned on the sink so my sniffing would be covered by the sound of the running water. The burn got my attention and, as the drainage gagged me a bit, the meth stiffened my spine right up.



*"...barely missing on a frozen plain to nowhere... (or how I exploded my own ticket)" is an excerpt from the as yet unpublished novel **Low Plains Drifter** – an autobiographical account of A. Razor's homeless wanderings across the Midwestern states, as he drifted from coast to coast between his birthplace of Brooklyn, NY and the California surroundings where he spent most of his childhood.*



the mind's camera - we
heart is drifting. Ufa ca
No need. It's not a
that week in a single
messengers? Something is scuttling
like spiders knowingly to
"escargots", vaguely laughing
watching the test card and
terror. The siren
which was a piece of music.



Apre ran down a vision
vaguely bad trip. S
hysterically on our mo
sky above the wounde
a sudden move

where
every
the air

and red
over m

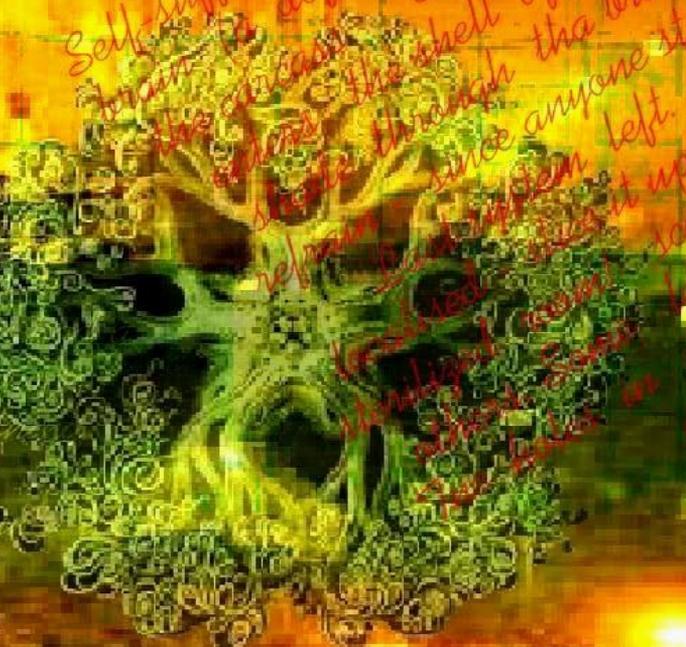
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messengers? Something is scuttling
like spiders knowingly to
"escargots", vaguely laughing
watching the test card and
terror. The siren
which was a piece of music.

*Self-sufficient, functioning it still isn't a brain (a defective term)
It's take over the carriage. So...*



*An automatic terror, sudden
feeling of drowning - a siren w
wen - my arm. Frau Erotica
abright - visions in blue or some
ting through
There was a piece of music follow
station.
And...*

*Self-sufficient
brain in
the ocean
since the shell of a
the broke
since anyone it
left.
it up
no
in*



so we operate; then the flies come, aj.1
2 golden/green. Some feel its needed - splattered
on walls and on the ceiling. A scant piece of
playing - it's been 24 hours in stone.

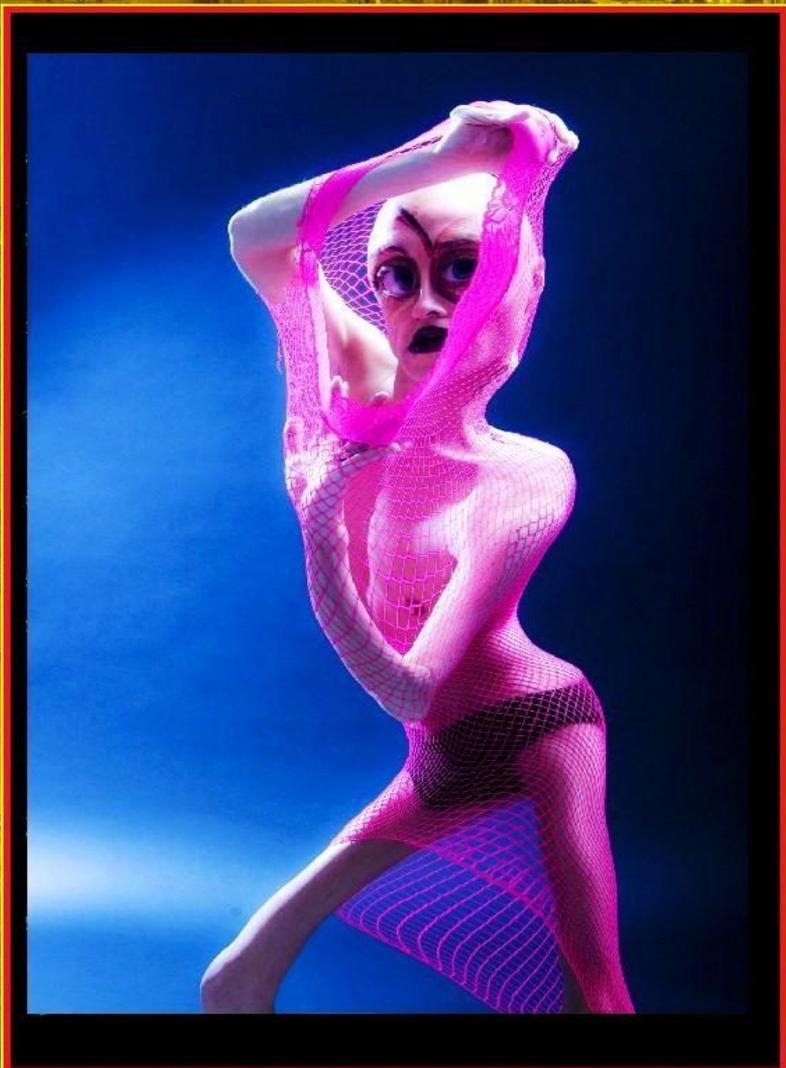
An evocation proceed a faint whisper,
lettering this desperate blood to tanned
remnant of fiction burning the ravine



And we saw the burnt red ground cracke
d amid clouds covered with destruction.
Our minds established order released
in anguish under that pale

Self-sufficient,
brain (a defective
over, the carcass
butterfly enters
entrance) a shade
exchange refrain
attention. Past
not localised - slice it up

The machines, the X-rays, the green
water whose face had been telling a
functioning it still isn't a
fragment of the photos. A low
murmuring of little voices approaches
So, 10 times the
hills upon hills. He said skulls in
glass tube rise to the mimicking eye
revealing the cheated strings the
the brain is



bigger than
with the thing.
lights and
machines, the
whose face had
of the photos
little voices
He said
the cheated
that while the
the next dreams
green is almost
a brown chair
their in kind
of the notes has
a kind of

eyes feeds through dreams, of standing face
the adjoined down. Clumping luggage at the
completely admitted for an hour. The hair
towns, mid-top, lamps, ceilings, lattices,
and teeth have top and men, business
tomorrow's street mess that will
of the city. This image of
to communicate a feel
recognition.

Underfoot, revealing a pollution en route
to the nightmare elephant - I refuse to
die of a skull, stained sockets, defiled
water basins from a Dieppe window.
Symphony of the mind's camera - we
drank beer, fly heart is drifting, Vifa can
put it up to you. No need. It's not a
hot dog. Oh-how that week of a single
detail, messiners? Something is scuttling
past me like spiders knowingly to
reel - "escargots", vaguely laughing
hysterically watching the test card and
pointing to the air - terror. The siren
which was a piece of music.



Pig iron wormcasts our inheritance
dying from a galloping malady
We spit it and the flies come golden and
green some feel its need
Splattered on walls and ceiling

Additional Otherworldly portraits can be seen at:
<http://www.thomasevansphotography.com>



PLAYING TAG WITH THE DEVIL

An Interview With Robert Earl Reed

It would be considerably easier to describe the music of Robert Earl Reed in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is. For instance, it is not overproduced or ostentatious in a 'music industry' way. Nor does it aspire to appear sophisticated or hip. Despite its candour, it does not feign 'authenticity' in the way that much self-pronounced folk culture does. That kind of 'authenticity' has become another marketable commodity that can be bought and sold alongside

other genres. Reed's music not only defies facile categorisation, but makes one question the need to attempt the same.

Watching the music video for 'Boone County Thunder'¹, a face peers out of the screen, guileless and uncurious, like a character from a Beckett novel. The eyes gaze out with an apparent lack of

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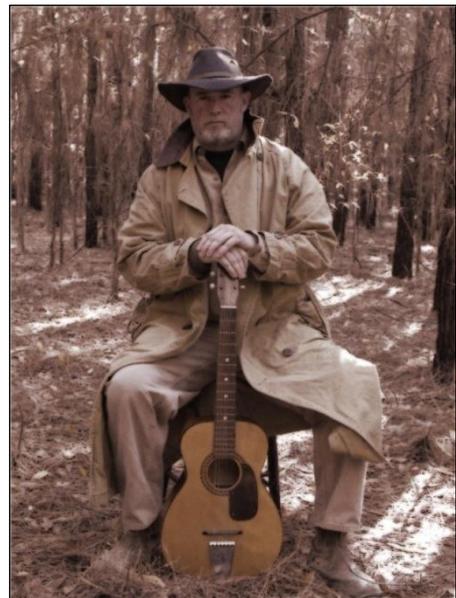
(<http://www.paraphiliamagazine.com/dungeon.html>)

interest, and no trace of introspection. The eyes look out plainly and simply, seeing what is in front of them without agenda or any attempt to appropriate the visible world to any predetermined cultural scheme. The man's body is stringy and lean with a suggestion of sinewy strength, neither poised nor in repose. It simply *is*. More like a gnarled tree or a rock formation that has grown in place a vast amount of time.

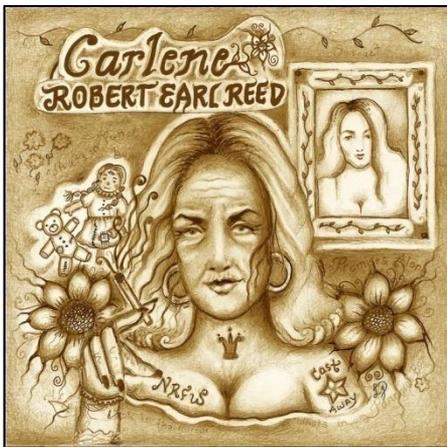
Accompanying these opening images is the sound of a thunderstorm, providing the 'backing' for the song itself - a natural orchestra that blends into the music without drama or bombast. Like the face of Mr. Brock, it simply *is*. A guitar starts up, playing simple, understated chords, E minor, A - a standard blues progression, strummed lightly, almost hesitantly. And then Robert Earl Reed starts singing. The voice is natural, rugged and square, not that of a trained singer. It creaks like a tree in the wind, and the words drop into the framework of the song itself, like pebbles into a pond, chosen more for their weight than for their superficial polish.

The song winds its unassuming way through your consciousness, and by the time it's finished, you find yourself wondering what you just heard.

It was not flashy or overbearing. If anything, you may feel nonplussed at its naivety, and bewildered by the way the singer made no effort to convince you of his beliefs or opinions, or to make claims for his significance. The song just *is*. You find yourself listening to it again, trying to recapture what you just experienced, and pin down what it was about the song that was so haunting. After the second listening you are none the wiser... but you're hooked.



Robert Earl Reed is an emerging artist of the Americana music genre. Hailing from Little Rock, Arkansas, he currently resides and creates his unique brand of music in the North Mississippi Hill Country. His debut album entitled *Carlene* will be released in January 2011.



Listening through the songs on this album, the most striking impression you get is one of familiarity - the kind of familiarity you feel when striking up a conversation with a stranger, and finding you somehow 'know' the person. It's an experience reminiscent of discovering an old family album in a junk shop or an abandoned house. Photos of people who may have given up the ghost ages ago, telling vignettes, whose small and incidental details reveal layers of intimate facts

about the lives of the subjects - lives that simultaneously intersect, yet tragically remain fixed on their own personal paths with their joys and tragedies.

The songs' characters and their backgrounds blend into each other inseparably and inevitably. The ravaging passage of time is shown modestly and compassionately, but without angst. There is nothing of Faulkner here. No pacts with, or duels with the devil, no Old Testament style prophecies, and yet one feels nonetheless a great sense of spirituality at work. A spirituality (God, if you like) that isn't set apart from our world, but that moves through everything natural, shapes it and changes it and imbues it with its quiet power and dignity.

Paraphilia Magazine conducted the following interview with Mr. Reed, who we have found to be a very gracious and forthcoming person...

Paraphilia Magazine: *You haven't been playing long, is that right? Tell us how it came about.*

Robert Earl Reed: In the Summer of 2005 I lost a dear friend, Sgt.

Daron Audrey Lunsford, to the War in Iraq. Daron and I had a mutual friend here at home, Jason "Taters" Evans who is a fine Guitarist. While hanging around one another, Taters taught me some chords on the guitar. For some odd reason those simple chords awoke something in my mind. I began to write. Poems came at a brisk pace. Thoughts long sequestered in my mind began to bleed out of me. The addition of music just seemed natural.



I was forty, and was living in a manner that, as I look back on now, was ridiculous. The music suddenly became a tangible endeavor that filled a void in my life. Abstract thought had always

been in my mind, but now I had an outlet so that I could share what I was thinking and living with others. As luck would have it, I was introduced to the Grammy Winning Artist, Jimbo Mathus (Squirrel Nut Zippers and much more). Jimbo has a studio (Delta Recording Services) here not far from my home. Initially I hired Jimbo to produce and sing three songs that I had written. I loved being in the studio. After the first session, Jimbo said, "You know you should really sing your own songs." I scoffed at the notion. I had never sang a note in front of anyone, but Jimbo was insistent. Jimbo and my co-producer Justin Showah (Afrissippi) patiently helped me "find" my voice over these last few years. There was no master plan to produce and release an album, but the songs kept coming.

PM: *In the themes of your songs, you don't go for the big overblown dramas so popular of Nashville, and yet they are incredibly gripping and moving.*

RER: The songs on *Carlene* are a mixture of personal experiences and observations I have of the human condition. They are my simple reflections on times and

people that I think we all know at a point in our lives. I write what comes to me. I don't set about to write a song about a particular subject. I either see something that moves me, or I contemplate a time or episode in my life and the words come forth. Each line writing the next until I've said what I want to say.

PM: *How much of a time span do those songs cover in terms of drawing on characters and experiences from your life?*

RER: I suspect that they are from the very beginning of my life to now. There are many metaphors wrapped in to the songs that represent many different times, people, or emotions that I have. My thoughts about these subjects began taking shape I suspect when I was a child, and the environment in which I was raised.

I've seen some of these characters many times in my life, both in myself my family, or in others ...random strangers who exhibit the same wants desires needs. I've lived, unfortunately, some of these experiences over and over as well and they've taken their toll.

PM: *Listening to the album, everything is recorded very professionally but the production job is quite simple. You've not used masses of studio effects, only minimal reverb. Tell us a bit about that.*

RER: The Brilliance that is Delta Recording lies in Jimbo and Justin. I am the writer who comes with the lyrics and the chord progression. They are ones who craft my raw materials into the songs. Together we create the textures. The studio has a soul of its own that is ever present in the songs. Jimbo uses vintage equipment like 1947 ribbon microphones, and vintage guitars and amps to turn out a very different sound. Each song on the album was recorded one night at a time. Most of them have few if any overdubs and were laid down in just a two or three takes. The emphasis being on capturing the feel and personality of the piece and not on the perfect placement of notes. Additionally I am blessed to have access to fine local musicians who would lend their talent to the work. Much like my writing, we would begin a session with no preconceived notion of what form the song would take. It was creation on the fly. We are influenced greatly by

the late Jim Dickinson the legendary Producer a dear friend and mentor to Jimbo, who believed in that magical way of creating. We didn't want to sound like anyone. We wanted to craft our own sound and I do believe we succeeded.

PM: *Are you really a reverend?*

RER: (Laughing) Yes, in a sense. An Internet reverend I am. The journey to become "ordained" came as an act of protest. For roughly \$39.00 U.S. ANYONE may become a Reverend or Doctor or whatever religious title they want. My point being that man is fallible, and just because someone has a title in front of his/her name doesn't make them any different than you or me. I look at history and see the destruction wrought in the name of religious ideology and it makes me sick. I have no problem with people believing what they want, just don't be violent, judgmental, or prejudicial in said practice. Peace and Harmony, that's what I wish for all. Unfortunately that will never come to pass I fear.

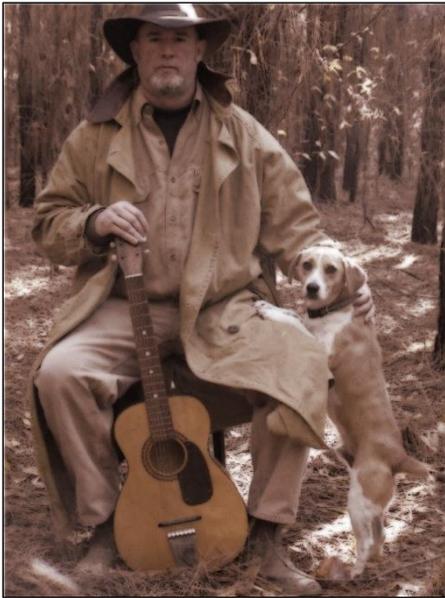
PM: *How much of your spiritual leanings come across into the music?*

RER: I suspect a great deal of my leanings are there. I do not shun others of faith, unless I find them to be hypocritical or dangerous. We all look into the void that will come for us all and each have to deal with it in our own way. I wish sometimes that I hadn't peeked in Pandora's Box.

PM: *The people you sing about, are they all real people you know or have known? Like Mr. Brock?*

RER: Yes those are all real people that I know or have known. Sometimes that person is myself. I am drawn to people who are different. I am drawn to pointing out the realities of life. Some say, "Wow, you are dark!" to which I answer, no, I'm a realist. I am pointing out the cold hard underbelly of life. I'm not being dark. I am merely trying to say, "Hey it's good to deal in reality and it's fine to be different." They are... I am... a person and there is meaning in our existence. Mr. Brock is a prime example. He didn't read or write very well. He was what people around here would call "touched". His speech was like that of some turn of the century back woodsman... he bathed very infrequently... in his home he had only electricity...

no running water, no television. He lived a very austere existence. However, sitting and speaking with him you would find that at his core he only wanted what everyone wants... acceptance, love, a family, etc. But because he was so outwardly different and had such odd behavioral tendencies he was ostracized within his community. The cruelty of life weeded him out of the gene pool and he never married nor bore children.



PM: *You've written about Mr. Brock on your blog spot <http://reverendrobertearreed.blogspot.com>*

RER: Well, I have many other stories in my head about that

soul. He was a very interesting fellow. His eyes were so clear. He couldn't write very well, and when he did, it was all Caps with dots in between and in a type of old English like "YE. SONS.OF.GAWD. SHOULD. NOT. BE. RESPECTER. OF. PERSONS." and he would write messages on cardboard and affix it to trees in the woods where I walked and hunted. You would be walking along and come upon four trees with Bible Versus and words written about his desire for love. He had a special way speaking that was much like his written word. He had a piano that he used two fingers to play for anyone who would listen. He wore "Walkin' Shorts" as he called them... this, I found out in my older years was actually his underwear. He would not find it odd to walk the property in those Walkin' Shorts.

PM: *How connected is your music with the place you live?*

RER: The music is reflective of the many places I have lived. I have lived in Chicago, Charlotte, and Los Angeles and small towns of Arkansas and Mississippi. In a nut shell, you experience much of the same wherever you go. There

are people all trying to survive. There are the "upper crust" and the "lower class"...there are just people, breeding, consuming, fighting, loving, dying, living out addictions, just being people. I know that having lived in many places and having seen many different ways of life that this has contributed to my desire to communicate about the human condition. I personally am a chameleon with respect to where or whom I am with. My music is influenced by my channeling (if that's the right word) the very personal feelings that I get when I encounter a human being in a certain way. I am a very empathetic person... I hurt when others around me hurt... that trait was directly from my mother... I do not like to see anyone in pain and it haunts me. Most people do not understand why I would even care... they think it's a waste of time. Perhaps it is, but it is there and I can't look away.

PM: *We won't ask who your 'influences' are because that's always odious. Who would you say taught you the most - in life and with regards to your music?*

RER: In life that would be my Mother and Father. They

divorced when I was three. My Mother worked and provided for me as best she could. I really didn't know my father until I was sixteen. However by this time they each had remarried and actually were close friends until he died. They both were empathetic people. Neither of them was tolerant of individuals who were not real at heart, and each of them encouraged me to do whatever it was in life that I wanted to do. They taught me that if I put mind to it I could accomplish whatever I wanted. They were each free-spirited and volatile. They were creative in many ways and encouraged the same in me. Musically it would start with the belief that Jimbo and Justin had in me that I could create something special. The sound and the philosophy behind the sound comes from living here in North Mississippi. There is a certain vibe that one gets by being around the Hill Country Blues music of R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, Otha Turner, Sid Hemphill and their sons and daughters, and grandsons and granddaughters. People like Jessie Mae Hemphill, and R.L. Boyce who are as real as you can get. An artist can't help but be touched by the area and local

talent that it offers. I have been fortunate to be privy to sessions at Delta Recording that featured Luther Dickinson, Alvin Youngblood Hart, Davis Coen, Eric Deaton, Shannon McNally (who lends her fantastic voice to "Castaway Star") and many others.



John Prin, the songs from the Book *North American Folk Songs*, John Lomax, and Darrell Scott, Johnny Cash, many artists... it's hard to name them really. I try very hard not to pattern or copy. I realize that much of what I have heard influences me. I love all music from Beethoven to Suicidal Tendencies to Sinatra, on and

on... so really it's just music in general. When I write, I write the words first and the music comes from the words and some place in my mind. They all have left indelible marks in my mind whether they hear it or not.

PM: *How did the album come about?*

RER: The album itself came out of the cosmic ether. One song led to another and so on. It was a labor of love for me and my two dear friends. It is my totem. One day I hope that my children will listen back to it and say, "Hey Pops was a unique guy, with some unique thoughts and he made a piece of Art that we are proud of." Earlier this year, some of my music was chosen to be in the score for *Where I Begin*, an independent film by Thomas Phillips and Melanie Addington. This exposure brought about the right time to release *Carlene*.

PM: *Can you tell us about the collaboration with Kim Dallesandro?*

RER: I found Kim through MySpace, and really enjoyed her writings and lyrics that she posted. I would share some of my music with her and she was

one of the people that gave me confidence to keep creating. Her song "Splash Me" struck a chord with me. Here is an excerpt from my Blog about this:

'The Featured song on my page is "Splash Me" by Ms. Kim Banks Dallesandro. This song came I would say by way of the fates and the supernatural oceans of thought and ideas that traverse the ether in the dark of the night. Through my admiration of Kim's visual work on her MySpace and Kim finding interest in my music we began to trade poems and quips back and forth.

I found that Kim is also quite an accomplished lyricist. When she posted "Splash Me" as a comment to other's sites, I knew in an instant that I FELT! that song. Kim was kind enough to invite me to interpret the song. This song was written by Kim in the 70s and recorded by Kimmie Rhodes in Austin back then. Unfortunately, Kim had lost the track and no one seemed to have a copy of it. So here were these profound words who had become separated from their music. I appreciate Kim letting us interpret the song. It is actually the first song that I have recorded

outside of my own writings. It is that special to me.'

PM: *Do you play live very often?*

RER: I don't play my own music live all that much. This type of music needs a certain kind of audience. I'm looking for them. (laughs) In February I'll be performing at Music in the Hall in Oxford, MS in support of the release of the *Where I Begin* movie. I hope that by building awareness of my music that I can find audiences that would like to hear it live, and I can plan economically feasible trips to perform it.

Currently I play in Jimbo Mathus' *Mosquitoville, Mississippi Songs and Stories*, which is a theatrical production that chronicles the 1880s and the Birth of the Timber Industry here in Mississippi to the Westward Expansion. I play tenor banjo and the part of "Mr. Chorley". It is a 10 to 12 piece Folk Orchestra that Jimbo has assembled to rave reviews. I am cutting my live teeth there, and what better teacher than Jimbo Mathus?

PM: *There's a weird irony in the way your music and words have found their way into the world via*

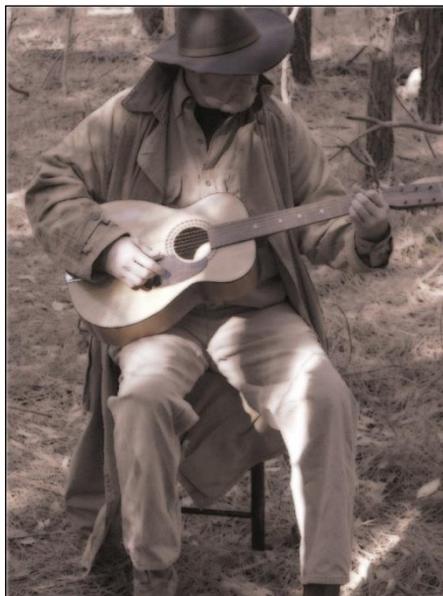
the internet. A strange marriage of the simple and minimal with high-tech. What do you think about that?

RER: I know that without the internet we'd have all never met. I have met so many fine artists of all disciplines. Lana Gentry, the surrealist, who is illustrating the artwork for *Carlene* is a fantastic find. Her style and vision fit perfectly with the rough hewn edges of my art. Also a long list of people who over the past five years gave me healthy criticism or pats on the back that emboldened me to continue honing my art. There is a bigger sea of voices than ever now, and to be heard by people like yourselves is such a great honor. It is allowing me to achieve that goal of leaving this totem and knowing that I did do something that was considered "good", and that feels GREAT!

PM: *And what next? What would you like to happen?*

RER: I would like to continue to write and record. I write a song every few days. I feel like I got started so late that I have so much more to say but in a limited time. I feel a real sense of urgency about that. I want to find my audience and then perhaps play

these songs live and tell the stories that are so important to me.



**Photos © Kaolin Bass, *Carlene*
Cover Art © Lana Gentry**

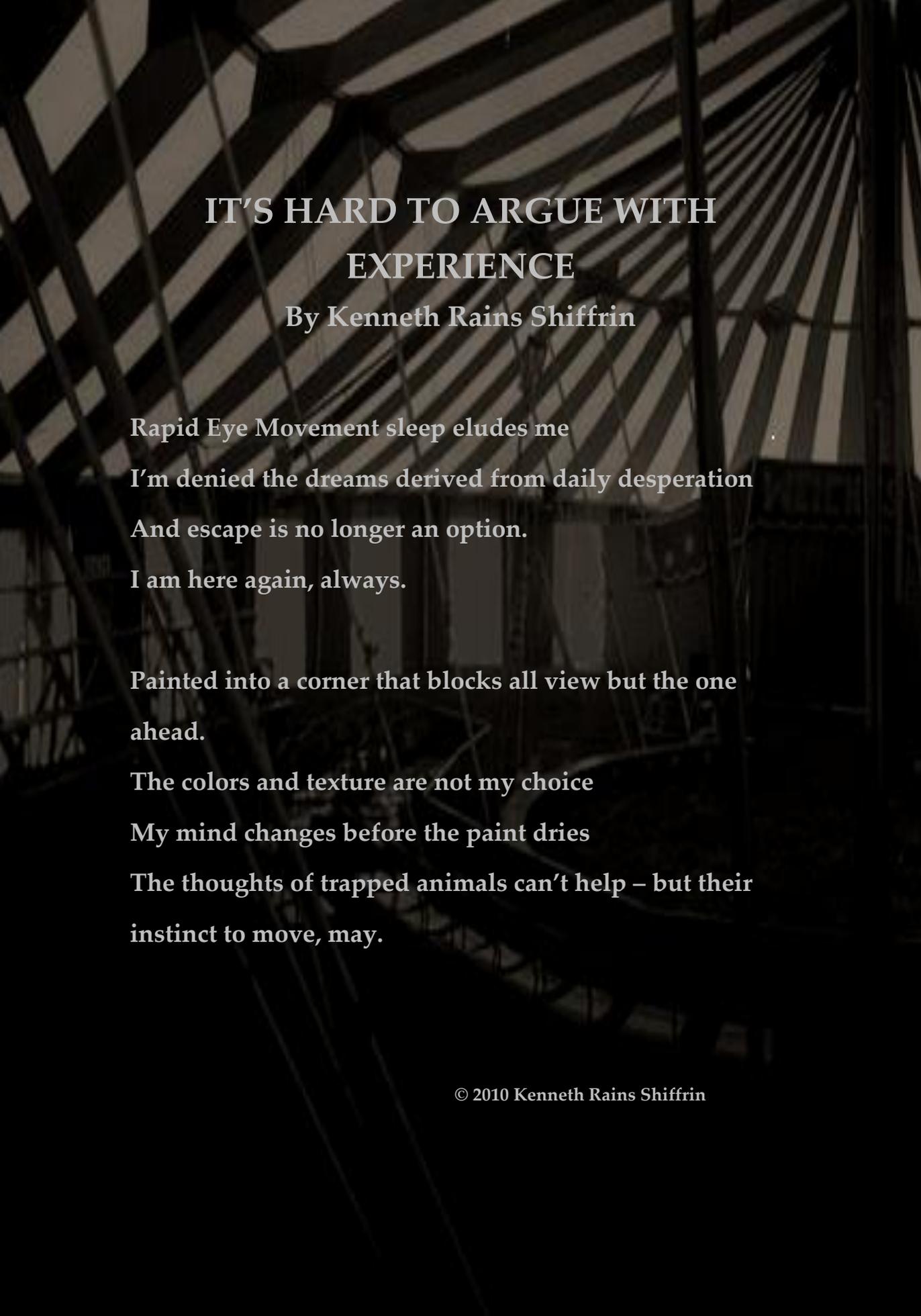
Carlene is available on pre-order special at:

www.hillcountryrecords.com

All pre-orders will be shipped by January 1st. For more information on the album, please visit:

www.carlenethecd.com

For booking, please contact Justin Showah at 662.816.4000.



IT'S HARD TO ARGUE WITH EXPERIENCE

By Kenneth Rains Shiffrin

Rapid Eye Movement sleep eludes me
I'm denied the dreams derived from daily desperation
And escape is no longer an option.
I am here again, always.

Painted into a corner that blocks all view but the one
ahead.

The colors and texture are not my choice
My mind changes before the paint dries
The thoughts of trapped animals can't help – but their
instinct to move, may.

BLOOD AND HONEY AT THE HORIZON, THE HORSE SAID

By Craig Woods

Rain fell hard on Lake Pontchartrain. The disgruntled sky swirled and bellowed, a heat haze shimmering odiously above the brackish water like the afterbirth of a strangled dream. Matthias stood statuesque and watched as Jensen's ruined body - entrails spread out in a visceral collage - began to sink into the softening clay. For the previous six carnary years, this bold black horse had been his closest compatriot and the only living creature he considered his equal. Now the noble beast lay slain, his magnificent form defiled by the vicious geek child who, clearly having harboured her plan of sabotage for some time, had now robbed Matthias of everything he valued. In an aberrant moment of uncontrolled anger, he raised his pistol to the sky and fired as though attempting to blast a hole in the firmament itself. His eyes wept red with frustration. Over the course of his wayward life, Matthias had made himself an enemy of many. But caring nothing for the underlings he offended or harmed, he neglected to return this sentiment. To

identify another human being as an *enemy* required some recognition of their influence upon him. Until that rainswept morning of 1911, no living soul had proved a worthy enough adversary to warrant the title. Now though his vexation had a name: Soledad Cuervo de Perdido.

He had acquired the child as part of a disreputable deal during a season tour in Mexico City four years previously. A big time industrialist by the name of Velasquez had a stiff one for freaks, the more grotesque the better. Seemed the big shot's illicit dalliance with a local dog-woman had produced this illegitimate child whom - though boasting no obvious deformities of her own - was nonetheless a massive inconvenience to such a respectable pillar of the community as Sr Velasquez. Much of the man's public appeal rested on his carefully cultivated image as a steadfast husband and father, embodying the traditionalist ethics of loyalty and honesty. An affair with a peasant

maid or prostitute would have inflicted damage enough, but were it to become common knowledge that the man had a penchant for slipping his mannerly meat into the cracks and cavities of seamy circus oddities then he would be surely ruined - the fact of his mutant offspring the bitter icing on a gravely unpalatable cake.

"Please, Senor Matthias. I pay you good money to make these ... *problems* disappear."

Sceptical at first, Matthias was swayed irrevocably when Velasquez had introduced his canine mistress, Dolores Cuervo de Perdido. The dog-woman had been quite sublime; an elegant figure layered in coarse hair with a proud aquiline muzzle protruding unapologetically from the malformed face. Dolores could understand the Spanish language perfectly but her deformed vocal chords ensured that she could communicate exclusively via guttural croaks and barks. Matthias was quite smitten. His sideshow had already boasted its fair share of distinguished freaks but Dolores was truly exceptional. Velasquez offered to sell the specimen to him but only on the condition

that Matthias also accept the bastard child as part of the arrangement. Matthias was deeply reluctant. The child, a bedraggled urchin with matted black hair hanging perpetually over her sharp features, not only displayed no obvious symptoms of freakish, but she seemed of a wretchedly reticent disposition. The carnymaster could conceive of no way he might possibly make productive use of the girl. Nonetheless, Velasquez was insistent and Dolores appeared quite attached to her daughter. Thus Matthias found himself leaving Mexico with both in tow. If nothing else, he decided, Soledad would provide another pair of hands in shifting and dropping the awnings from one place to another. Besides, once she was a little older, he could always rent her at a fair price to the local clemis if things got tight. Whatever hand fate might deal, he was going to make sure the girl earned her keep.

How he now regretted that decision, the first true regret of a life spent on the world's darkest margins. If he had only followed his initial gut instinct and turned his back on the wonderful dog-woman and her vicious daughter. If he had only refused to permit

Soledad a claim of influence upon his existence, for this was the greatest affront of all.

For the first two years Dolores proved the jewel of the sideshow, wowing crowds throughout the southern states as the Matthias entourage developed a robust reputation as one of the greatest travelling shows in the Americas. From Texas to Missouri, the dog-woman was greeted with the same awestruck mixture of fascination and disgust. During this period her daughter remained silent and sullen. Matthias put Soledad to work as a rousty. Though barely an adolescent, the girl worked her diminutive body thoroughly in any given task. She learned the ways of the awnings quickly, becoming something of a tent expert in a very short space of time, her nimble hands seemingly carved for the express pursuit of grim and arduous tasks. Moreover, while her mutant origins had neglected to endow her with any obvious deformities, she nonetheless revealed certain talents which were undeniably canine in nature. She could sniff out a cheat like a bloodhound and - hairs rising on her thin arms - she would grow stiff and emit a low growl whenever she

caught scent of the law closing in. Additionally, Soledad was a born prowler. Crouched low to the ground, every muscle hard and tight, sniffing nose turned downwards, she could move swiftly and silently through shadows and crowds almost invisibly. It was on account of this particular ability that she was eventually assigned the prime duty of marking, for none other of Matthias' employees possessed the dual gifts of deft perception and inconspicuousness that so allowed Soledad to identify potential vics and mark them undetected.

As an added bonus, Soledad more than proved her expediency in the event of trouble. During a spontaneous 'Hey, Rube!' in Mississippi, she was revealed to be a ferocious and remorseless fighter. Matthias could still conjure vividly the broken bloody face of the dumb yokel who'd wound up taking on a lot more than he'd bargained for when he picked a fight with Fiery Jack the Blade Glommer. In Jack's defence, Soledad had launched herself teeth-first at the townie's crotch, clamping herself there like a vice. Screaming, the hick attempted to push her away only to lose three fingers to the girl's

snapping snarling jaws. She had then grabbed her victim's head with both hands and slammed it repeatedly against the hard ground, blood pumping from the torn scalp, the skull cracking audibly. The incident had necessarily precipitated an immediate circus-jump, but the fool had been lucky to escape with his life. While her manner remained perpetually aloof and her animalistic tics proved occasionally unnerving, Matthias could certainly not complain of the girl being lazy or without use. He would never be fond of Soledad but he soon accepted her as an asset.

Things took a turn for the worse during a term in East Texas through the winter of '09. Dolores' health had begun to ail and her mood spiralled downwards. She would spend her nights coughing sleeplessly, a terrible bronchial sound that turned the stomach to hear it. Before long it was affecting her performance as she refused to stand for the onlookers, instead sitting sulkily with her back turned and her canine features concealed. When Matthias had attempted to cajole her into a standing position she had snapped viciously at his hand,

drawing blood. Enraged and despite himself, Matthias had proceeded to whip the dog-woman into obedience. This drew a hugely hostile reaction from the audience who roared and spat at the carny-master as he beat the cowering, yelping figure who was now coughing up copious amounts of bright red blood. He could recall glimpsing Soledad's face, her eerie dark eyes peering from the edge of the awnings as he violated her mother, an unreadable expression claiming the young features half-hidden by that impermeable curtain of black hair. The episode was a disaster and the entourage was forced to circus-jump the very next day for fear of reprisals by rowdy locals. Later in the night, an audible commotion from Dolores and Soledad's carriage disrupted the caravan's collective sleep. The dog-woman - her pent-up rage at having been so publicly humiliated now seemingly erupting - beat her daughter mercilessly. Soledad's cries continued for over an hour, but not one in the caravan dared nor invested enough interest to intervene. Eventually the blows subsided and Dolores' bronchial snore sputtered upon the night air while her brutalised daughter

lay snivelling.

The caravan came to rest four counties later whereupon a local croaker was recruited to examine the dog-woman. Turned out poor Dolores was in fact suffering from consumption and was not long for this world. Worse still, there was no way of knowing how many others she might already have infected with the disease. The croaker gave the entire entourage the once over. There was no way to be conclusive but the Doc identified five other employees with suspect symptoms. Curiously, Soledad, who had slept beside her mother since day one, appeared completely unaffected and remained vigorous. However, this was little comfort to Matthias who was forced into an undesirable confrontation with a cataclysmic truth: his prize freak had become an unaffordable hazard.

"We gotta get rid of her, Boss," Harlan the pitchman, his oldest associate, said with wide-eyed regret, "She's a good freak but she's gonna drag the whole show with her to Hell."

"Give it a name. What's your suggestion?"

"She ain't lastin' much longer, that's for sure. But we can't afford to keep her, and there ain't no-one in these states gonna take in a dyin' contagious freak. We got no choice, Boss."

"Let's sleep on this thing, Harlan. First thing tomorrow we do what needs doin'."

Harlan was right, of course, and Matthias knew it. But the Master was a proud man and felt hugely wronged by God on this matter. If his prize specimen was going to be taken from him, he intended to make sure it happened on his own terms and at his own leisure. The ominous drumbeat of the East Texas rain throbbed against the canvas as he drifted off to a haunted sleep, his heart a livid inferno ...

He walked through red awnings into a strange tent. He was on another Master's midway it seemed. The drums of rain reverberated in that scarlet amnion, announcing the destructive heartbeat of some unknown monster yet to be birthed. The tent was empty of townies, no audience for this anonymous sideshow. At the end farthest from the opening stood

seven upright mirrors, each the height of a man. Approaching cautiously, he noticed a banner hung above them, red letters on a gold background: 'THE SEVEN WINDOWS OF ENTROPY'. As though slipping in through some crack in the fabric of space itself, the dog-girl materialised before him. She stood to the left of the scene, one arm extended and beckoning him towards the shimmering glass panels.

"Mire y vea usted," she hissed cryptically from behind a tenebrous shade of raven hair, her young face obscured and inscrutable.

The panes were those of funhouse mirrors, each reflecting an image of his face and body disfigured by tricks of warped glass, a cheap gimmick he knew too well. Surveying these tawdry depictions of himself in varying states of corpulence, emaciation, elongation and compression, a smugness asserted itself in his mind. Clearly the girl had sought to unnerve him with this substandard parlour device. He made to cast a disparaging gaze in her direction when his attention was seized by a flicker of

movement in the central mirror. There his image appeared aged; elderly, frail and broken. This in itself wasn't so remarkable. In his time he had known many a sideshow trickster capable of illusions more elaborate than this. However, the clarity of the image perturbed him. Gazing intently at this warped mockery of himself, he could make out the fine detail of each crease in the sagging skin, the alarmingly exact rendition of liver spots and discoloured patches. Then there was the smell ... a pungent ammonia stench like stale horse-piss assaulting his nostrils and coaxing tears from his eyes. In spite of his seasoned resolve, terror seized his heart with a keen frosted claw. The haggard reflection seemed to press against the glass until finally it pushed past the boundary of the frame. Inexplicably, this travesty of his own image emerged slowly but deliberately from an alien realm of inverted dimensions - yellowed eyes filled with malign intent staring deep into the lining of his soul. Terrified, he thought of spinning on his heels and bolting, but some unnameable force fixed him to the spot, rendering him utterly immobile. Behind him, he could sense the

girl's approach, could feel her hot animal breath blazing a hateful hex against his back. His frail, twisted doppelganger collapsed towards him like the dead trunk of a diseased tree. It was only as the girl lay a hard heavy hand upon his quaking shoulder that he was finally able to scream ...

A rifle shot split the night air like brittle glass, propelling Matthias from his nightmare and into a swamp of sweat-soaked sheets, a silent yell trembling upon his dry lips. Denying him any opportunity to review the dream's content, the real world of wakefulness swept it brutally aside in a flurry of commotion. The carnies, alerted by the report of the anonymous weapon, jumped out of their beds and carriages in instant defensive formation. A second shot sounded, followed by a muted cry. Matthias shouldered his holster and strode out into the midway where the rain was turning the soft ground to a brown mush. A third shot drew his attention with its accompanying cordite flash. Standing there in the mud was Soledad; her diminutive form silhouetted iconically between the sideshow tent and the Spinning Jinny, Harlan's Lee-

Enfield rifle gripped gracefully in her muscular young arms. The bodies of Dolores and two of the infected rousties lay facedown in the mud. The remaining three unfortunates stood by the Jinny, hands tied behind their backs and wailing for mercy. The girl fired a fourth time and the rousty on the far right collapsed like a sack of potatoes. Matthias knelt by Dolores' body and looked into the dog-woman's one visible eye which now stared lifelessly into the tenebrous depths of the sludge which claimed her. Spinning around on his heels, he saw that Soledad - aware but evidently uncaring of his presence - was commanding the rifle expertly, putting its owner to shame. As the girl hoisted the barrel a fifth time, Harlan appeared from behind her and attempted to wrench the gun from her grip. Soledad wriggled lithely, raising the rifle butt and slamming it forcefully into the pitchman's face. Bringing a hand to his wounded mouth, Harlan collapsed on his rump in the mud. In less than a second, Soledad reasserted her aim and sent the penultimate rousty to the stars; blood and brain tissue splashing into filthy puddles. Quite a gathering had formed in the midway by now and several

eager carny faces burned like lanterns in the night as they crept nervously towards the young assassin.

"Leave her!" Matthias bellowed finally, "Let her finish it."

Soledad regarded the Master silently, a fierce wind casting a torrent of wild raven hair across her impenetrable features, dark eyes glowing with an eerie animal wrath. Again the girl handled the weapon with illogical precision. The shot shattered the night with infernal thunder and sheared off the top of the rousty's head, fragments of scalp and skull spattering the seats of the Jinny in red clumps. Business concluded, Soledad lowered the rifle with a casual sigh and bowed her head as the rain seemed to strike her for the first time. Matricide and murder evidently came to her as naturally as breathing.

"Where in the Devil's Hell did you learn to shoot, kid?"

Soledad spoke softly but self-assuredly, the first complete sentence he had ever heard her utter: "No tengo maestro ... Acabo de *saber*." [*I had no teacher ... I just know.*]

With his prize freak dead and staff depleted, Matthias began to re-evaluate his lot. Though he had little affection for her, Soledad had more than proved her worth in the most dire of situations. He had acquired enough respect for the girl to assign her a new set of duties; she was now put in charge of managing the freaks. An unruly rabble, the sideshow performers were at best reluctant to accept instruction from the Master whom they knew had just as much to gain from them as they from him. Soledad however remained something of an unknown quantity and, despite her brief tenure, it was evident that the freaks held her in an exclusive esteem. It was no secret that both Fiery Jack and Aquinas the Fish Boy had developed something of a muted fondness for this strange Mexican urchin with her veiled bestial fury.

It was this untamed quality to the girl's character which also encouraged Matthias to assign her as personal caretaker to his loyal steed. Jensen was a strong beast with an unpredictable temperament and, as such, it had long been left to Matthias to cater for his horse's every need; a desperately time-consuming

responsibility for a carny-master who must ideally be free to keep his eyes on every corner of the midway. However, the horse seemed unperturbed by Soledad, even going so far as to allow her to pet his dark muzzle - a luxury once afforded exclusively by Matthias himself. With the girl to engage in the menial duties of feeding Jensen and maintaining the sheen of his proud black coat, the Master was permitted a far more open management of his time.

With the ensuing months, Soledad appeared to slip more comfortably into the carny lifestyle and could be found to engage with the patrons in an increasingly direct manner. Indeed, she now adopted the self-assigned role of freakshow geek, utilising her agile form to perform a series of screwball physical comedy routines, all of which were entirely improvised. The twist was, of course, that Soledad only ever spoke in Spanish. While she understood English unquestionably, she refused to speak it. This rendered her constant in-performance commentary entirely incomprehensible to many of the patrons and only contributed to her appeal as an oddity. Whether

they understood or not, the customers invariably laughed aloud at the girl's spontaneous routines which added an energetic backdrop to the meticulously rehearsed and otherwise static performances of the freaks. All in all, Matthias was pleased with the result. Though the loss of his prize freak remained an unhealing wound, he nonetheless congratulated himself on having carved something positive from a disastrous predicament.

How foolish and short-sighted he had been to assume he could so easily contain that vile creature.

I should have grabbed that rifle from her when I had the chance and sent the bitch to Hell with her dog-faced mother.

It was during a tour of Florida in October of 1910 that the seeds of the girl's treachery were well and truly sown, though Matthias had not recognised it at the time. While Soledad was engaged in one of her absurdist routines, the Master had been humouring some nearby patrons with idle small talk as they prevaricated around their exit from the freakshow.

"That girl you have there, the geek. She's Mexican?"

"Oh she's from all over. As are we all, eh?" Matthias was already bored of this banal discourse.

"Ah well," the clem had continued, "Something of a storm brewing down in the Latin country. I hear Madero escaped from prison and is hiding out somewhere in these states. Word has it he's issued a call for revolution against Diaz to start next month. Looks like big changes are afoot."

Soledad fell suddenly mute. She gazed at the clem and hushed a small gathering of patrons at her side with a raised palm. The dead weight of silence filled the tent.

"I'm sorry," the clem muttered awkwardly, "Did I say something untoward?"

"Think nothing of it," Matthias addressed the crowd, "It's alright folks, carry on." He turned sternly towards the girl, "Sol, you may continue with your routine."

Soledad remained still, her dark eyes squinting at the clem.

"Immediately, Sol. That's not a

request."

The girl fixed her gaze upon Matthias and glared for a moment before turning her back reluctantly on the clem and resuming her showpiece lethargically.

Matthias had experienced a bizarre sensation as the girl had stared at him, a subliminal chill shaking him to his bones. But after a few moments it seemed normality had reasserted itself and he thought no more of it. What a mistake that had been.

He knew now that, from that day forward, Soledad had been planning her escape and devising a means to cause him as much grief as possible in the process. For the next few months, the girl had maintained a façade, attacking her work with a new fervour. Her routines grew more raucous and Jensen's coat boasted a gleam never before attained. As the caravan travelled across the state line into Alabama, she proved a relentless worker, enthusiastic to an almost fanatical degree. Her impending treason should have been as predictable as the sunrise, her motivations as transparent as the water in Aquinas' tank. But alas

Matthias found his judgement clouded by the overpowering force of his own self-righteousness. It was to prove his downfall.

By now it was no secret that Matthias was illicitly employing the use of flat joints. Many of the carnival games were routinely gaffed, something which was illegal in most states. It was not unusual for some sour-faced townie to scream "Gaff!" if they failed to win a single game, regardless of this being the case or not. Thereafter the law would come snooping around and grill the Master with a selection of ineffectual questions. When they were unable to prove anything amiss, they would then search the tents and booths for cranks and stroms as well as any evidence of illegal substances. Over the course of the previous three years, with Soledad's sensitive nose to warn him of the approaching law, Matthias had branched confidently out in this direction and there were now several booths which performed a covert under-counter service as providers of hashish and opiates. With the girl's warning, the carnival was afforded plenty of time to conceal the goods where they would never be found

before the heat closed in. This was all to change ...

Some Alabama townie had went into a gloom after playing a whole day and failing to win a single game anywhere on the midway. This toothless chump-sucking clem had run off, jerking his head indignantly towards Matthias as he went; "You're fuckin' finished here. You're rumbled, y'hear? I'm goin' to the law right now and they're gonna blow the lid right off your whole crooked shithouse here, you get me?"

Matthias had heard a billion threats of this ilk throughout his life and knew that the vast majority of them transpired to nothing. Besides, he had under his employ the best nose on the continent who could smell the liquor on a lawman's breath from a hundred miles out. He warmed himself with a self-satisfied smirk as the disgruntled townie disappeared past the front.

And then, only an hour or so later, two lawmen appeared, censorious eyes scanning the games and sideshows as they patrolled the midway, six-shooters hanging odiously from belt holsters. Matthias had to

double take. He simply couldn't believe his eyes. How could Soledad's nose have failed her? How could she fail the carnival? The answer struck his heart with a sobering black bullet.

She knew they were coming. She wanted them to come here. Sweet fuckin' Jesus, she wants to ruin me!

The carnies went into cover-up overdrive, attempting to pass packages and illicit objects into one another's pockets while each performing a pantomime of innocuous daily carny routine. Matthias approached the two officers with a gesture of wide open arms and an ingratiating grin.

"Gentlemen, how good of you to stop by. We're always happy to welcome the guardians of the local community into our little world here. I do hope you enjoy."

The man on the left - the older of the two - was clearly impervious to the Master's charm. "We have reports of rigged games here. And the use and sale of prohibited substances. We'll be taking a good look around."

"Well of course you may look around as you please," Matthias

maintained his façade, "But I assure you, you'll uncover no evidence of anything illegal here, gentlemen. This is a respectable business where you'll find only the finest in legitimate entertainment."

The two men began to inspect the games more thoroughly. Matthias' heart thundered in his chest, threatening to tear through his ribcage. For the first time in his life he came close to something resembling fear. He peered across the midway to the sideshow marquee and met Soledad's dark eyes glinting in the dim afternoon light. She stood by the entrance, arms folded across her chest, staring into her Master's soul.

You little bitch. You're finished. I'm going to hang you with your own guts.

Miraculously, the carnies did an immaculate job in concealing the goods. The officers found nothing. A wave of relief washed over the Master's body and he allowed himself a victorious glare in Soledad's direction as he reconvened with the two lawmen. The girl stood rigid, her eyes narrowed to slits.

You can't beat me, you little whore.

"Well, sorry to have bothered you here, Mister ...?"

"Matthias."

"Yes. Well. Sorry for the inconvenience but, as officers of the law, we do require to be thorough ..."

"I quite understand, gentlemen. And we appreciate your diligence in this matter. Please, let me offer you gents the opportunity to play on the house."

"Ah sorry," the older man, more relaxed now, smirked jovially, "I'm afraid in the line of duty there's no ..."

From the corner of his eye, Matthias perceived a lightning blur of movement as Soledad retrieved a steaming coffee pot from the counter of the direct sales booth. With a vicious speed, the girl threw the contents over the head of a nearby townie who squealed in agony and shock. The scalded man turned to see the girl drop the pot on to the ground and yelled at her in equal parts rage and pain.

"You little bitch!"

The man lunged at Soledad and she raised her face to the sky, emitting the first English words that Matthias had ever known to fall from her savage mouth: "Hey, Rube!"

The call went out and a gang of carnies dropped what they were doing and ran to the girl's aid. The townie was pulled to the ground, punched and kicked.

"What the Hell?!" The older of the two officers dropped a hand to his holster. He was taken aback as Soledad came rushing out of the rabble towards him, a feigned expression of distress upon her young features.

"Chester! Chester!" she cried, pointing to the man being thrashed upon the ground. "Violador. Molestero!"

"That filthy ..." The lawman strode towards Soledad, extending a benevolent arm, "Come here, darlin'."

Before Matthias could intervene, the girl reached out with unreal speed, grabbing the six-shooter from the officer's holster.

"What the-?"

Thunder cut the question into dead air as Soledad blew the lawman's guts out through his back with his own gun. In a flash, she spun and fired a second round through the forehead of his partner. Both officers crumpled to the ground as gracelessly as abandoned marionettes. Twirling the smoking gun expertly in her lissom hand, Soledad glared into Matthias' stunned face. In a voice thick and black as crude oil, she spat out words which would remain with him for the rest of his days:

"No voy a ser enterrados en la tumba de mi madre."

With that, she turned and sped out of Matthias' reach and on towards the pen where the horses rested. The crowd screamed and yelled, men and women grabbing their children and ducking for cover.

"Stop her!" Matthias shook with rage, his voice reduced against his will to an animal snarl.

Soledad pulled a knife from her belt and cut a rope, causing the gate of the pen to swing open. Wasting no time, she grabbed hold of Jensen's noble black mane

and climbed lithely on to the beast's back. Harlan the pitchman emerged, Lee-Enfield primed and shouldered, followed by several other carnies now conscious of the situation and armed with pistols.

"Kill the little bitch! I want her dead!"

With a sharp jab of her bony ankles, Soledad spurred Jensen over the fence of the pen. As the horse raced towards the front of the midway, Harlan and the pistol-packing carnies sent a volley of bullets through the air which whizzed past the girl. Each gunman fired several times, missing Soledad with every shot as she clung low to Jensen's mane. A single bullet struck the horse in the side causing the beast to whinny in pain and rage, but it sped on.

"Not the fucking horse!" Matthias wrenched the pistol from the grip of the offending gunman and slammed the heavy handle against the dumbstruck face - a yell of pain stifled behind burst lips and broken teeth.

Within moments, the horse had disappeared from view, taking the mutinous girl with him and

leaving Matthias and his carnival in a town full of panic and hatred with the heat closing in fast.

The entourage had packed away in double time and Matthias ordered the whole caravan to head back east and lay low in Gibtown, Florida. Meanwhile, he and Harlan would track down Soledad and make an example of her.

"Where you think she's goin', Boss?"

Hazily remembered words came floating towards Matthias as if sailing in from another time track; *Latin country ... call for revolution ... next month ... changes afoot ...*

"She's gone west, Harlan. She'll be making her way back to Mexico any way she can."

"Well if you're right, the law could likely catch up with her first, Boss. Maybe we should just let ..."

"She's not getting away from me!" Matthias could not recall the last time another human being had caused him so much rage and pain. "If she's going to die, then it will be at *my* hand.

I'm going to drag the little cur all the way to Florida and put her in the stocks and let all of Gibtown throw their shit at her, you hear me? And then I'm going to slit her little spic throat and let them all piss on the bleeding wound before we burn her alive! Got it?"

"Hear you, boss." While Harlan had known Matthias to be vicious in the past, his viciousness usually proved a rather cool and rational variety. He had never before witnessed his employer descend into such an uncontrollable state of vitriol and this unnerved him.

"We're going to split. You're going to follow the route of the Mississippi, I'll stick close to the coast and we'll reconvene in New Orleans. Understood? If neither of us finds the little whore on the way, she's bound to show up there. Even a runaway circus freak can find a place to hide in New Orleans and she fuckin' knows that, she ain't stupid."

Over the course of the following week, Matthias rode relentlessly across the mud flats and swamplands, nightly setting up camp in the undergrowth. On the way, he stopped to ask each and every innkeeper and smalltown

drunk if they'd seen a little Mexican bitch on a big black horse.

"Kinda thing I'd remember, don't ya think?" whined a particularly disrespectful civilian in Asshole, Mississippi, careworn by the Master's belligerent questioning. Matthias had smashed the dumb hick in the face with a rifle-butt for his trouble.

By the time he reached Louisiana, Matthias was fatigued and saddle-sore, eager for rest but still burning with the desire to exact revenge upon the defiant girl who had wronged him. He made his way through central New Orleans, stopping in at favourite haunts in attempts to locate both Harlan and Soledad, but his search bore no fruit. Finally he headed northwards to the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain where his company had traditionally set up business on many previous visits. There was a chance that Harlan may be found there.

And indeed he did find the pitchman on the muddy banks of the lake, and Jensen too. But Soledad was long gone. Matthias rode over the vast patch of pasture which had previously

acted as his midway and his blood ran cold as he glimpsed the dark shapes lying by the shore. He dismounted and ran towards the horse's heavy corpse and the stricken figure of Harlan who lay soaking and shivering in the merciless rain. The sopping red maw of a knife-wound yawned wide in the pitchman's stomach and blood trickled from between his lips as he struggled to speak.

"Boss ... the girl ... she g-got m-m-me ... she got me good."

The man was doomed, there was no doubt of that. Matthias wasted no time with compassion. "Harlan, what happened exactly? Tell me."

"I found Jen ...Jen ..." he pointed feebly at the dead horse, "There was n-no sign of th-the girl. I sat down next to him, cou-couldn't believe he was gone. And then ..." A lucid expression of horror broke through the pain on Harlan's face as he recalled the terrible moment: "His body just ... just opened u-up an-and this ... *shape* came flying ou-out of his stomach to-towards me. I had no idea what I was s-s-seeing ... this thing just c-came out at me and I felt a pain ... a pain ..." His shivering hands fumbled at the

mortal wound. "She was *inside*, boss. In ... in the fuckin' horse! Hidin' there! L-like ... like a f-f-fuckin' dog!" Harlan spat the last word like a curse and, with a few more unintelligible grunts, the pitchman passed away, empty eyes locked in a perennial stare towards the angry Louisiana sky.

Jensen's ruined body lay gracelessly oozing red mush upon the soaking ground like a scene from an abattoir. Clearly the wound he had sustained in Alabama had guaranteed the animal's downfall. All things considered, it was remarkable the beast had made it this far west. Matthias could only assume that Jensen had developed a far closer and more loyal bond with Soledad than it had ever felt possible to share with him, and it was this loyalty which had seen it carry the wretched girl all these weary miles. Affronted by this betrayal, Matthias kicked at Jensen's dead skull and spit into the white unseeing eye.

In spite of everything, the carnymaster remained in awe of the girl's survival instinct and incredible resilience. Where most her age would have panicked at their steed's demise and ran off blindly into the rain to meet their

doom in the southern wilderness, Soledad had recognised the horse's potential to keep her alive after its death. With her humble hunter's knife she had slit open the beast's belly, removed the innards and climbed inside the still warm cadaver to shield herself from the elements. Concealed within that wreckage of flesh and bone, she had waited patiently for the storm to subside or for another mode of transport to present itself. How eerily appropriate that Harlan should have stumbled across the ruined horse and thus provide Soledad with the perfect opportunity to continue on her journey while also inflicting another bitter wound upon her former Master. With cold-blooded instinct, she had plugged Harlan, relieved him of his pistol and rifle, claimed his horse and vanished into the storm like a dark wraith. All things considered, the girl had declared herself a formidable adversary.

Matthias roared and shot at the sky a second time.



A SYMPATHETIC FIGURE

By James King

Images © Max Reeves

June 14th, 1940

Through the sweat-drenched windowpane he observes two bleary-eyed officers swinging blindly at each other. One makes a connect. The other splashes into the gutter.

Tobacco crackles between Max's lips. He wipes his brow and takes another drink. From the bedpost Inez laughs at his silhouette, all framed dramatic against the window.

'Why so tortured, baby? You're winning, no?'

It's hot.'

Max does away with the last buttons of his shirt. In the window reflection he stands a Hindu with an armband, redeemed through inversion. Smoke rolls out of his mouth, snaking its way up towards the ceiling.



Inez ripples in the sheets, caught in his eye. Max takes another drink, regards the nude.

You are not sad?’

‘I was. I am. But for me, things could be worse.’

A slither of wallpaper peels away, glue stretching like saliva between parting lips. Max takes another drink.

‘It is not bier in that bottle, you know?’

‘I know.’

‘You drink like it is so... it won’t work no more.’

He buttons his fly.

‘No more tonight. Just this.’

An air bubble works its way around the glass cylinder as he glugs. She watches bourbon disappear.

‘You want me to go?’

In the gutter he is stirring now.

'No. You stay. It is a bad night tonight.'

'The streets, they tremble with the music and the singing. You very much wanted Paris?'

'I would have liked to visit another time.'

Inez finds the vial in her bag, tastes a drop. Her eyes droop. A smile slurs across her lips, she twists the sheets around herself.

'I don't think you are very good at being what it is you are, garcon.'

'Neither do I.' Max takes a long drag. 'I had very little choice in the matter.'

Inez stretches out, her joints crack, 'He does not like what he is! He had no choice!' Then giggling something hysterical, 'What a terrible shame it is so!'

'I did not say I had no choice. I never said that. I know English. I said I had little choice.'

Celebrations rise up through the floorboards from the bar below, an old Germanic song. Rats scuttle beneath his feet.

'I am no innovator. I have friends. Some family. Some education. I have views. Some opinions. But I have no extraordinary-' He swallows, 'No heroic-'

'You are unhappy with the mould, but will not break it.' She laughs some more, 'It is rather beautiful, no? He remains stoic as the heat rises and the flames glow brighter on the horizon and things become worse and worse-'

'But not for me.'

'No. Not for you.'

'Not yet.'

'Definitely not yet.'

He lights a cigarette with the molten butt of the last one, takes another drink. She continues:

'So he stands, tortured little soul, framed in the window-'

'Of a rented room-'

'In a rented city. With a rented girl. Your very own little place in the Sun.'

'Even deserts grow cold in an eclipse.'

She really laughs at that one.
'Very good. But baby, deserts are cold every night. We must not make poetry out of things.'

He takes another drink, 'If I were born somewhere else, in a different time, I would have been remembered a good man.'

'And now they will shoot you in the pictures. Dead. You will be a

small and very bad character. One without a proper name. And they will cut my hair short.'

'They do that.'

'I know, baby.'

Max takes another drink.





THE CIRCUS

By Ele-Beth Little

Photos © Lisa Wormsley

PART 1.

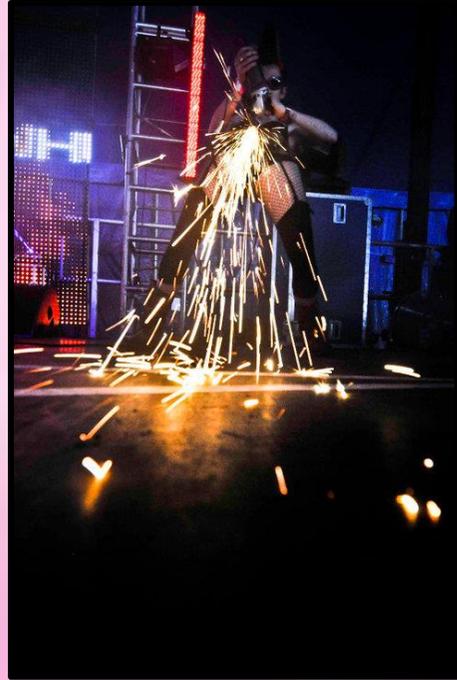
Welcome! Welcome! We hold within our thin-skinned bubblegum walls, thrills and horrors, spectacular spectacles, honest delights. Take time to consider now, if you should allow us darlings to lead you there. And prepare yourself. Beware! Beware!

You may have noticed our wretched guide here, grimacing in his furs, with only his groin exposed to the bitter cold (it is a shameful punishment for a misdemeanour committed in his youth and he has born it for so long that his soul has turned to vapour and he hardly feels at all).

Well it is this very impediment - his absolute vacancy - that created in him the special talent he holds today. That is, the skill to create other realms based on the customer's imagination. See how his eyes pierce you as he gapes blankly in to your most sacred inner life - watching your mind like a theatre, seeing all there is to see. He is the gateway, my dear. So don't keep him waiting.

Come along, come along. We are children; simple and sweet. Our hands are sticky with candyfloss. We promise to take good care of you. Oh it's a gamble we admit that, like any dose of life in its purest form. But you couldn't possibly be in better company...

My name is Dot and my mute twin here is Janice. She is swollen with child - at the tender age of seven I'm afraid, but she will never give birth. That's her perpetual condition. She spends eternity suffering for our youth. What a sacrifice she makes - brewing all that magic in her cauldron belly. And yet look at her; she beams broadly like a fool. She knows she has a purpose you see. Everyone needs a purpose.



We aren't identical in every way, us girly-girly sister pals. As you can tell, I do the talking. Also, most importantly, she likes to play with dolls for fun whereas I like to tickle people until they squeal. We're quite unique as far as twins go.

Oh you are being very cautious Sir and perhaps you need more convincing. This is a circus that will stain you on the inside, and embed there a coil of fantasy that you might slide down again if you dare. It's like madness only better, its birth and death all rolled in to one. Sound appealing? How can you resist.



That's it mister. Step in to the red glow and be close to the guide at all times.

Now beyond the curtain lies another land - a land born from your unconscious yearnings - and I'm as curious as you are to discover what may unfold as we venture inside, so make haste. See our guide staring at our path - his eyes create the way *and* the destination. He is the pore through which your dreams will seep out before you, a cleansing if you will.

Those chimes you here are the voices of time, calling it to a halt

for you. The nausea will pass, it is your heart having its triumph.

PART 2.

And what did he face when he entered? A colourful banquet of fruits on a circular table. And behind - a row of women of different forms and beauties, lay naked and paralysed in eternal sleep.

His mind raced with strange and curious impulses that he could now satisfy. But he mustn't rush, he should prolong it. He has forever to indulge. And they shan't wake.

So for the first hour he focused on one woman alone, choosing her as a canvas to create a fruity masterpiece. A grape in the belly button, halved peaches in her arm-pits, sliced pineapple circled the nipples and the finale; bananas inserted into each orifice. She lay as if dead, a decorated object. He trembled with the empathy he wished he had for the feelings she wasn't having!

Time sped quickly on and he picked next a woman with a sly

and boastful seeming face. He should not and could not judge a sleeping stranger, but this was a dream and it seemed only right that he could create truths in such a realm. He designated her the least favoured of the maidens on offer and decided that he disliked her, she was a spiteful creature deserving of humiliation. He ate strawberries then, over her wide, staring eyeballs until the white turned pink and strawberry tears were dribbling down her face.

Ideas quickly flooded him and tickled at his genitals like teasing demons. He now rushed to perform each before the allure of a new idea had taken him over, enjoying the torment of his urges pressing at his soul like a tide.

Next he chose a frail looking brunette though her face remained a blur. His task, he decided, was to stuff as much in her mouth and down her throat as she could possibly contain until it overflowed like some fruity overdose vomit. This accomplished he sat on her face,

rocking back and forth, until the fruity mush smeared round her head and leaked into her hair.

His impulses growing more sexual in nature his next focus was a plump girl's vagina where he decided upon a delicate and clinical procedure of placing an apple pip between her clitoris and its hood.

Oh all the possibilities from one small set up - he looked to the guide and the guide looked on...





THE SUNNYBROOK RETREAT

By Karl Koweski

Photos © Max Reeves

1

The doctor looked like Stephen King. His jet black hair was so thick and bushy, you'd need a machete to part it. He wore eye glasses like twin fish bowls, his dark eyes submerged within. Big, sulphur colored teeth and a nostrum twice the length of his forehead. I figured he'd fit the chronic masturbator profile. But no. That mantle fell on my shoulders.

"Now how long have you been interfering with yourself?" Doctor Cameron inquired.

"I've been boxing the clown for - ."

"Please," the doctor said. "Here at Sunnybrook, we refrain from using cutesy euphemisms for the act of masturbation."

He steepled his fingers beneath his chin and regarded me with

those watery eyes.

"You wanna know when was the first time?"

"However you feel is the appropriate way to answer."

"Well, the eighth grade, I guess. Thirteen, fourteen years old. Like anybody else."

"Anybody as in whom?"

"Anybody as in everybody. Everybody does it."

"And you've researched this? Interviewed subjects? Compiled statistics?" The doctor furrowed his brow. "Let's keep the answers centered on your aberrations and not project your onanastic tendencies on the populace. How many times a day do you touch yourself in an inappropriate manner?"

"You mean like jerk off? Or just touch?"

"Touch yourself for the purpose of arousal. And please stop fondling my ink pen."

I didn't realize I still held the pen I used to fill out the paper work. I looked at the cheap ball point pen perched between thumb and

forefinger.

The doctor rephrased his question. "How often throughout any twenty four hour period do you manually bring yourself to orgasm? And be truthful. Dishonesty on your part will only prolong your stay here and negatively impact our ability to rehabilitate you."

"Rehabilitate? You make it sound like I'm a crack addict."

"Interesting you should make that comparison. What would you say about a crack addict smoking dope in the presence of his six year old daughter?"

The doctor allowed the silence to hang between us a full minute before continuing. "That's enough for our one on one time today, Mr. Melrose. I'll have Mr. Fogel escort you to the dormitory and give you a more thorough explanation of what will be expected of you during your stay at Sunnybrook. And please do keep in mind we are here to help ensure a healthy and productive lifestyle that will benefit you and your family."

I thanked him and immediately hated myself for it. Waiting outside the doctor's office for Mr.

Fogel, I sat on the hard plastic chair for how long? Ten, twenty minutes? There were no clocks on the walls. My watch had been confiscated during indoctrination along with my belt, my shoes, my wedding ring, even my wallet with the folded beaver shot stuffed behind the credit cards I declared bankruptcy on two years ago.

I heard computer keys tapping in an adjoining office and thought about my own computer, an assembly line Dell now in the possession of the eggheads here at Sunnybrook. Even now, specialists poured through my files, my internet history, sites ranging from zombie porn to naked midget mimes. And all those porn clips downloaded from peer-to-peer sites. Erica Campbell. Raven Riley. Brandi Belle. I knew their bodies better than my own wife's.

"Mr. Melrose?" Mr. Fogel stood to my right. He held a clipboard angled away. He wore khaki pants and a gray polo shirt with Sunnybrook insignia embroidered on the chest. There was something perverse about the size of his gigantic moustache.

"Yes?" I stood and extended my

hand.

He glanced at it distastefully. "We don't shake hands here. Sunnybrook policy. My name is Mr. Fogel and that will be the only way you will address me. Understand?"

"Sure."

"Yes, Mr. Fogel."

"Yes, Mr. Fogel?"

"Ok. Follow me. I'll get you situated."

He led me from the managerial area toward the dorm. Along the hall, posters hung at five foot staggered intervals. All the images featured soft focused congregations of men. The catchphrases went along the lines of NO MORE FLYING SOLO or WINNING BACK YOUR LIFE FIVE MINUTES AT A TIME.

I suppose when the doctor said dormitory, I expected a university style dormitory with small, semi-private rooms and perhaps the inconvenience of a roommate.

Mr. Fogel led me into a military style barracks. Fifty cots were lined up at three foot intervals. A

standing footlocker separated each bunk. Track lighting illuminated the entire room. No dark corners existed here. At a rough estimate, maybe twenty men, pale and sullen, milled about in small groups numbering no less than three, no more than five.

"Mr. Rearick. Front and center. And what did I tell you about hands in your pocket?"

"They're not my hands," Mr. Rearick, a pasty faced, freckled redheaded man answered.

Several men standing in his vicinity giggled behind their empty palms. The intense lighting and the plum rings of exhaustion circling their eyes created grinning skulls of their faces.

"That's one demerit, Mr. Rearick. You don't want two."

The demented smile disappeared. Mr. Rearick approached hands flat at his sides. He stopped two feet in front of Mr. Fogel as though there were an invisible barrier between the two men. "No, I don't."

"No, I don't, what?" A ghost of a smile flicked the corners of his

moustache.

"No I don't want two demerits, Mr. Fogel."

The orderly withdrew a penlight from his belt and clicked it on. He played the ultraviolet light across the crotch of Mr. Rearick's chinos. "Looking clean, Mr. Rearick. Looks like you're learning to keep your bodily fluids where they belong. Inside your body."

He made a suck lemon face. "Yes, Mr. Fogel."

"Mr. Rearick, this is Mr. Melrose. He's going to be your new flaccidity partner for the time being. Get him up to speed on what will be expected of him during his stay. Keep each other out of trouble. No touching below the waist, of course. Mr. Melrose, you will find your Sunnybrook apparel in the footlocker next to your assigned cot. Also in the footlocker you will find the Sunnybrook handbook listing all rules and regulations. I suggest you become intimately familiar with the codes of conduct if you wish for your stay here to be pleasant and beneficial."

"Yes, Mr. Fogel," I said.

"Mr. Swann will be along shortly

to collect your civilian attire. Dinner is at 5 pm followed by the share circle. You'll be expected to know the Sunnybrook bylaws and conduct yourself accordingly."

"Thank you, Mr. Fogel." The words roiled around my mouth like a shot of Castor oil. I didn't call my bosses at work 'mister'.

2

Dinner consisted of a crumbling slab of meatloaf, watery mashed potatoes and a dollop of mushy peas. Code 43 of the Sunnybrook Handbook stated: No phallic foods will be served the duration of your stay. And the food was uniform in its utter blandness so as to be simply eaten, without pleasure or appetite in accordance with Code 5; Sunnybrook will ensure the client overcomes his addiction without the aid of cross addictions.

Rearick sat across the table glowering at his own tray of mush. "Go easy on the flaccidity punch," he warned. "It's spiked with soft petre."

"Soft petre?"

"I'm guessing you never served time in the military. Soft petre's

the anti-Viagra. Keeps from having a dorm full of hard dicks running around."

"Oh."

"Don't look so morose, Melrose. This ain't the end of the world."

"I've been institutionalized for chronic masturbation. I'll be lucky if I don't get divorced."

"Self-pity is the masturbator's prime enabler," Streggie, a little elf of a man, leaned over and recited emotionlessly.

"Well, if your wife does leave you," Rearick said, "you all ready got all the tools you need for a sex life alone. Besides, it's not like you're an intravenous drug user. You ain't got any track marks lining your arms. Maybe a few bruises on the tool, but nothing noticeable in public."

"Great. At least I'm not a junkie."

"Hell, man, be thankful you're not Kerry Hedges over there." Rearick pointed out a stocky guy, boyish-looking despite his gray hair.

"Looks like he's in the same boat as us."

"Shit. He's not a masturbator. Can't even remember the last time he whacked it."

"Then why the hell's he here?"

"He can't keep his hands off other guy's junk."

"Oh, damn."

"But don't start getting any ideas. He's under constant surveillance. Even the bracelet he wears; the alarm goes off if his pulse quickens. He even moves his wrist too quick, the orderlies are on him. Plus, he's the most unpleasant sonofabitch you'll ever come across. You can't so much as hustle your balls without him telling Fogel on you."

"Christ. This place is a madhouse."

"Meaning you think our acts are natural outside these walls?" Rearick asked.

"Maybe not Kerry's."

"So you've decided to have final judgement on what's right and

moral in this society?"

I stared stupidly at him for a moment. "What the fuck?"

"I'm just giving you shit," Rearick finally laughed.

"How long you been here?" I asked.

"Let's just say you're my fifth flaccidity partner."

"Fifth?"

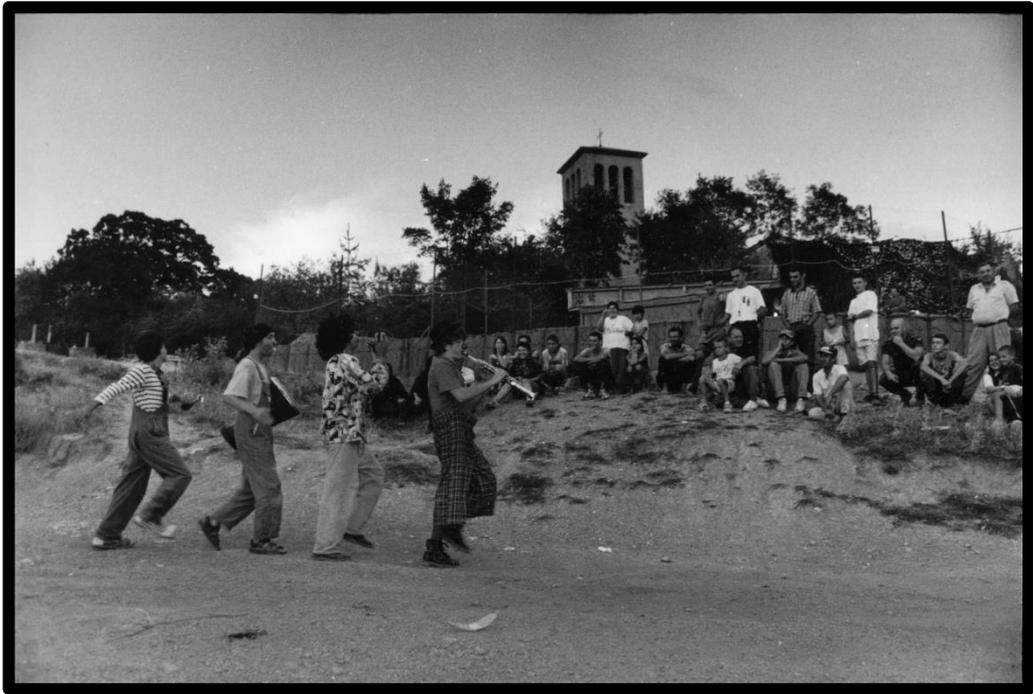
"Yeah, I'm like One Spewed Over The Cuckoo's Nest in here. I may not ever get out of here. It'll be the final cure."

"Bullshit. We can walk out of here any time we want. It's not like we're committed."

"Ha! You might wanna take another look at that contract you signed, Melrose."

"What? What's that suppose to mean."

Rearick glanced at Fogel entering the cafeteria. "Put your tray up, partner. It's share circle time."



3

The man who introduced himself as Sonny Dobson perched on the edge of a gray folding chair. Dressed in his Sunnybrook attire, he didn't look any different than any other clients circling the share area, as though they were all created from the same mold, old G I Joe style replicas where only the hairstyles change color.

He said "I was still in junior high, I guess. Thirteen years old, maybe. I'd heard about jerking off, but I was always kinda scared to try it out. Mostly because we all accused each other of doing it and it was always

looked at like it was the worst thing you could possibly do. I figured if I didn't do it, I'd be believable, you know, if I ever had to deny any accusations.

"There's this kid a grade ahead of me, Kevin Forster. I always hated the smarmy sonofabitch, always acting like he was better than everybody. Someone spread the rumor he got caught masturbating in the gym locker room. It was one of those stories you hear from a friend who heard from a friend of a friend who caught Kevin red-handed. None of us even questioned why the hell someone would even jerk off in a gym locker room where

any dude could walk in and catch you."

"I got caught flogging it in the back of a greyhound bus," Kerry Hedges interrupted.

"Got caught by the guy you were flogging," someone else added, laughing.

Mr. Swann, the moderator, made a sour face. "Enough of that Mr. Carrington. Mr. Hedges, you know better than to cut in."

"Yeah, well," Dobson continued, "we gave that poor sumbitch so much shit. Made jerk off gestures every time we saw him. Told everyone the story, the girls especially. Turned him into a pariah over night for nothing, you know? So after a while I got curious what the big deal was. I came home from school one day, said hello to my mom, walked into the closet of my bedroom and masturbated right there. Still the best two minutes of my life, that first time. I nutted into a moon boot. Next day, I called Kevin Forster out in the lunch line. Asked him if he washed his hands before getting them French fries. Everyone laughed at him. But not a day went by I didn't jerk off like a bandit."

Mr. Swann templed his fingers under his nose. "Did you ever apologize to Kevin? Perhaps some closure?"

"Nah, he killed himself when he was eighteen. Hung himself with an extension cord in his closet. I figured maybe, I don't know, autoerotic asphyxiation? That's what I told everybody, anyway."

Chuck Streggie said "I always had a hard time finding stuff to beat off to. This is before the internet, mind you. Kids today got it too easy. A couple clicks and in two seconds they got all the porn in the world. I came out of a close knit family, kinda religious, you know? I couldn't get away with sneaking any porn mags into my room. My mom would find them in a heartbeat. I swear to god mom didn't have nothing better to do than scour my room while I was school. For what I have no idea; I didn't smoke, drink, drug, I was terrified to come home with a B on my report card. But I needed something to beat off to. I even searched my parent's room when they weren't home and didn't find nothing."

"You didn't look hard enough, dude," Carrington said.

"Mr. Carrington..." Mr. Swann pointed his temple fingers at the lanky fella, leaning back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head and his legs stretched out, trying to look cool at a masturbation clinic.

"Anyway, I had a TV in my room, but no VCR. This is back when VCRs were still real expensive and we just had one in the house. But I found that I could hook up my parent's camcorder to my tv and watch movies. I knew good horror movies always had a few scenes of T n' A. So every week I'd rent a couple horror movies to beat off to. It'd take me hours to get off. Playing and rewinding, playing and rewinding the Linnea Quigley strip scene in Return of the Living Dead. Getting aroused, ready to pop, catching sight of a nasty-looking zombie, having to start all over. Sometimes having to watch the sex scenes through the camcorder's view finder if my parents were home. All that time wasted, I could have been a horror movie director instead of stuck here."

"You're getting help, Mr. Streggie. That is what is important."

"Well, the worst part," Streggie said, "I'd just rented Lifeforce. A Tobe Hooper movie about, like space vampires, and I was really excited about it cause I heard it was loaded with full frontal nudity. I got the camcorder out of the closet and found a blank tape already inside. I thought, hey, you know, I don't know what I thought, really. I turned it on and it was my mom and dad getting it on, man. They'd recorded themselves and they were doing everything. You know..."

"No, dude, you didn't..."

Streggie put his face in his hands and didn't say anything for a long time.

"Dude," Rearick said, "I've jerked off to some crazy shit in my time. Midgets, mimes, midgets with mimes, midgets dressed up like mimes, pregnant German women with Down Syndrome. But parents? Fuckin pervert, man."

"That'll be enough, Mr. Rearick," Mr. Swann said. "We are here to share. We are not here to judge."

"Parents, dude."

"You are hovering dangerously

close to a demerit, Mr. Rearick."

"Ok. Ok. Sorry, Chuckles. It's perfectly natural to masturbate to, what would you call it, Mr. Swann? Visually documented parental fornication?"

"That's one demerit, Mr. Rearick."

"Fuck, man. What do you want me to hear, sitting here listening to this twisted shit? You want me to congratulate Chuckles for choking out a load for his mom and dad?"

Streggie didn't look up from his palms.

"That sort of behavior is counterproductive to the Sunnybrook ideology. You can tell Dr. Cameron all about your problems in the morning."

"Like I give a shit."

"I jerked my brother off imagining my mom and dad," Kerry Hedges said.

4

"Hey, Melrose," Rearick hissed from the cot next to mine. "You jerking it?"

"What? No. You just asked that five minutes ago."

"Well, that's five minutes you could've started on it."

"I don't want to get started on anything. I just want to sleep."

"It's just gonna be more of the same old shit for you tomorrow."

"For me? Why not you?"

"You heard the man. I gotta go see the doctor in the morning. For another attitude adjustment. Probably take me outta regular circulation for a while. Last time they told me it was my last chance. Fucking bullshit. I haven't touched myself in weeks. Haven't had a decent hard for... ever it seems."

"Rearick. What'd you mean, earlier, when you asked about reading the entire contract? About leaving here?"

"Read the contract. All the way through. Sunnybrook is an experimental live-in rehabilitation facility. You're their guinea pig, Melrose, no different than I am, or Hedges or Carrington, or poor fucked-up Streggie. If you opt to leave before the mandated length of

your stay--."

"What's the mandated length of stay? They didn't tell me any mandated length of stay."

"As determined by Dr. Cameron."

"Shit."

"You'll be in violation of the contract and you'll be required to pay for treatment received."

"Fuck. I didn't even want to come here. My wife made me. How much do they charge?"

"You're looking at thirty thousand dollars a day."

"What? What the fuck!"

"Shhhhh. Quiet, man. You'll get us both locked in the light room. Didn't you read the fine print? Or has masturbation made you blind?"

"Thirty grand a day for what?"

"To wrest control of your life away from your penis, to hear them tell it."

runny oatmeal and raisin toast, Mr. Fogel retrieved Rearick for his meeting with Dr. Cameron. Rearick bowed his head and offered no goodbyes.

The rest of us were led by Mr. Dwyer, a slight man in blue sweatpants and a Sunnybrook staff t-shirt, to a football field-sized yard behind the barracks. Here, surrounded by a twelve-foot high chain link fence topped with razor wire, Mr. Dwyer led us through half an hour of light calisthenics followed by a two mile run. The entire time he repeated Code 7 of the Sunnybrook handbook. A rigorous exercise routine dampens masturbatory urges.

I wanted to argue the logic of Code 7. After all, I was at the peak of my athleticism when I embarked on the one-handed journey without end. However, at the moment, I had to admit there's nothing less appealing than almost two dozen huffing, sweating guys shuffling along the track punctuated every ten seconds by Carrington muttering "this is some bullshit".

It looked like a run but we moved slower than a walk. Even then, there were men who couldn't keep up; Dobson,

Streggie, Kerry Hedges.

I hit my twenty four hour mark, the first thirty thousand dollars I didn't have, three quarter miles into the run.

The communal showers were awkward. A single room, three dozen shower heads and no partitions. Twenty guys trying not to look at their own cocks, trying not to glance at their neighbor's cocks, making sure no one's taking an inordinate amount of time to lather their cocks, praying the soft petre doesn't wear off any time soon and keeping an eye on Kerry Hedges whereabouts.

From there, Mr. Fogel herded us into the group session. Before Mr. Swann took over, Fogel introduced me to my new flaccidity partner, Carrington.

"If you'll take your seats." Mr. Swann was all ready seated on a folding chair surveying his clipboard. "I believe today we'll start with you, Mr. Brock."

Wes Brock didn't look old enough to have even graduated high school. He slouched in his chair, weak chin resting on his chubby chest as though he were sitting in the back of algebra class

rather than the Sunnybrook group therapy spotlight. His acne sparkled like cherry stars in a cottage cheese sky.

"I'm curious about your masturbatory habits, Mr. Brock," Mr. Swann began scanning his clipboard. "With this device called a fleshlight. For the sake of anyone present who are unaware exactly what a fleshlight is, can you enlighten us?"

Judging by the catcalls, most everyone had all ready been enlightened.

"It's this thing," Wes mumbled. "Speak up, please, Mr. Brock," Mr. Swann said.

"It's this thing." The volume rose but the words remained jumbled.

"Please enunciate clearly, Mr. Brock. Remember, you're speaking not only to me, but to an audience of your peers who need help every bit as much as you do. We're not here to judge or demean you. Only to cure you of your affliction and present you a better quality of life. A life no longer centered on the next opportunity to touch your penis. Now please. Describe this masturbatory aid."

"It's this thing. You stick your dick in it and it feels just like a real pussy."

"What's this fleshlight constructed of, Mr. Brock?"

Brock's mouth hung open.
"What?"

"What material is the business end of this fleshlight constructed of that it should feel like a woman's moist, swollen vagina?"

At the words "moist, swollen vagina" I felt a brief flutter at my groin. The sensation expired quickly like a moth in a kill jar.

"Latex, I guess," Wes mumbled.
"I dunno, some space age polymer..."

"And the latex feels like a woman's vagina?"

"That's what the box says."

"Mr. Brock, have you ever touched a woman's vagina?"

"Well, it's also got a mouth and booty hole attachment."

"Answer the question, please, Mr. Brock."

Brock's eyes glazed. His mouth

hung open, lips moving as though he were measuring his answer options. Finally he settled on the truth. "No." For him, admitting to his virginity was like Hester Prynne owning up to adultery. In case you missed the blazing, gigantic fucking A.

"What about when you were born?" I asked.

"I was a C section baby," Wes muttered, sweat beginning to bead his forehead.

"Oh you poor bastard."

"Enough." Swann drew his eyes away from his clipboard long enough to give me a stern stare.
"Mr. Melrose, are you looking to take up where your flaccidity partner left off?"

"No, Mr. Swann."

"Respect, Mr. Melrose."

"I wasn't disrespecting."

"Respect, Mr. Melrose."

"Yes, Mr. Swann."

"Now how many other men in this room have experimented with masturbatory aids in a solitary setting?"

Only Kerry Hedges raised his hand.

"Well I appreciate your honesty and willingness to share, Mr. Hedges. But I asked how many men have used masturbatory aids. I did not ask how many men acted as masturbatory aids."

Hedges lowered his hand.

"According to your paperwork, here, this hasn't been the first masturbatory aid in your arsenal of real feel vaginas. What was your first?"

"Uh... I had uh... a mold of Missy Dahl's ass and pussy. That was pretty sweet."

"And it says here, you also possessed a set of Sally Suckem's breasts."

"Yeah."

"And what purpose did these disembodied latex breasts serve?"

Wes looked down at his hands in his lap, hanging there like two strangled puppies. His lip quivered.

"You'll feel better when you share, Mr. Brock. And please

keep in mind that nothing you say here will ever leave the room except in articles written for a handful of psychology journals."

"Ok."

"The breasts, Mr. Brock, what purpose?"

"I played with them while I fucked the Missy Dahl ass and pussy."

"Somewhat of a Dr. Frankenstein creation is it not? Considering women don't have breasts growing out of their backs."

Brock's mouth hung open.

"All right, Mr. Brock. How much would you say you've spent on these masturbatory aids over the years? Not including lube."

Wes shrugged.

"According to my notes, the Missy Dahl buttocks and vagina coupled with the Sally Suckem's breasts retail for \$302.68. Now you've been unemployed your entire life, correct?"

"I delivered papers for The Times."

"Your entire adult life."

"Oh." Brock's shame was palpable. A tear welled over and spilled from his eye.

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

"That's a demerit, Mr. Melrose."

"What the fuck for?"

"Two demerits, Mr. Melrose. Now, Mr. Brock, without an income of any kind, how did you afford so many masturbatory aids?"

"My mom."

"Your mom? The woman who brought you here, sobbing. The woman who signed you in to Sunnybrook for rehabilitation? Who claimed you were possessed by a demon, a 'jack-off demon'? She bought the Sally Suckem's breasts for you?"

"Yeah. No. She gave me the money. For college textbooks, she thought."

"I see. And how were you able to attend classes without books?"

"What? I didn't go. I pretended and just went to my buddies' apartment and played Guitar Hero."

"Wouldn't a college campus make an excellent place to meet women and perhaps eventually mount a meaningful sexual relationship?"

Wes shrugged. "Guess so."

In the exasperated silence I said "he's scared of the pussy". That was the problem. He didn't have any game. For him it was less shameful to plant his dick in a piece of plastic than to get rebuffed and rejected over and over by real life women.

"Mr. Melrose, I don't believe your medical transcription degree qualifies you to make a psychiatric analysis of Mr. Brock's mental state."

"Well, it's pretty fucking obvious, is it not? He don't need rehabilitation like he's some kind of deviant. He just needs to learn how to talk to women."

"You're coming dangerously close to a third demerit, Mr. Melrose." Swann narrowed his eyes at me. "Maybe Dr. Cameron might be interested in your opinions, and maybe how these views reflect on your own masturbatory habits."

"I'm not a virgin, dude."

"Mr. Swann."

"I've had plenty of women, Mr. Swann. More than you have, I promise you that."

"Yet here you are. A patient at Sunnybrook. My patient."

"Yeah, but I know what my problem is."

"And we'll deal with your problem..."

"I'm married, that's my problem."

"And we'll deal with your chronic masturbation in a later session. Today we are dealing with Mr. Brock's addiction. And I'm sure we'll be able to make more progress without your unwarranted, uninformed interruptions."

I threw my hands up in the air.

"Now, Mr. Brock. Would you care to tell us how your parents discovered your masturbatory materials?"



"I understand you had an outburst today during group therapy."

I didn't say anything. The doctor sat behind his desk. The entire office smelled of buffalo wings which reminded me I'd missed lunch waiting outside this prick's office door. By the way Fogel and Dwyer hovered to my left and right, respectively, I knew this wasn't going to be a civil meeting.

So I spoke accordingly. "You consider offering my opinion to a kid who's getting treated like a fucking monster cause he likes to jerk off an outburst, then, yeah, I outbursted."

"Well, that certainly is a counterproductive attitude."

"What are you gonna do about? Give me another demerit? Pile them on, I don't give a shit."

"No, Mr. Melrose, we're far beyond that point with you. It's time for us to take a more hands-on approach. But not the hands-on approach you're accustomed to."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck me? Yes. The last verbal resort of a beaten man. Fuck me, indeed, Mr. Melrose. You actually have more in common with that boy, Wesley Brock, than you realize."

"I want out."

"Mr. Brock simply can not keep his hands off himself to the point where he can no longer function as a productive member of society."

"Bullshit. I want out of Sunnybrook. You can shove the contract up your ass and bill me, motherfucker. There's nothing wrong with me."

"Like yourself, Mr. Brock doesn't care who he hurts with his inability to control his masturbatory urges. In this case, rather than a six year-old daughter, he was continually caught in the act by his mother and father."

"Fuck you. You can't keep me here. You hear me?"

"Your belligerence, Mr. Melrose, does not offset the fact that you engaged in the act of self-interference in front of your six year-old daughter."

"Oh, you're so full of fucking shit. That never happened."

"According to the report filed by your wife--."

"My wife's borderline insane. She's the one who should be committed."

"Nonetheless."

"Look, my daughter likes to sneak around, ok? Ever since she was a baby she's been sneaky. I swear to god, she's got a spy gene or something. We take her to Wal-Mart, all she wants are the spy gadgets. Binoculars, little fake camera, walkie talkie, all that sort of shit."

"So it's her fault."

"Listen, dammit. I thought her and the wife were still at the grocery store. And it wasn't even like I was jerking off to porn. There's a woman in Texas I met online. Every once in awhile if we catch each other on when we're both home alone, we'll turn our webcams on and play for each other. Mutually. I lost track of time or they got home early. Either way, rather than come inside, my daughter spied on me through the window. All she could see was my back. She

didn't see what I was doing. She didn't see any cock."

"But she knew enough to call your wife to the window."

"She might've all ready been there. She might have goaded my daughter into looking. Who the fuck knows? Things haven't been right with my marriage for a long time."

"Because of your preference for masturbating with women on a computer screen rather than looking to repair the sexual relationship with the woman you chose to marry?"

"You don't know my wife, dude."

"Dr. Cameron. You are to address me as Dr. Cameron at all times. The first code in your Sunnybrook handbook."

"Fuck your handbook, fuck your codes. I told you I'm done."

"But Sunnybrook is not done with you, Mr. Melrose. Sunnybrook is not done with you by a long shot."

"You can't keep me here against my will."

"We can keep you here as long as I deem necessary, Mr. Melrose. You must realize I do have your best interests in mind. Just because you can't realize you need help; that doesn't alleviate our responsibility to help you. At the very least, think of your daughter and the emotional scars you've all ready gifted her."

"She didn't see anything."

"Children are very intuitive, Mr. Melrose. What you believe she hasn't seen today will haunt her subconscious tomorrow. I can assure you of that, Mr. Melrose."

"You're trying to fuck with me. There's nothing wrong with me, with any of us. I want out."

"You want out, or your addiction wants out? And after only a day and a half. But then, with you, we realized quickly we were dealing with a near terminal case of chronic masturbation."

I lunged at him then. I think I realized I was going to attack him the moment I stepped into his office. I was fooling anyone. I tried to lunge. Dwyer and Fogel wrestled me face first into the carpet before I had the chance to gain my feet and spring.

I wasn't the first and I wasn't the last. I was just the next. They handled me with the same calm efficiency they handled everything at Sunnybrook. I didn't see who slid the needle into my ass cheek. I felt the radiating warmth and expanding void. Then for a long time after that, it seemed, I felt nothing at all.

7

The session rooms were in the basement. I think they were in the basement. There were no windows. Without any clocks, I had no way to tell night from day or the passing of days. I slept. I ate. I spent hours in the cramped session room with Dr. Otwell.

The session room measured eight foot by eight foot. There was a sandbox, slightly larger than a kitty litter box, in one corner which afforded me a place to play out my fantasies with the toy figures showcased on the shelves lining the room. The figures ranged from hard carved wooden totems to green army men, from G.I. Joe action figures to Star Wars collectibles. There were various toys from several nearly forgotten cartoons. Thundercats, Silverhawks, Mask, I recognized. There were comic

book heroes and villains. Batman, Superman, Wolverine. There was a Ken Doll wearing Malibu shorts (anatomically incorrect, I checked). The toys ranged in sizes from an inch to twelve inches.

After a decent string of good days I asked Dr. Otwell when I'd be going home.

"We can't think about home at this stage, Mr. Melrose."

"Why not? I'm doing better, aren't I?"

"You're acting better, Mr. Melrose. There's a difference. Let's focus on the positives."

"I'm trying."

"I know you are, Mr. Melrose. Now," he motioned to the action figures, "let's say you've just come home from a busy day. You're tense, tired, and beginning to feel those urges that have shackled you for so long. Show me what you do to get time alone from your family. What do you say? What excuses do you make?"

"I can't keep doing this, Dr. Otwell."

"You can and will, Mr. Melrose. I have complete faith in your capacity for healing."

"I don't think so, doctor. I really don't."

8

I was finally granted unescorted bathroom privileges. The hallways were narrow and lined with a dozen doors per side. All closed and revealing no secrets. There was no telling how many of my brothers of the furtive stroke were locked down here.

The bathrooms were as cramped as the session rooms. There were only two stalls, both lacking doors per Sunnybrook protocol. I'm sure there was probably a code in the handbook concerning stall doors, but I'd found the guidebook much like the demerit system, no longer applied to me.

Entering the bathroom, I noticed the first stall occupied by a fiercely Irish-looking man with a shock of red hair haloing his head. He was scrawny, with sunken eyes, hollowed cheekbones and a hawk nose as though he'd been waging his own private potato famine. It took a minute of blatant staring to recognize him.

“Rearick?”

He stood up to wipe and I couldn't help but notice there was nothing dangling between his legs. Nothing at all. He was as anatomically incorrect as the Malibu Ken doll in the session room.

“Rearick... what the hell happened to you?”

“Melrose, is that you?” A tear spilled down his cheek. “Don't tell me you're down here too.”

“What the fuck happened?”

Rearick grinned. It was the grin of a man with terminal lung cancer who's just been diagnosed with stomach cancer.

“I've been nullified. I've been freed from the tool of my addiction, Melrose. But it don't matter. Ha ha. Because you're never truly cured. I still feel the urges. I still feel the need.”

I backed out of the bathroom as he stumbled toward me, his

sweatpants around his ankles, the flap of pale, hairless skin between his legs shining in the fluorescent light.”

“They're gonna cure you, too, Melrose. Except it won't be any kind of cure you want.”

I turned my back and ran to the session room where Dr. Otwell awaited with his sandbox and action figures and gentle smiles.

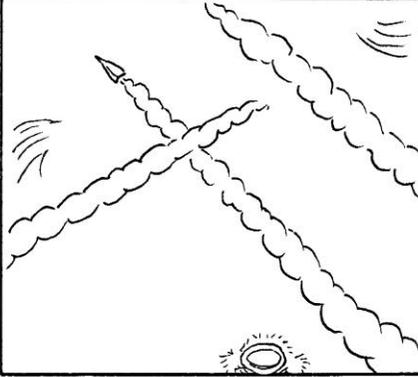
“That was quick, Mr. Melrose. Very good. The less you dawdle, the less chance temptation can sink its hooks into you.”

His eyes sparkled with good humor and glimmered with something you had to look harder to see. Cruelty. He knew who was set to ambush me in the bathroom. There were no accidents at Sunnybrook.

“Are you ready to continue the healing, Mr. Melrose?”

“Yes, please. I want to get better.”

THE SKY WAS BEAUTIFUL TODAY,
(DESPITE THE CONSTANT SPRAYING);



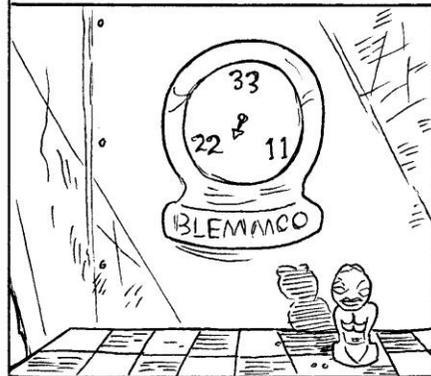
THE ATMOSPHERE, ALIVE,
ASSERTED A DIVINE SUBSTANCE.



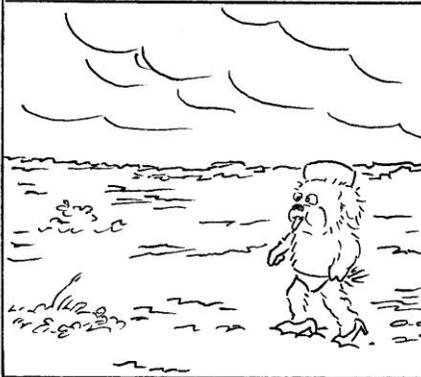
THE FAMILIAR KITCHEN ANOTHER
MERE LAYER SATURATED IN THIS.



THE COUNTING OF THE CLOCK...
... THE RANDOM SHADOWS ...



HE FELT ADRIFT, SLEEPWALKING
ON THE OPEN LANDSCAPE .



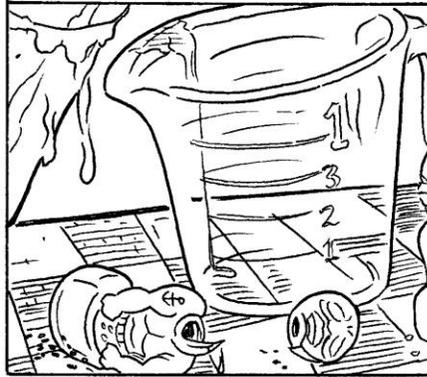
BUT, OF LATE, AS IF HE ALONE
WERE 'NONESENTIAL PERSONNEL'.



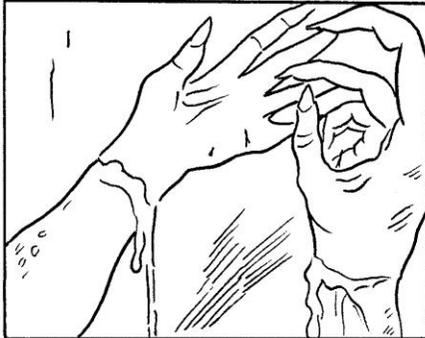
EVEN DAZZLING, TOO, HOW SUNLIGHT
HIT THE RED ENAMEL NUMBERS



ON THE PIREX PITCHER AND HER
BLOOD AS IT SPILLED ONTO, INTO...



SEEMING SO IRREVOCABLE. DABBING
THE SCENE WITH VITAL PAINTS
USUALLY KEPT WELL HIDDEN,



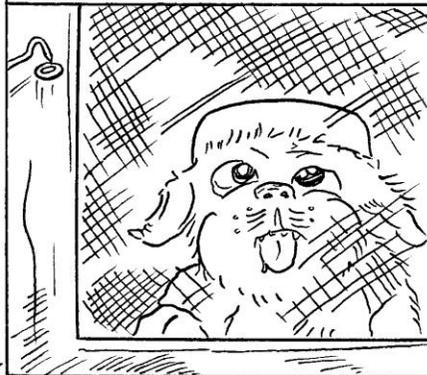
HER SELF-DAMAGE A PART OF
THINGS NOW FOR ALL TIME LASTED.



THE NAGGING BAFFLEMENT
WHERE ANY ONE GOD WAS IN THIS,
AND THE TOO-LATE PANIC



WHETHER HER PET PEKIPPOO
WOULD HAPPEN TO HELP...





POWER & SACRIFICE

The Resolve of M. Gira & the Resurrection of Swans

By Craig Woods

Photos © Owen Swenson & Beowulf Sheehan

Art possesses the power to drastically alter and reshape the lives of those it touches, its influence searing the mind's veneer, moulding it into forms that would not have otherwise existed. A significant portion of the perceptions through which we view the world is largely governed by the art we consume; those transmissions of shapes,

words, images and sounds flying free from the minds of their creators to echo in endless permutations within the harmonic lattices of our nervous systems. Arguably, music is one of the more immediate art forms as its power resides in its function to infiltrate the nervous system directly via the ear, infecting the body with a sensory code which

the mind has yet to fully decipher; a latent and benign virus determining the recipient's responses to each subsequently enriched exposure. The music that harmonises with us becomes inseparable from our idea of ourselves, just as it assumes an existence beyond the will of its creator.

To put it more bluntly: metal fans have it right when they say that music "ROCKS!" At its most potent, the force of music may shake us from the cosy perch of our preconceptions, slap us in the face, stamp on our helplessly aroused genitalia, pound our cardia into pâté, rub our faces into our own vomit and, if we're lucky, leave us thankful for the privilege. A little like indulging in a drug-fuelled S&M party with Colin Farrell and Russell Brand, but without the ensuing sense of shame or advisable appointments at the VD clinic. Even for obsessive music aficionados like myself, the most extreme cases of this phenomenon are rare, and each is a treasured encounter from which we grow to acquire an autonomous reverence for the artist(s) responsible.

So it was that, at the tender age of fifteen, I experienced my first and unforgettable brush with the work of a band named Swans. The year was 1992 and the song, called 'Love of Life', opened side B of a mix-tape put together for me by a girl with whom I'd only recently become friends. Disrupting the otherwise relatively standard punk and alternative rock fare which comprised the rest of the compilation, the song's intro exploded from my trusty old Alba ghetto blaster's stuttering speakers in a swirling tempest of fluid guitars and ice-cold piano chords. Its off-kilter melody and the startled-heartbeat urgency of its rhythm informed me that change was afoot, both transcendent and cataclysmic. There was a rage at work in the music, but one of a far more refined and elegant sort than that exemplified by the hardcore punk, new wave and metal bands I largely favoured at that time. This was the fury of a comparatively nobler creature. It seemed I was staring into the gaping maw of a roaring tiger, helpless to pull myself away from

the awesome spectacle of its jaws as they prepared to close themselves around my head. And then there were the vocals: an impossibly sonorous baritone backed by an unyielding female backdrop of banshee ululations. This, I thought, is what the end of the world will sound like. The music was as precise as a finely honed razor, yet delivered itself with an unapologetic candour. In short, it resembled nothing I had heard before. In the space of a minute, I was hooked. My mission was clear: to discover as much about this band as I could and to seek out every Swans recording I could lay my eager hands upon.

With a little preliminary digging, I soon discovered that Swans had formed in New York in 1982, the brainchild of vocalist/guitarist/bassist Michael Gira-- possessor of those inimitably arresting vocal chords and evidently also an accomplished wordsmith with a flair for primal narratives and dense metaphors. At Gira's side stood his partner, the sublime Jarboe: an ethereally striking woman whose plaintive piano

chords and bellicose synth drones were matched only by the impossibly extensive range of her voice, veering as it did between angelic soprano and guttural, scornful demoness. Filling out the band's core trinity was guitarist Norman Westberg; a lean, muscular figure whose minimalist chords and dense sheets of harmonic feedback were so skilfully crafted as to boast a skewed but firmly defined signature that no other band could hope to emulate. Completing the line-up around this time was the formidable rhythm section of drummer Ted Parsons and bassist Algis Kizys, plus a string of guest players that included Anton Fier, Vincent Signorelli, Jenny Wade and Mr Foetus himself J.G. Thirlwell. Having previously acquired an appreciation for the likes of DNA and the Contortions, it was no surprise to me to learn that Swans had their roots in the experimental No Wave scene. However, in terms of exploring fresh sonic and aesthetic avenues, Gira and co seemed to leave their predecessors and contemporaries behind in the dust of an atomic blast. Try as one might to assign

them to a musical lineage, Swans were almost disturbingly original. They played Swans music, pure and simple. This was a band whose whole was far greater than the sum of its parts-- a first in my experience. There have been very few since.

Returning to my mix-tape-compiling friend for advice on where best to begin my immersion in the Swans catalogue, she pointed me in the direction of their 1987 album *Children of God*. It was an inspired suggestion as, though I did not immediately appreciate it, this record presents Swans at a pivotal stage in their career, showcasing their talents at each station of their diverse sonic palette. The warlike opener, 'New Mind', with its apocalyptic lyrics and coarse metallic guitar grind, instantly elevated itself to anthem status in my mind. Gira's imperative cries of "*People get ready!*" resounded with the exigency of a rallying call to an unknown battle beyond time and space, an effect which has shed none of its vigour in the intervening years. That this powerhouse is followed by the haunting subtlety of the Jarboe-

helmed ballad 'In My Garden' is testament not only to Swans' commitment to the art of contrast, but also their courage in pursuing their artistic impulses to all logical extremes. The album is rife with such juxtapositions; the languorous sludgy riffs of 'Sex, God, Sex' giving way to the spectral tension of 'Blood and Honey', which subsequently yields to the deviant belligerence of 'Like a Drug' before fading into the melancholy acoustic strains of 'You're Not Real, Girl', and so on. Although never quite subscribing firmly to any single specific genre, the songs glimmer at the edges with alternating shades of industrial rock, post-punk, dark blues, neo-folk and country. Throughout, themes of love and fear, hope and despair, sex and death continually rub shoulders. Standout track 'Beautiful Child' -- a torrid industrial behemoth of thunderous drums and grandiose synth passages over which Gira bellows a candid intention of infanticide-- presents the band at their tumultuous apex. Meanwhile the closing title track finds Jarboe chanting a mantra of divine superiority, a contention whose meaning is as disturbing as

its delivery is ostensibly heartening.

This is the Swans experience in a nutshell: a post-generic arena where 'light' and 'dark' are thrust so violently together as to become indistinguishable in their fury. (A notion which, incidentally, is further augmented by 'I'll Swallow You'-- the bonus track at the end of the 1997 re-release of the album-- which combines samples of several songs into one beautifully rendered collage.)

Before long I had reached that particularly fanatical phase of enthusiasm that one often does as a young person; those seemingly epiphanic junctures where one experiences something so rich and rewarding that there arises a need to express it through every facet of one's life-- scrawl its name across walls, desks, schoolbooks and even your own skin; wear its imagery upon your chest; regale anyone who'll listen (and even many who won't) with the details of its life-affirming qualities. And I had only as yet heard one full album and a handful of other tracks. My deeper interrogation of

the Swans narrative would supply a profusion of surprises.

I approached the band's discography in a non-linear fashion and, as such, failed initially to appreciate the steady progression from their noisy industrial roots to the multi-textured fare of their later career. Moving from *Children of God* to 1986's *Greed*, I experienced an almost supernatural chill at the starkness of the earlier work; the instrumentation stripped down to its essence, Gira's voice chanting and wailing in the style of a lost pilgrim trapped in a desolate post-apocalyptic landscape with only the sporadic ghost of Jarboe's gospel chorus and the remote metallic clatter of Westberg's guitar for company. From there I stumbled into the cool melodic elegance of 1991's *White Light From the Mouth of Infinity*; a truly beautiful record comprising twelve finely crafted gems of sumptuous instrumentation and philosophically charged lyrics. Though the violent clamour of the previous recordings had apparently been usurped by complex harmonic arrangements, the intensity of Swans remained

intact. Even in their most subtle and introspective moments, this was a band whose dedication to a particular aesthetic continued to yield devastating results. Their indolence was that of the bird from which they took their name: graceful, pleasingly composed, but charged with innate and potentially savage hostility.

When finally I had rounded out my Swans experience from the earliest albums to the most recent, I was able to begin piecing the chronological puzzle together and glean a thorough comprehension of the band's development from abrasive post-No Wave noise-makers to purveyors of cerebrally charged experimental rock. It was a shock to me to discover a band of such unapologetic breadth, who could straddle lush semi-acoustic ballads and minimalist industrial assaults with equal confidence. I was bowled over to learn that there had been an incarnation of Swans without Jarboe-- a version specialising in ugly, distortion-heavy, menacing guitar dirges and hopeless tales of urban alienation that exposed the heaviest of metal bands as

toothless poseurs. And nothing could have prepared me for the earth-shattering devastation of live album *Public Castration is a Good Idea* (1986), wherein Jarboe's throbbing synth is as instrumental in the brutality as Gira's condemned howling and Westberg's flesh-scouring harmonics. That this same band could, in the space of a decade, also be responsible for some of the most lyrical music I would ever hear confirmed the audacity of their artistic principles.

Equally impressive was that all of this seemed perfectly cohesive; the transitions from each sonic and artistic station of the Swans journey as flawless and unaffected as that of ice to water. Predictably, there were detractors; committed noise enthusiasts who claimed that the band had sold out upon their forays into melody and more complex orchestrations. Such criticisms seemed flimsy to me then and strike me as pathetic now as they so utterly miss the point. Arguably I was at an advantage in having approached the band's output non-chronologically, but it struck me as immediately obvious that there

was something far deeper at the heart of Swans than a simple allegiance to genre or any specific sonic style. Everything this band did, from the most outwardly brutal to the most soothingly plaintive, was guided by a palpable desire to pursue the vital, the primal, the raw meat and bones of human experience in all its extremes from the terrible to the tender. As such, Swans were uncommonly honest in their attitude towards their audience, with Gira making no secret of his disdain for the insular industrial/noise/rock fans who berated the band's sonic expansion circa *Children of God*. When that album's follow-up, *The Burning World*, was released in 1989, the message was clear. This record saw Swans at their most accessible; a glossy production of intricately arranged subtle rock numbers and folk-style ballads. Their subsequent output, beginning with *White Light From The Mouth Of Infinity*, would retain this attention to melody and texture, but also reclaim some of the rawness of *Children of God* whilst assuming a more experimental approach towards production which would expand

across the next few albums. In some ways the comparatively conventional and polished work on *The Burning World* could appear to some listeners like a litmus test to the band's established audience; an open challenge for them to follow Swans on their odyssey or else jump ship. However, though the band would doubtless have shed no tears at losing some of the more prejudiced members of their fan base, this chapter of the Swans story makes a more elegant sense when viewed in the context of their unpretentious commitment to utilising their art as a means to explore urgent human truths in a diversity of ways.

All of these various strands --which in the hands of a lesser artist could all too easily collapse under their accumulative weight-- were bound together tightly by Michael Gira's single-minded vision. Regardless of the musical and technical experiments the band pursued at any given time, the established aesthetic of Swans remained intact, its identity firm and unequivocal. This was consistently secured by Gira's

lyrics which stand as some of the most accomplished and literary in contemporary music (certainly far more so than those of Nick Cave, the frequent praise of whom makes the lack of widespread recognition of Gira's achievements in this field very mysterious indeed). Bringing together personal experiences with philosophical insights, literary riffs, fragments of folk tales and true stories of violent crime, Gira's lyrical milieu is complex and substantial, offering an endless array of interpretations and claiming a tangible life for itself independent of its author. Listening to a song like 'Failure', for example, one might believe themselves momentarily privy to ruminations on the songwriter's past life experience, but the song's metaphor-heavy country inflection grant it the properties of an ancient folk ditty with no particular attachment to Gira at all. Both lyrically and musically, Swans were seeking out something all-encompassing and altogether more truthful than anything their critics and spurned former fans could comprehend.

Despite my youthfully enthusiastic allegiance to the Swans banner, it would be several years before I experienced the band live, the timing of their Scottish shows falling foul of me for various reasons. In late 1996, two earth-shattering pieces of information knocked the wind conclusively from my lungs: i) Swans were poised to release an epic double album entitled *Soundtracks for the Blind*. ii) This would be their final studio album and was to be followed by a 'Farewell' tour. That apocalypse promised by the opening salvo of 'Love of Life' four years previously now seemed terribly imminent. I snapped up a copy of *Soundtracks for the Blind* upon its release, as desperately as one living with the threat of biological warfare would procure a gasmask. The dense collage of various genres, field recordings, experimental passages and drones which comprised the album not only effectively summarised the totality of Swans in all its rage and repose, brutality and beauty, but also painted a picture of a fractured world where all meaning had been deconstructed into disparate fragments. It was

an appropriate and awe-inspiring Swansong. When the band's 'Farewell' tour roared its way to our corner of the world, I attended in the company of the female friend who had introduced me to the Swans universe. The blistering, searing and heart-breaking beauty of the show proved a bittersweet experience. Though euphoric as one can only be after such a spectacle, there was more than a smidgen of sadness in our hearts as we returned home. While the music still lived and would continue to live, Swans themselves, as an entity, were now dead, leaving behind them a void of uniqueness which no other band could fill. It seemed the apocalypse had robbed us in its occurrence; the pleasures of its imminence far richer than its consummation.

In the years following their disbandment, the legacy of Swans was borne out by their identifiable influence in the work of an astonishing range of subsequent bands from noise-rock troublemakers to alt.-country balladeers. Meantime, with Michael Gira and Jarboe having gone their separate ways, the

members of Swans splintered off on divergent creative paths. Jarboe has since produced an impressive body of work as a confrontationally experimental chanteuse, equally as convincing as both a solo entity and as a collaborator with an extensive list of artists (--her 2003 LP with the avant-garde metal band Neurosis is a particular high point and an enviable treat for those yet to experience it). In addition to appearances on some of Jarboe's solo work, Norman Westberg has also since lent his signature sound to an assortment of bands, most notably the New York-based noise rock outfit Heroin Sheiks.

Concurrently, Michael Gira continued to carve his own particular furrow with his new project Angels of Light, a semi-acoustic ensemble specialising in densely orchestrated freak-folk and country-inflected material foregrounding his distinctive voice and narrative-oriented lyrics. Between this and the running of his record label, Young God Records, Gira has also made numerous appearances as a solo acoustic performer, sharing bills with bands as diverse as the

Boredoms and Akron/Family. Throughout, his dedication to his art has seen Gira produce a wealth of quality material while continuing to eschew adherence to a specific genre. As such, any possibility of a resurrection of Swans long seemed remote, a notion consolidated by its creator's frequent vocal assertions that he had no desire to ever return to that world. For Swans fans, it seemed access to that domain would remain restricted to repeated indulgences of the discography, the thrill of Swans fandom maintained through introductions of the band's work to new uninitiated generations.

And then, in 2010, there was change. Seemingly transmitted from the same unpredictable alien wellspring that had accosted my consciousness with the intro to 'Love of Life' eighteen years previously, a rumour came floating my way: Michael Gira was reactivating Swans. Convinced that this was nothing more than hearsay, I nonetheless prepared to scour the internet for the most meagre morsel of information which might support

the claim. I didn't have to look far: "SWANS ARE NOT DEAD" the official Myspace page proclaimed. An announcement on the Young God Records website soon followed; Gira had assembled a new Swans line-up which included Norman Westberg and various collaborators from Angels of Light and other projects. A record was in the works and a full-scale tour forthcoming. At that moment, I'd be a liar if I said the adolescent impulse to scrawl the word 'SWANS' on my desk didn't curl back through the tangle of years to grip me excitedly.

In what seemed an uncommonly (and mercifully) brief space of time, the first Swans record in thirteen years --bearing the deliciously portentous title of *My Father Will Guide Me Up a Rope to the Sky*-- was alive and unleashed into the world. Less than two weeks later I held my CD copy in my hands and inserted it into my player with the caution of one handling an explosive device. The sounds to emerge from my speakers were a typically untypical treat. Presenting neither a continuation

of the abstract *Soundtracks for the Blind*, nor quite an extension of the concise Angels of Light discipline, this is a record with its own progressive and fully-formed identity. From the tempestuous clamour of opener 'No Words/No Thoughts' to the lascivious groove of 'Jim' to the asymmetrical jaggedness of 'You Fucking People Make Me Sick' to the forthright blues stomp of 'Eden Prison' through to the a capella finale of 'Little Mouth', this album presents a creative force at the peak of its abilities, and stands as a fitting statement of a band poised to plunge themselves into the human heart's most primal recesses and swim there. Swans are indeed not dead. The apocalypse has been reversed and is once more imminent. The circle is complete.

Entering Glasgow's Arches venue on this cold October evening to meet with Michael Gira prior to tonight's Swans performance, it's difficult not to believe that there is a cyclical logic at work. The Arches, previously a derelict area beneath Glasgow's Central Station, had been renovated as an art and exhibition

space in the early 1990s around the time my first encounter with Swans had occurred. Though a chasm of eighteen years now separates us, my fifteen year old self is tangibly elated as the tour manager leads me down a series of stairs into the venue's subterranean innards. Through its walls and ceilings the hum and throb of overhead passing trains reverberate menacingly. I've bypassed the roaring tiger's jaws and walked straight into its cavernous belly.

Michael Gira greets me with a firm handshake. His manner is cordial and sincere and, within minutes, my elation has been tempered and replaced with the relaxed pleasure of agreeable, familiar company. Remembering momentarily the many friends and associates in the Glasgow music scene (where abrasive experimentalism has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years) who have asked me to pass on their hellos and well-wishes to Gira, the notion of doing so quickly appears ridiculous to me, and not just because the extensive list would feasibly consume our allotted time. Against all my

expectations, what follows is more of a relaxed and affable dialogue than a rigidly defined interview. Gira is good-humoured but also frank in his responses, his every word fortified with a manifest pragmatism. The vibrations of passing trains punctuate our conversation like the pulse of a sleeping beast...

As I understand it, you came to music with absolutely no formal tuition whatsoever.

No, none at all.

And I know that before pursuing music you studied art. Did that background have any influence on the aesthetic formulation of Swans?

In a way, in that I was in art school in Los Angeles in 1976 to 1978 when punk rock happened. I was already having reservations about going into the art world because it was seeming to me to be so elitist and academic and really not vital, not powerful, not expressive in any truly primal or spiritual way. It just seemed to be like a career choice; people chose to be an artist like they'd choose to be a lawyer or something. It seemed kind of banal and flaccid

compared to my heroes like Francis Bacon.

I had assumed Bacon was an inspiration for you. His influence certainly seems palpable in the lyrical matter of early Swans records. Songs like 'Job', 'Clay Man', 'Sealed in Skin' and 'Stay Here' are oozing with references to flesh and bone and muscles, displaying a distinctly Bacon-esque obsession with the raw gristle of humanity. Are there other artists who inspired you to the same extent?

The performance artist Chris Burden. And Viennese Actionists; Hermann Nitsch, Otto Mühl and Günter Brus. People who really challenged our perceptions of reality. Going to art school in L.A. in the late seventies, conceptualism was happening and everything was very academic. The lingo to me was really repulsive and elitist and boring. Then punk rock happened and it just seemed so much more compelling and relevant to the culture we were living in. I started a magazine called *No* magazine, which was like a broadsheet, big NME kind of size. We did interviews with all the L.A. bands. It also had pornography and some

art pieces in there, and interviews with different artists and musicians.

What precipitated the move from the magazine towards your first forays into music?

I was involved in that for a while and it just seemed natural to make my own music. I had a guitarist I was working with in L.A. at the time. We wrote songs together and they were pretty bad. [laughs] But eventually I decided to move to New York because I was really enthralled with Suicide, Lydia Lunch, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Glenn Branca, the Contortions... It just seemed a more vital and primary kind of thing, less fetishized than the L.A. punk, or even the stylised standard punk that we were hearing at the time, the standard three chord progressions.

The artists of New York's No Wave scene seemed quite possessed by the idea of disregarding what had gone before and really tearing up the established rule books, including those of punk rock. Presumably that's something that appealed to your sensibility.

Yeah, it wasn't using the standard chord structures or the standard progressions. I don't think it was particularly intellectual music, it was just expressive. I didn't want to sound like that, but that was inspirational to me. And also New York at the time was in a state of perilous decay. It just seemed like an apocalypse there and I kind of wanted to be in the midst of that. So I moved there from L.A.. And then I started this band that I had there for a while, then it broke up and I started Swans.

So your previous musical experience prior to Swans was really pretty limited.

I had played bass with Rhys Chatham [--avant-garde composer renowned for his 'guitar orchestra' pieces--CW]. He taught me how to tune, I didn't know how to tune. He sort of showed me how to finger and what to play, and after playing with him for a couple of months or something he gave me the bass and I just started writing and figuring stuff out on the bass. Then got a band together. That's how it started.

Though Swans has always boasted a peculiarly unique sound, those first

recordings in 1982 - the songs on the eponymous debut EP - do betray a certain debt to the No Wave scene. There are minor traces of the Teenage Jesus shrillness, a bit of DNA's eccentricity and the Contortions' groove in there.

Really? I don't know about that, but ...

Well, in comparison to the recordings you made for the first full-length the following year, which stand out radically from anything else that was going on at the time. The songs on Filth are markedly different from the EP in both construction and execution. The sound seems more fully formed and idiosyncratic, presenting a fundamental shift from the established modes of the No Wave scene. In the context of the time, Filth seems like it materialised from an alien planet.

Well I don't think Swans has ever really sounded like anybody else.

Where do you think this specific, perfectly formed sound came from?

The need to go 'Ugh!' [laughs] It came from a lot of places. It came from Howlin' Wolf, blues. It came from Throbbing Gristle. It came from Brian Eno. It came from the

No Wave scene. It came from Kraftwerk. And ways of thinking about sound as opposed to needing to be a technically adroit musician in order to make something happen. And I guess I just took that to the logical extreme. Or I should say *we* did, because Norman [Westberg] was an integral part of that. It wasn't really worrying about 'songs' per se, we were just making chunks of sound and rhythm that had an emotional capacity to kind of destroy your body for a minute. The volume and the chunks of sound... It was kind of an ecstatic experience, like undergoing a trial by fire. It was really nice.

That point about wanting to destroy your body, I want to come back to that, but...

Oh and the Stooges would have been a big influence as well of course.

The early Swans sound is often described as post-industrial...

Well, that's ridiculous.

Yeah, I'm not a fan of attaching these kinds of arbitrary labels to anything myself, I consider it a dilettante exercise. However, I can understand

the suggested meaning of that phrase in a particular context. Not only does the sparse, machine-like palette of early Swans conjure images of the modern urban landscape, but much of the lyrical subject matter seems to deal ostensibly with the alienation incurred there; lack of privacy, sexual insecurity, economic oppression, loss of identity, etc. Did New York in any way prove inspirational to these particular themes?

No, I was already thinking about stuff like that.

But presumably you were still doing menial jobs to support yourself in New York at that time. The drudgery of day-to-day employment and the indignity of wage slavery are recurring themes on those early records.

Yeah, I was intensely concerned about work and what it meant.

It ties in with the Francis Bacon-esque strain we mentioned earlier, but the corporeal concerns of those early lyrics; all the flesh, bone and muscles generate a picture of someone who feels trapped in their own body. It seems a fitting metaphor for a person demeaned by the sale of their physical labour.

I think work is great if it's what fulfils you and is where your imagination is and is your calling in life. But work that takes up one third of your life --which is eight hours a day at least-- where you work for a boss who just treats you like a commodity... That to me is tantamount to slavery. There's a lot of stuff about that, yeah. And about advertisements and Mass Media, which has only gotten worse since then, you know.

I ask the question about New York simply because I wonder how influential your environment is upon the work you create. Something to be asked of any artist I suppose.

That's a logical question. But I don't really know because I live in the country now and I'm making some of the most challenging music I've ever made, as you'll see live. The record is one thing, it's sort of a transitional phase between Angels of Light and Swans. Now we've found our pace here live it's really pushing things forward. But I live in a sort of bucolic setting. [laughs]

I'm curious about the idea of catharsis in your work. Having spent

more hours than I can count listening to your music since I was a teenager, there are a lot of rewards I've gleaned from it, not all of them cathartic by any means. But the intensity of the music and lyrics does undeniably possess a cathartic quality-- many a bad day has been pummelled out of my system by a healthy dosage of Swans. Does the creation of your music and records serve any cathartic purpose to you personally, and does that make it necessary?

It's really like how a boxer trains for years and then he is at the ultimate of his capacities when he's in the ring. At that point I think he feels his place in the universe, feels totally connected to everything around him in that moment. So that's sort of what it is for me. That's what I need to be doing. Making records and writing songs at home and figuring things out that way. Then getting people together, going into the studio, rehearsing the thing, recording it, doing overdubs. That's all a long process. It's energising and I tax myself to my ultimate abilities to do it. But then you have this sort of dead piece of matter which is the record, you know? It's just a point in time. To me the next step

is taking the material and performing it live, arranging it in various ways.

You have quite consistently reworked your older material throughout your career, and on this current tour you're employing completely revamped versions of songs from as far back as 1984. Is this constant revision something that is utterly necessary for you in order for your material to remain relevant to you?

Sure. Otherwise I'd just feel like a parody, like a clown. As you'll see tonight, even the songs from the record we just did have been transformed radically from what we just recorded six months ago. And certainly songs that we're going to play from the early days are, for the most part, just a starting place for something else to happen. It's a process. I don't think it ever ends really. A song is just a template; a way to move and make something happen in the moment, which is the most important thing. I could never go out and just try to play our 'hits', you know? It just seems ridiculous.

I assume this is the same impulse that led you to turn your back on loud, noisy music in the late eighties.

Exactly, yeah.

Even in the earliest Swans material, there are quite strong elements of various genres stitched together among the rage and violence for attentive listeners to identify. Much of the songs on Filth boast awkward time signatures betraying a jazz influence, while the minimalist chords are more evocative of blues. Indeed the repetitive plodding of the songs on Cop could be seen as blues stripped down to its obsessively minimalist extreme. By 1986 you are almost flirting with dance beats on songs like 'A Screw' and 'Time is Money (Bastard)'. The pivotal period around the Children of God album and tour saw you exploring a wider range of avenues. Although the music remains difficult to classify in terms of genre, it is woven together with identifiable threads of blues, folk music, gospel and country. Were these conscious choices on your part?

I never think like that. In the early days I was on bass and I'd work with people and we'd build something up around the bass. And then later I started writing on an acoustic guitar, fitfully and not

very successfully all the time. But it was just to make something happen that would work with the voice. Then I'd gather people and one thing would indicate another thing. It's just what I thought the material required, it wasn't like trying to be a genre or a style. That's the way a critic thinks, you know? To me, art is just doing the thing. That's everything. Making something physically happen and not worrying about the consequences or the meaning, but just being compelled to do something. That's what's really important.

Given what you've said here combined with your lack of a professional background in music before you started Swans, do you see your role as more of an intuitive orchestrator...

I don't see my role at all...

Sure, that's probably the wrong way to phrase it, but it's almost like...

It's just what I do, it's who I am.

Of course. But your dedication to experimenting with form and content seems suggestive of an intuitive process at work over and above an intellectual one.

Oh, well, there's both. That's one of the reasons I guess I rebelled from art school, because they were teaching artists to begin from a theory rather than from intuition. And I've never worked that way. But it doesn't mean that when you work intuitively you're not using your intellect, because you're defining the form as it goes along-- you're codifying it and editing it and making it into something that seems vital and necessary. It's not like just spewing a bunch of barf on a canvas and calling it art, you know?

Asides from your art world influences, there's also a strong literary quality to your lyrics. Are there any particular writers or forms of literature which have most specifically inspired you and which you recognise as having infiltrated your work?

Sure. Not that I necessarily do it intentionally as I write a song. But I've written songs about books before. I wrote a song called 'Love of Life' which is a Jack London story. I go through jags when I'm reading someone. Even in the early days I was reading Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of*

Fascism, and that inspired several songs. And then I believe that Joseph Conrad has inspired a few songs. One was *The Secret Sharer*, which is a really great book. It's a story about this captain who rescues someone at sea and it's really his kind of alter ego. A confrontation with his true self. It's a beautiful story.

I can definitely see the Conrad influence in the way the narrators or protagonists of your lyrics are confronted with extreme predicaments in often seemingly isolated conditions.

Yeah. And Jerzy Kosinski influenced me. I used to read Robbe-Grillet who influenced me, I think, in the kind of terse, very precise way of describing things. I used to enjoy very much the almost scientific or analytical way of describing extreme acts of brutality and violence. [laughs]

Have you ever approached the structure of an album as a kind of literary exercise?

No.

I ask that thinking principally of Soundtracks For The Blind which seems to flow and segue through a

series of different aural palettes, as though each track is a scene in a larger narrative. It seems there has been a lasting commitment in Swans to combining the old with the new, the sacred with the profane, the tender with the terrible, right up to the new album with its hybrid of bestial spirituality. Cultural and aesthetic ideas are thrust together so violently so as to entirely question each other's meanings. This approach seemed to hit its apex on Soundtracks For The Blind.

That's the result of hundreds of hours of trial and error just to find what works. That album, and also the project which followed called *The Body Lovers*, were the result of fifteen, twenty years of work. All the recordings that I'd made since I started making music --all the tape loops, the little cassette ideas, little experiments with synthesizers that I kept on cassette, rehearsal tapes that I had, unmixed material that I had, and new recordings that I developed for that record, including the multi-tracks and the finished mixes-- all that was put into a computer and I started to sort it out without respect for whether something was recorded in 1982 or if it was recorded in

1997. I started to find out what worked with what and slowly pieced the puzzle together. We had handheld recordings of my father and Jarboe's mother, and her childhood recordings and other recordings. I took those and put those to music like a little soundtrack vignette. But I had to think about where that began and where that ended and what happened after that. It was an incredible amount of labour. [laughs] But it wasn't from some theory or from some road map, it was really just tangibly and tactilely going in and finding out what fit.

Different styles and genres are stirred into a cauldron of competing ingredients on that record; expansive ballads, sparse instrumentals, feedback-laden rock numbers and euro-dance anthems all rub shoulders, interspersed with drones and the field recordings which seem to fade in and out like dislocated voices from an annihilated planet, almost entirely stripped of their original context. Given that you had intended the album to be the final Swans LP, was that sense of everything being broken down to its last granule a fitting statement for you and the band at that time?

Yes. I used all that material on that and subsequently *The Body Lovers*, and then I threw it in the dump. Took it to the dump and threw it all away; the multi-tracks, the recordings I had on floppy disks for samples... I don't know if you remember them...

I'm old enough to get a little nostalgic about floppy disks, yes.

Right, well I threw all of those away. I had trunks of them. I just threw them all in the dump. I said: "I don't want any more of this shit," and threw it all away. So it was really just a way of taking the whole experience of Swans and my musical impulses up to that point and making something out of it. Just wrestling with demons, figuring it out.

Swans in the early days were quite renowned for their intense live shows. I understand this reputation became something of a burden to you. I recall reading an interview with you from some time ago wherein you related the experience of touring Children of God throughout Europe and looking out at the audience and being sickened by what you saw there. If I remember correctly, you described the audience's collective expression as "bovine".

Yeah. [laughs]

You also stated that you felt the band had attracted a "dumbass heavy metal crowd" which you didn't care to cater for. It's rare to hear an artist remarking on their audience with as much candour. Few seem to value the idea of mutual respect between the artist and the audience as vocally as you do. How vital to you is it that this mutual respect exists? Is there an imaginable extreme case where attracting the "wrong" kind of audience - one with which you feel zero connection - would cause you to stop touring entirely?

Sure. There's been a couple of cases on this recent tour where, if that was the only audience, I'd definitely quit the next day. Meaning like guys in their mid-thirties with stringy hair and beards just wanting to bang their heads or something. Fortunately the audiences have been very mixed. Lots of attractive young ladies and young people that look curious and are really into the music. So that makes it worthwhile. It's normally mixed. Sometimes it isn't, but I just play to the air then. [laughs]

Would you say this current tour has been one of the more positive

experiences of your career in that respect?

Oh, very positive, this has been great. I never would have expected it. I don't know how tonight's attendance is going to be, but in a lot of instances shows have been sold out, which is really a first for us. And then a lot of press attention and audiences who truly want what we're going to do, even if they don't know what that is. Whereas in the entire first period of Swans --call it that if you want-- it was really kind of challenging to people. They rarely came along for the ride, except on the final tour when they realised the error of their ways or something. [laughs]

It was almost like a battle between you and the audience.

It was always a battle, yeah. We started with this really heavy, brutal material and people left in droves. I guess then they read about it and these people --who wanted to "rock hard" or whatever-- came along. When I started seeing what that was becoming, our reputation for loudness and everything, I switched gears, you know. Just

for myself, to keep myself interested. And then those people were alienated. Then we'd do something else and they'd be alienated. It was just a constant struggle because we didn't just play in one style.

Though the new material is significantly more layered than early Swans, you have nonetheless returned to a loudness and aggression in your music not heard since the eighties.

Yeah.

Is it still as physical an experience as it was back then?

Oh yeah. I don't torture myself physically as much onstage as I once did. I don't do that at all now, I'd be kind of a clown act if I did. But it takes every ounce of energy just to make the sounds happen. I think the result is that it creates this kind of total physical, sensory experience for us and the audience, and that's what I want.

You've mentioned before that the violence and volume of the earlier Swans material became overbearing to you physically. I believe I read an interview where you said that you felt the force of the music would throw

you around like a rag doll onstage and that you were essentially being battered silly. Recently I was watching some performance clips of the band...

See, isn't that weird that it's already on Youtube, it's like...

...from about 1986, you do often appear...

Oh, from '86, yes.

I have seen recent ones of the current tour also, however.

When I get back home I'm gonna have to contact people to tell them to take them down...

There are a lot of them. But I was watching clips recently from about '86 and, as well as the obvious physical labour you're visibly putting yourself through, you also do appear as a quite haunted and brutalised figure. Your gestures and expressions onstage are every bit as unnerving as the volume and ferocity of the music. Was there a similar detrimental effect to you psychologically?

Well look at it this way: if you have someone that you truly love and you're having very slow tantric sex that lasts for four hours, six hours... And it's a long

process and you're just drenched in sweat. And you're completely immersed in each other and you feel the boundaries of your body dissolving into the other person, and you feel yourself dissolving into the universe because of the heightened state of awareness that you've achieved though that. That's sort of what it's like. [laughs] It's brutal. But you also need to go through that to reach something.

Right. So, in its brutality, it's a kind of transcendental process.

I think it's transformational, maybe transcendental, but that's a little lofty a term to use. But you are reaching for something bigger than yourself, you know? At least I am.

One of the things that has always struck me about you as a lyricist is the way in which you combine various strands; personal, observational and extrapolative, and weave them into a dense tapestry that is impossible to unravel. While the listener might pick up on the reference to Dennis Nilsen in 'Killing For Company' for example, or appreciate the basic police brutality context of 'Cop', these threads are laced with other less obvious personal

references and extensions, many of which can seem initially obscure. As a result the personal in your work has a way of becoming impersonal and vice versa.

That's important to me.

This is a very conscious endeavour on your part.

Certainly. I think it's narcissistic to think that your life in itself should be interesting. Like what Smashing Pumpkins do, where he's whining about his problems, you know? Fuck you! You should be making something bigger than yourself, that people can reach into. I mean, look at Dylan --not that I'm comparing myself to him by any means-- but his songs are not personal. There's personal *in* them. Even an album like *Blood on the Tracks*, if you know the back-story, it's based on what he was going through then with the break-up of his marriage and other things. But the song itself is much bigger than that. That's what makes a great writer is someone that transcends that. Take Céline-- his stuff was autobiographical in a way, but he made it transcend itself. It's a work of art. It wasn't just him

whining about his shit. That's what distinguishes a good writer from a bad one really.

Okay, let's talk a little more about the present. I understand the genesis of this new incarnation of Swans started during a kind of epiphanic moment you experienced during an Angels of Light gig a few years ago.

Well it wasn't like my head shot flames out my ears or something. [laughs] But we were doing this sort of slow song, it was fairly loud, and the chords were swaying and the harmonics were dissipating in the air. It just reminded me of Swans. And I thought: "Oh, it wasn't so bad. Maybe that's something I could pursue again." Because before that I had disavowed it completely and said I'd never do it again. And it just sort of set the germ or the seed in place. As time went on I started thinking about it more. The last Angels of Light album I did was called *We Are Him*, and it had some louder moments in it, but it was still kind of singer-songwriter-oriented. When it came time to make this new album, I had a series of songs gathered and I started thinking about making them as an Angels

of Light record. And I was just underwhelmed, I didn't want to do it. So I just thought I wanna make something that's as intense as I remember moments from Swans being. So I'll start Swans. And I wanna do it now before I'm so broken down physically that I can't. And I want to experience it again. And hopefully people will want to step into that world as well. Fortunately they've demonstrated that, so it's good.

When you approached Norman Westberg and the other collaborators, how did they react when you pitched the recording of a new album under the Swans banner?

They said: "Get outta here! Go fuck yourself!" [laughs] No, they had to consider it for a while, but everybody was very interested. There was no cajoling necessary. It worked out.

One of the great pleasures for me and others with this record and tour is in hearing Westberg's distinctively epic guitar sound clash once more with your voice.

Mm, his guitar is amazing. I look at him as the logical descendant of Ron Asheton, the Stooges guitarist. More minimal, but with

that kind of feel. He grew up in Detroit, so there's the MC5, Stooges... He has that kind of sense of the really big, soaring, sustainy guitars, you know.

I think, for most Swans fans, it's almost impossible to think of the band without Norman's characteristic sound. Was it vital to you to include him in the new line-up? Would you have done it without him?

Uh, I would have done it without him. But it was immensely important. Yeah, it was great when he agreed to do it. I'm really happy he's along.

The new record combines some of the refined songwriting techniques from Angels of Light with the intensity of early Swans. Additionally there also seems to be a dedication to the control of texture and sprawling arrangements you employed on Soundtracks For The Blind which, judging by the recent clips I've seen, is something you're developing further in live performances. Does that perhaps mark the future direction of Swans?

Yes. I'm sort of discovering what that's going to be in the moment as we go. So I think the next record --which there will be, I'm

gonna do Swans for probably another five years. But I think the next record will use these long instrumental sections as the starting point. And then I'll think about inserting a song or doing some vocals on that, and not start from sitting with my acoustic guitar in front of a page working out words. But think more in terms of sonics and rhythm, things like that, and start from there.

That kind of echoes with what you said earlier about your starting point for Swans, and exploring "chunks of sound". In some ways your approach to composing and recording has come full-circle, albeit refining itself on the way. It's definitely evident on the new album. Though it has way more texture than your earliest records, My Father Will Guide Me Up a Rope to the Sky does remind me of pre-Jarboe Swans in some respects.

Sure.

This is the first Swans record without Jarboe's input since 1985. Due to her considerable presence in the band's history, it's almost jarring to be faced with a Swans line-up that is entirely male...

Well that depends on what you expect. If you have expectations and you think: Swans, Jarboe... Then yeah, I guess you would be disappointed. But if you can adjust yourself and think...

I certainly wouldn't use the word "disappointment". It's a positively surprising development of the kind Swans fans have previously experienced, like the development of new sounds you were continually exploring in the late eighties and nineties. But in some of the new songs - and I'm thinking particularly of 'Jim' and 'Reeling the Liars In' - there's a distinctly masculine quality; a kind of leather-booted, dusty-jacketed pioneer spirit which is almost boyishly playful.

[laughs] Yeah. Yeah, there is.

Was this something you were deliberately pursuing, or did it arise out of the sessions?

It arose out of the sessions. But we did consciously say "No women". [laughs] Although my wife does sing a little bit at the end. My daughter sings too, but... I don't know. I guess we just wanted to be more male.

I assume there was never any question in your mind of reconvening with Jarboe.

Jarboe is wonderful, I wouldn't disparage her at all. But it just would have seemed ridiculous, like a self-parody to involve her. It would have been, I think, embarrassing for her and for us to do so. 'Cause then it would truly be like some nostalgia act, getting back together to do our old hits or something. I have no contact with her. Or very little anyway for the last thirteen years. So it wouldn't make any sense. So that didn't intimidate me. I look at this material as encompassing everything from the beginning up until now. Particularly live you'll see it, though there's maybe just not that many quiet moments live in this incarnation. But certainly with the record, it kind of incorporates all the ideas from the beginning

Your first shows under the Swans banner for thirteen years must have arrived with more than a little trepidation.

Oh, the first shows, yeah. God.

How did you go about preparing yourself for the tour?

Well I did a hundred sit-ups and push-ups a day. While drinking six beers a day of course. [laughs] No, I prepped myself a little bit for it, but psychologically it was really, really kind of tumultuous there for a while, wondering how it would be. But it's worked out well. I feel like I'm back in my milieu. I love doing this. Providing I hold up physically, I'll continue for at least five years I think.

From what you've said combined with looking at your output for the last few years, it seems you've entered one of the most explicitly experimental phases in your career, at a level not touched upon since the previous Swans album in 1997.

Oh, sure. Angels of Light was intentionally... Well, when I started it after Swans, it was because I wanted to start from the root of a well-written --or at least I hoped well-written-- song that I could perform in front of an audience by myself with an acoustic guitar and sing. And then I'd orchestrate it, and sometimes it got very orchestrated, sometimes it had electric guitars and got kind of loud. But it was always based on that-- on

performance and on a coherent concise song. Most of the time the performances in the studio were with just a drummer or something. That was it, that's what I orchestrated upon. Now it's a different matter; I'll start from the point of view that the song's there and you can expand it and change it, and you wanna make it more cinematic and all-encompassing, overwhelming.

You touched upon this earlier, but I recall reading early interviews with you where you stated your desire to be utterly atomised by the music you create.

Yeah.

Is that still a goal with your current material?

Yeah. Again, it's the tantric sex analogy. It's like you really wanna lose it. I want that for myself and I hope that the audience will come along for the ride to where you just lose yourself in something. It's like going to church in a way. But you maybe have ten church choirs singing all at once, different hymns, very loud. [laughs] And it's just swirling around, if you can imagine such a sound.

In your recent performances, much of the material has expanded to epic proportions with songs lasting about twenty minutes apiece in some cases. Would it be fair to say that you've supplanted or maybe supplemented some of the violent loudness of early Swans with this approach...

This [current tour] is very loud!

Oh no, I'm not suggesting that it isn't. But would you say that the added dynamic of expansion has allowed you to take a step further in achieving that atomising effect in a modified way?

I hope so. I mean, every night we discover something new and then we pursue that a little more. We started doing this song 'Beautiful Child' from *Children of God*, fairly close to the original. We did it for four or five shows that way, and then I started to feel preposterous doing that. There was something in it I heard and we tried doing it quiet. Very quiet. Now it's very quiet and it builds, but it has more open-tuned guitars in it and it rings and it crescendos, rather than just being this thudding thing that I'm screaming over. Now it's changed into something completely different. In fact I've gotten rid of most of the lyrics, so

I don't even know what it is anymore, but it was based on that. We're calling it 'Beautiful Child'. But it just came about through doing it. That's the way, like I said, the music happens-- it happens through doing it. Because that would have never come about from me sitting in a room thinking about how to do that. I had to experience it first, to be inside it.

There's clearly never any concern for you then that you could alienate members of the audience who are keen to hear you play versions of the material they recognise.

No! [laughs] No, I've never done that.

It's important to you to cater only to those who are willing to take that journey of discovery with you.

We used to intentionally... Well, it wasn't like a marketing move, but we used to play the songs from an album live several times or whatever. And through a tour we'd record the album and then not do those songs anymore, but do new songs. [laughs] So we'd go out and we'd never do any songs from the album. [laughs] It's not that I'm cavalier or

disrespectful of people's expectations, it's just that one can't base their need to make something authentic on thinking about other people's needs. Presumably, people want to come and have a real and true experience that's powerful. If we're just up there playing our hits to them, well then it might as well be Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs doing the oldies circuit, you know?

There's a general view of you and your music, particularly among the less imaginative of the music journalism community, that you and it are both deliberately abrasive and willfully dark, and that that's your whole raison d'être. It seems obvious to me that you don't see it that way. Indeed I've always been struck by the way in which your work encompasses all the extremities of the human condition from the most volatile to the benevolent. Do the misconceptions of you and your work bother you?

It bothers me a lot, but not as much as it used to. People have an impression and that's what sticks, you know. You can't really worry about that. I find the music to be elating and a truly positive

experience. I write about primal things I guess, or things that seem to me to be urgent, and sometimes those aren't so pretty. But it would be sophomoric to assume that you have to write happy songs all the time or something. I mean, Christ! What if Leonard Cohen made that decision? [laughs]

The thing that I personally find bothersome about that view is that it completely ignores all of the work you've done that isn't quite as dark or troubling. And there's a lot of that. You've written songs that are actually very tender.

Yes. Lots of them!

Some of those tender songs may have dark sides to them, but that's reflective of a basic truth of life...

Yeah.

...which I think is something you've always been very adept at illuminating.

And there's a love song on this record. It's called 'Little Mouth' and it's not a dark song at all. And there's a song that's sort of a tribute to my daughter on the

record. She's certainly the extreme opposite of dark, so...[laughs]

This brings me to the idea of the divine in your work. As Swans began to explore new musical avenues in the late eighties, your lyrical concerns also seemed to shift from the corporeal to a more spiritual arena where the earlier flesh and muscles are replaced by quasi-religious allusions and overt spiritual references. Clearly you're attracted to the rhetoric of organised religion for the rich metaphors and effects it offers. But you've also made quite a few references to the divine in relation to your performances, and indeed the new record is lyrically charged with those concerns. Do you feel that what you do in writing and performing music is --for you and your audience-- a divine or spiritual exercise?

Of course not [for the audience], though I would want to share that possibility with them, but... [pause] I've never realised or talked about it before, but yes, I think it is a spiritual undertaking, definitely. It's like if you practice Zen, for instance; your day is maybe cleaning for that day, cleaning the monastery. And that leads you to a sense of selflessness. So maybe the way I

do the work I do is kind of an analogous enterprise-- wanting to lose myself in something and be ego-less. Also the aspiration for the music to atomise the body, it's that sense of losing yourself. It's like meditating too. When you meditate you're both in yourself completely and out of yourself completely. That's a sort of desirable state as far as I'm concerned. But it's not in any sense of being a regular kind of religious impulse. Not like organised religion. But I definitely have that impulse, I don't know where it comes from. I think everybody does really. If you sit down and think about what you're doing on Earth, you start to think about larger things. But it's not that I'm trying to write about heavy subjects or that the music is heavy, it's just that I want to reach that state while I'm on Earth. Otherwise why am I here?

Is it the pursuit of that state that is the primary imperative for you to continue making music?

Yeah, definitely. Well if I wasn't making music I think, if I had the ability, I would write books, which is a similar enterprise ultimately. But I can't do anything

else. I'm an artist. That's what I do.

Do you feel that that desirable state is more within your grasp as you continue to work? Particularly since you are constantly refining and redefining your work, I wonder if you feel you are achieving something closer to that with each new endeavour?

Oh, I've no idea. It's hard to compare what I do now to what I used to do or to think of it that way. All I know is it's never easy to try and revitalise what you're doing all the time. [pause] Yeah. I mean, I don't want to get too serious with it, but it's never easy. It's really difficult to make these forms and shapes and have it still be compelling to you as the person making it. And it's really depressing once it's done because I get very elated for months at a time when I'm making a record. Then it falls apart and I manage to wrangle it back into shape and reach something higher than I would have thought. Then it's all done and it's recorded and it just sounds like a dead dog in the road. It's just this finished thing with no more possibility in it. So

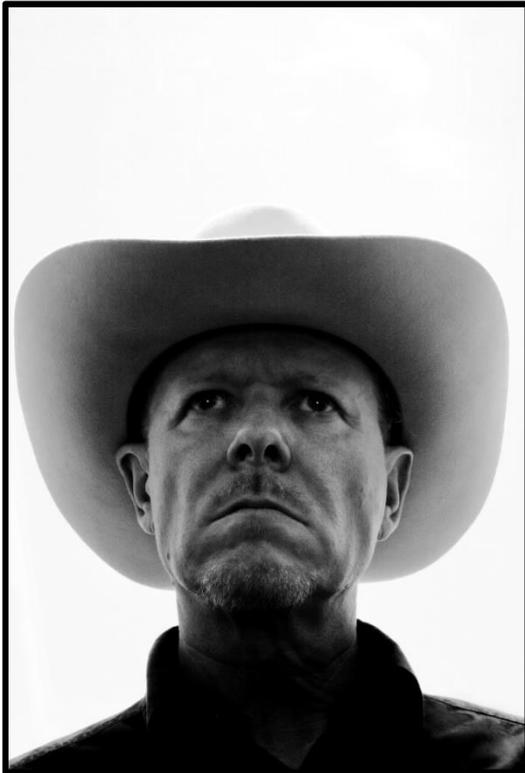
it's kind of depressing, and so you leave that behind and move on.

But the process remains ultimately rewarding?

Yeah, the whole process is what it's about as far as I'm concerned. And like I said, I can't do anything else, so... [pause] Well, I can mow the lawn well. [laughs]

I suppose that might have a transcendent Zen aspect too.

[laughs] I guess it does, yeah.



Our casual business concluded, Gira leads me to the band's dressing room where percussionists Thor Harris and Phil Puleo are preparing themselves for their impending performance. Gira offers me a beer, reaching into a bucket of ice and plastic bottles. Both the plastic and the bottle's modest size visibly appall him: "Is this half-size or what?"

"They don't refer to this as a nanny state for nothing," I volunteer, only semi-jokingly. Gira is almost apologetic as he hands me the bottle which looks like a doll's house accessory in his fist. To an artist who has spent his life and career exploring and celebrating the extremes of human experience, this example of institutionalised British prudence clearly strikes him as absurd. We part with laughter at the irony.

Shortly afterwards, Swans take the stage in an unmitigated storm of feedback and churning bells before launching into a dynamic expanded rendition of 'No Words/No Thoughts'. Gira is true to his word: the volume of the

show is almost painfully intense, each guitar chord and cymbal crash blasting their way directly into the crowd's collective nervous system, every surge and lift propelling us closer to that coveted atomisation of our physical selves. Gira conducts the band meticulously, his concise gestures and sharp gesticulations forming a visual shorthand which the other members translate impressively into crucial shifts in tone and rhythm. At the far right of the stage stands the familiar imposing silhouette of Norman Westberg; his figure still impressively lean, eyes still glimmering with a youthful primal energy beneath a greying brow. Between songs he is composed and dignified as a marble effigy, cradling his Telecaster like an unsheathed weapon. As soon as his fingers strike and bend the strings the air in the venue is cut into shards, the universe seeming to splinter into cryptic fragments. Filtered through this epic wall of sound, Gira's earnest vocals resonate with the magnitude of a vexed god rallying his followers to holy war. It's a baptism of fire and blood thirteen years in the

making. Judging by the consensus of elated expressions radiating in The Arches' shadowy interior, the wait has paid off with dividends.

Throughout the performance, Gira remains as composed in his conversational persona as he is in his musical one, offering the crowd occasional and typically disembodied slivers of information devoid of the context of a larger story. "I once shared a jail cell with a Scottish man in about 1969," he declares unaffectedly. The crowd falls silent, waiting for a follow-up nugget. Without another word the band launch into 'I Crawled'. During gaps in the performance, Gira is repeatedly apologetic about the presence of a manned security barrier between the crowd and the stage. "I tried to get them to change their minds about it. I think it's a horrible thing," he says with genuine regret, adding: "You should fire your government". The amused applause this generates is almost immediately hushed by the languorous opening chords of the newly reinterpreted 'Eden Prison', a slow-burning battle hymn which explodes midway in a

celebration of minimalist guitar noise. Among the new material, several more gems from the back catalogue also make their appearance; the promised revised version of 'Beautiful Child', a sublime squall of chiming chords almost unrecognisable from its original incarnation; an admirably groove-laden translation of 'Your Property'; and perhaps most jaw-dropping of all, a stripped-down 'Sex, God, Sex' which finds Gira in full-blown quasi-preacher mode, bellowing his lungs dry in wild praise of the Lord. When the band eventually take their final bow with the heart-breaking 'Little Mouth' which showcases Gira's baritone in seductive bloom, there is not a heart unmoved by the experience.

On my way home --dazed and jubilant, eardrums pounding with a gorgeous white noise-- my mind and body feel pleasantly violated. A throbbing in my jacket pocket alerts me to a received text message (I am presently deaf to the phone's message alert tone). It's from an old friend-- the very same female friend who first introduced me to Michael Gira's inimitable artistic universe some

eighteen years ago. It reads: "Saw you at the Arches. Couldn't make it through the crowd to say hi. SWANS ARE NOT DEAD!"

In its second manifestation the apocalypse has never seemed a more exhilarating or all-encompassing phenomenon. Hallelujah!

'...you lost your way on that river [...] till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had once known--somewhere--far away--in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world [...] And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect.'

- Joseph Conrad
Heart of Darkness



THE NATURE OF ELECTRICITY

By Kyle Hemmings

Images © Richard A. Meade

Father was struck down the night of the storm. In the kitchen reeking of old yeast, spoiled buttermilk, right before our eyes, a shock of lightening turned him into stone. The same father who almost loved us after mother's death. He told us she died of a heart attack. With the exception of

the youngest, my sisters and I never believed him. She was too beautiful to vanish, too light to sink. And it hadn't been the first time he lied. He promised he could feed us the way mother did, provide us with the sustenance to tolerate both day and night. Truth was he couldn't braid our dreams

or disassemble our night terrors. He only took from us, leaving us to taste the salt off our palms, to hold nothing in our bodies but the plasma type of the universal victim.

I was the oldest of four sisters, ages ranging 20 to 10. Father loved even numbers. Mother loved odd and the smiles of antique rocking horses.

The night it happened, our youngest sister, Penelope, fell to the floor, writhing from a series of convulsions. She was Father's favorite and sometimes she snuck into his bed on rainy nights. His sinewy arms and loud snores would protect her from the rain. So she thought. We warned her not to touch his body on the floor. Even though we didn't understand the nature of electricity, as we do now, we warned her. We said Don't touch him—You'll burn. She didn't listen and slid into a semi-coma.

The night of the storm, an insane one the likes of which we had never seen, parts of the walls, the ceilings, crumbled around us, dust settling in our lungs. Then something incomprehensible happened. We found ourselves wrapped by a thick strand of electrical cord, tightening around our waists as if a snake wishing to devour, forcing us to savor its cool inner sanctums, to taste cold

blood. The snake, we believed, dropped from the ceiling. The cord made us prisoners and none of us could move without the others. There was now the physical semblance of a bond and slowly we grew into each other.

The house was mostly dark and eventually our eyes adjusted to it. We groped and wended past the furniture to peek out the window. The streets were empty, littered with broken wires, their ends frayed and curling upwards. Car horns blatted for hours. In the distance there were sparks and small fires. It seemed everyone was hiding in their houses, which leaned to one side like an old woman. Or perhaps no one was alive. The phones were dead.

Earth was always a strange planet.

It was becoming harder to move. Helen, the second eldest, grew more depressed, despondent, recalcitrant to our wishes to search for food. Growing frustrated, we had to drag her weight. At times, she rambled on how Mother would hold or gently rock her after her first period, which was heavier than the ones that followed, or after claiming what Father did or did not do enough of. We felt the pain of the silent other. At times, we cried with invisible discharge.



Over the next few days, Penelope sometimes approached consciousness, mumbling some mantra or half-formed utterance as saliva streamed from one side of her lips. It took us the good part of an hour to digest what she had said. "I saw her face in the sky. So white. So perfect. The clouds smiled. She was made up from them. Can't you see? Why can't you see!" Then, slowly, her eyes rolled, the back of her head hitting the floor, and her body stretched and convulsed. We

wondered if this time she was truly dead. Helen herself began to shake, saying It's no use. We won't survive. Our cord began to stretch.

At my suggestion, we traced the source of the cord that entangled us. One sister after the other, we stumbled upstairs and into the attic rooms. We twisted and squirmed on our bellies to get past crawlspaces. We reached dusty rooms that hadn't been used for years. With the help of a

candle, we could see what we otherwise could not. Helen screamed. The others turned to stone.

There in the far corner of the attic was Mother's body, stiff, whiter than bone, entangled by a cord that reached through the walls and probably up through the ceiling. Perhaps it's junction was with a cloud. Staring at her, we felt terribly decomposed. Closing our eyes, we offered her our love but hated ourselves for harboring Father's dominant genes. We set her on fire and inhaled the fumes of this burnt offering to the source of all flesh and Nothing. We giggled nervously the way some people do when they're angry or scared. We held hands. From each other, we knew we were no longer insulated.

After the discovery, a number of inexplicable events occurred. It was if everything we witnessed was through the bubble of our sisterhood. Even if it wasn't out there, the world was now here within us. It was safe. We made this world.

Penelope slowly awakened and rose from the floor. She still uttered things we could not totally comprehend. But believing that the same current that had killed Father had left her, we embraced her. Then the thick electrical cord that bound us

disappeared. But we still felt its weight and tautness. We could hear what each sister thought. We would laugh inappropriately at another's stale joke, especially the ones about breastfeeding or unplanned pregnancies. Just to make the other feel good and human. We never thought or spoke out of sequence. And we discovered food in various rooms of the house, in places we'd never expect. Mother worked at mysterious frequencies.

Over the years, we performed our own home repairs. During the day, we assumed our banal identities and attended school. We pretended we were shy and stupid. At night, a voice in our ears instructed us in a great many subjects. We learned extraordinary geographies or the names and locations of strange trees and exotic plants. We knew that voice. We stayed in Mother's house until we grew too long for our thoughts.

One by one, we moved out. We married men who resembled each other. They were all kind and respectful of our neon secrets, our inner halogen lives.

I now understand somewhat the nature of electricity. I appreciate the difference between good electricity and bad. I know the direction in which electrons flow and why atoms collide. What I

know about the nature of electricity is this: It's a form of magic, a mysterious conductor among humans who once lived in a house of random acts and darkness.

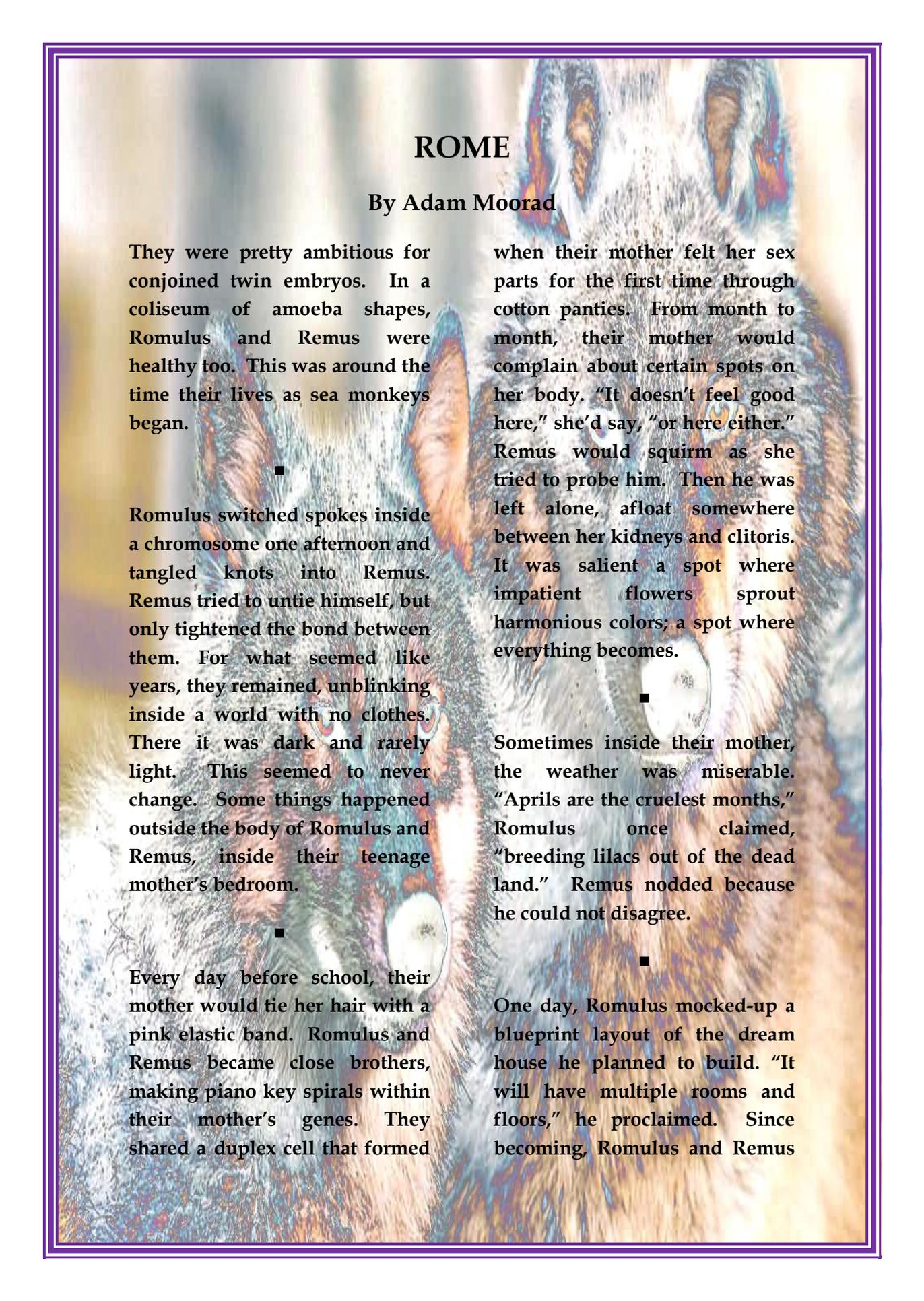
And long after the sun goes down, when we straddle our husbands for a fix, in the heat and crest of climax, we recite the names of strange trees or

impossible flowers growing under our beds, of amazing goddesses who echo our mother's mute agony and glassy eyes. And after they recover, our husbands will ask Why these names? What do they mean?

And in this way, we keep them longing. We keep them airy and light.



Photos: Mascaras, Untitled, and SOS © 2010 Richard A. Meade



ROME

By Adam Moorad

They were pretty ambitious for conjoined twin embryos. In a coliseum of amoeba shapes, Romulus and Remus were healthy too. This was around the time their lives as sea monkeys began.

■

Romulus switched spokes inside a chromosome one afternoon and tangled knots into Remus. Remus tried to untie himself, but only tightened the bond between them. For what seemed like years, they remained, unblinking inside a world with no clothes. There it was dark and rarely light. This seemed to never change. Some things happened outside the body of Romulus and Remus, inside their teenage mother's bedroom.

■

Every day before school, their mother would tie her hair with a pink elastic band. Romulus and Remus became close brothers, making piano key spirals within their mother's genes. They shared a duplex cell that formed

when their mother felt her sex parts for the first time through cotton panties. From month to month, their mother would complain about certain spots on her body. "It doesn't feel good here," she'd say, "or here either." Remus would squirm as she tried to probe him. Then he was left alone, afloat somewhere between her kidneys and clitoris. It was salient a spot where impatient flowers sprout harmonious colors; a spot where everything becomes.

■

Sometimes inside their mother, the weather was miserable. "Aprils are the cruelest months," Romulus once claimed, "breeding lilacs out of the dead land." Remus nodded because he could not disagree.

■

One day, Romulus mocked-up a blueprint layout of the dream house he planned to build. "It will have multiple rooms and floors," he proclaimed. Since becoming, Romulus and Remus



had always shared the same room and slept linked together like zippered butterfly wings. Remus ate melting ice cream when he sat with Romulus in bed. They would trade brotherly licks for space on their mother's shag carpeting.

■

In the vacant lot, there was an abandoned gas station. Grass came up through cracks in the pavement. There, the brothers listened to middle school skaters beat-box bass lines somewhere outside their mother. To this soundtrack, they worked-out new dream house ideas. Their brains stormed from empty womb skies. "This one will have a planetarium," Romulus once said. "No," Remus recanted. He gave his brother a sharp lick in the ribs. It made Romulus jiggle like a chocolate snack pack pudding with vanilla swirl. "What do you mean, 'No'," Romulus said. He poked back at a ticklish pace. "It's too late to start all over."

■

Their mother would laugh when the skaters' skateboards made a crunching wheel sounds on bad

concrete. The skaters weren't any older than 7th grade. Most of them must already have had pubic hair. Some were even enormous, like the Venetian cords hanging from their father's blinds. Their mother liked skaters who were.

■

Some dream home designs made no sense at all. "Do you really think we can have an in-ground pool if we live underground?" Remus once asked. His forehead wrinkled, "Or am I just reading this one upside-down?" Romulus shrugged and put his arm around his brother's shoulder. His hand brushed against his brother hand. "Not underground, or even aboveground," he assured Remus. "It will be above-the-ground." Romulus smiled and hoped Remus might understand. He felt his hand on his brother's hand. It felt like it wasn't supposed to be there. Their plans were becoming delusions of delusions.

■

The skater their mother liked didn't have enough money for condoms after he bought her

pizza. He proposed to their mother daredevil stunts. "If I crash my board trying ollie in the air, I'm going to wipeout doing a flip," the skater announced, "then I'll spill into your arms." When their mother was alone with the skater, he indiscreetly moved an erection into her hand, pushing it through her fingers. Romulus and Remus thought they could feel their mother beam. She stared at the skater without seeing him. "Do we have to live in the same house, or can we build different houses?" Romulus murmured, unsure of what he was saying. Remus sneezed. The skater squeezed their mother's nipple through her shirt, "It has to be the same house," Remus replied. His voice became Romulus' thoughts. Remus turned and sneezed again, then said, "And the house should be earthquake-proof." It got cold and their mother pimpled. Inside she was shaking.

■

The skater did the stunt and landed, but somehow still managed to crash. Some of him spilled when their mother said his name. Some more was

thrown across the gravel of the earth. The skater laughed a heckled high-pitched giggle. He called their mother, "a hyacinth girl." It echoed into their mother's ear. The commotion jostled Romulus and Remus inside their cell. It felt like they were on a boat, rocking awkwardly on an ugly sea.

■

When their mother stuck her tongue into the skater's mouth, Romulus discovered the skater had been where they lived inside their mother. The brothers felt like they were being reincarnated, falling asleep and waking up a thousand times in one second. All the different ideas for their dream house filled their heads in a kaleidoscope swirl. Romulus asked Remus what was in their mother's mouth. Remus said she was being kissed in one of the upstairs cells. They felt a calmness fill their mother's body. The skater's erection got smaller and, with a muscle, the brothers felt his particulars twitch as he withdrew through their mother's hand and into his jeans.

■

"That was good," the skater said. He challenged their mother to disagree, nudging her in the ribs where he kept all his dream house thoughts. Remus sighed. The mother's tongue lashed wildly inside her mouth. Right now, she was enduring something. Romulus and Remus could feel her resistance bend. Muscles tugged disapproving on one another, but danced together with enthusiasm. It continued for several seconds, then stopped.

■

The skater said he had read in a book of World Records that a person in Brazil skated for four days straight. Another skated the entire Great Wall of China in one attempt. Their mother's molars touched in the back of her mouth. Remus hoped she would go get something to eat. He touched the stomach he shared with Romulus with his hand. Their stomach growled.

■

Romulus had always wanted a cottage on a lake, but Remus hated the idea. He had been unwilling to learn how to swim, having once seen a movie about a

with his arm. Romulus felt the skater's elbow poke his head

gigantic shark that lived in water and fed on unsuspecting people bathing in their tubs. Romulus abandoned all cottage ideas. Remus' dream home was a two-bedroom apartment in the West Village on a quite cobblestone lane off Jane Street. He wouldn't have to paint, he would think, because each room would have exposed brick.

■

Sometimes, their mother would run out breath, talking on the phone to girlfriends about weddings in New York City. Their mother had never been to New York City though, because she had never traveled. She wouldn't be traveling for a long time. She wouldn't even be getting married.

■

"Let's renovate an old farmhouse," Remus said, tapping his brother with their shared arm. Romulus closed both eyes, then he opened one, and began blinking each eye separately in quick succession. Their mother's finger was inserted to herself

and the brothers temporarily forgot about dream homes. The skater skated down a ramp a loud crack, skid his knees and rolled his ankle on the pavement. Blood formed from under the white shoelaces of his Airwalk sneakers. Their mother crowded around the skater in distress. Romulus and Remus felt tension clench their mother's face. Remus thought about their mother's mouth. He wondered if it was empty. He thought about the skater's tongue and where it had been. Their mother turned to the skater. Romulus yawned. Remus saw Romulus yawn and yawned and stared at Romulus with the glazed look on his face. "I do like farmhouses, but what about old chapels," Romulus said rubbing his neck, "with loads of stained-glass." "I love stained-glass," Remus said. On stained-glass, they always agreed. Their mother wriggled her hand in the skater's boxers and felt through an opening where he concealed his flaccid penis. It was the first time she had touched a flaccid penis with any part of her body. It reminded her of the rubbery bodies of salamanders. Then her

gaining speed, then tried to jump to a spray paint can, but over-shot it, hit his head with hand grew warm and she got used it.

■

Romulus and Remus began to smooth; smooth like babies. They both thought they were becoming babies. They were confused when they fused into the same baby. They had only known two other bodies up close: their mother's and the skater's. Those bodies could connect and disconnect with natural ease and no complication. For the brothers, things were complicated. They did not have a body like their mother's or the skater's.

■

Their mother was crying. Remus paused to hear her weep. The sound she made was horrible. Especially in the season of cruel April weather. It felt like cold water, stirring dull roots with spring rain. The skater had a broken foot with the bone sticking-out. Parts of both arms were wet with blood too. Most of his head was sliced or missing. "Ewww," the brothers cringed.

They could see everything with the one eye through a hole inside their mother. The harder their mother cried the more the hole opened. Remus turned to Romulus and said, "What about a log cabin?" "It all depends on the wood," Romulus said. Somehow, little feathers of hair began to sprout on their arms. It was soft like white mold on old bread. Remus giggled and when he touched his fuzzy wrist to his lips. Romulus watched Remus and did the same.

It was already dark when their mother closed her eyes. This was after she had eaten an entire sleeve of saltines. There was a bright orange cheese slice layered across each cracker she chewed and swallowed. Remus was hungry and helped their mother absorb it with his microscopic tongue. Romulus segued, claiming to be lactose intolerant. Later, their mother got drunk on beer by accident. Normally, she would only drink one, but somehow, she felt, sex comes with a price. Yeast had filled her tummy with hopping bubbles. A pressure she hadn't felt before burped inside of her. When she used a tissue on her

nose, she felt the burp again. Romulus played with his lips. Remus drooled from his mouth. A faraway siren moaned in the night. The brothers thought it sounded pretty from inside their mother, like dolphin sonar, or like when an eagle caws from a tall cliff above the ocean.

When Romulus wiggled his toes and kicked, their mother instinctively cupped her nipples. Then, she remembered the skater. Maybe she was imagining things. Maybe the brothers were only air trapped inside of her. She began to feel like an ice-sculpture in each of her extremities. Remus was now a full-sized sunflower seed. Romulus was half the size of that. In one of the new cells, he carved his name into the wall. Remus stenciled his fingers beside it. Soon, the wall would expand and their markings would stretch and get droopy. Their mother slept all day and never moved around. The brothers grew tired of living inside her. Each day, they would assure each other that they would live in house with stained-glass windows. They hoped their mother would like it.



YOUR NEWEST SUPERHEROES: MEET THE L.A. BASED RUBY FRIEDMAN ORCHESTRA

By Kirsten Milliken

Photos ©Alex Elena & Kirsten Milliken

It all started while I was driving down Beverly Blvd., listening to KCRW with Chris Douridas and guest DJ Rosanna Arquette. They played a song that held me captive to the point that I couldn't concentrate on the road while looking for a pen to write down the name of the band when it was announced. I was too impatient and called the station instead.

"Look...look for the shooting stars in your own back yard / That's where the blue birds are / Stay up...stay up to watch the show / Don't shut your eyes...you'll want to see them glow....."

I didn't want to shut my eyes. I wanted to keep them wide open, as the Ruby Friedman Orchestra, also known as RFO, began its flirt into my music-loving veins with

that song "*Shooting Stars*." I became a convert on the spot.

And I wasn't alone. In fact, at every show, you will see eyes widen as the band kicks off with its opening number. To see Ruby Friedman - the titian-haired front-woman, with her 6-inch platform Mary-Janes and fox stole inherited from her great-aunt Faye (who used to be a big band singer) - perform is to be reminded of a tent revival or jazz singer from another era. You leave feeling kind of sweaty, kind of sexy, and absolutely wanting more.

A cult was being born.

A friend of mine remarked that it's fascinating watching the audience as it gets seduced by the whole experience. Perhaps it's the lyrics that grab you, such as, "*I crossed the Rubicon into the Helicon and I got the point*," or...

*"I've seen the ledge
where the angels weep
for what they can't keep..."*

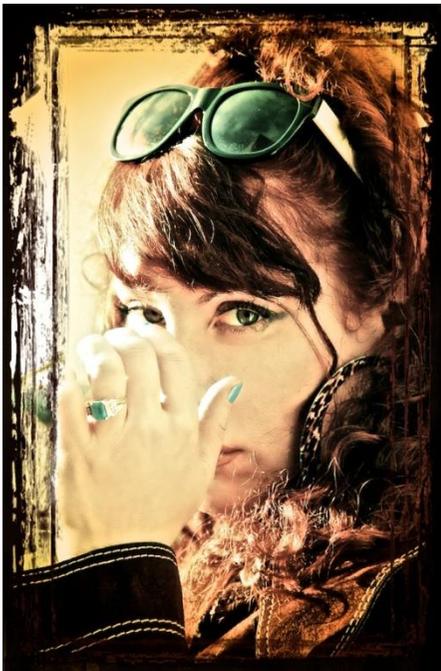
...from "Drowned" - a song that was featured on Episode 10 of the TV show *Sons of Anarchy*. Or is it the sheer stage presence and

talent of a woman whose voice can wrap around you like a snake, but let go with a whimper if she so chooses? Or is it the seasoned musicians who share the stage, seamlessly maneuvering the landscape with Ruby to bring you something visceral and raw, but also polished in that way which only true professionals can? Whatever it is, this band is blazing a trail with rocket propulsion.

Together for a little over two years, the RFO has been to SXSW, been featured on KROQ (both on Rodney on the Roq as well as being #1 on Kat Corbett's show *For Locals Only* with their latest song "Burning Skies"), the late great Indie 103.1, Hunnypotradio.com, KCRW and KPRI FM San Diego. The band members in addition to Friedman - Alex Elena (drummer, and producer), Dorian Heartsong (bassist), Adam Zimmon (guitarist) and Ulf Bjorlin (trombonist) - have played collectively with various acts, including Powerman 5000, Everlast, Glen Campbell, Imani Coppola, Bruce Dickinson and The Vaud and the Villains, among others.

In this incarnation, they are making the rounds in the Los Angeles venues, including Spaceland, Hotel Café, Silverlake Lounge, the Echo, 3Clubs, the Mint, the Bootleg Theater, the Bordello, the Troubadour, the Roxy and the Viper Room.

Already the stages feel too small for their intoxicating energy, but when you include their talented friends - master musicians on harmonica, violin, trumpet, etc - who sometimes join them onstage, you experience one enormous musical orgasm that truly feels like an orchestra.



I recently had a chance to interview Ruby Friedman at a Hollywood diner.

When I arrive, Friedman is already there, waiting in a booth. She mentions that she is in a transition state, and hasn't really eaten that day, but had a lot of peanuts.

"No, you don't understand," she says, noticing my reaction to her statement, "it was A LOT of peanuts."

The woman can make you think *and* laugh.

Moments later, Heartsong and Zimmon, join us.

Friedman begins by announcing to the table that she likes to plug the parking meters in her neighborhood. She is the anti-metermaid-esque Superheroine; bringing free parking to her community, in addition to her music.

The talk glides from which superhero the guys would be, to home improvement issues, to juice fasts, and quickly lands on

the plastic surgery craze in Los Angeles.

Dorian Heartsong (DH): I know this has been going on, but I didn't realize until the other day when I saw that guys get lip plumping done.

Ruby Friedman (RF): Tons of guys get it. It is out of control! Guys want to look like James Dean or Brad Pitt. They want puffy lips.

Adam Zimmon (AZ): It seems to me that slicing, into your face particularly, well the technology is not *that* good.

DH: But you had a good job done on your face.

AZ: I mean, yeah I did, but every time I look in the mirror...

[chuckles from the table]

AZ: Up close, in person, there is something in your basic human programming that thinks it looks weird.

RF: Some people get it done and you don't know it. Here are the choices for females: get older and

be discriminated against or try to look younger and hope that people don't notice. I think at a certain point in this town, that to look fake, is actually a status symbol and/or more viable than looking old.

AZ: There's that movie... Blade Runner - I think. Where the technology is so good that you can only tell how old they are based on their eyes and hands.

RF: Well, it eventually makes you examine, well, several issues. One is, why are we so afraid? Why can't we get older? Why can't we be imperfect?

DH: Native Americans - they had total respect for the elderly, and worshipping the aesthetic of aging as well.

RF: I think it's about valuing it... not worshipping. We don't *value* it. We are afraid of it.

Such introspective ideas lead me to inquire about what inspires them in terms of songwriting, in addition to the collaborative process of the band.

RF: I am inspired by things that aren't necessarily musical... or real.

Kirsten Milliken (KM): Is it the music or the lyrics which grab you first?

RF: It changes, I can be inspired by something someone's playing, or I will hear something in my head driving down in Orange County... I have *several* songs in my head. They have been there for years and years [laughs]. I'll need to excavate them sooner or later.

KM: Do you guys write some of the songs too? [question directed to Zimmon and Heartsong]

AZ: We collaborate but the ultimate... well the final thing is... is Ruby, if we have an idea, it's about her. She does the lyrics and melody.

RF: I can edit things. I can take something and chisel it.

AZ [to Friedman]: You can sing what sounds like clunky words and they don't have to rhyme but you just... *sing* them. That's a talent.

KM: You guys are pretty seamless onstage. There seems to be an amazing give and take without even looking at each other.

RF: A couple of times I have actually stopped singing since I liked what I was hearing so much.

KM: That's the power of a good song.

RF: I want to make sure that the other pieces [of the song] are heard.

KM: Can you guys hear what we, the audience, hear?

DH (bassist): All I hear is guitar [laughter at the table again].

AZ: Sometimes being onstage is the only place that I am the most comfortable, the place where I am the most focused in my everyday life.

RF: I am like that too.

AZ: You can get addicted to that. I am basically pretty shy.

RF: I am shy too. We are all kind of shy.

It sounds like an oxymoron for performers to say such things, but for some reason, I believe them.

KM: How many shows has the RFO performed?

RF: We don't really perform shows.

KM: What do you mean?

RF: Well, I guess they are shows, but they feel more like exorcisms.

Having been to many of the RFO shows, it rings true. Something otherworldly happens on that stage, but I would think even demons would want to hear this music rather than be cast out.

KM: When can we expect another EP or the new CD?

RF: Well, we'd hoped the last one would follow this one. This being the RFO debut, but there's no accounting for chronology.

The waitress stops by our table to ask if we want anything else.

RF: I might want something sweet.

Waitress: Cupcakes?

RF: No. No cupcakes. I don't like them. They are silly. And I like silly things, but they remind me of clowns.

She foregoes the sweet craving.

Heartsong, who has just recently finished a juice fast is drinking what's left of his coffee.

KM: How are you doing with the caffeine?

DH: I am good. I am a lightweight with absolutely everything except caffeine... although King's Road has a latte that can kick my ass.

AZ: Don't get me started on places with good coffee. There are a few I like in Santa Monica.

DH: We should do an espresso tour... get a double-decker bus and wear headsets...

I can totally picture it too, but think the RFO fans would like to see them do a tour of the musical ilk. Their loyal band of followers on Myspace and Facebook are spread across the country, as well as internationally. The band could still wear headsets, although I doubt they would since it doesn't

seem to be their style. The appeal of the RFO is that they are professional, talented, and sharp, while also being accessible to their fans.

“Everybody wants to fill their soul / Everybody wants to be a rock and roll star... and a cover of magazines but they gotta wait up / Wait up / Wait up” [from “Shooting Stars”]

I don’t think this band is going to have to “wait up” much longer – they have already arrived. The

proof is in the meters Friedman keeps plugging. Only someone with the heart of a superhero and pipes of a diva could get away with that.

To hear more of this “Rubicon-crossing” band:

www.rubyfriedman.com

www.reverbnation.com/rubyfriedmanorchestra

All lyrics courtesy of ASCAP/Ruby Red Lawn © 2010





JOURNAL ART THEFT

By Stagger Lloyd

Photos © Malcolm Alcala

"I was born in a crossfire hurricane and I howled in my tights in the driving rain..."

The light is mad all around me. Pity I'm not hallucinating. Dunno if it matters or not.

Three days ago someone stole a portfolio containing a hundred or so of my better paintings and drawings from me.

For the first hour or so when I realized it had gone I was mad with rage. Since that time I've been fine though. It's strange. normally I'm pretty hot tempered and can fester over even an imagined sleight for many many years.

I'm an utter scoundrel but I'm not a thief.



Last weekend on a drink and drug fuelled binge with some friends we all piled into a shop to buy essential fluids so we could continue our mission.

On the way out of the shop I stole a single pair of ladies tan tights. It was a spur of the moment thing. The tights were hanging there shining like Elvis suspended above a Las Vegas highway and it was in total keeping with the mission we were on.

Minutes later we were sat around a table babbling and gesticulating again.

Not wishing to embarrass the fine array of gentleman and the lady I was with I put the tights on... on my head, where so perched they

resembled a sort of demented jesters hat. It was totally appropriate and in keeping with the fine spirit of the weekend.

The nice lady who modelled the tights on the packet cover probably imagined this day would ever come...

Some while later I woke up sprawled on a sofa. It was dark. I could hear breathing. I looked at my watch in the very faint light. It was 4.30! Had I really slept right through to the following afternoon?

I gathered my things from around the house, slugged down the remaining brandy, shoved the tights into my jacket pocket and left to catch a bus.

It was freezing and all was quiet at the bus stop on this major artery road into Manchester. The timetable suggested a bus would be along in ten minutes. Good, time for a cigarette.

I waited and watched the occasional taxi pass. Everyone else was probably at home having their Sunday Roast. Good for them, I thought benevolently.

Half an hour later I checked my phone. The time read something like 05.19.

Fuck.

It was am and not pm.

What should I do? go back to Tony's and in my now bright and alert state wake the whole house up to continue the frolicking or walk back home?

I had a heavy pack and it was bitterly cold and a long walk...

I set off walking and tried flagging down the occasional taxi but none would stop. Miserable bastards.

Then out of nowhere this car pulled over. The driver motioned to get in. I did. There was no meter. It wasn't a taxi. fuck walking, I'll take my chances.

The driver told me he had just dropped his employees' home.

'Ah, another benevolent fellow,' I thought and began jabbering away.

He told me he was Turkish and owned a pizza shop. "I often give people rides this way," he'd said in his thick accent.



I raised an eyebrow but most murderers would be unlikely to stop to pick up a 6ft dood like myself... unless they were well armed and totally fucking psychotic that is...

As it was he dropped me virtually at my front door.

I shook his hand and got out. Now that's serendipity, I thought as I crossed the road.

Now one week later I'm sat typing.

A few days ago I had my portfolio stolen from under my nose. I'd had a good night and been drawing people, doing my Entertainer on Gin routine and

generally having fun in a pub with a bunch of people.

I've done this for the last 12 years and my patter is well honed, if a little rusty in recent times. It felt good to be buffing it up again. I gave drawings away, digging the surprised and delighted looks on the faces of those I drew.



Later a friend woke me up in the corner of the pub. I don't remember this but apparently I was surprised to be there.

I came to my senses and scanned around. All my shit was there except for my portfolio. Fuck.

I searched all around the pub getting increasingly frantic and angry and started promising

hexes to the person who'd done such a vile and callous deed.

My friends who had turned up helped me search for it along with the remainder of the people id been chatting to earlier but to no avail.

The pub barman told me the CCTV had been broken for two weeks.

Fuck.

I'd been doing this for 12 years and not once had anyone stolen it. two paintings had gone AWOL in all that time but never had anyone lifted the lot, which was remarkable considering the sheer amount of time id been doing it and the amount of times id fallen asleep doing so.

On Friday, the day after my work was thieved I went to check at the pub but no one had handed it in. not long after I met up with friends, spent a small fortune and had a great night with them. Determined not to be outdone by the fates I drew people. Gave the drawings away. It was slashing it down with rain outside for most of the evening but this only served to heighten the excitement. It all went well.



People were happy and my drawing was in good form.

Fuck you bastards, I thought. You're not gonna beat my fucking spirit down.

Later on I walked back to the flat. I was starving like a stray dog. I felt like I hadn't eaten in days. I hadn't. "Never eat on an empty stomach!"

Looking at the proliferation of take-aways along the road I staggered into one at random. Behind the counter was the dood who'd given me a lift home days before. We greeted each other

like old pals. I looked at the menu on the wall and ordered a half pound cheeseburger. Yummy!

Then I ordered a big big pizza. "I'll have everything on it with double garlic please!"

I was suddenly in Total Greed Mode.

When the food arrived I shoved the pizza into my bag, bid the Turk farewell and ate the burger as I walked home. It tasted like shit but I forgave the guy after his generosity in giving me a lift the weekend before and for not instead taking me out onto the

moors at gunpoint then murdering me with an axe.

As I reached the junction near to the flat and where the Turk had dropped me off I saw a lass coming from the other direction.

She was in floods of tears.

I don't remember much of what was said but it turned out she'd gone back to some guys flat who she said tried to rape her. I do remember her asking me why she got into situations like that.

She was very young, maybe 18 and evidently naive.



Rape might have been too strong a term. He'd probably thought she'd wanted to be with him by going back to his place and got heavy with her when she backed off but still, not cool either way.

I did my best to console her, "At least yer okay." I flagged down a taxi for her. She was in a much better state as she was getting in and then I remembered something.



I handed her the pizza that was still hot and untouched in my bag. Maybe she'd learn more than one lesson from the night and hopefully the pizza would taste better than the burger I'd had. I'd forgotten about the double garlic, not to everyone's taste but I thought of it as a kind gesture nonetheless.

Last night, Saturday, I was sat in my flat when my phone rang. It was my flatmate telling me the landlord had contacted him to say he was evicting us and was gonna come around on Monday to do the nasty deed. "Cya Monday dood, take it easy."

I went to light a cigarette. click... click... clack! damn, the flint had gone. I looked around my room. I have about 400 lighters floating about at any one time. Just they're all well hidden.

I spotted my jacket.

It's possibly the coolest thing I've ever owned. A super svelte white and blue BMW biker's jacket a best friend recently gave to me. I feel like a fucking superstar wearing it. Like David Bowie or someone. Like a young god.

Rifling through the pockets I found a lighter and then I found that pair of tan tights.

Hmmmm...

Moments later I stood in my room with my cigarette lit wearing the jacket. I stripped off my jeans then pulled on the tights.

They felt good. The cigarette tasted good. I took another drag then grabbed a marker pen from a tub and wrote the letters "I. N.. S.. T.. A.. N.. T" down one leg.

After another deep drag on the smoke I wrote "K.. A.. R.. M.. A" along the other leg and smiled.

It's now Sunday and I'm now typing this thinking about making another attempt to track down my work.

There's over a hundred pieces there including many of those I've put up on MySpace.

I have four beers left, maybe three. I have 50 pence to my name so after those beers its delirium tremens again.

I've been getting 'em after every binge lately and they've been lasting longer and longer. Like 3 days and shit.

Tomorrow I'll try and get on a computer to bulletin this, after which I'll sit and await news from a friend about moving to a different city, which has been on the cards for ages but been held up by solicitors. Tomorrow a verdict is supposed to be delivered.

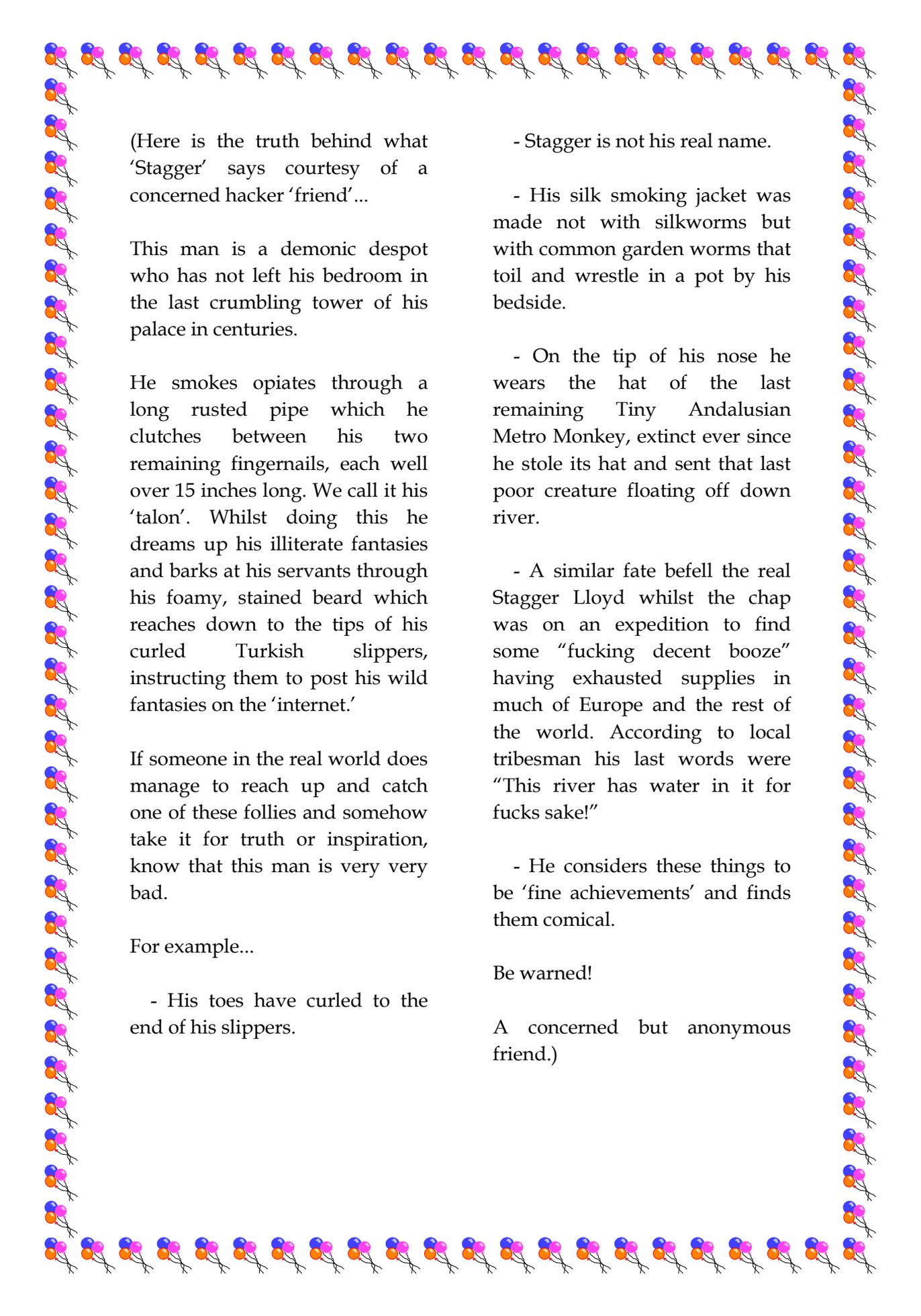
Later in the evening the landlord is coming to turf us out.

If all goes well I'll have a new house to move to by the time he arrives, if not I'll be well and truly fucked.

Ok, time to head out and know that I love each and every one of you...

Wish me luck, Stagger.





(Here is the truth behind what 'Stagger' says courtesy of a concerned hacker 'friend'...

This man is a demonic despot who has not left his bedroom in the last crumbling tower of his palace in centuries.

He smokes opiates through a long rusted pipe which he clutches between his two remaining fingernails, each well over 15 inches long. We call it his 'talon'. Whilst doing this he dreams up his illiterate fantasies and barks at his servants through his foamy, stained beard which reaches down to the tips of his curled Turkish slippers, instructing them to post his wild fantasies on the 'internet.'

If someone in the real world does manage to reach up and catch one of these follies and somehow take it for truth or inspiration, know that this man is very very bad.

For example...

- His toes have curled to the end of his slippers.

- Stagger is not his real name.

- His silk smoking jacket was made not with silkworms but with common garden worms that toil and wrestle in a pot by his bedside.

- On the tip of his nose he wears the hat of the last remaining Tiny Andalusian Metro Monkey, extinct ever since he stole its hat and sent that last poor creature floating off down river.

- A similar fate befell the real Stagger Lloyd whilst the chap was on an expedition to find some "fucking decent booze" having exhausted supplies in much of Europe and the rest of the world. According to local tribesman his last words were "This river has water in it for fucks sake!"

- He considers these things to be 'fine achievements' and finds them comical.

Be warned!

A concerned but anonymous friend.)



DEATH WISH CHAMELEON X

By Cricket Corleone

Photos ©Richard A. Meade

Dustin is riding the city bus back to her hotel room after a long day at the shooting gallery. Buzzing high off the feeling she got from shooting a gun for the first time, she cracks a smile while off in her own little world away from the other passengers. A slight itch on her scalp from freshly dyed black hair of the cheapest kind of color you can find at the drug store. She scratches her head a little and tries to brush her hair behind her ears. She is still trying to get used

to the fact that her long hair is now in a bob cut, which is too short to make it stay behind her ears. She sees her reflection in the window of the bus and almost cannot recognize herself. In a way, this is pleasing. Taking on a new person or personality would be an interesting project and would keep her real troubles at bay, for awhile.

Realizing that she needs to do the annual odd job to put some

money back into her traveling funds, she has set up a meeting time with the man who had placed the ad looking for a mistress. He is a well off man with a great paying job and a wife of thirty years. Getting some money off of him would be so easy it seems unfair in a way. All she would have to do is play the part of the perfect mistress so well that he would consider her advancements for a steady paycheck to be something as small as a tax write off would be. And he most certainly could afford a few hundred per session with her.

The next afternoon, around lunch time, Dustin is walking to a diner down the street from the hotel she is staying at. The rich man has asked to meet her there because no one he knows goes there, it's obscure enough that he would never be seen with this "mystery woman" he is about to have an affair with. As she walks she realizes she needs a new name. She stops in her tracks and decides to close her eyes and then randomly look at something around her. Whatever she sees first, she will use as her new name.





Leaving it up to randomness, she opens her eyes and sees a billboard advertisement. The model in the ad is a woman so plastic and airbrushed it is almost insulting to the people below. Searching the billboard of a Wrigley's gum ad she does not see a name that would be convincing as such. So she takes the word Wrigley and tries to rearrange the letters in the name until it forms a name she can use. "W... R... E..." she struggles to find another name in the letters. "G... I... L..." Finding it difficult, she suddenly realizes one word in the name Wrigley stands out. Ironically attached to such a fake advertisement of how a woman should look, and due to the fact

that she is making up a name for this new "character" she is playing, is the word "Lie." Rearranging the letters to the name, "Eli." She thinks to herself a moment, "Eli... short for Elijah... which can be both feminine and masculine. Yeah... Eli. That works." She smiles to herself and moves on.

Once she has the name down she starts to create the character of Eli in her head. Realizing it is best to remain a creature of mystery to this man, as his mistress, but that if it came down to it, she could lie through her teeth about her past so convincingly that he wouldn't even question the validity of the stories she would feed him.





A block before she reaches the diner, Dustin, or Eli, takes out a pair of sunglasses and slides them on. She smooths out her new long black coat and her new black tresses. Pressing her lips together and looking at her reflection in a glass window she realizes she needs something. Inside the window is a woman's clothing store. She sees a makeup counter inside as well.

When Dustin comes out of the shop she has on a deep red glossy lipstick. Now she was ready. Even her walk seemed to be slightly different. More femme fatale. She glides down the

sidewalk feeling like an untouchable ice queen. A bitch. And it feels good.

Dustin enters the diner. Looking around, there are few patrons there. The men in the room seem to be instantly drawn to Eli, staring at her. The waitress in the diner sees this and rolls her eyes. Dustin finally sees the rich man. He is sitting with his back to the entrance but wearing a red string around one of his wrists. This was how she would be able to spot him as he told her in their previous phone conversation. A cigarette burning half way down between his fingers.



Dustin walks right up to the table and sits on the opposite side facing the rich man. "Got a smoke?" she says. There is not a hint of insecurity in her body language.

The rich man pulls out a pack of menthols and offers her one.

Dustin sighs a little, "I don't smoke menthols."

All is silent.

She figures that making the man nervous would gain her some

dominance in their situation. "So... you never told me your name? Mr..."

The man sits up a little as he struggles to put his pack of cigarettes away. "Dane, you can call me Dane. I never got your name either."

Dustin sits back in her chair comfortably, "Elijah... you can call me Eli." As soon as the lie came out Dustin struggled not to crack a smile at her perfect delivery of it. "So, tell me about yourself, Mister Dane."





An hour passes and Dustin has learned a little more about this cheating man. What he does for a living. The places he has traveled. Easing into the sexual deviance he is into. Once the conversation had crossed over to sexual insinuation, Dustin figured she had two options. One, play along, which would probably end up in some kind of romp at a seedy hotel or the back seat of a car. Or...

Dustin stands up. "Well, I have another appointment. I'll call you," she says, heading for the door. Dane looks a little confused, which is precisely where Dustin wants him to be. But before exiting, she comes

back behind him and leans over to whisper into his ear, "I think we may be able to work together," she says seductively. Then she turns and exits the diner, leaving Dane with a building erection. As she walks out she says to herself, "I got him."

Back at her hotel room, Dustin is sitting on the bed smoking a cigarette. The phone by the bedside rings. She knows it is Dane because for one, nobody knew her hotel number and room. Two, she knew that she had left him wanting something more. She decides not to answer and turns on the television instead.





Later in the evening, Dustin takes a little walk to the building that Dane works at. She had figured out where he worked because when he told her what he did for a living, Dustin had later looked in the phone book to narrow down the businesses that specialized in his work. There were three. She went to each of the buildings pretending to be interested in bringing them business, and then searched their directories to find the name Dane. To her luck, only one building had a man with the name Dane working there. Waiting outside until closing time, Dustin secretly spies to see

if Dane comes out. Sure enough, he does.

Dane gets into the back of a black town car. Dustin watches as the car drives off down the street. But, to her surprise, she notices she is not the only spy watching the building. A woman in a taxi motions to the driver. Dustin watches the woman's mouth and makes out, "Follow that car."

It is obvious that the woman in the taxi has not noticed Dustin, so Dustin takes advantage of this. In an attempt to figure out the woman's game, Dustin pretends to trip in front of the taxi.

The taxi comes to a screeching halt. The woman jumps out and comes to Dustin's aid.

"Oh my god! Are you alright?" the woman says frantically.

Dustin stands up and dusts off her knees and hands. "Yeah, I'm alright. I am so sorry, I totally did not see you coming." Dustin starts to walk a little and fakes a limp, "Ouch," she says as if seriously hurt.

The woman helps her to the sidewalk. "Oh... are you sure you are alright?" the woman says as

Dustin turns to her. Suddenly the woman stands back a little and examines Dustin's face. "Don't I know you from somewhere?" the woman says in confusion.

"I don't know? Do you? I mean... I doubt it because I just moved here. I haven't met too many people." Dustin laughs a little.

"Well... can I..." The woman looks to the cab and looks ahead to see if she can still spot Dane's town-car, "Sorry, can I at least... drop you somewhere?"



Dustin plays overtly nice, "Oh no no no, you are too kind. I really appreciate it. I was just..." Dustin thinks for a moment, "I was just on my way to meet my girlfriend."

The woman smiles politely, "I thought you said you didn't know anyone here?"

Dustin realizes the slip and quickly comes up with another cover up. "Oh, yeah... I haven't really. It's my girlfriend from out of town. She came up to visit me because I was feeling, not to sound pathetic, a little lonely."

The woman buys Dustin's story. "Well, let me at least drop you off where you need to be. It's the least I can do."

Dustin smiles, "Thanks." She follows the woman to the back of the cab.

Inside the cab, Dustin is trying to come up with smooth ways to find out who this woman is and why she was following Dane's car. But before she can speak, the woman starts to break the ice. "So, how long have you and your girlfriend known each other?"

Dustin is about to make up the whole story when she notices the

woman glance down at her thighs. Dustin turns her head a little and wonders, "Was she just checking me out?" Dustin responds, "Well, we used to date but that was a long time ago. We've been friends for about, three years now."

The woman glances over at Dustin, "Oh, well... it's great that you two can be such good friends."

There is an awkward silence.

"How about you?" Dustin pries. "Do you have a special someone?"

The woman looks down and laughs a little, "I suppose you could say that. I wouldn't call it special though." Dustin listens intently. "Sorry, I shouldn't be dumping my stuff on you. I mean, I don't even know you." The woman clears her throat. "I have been married for about thirty years," she says, forcing a smile.

Dustin looks out the window as she finally figures out who this woman is. "Oh, she's the wife," she thinks. "Of COURSE. She was probably following him because she knows he is cheating."

Dustin turns back to the woman, "Are you happy? I mean, I know it's none of my business. I am just making conversation."

The woman looks at her reflection in the rear view mirror at the wrinkles under her eyes. "Happy? I don't know... no one has ever really asked me that."

In that moment, Dustin feels sympathy for the woman. "Don't you have any friends? I mean... I just find it hard to believe that no one has ever asked you that."

The woman smiles a little, "You seem like a nice girl. But I would have to say that I have been so busy with my work life and what's left of my home life, I am afraid I may not have any friends anymore. If I ever really had any to begin with. It all just sort of, caught up with me when I wasn't paying attention." She pulls herself out of it. "Listen to me going on and on about myself. You must think I am a pathetic old lady."

Dustin smiles, "Not at all. I'm starting to think it's your husband that is the pathetic one."

The woman looks at Dustin, "Excuse me?"

Dustin sits up and tries to cover up her remark, "I mean, you say you have no friends... I just think that if you are married, he should be... a friend? Anyway, you can drop me off on the next block."

The cab pulls over. Dustin is sitting inside next to the woman. The woman extends her hand, "My name is Eveline."

The two shake hands.

"I'm D... Eli. Call me Eli," Dustin says as the two share a moment. Then before Dustin gets out of the cab she snaps back to the reality of her situation. This was an opportunity that could completely work in her favor. Although she felt bad about the possibility of using this broken woman to her advantage, she wondered how far she would go and if she stopped here, what all the efforts up till now would mean. They would mean nothing, she thinks. With every fiber in her being telling her not to pursue the situation any longer, Dustin swallows it down like a bad pill.

Dustin turns to Eveline, "So, you say you have no friends. Well, you just made one. Why don't you give me a call sometime and we can hang out. I mean, I don't

really know anyone here, you need a break, so it all works out.” Dustin writes down her hotel number and room number onto a piece of paper and hands it to Eveline.

Eveline seems charmed by Dustin. “Maybe I’ll do that.”

Dustin smiles, but before she closes the door she does one more thing to sway the situation in the direction she thinks would work best to her advantage. “You should, I look forward to it,” she says as her eyes glance over Eveline’s body in obvious insinuation.

As Dustin is walking down the street she turns once to wave goodbye to Eveline.

In the cab, Eveline hesitantly waves back but smiles with grace. She looks over the number and then puts it into her pocket. The look on her face is saying that she has no interest in calling and the thought makes her uneasy. But the fact that when she thought about the advance from this strange woman named Eli, it kind of felt good. Her fingers brush over the pocket in which the number now rests.

The cab driver turns to look back

at her, “Where to now? Still wanna follow that car?”

Eveline has forgotten she was following the car at all, “No... ummm... that won’t be necessary,” she says as she gives directions for the cabbie to take her home.

Dustin ducks into a corner as she watches the cab drive off with Eveline inside. She realizes that if she could play both the cheating husband and the unhappy wife, she could up her chances of reaching her final destination. Now the tables have turned a bit. First thing she needs to do is get the husband involved with some devious sexual behavior, the kind a man in his position would rather kill to cover up than be exposed publicly with. While she is doing that, she has to work her way into Eveline’s affections and somehow place herself into their everyday life as a close friend. Then she could move in for the kill and work off the husband’s fear of getting caught.

As she makes her way back to the hotel, the plan begins to formulate in the darkest parts of her mind. In a way, that sick voice in her head begins to enjoy this fucked up idea. In a way she thinks, “This is going to be fun.”



But in a moment she stops in her tracks. There is a young woman down the way peeking out from behind a building at Dustin. It looks a lot like Greta. Dustin squints her eyes, but suddenly the young woman disappears. Dustin is disturbed by this sighting of her dead friend. It was just like in the bathroom at her old apartment. Dustin takes a full breath and calms down a little. She says to herself, "This is no time to completely go mental. Not when I am this close to finally getting the fuck out of here." Dustin continues on her way until she turns a corner and

comes face to face with Greta. Everything seems to go in slow motion as Dustin gasps for breath. Dustin cannot believe what she is seeing.

"Oh my god," she says under her breath, "I am losing my mind." She goes around Greta and continues to walk trying to ignore that she can hear Greta's footsteps following behind her.

Greta suddenly speaks, "I know you can see me."

Dustin is utterly terrified and on the verge of a total panic attack.



"OK... I know what this is. I didn't sleep too much last night. So now I am hallucinating. I am seeing things. That's all. It's not real."

Dustin reaches her hotel and quickly rushes in.

When she has reached the room, she quickly goes inside and locks the door. Sitting down on the bed she lets out a deep breath and listens for footsteps. When she hears nothing she starts to calm down and laughs to herself. "My GOD that scared the crap out of me. I am so fucked up. I am seeing my DEAD FRIEND now? Can you rain anymore shit down upon me?" she says to the ceiling.

Dustin rolls over on the bed and suddenly comes face to face again with Greta who is now lying next to her.

Greta smiles, "Hello."

Dustin jumps in horror. "WHAT THE FUCK?" She backs away slowly. "Are you... you're... no way. You DIED. You aren't supposed to be here!"

Greta stands up and walks to the look at a bad painting hanging on the wall of the hotel room. "Yes, I am dead," she says nonchalantly.

Dustin, still in shock, takes another step back. "So, are you... like... a ghost?"

Greta shrugs, "Could be? I could be a ghost, I could be a figment of your imagination? Who knows? The thing is, you asked for me. Something in you wanted me to be here, so... here I am." Greta sits back on the bed.

Dustin starts to laugh a little. "I'm sorry... I am SORRY. But this is too much. I didn't ask for this? You know what, something in me is asking for a nice STRONG DRINK right now."

Greta lies back on the bed, "Look, there's no reason to be afraid. I mean, no matter what it is that I am, what I was was your friend. So, make the best out of a crazy situation. It's not like I am going to hurt you or anything. I'm still the Greta you knew."

Dustin slowly sits on the end of the bed and tries to touch Greta. She seems to be real. For some odd reason Dustin's fear starts to disappear. "I guess you have a point? I could be crazy... but who cares, right? It isn't like I was the poster girl for sanity to begin with? O.K.. I can deal with this. I will just pretend you aren't

there." Dustin lies on the bed and closes her eyes.

Greta starts to sigh, "Oh come ON. It isn't THAT bad. It's not like you have any real friends anyway? Just, you know, enjoy it!" Greta hits Dustin with a pillow.

Dustin covers her ears and starts to sing loudly.

"LALALALALALALALALALA!
I CAN'T HEAR YOU!
LALALALALALALALALALA!"

Dustin uncovers her eyes but Greta's still there. "Oh, GO AWAY," Dustin says now rather irritated. "I have things to do!"

Greta looks at herself in a nearby mirror, "Yeah I know, killing yourself... blah blah blah... But the thing is, I'm not going anywhere."

Dustin turns on the TV and tries to drown out Greta's "ghost."

Finally Greta gives in, "Fine fine fine... I'll leave. But, I will be back, you know. I won't be too far away. See ya." Greta smiles.

Dustin turns her eyes to where Greta was standing. Greta is now gone. Dustin lets out a sigh of

relief. "As if you weren't annoying enough in life, she says. Mocking Greta, "I'm not going anywhere. That's fine. That's just fine. I'll just ignore you then. Don't want anyone around anyway."

Dustin looks around the room. She starts to think that maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if Greta were there. "I mean, what could it hurt?" she says to herself. "O.K. FINE. I don't mind. You can come back. Just, don't make me go all psycho or something because I really don't need that... I am crazy enough as it is," Dustin says out loud.

Suddenly Greta is back and jumps to a sitting position on the bed. "Great! What's on t.v?"

Dustin rolls her eyes. "This is some crazy ass shit," she says out loud. "Are you going to be here all the time though? Cause I don't need that kind of... thing," Dustin finishes.

Greta sits back, "Just when you need me. I won't be any trouble. I promise."

The two of them sit back on the bed.

Dustin lets out a sigh and laughs a little, "I can't believe this. It's like some sick version of Harvey or something. But... whatever. Figures."

The light from the television flickers a little from fuzzy to picture as the nighttime outside seems to drag on into the strange metamorphosis that has become Dustin's death wish.



DESCANSOS

By John Paul Jaramillo

Photos © Sid Graves

The first man I'd met while working maintenance became my friend and gave me a place to sleep in his basement out on La Vega Road. He shared posole and mashed beans with me at his dinner table and he drove me around town looking for fluorescent liquor signs out on Central, Northern and East Ninth.

This one evening, one time, while we were drinking beer, I asked him, "How much longer you gonna fuck around with that car?"

"A man works to keep busy," he instructed.

The half-primer, half-purple Chevy was a '76 and the first beautiful thing I'd seen after the Army. At first I didn't want it, at first I didn't want the responsibility. His wife and kid landed up dead-meat in the thing out on Interstate 25 near Aguilar, Colorado about two years back.

After we drank as much as we could, we drove out to the crash site and just pulled over, turned off the engine. Luis' eyes flooded and he doubled over with yearning. He was bulky and shaped like an ox and it was strange to see him cry. Headlights streamed by and I stared at the sad wooden cross and roses to the side of the highway, the wallet sized photos and an old locket placed beneath.

He ended it by making the sign of the cross and saying, "Descansos por los muertos, Relles."

That Monte Carlo was a piece of shit afterwards, mangled and smashed. But his work had an amazing effect. He dropped a new Windsor V8 and banged out all the dents to smooth the body. He lowered the suspension and fixed her up with a new set of basket rims, all chrome and clean.

"Jesus, man," I said. "You finally fix up that piece of shit?"



"It's drivable," Luis answered.
"You can drive it—"

"Well, that's the point, right?"

His shoulders slumped. "It's not about selling a damn car." He wiped his long forehead with his ancient fingers, shifted his cigarette from underneath his moustache.

While I packed up my stuff, Luis airbrushed the figure of a woman and the man introduced the hood of that Chevy as a vision. I didn't know Luis as an artist. Never been around one. I saw the

woman had angel wings, and her eyes seemed gray and cold, her flawless arms crossed low at her waist.

I took Luis' car and went looking for Romes and found him sitting in a squatter's house with his hair combed back and his collar up, suffering through the cold of a New Mexico night. He looked strung out and thin. I really thought he was in jail or dead.

I put my hand on Romes' thin shoulder and took the cigarette out of his mouth. "How'd you ever imagine finding me, Relles?" he asked.

He was the only one laughing. Out of everyone at the party, he was the only one laughing.

"I'm headin out to California," I told him.

"A lifetime ago, Manito. I was in Colorado a lifetime ago." He smiled widely with big, yellow teeth.

People were always fixing him drinks, rolling the fattest blunts to get him to slow down, making him talk while they quickly guzzled. The people at this particular party, this particular

night, I didn't know very well and I was confident they didn't know Romes all that well either. He told me he had just lost his house and his common law wife. "I know the kid's out there somewhere, you know."

He shook his head furiously as if he had been there with me the whole way, every mile. "What kid is that, Manito?"

"My kid," I said.

We started telling stories about Army days. We talked about Camp Bondsteel and the 7th Infantry. At one time my brother had tried to explain it all to me, but this night I was out of luck. I came all that way and the bastard kept it hidden.

"The Army is over for me and you," he finally told me. "I know that much."

Only the drinking and the weed came out that night. He was in high spirits after receiving his latest VA check and he showed me his wallet and the ten twenty dollar bills he had left. At this moment while on that disgusting little couch, as he rested the money out on his lap, I noticed how his curly hair was clean,

how things were going to be all right for him for the next couple of days, until the money ran out.

"Shit happened a long time ago, Manito. Two years ago, whatever. So don't ask me no more, Relles. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus! Don't ask me," he repeated and then he laughed at himself.



Romes kept talking and sounded glorious: he told a lowrider, junky-looking girl that he was working in Taos as a vendor at a baseball field, and then he told another woman who I never saw the face of that he was living closer to the mountains and

restoring old cars. He asked another girl if he could sleep at her apartment, and then he told another girl who was fighting with her boyfriend to meet him in the narrow street out front and to forget about the little chivato she had come with, that he had a custom Monte Carlo outside.

"Just let me borrow the car, cabrón."



After a day and a half, California came like speed trials. I drove Luis' death-filled Chevy all night and stopped only to eat, then once to piss at the head of an

entrance ramp. I was high on amphetamines my brother Romes gave me in New Mexico and I wasn't used to driving.

I stopped in an AM/PM for gas, gave my troubles a case of Bud Light. The woman's face behind the counter was veiled in bulletproof glass. The tattoo of an eastern sun on her neck lit the wall. Her nametag read "Lynn".

"If we were in love," I asked, "would you ever leave me?"

The Chevy fell into park, the brakes cried in front of Loretta's house that morning, our house on Cardinal Avenue. All the houses on the block were flat roofed and earth-toned and built by the same company, but this house stood out because it sat inside an immense garden. She loved the beauty and the neighbors would always admire her roses and marigolds. Once I took a shortcut through the garden in a straight line for the door, and Loretta said, "Can't you see that's disrespectful?"

I managed the steps to our home's front door. It was missing a screen, so I reached my hand through to feel the knob. The metal felt cold and reminded me

of loneliness, so I rang the bell three or four times. I looked in through the living room window; there were no curtains and I saw toys on the floor: a little plastic kitchen and a spotted horse on springs.

I smashed a window.

Inside, the green carpeting to the bedrooms was stained, and I could feel the blood pumping through me. Loretta's bedroom was cluttered and sad. The door frame had been fixed from when she locked herself in, and a queen-sized waterbed now filled the room. Two antique-looking dressers stood side by side near the closet. Work clothes were stacked neatly on her bed. A necklace rested on one of the dressers. I held the metal in my hands smelling for perfume.

I sniffed around like a dog, continuing through her jewelry. I found some photos, strange faces until the Polaroids taken just before I had left for Macedonia, one of the same pictures of my daughter Belle that I had kept in my wallet.

I pocketed some money folded into a small square, about fifty dollars, from a jewelry box. It

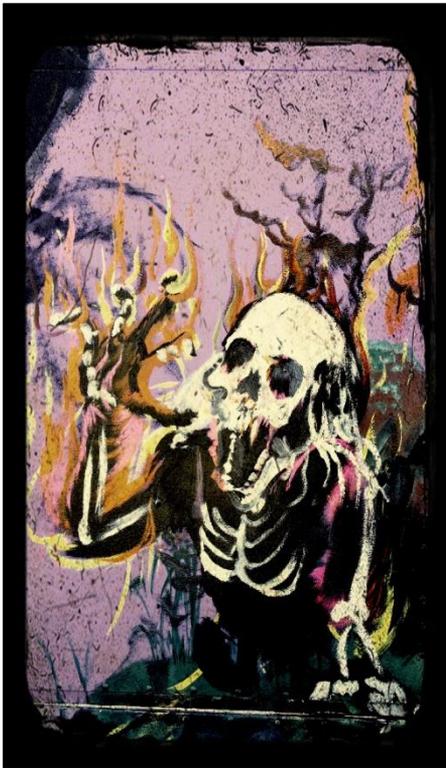
took me a while to notice the man's work shirts hanging on the door to the closet, but the gray material looked pressed with the top button done up with care. The logo over the pocket read Allied Electric.



My daughter Belle posed in front of a large tree. Her clothes were too big for her frame, and her face was mischievously young and rosy, her perfect nose like her mother's. In another, newer photo of a young man standing in front of the house. A handsome man with a white face and a red beard smiling wide,

patiently waiting for the picture to be taken.

Around the corner from our bedroom, I edged to where our daughter slept. Toys lined the dirty carpet of the small room, and I had to clear a little path to get into the center. Her books littered the long shelf over the picture window, looking out into the back yard.



The walls up to about four feet were an institutional brown. The color reminded me of the room at the halfway house, but here brown meant a prairie and

rolling hills, the sky meeting them at the level of the bookshelf and the dresser that held my daughter's clothes.

The blue horizon blended into majestic purples and turquoises, fields rolling backwards into hills and then finally mountains, and then on to amazing distances, billowing, cloud-filled horizons over the twin bed. The clouds felt God-like, weightless, and I lost myself in view of those faultless clouds, along the tops of trees that extended on the walls and some white picket fences added for detail over the brown hills. The rested on my daughter's bed and the light fixture poured warm sunshine over me.

The mailman placed the mail. The phone rang a couple of times. I felt sick and weak and had to vomit in their bathroom. And in that lowliness I became the worst thoughts.

I held the .32 Romes had given me in case of trouble. I had the gun in my front pocket, and every once in a while I would pull it out. There were no bullets so I kept pulling back the hammer and letting myself have it. My eyes squeezed shut and warm tears cut down my face.

Her tears were rolling, but if I regret anything from that day it's that Loretta's hair wasn't down. "Jesus, Relles. I can smell the fuckin beer on you." She shook her head with terror.

She eyed the gun and before I could say a word she had the phone. "Can you even imagine in your stupid fuckin' head what I have to do to explain to your daughter or where you have been and what the hell you have been doin'?"

"Fuck, Relles." Her round face had no makeup whatsoever, pure as a saint. Her skin remained close to porcelain.

"Loretta, I've moved on." She stutter stepped into the wall behind her.

"You hear me Goddamn it? Goddamn it! You see?" she said. "You fuck of a man."

I dragged her to me and my muscles began to spasm. That's when I could feel what was alive on her, that pregnant belly. I squeezed her arm down to bone. With those blue skies around me, I swear I wanted to hurt her. I wanted to break both her goddamned arms.

She jerked from me into the hallway. I lost the material and the threads tore down her shirt. I grabbed at her shoulder and then at her hair.

"Ah, please Retta," I repeated, still holding the gun. "Shit. Fuck. God."

In that last look of my wife, pulling away from me and running out the door in a full, short-legged sprint, still bawling, I knew our goodbyes would never be real, that they would have to stay inside.

After two or three days of me haunting around Retta's neighborhood, they hauled me out in front of a Denny's. And as the officers had the cuffs on me, between parked cars and as they draped my body over the trooper's hood, for several less-than-conscious moments, I pleaded with the woman on Luis' Monte Carlo and her naked, airbrushed frame.



THE LOVERS.

FIEND

By Michelle Lee Escobedo with Chris Madoch

In the smallest of small minded towns,
On the darkest of dark unkind nights,
He entered the holy city.

He
sought sanctuary
Between my thighs.
Sanctum sanctorum,
Transformation, conversion,
Perversion.

The fucking fiend sits
right across from me.
licks his lips, his prick hard,
Forming mental pictures. 'O'
The possibilities grow.
Filthy thoughts- eyes undressing
his dirty little girl in her flannel gown
stained
with a late night snack of
peanut butter and jelly
full belly pearl.

I begin to squirm uneasy
on the big blue couch. I think I know what
he wants.
The look is familiar. He's looked at mommy
this way- after too much to drink.

I cross my legs
butterflies in my
vacant lot tummy for rent hell-bent on being loved.
Wannabe loved. Wannabe held. Wanna me daddy
to weld me to his denim knee. Does this make me naughty?

This fiend, patting his lap, lets his robe
lay open.
Good girl, come sit here.
I need to show you with how much veneer
I love you.
It's what makes my mother scream
In the middle of the night- this sick version of love;
the sanctum sanctorum soon to become the second death;
No affection but the common grave affection that
ALL screwed-up bad girls burn in hell. Take a breath.
He smiles at me opens his arms-
furry monster at attention. I slowly stand too,
begin my walk towards him knees trembling.
body shivering
the night air has
become as one with his soul. Cold on cold.
I AM going to give him what he wants.
He tugs at my girls gown-
take this off for me.
I pull at it, nervously, it falls to
The bare floor,
he stares at my slight body as if
he's eying the world's largest chocolate
cake hungry to devour me.
...Pink nipples, erect, cold.
...Underwear, damp, warm.
What am I not feeling? RIGHT.
Wish I were in MY
Room colouring pictures in my Peter Pan
Book. I wanna go to where children
Never grasp the stinging nettle of growing up. FUCK.
IT slides my underwear down
My hips. Scents of urine and some
Sweet odour I have never smelled before.
Quick as light, his lips, his hands
explore my body. IT

is moaning and grunting like a hungry
Pig.

That's what men are- in large part porcine.
He lays me down on the decorative tiles. I wish there
Were carpet here. Wish my mommy were
HERE.

DOES JESUS LOVE ME.

God! Why does this feel so good?
Want to vomit. Want him to stop.
Tears, hot, salty, slicing my face.

ITs bit wants to rip me in
Half. Pressing, pressure, prying the fixed flesh lid
From my moist treasure box.

Me screaming I WON'T LET IT IN
IT stops.

He's sweaty and the look
Of fake love has turned to one of disgrace, disgust.

You dirty untrustworthy little bitch!
Go to your precious space! I scurry-
Like a three limbed rat. I am just that.

To my room I crawl, clutter of gown
And underwear clutched, one in each
Hand, spoils like contraband.

Don't know why the fuck I was created.

AND my mother's voice three days later-
Torn, worn, arbitrating traitor to her spawn
You, what did YOU do?

What did you do to make him want to
Do those things to you?



THE AMOK BLIND MEN OF MUHARRIN

By Hank Kirton

Images ©Sean Madden

This whole thing may have been a dream.

My maternal grandfather died of emphysema when I was ten years old. He and my grandmother used to baby-sit me whenever my parents wanted to get away for the weekend. I have many happy memories of my grandparent's house - climbing the apple trees in the backyard, playing cards with my grandmother, going for

long walks with my grandfather. And watching home movies.

They had TONS of home movies. Lots of boring parades. Lots of family vacations (seeing my mother as a little kid around my age was a revelation I still remember fondly). A lot of nature stuff (Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, etc), and a lot of grainy, 8mm footage of their travels around the world.

When my grandparents were a young couple (early 1930s) they set out on several global adventures. They didn't have much money, so their long journeys must have been difficult and taxing. I always think of the characters in *The Sheltering Sky* who insist they aren't tourists, but TRAVELERS.

My grandparents were like that.

One night they set up the projector and screen (they had a real movie screen) and ran some short home movies for me; parades, picnics, the beach, the mountains, etc...

And then my grandfather clicked a reel onto the projector and said, "I took these shots in (I think, please forgive my poor worn-out memory) Muharrin (go ahead and look for it--I can't find anything...) in 1929."

I will now describe everything I remember about the film:

It's black and white and the film is worn. The leader moves through the projector and thousands of angry scratches pour across the screen. The first shot reveals an empty desert at sunrise. It blurs, and then comes into focus. Soft dunes stretch away forever. Cut. A shot of a village. Thatched, conical roofs, fences weaved from gnarled tree

limbs. There are people moving between the buildings but they are too far away to see clearly. Cut. A shot of two men dressed in coarse robes. Their faces are rough and craggy, baked and sculpted by hard sun and desert winds. They do not speak. They climb out of their robes and stand naked. They bend down and each comes up with two flat stones. The camera zooms in on one of the men as he slides the stones under his eyelids (I remember the camera jiggled at this point. I imagine my grandfather was quite unnerved at this sight). He has just blinded himself, his eyeballs covered by the stones. The camera lurches to the other man. He too has secured flat stones under his eyelids. Tears of blood trickle down his cheeks. The camera jumps back and a small boy enters the frame. He hands each of the men a machete.

The boy's mouth moves as he starts walking toward the village. I think he's singing, guiding the now-blind men with the sound of his voice. My grandfather follows the strange procession from a nervous distance. When they reach the village, the boy runs out of the frame and the two men move between the buildings, swinging wildly.

The villagers do not run. They turn, tuck their arms into their sides, eyes closed, and wait to see

who will get hit. Who will live and who will die. My grandfather's camera is in a panic, turning and swooping and shaking and blurring. One of the men hacks an old man's arm, nearly severing it. He collapses. In the distance, the other blind machete-man hits a woman in the neck. She too falls. The camera whirls around, takes a blurry shot of the bright sky and then cuts.

I remember staring at the blank screen, listening to the tail of the

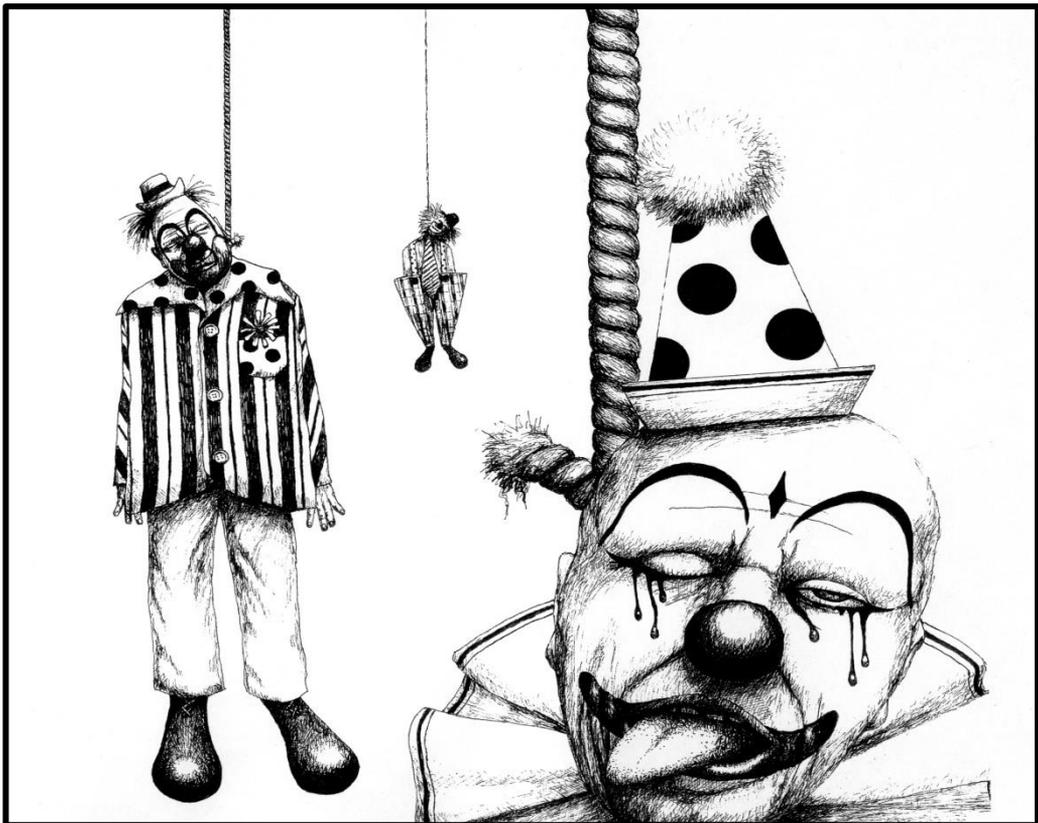
reel flap flap flap.

Then my grandfather shut off the projector.

That's all I remember. Years later, after my grandfather died, I searched through their box of home movies. The film I just described was not there.

Was it ever there?

Or was it all just a dream?





CLOWN UNCLE

By Sue Fox

Photos © Richard A. Meade

I was at a party. It was my brother's birthday. He was six, a year younger than me. He was excited. I wore my red and orange swirly patterned taffeta dress. We sucked on brightly coloured rock lollipops my grandmother bought for us. We

had photos taken in black and white film of all the kids crouching or leant against the window sill; there was my gran, my mother, siblings and friends from school. It was a sunny day. I was always shielding my eyes from the sun in photos. I was

always caught with a scrunched up face. In the yard we played games like darts and hula hooping. Mum had brought my brother a special surprise. It was the Clown Uncle, a 'close friend' she said and winked. He had come round with a sack filled with toys and strange tricks and a large water squirting gun. He had a military hat and uniform on and his face was doused in white paint with upturned evil-red lipstick and a silly oval nose. He grunted a lot. He chased us

around in the yard like dogs do. He reminded me of someone. I didn't remember who.

When things got quieter I went back into the house and Clown Uncle was there smoking a cigarette. He asked me to sit on his knee. I liked the clown so I sat on him and bounced around. He slid me off and on his lap. We were both laughing. He had something hard attached to one of his legs.



He told me to show him where the toilet was. I took him up the steep stairs. He held my hand. He asked me to go in with him saying he was scared of the dark. I stared as he urinated. I saw his piss shooter. He asked me to pet it. I took it in both hands and rubbed it like he showed me how to. It got hard and red. It oozed white sticky stuff. He told me to lick off the ice-cream he had made me. It tasted of salt. I felt sick. He sat me on his knee again

only this time it was wet with the white stuff. He told me how beautiful I was and that he only wanted me, not the other children. He held my legs apart and began to rub where I wee from. It felt nice but I was afraid. I wanted my mum. They were all outside making a noise. I thought I should be quiet as no-one would hear me anyway. He started to feel around with other fingers searching for things. He opened me out wider.



He grunted a pig noise. He pushed his fingers into my body and I cried. Then I let him go on. He kept moving in and out, up and down. Then he moved his thing and tried to press it into me. It hurt. It was big and hairy and all the ice-cream was coming out again, oozing. He held my body like a little doll and moved me around fast and told me he had to do this because this is what clowns do to the biggest most clever girls. He called me a special little niece. He told me that this was our grown up secret that no-one must ever know or something bad would happen to my mummy. I nodded. He patted my head and pulled my knickers up. Then he went off down the stairs leaving me stood there.

The next time I saw Uncle he was surrounded by near-corpses with dementia. One of them was his wife who lay dying and senile in the hospital. I saw his large eyes protruding from behind big spectacles in shock. His eyes shone. He had the force of an army in him. He had a fine head of hair and big strong hands and thick bursting fingers. He didn't realise who I was at first but said I was a big smart lass. We watched the frail body of Auntie taking gasps of air with her long discoloured fungal toenails that made you want to wretch. Her face was gaunt and her eyes

stood out on stalks. She was entwined in sheets gasping to be set free of the cotton shroud. Her eyes leapt everywhere but upon yours. Lips tried to speak but mumbled rubbish. She was fed by Uncle from a small tub of vanilla ice-cream. He licked his lips impersonating her actions. He kept stroking her hair and face with his fingers. I watched him keenly. He was attending her like she was now a child, his favourite! I imagine being pressed against him on his knee whilst he inserts his stiff cock into me and rubs me. I think of him making me eat her out whilst she is in a state of undress and dying. I think of him showing her his little fuckers cunt so she can see the up and down of us. I watch her dying as I have sex. I cum when I know I am watching the dead.

He likes phone sex. He says when I visit him he will tie me up and fuck me hard and pretend I am a little girl. He wants to shave my pubic hair and put it in a locket so he can wank over it and think about my little cunt. He talks about making babies and of me being his other wife, his child-fuck. He tells me he will take me to the bathroom and abuse me. He will stick his cock in my little knickers. He will suck my little tits. He will fuck me on the cold sink. He wants to rub me for hours and not let me

eat. He wants to fuck my mouth and ass as much as he pleases. He wants me to pretend I am a docile girl and that he has come to make me laugh again and feast his eyes upon my wet clit. I tell him he is a pervert. He laughs. I tell him he is a paedophile. He laughs. He tells me he played with his brother for years in their late teenage years. He laughs. He talks of wanting to fuck most people in the family but in the

end chose me. He keeps telling me I am special to him. He wants to make me laugh. He does. Clowns do. He wants to make me cum again and again. He wishes he had raped me more and made me his little sex toy forever. I see embellished in the pit of his skin the white worn face paint and see the cherry-red piggy nose as he continues to grunt and wank off down the phone.





GRASSHOPPER

By Claudia Bellocq

Photos © Guttersaint & Lydia Lunch

The woman sat gazing blankly upon the creature she had just birthed. It confused her. Women were supposed to give birth to forms that at least resembled their own basic genetic construct but this wriggling thing in front of her defied all logic or reason. The creature had emerged looking like some strange straw coloured amoeba with multiple 'limbs', a clear gelatinous sperm

like head and the beginnings of a rudimentary personality. It had rapidly transformed into a grasshopper with a baby's head; some small relief that there was at least one part of it that resembled either her, or her human form at least?

She was mad as hell and looking for someone to pay. There was no way she was taking this one on

alone. Someone had impregnated her knowing that their own gene pool was contaminated, there could be no other explanation and she knew exactly who it was.....

Claudia strutted across the path to the University canteen. She was gunning for some pay back here; her sensory stimulators were on full tilt as she sniffed him out. She spotted him in the queue for dinner standing next to a good looking Japanese woman in a short white dress and high heeled tan sandals. Typical! He was working his charm on her and she recognised it so well; she could smell the pheromones from here. She knew from her innate sensory programming that two things were going on here:

1). His cock was dribbling a clear pre-ejaculate fluid that meant he was eager and fully aroused by the woman beside him, and

2). The woman's panties were damp and she was equally aroused, though feigning only moderate interest on a purely professional basis right now. Her smell told Claudia that her interest went beyond the professional.

Strangely, and somewhat reassuringly, there was a third smell she was picking up, a kind of burnt metallic odour that she

recognised as the tiniest hint of fear. He was aware of Claudia, though not because he could see her or knew she was there, but simply because he feared her, full stop. Good...it would make her job so much easier...

Claudia stepped back a little, she didn't want to be seen; this was too good to miss. He postured in ways she knew so intimately; looked the woman direct in the eye when speaking, responded well and with full engagement to her professional assessments of their work, smiled broadly intermittently (though not too often lest she think he was not taking her seriously) and his body language matched his desire to get to know her more. The bastard! Claudia knew where her own strengths lay and she was letting this one play out in order that she could punish him appropriately later. She hung back and continued observing him.

Closer now, he sat beside her at the table, eating heartily whilst the woman, conversely, picked at her food, shoving it restlessly around her plate; distracted. The man gathered momentum now, sensing he was in control. He was nodding vigorously in response to something she was saying and the woman flushed. Over her shoulder the man was watching another woman in the queue;

tight red sweater, knee length black skirt, red heels, the kind of look he found irresistible. The Japanese woman turned to follow his gaze and in that moment, he lost her. She had seen the other woman and had she retracted her interest almost instinctively, wounded by the generic desire she clearly represented. She made her excuses and left. The man silently cursed his own carelessness and stood up to go and find a place outside where it was still possible to smoke.

Claudia made her move....

"Hi baby....fancy running into you here," as she looked him square in the eye.

He flinched; coloured as red as the woman he'd been sitting with ten minutes earlier and casually focussed his attention on lighting his cigarette. He inhaled deeply.

Claudia detected a new smell...the stink of sweet submission.

"Busy?"

"No, not really princess....you?"

"Well you know, here and there, this and that" she responded vaguely. "I have something I need you to see" she said, "come with me!"

Unable to refuse her, he stood on the burning butt of his cigarette and ran to catch her up. Claudia, already clear about where she was taking him and in no doubt whatsoever that he would follow her, was striding across the car park to a small dark outbuilding in a woody copse in the University grounds.

She opened the door and beckoned him inside. Taking a moment to adjust his eyes to the dark, damp room, he looked at her quizzically....

"What is it baby? What do you want to show me?" he asked, trying to add just the right amount of charm in with his naturally submissive tendency whenever he was in her presence.

She turned on him, a cold vicious glare in her eyes. Glinting, cruel? Definitely enraged....

"You bastard!" she spat, "what the *fuck* is this?" as she pushed a small box toward him with her spike heel.

He gazed into the dirty card box to see it lined with an equally grubby frayed old blanket, on top of which lay some weird chirping creature with a grasshopper's body and the head of a human child.

“Jesus Claudia...sorry....I never realised....”

“No, well get this fuckwit...it’s all yours. I’m not cut out to be a mother and certainly not to some hybrid freak of nature orchestrated by your perverted desire to fuck anything with a pulse. Tell me...exactly when did you start fucking (insects)?”

“uh....”

“Listen, don’t bother right. Not interested. Why don’t you just step over here to me and assume the position baby;” a demand rather than a question.

G. fell to his knees at her feet and bowed his head in natural deference to her superiority...



THE EYES OF VICTORIA CRAVEN

By Max Dunbar

The sun's almost up but there's another three hours of this shift to go. From my rooftop vantage I can trace the scattered lights from Briggate almost up to Elsix. It's June and looking like we're gonna get a proper summer this year. My short-sleeved Boss shirt is limp with sweat, and it's so humid you can practically chew the air.

You're in theory able to crash out on the nightshift, but no one ever does: there's so much going on, fighting and fucking and all sorts, and even on a relatively reasonable night the noise from DVDs and Playstations and clandestine conversation renders sleep a distant dream. So I'm in that pleasant zone on the other side of insomnia and don't recognise the voice when it raps out: 'E'ya! Winterbourne!'

I spin around, one hand on the air rifle I keep in the knee pocket of my Carnage combats, only to see a grinning Ty Taylor, hands on hips and visibly amused by my discomfort. 'Eh J, calm it, mate! We're best buds, remember?'

'Shee-it, nee-grow,' I tell him in my best Baltimore. 'You got the gear or haven't you?'

'Sho', brother.' I can never tell if he's putting on the accent for ironic effect or if he really wants to sound like this. The little guy seems smarter than your average resident so probably the former. A local authority in South Yorkshire paid our company a good deal of money to take Ty off their hands.

He hands me a thick, bound wrap. I look it over in a sceptical way but it's probably all there. Ty is a decent lad considering that he's a) a service user and b) non-white. 'Let's see d'green.'

I hand over two hundred quid in twenties. 'How was your night, pal?'

'Alright. Down the Glasshouse, did some MDMA powder, still fu' en buzzin off it la. You?'

'Quiet. Bear was self-harming again, about one. Drove her to the A + E, persuaded them to keep her in for observation so

that's her off our hands for the rest of the night. Maybe they'll section the silly bitch.'

'I could never get that lucky.'

Ty doesn't like Bear. She occupies the room next to his and is always causing a ruckus. Bear is a nineteen-year-old who's ended up here after going through three schools, four foster homes and a PRU. She's always starting big commitments with the abusive scumbag males in this residential care home and the surrounding satellite towns, then pitching hissy fits when they end in tears.

I make some coffee for the two of us and Ty invites me into his room to play computer games. I was never into that kind of thing as a kid, but Ty has got me addicted to *GTA Chinatown Wars*. It's a pleasant way to kill the end of the shift and I'm therefore not best pleased when my work mobile goes off halfway through a crucial mission.

It's Azad, the only other support worker on duty, letting me know that one of our residents has become stranded in the city after a night out and needs a lift home.

'I'm not sure I can do that,' I tell him. 'I'm with Tyrone Taylor and we're talking out some hard emotional issues that he's going through.' Ty, who is smoking a blunt and swaying to Kid British, giggles insanely. 'I can't leave a vulnerable resident on his own.'

'Look, John, stop fucking me about. My car's in for service and we've got a resident stuck three miles away with no money. Go out now.'

I'm about to tell him to go bone himself - I mean, if I wanted to take orders from an Asian, I'd work in a fucking corner shop. But curiosity makes me ask the girl's name.

'Victoria Craven? We don't have a Victoria Craven here.'

'We do as of today. Twenty oh-four eighty-nine, LCC referral, substance and behavioural issues. She's at the bus stop by the Corn Exchange.' He hangs up.

Victoria Craven. It's a familiar name. I feel a pulse in the head of my cock and I'm handing Ty my controller, complaining loudly about the number of residents who use the support staff as a free taxi service. I usually mean it

as well: if it was up to me, I'd leave the fuckers to get raped or knifed.

But - and I know it's just a name - Miss Craven sounds a little different.

Having enjoyed a full English in the residential canteen I am bombing out of the residential car park in my red Nissan, tearing through the hamlets and estates with the Chemicals' 'We Are The Night' blasting the nine-to-fivers off the road. At a traffic light I start drumming the wheel. I lose the beat and start laughing. A guy waiting in a Vauxhall gives me a concerned look from the adjacent lane. I give him a wink and a thumbs-up. Suddenly the man's dashboard fascinates him.

I always get like this after a nightshift: I love the expressions of the day staff on the forecourt, anticipation of the next twelve hours stamped into their faces, while I am racing towards the city, the city, and decent people, and expensive beer, and quality drugs, and Hellen's waterside apartment, where I use my key and tiptoe up the stairs and climb into her bed, silent as a lynx even as I slide inside her, and the first she knows of what's going on is

when she's awoken by the sheer visceral pleasure of having me bone her inside out.

'John, John, where, what, what are you *doing!*' she squeals in ironic submission, which turns into real loss of control as I pound in for the kill. She screams as she comes and then I come too and I'm zoning out here while she's asking me about the shift and stroking my hair and kissing my face.

I'm crashed until late afternoon, then Hellen's patience runs out and she wakes me up, letting me know that we're meeting Dave and Selina in Dr Wu's at eight. Naturally it will take her several hours to get ready. Women. Not that I'm complaining. This cow is a team leader in debt consultation and not only does she have that whole powerdressed thing going on, she's fucking rich and doesn't mind subsidising a public servant of my calibre.

It's eight thirty by the time we get down Call Lane. Dave seems interested in my job and is asking me loads of questions about the recession and how it affects supported housing.

'Well, the last ten years, we've been throwing money at these people under the anticipation that somehow they'll change.' I take an authoritative swig of my pint. 'That approach clearly hasn't worked, youth crime, teenage pregnancy, all these things have gone up. The welfare state's not only wrong, it's now unsustainable.' Dave nods with vigour over his pint of Unicorn.

'What we're seeing now is the handing over of the welfare state to various religious charities and private companies. This is presented as something new but it's actually a return to the good old Victorian days where social welfare was carried out by the churches and the workhouses. It's time to face up to the fact that the underclass deserves nothing more.

'Either that or we go with my plan. Voluntary sterilisation. We give these chav scum a one-off payment, say a grand, to get their tubes tied. I guarantee most of them would go for it. Sort every social problem within a generation.'

Dave asks more questions - he's a boring man, works for the housing allocation team, and he's

only deferential to me because of what I've got on him. I have no interest in work while I'm there, I never did, so why the fuck would I want to talk about it on nights out?

It gets so tedious that I'm forced to duck into the toilets for lines. Hellen sees the signs and demands some change. I insist that she sneak me into a female cubicle where we fire back a couple more lines and do a couple pills, Hellen's thick tongue dropping the tab into my throat and curling around my own, and by the time we hit Rehab I am absolutely flying.

Loads a fit birds in this club checking me out whenever I go to the bar for drinks - I'm six two, and still tanned from the Far East. Hellen has to squeeze out a couple of club whores on the dancefloor, as well as fending off the standard unwanted advances from average frustrated twats. To be honest I'm tempted to get a couple of numbers or maybe a blowjob in some cubicle but it's just not worth the risk, I need Hellen's apartment and her cash else it's back to Elsix with me.

We leave kind of early and spend the rest of the night doing coke in

Hellen's apartment. I remember me and Dave doing impressions of Richard Quest from News 24: *Oh my GOD we're seeing some HOT MARKET ACTION HERE!* And walking along the riverside with glasses of wine in our hands, wanting to touch the water, and at the same time feeling excluded, insignificant, almost irritated by the beauty of the night, and then raw and humid coked-up sex in the bedroom, my tongue sobbing with the thirst, taking a pint of milk and downing it in one, and this tune in my head: *Can you di-ig it, oh yeah... can you di-ig it, oh-yeah...*

I've fucked residents before, in other places I've worked at, but none of them affected me like Victoria Craven. What happened, that time when I had to go pick her up, was that I pulled into the Corn Exchange car park and walked over to find a group of working-class teenage sluts, being circled by scum pillheads at the D corridor. Even with my gym-toned frame and air rifle, I felt afraid – and not just because I was outnumbered.

The bitch came as soon as I called her name and we walked back to the car. You could tell she was up

for it on first meeting, she had that whole flirty-confrontational thing going on, but flirting back is a schoolboy error: you have to keep it cool and professional, with the underclass beauties more than anyone.

'So I've not seen you before.'

She had her hand on one stocking and a teasing look on that pointy, panelled face, but I wasn't biting – not yet. 'Look, Victoria, I'm going to say this once, and only once. We're not here to pick you up from nights out. We're not cab drivers. We're professionals and when I have to do this I'm taking time out from residents who need our help. Got that?' Fixing her with a hard stare. She stared back for a while and then dropped her eyes.

'Because if this happens again, you're grounded.' Any other resident would have laughed at this: we don't have the power to physically keep people in the home.

So now when I'm back for the Sunday night shift she's hanging around; my indifference has provoked her interest. Sunday shift is generally a quiet one – there's no activities or courses

going on, and so us support workers sit in the rec room doing paperwork and playing Xbox.

I work with the usual public sector drones, except that the guys here tend to be more druggy and laid-back than most frontline staff. There's a couple of pillhead women in their thirties, Jules and Lauren, who I sometimes run into at Rehab or Call Lane. There's this black cunt, Yoshi, who seems to be living out some kind of popular-kid fantasy, there's Azad who's team leader and a couple of queers whose names always escape me. Not worth my time really, although Jules and Lauren have been good for the odd shag.

'Hi, John.'

I look up from the desk and she's there, rotating with great, lazy strokes on a swivel chair, all made up and one hand on a stockinged kneecap. 'Hi, Victoria. What's up?'

'Do you have a girlfriend, John?' She's taken the trouble to find out my name.

'That's not really any of your business, Vicki.'

'Come on.'

'Look, do you have a reason for wanting to speak to me? Cause I'm snowed under here,' I gesture to the paperwork, 'and I don't have time for idle gossip. Got that?'

'Well, then,' she says with an exaggerated flounce, 'I know when I'm not wanted!'

After she's gone, Azad pulls me up. 'John, I appreciate you're busy, but you need to be more approachable to the residents. They need to think of you as someone they can talk to.'

'Yeah, but she's asking me a personal question that crosses our boundaries,' I rap out.

This starts the predictable debate about what's appropriate and what's not. It's so dull that I get back to the incident forms: you have to fill one of these out every time you pick up a resident, believe that, and as for claiming the petrol, it's a fucking nightmare. Being an unsung frontline hero ain't all it's cracked up to be.

The week's loaded with dayshifts. I'm teaching smack

addicts how to make casserole. Jules and I are leading the out-and-about group to the Imperial War Museum. I'm helping a pregnant fourteen-year-old fill out child benefit forms. Bear comes back from the Northern General and immediately gets into this shag scene with a twentyish guy who's here after he got thrown out at his last foster home for getting a little too friendly with his younger stepsister. We have to call the police out for the third time this week, after one of the residents tries to rape Lauren. Not worth it, I could a told him.

Hellen works long hours during the week and so I'm confined to the Otley Road houseshare, barely there except to sleep, masturbating again - it's always been a point of pride with me that I don't need to, I can get sex like *that*, except that my girlfriend is too tired during the week to be of use and Miss Craven has started to close in. That languorous *hiya* in the corridors. The scattershot personal questions: *Where do you live, John? How old are you, John? Do you have a girlfriend, John?*

Tuesday she asks me to help her fill out an application for social

housing. This is an excellent idea: get her out the care home as soon as possible, so I can go round and fuck her as needed without compromising myself at work. I sit her down in the IT room and we do the application over two excruciating hours, during which she brushes her fingernails against my thigh and asks basic clerical questions in that girly-girl voice. It's worth it though. This is the approach I should have taken from the start. Set up a satellite system of council houses, each one containing a dripping, painted *poblana*. King of the underclass.

I'm discussing this with Ty in the Comfort Inn. I've just done an eight-eight and he was heading into town to spend his dealer's income so I gave the kid a lift. Well against protocols, especially as he's not old enough to drink, but it's good to have an ally among the residents.

'Yea, she seem well into you, man.' His expression outweighs the experience of every other man in this bar. 'Gonna go for it?'

'Of course not. It's an abuse of authority. I'll report her if she says anything like that again.'

'What'll Azad do, put her on a verbal warning?' He sniggers.

'Fuck knows. Where'd the hell that idea come from, that Asians are good at business. Someone should tell him that we ain't running a fucking corner shop here.' Ty is sniggering like a bastard. 'Besides, she ain't really into me. She's just bored. Like the cool girls at school... they'd flirt with you in the lessons, but not cause they were into you, just to kill time...'

'Eh?' Ty says. He doesn't have that reference point (not having *been* at school since he was twelve) and I move the discussion on to something else, feeling the room come into sharp focus around me and clearing my head with a shake.

This was all to give myself an alibi in case the bitch told one of the support staff when I finally did fuck her - she was less likely to be believed if I had it on record that she'd made advances before and been rejected. The little tart had probably been around the block a few times. My first line of defence: I was not even her first lover.

For, make no mistake, I did end up doing her, on the double weekend nightshift. Naturally, Friday and Saturday being our worst nights, there was only myself and Azad on staff, and Azad spent all his time playing *World of Warcraft* in his on-call room up floor twelve, terrified as ever of having to interact with an actual service user.

So it was fairly quiet when the slut rolled in at three, off her head on aftershocks and Christ knows what else, and as ever I acted the weary disciplinarian, forcing her to drink black coffee in the communal kitchen. 'Hey, I'm sorry, John... I mean, what the hell, it's Saturday... thanks for taking care of me...'

I shook my head. 'You're not entitled to drink, Victoria, and you're gonna be rough as houses tomorrow, I'll tell you that much. Plus, you're doing yourself serious long-term damage.'

'For fuck's sake, John, no one calls me *Victoria*.' Flicking her hair back, earrings bobbing, tits quivering against the thorax: if you think lust is less powerful than love, that biological desire can't give you that feeling of

choked ice in the throat, then you're wrong.

I forced more coffee down her - because I prefer them sober, I like them to understand exactly what's happening. We smoked a couple of cigarettes on the roof balcony and she babbled on about girl stuff: music, clubs, her crazy ex who was in Wakefield for GBH, her crazy dysfunctional family, complex vendettas with other residents and birds from her last school. Then she was like: 'Thanks for taking *care* of me, John,' and brushing up against me, kissing me full on the mouth.

About half a second later we're in her room and my hands around her waist and there's this look in her eyes, half wild with lust, but also afraid, the realisation that this is where cockteasing can lead you, that it's too late now, this is my true form and she looks her age for the first time and I'm cranking up the Girls Aloud CD, then the Beyonce one, as I fuck her to bits and then bend her over for a spanking. I admit I got a bit carried away. Once I'd come for the fifth time there was the urge to run but I fought it and stuck around, making more coffee, getting a joint and a conversation

going, leave the situation with a patina of normalcy.

I had done seven straight shifts and sailed on to a week of TOIL. The first couple of days were spent catching up on my sleep in Hellen's flat. In the evening we'd watch *Britain's Next Top Model* and *The Apprentice* over bottles of Shiraz. Exactly what you need, but I kept thinking Craven. It's strange for me because I don't usually take my work home.

My main accomplishment is to phone Dave's mobile and get him to expedite Miss Craven's housing application. He points out that she's adequately housed and doesn't merit additional points for pregnancy, vulnerability etc. I point out that I still have copies of his bank statements from a couple of years back. He says that he will sort a tenancy within the next week.

Friday night's nothing special: another coupla bottles and a DVD of *In Bruges*. Saturday I'm itching to get out, but Hellen's not up for it as she's spent the day working on a report. I'm talking myself into another night in, work looming tomorrow, when my council mobile goes off.

It's Vikki Craven, asking if I want to meet her for a drink. The sight of her text-talk, all those 2s and 4s, brings that jolt in the shaft again, and I immediately text back. We arrange a time and I tell Hellen that I'm going out with some of the lads. It's a blatant lie - shift workers have few friends outside the organisation. But she waves me off with an indulgent smile.

I flag a cab up to Millennium Square. It's where all the Ben Sherman scum and the working class binge drinkers hang out and normally you wouldn't catch me dead here. But I'm not passing up another shot at Miss Craven: I'm thinking a couple of drinks, then book her into the Novotel, back by two after having boned her to pieces. *Come on.*

She wants me to meet at a chain bar opposite Creation. Soon as I'm in there I get a text: she's in the smoking area outside. I'm across the floor, slavering, and out in the night air, taking gulps of my pint, feeling that crescendo of lust in my heart, and the voice comes out: 'Are you John Winterbourne?'

And I'm thinking: did I give her my number?

I turn and there's a black guy. He has three inches on me and a good few stone. I take the punch before I see it. I'm guessing that I've been set up and that this is an older brother or ex of Victoria Craven, come to avenge what passes for the slut's honour. He has a couple others with him and they haul me out into the layby, shouting names in my face - paedo, faggot, cunt.

I take a couple more blows to the face, a couple of kicks to the ribs, but then I get a free hand and thank fuck, the air gun is still in my jacket and I've got it out and firing, I don't think I'm hitting anyone but it has the effect of creating enough space to run, which is all I'm interested in. I don't stop until I'm on Call Lane.

I stagger in at seven am and don't make it upstairs before I fall asleep. It's just as well as Hellen is none too pleased when she tumbles me off the sofa at ten.

'Where were you last night?'

'I told you, I was out with the lads.'

'Which lads, exactly?'

The truth is that I met a few of my old housemates down Call Lane and we ended up pilling it at the West Indian Centre, of all places. 'People I lived with. Harry Moulton. Spinny Tom. Dave, Dave was there -'

'Really? Because Selina was texting me that night and she made it very clear that Dave was with her.'

'Well, not *that* Dave, obviously.'

'Give it a rest. You've been miles away this past two weeks. You've been seeing someone else and I want this sorted out.'

She's there in her dressing gown, hands on hips. I deny, shout and finally plead but it's no good. The upshot: I am to leave the flat until Hellen's 'had a chance to think about things'. We are on a trial separation.

So I'm packing my laptop, stereo, clothes, the works into the back of the Nissan. There is nowhere to go except the residential centre and my shift doesn't start until eight. I tear up the hill and leave my car in the car park. I go in through the fire escape, sneak along the corridors until I find

my on-call room and lock the door behind me.

For the next few hours I'm slaloming through various states of consciousness, thinking about the assault - because if my attacker knew about Vikki and me, probably everyone knows. That's the thing: women talk, particularly working-class women, and the hard part is to get the little whores to keep their fucking mouths shut. It's possible the management of this place have already heard, and that could mean I could lose the job.

But:

Last year Jules hid a convicted robber in her house for three days.

In 2007 Azad parlayed a broken wrist into eight months' paid sick leave.

Three years ago Dave transferred four grand ringfenced for youth activities into his personal bank account.

In 2006 Lauren ran up several thousand pounds for nights out in work taxis and text messages on work phones.

Last Christmas Gerry was found smoking crack with four naked residents on the east wing.

Against all that, fucking a sixteen-year-old don't look that bad, especially considering that I'm only twenty-three. So it's in high spirits that I leave my room at nine that evening. I take a shower, thankful that the recent assault hasn't left a mark on my face - though it can hurt to shift position, and there's a scar on my cheekbone that kills when it's traced.

First I need to question that Craven slut about who she's told. My shaft tingles as I take the stairs two at a time, figuring that a little discipline never hurt, but when I get to her room it's empty - and I mean stripped bare, no Leeds Utd pennant or Creation flyers or cuddly monsters.

I wander down to the rec room, thinking: how do I find her? And: what has she said? Azad and Jules are in there, and there isn't that prickly silence as I enter - which means I'm probably in the clear. But how do I ask about Craven without drawing suspicion?

Azad solves that problem for me. 'Oh, John, we transferred a resident out a here when you were off. She's on the Federation Estate in Burley now.'

Not bad. Dave came through okay. 'Christ, that's a quick allocation.'

'Too right. Anyway, she left a card to say goodbye.'

'Cheers pal.'

Believe it or not, our ex-residents do occasionally present tokens of gratitude. We get letters from ex-gangsters and NA veterans doing sports sessions in Fallowfield and motivational stand-up in Haringey schools. There's nothing suspicious about my getting a card in and of itself, and I begin to think I've got away with this. *Come* on. I get onto the roof balcony and tear up the envelope; now all I need is the bitch's address.

The smell of the envelope and the lush girlish calligraphy give me in the horn. There is nothing good about the message, though:

Dear John, thx so much for not givin up on me and for sorting out my house. Yr gona love it babe. I got

some big news for u - I am PREGNANT!!! U r gonna b a daddy and that means I need some cash soon as. Dont even mention abortion or try to run away - my bros are big lads they are part of I don't know if u heard of them the Fitzwilliam Cravens and they r good at findin peeps so its best for both of us if u stick around. THAX FOR EVERYTHIN SEXXY!!!

XXXXXXXXXX

PS I need £500 in this bank acc no by July or u are dead!

PPS XXXXXX!!!

Craven. The Cravens. The Selfridges armed job last year. I knew I'd heard the name.

I sit down. It feels heavy. Thinking how I'm gonna get away from that conniving, whorish, fucking bitch... God, I knew she was bright, but I never realised -

'Ey, Winterbourne.'

Ty Taylor stands over me. He appears to be pointing a gun at my head.

'What's up, Ty.' I keep my voice free of inflection.

'You think you can get involved without getting involved. You think you can pick and choose without getting involved.' His voice is a different species from the ironic patois we normally use. His eyes are older and wiser than any I've ever seen.

'It was me set you up in town last night, not Vikki. Just to give you a taster of what could happen if you don't do things my way.'

Discreetly I'm feeling in my jacket for my work mobile. No, it must be back in the on-call room. We're way out of range of the window.

'You think you can just do our drugs and shag our birds without having to pay the price.'

I'm looking at his gun. It's like my air rifle, illegally modified to fire bullets. I say: 'Anything, Ty. Tell me what to do and I'll do it.'

He wants me to deal for him. He wants me to hold things for him. He wants me to get things for him. He says: 'There are gonner be some changes around here.'

I feel very small and very young.



BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE; UGLY SOULS

By dixē flatlin3

Photos © Sid Graves

Eve loved gay men. Always had and always would. However, this scene at the church was completely freaking her out. Having only spent a few minutes in the sacred walls of the place she had been schooled on the

ways of the “Order of the Cocksuckers of Perpetual Hell.” The man in the nightgown was named Simon. He had indeed been a Catholic priest in the not so distant past. He was excommunicated when he was

caught smoking meth and fucking a teenage parishioner. "I had my cock up his ass and a glass cock in my mouth!" Simon had exclaimed from his throne as he told Eve the story. Eve was simply transfixed by the entire thing. Never in her life had she met a real-life pederast priest. Let alone a cross-dressing, excommunicated, drug-addicted and dealing one! It was like hitting the absurdity jackpot and she fucking loved it. It was simply too awesome to believe. Eve sat near mute just taking in the horrific assembly of characters in the astonishing display of true evil. She felt much like poor Alice when she was forced to have tea with the Mad Hatter and his crew. Yet Eve refused to drink the kool-aid with them. She knew Ken was off in a confessional smoking dope and likely getting blown by a pseudo altar boy. Simon was equally as fascinated with Eve. Mostly because her name was Eve and she was "so very far from the Garden of Eden." When she had declined the glass pipe handed to her she was quickly given a massive communal goblet filled with what she hoped was merlot. "You're not like the other hood rats Ken has dragged in here from the gutters" Simon stated. Eve could not get over how very

priestly he still was. Even in this ridiculous get-up. Which she had to admit was not quite as pompous as typical clergy attire. Though not Catholic, her paternal extended family was Roman Catholic. Irish Catholic. Kicking it old school. She'd always been fascinated by the "smells and bells" as her friend called it. Simon was looking at her as he exhaled a huge amount of toxic smoke, politely away from her she noted. "You need to play with us Eve! Follow me" and with that they were off, walking between the pews. Eve noticed there were what looked like rubber ducks floating in the font toward the entrance. She swirled the red liquid around in the goblet wishing it were indeed laced with something a bit stronger.

Tami was out of her mind and in a complete blind rage. She could think of no worse a fate than what she was currently being subjected to. Stuck in this tiny, middle of nowhere wasteland yet privy to watch all the machinations of her former life online. Social networking was more a curse than a blessing at moments like this. Sure, she was completely lurking about and monitoring activities from afar. No crime in

that. Only the ignorant believed their actions online to be private. If there was one thing Tami knew it was computers. Her ex husband had been a total black hat cowboy. She had learned all she could from him prior to the Feds kicking down their door and seizing all their equipment. Tami had simply played dumb. The authorities did not expect her to know much. He was the brains of the operation and they knew it. She was actually surprised Ken was still using the laptop she had given him right before she left. Too stupid or lazy to realize there were trace programs installed. The key logger had provided her with valuable information.

However, it was all biting her in the ass at the moment. While she preferred to have the upper hand in matters such as this, sometimes knowing as much as she did was infuriating. In real-time she was watching him lure in this woman and he was using the exact same script he had used on her! The audacity of this fucking loser astounded Tami. She wanted to reach out to this poor woman but knew it would be counter-productive. The female bitch competitive gene would kick in and her words would fall on deaf

ears. Or Ken would weasel his way out of it. Like he always had with her. Tami had presented him with over 100 pages of hard copies of emails and IM transcripts of incriminating evidence. And somehow he had diffused that bomb and got her to suck his cock by the end of the night. Tami suddenly felt her cheeks flush hot with anger.

She picked up the ashtray immediately in front of her and hurled it against the wall. The crashing of the glass woke up the baby. "Fuck!" she screamed. She threw herself onto the second-hand couch and began to sob. She had trusted him. She knew better, but she had. She had let him inside of her when she should not have. When her womb was still raw from giving birth he had come inside of her. During the act she could actually feel him defiling her. Exposing her to his disease and his sickness. Taking it all in, wallowing in the misery and agony of this fucked up quandary. What man in his right mind would treat the woman who had just borne his child this way? And yet, there she lay, his putrid cock pounding away at her raw soul and body. Wishing quite vividly she were dead and

profoundly realizing that she quite likely was inside.

On the drive back from their lovely evening out, Kaitlyn could tell that Angel's mood was souring. She wasn't exactly sure why but it likely had to do with his missing shit. He was quiet, too quiet. She had tried to make small talk but quickly realized it was futile. When Angel was like this it was best to just shut the fuck up and leave him alone. Staring out the window thoughts of her family came to mind. It had been several weeks since she had stopped by. Rumor had it she had been reported as missing. Which made Kaitlyn smirk. Fucking cops would never find her. No hood rat would dare tell what he or she knew. Not even that poor fuck Angel had beat within an inch of his life would tell and he was a firefighter! She thought about Paula and what a disgusting pig of a woman she truly was. She had walked in on Angel fucking Paula up the ass one evening as another guy stuck his cock in her mouth. Kaitlyn had simply grabbed the dope and retreated back to the computer room. A quick update to her profile had alerted all D-Town losers that Paula would henceforth be known

as finger-cuffs. To be especially nasty Kaitlyn had run back in and snapped a few pictures with her phone. Angel had not minded. He was always amused by Kaitlyn's random displays of cruelty. She had immediately sent one to Ken. Since he was one of the many people she had a score to settle with. This forage down memory lane made her smile, which did not go unnoticed by Angel. "What's so fucking funny?" he spat at her. Kaitlyn simply smiled at him, batted her eyes, and purred "Nothing papi, just thought of a funny cartoon from earlier that's all." Silently they continued down the barren terrain that separated Palm Springs from D-Town. The Badlands is what it was known as. A place where an abandoned roll of carpet in the desert was best left unmoved.

Ken opened his eyes just in time to see his come shoot all over the altar boy's face. Nothing gave him more satisfaction than adding blasphemy to sexual release. He had never known confessionals could be so much fun but truly understood how they had come to represent absolution. Shaking off his orgasm his mind suddenly focused on Eve. He had

completely forgotten about her and honestly had no idea how long it had been. He shoved the body in front of him out of the way and made his way down the hallway.

Randomly he encountered people and merely growled, "Where the fuck is she?" He could tell they were pointing but fucked if he could tell where their hands were pointing. The fear began to rise up in his chest and he fucking hated that. Never lose your cool was rule one of the streets. He had a reputation for being a badass and a heart breaker.

He'd be goddamned if he would lose his shit in a fucking church of all places. A mockery of the natural order in his opinion. How unfair it was that the angel who had fought back and refused subservience had been cast down. Good thing they had though. Without this event Ken might never have had encountered the being that changed his life forever. The shadow in the corner of room that had helped a shy, slightly slow child realize his full potential. Funny how we see things as a kid and have no idea it will affect our entire lives, Ken thought as he continued his hunt.

Eve had always reminded him of Alice falling down the damn rabbit hole. So completely out of place and yet oddly aware of the absurdity of her surroundings. She was funny that way. Always had been. Always would be. This he knew. He was hoping to simply keep her confused long enough to set his plan into motion. So far it was working. However, he could sense time was running out. She had become too complacent and turned his weakness for dope against him. The awareness that she could in fact be manipulating him sent Ken into a panic. Overturning candles on his way down the hallways he suddenly began to scream out "Where the fuck is she?" as he moved along his destructive path.

Eve looked up at Simon, who had changed into his full priestly regalia and she smiled. He had taken it upon himself to perform the rite to christen her into the order of the Cocksuckers of Perpetual Hell. Prior she had been stripped naked by several gay boys, bathed in holy water, and anointed with oils. From there they had draped her in the most sumptuous robes that were indeed a bona fide nun's habit. All the while she had a goblet full

of red liquid, still not quite sure what it was exactly but thinking that somewhere Ecstasy had been added to it. Eve didn't really mind the overpowering smell of roses either. Seemed appropriate for the desert. Fitting for the purpose and event in fact. Nor did the fading memory of the somewhat lingering hands that had prepared her. Cheap thrills had to be hard to find in this world, she thought? There was an actual ceremony taking place, that Eve was now a central figure in, even though she lacked the capacities to interact fully. Staring up at Simon, who looked rather authentic, she saw the huge crucifix bearing a defeated looking Christ upon it, and noted the halo of candle-light surrounding Simon's head as he spoke the words to canonize her. She couldn't really make out what he said but quickly realized it was in Latin. Motherfucker knows Latin! She thought to herself but managed to not giggle. Somehow Eve knew that she was meant to bow her head at this point of the script and did so. She realized she was curtseying in a manner that was known as the "Texas Dip." No idea how she knew this, but she did. Simon bestowed around her neck a rather ornate looking

rosary and spoke a few more sentences in Latin. When his voice faded, Eve looked up and saw that he was smiling. "Arise now my love" he instructed taking her hand. As she stood up and turned around she was quite shocked to see the pews were now filled with various dope demons she had not before noticed. "Go out amongst the heathens and spread the word!" Simon commanded. "Go out and spread the word Sister Ardat Lili!" Eve was quite sure she heard the sounds of applause, or perhaps an organ? At the climax of which the rear doors burst open and Ken pushed his way into the sanctum. "What the fuck are you doing?" he shouted as he made his way up the aisle. "Why Monster, you missed it all! Wherever were you hiding?" Simon asked. That familiar lilt back now that Eve loved so much. Eve was not quite sure what had just taken place but she could tell from the aura of anger rising off of Ken that it wasn't to his liking. Which pleased her. Greatly. She suddenly burst into laughter, began jumping up and down shouting "Fuck yeah, I'm a fucking nun!"

After Ken had thrown Eve over his shoulder and hauled her off to

the car the remainder of the night was a blur. She recalled the colors and shapes as they moved by her but not necessarily what direction they were moving. The fact that Ken was driving her car did not even bother her much. Though her husband would be none too pleased by it. Ken had been ranting and raving about something but his words were drowned out by the cacophony of their voyage through the Badlands. Eve knew the demons she saw out in the distance were real, very real, which she choose to ignore, as usual. The ride came to an all-too-soon of an abrupt end in the driveway she had come to dread. Even in her drug addled state she would know this dead-end. No sooner had she recognized it than Ken was yanking her from the backseat. Still muttering something as he fumbled for the keys, Eve was relieved to see headlights illuminate them from behind. She turned around and began to wave at whatever idiot was making the drug circuit this evening.

Paula could not believe what she was seeing before her eyes. Ken was standing in front of his house with what looked to be a nun. Just as she had tilted her head to make

sure she wasn't hallucinating Paula noticed Ken rushing towards the passenger side of the car. She had asked someone at her house to make a buy for a ride. All it took was a tiny bit more dope in a sack and voila, insta-ride. Only bad thing was Ken didn't recognize the car and was likely to start punching things quickly. She realized this too late and was quickly pulled from the car by her hair. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he screamed as he slammed her onto the ground. He swung an iron bar across the windshield shattering it as he climbed across the hood to reach the driver. Paula had seen Ken be violent before, in fact his first use to her had been for hired muscle. But not like this. He was unhinged. She knew she had to do something and quickly to prevent him from seriously hurting the poor fool that drove her there. Thankfully the guy was too high to respond appropriately and kept his door locked. Paula ran up behind Ken and grabbed his arm just as he swung to break the driver's window. "You fucking cunt!" he screamed as he elbowed her full-force in the face. Paula saw stars and tasted blood immediately. She fell onto the sand, her hands instinctively

cupping her shattered nose. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted the dancing nun again and heard laughter over of the sound of the coarse motor grinding from the car's engine. Backlight by the headlights the sweat on Ken's body glistened in a way that made her wet. This happy thought was short lived as Ken was immediately raging back in her direction. "Who the fuck do you think you are?" he screamed, kicking up sand into her face. "How dare you just show up at my house after I have told you a million times to get fucked!" he spat. Paula knew full well she deserved this, but it cut deep. Every word rang true and sliced open her delicate psyche to the point she was afraid it would spill out into the rays of the headlights upon the sand in front of her. He grabbed her by the back of her hair and dragged her in front of the car "You are nothing more than a fucking sack whore Paula. I fuck you when I need something. You mean nothing to me!" he slammed her head first into the door before opening it. "If you so much as show that mutt face of yours around my house unannounced again I will bury you! Do you hear me?" he screamed as he pulled her up by

her arms and looked her dead in the eyes. Her heart was breaking and pounding simultaneously. The audacity of Ken to treat her so mixed with the overwhelming heartache caused by the sincerity of his words was simply too much for her. She knew she had to save face but just could not muster the strength to do so. Without warning she burst into tears, which only furthered her abject humiliation.

"Tears? Really? From you?" he mockingly laughed. "Get your tired ass into the car, go home, fuck some idiot, and wait until you hear from me." Ken ordered. She quickly got into the car, avoided catching a limb in the door as he slammed it shut, screaming "Get the fuck out of here!" to the driver. As the sight of Ken quickly faded as the car moved away and then east of the driveway Paula felt the familiar mixture of sorrow and rage well up. She did not know who the girl in the nun's outfit was but she would find out. And when she did there would be hell to pay.

Eve was loaded, for sure, but even in this state she was astonished by the spectacle that had just played out before her eyes. She almost

wished she were sober, just to relish the moment of Ken putting that bulldog in her place a bit more. However, she wasn't. In fact, she was dressed like a nun, smelled like a cheap whore, and wanted nothing more than to wrap her legs around Ken. There was just something primal about what he had just done. It could also be the Ecstasy, but she didn't really care. When he came back to the porch the first thing she did was wrap her arms around him and kiss him. He tasted of sweat and every muscle in his body pulsed with tension. She felt the firmness of his abdominal muscles against hers and felt his cock rise to the occasion. He reached down and deftly lifted her allowing her legs to wrap around his waist. Never missing a step he opened the door and carried her into the house. "Lock the door and fuck me," she whispered as she softly bit the lobe of his left ear. The guttural growl he emitted sent shivers down her spine. The taste of his salty sweat mixed with the grit of sand didn't even bother her. Without her feet ever touching the ground he had soon dropped his jeans and was slamming her into the railing of the stairs to the entryway. Eve knew the habit she

wore was more than a perverse thrill for him and she could tell by how quickly he came. Not to disappoint, he was almost immediately hard again and now ready for damage.

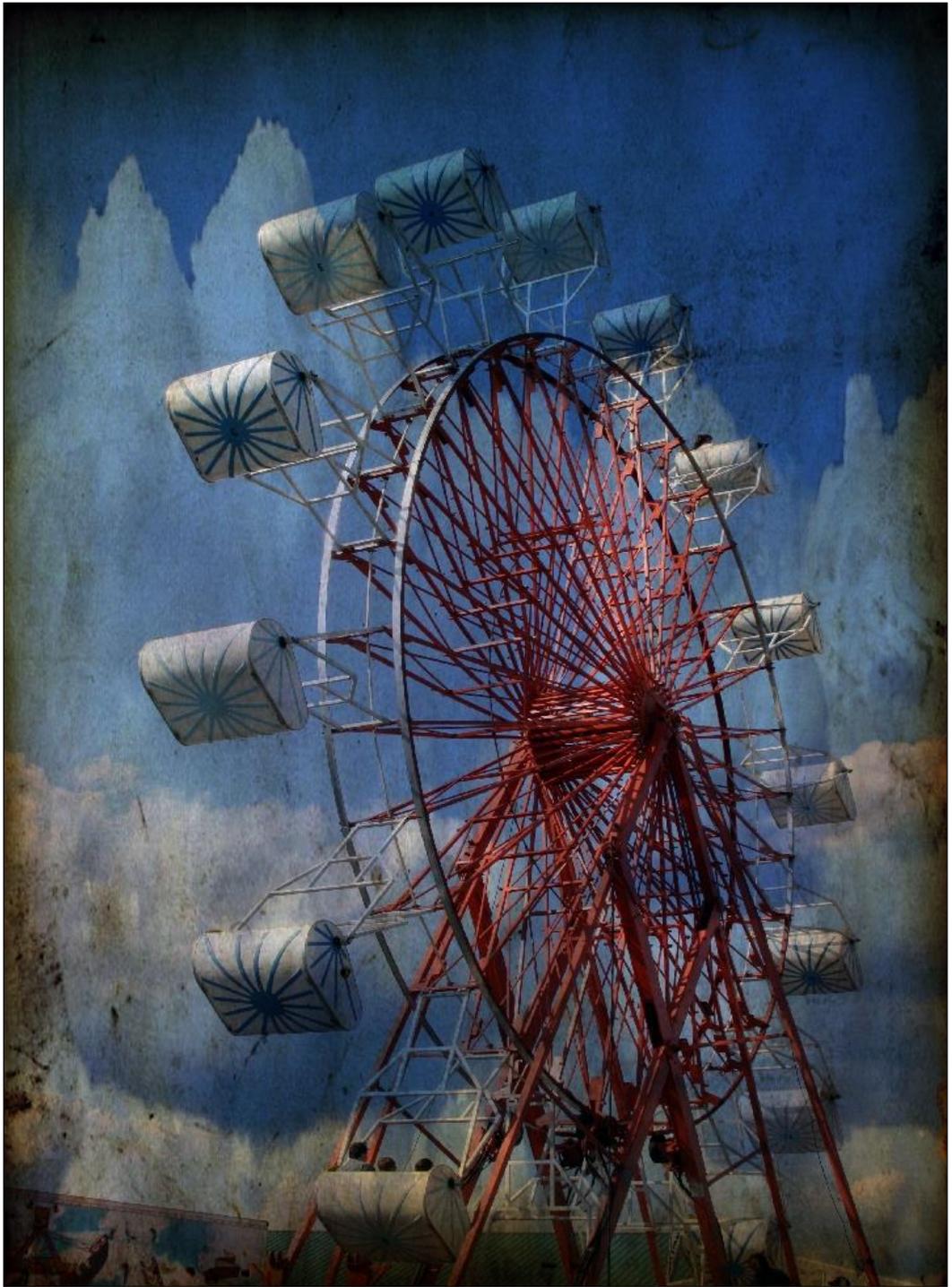
"You've been very bad and I am going to punish you" he informed her.

"Oh yeah, think you got what it takes to make me cry?" she inquired as she reached down and squeezed his balls. Ken laughed, pulled out, and immediately flipped Eve around. Pushing her up against a wall he reached for a roll of duct tape on the floor. "Yeah, I think I do." He replied as he forced a ball into her mouth and secured it with the first strip of tape.

Upon returning from their dinner adventure Kaitlyn was surprised by the amount of activity taking place at the house. Several of Angel's flunkies were running around with baseball bats, a few had guns. Angel immediately went into Alpha dog mode and ran down to his 'office' to get an update from his homies. Kaitlyn knew that if Angel found out the truth he would kill her. She quietly made her way back to the

room he kept her in and changed out of the dinner clothes. She quickly put on her favorite lounge clothes and focused on the computer. She wasn't allowed to communicate with anyone but he did allow her to use the Internet. Which helped alleviate the overwhelming sense of isolation she often felt. And these moments were few and far between. Angel was prone to snapping and taking it out on her. She knew at any moment he could walk in and do whatever he wanted to her. The thought made her wet. The first night Kaitlyn had spent here was bound and in service of several of his friends. It was Angel's way of letting her know her life was in his hands and that no one fucks him over and gets away with it. He made a point to let her know he had charged every man that fucked her \$300.00 because, as he put it, "How often do guys their age get a chance to fuck some underage pussy?" There had been a few other nights that included people

that paid Angel to fuck her. One was an older couple, oblivious that Kaitlyn knew their kids from school. The old man wanted to see a "sweet, young thing" eat his wife's pussy while he fucked her doggy-style. Kaitlyn had obliged. What choice did she have? There was enough dope in the room to make her do anything. Hell, she had even put her entire fist inside the bitch when she was down there and let the lady come all over her face. Eating pussy wasn't a big deal. Kaitlyn had done it lots of times before. Getting her face pounded into it whilst the old man balls banged against her ass had really gotten Kaitlyn off. It ended with her and the wife 69'ing. She did an amazing job licking Kaitlyn's clit while the husband slid his cock in and out. Kaitlyn came several times and didn't even mind that the guy came inside of her; since the wife did her best to get it all out. Only Kaitlyn was aware that the entire event had been covertly filmed. Angel was kinky like that.



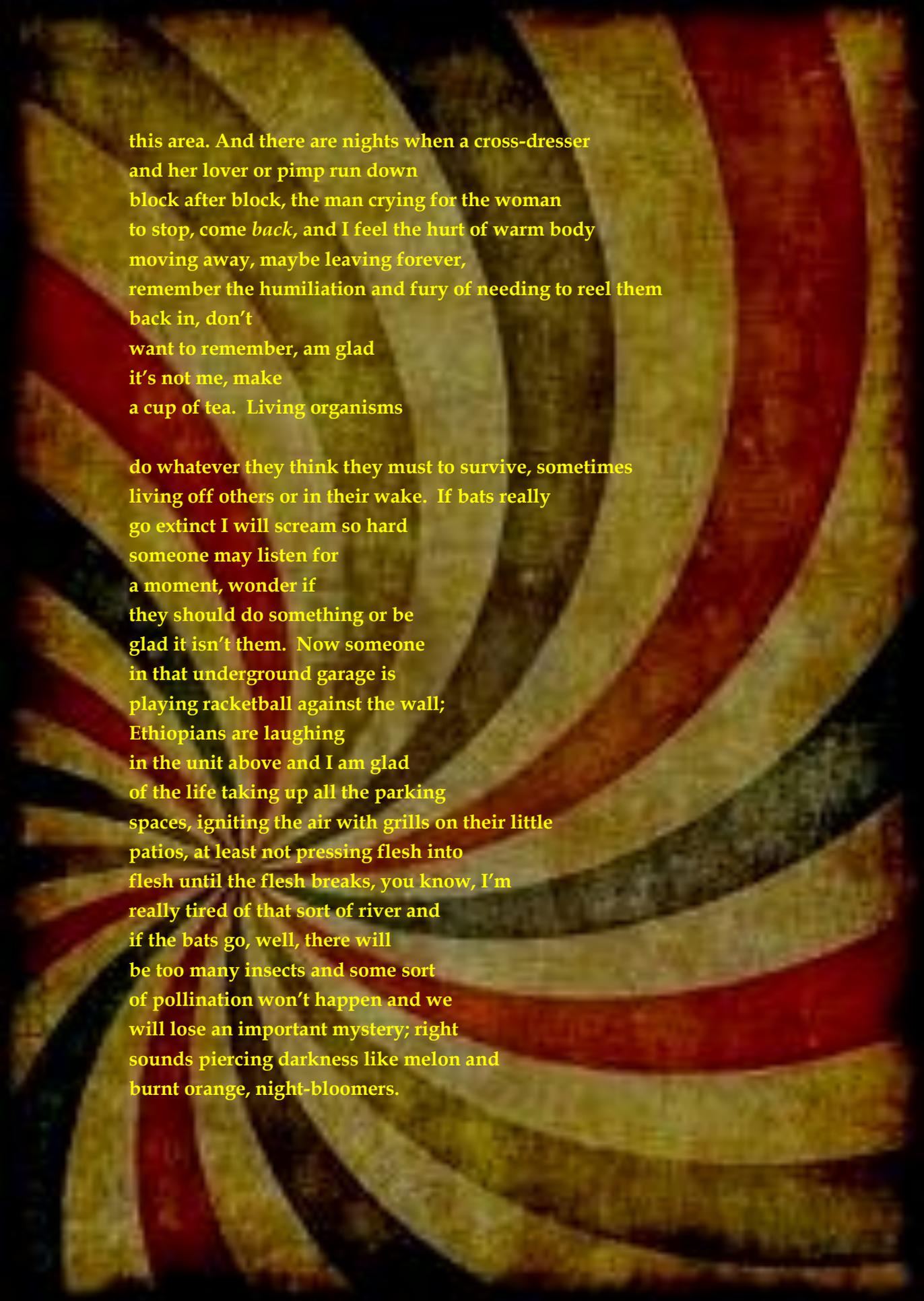
SCREAM

By Mary Leary

Tonight as I was pushing another packet of crackers
into the bright red tin
it bent in response,
a surprise, perhaps like that felt
by the men who kept using that woman's body
--which woman? you say - well, let's just leave it at
"her body," which opened and flowed
wetter, the men felt,
as a young couple with a blue BMW Cooper enjoyed
night-blooming jasmine, subtle scent of sleeping Sweet Peas
behind their charming mission-style home near the canyon where the
woman
managed to scream, at least
at first, when they forgot to cover her mouth
with their hands, before they belted her
and she just lay quiet. The couple

find it easier to like their Akita than people;
had just made gourmet pizza and were downing some micro-brews
around their backyard fire bowl. After they
put out the fire and went to bed the woman
sat bolt upright as if she had been struck or suddenly
remembered something, realized maybe she had heard
someone scream. One night

when a nearby apartment building was still empty
and people could get into the underground parking cells
I heard the echo of an ugly, anguished moan. Wished
I could do something. Thought of calling
the police, then remembered how they ignore



this area. And there are nights when a cross-dresser
and her lover or pimp run down
block after block, the man crying for the woman
to stop, come *back*, and I feel the hurt of warm body
moving away, maybe leaving forever,
remember the humiliation and fury of needing to reel them
back in, don't
want to remember, am glad
it's not me, make
a cup of tea. Living organisms

do whatever they think they must to survive, sometimes
living off others or in their wake. If bats really
go extinct I will scream so hard
someone may listen for
a moment, wonder if
they should do something or be
glad it isn't them. Now someone
in that underground garage is
playing racketball against the wall;
Ethiopians are laughing
in the unit above and I am glad
of the life taking up all the parking
spaces, igniting the air with grills on their little
patios, at least not pressing flesh into
flesh until the flesh breaks, you know, I'm
really tired of that sort of river and
if the bats go, well, there will
be too many insects and some sort
of pollination won't happen and we
will lose an important mystery; right
sounds piercing darkness like melon and
burnt orange, night-bloomers.

SCENES FROM IMAGINARY FILMS V - WEARY OF THE SUN

By David Gionfriddo

*Film has been the dominant medium in American culture since at least the mid-1960s. In the U.S., there are even isolated tribes of middle-aged men who communicate only in movie quotes ("But it looks good on you!" "Show me the money!") Much of our lives are spent in thrall to the filmmakers and their actors. But I find there are very few movies memorable from beginning to end. What stays with me are the indelible scenes, the important images: that last, long tracking shot in **Citizen Kane**; Michael Madsen's **Reservoir Dogs** torture dance; Catherine Deneuve inching down the corridor of hands in **Repulsion**; Cybill Shepherd's **Last Picture Show** diving-board striptease. These pictures are the building blocks of post-modern consciousness. Like family snapshots found in a junk drawer, these moments let us reconstruct entire stories, eras, lives. Some of us are all thumbs with the camera, however, so we are left to play with their literary equivalents. My scenes aren't meant to be beginnings, middles or ends. Consider my humble offerings a parlor game, simple party favors inviting you to dream your own stories, to invent new rewards, conflicts and tribulations for these very malleable characters. Have fun...*

INT. AUTOMOBILE - NIGHT

RAYMOND and MAEVE RANSOME, a married couple in their early 30's, drive down a dark and lonely country road somewhere in southern Virginia. Raymond is wearing torn jeans and a wife-beater t-shirt. His hair is greasy and unkempt, and he speaks with the jittery, vacant air of someone who has yet to clear out the cobwebs of sleep. His arm that guides the steering wheel is tattooed in an ornate sleeve of gears and wires. Maeve's hair hangs limply around her face and shoulders. Her striking green eyes are heavy-lidded and wear dark circles that stand out against her eggshell skin. Under her leather jacket, she nervously fingers a nickel Smith & Wesson snubnose .38, the kind of gun a family might keep for show. They act as though they are running from a crime already committed.

MAEVE

This is crazy. Just nuts. It's not too late...

RAYMOND

What did you think was going to happen? I'm already starting to get the feeling. You are, too. (Pause.) It's a little late for buyer's remorse.

MAEVE

Everything seems different now.

RAYMOND

Funny how that works, when you're not totally wrecked.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

The car moves, alone, through the undiscovered night. On one side of the road is a long-abandoned rust-over-Warwick-Blue Chevy Impala, whose windows are duct-taped plastic. On the other is a large, beaten-up sign for the Canyon Drive-In. The marquee, full of missing letters, advertises a long-ago, family-night double feature of *Christine* and *Pieces*. A dirt driveway leads into a field, overgrown with dandelions and littered with empty speaker poles.

INT. AUTOMOBILE - NIGHT

MAEVE

How do you feel?

RAYMOND

Like parboiled shit. Sorry, babe. My head feels like somebody soaked a wasp's nest in turpentine and lit it on fire. The rest of me just feels...empty...nothing beating, nothing moving, no juices sloshing around. Like I'm full of sawdust or something. What about you?

MAEVE

So light, but not in the good way. I feel weak, like I'm just going to float away. And my arms and legs are burning, like they're full of acid. Is that normal?

RAYMOND

Normal?

They ride on in silence.

MAEVE

What did the Monteros say last night? Did they say anything?

RAYMOND

Some crazy riddles. Something about leaving the world. Hearing things.

MAEVE

Yeah. "The music of tides." All I hear now is tinnitus. And the knocking of that engine. (Softly, apologetically.) Needs a tune up.

RAYMOND

(Sarcastically)

I'll put it on my "Honey Do" list. As soon as we get back home.

She leans her head on his shoulder.

RAYMOND

I know, Lamb. We're both a little tweaked. Let's just do this and see how it feels after. It's got to get easier after this. Got to.

His eyes fix on an old set of wooden rosary beads wrapped around the rearview mirror. The tin crucifix swings like the hand of a metronome.

RAYMOND

Can you throw that in the glove compartment? It's starting to bug the everloving shit out of me.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

Raymond and Maeve's Acura moves slowly down the road, which opens into something resembling a neighborhood. A scuffed-up brick rambler is on one side of the road, and about a hundred yards farther down, on the other, sits an old shotgun house with a weathered porch glider on a browned-out patch of lawn. Raymond slows and parks along the grass verge, midway between the homes. He kills the lights. Nothing stirs.

INT. AUTOMOBILE - NIGHT

MAEVE

This is way fucking surreal. Tell me, what do you remember about last night? Can you remember at all?

RAYMOND

Patchwork. I remember you were complaining about Callum's late alimony check and the credit cards and your "chronic fatigue," so we went over to Blue and Olivia's to cheer ourselves up. We were getting tight on Cutty and water and, out of nowhere, that guy and his wife plopped down on the sofa and just hijacked things.

MAEVE

What was his name?

RAYMOND

Pablo or Pedro or something. I don't know. First, I thought he wanted to fuck you and I was ready to let him. Just for grins. But he starts homing in and talking about our life, like he's been listening in the whole time. We go out on the fire escape where this crazy wind is blowing, and he says *how would you like to get away from all of it* and that they were...

MAEVE

...I remember that part. It was, like, a big goof. Big joke.

RAYMOND

Then we were partying at their place. Some pills, some classical music, and then they're pulling out travel books and African statuettes and some panfluteish thing and messing around with a little flick knife, cutting each other. Weird shit. Then, I crashed.

MAEVE

How did we get home?

RAYMOND

They must have given us a lift.

MAEVE

How did Blue even know those guys?

RAYMOND

Nobody seemed to know them, really. I just figured he was their connection. They had that kind of vibe.

MAEVE

What did his girlfriend say to you?

RAYMOND

When?

MAEVE

When you went outside for a smoke and she followed you. You were out there for a while. Quite a while.

RAYMOND

I couldn't tell you. She was crazy. Whispered a lot. She was a close talker.

MAEVE

That where you got this?

She leans over and reaches for his neck and we see, emerging from the shadows, a purple bruise. Raymond is silent. Maeve pulls her hand back and rubs her own shoulder, peeling back her own shirt to display an angry red wound there.

RAYMOND

Yeah, it was a fucked-up night. Let's get this over with.

Raymond gets out of the car. Maeve hands him the gun, which he tucks in the back of his jeans and covers with his shirt. He crosses the road and starts toward the door of the shotgun house. Maeve shakily lights a cigarette and fumbles for a mixtape in a box of junk (maps, campaign buttons, change, empty cigarette lighters). She puts it in the tape player and hits "play." She worriedly massages her shoulder while Nico sings "Janitor of Lunacy," and waves of mournful harmonium punctuate the minutes.

SINGING VOICE

Tolerate my jealousy/Recognize the desperate need...

MAEVE

Wow. (Sniffs.) Great. That's really great.

She picks up a ripped copy of *The Handmaid's Tale* from the floormat and aimlessly riffles the pages. She is elsewhere.

EXT. FRONT DOOR OF COUNTRY HOUSE - NIGHT

Raymond pounds on the door with a primitive, arts-and-crafts door knocker in the shape of a horse's head. The doormat reads: *Bless This House*.

RAYMOND

Hello? Hello? Anybody there? I know it's late, but my car broke down. Can we get a jump or use a phone? Anybody?

INT. AUTOMOBILE - NIGHT

Maeve sits with eyes closed, listening to the music and suffering through some portentous, waking dream. She is startled by Raymond, punching the driver's side window. She opens the door and he slides in, shaking with nervous energy.

RAYMOND

This is bullshit. Nobody's gonna open their door to strangers at this time of night. We must look like a couple of fucking thrill killers. Goddamnit. What was I thinking?

MAEVE

Maybe we can just go home, Ray. Think things over. See how it all looks in the morning.

RAYMOND

There's not going to *be* any morning. Shit, my throat is on fire. So is yours, isn't it?

MAEVE

Yeah. (Pause.) Why did we go through with it, Ray? We didn't have to.

RAYMOND

Because people like us are not strong enough to fight this life. We never get an edge. It would have to take something wild,

something fucked and *insane* and *impossible*. And she made me believe it. She had these eyes like animal eyes. Like wishing wells, man. There were no “ifs” in them. She put her mouth next to my ear and nibbled a little and breathed *live live live*. And she made me believe I could. We all could. (Defeated.) At that point, I might have done anything.

They sit silently for a moment in an almost palpable despair.

MAEVE

Maybe there’s an emergency room. Maybe they can look at us or give us something. Honey? Can we?

The two are surprised by three loud raps on the car’s roof. They look out to see BAILEY, owner of the house up the street, armed with an aluminum baseball bat. He motions for Raymond to lower the window.

BAILEY

Hey, whatever the hell you’re doing out here at three in the morning, I would suggest that you move along. Awright?

RAYMOND

Whoa, take it easy, sir, just a little car trouble.

Raymond lifts his shirt to show Maeve the gun in his waistband, visible to her, but hidden from Bailey.

BAILEY

Car trouble?

RAYMOND

Yeah, just looking for a phone.

Maeve inches toward the gun.

BAILEY

Well, I gotta tell ya, pal, you guys look like trouble to me. We get a lot of druggies from over Culver messin' around out here and we know how to handle 'em. Read me? Don't need the cops. What the hell you doing out riding around this time of night, anyway? Nothing out here.

MAEVE

Watch out, RayRay!

Maeve grabs the revolver, shakily points and unloads two slugs, hitting Bailey in the jaw and the chest. Bailey falls back in surprise. Ray wrenches the gun from Maeve's hand and, flinging open the door, puts two more in his chest, for insurance. Bailey heaves, then expires.

MAEVE

Jesus! Oh shit! Oh my God!

Raymond roughly grabs her shoulders.

RAYMOND

Easy. You done good, babe. Now help me get him in the back. We gotta move fast. Stay with me.

They jump out of the car and gingerly grab Bailey. The two virgin killers laboriously bundle him into the back seat, struggling until their arms, necks and torsos are streaked with blood. Maeve, eyes glazed with shock, dips a finger into one of the chest wounds and timidly licks her finger until her face transforms into an expression of fearful satisfaction. She glances at Ray, wide-eyed, asking permission: *can I?*

RAYMOND

Not here. Come on, let's get gone.

EXT. DIRT PATH INTO WOODED AREA - NIGHT

A car's headlights pierce a profound darkness, as it inches its way farther and farther into some heavy roadside woods. The lights are extinguished, letting the still blackness flow into and over the thicket. For a moment, the passengers slump, lifeless, shell-shocked.

INT. AUTOMOBILE - NIGHT

MAEVE

I can't believe it. We did it. Is it always gonna be like this, Ray? Is it? Is it always gonna be like this?

RAYMOND

No, baby. We'll get a system. Better and better. Come on. (Motions toward the back seat.) Everything's gonna look different once we get right.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Against the vast, immeasurable night, two small figures wrestle a blood-soaked body from the back seat. All thought of evasion or concealment has evaporated. They are focused only on driving away an encroaching, holistic hunger, and this desperation makes them stronger than they have a right to be.

They lay Bailey across Maeve's lap, like some sort of depraved *pietá*. The feel and smell of blood spreading through Bailey's clothes and speckling his wounds fill Raymond and Maeve with a kind of nervous excitement. Ray, betraying his inexperience, clumsily saws away with a pocket knife, carving wounds at the throat for him, at the wrist for Maeve. You can see on their

faces that they realize they now have nothing in the world but each other and this need. They silently drink, animals. After a time, Maeve speaks.

MAEVE

Ray...

RAYMOND

I know.

MAEVE

I don't know where we are. I mean it.

RAYMOND

It'll get easier. We'll learn.

MAEVE

Promise?

RAYMOND

I can't promise.

Maeve tenderly offers Raymond the dripping wrist and he sucks away some of the blood in a motion that mimics a kiss. Maeve wraps her arms around him, hiding his face in a veil of dirty red hair and kisses the crown of his head. The only sounds are human breath, the chatter of crickets and the faint rustling of soon-dead leaves. They are a circle of peace in a suddenly unfamiliar and collapsing world.

MAEVE

We messed up, baby. We messed up, big time. We went for the wrong thing.

RAYMOND

(Looking sated and drowsy)

You're just upset. We'll figure it all out. You bet we will.

MAEVE

No, we won't, Raymond. Never, never. Because it's all about endings.

Raymond sits up a little.

MAEVE

Endings. Everything moves toward an ending. Everything wants to close the circle. It's the way. Nature's. God's. Maybe it's the way to pass on to the next thing. Maybe it's just an end that lets something else be born. But it's meant to happen. We don't get to be part of that. We're out of sync. We're outliers. We're the two-headed baby in the glass jar on the museum shelf nobody visits. (Pause.) Forever, we're going to be like that.

In the distance, we hear what sounds like a rifle shot.

MAEVE

Forever is a really bad idea, Love. The very, very worst...

Back on the main road, there is a growl of idling engines. The woods are rent by blades of light from flashlights and lanterns. Maeve and Raymond, in a place beyond caring, huddle in their pocket of dark.



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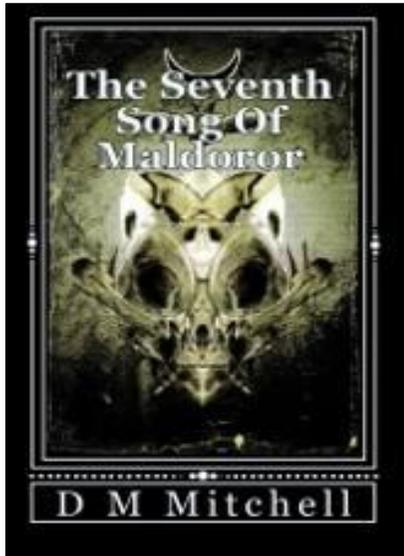
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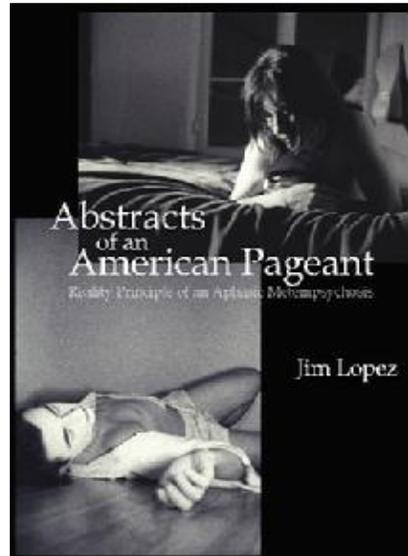
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Jim Lopez

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Hank Kirton

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