

PARAPHILIA:
TRASUMANAR

CONTENTS

Cover 'Assassination of the Pope' By Sean Madden	
Frontispiece 'If Zeus Don't Charm' By Dolorosa De La Cruz	
'Interesting Times: Kind Strangers' By Andrew Maben	p5
'Tangier Morocco, 1957' By Joe Ambrose	p19
'The Mercenaries Of Time: Parts I & II' By Michele Dawn Saint Thomas	p23
'Night in the Natural History Museum: Douglas Preston and the Power of <i>Relic</i> ' By Noah Charney	p33
Art 'Subterranean Altar Piece - Left' By F.X. Tobin	p39
'Mugged by a Movie Star' By B. Kold	p40
'Fame Whore' By Mike Hudson , Photo By Malcolm Alcalá	p48
Art 'Venus - A' By Rob Sussman	p52
'The Fallen' By Michael Hann	p53
Art 'Venus - B' By Rob Sussman	p64
'Rapier' By Salena Godden	p65
'Lobster Cracking, Stomach Skinning and the Air Loom' By D M Mitchell , Photos By Max Reeves	p74
'Legacy' By Christopher Nosnibor , Photo By Lisa Wormsley	p83
'To Eat the Sky Like an Apple' By Craig Woods , Images By Sarah Amy Fishlock	p88
'Th' Knap Witch Ov Wessex' By Matt Leyshon	p96
'Ruffy' By Steve Overbury	p99
Art 'Subterranean Altar Piece - Center' By F.X. Tobin	p102
'Taste Is a Form of Self-Censorship' Mark Stewart Interviewed By Craig Woods	p103
'Thoughts on Zombies and Tropical Storms' By Jim Coleman	p122
'Schizophrenia at the Kitchen Door, 3AM' By Patrick Wright	p126
'The Feast of the February Flies' By Gene Stewart Writing As Samael Gyre	p129
Art 'The Black Orchid Beckons' By F.X. Tobin	p134
'Procedure 769: CDC# B66883' By Dire McCain	p135
'The Unit' By Ron Churchill	p140
'Drug' By Claudia Bellocq , Photo By Tom Garretson	p144
Art 'Ex-communication' By Lana Gentry	p147
'The News From My Area' By Chris Madoch , Photo By Michael Dent	p148
'Mr. Sunrise' By Brett Garcia Rose , Photos By Toby Huss	p162
Art 'Subterranean Altar Piece - Right' By F.X. Tobin	p170
'Polka Dots' By Ron D'Alena , Photo By Malcolm Alcalá	p171
Art 'Hell & Bone' - Cryptical Swamp Drawing © 2010 (brad, felt, ink, gold, cufflink, charcoal, ocelot's pils, junk stuff) By Merle Leonce Bone (aka Manuel Aubert)	p177
'A Dog Named Boo' By dixē.flatlin3 , Photo By Sid Graves	p178
'The True Stories Of Robert Brock: Rainy Morning' By Robert Earl Reed	p182
'Lest Romance Die' By Rick Grimes	p184
'The Wood Fairy' By Matt Hill , Photos By Richard A. Meade	p186
'Madonna 666' By Rob Same	p189
Art 'Must Be Santa - Portrait of Beautiful JonBenet Ramsey and 'Santa' Bill McReynolds' By Lana Gentry	p199

Whatever Happened To Odia Coates? A Tragedy In Six Acts (Part III) By David Gionfriddo	
Photos By Claudia Murari	p200
'Billy Rai & The Ozark Jesus' By Ron Garmon	p231
'Bitchin' Bibliography On Banned Books' By Adel Souto	p242
'Babette' Ross Eliot Interviewed By Cricket Corleone	p245
Four Fabulous Females Of Los Angeles Who Are World-class Rock Singer/Songwriters By Heather Harris	p252
'Untitled' Edward Paul Quist Interviewed By Yen Tan	p265
Art 'Subterranean Altar Piece - Bottom' By F.X. Tobin	p271
'Ballads, Blues & Bluegrass' A Review By Simon Phillips	p272
'Shortcuts To Infinity/ Symptomology' A Review By Simon Phillips	p274
Contributors' Links	
Book Adverts	
Back Cover 'As Heathen Velvet Grunts On' By Dolorosa De La Cruz	

Editor in Chief
Díre McCain

Contributing Editors
Christopher Nosnibor
Craig Woods

Edited & Designed By **Díre McCain**

Contact Paraphilia
paraphiliamagazine@gmail.com

Website
www.paraphiliamagazine.com

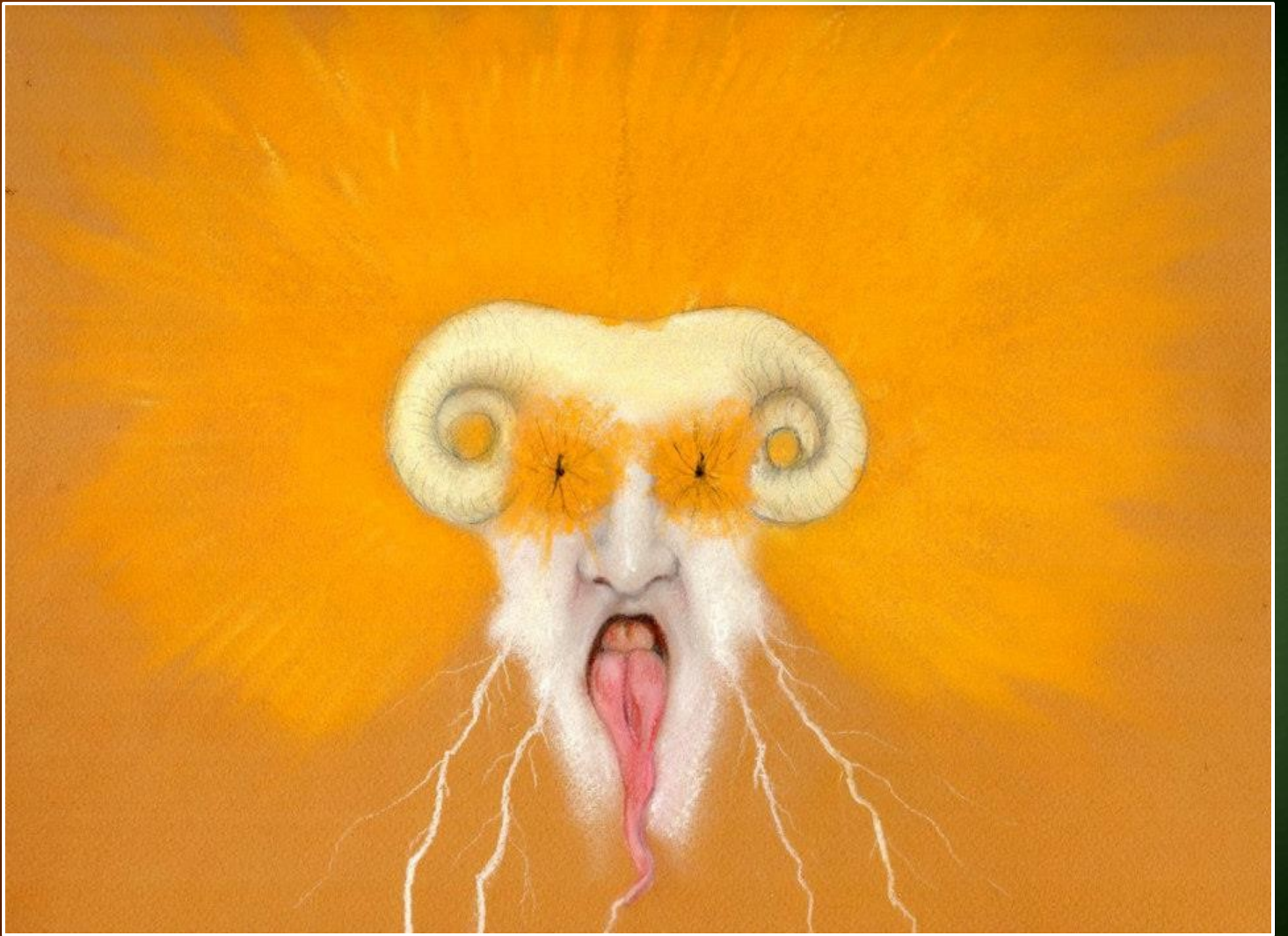
Official Facebook Page
<https://www.facebook.com/ParaphiliaMagazine>

Official Twitter Page
<http://twitter.com/paraphiliamag>

Submissions:

Please send all submissions as email attachments, Rich Text Format documents and JPG photographs. Be sure you include your name, contact details, and any internet links you would like shown in the magazine. **PARAPHILIA MAGAZINE** is currently a non-profit venture, thus we are unable to provide financial compensation for published works. All copyrights, of course, belong to the writers, artists, photographers, etc.

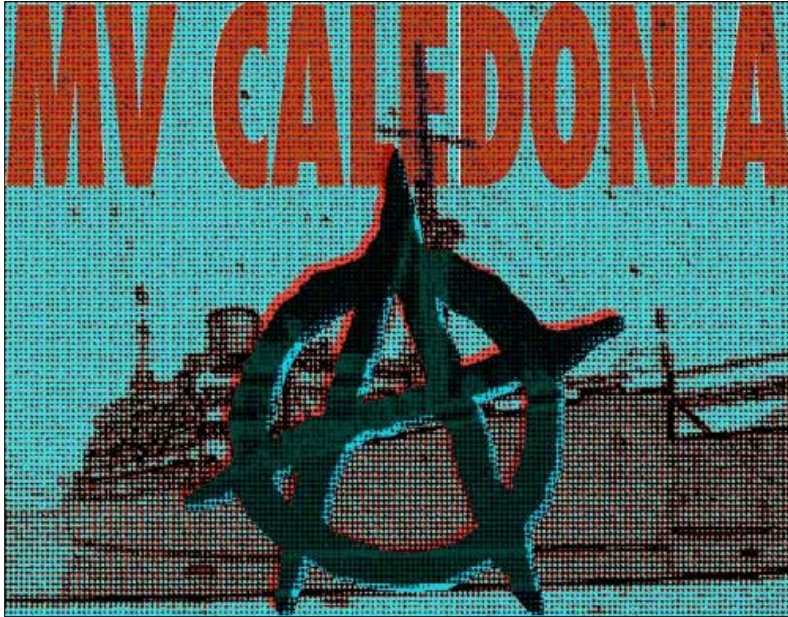
Any opinions or beliefs - religious, political, or moral - expressed anywhere within these pages are not necessarily those of the editors.



INTERESTING TIMES:

KIND STRANGERS

By Andrew Maben



You'd think that at this point I might have stopped, or at least paused, to take stock, to consider what I thought I was doing, where I thought I might be going. Apparently not. If I had a picture of myself at the time it was arms spread high, head back, running at full tilt. If asked, I would certainly have claimed to be running to embrace life, but who knows? Perhaps I was in headlong flight... In any event I hope you'll indulge me as I venture a few thoughts from my present vantage, with all the advantages of hindsight.

All kinds of ideals and ideas filled my head, heady visions of possibilities that I was convinced both could and should be realised were confronted with harsh realities that it would seem I believed would be overcome through sheer blind faith. My schoolboy infatuation with Christ, itself born of the loneliness and pain of my schooldays, remained on the one hand as a deep desire to find a way to live a life both just and kind, and on the other had mutated into a certainly unrealistic, and quite probably unhealthy, idealisation, idolatry even, of "Woman". I still believed in the transformative power of Art, but with no clear notion of how that might be realised in actuality. And of course I had been bewitched by the many utopian notions that were abroad at the time: the promise of a world in which work would be but a small part of lives dedicated to leisure and self-fulfillment; and of course Leary's Pied Piper call to "turn on, tune in, drop out". Now I was coming face to face with the difficulties of living a just life in a profoundly unjust world, and as you'll see making some pretty dubious moral choices as a result. My artistic ambitions were still reeling from my expulsion from art school. My notions of romantic love had received a near-crippling blow at Sally's hands. Finally I was finding just how difficult it is to "drop out" without the advantages of privilege and celebrity enjoyed by figures like Leary. Then, of course there's the laughable irony, not to say hypocrisy, of the scion of an English family with upper-middle class aspirations pretending to adopt poverty as a way of life... Alas, I failed to even recognise, let alone confront these conflicts in any meaningful way.

So it was that not many days later I was sitting at an outside table at the Café St. Michel, nursing an espresso, enjoying the waiters studiously ignoring American tourists' calls of "Garçon!", and

watching the passing parade and the youngsters sitting on the wall of the fountain. My eye was caught by two very attractive girls approaching from the direction of St. André des Arts – the first was the perfect embodiment of chic, thigh-high boots, mini skirt and polo-neck that perfectly flaunted her Bardotesque figure, her companion rail thin and less ostentatiously attired, a Pre-Raphaelite faerie queen. To my astonishment they asked if they might join me, and needless to say I agreed. Well, of course it was not my stunning good looks that had caught their eye, simply that I looked as though I might be able to find some hash... They told me their names – the siren was Xanthe, the sylph Helen – gave me some money and an address, and went on their way. Some hours later I rang the bell of what turned out to be Xanthe's flat. I was soon, subtly but unmistakably, disabused of any idea that I might have had of bedding Xanthe, or even being allowed to stay for a night or three...

Helen, however, was rather more willing to extend the hand of friendship, and so it was that the two of us were back at the Café St. Michel late one evening. There was a small group of Germans frequenting the Quartier who, rumour had it, were in the habit of robbing people at knife point, so I was a little put out when a couple of them sat down uninvited at our table.

"Wanna buy some hash?" asked the burlier of the two.

"No way," I replied, "that leads straight to heroin."

I suppose I had some idea that this would be enough to send them on their way. I was mistaken. We were subjected to an intensive sales spiel, by turns cajoling, pleading, reasoning. Somehow I signalled to Helen to follow my lead, and for the next twenty minutes or so we resisted all their blandishments.

Finally: "You should at least try it once." And reluctantly we allowed ourselves to be persuaded. Given their reputation, god alone knows what I was thinking in going myself into this bears' lair, let alone bringing Helen along. Nevertheless, off we went to a grimy *piaule* in a back street near to Shakespeare & Co.

All five of their little gang were crammed into the tiny space, and Helen and I were offered the only two straight backed chairs. A joint was rolled. Some very potent Afghani.

"What do you feel?" I was asked after taking a first hit.

"Nothing at all," I lied.

"Take another hit."

I did.

"Still nothing."

I passed the joint on to Helen, who also professed to be unaffected.

And so it went. They rolled joint after joint, and we claimed to be completely unaffected. Finally I asked for the loo, where I shook some drops of piss onto blotting paper and wrapped them in foil – in those days I carried all kinds of paraphernalia – before going back into the room.

"Well, we should get going. Thanks for the smoke. And, oh, anyone want to buy some acid?"

Again I ask myself what on Earth I thought I was doing... But I was greeted with gales of laughter.

"So you do smoke?"

"Yeah. That was some really nice hash. Thanks."

More laughter. They bought five "trips" and off we went. Luckily I never ran into them again...

Jean and Le Dorze were back in town by now, and they introduced me to a friend by the name of Gilbert who worked, appropriately enough, at the Gibert Jeune bookshop on Place St. Michel and lived with his mother in the suburb of Robinson. Gilbert had very kindly offered me a place to stay, more or less indefinitely. Sometimes we'd take the train together from the Gare Montparnasse, sometimes I'd meet him at a café near the Robinson station. On one of these latter occasions a lonely looking middle-aged man was sitting at one of the tables, gazing moodily into space. His face was remarkably similar to mine, or how I might have imagined mine would look at that age. With something of a shock, I somehow became convinced that he in fact was me, that this was some backwards *deja vu*... I had, and still have, no idea how to process this perception, nor a companion experience on a bus in Hollywood some years later...

I might never have got around to leaving Paris, were it not for Helen. She and I had formed a friendship of sorts, and when she more or less begged me to accompany her to England to visit her brother, who was with the USAF and stationed somewhere in East Anglia, I was fairly easily persuaded.

So we found ourselves on deck on the Calais-Dover ferry as the sun set on a blustery autumn day. She affected surprise when I tried to kiss her.

"But do you love me?"

"Yes. Yes, I think I do," I lied, and she melted into my embrace, though it would be several days before we would have the opportunity to sleep together...

I have only the haziest of memories of sitting around a kitchen table with her brother and his wife, before we made our way to Brighton, where I invited us to stay with Tom and Penny...

Alas, our little idyll was to be short-lived. "But do you love me?" became a persistent irritant. We went up to London to see Blue Cheer at the Roundhouse. We were getting ready for the show in a friend's flat in Notting Hill and had each dropped a hit of acid. Helen was sitting at the dressing table, putting on makeup.

"Almost ready?" I asked.

"Do you love me?" she answered. It's hard - for me at least - to lie on acid, so I prevaricated.

But she persisted...

On the tube to Chalk Farm: "Do you love me?"

At the Roundhouse, repeatedly: "Do you love me?"

Finally, in desperation, I took refuge *inside* a speaker cabinet on stage. Blue Cheer advertised themselves as “the loudest band in the world”, so I heard nothing but the band, guitar howls that conjured a vision of a dying dinosaur, but Helen stood in front of me, mouthing over and over again “Do you love me?”

It didn't help that our hip bones were exactly the same width, so I'd get bruises whenever we fucked – I suppose she did too, but I'm afraid I gave no thought to that...

Things came to a head one afternoon when I ran out of cigarettes.

“I'm going out for some fags.”

“I'll come with you.”

“There's no need.” Hell, the shop was two doors down on the other side of a narrow street.

“OK,” I sighed. But I'd reached the end of my tether, and when we got back to the flat I told her she'd have to leave. Tears ensued, but she left. And then Penny let me know that I'd overstayed my welcome too. So I found a little room to rent in Hove. Where did I get the money, you may be wondering. Well, I was always dealing quid deals of hash, which kept me in smoke, and I somehow managed to get a job in a little hippy café in the Lanes. The pay wasn't much, but I was allowed to eat free of charge – I still remember fondly their yogurt and muesli...

Around this time, Nigel, a friend of Tom and Penny's, planned a trip to the West Country in his ancient Austin 7, and somehow I inveigled an invitation to join him. I think we made it as far as Plymouth and back... And one mad night in Windsor. I was with Nigel's girlfriend Jill, though how we happened to be there, and how we happened to be together entirely escape me now. Yet somehow we were at the Castle wall.

“Let's go in!” said Jill.

“But...”

She laughed, turned and started to climb a gate. She jumped, turned again and beckoned me...

We cavorted on the lawn for a few minutes, ran back to the gate and left...

I indulged my artistic impulses whilst in Hove by actually completing a painting, long since lost, and certainly not very good. As I recall, it depicted two naked women, kneeling, their backs arched and facing each other in an alien desert landscape, a rainbow sprouting from their nipples arced between the two...

Then one evening in December, a dusting of snow on the ground, I came home late from the café to find Helen sitting on the doorstep.

“Please let me in,” she begged.

Did I mention she was from Texas? “I went back to Paris and got back with my old boyfriend. He's black, but he just can't satisfy me like you. Please make love to me again. Even just once”

Oh dear. Poor sweet girl... I made her sleep on the floor next to the bed and masturbated. Loudly. In the morning I sent her on her way. I know, what a bastard...

By Christmas I was almost completely broke so I couldn't afford the room any longer, and early in January I went back to Paris. Apparently I felt that in fact the world did owe me a living – or if not the world, then my friends and acquaintances...

Jean certainly seemed glad enough to see me and took me to visit Le Dorze. We had a smoke and then set off to Le Dorze's grandma's, where she graciously offered me a bed in her tiny spare room.

The three of us were often joined by Jean's friend Minet, who got his nickname from the fact that as he actually held a job he could afford to be a snappy dresser – at least compared with we scruffy three. We would meet every day, smoke, prowl the Quartier Latin, spend hours listening to records at PAN...

I listened with envy to Jean's plans to leave for India in the spring, to spend the summer there and return in the autumn.

After a couple of weeks, I decided I should move on. I could feel my presence becoming burdensome at Le Dorze's grandmother's. Nothing was really happening, just hanging out with no real plans and precious little in the way of amusement. We were all sitting at a little café by the metro, Jean quietly sardonic, Dorze bored, self-absorbed, indifferent and Minet concerned, when I told them my plan to hitch to Copenhagen and meet up with Erik.

When we had finished our coffee, they walked me back to the flat. Standing beneath the metro, saying our goodbyes, Minet surprised me by asking, "Do you have any money?"

"Well, yes – a bit."

"How much is that?"

"About ten francs..."

"That's not enough!" he said, putting his hand in his pocket, "here, take this," and handed me a crisp new one hundred franc note and a gram of hash...

Early next morning I got off the metro at Porte de la Chapelle and walked out past the peripherique to the on-ramp to the A1 north.

A series of uneventful, unmemorable rides carried me steadily northward across the grey winter landscape, black scarecrow trees and fields dusted with snow...

It must have been close to midnight when I arrived at the Belgian border, just beyond Lille. I walked across, showing my passport to indifferent guards, and found a spot beneath the glare of the last of the border floodlights. Traffic was light, not to say sparse, but I didn't wait as long as I feared I would have to. An old black Maigret-style Citroen pulled over. The Maigret-style driver leaned across and rolled down the window.

"I can take you to Ghent."

“Perfect,” I said, climbing in.

We drove in silence through the black night.

Then, “Aren’t you afraid to get in a car with a stranger in the middle of the night?” he asked in an amused tone.

“Not particularly. I don’t have a lot to steal. Aren’t you afraid to let a complete stranger into your car, in the middle of the night?”

“Oh no!” he laughed, “I’m the chief of police in Ghent.”

I gulped at the thought of the hash in my pocket...

We made desultory small talk from time to time, but mostly rode in silence. I must have dozed off.

“Hey!” I shook my head awake. “Hey, it’s raining.”

I looked outside. We were entering a town, and yes, a nasty looking rain was falling.

“Listen, I have to stop at the police station anyway. I’ll drop you there and you can wait until the rain stops. It’s not as if you’re going to catch a ride at this hour, anyway.”

That was certainly true, it must be close to three in the morning by now.

“Thanks. Very kind.” Words, and a feeling, that would repeat themselves many times in the course of the coming weeks.

We pulled up in front of the police station, an imposing, ancient seeming building with a massive metal-barred and studded wooden double door set in its corner. Within, the worn flagstone floor, heavy, blackened and nocked, massive plain wooden tables and benches gave a sense of going back in time. As did the three Rembrandt-visaged policemen in their ornate, old-fashioned uniforms.

“Hey, guys, I found this young man on the road. He’s on his way to Copenhagen.”

This announcement met with a gentle round of laughter.

“It’s raining outside, and cold. Give him some coffee and let him wait here till the rain stops.”

He shook my hand, wished me luck and left, leaving me standing just inside the door looking at the three policemen, who looked mildly displeased that their card game had been interrupted. One of them stood.

“Here, why don’t you sit,” he said, indicating one of the two other tables. I straddled the bench, while he went to a corner of the room. After some clattering, he came back with a tin mug of steaming black coffee before rejoining his partners. I pulled out a book, sipped coffee, read and listened to their murmurs and occasional quiet laughs, losing myself in Dinesen’s Gothic Tales. Was I submerged in her imagined world, or was her world somehow suffusing mine?

I looked up at the sound of the opening door.

“Rain’s stopped. You can be on your way.”

I downed the last of the coffee, grabbed my bag, asked directions to the Antwerp road and headed out into the night. The street was softened by a gauzy white mist. Blurred street light globes with gentle glowing haloes, my solitary footsteps echoing back to me across the black canal, lent the scene the air of another time and I felt myself, for a moment, the hero of some gothic romance, setting off in pursuit of fortune and adventure. Wending my way through narrow cobbled streets that led me to a wider thoroughfare, where I set down my bag and took up my post, by a yellow road sign that stated “Antwerp”, and waited...

A truck rolled by, a couple of cars. Drops splashed down into the silent street from branches and eaves. And I waited.

Another car approached, I put out my thumb. Then, realising it was a taxi, I waved in negation. But he stopped and backed up.

“No, no. I don’t need a taxi.”

“I know. That’s OK. Where are you going?”

“Copenhagen.”

He laughed. He was a small man, thinning black hair above a round face with round glasses, atop a round body dressed in a nondescript jacket and creased white shirt, open at the neck.

“I can’t take you there! But you’re not going anywhere now. I’m getting off work. If you like, I’ll fix you breakfast and then I’ll take you to the main road out of town. It’ll be easier to find a ride there.” I’d scarcely eaten in twenty four hours, it was a tempting offer. We drove a short way, and parked in front of a little row house.

“Shh, my wife is sleeping.” We crept through the front door, down a passage way and into a small sitting room.

“Please, sit down, make yourself at home. I’ll get breakfast. Do you like Polish sausage?”

I perched on the edge of a small light-coloured, flower-patterned sofa and looked around the little room. At the far end, a small dining table, lace table cloth, a vase of dried flowers, two wooden chairs, next to a floor to ceiling curtain taking up the whole wall. A matching beige curtain took up the whole of the wall facing the sofa. A low sideboard and a coffee table, small framed pictures and some knickknacks completed the scene.

My host returned, carrying two plates. The three eggs, generous chunk of sausage, bread and butter were a welcome sight, and I didn’t need to be told to eat.

We silently shovelled down the food. When our plates were empty and wiped clean, he piled them on the coffee table and turned to me.

“You know, I envy you,” he said. “When I was young I always dreamed that I would travel in tropical lands. But I married when I was eighteen, so it was not to be...”

He got up and walked to the curtain-pull.

“I decided that if I could not go out and see the world, then I would bring the world to me.”

And with a shy flourish, he pulled the curtains open on both walls. Dim shadows of plants in the blackness of the night outside, became, with the flick of a light switch, the brilliant greens of a luxuriant miniature jungle that occupied the narrow space outside. I gasped in astonishment, for there were not just jungle plants. Perched among and upon the branches were parrots and macaws, fluorescent greens, brilliant reds and blues and yellows. Curled in a corner a huge python, and draped along a branch, head hanging low with tongue darting as it seemed to eye me through the glass, an anaconda.

But I only noticed the birds and snakes after taking in the real wonder of this tiny urban forest. For proudly pacing the jungle floor were two beautiful spotted leopards and a shining black panther.

My jaw hung open as, eyes glowing, seeming somehow to stand taller, his portly body, comical a moment before, become imposing, he described the animals to me. Yes, he had brought the world to him. As some make the world their home, he had made his home the world, and it transformed him. No longer an inconsequential toiler with a mundane job in a provincial, if picturesque town in a country famous only for beers and as a synonym for boring, he was a globe-trotter, an explorer, a man of consequence.

“What’s going on in here?” His no-longer sleeping wife, evidently. Fierce, narrow faced, sharp eyed and sharper tongued, her hair disheveled, clutching closed her pink quilted dressing gown.

The fire faded, but did not entirely disappear from his eyes.

“I was just...”

“No, no. He must go.” Casting a disapproving look at our empty plates. “He must go now.”

He gave her a brief, imploring look, but finding no sympathy there, turned resignedly to me.

“I’m sorry...”

“No, no,” I told him, “Thank you. You’ve been very kind,” picking up my bag and squeezing past his wife towards the front door.

At the door he pointed me on my road, and again, “I’m sorry.”

“No, no. Thank you. Extraordinary. Truly, thank you.”

“She doesn’t understand.”

“I do.” For a moment the light returned to his eyes.

I walked out into the enchanted night. Perhaps I could be forgiven for thinking, out into my enchanted life.

By now a grey light had infused the sky, the fog risen. I found the road and was soon enough on my way, through Antwerp and across the Dutch border. The weak sun shone in a chilly powder blue sky. A nondescript beige VW Beetle pulled over for me.

“Rotterdam?”

“Yes, please.”

The driver was small, wiry, his hair close-cropped, his skin tanned nut-brown. He reminded me a little of Donald Pleasence in *Cul de Sac*. I must have dozed off... When I awoke we were driving past dunes, a sandy wind-swept beach. Noticing that I was awake, he glanced at me, offered a smile.

“I like to be fit,” he told me. “I like to swim in the sea and run naked on the sand...”

I didn’t quite know what to say to this, just looked at him rather bemusedly.

“Would you like to join me?”

Not bloody likely, I thought to myself.

“Um. No. No, I really don’t have time. I have to get to Copenhagen.”

He sighed softly and gave a sad little smile...

The evening found me at a junction on the outskirts of Groningen. The sky was overcast and a bitter wind blew from the east. Not much traffic... An old tramp approached and gestured a request for a cigarette. I couldn’t keep a match alight in the wind, and he held out a hand. I passed the matches and he demonstrated how to strike the match into cupped hands shielded by the matchbook. A useful lesson that I have continued to make use of almost daily...

It grew darker, colder, the wind now laced with a few sparse snowflakes. After some hours of foot-stamping, shivering, hand-blowing waiting, at last a car stopped.

“I live close to the German border. Listen, you’d be crazy to try to get any further tonight. Let me take you back to my house. You can have something to eat, a good night’s sleep, and in the morning I will leave you close to the border.” As you may imagine, I was only too glad to accept...

Once we arrived at my rescuer’s house he called his wife to fix me a bite to eat, then turned to me.

“My little boy has just moved from his cot to a bed. Please wait here,” he gestured to the dining room, “and I will move him back to his cot. You can have his bed tonight.”

I protested feebly, and he insisted, so I took a seat at the table. Soon his wife brought a large bowl of steaming home-made soup and a thick ham and cheese sandwich, which were followed by a cup of hot chocolate and biscuits. To be warm, and fed, in the company of these two kind people as the storm outside grew stronger... I was bathed in a glow of gratitude, comfort, relief...

After his wife had served me a hearty breakfast, and given me a bag of sandwiches, we hit the road again. Soon enough we were at the approach to the border.

"I'll drop you here." I offered profuse thanks, waved as he drove back the way we had come.

It soon was apparent that no-one was going to stop for me on this side of the border, so I decided to walk to the German side and hope for better luck there.

The Dutch border guards were friendly, joked with me when I told them my destination. Some five hundred metres or so down the road was the German guard post.

"Step inside, please."

I stepped inside, approached a counter.

"Your passport."

I put it on the counter.

"So. Where are you going?"

"Copenhagen."

"Ah. And you have money?"

"Yes."

"So. Show me, please."

I fished out Minet's hundred franc note, put it next to my passport. The guard raised an eyebrow.

"That is all?"

"Yes. It's enough."

"It's not enough."

"Tonight I'll be with my friend in Copenhagen, and I have money waiting for me there."

"Wait, please."

He picked up my passport, walked to a desk, picked up the telephone. The tone of the conversation did not seem to bode well for me. He walked back to the counter, shaking his head.

"No." He put my passport down.

"No?"

"No." He opened the passport, found a rubber stamp and inkpad, stamped the page, took a pen and scribbled a few words. He placed Minet's money between the pages, closed the passport, handed it back to me.

"Now you must go back."

So I plodded back to the Dutch side.

"You again?" the guard laughed.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. The Germans wouldn't let me in."

"Well now. If the Germans don't want you, why should we?" I had a vision of a life spent eking a living in the no-man's land between the borders, surviving on insects and wild roots...

"I'll go straight to Amsterdam and have a ticket to England sent to me there."

Another burst of laughter, but then my passport was stamped and I was on my way back down the road. I was lucky enough to get a ride more or less straight away going all the way to Amsterdam, a journey whose highlight was the traversal of the Zuider Zee causeway. Sometime in the afternoon we pulled up in front of Amsterdam's Central Station.

"This is probably the best place for you. Good luck!" And off he went.

The station forecourt was crowded with pedestrians and cyclists, and I stood bewildered for several minutes.

"Excuse me!" I'd seen a friendly looking face, a bearded, duffel-coat-wearing, book-carrying student.

"Excuse me, I've just arrived. I wonder if you know somewhere where I could stay?" (Yes, in those days you could ask this of a perfect stranger, and reasonably hope for a helpful reply).

"Yes, I think so," he answered in near-perfect English. "You should try the student ship *Caledonia*. When you get there, just ask anyone." He gave me directions and off I went.

It was a bit of a hike to the docks, but the ship was easy enough to find. I climbed the gangplank, and didn't even have to ask – the first person to see me as I stepped onto the deck took one look at me and asked if I needed a place to sleep.

"Well, yes, I do."

"I have a friend who I think has still a little space in his cabin."

"Thanks, that'd be great..."

A few minutes later we were knocking on a cabin door.

"Sure, I think there's room for one more, if you don't mind sleeping on the floor."

As well as Pieter, the student whose cabin it was, there were already three Germans camping out there – two guys and a girl, all of whose names have, I'm afraid, long since faded from memory...

I easily fell into the casual routine of life aboard the *Caledonia*. The University had an agreement with the Amsterdam police that the ship fell outside police jurisdiction, unless the

University authorities specifically requested a police presence. What resulted was an *ad hoc* commune run on loosely anarchist lines. Hashish and other drugs were freely available. Almost every cabin hosted one or more visitors as well as the student to whom it was assigned. There was a bar, where drinks could be cheaply bought, or cadged if you were broke, and a subsidised cafeteria serving three nutritious meals a day. The great thing about the cafeteria was that for two guilders you could buy a meal ticket that entitled you to one full meal, plus as many refills as you liked of vegetables and dessert. People would eat in groups, taking it in turns to be the one to have the full meal, while each of the others would fill up on veggies and pudding. And no, if you are wondering, it didn't occur to me, and probably not to most of the ship's other denizens, that this was in any way dishonest – whatever I may think in retrospect.

These arrangements meant that there was no necessity to leave the ship at all. Of course I visited the famous Club Paradiso, where drug use was unregulated, a couple of times, and occasionally of an early morning a couple of us might hit the dock to steal a crate of custard and a crate of chocolate milk, all in litre bottles, which milkmen kindly left on doorsteps for our convenience. No moral scruples here either, I'm afraid...

One night the German girl who shared the cabin floor with us crept into my sleeping bag after the lights were out...

"Don't worry, we are communists. We must share everything, no?" Her boyfriend told me in the morning. I was certainly in no position to argue the point, though it seemed, and still seems to me there is something deeply flawed in any argument that classes a woman as a thing, reduces her to the status of chattel or object... Though no doubt I have treated women thus. Yes, I'm deeply flawed. Like you.

I'd managed to put through a phone call home, and the parents reluctantly, and extremely grudgingly, agreed to send me enough money to pay for a ticket back to England. Before the money arrived, though, my twenty-first birthday rolled around. I smoked a lot of hash, had a ludicrous cross-purpose conversation in a corridor with a biker who noticed the STP sticker on the back of my jacket. I'd put it there in reference to the psychedelic, he was referring to the engine additive. I'll let you imagine how that one went... Then an American sailor decided to take me under his wing. "You can't drink alone on your birthday!" He led me to the bar and plied me with beers. Sometime later the sky outside lit up in a brilliant flash. Everyone in the bar rushed out on deck, to witness a conflagration on the other side of the harbour, where an oil storage tank had exploded. "Birthday fireworks!" my American friend declared...

Somehow, while waiting for my money to arrive, I had come up with, or been talked into, a scheme to buy a VW van and drive it to India with the three Germans. I had been left the princely sum of £200 by my paternal grandmother, and thought this would be more than adequate to buy the vehicle and pay my share of the expenses of the trip. So once the ticket money arrived, the four of us set out to hitch to Ostend.

We split into pairs and left at the crack of dawn. The ground was snow-dusted and a bitter wind was blowing... Astonishingly, we all arrived in time to board a Dover ferry that disembarked in the early afternoon. Perhaps not so astonishingly, the English Immigration officer did not take kindly to my friends. I called home, hoping that I could persuade my parents to stand a guarantors, which went over much as you might expect. So regretfully I bade my friends farewell, promising to get in touch as soon as I'd found a van. It does not seem to

have occurred to me to wonder how, not having ever learned to drive, I would manage to get the van over to the Continent... The Germans were put on the next boat back to Ostend, and I set off to thumb my way back to Eastbourne...

It was slow going. As the sky closed in with the dusk I found myself at the outskirts of Folkestone. Cars were not stopping. It was getting darker. It was getting colder. I began to be afraid that I might be stuck all night on the road...

Behind me was a row of half a dozen or so houses. I knocked on a door. No one answered. I knocked on another door, "Excuse me, I can't seem to get a ride. Perhaps..?" But the door had slammed in my face before I could even make my plea. And so it went until I had finally, fruitlessly, knocked on the door of the last house...

My heart sinking, I returned to the roadside. More cars passed without stopping. By now it was dark, snow was beginning to fall gently, but threatening to become fiercer. In the distance I saw the lights of one more dwelling. In what was now close to desperation I began to trudge towards the light. At last, after walking perhaps a little more than half a mile, I found myself in front of a small cottage. A warm light glowed through the windows, smoke curled from the chimney. Hoping against hope, I knocked. I could hear muffled voices, and after a moment the door opened!

A very old lady was standing there.

"Yes? What do you want?" she asked, a little suspiciously, but not unkindly.

"I'm trying to get back to Eastbourne, but I haven't been able to get a ride. I wonder if..."

"Let him in, Maud," came a man's voice from within.

Maud opened the door wide. "Come in, come in. Take off your shoes. Hang up your coat."

As I shook off those outer garments, I introduced myself.

"Fix the boy something to eat, Maud," said her husband, and she disappeared into the kitchen.

"Come and sit down." With a grateful sigh, I took a seat in a wooden armchair by the hearth.

"I know what it's like to be out in the cold. I was in the trenches in the Great War..."

We chatted slowly about the weather, my travels, until Maud came in with a tray bearing a big, steaming bowl of soup, a couple of bread doorsteps and a mug of tea.

The food was delicious, the more so seasoned with relief and gratitude...

As the evening drew on, they produced blankets and cushions that I arranged in the cupboard under the stairs. Which is where I slept a deep, dreamless sleep, snug.

They woke me early, with breakfast of porridge and tea. When I was putting on my coat, Maud proffered a brown paper bag. "You'll be needing some lunch..." When I opened the bag later, I found two thick sandwiches and an apple.

I bade this kind couple farewell and set off, arriving at home without incident.

That evening, or perhaps the next day, I saw the news that on the night I had spent with Maud and her husband, another hitch-hiker, stranded on the road not five miles from their cottage, had managed to break into a car to take shelter. His frozen, lifeless body had been discovered there the next morning... Yes, I owe that kind old soldier and his wife my life.

I have absolutely no recollection whatsoever of this brief sojourn at home, so I conclude that it was none too pleasant. I do know that they refused to release my bequest until such time as I had some more prudent plan for its disposition. And I don't think I stayed more than a couple of nights...

So I wound up at Grannie's, who welcomed me with open arms. She offered a sympathetic ear for my complaints about my recent reception at home, treated me to her wonderful cooking. I knew she had stomach cancer, and that it was at an advanced stage. I knew that her doctors had seen fit to keep this truth from her. She gave no hint that she felt herself to be gravely ill, and I like to hope that indeed she had none... I hope her memory of me is as fond as mine of her.

I thought I'd try my luck again in London. I still had the phone number that Sophie had given me last summer in Nice, and when I got off the train at Paddington I rang her up.

"Hello, Sophie? It's Andrew. From Nice, remember?"

"Of course I remember. Where are you?" The "of course" came as a nice surprise - I've never been able to envision myself as offering any very deep impression...

"I'm at Paddington. I just came into town."

"Would you like to come over for tea?"

Of course I told her I'd love to, and with her address and some directions I set off for Notting Hill...

I went down the basement stairs and rang the bell. The door opened and to my disconcertitude I found myself face to face with Sally.

She appeared equally astonished.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked simultaneously, as I asked, "What are *you* doing here?"

TANGIER MOROCCO, 1957

By Joe Ambrose

Titi stretched up to clasp the Hand of Fatima doorknocker and hammered persistently against the Snell's ancient gnarled door. The boy peered up at the high stone wall that the door was set into. His hammering disturbed a family of birds perched on top of the wall, storm petrels with black and white tails, who now flew off into the city.

The Hand of Fatima –the Jews called it the Hand of Miriam – was said to ward off evil.

An old man sitting crouched in a shady doorway opposite the Snell's place took a deep drag on his Gitane, stared lazily at the scrawny kid now hammering on the door for the second time with increased impatience, loudness, and vigour.

Up above the narrow laneway a bright blue cloudless sky looked down upon the scene indifferently. The air was full of the scent of hidden orange jasmine trees. A distant manic sound of dogs barking and the gnashing and neighing of worn out donkeys further interrupted the Casbah's afternoon silence.

The old man giggled mischievously, his laugh a nasty smoker's rasp, his eyes suggesting a certain lack of common sense or grounding in the real world, as if he was already in communication with Allah or belonged to some secret sect with access to true wisdom.

'*Skun?*' demanded a loud full-bodied female voice from behind the door.

'I am Titi. I have a message for Mr. Bill,' the boy shouted, feeling stupid talking to a wooden door. 'He asked me to come get him.'

The old man cackled again as Fatima the housekeeper noisily struggled with the large and ancient bolt lock that protected the Snells from Tangier's unwashed hordes. Eventually the bolt surrendered, the door swung open, and Titi stared up at a tall, statuesque black woman in her fifties dressed in a pastel pink jellaba.

'Yes? How did you know where to look for this Mr. Bill?' she demanded haughtily, eyeing Titi's clothes to assess what sort of boy he was and to what extent he could be trusted. He was smartly dressed in a pair of worn chinos and a freshly pressed white cotton shirt. He was clean, hair freshly cut, and he held himself well.

Fourteen year old Titi, a quiet studious boy thought to be short for his age, was the son of Achmed who worked in the office of Tangier's Harbour Master.

'Mr. Bill? He is here?' asked the exhausted boy who'd been looking for Willy el Puto for over an hour. 'He told me he was going to a funeral at St. Andrew's Church so I went there first to find him. They told me there that the funeral was over and that Mr. Bill went to Dean's Bar with some American friends. So I went and they told me there that he had been but that he got invited to the home of the Snells in the Casbah. So I climbed up the hill to the Casbah and then I asked some English people where the Snells lived. They didn't know but some other people came along and the English asked them and these ones told me the way. And now I am here.'

'Now you are here,' Fatima agreed, clucking soothingly, for he'd endured a long and difficult walk in the sticky afternoon heat - and he sounded like an educated boy. 'What you want with this man?'

'He asked me to tell him when the ship arrives from America with his friend and now the ship is coming soon.'

'Get inside,' the big woman ordered, pulling to one side, summoning the boy into a small walled garden where he saw the source of the orange jasmine smell, a large bush arched out over a simple well worn wooden bench.

Fatima pointed towards the bench and instructed the boy to sit. 'You wait here. I'll go see.'

Before she went into the salon she poured a glass of iced lemon water and brought it out to him. Gulping it gratefully, Titi thought about what he'd do with the money Willy el Puto had promised to pay him.

In the Snell's small salon a group of slightly drunk American mourners lolled around on long ornate Moorish sofas lining three sides of the room's tiled walls. A large carved oak coffee table took up the middle and was covered in glasses, cigarette packets, and ashtrays.

Lester Snell, a smart conservative-looking New Yorker in his early forties, was taking orders at the drinks cabinet. He taught economic history at the American University of Beirut but was on temporary secondment to the American Information Centre on Rue du Statut.

Rumour had it that John Foster Dulles thought the world of Lester, who wore a white poplin Brooks Brothers summer suit. He'd voted for Adlai Stevenson in '52 and '56 but nobody knew that. He'd been in Iran in '53 when they'd toppled Massadegh and reinstated the Shah.

Linda Snell, with her cropped and dyed blonde hair, looked younger than her husband. She'd just discovered she was pregnant with their third child. She sat on one of the long sofas, holding a joint disdainfully, pincer-like, between her thumb and index finger, her slim figure shown off to perfection by her favourite Dior bar suit. The jacket was a brilliant white and the skirt a dark

navy blue. She'd voted for Eisenhower in '52 and '56. Everybody knew that.

Looking at her from the opposite end of the sofa, as if taking notes, was Bill Burroughs, whose purpose in living in Morocco was unclear. Some said he was on the run. He talked a lot in his twitchy way about guns and about things made out of steel. Steel appeared to be of particular interest to him.

He fidgeted as he spoke and seemed a bit uncomfortable in his skin. Despite all his shortcomings, he was not without charisma.

Watching Burroughs surreptitiously was Dave Ulmer, a gossip columnist with the *Tangier Gazette* who was also editor Bill Bird's Sancho Panza. Ulmer wore baggy pants, old shoes, and a red-and-black flannel shirt with two open front pockets. He'd an oily appearance and olive-coloured skin.

He first came to Tangier during the War to help build the American air bases. When Burroughs first arrived in town he'd wanted to meet the celebrated writer Paul Bowles, bestselling author of *The Sheltering Sky*: It was Ulmer who'd made the introduction. Ulmer was a big fan of the Tangier young boy homo-sex scene and had a sour reputation in that regard. Tall and skinny, he retained a boyish quality though he was well into his forties.

Alongside Ulmer sat Bill Bird, both editor and assumed proprietor of the *Tangier Gazette*.

Bird, who'd a cautious avuncular way about him, despised Dave Ulmer. At 69 he was the oldest person in the room. Hemingway based Jake Barnes, the narrator of *The Sun Also Rises*, on Bird, an exuberantly fat man whose food-fuelled belly burst out from between sober grey suspenders. He'd written a celebrated guide to French wines.

He was a safe pair of hands.

Keeping himself to himself; for he'd money worries at the paper, his face had that sallow look that comes from overeating and undersleeping with visible black lines clustered around eyes which betrayed enormous intelligence, sensitivity, and alertness.

Opposite this group, relaxing on another sofa, lay the famous Paul Bowles – the only one of the group gathered in the Snell's home who'd known Jim Tyler, the dead man, in any way well. Bowles was thinking about Tyler who'd given him good advice when he first came to Morocco looking for a place to live. Jim had a small but booming business importing top end cars. Bowles bought his Jaguar from Jim – who'd just keeled over after a heart attack at the age of fifty-three.

Bowles was also thinking about Jim's wife Peggy who'd flown in from Miami for the funeral. Bowles liked Peggy; she reminded him of Maureen O'Hara.

Linda Snell, who felt it'd been a near-perfect day for a funeral, leaned across to offer her joint to Bowles. He arched over to accept it, smiled softly, and murmured sincere thanks. He had an air of courteous melancholy about him and was dressed, as usual, impeccably. He looked considerably younger than his forty six years with a brisk head of flaxen hair and an aura of physical unruliness which went hand in hand with his somewhat dry, pedantic, academic manner.

Jane Bowles was not with him. Gossip doing the rounds on the Tangier Telegraph, that broad majestic river of hearsay that circulated freely around the city, had it that she was either extremely ill or just going off the rails again.

Eldon Gubbins, a mature but impressively built character with vigorous black hair cut to the bone and piercing brown eyes which rarely missed a thing, was helping Lester with the drinks. He had the broad neck of a man powerfully connected to his own physical life and his face was firm-nosed, firm-jawed. Just turned sixty, he lived in the same building as Bill Burroughs.

Gubbins claimed to be a businessman but clearly had something to do with what he once referred to as "the American Government abroad." He'd gotten his education at the War College, Georgetown Law, and West Point.

Possessed of what the Army called "command presence," he carried his head proudly but low, a little to one side, with a hangdog, unassuming expression.

Bill Burroughs moved jerkily in the slim-fitting black business suit he'd picked up for next-to-nothing at a second hand stall on the Socco Grande. He wished Linda Snell had passed the joint to him first. There'd be nothing left when Bowles got finished with it. His sober suit contrasted loudly with the flamboyant red Moorish skullcap that adorned his tightly cropped head. Excepting that cap, he looked every inch the Baptist preacher.

Joe Ambrose works as a writer, DJ, and arts agitator. The author of 14 books, he has worked with Marianne Faithfull, Anita Pallenberg, and Raymond Salvatore Harmon among others. www.joeambrose.info.



THE MERCENARIES OF TIME: PARTS I & II
THE STOOGES WITH ELEPHANT'S MEMORY - MICHIGAN
PALACE, FEBRUARY 9, 1974
SPECIAL APPEARANCE: SATORI CIRCUS

By Michele Dawn Saint Thomas

Photos ©Michele Dawn Saint Thomas

I was oblivious to it at the time but the signs were all around. The counter-culture scene in early '70s Detroit was in a state of free-fall, towards a tragic demise from its epic creative height of the sixties.

Plum Street's attempted bohemian arts colony had completely collapsed, along with efforts by local artists to establish a street fair on Woodward Avenue similar to that in Montreal. The existing brick and mortar business were strictly opposed to this effort, in the belief that when people came downtown the local artists would seize profits from the larger stores of the establishment. Problem was, people were just not venturing downtown like they used to. Life had changed. Two major aspects, one, the "white flight" exodus, and two, the high crime rate,

were keeping people away from Detroit. Plus, something new was on the horizon: the suburban shopping mall. Why travel beyond your neighborhood community when all could be found locally?

One would think that the release of White Panther leaders John Sinclair and Pun Plamondon would have sparked more energy in the air in terms of a revolutionary earnestness. However, there was something destroying the inner city culture that all the radical politics and bohemian artists in the world were unable to prevent. An inner city struggle for a greater share of a shrinking pool of decreasing financial resources was inevitable. False hope was held by the ever-dwindling diehards. Some said that Detroit would make a comeback: a phoenix rising, the Renaissance Center, and all that jazz. But it didn't.

The toll was staggering. Motown left the city. Eventually, the music icon whose very band was representative of the power and glory when Detroit had exploded musically and creatively, Rob Tyner of the MC5, would himself depart Detroit for Birmingham, a suburb on the outskirts of the city.

It was in these years that the mighty bands of the Motor-City and the surrounding areas began a downward tumble. I thought of the phrase that I had heard manically repeated during one of my past trips: It is time for you to read the signs. Yes, it was true, the signs were apparent, and I knew others must have seen them as well. As the symptoms of the decline became impossible to ignore, two questions came to mind. Why would a city become a perpetrator of its own implosion? And why would a nation's power elite allow one of their top ten cities to collapse?

It was the circumstances of this era that my thoughts kept returning to, and I became obsessed with the idea of somehow altering history. Was it possible that the events of the past could be changed? And if so, how?

I knew that I could effectively travel back to the past, and was getting pretty good at arriving at my targeted destinations in time. But as I looked through my hotel window at the surrounding wasteland that encircled downtown Detroit, my mind again became enraptured with the thought: Could there be an alternative reality to what I was seeing?

In this mindset I pondered, and into this time frame my thoughts latched onto.

Although many years had passed and much had transpired since the time of Detroit's glory days, the thought of Michigan's very own Palace being just a rotting curtain on a stage in the parking lot of a vacant city was more than I could bear. This was the image that became the catalyst in my premeditated attempt to alter history.

For most of the Palace acts I had attended in my youth, I had been accompanied by Julie. However, for some reason or another, I could not remember why, I had originally attended The Stooges' concert solo. This fact just made my decision easier. I could not tolerate any distractions. There were to be no encumbrances to influence my moves in my quest to alter events, and to that end my re-attendance of this concert was to be the ultimate test in my most righteous plan.

My first appearance at this concert had been cut short due to the violence of the crowd. But I had never really understood why a local crowd would vent in such a terrible manner to a local

band, especially one that was beginning to make inroads to national acclaim. What had compelled segments of the audience to be so demonstratively hostile? How could I possibly alter that? What could I myself do to change anything at all? I was not a player of any sort, not a producer, musician, celebrity. No, I was just a young kid, barely out of my bubblegum waifish years.

I was stymied. Then I latched onto the idea of testing my hypothesis, and to this end I made a simple enough plan. I would purchase a camera prior to the concert, and see if I could take photos of the event, and have the photos in the new time stream after the event. Not exactly a life changing alteration to anything, let alone time itself. But if this idea worked, I would have the proof I needed that time itself could be changed by virtue of this time travel photographic magic. The rest, of course, would begin a journey into an incredibly dramatic pursuit!

It would take two hits of acid. I immediately dropped one, and began my thought process. The first hit would take me back to the time period. The second hit was required to obtain the intensity I needed to achieve the desired effect, thereby attaining my goal. It would be a trip within a trip. The first was easy enough. I floated through time and space. My landing, although spinning, was surprisingly relaxing, and I was soon back in 1974 on the day of the concert, once again, alone in the front room of my parents' home in Lincoln Park.

I then tore the second tab from the WMP Pursuit card that I had brought along with me, and, taking a deep breath, I readied myself and prepared to change fate. I knew that my idea to transverse this realm solo was the ideal and only way. After all, I would need to be in top form and focus my entire energies upon the task. I had no idea how I was to deal with the events, nor what I might expect to occur once the time streams had been altered.

This was indeed going to be an outrageous adventure! I started my turntable spinning with the licorice pizza of The Stooges' newest, which I had recently purchased from a hippie boutique on Dix Avenue, along with an Ann Arbor Sun that had the headline "Weed Wins," and some incense. I lit the incense. Colours were already forming misty fogs of ever-changing patterns on the carpet. Then, much like a cue, a guttural belch launched the sounds of *Raw Power*, and the music began to spill into the room. Within a very few moments, I was once again in a glorious time traveling mood. Grasping the cork screw, I opened the Cabernet, sipped some wonderful red, and downed one more tab of acid from the card.

Seemed like only moments passed Can ya feel it, can ya feel it, and again it got me floatin', round and round. God, how I was loving these journeys. Always an exciting adventure, and now, if only to myself, an important mission!

I projected myself upward and outward in astral travel until I spied my '67 Pontiac Catalina motoring on Fort Street within a mile or two of the Palace. Seeing myself in the auto, I made a beeline to my own body and entered it. Simple enough. I was instantly renewed with my real time thoughts, even allowing myself the necessary time to stop at a drugstore, pick up some smokes, and buy the best possible camera they had. It happened to be an inexpensive Olympus 35mm camera. Smiling, I thought to myself, This is perfect! I knew I did not have this apparatus previously on this outing.

The clerk, happy to make such a nice sale, inquired "Anything else?"

“Pack of Kool,” I replied.

The amount for the camera and cigs were moderately priced, and I was prepared. I had saved small face denominational bills for this very reason, and they worked like magic. If the clerk had checked he would have discovered that the mint dates were in the ‘80s, but who would have ever noticed?

Back in my car, I loaded the film into the camera and started the engine, now only minutes away from the Palace. Luck was on my side; I obtained excellent parking adjacent to the venue. Crossing the street towards the Palace, I noticed the bright lights of the marquee displaying “The Stooges” in bold neon. The night so far seemed to be flowing like a breeze.

I paid my admission and entered the main lobby. The palace had elements of the sexy girls in nylons and garters parading with their gentleman friends, remnants of the Dolls show a month or so earlier, but the gritty street rockers of Detroit were much more prevalent in attendance. I sat for a brief minute and took in some of the beautiful ambiance of the theatre. It was then I was approached by a lean, long-haired rocker. Exchanging introductions, we immediately took a liking to one another. Several years my senior, his name was Dave, and as I accompanied him upstairs to the balcony, I discovered he was from Ann Arbor. We spoke at length and shared a joint while I tested out the camera with a few shots of the first band, Elephant’s Memory.

Dave and I talked about the Stooges in their earlier days, when it seemed everyone knew them as the Psychedelic Stooges. He had been at the Grande many times when they had performed there, and recalled how nearly everybody used to laugh and make fun of them at the time because they could barely play their instruments. I mentioned how my sister Betty used to speak of them in the worst terms ever: “They just can not play!” she would say, or “They sound so distorted you can’t even hear proper notes!” Dave laughed as I related this to him, but we both agreed that those very sounds were becoming The Stooges’ stock in trade. “I Wanna Be Your Dog” represented this well, but the beauty of this song was its simplicity and gut appeal. It affected you with an angst and sexual ennui that rang true with the teenage condition.

We seemed to be in agreement that Elephant’s Memory was just not the proper supporting act for The Stooges. It would have been far better to have had an act such as Detroit’s own superstars The SRC or Frijid Pink, as each band had their own unique distorted fuzz-guitar sound. Even The Dogs, with their electrifying high energy, would have been a much better warm up in voltage for both the crowd and The Stooges. After all, where would the rock and roll guitar be without Detroit – we invented electricity!

Following the opening act, Dave wanted to stay in the balcony for a bird’s-eye view of The Stooges, while I wanted to shoot them from the main floor. So, during the intermission, we said our goodbyes and I headed downstairs. Making my way closer to the stage, I lit up a cigarette and inhaled – there’s always something refreshing about a menthol cigarette to follow up a marijuana high – and awaited The Stooges.

The Stooges were the stand-outs of the Michigan counter-culture music scene. The first years of the ‘70s saw many of their local contemporaries slowly slipping into the dark crevices of oblivion. Such was the lot with most hippie acts who, by the end of the ‘60s, had been unable to evolve – musically speaking, they simply had nowhere else to go. But The Stooges stubbornly refused such a fate; after all, they were never really part of the flower-child set. They did not

harmonize the mellow grooves of the free-love generation, but screamed out a raw convulsive energy.

The effects of the grass were still abuzz in my head; I felt excitement flowing in my veins. The Stooges were the creators of three innovative albums, and I was here to rock to any combination of them. Soon, a Victorian-styled gentleman in a top hat walked to the mike and announced that The Stooges were ready to take the stage. I squeezed up even further and prepared myself for what I had originally believed would be the Detroit kickoff-off to their world-wide fame. Boy, had I ever been mistaken!

The band's stunning appearance on stage visually attracted everyone's attention, even before Iggy's arrival. They began rocking out an instrumental reminiscent of earlier Grande days. It was weird to see Ron on bass and the sound certainly had that eerie vibration to show for it. To hear someone on bass playing a lead-like rhythm to the pounding beat of the drums was something you'd never expect, but only with The Stooges could it be a method. But as for Williamson on lead, who I had never seen previously with the band, with his space-age glitter well beyond current fashion, offered up an astonishing orchestration of vicious fuzz guitar. The drumming kicked in and the theme harkened back to the days of "Shake Appeal," which rocketed the music forcefully outward to the crowd.

They held this vibe for minutes the sound oscillated with trappings of a hypnotic trance that began to get the kids in the crowd boppin' to its manic beat. Everything at this point seemed to be going exceptionally well, and with the added promise of this being an incredible show. The beat grew stronger, James slamming his axe near center stage, and Ron to his brother's right banging the bass notes down. Ron being dressed provocatively in military jacket, and swastika armband, appeared to have an air of fascistic fascination. How groovily decadent I thought, this was so way cool visually that it was exciting to even see, let alone hear.

In a language of musical terms that fondly described two of the most prominent bands known in Detroit. If the MC5 were the high energy of a powerful acid induced locomotive, The Stooges were the results of the glorious psychedelic mayhem of its chaotic train wreck!

I first thought that they would segue-way into Loose but the band's angle of attack was in a bizarre cacophony of Williamson's guitar twanging out screeching notes in typical Stooge fashion. Then dancing with a primal out of control instinctive angst appeared Iggy dressed provocatively in black leotards and flaunting a ballerina's Tu-tu dancing like a magical imp, and moving catlike across the stage more or less in sequence to the music and over to the center micro-phone stand.

The band's maniacal musical pace intensified. Firing fuzzed out volleys of splattering notes, their sound was like the noise of a head-on car crash. Yes, these were The Stooges, so insanely unsettling, like an overdose of a San Francisco speed-ball—heroin and cocaine mixed with LSD—their sound so diametrically opposed to their '60s flower-children counterparts. "Cock In My Pocket" was slammed out in such a disturbingly wicked manner that it captured the feel of the band's beginnings as the Psychedelic Stooges. So much so that I believed everyone in attendance would undoubtedly rock out to this. However, to the contrary, it got real twisted, real fast.



Their devastatingly acid sound flowed easily from one song to the next. It wasn't like there was much of a break in the chords. Perhaps they began another song, I could not tell, but I began seeing bizarre trails of colourful flying objects targeted towards the stage. I was momentarily taken aback. What the hell?!

The chaotic power of the music, twined together with Iggy's sarcastically vulgar vocals, had unleashed the worse in a segment of the audience. Coins, food and other objects were thrown. Bottles shattered on the stage, a few nearly missing the targeted head of the spastically moving front man himself. The band continued jamming out their unique madness of auditory dementia, but were barely able to finish the piece amidst the barrage of Stooage-seeking

missiles. Iggy pranced about wildly, taking verbal shots at various audience members with quick-witted profanity. All the while, Williamson held his ground like an out-numbered soldier on the front flank, stage-left. The Ashton brothers were positioned back a bit; ironically, Ron, in his commanding military attire, appeared dressed for the event, and seemed initially unfettered by the continuous airborne assault of objects. Scott, in his black "Detroit Wheels" Tee, was perhaps the best protected, his kit offering somewhat of a shield.

Being pelted left and right, The Stooges for a time held their ground, and the band played on till it was near impossible to do so. By this point, the stage was littered with broken glass and other miscellaneous debris. Boos and jeers prevailed. Those who had come to see a Stooges performance were in a very distressed state. The Palace had been transformed into a demented hall of havoc. When a flying bottle made direct impact with and exploded off of James' guitar, they had had enough. James unplugged his instrument and they all walked off...

However, those in the crowd that were fans quickly became very vocal and united in voice for The Stooges, Stooges, Iggy, Iggy... till the members returned back on stage one after another. I remembered the concert from New Year's and with all the variations of styles that the rockers wore, and the words of a Mod that I met at the Dolls concert on New Year's Eve and a conversation with him about music, and his speaking about Mod mentality vs. mob mentality. Gee, I thought it truly made sense, especially now. This venue could certainly use some of this valuable mod thinking right now. And in seconds Williamson began firing out the salvos again with the combination of piano and pounding percussion the Stooges were back with a blistering counter attack. Some in the crowd still continued throwing items, I myself grabbing the arm of a kid throwing small objects on stage, and when he protested, my threatening a bitch slap made him quickly fade away. A momentary respite in the mood of the crowd as those fans of the Stooges took control of the whimsical attitude of those hostile in the audience. Another bottle broke on stage right between Iggy and James, but then the others could take no more the band again departed, the debris cluttering stage again. It was all but over, the top-hatted emcee came out requesting in no uncertain terms that the people responsible had to exit the palace, some did, but conflicts were everywhere.

Admst the backdrop, I was frantically snapping a shot here and there, extremely eager to see the band retake the stage, as I knew from my future reality that this was to be their last show. Yes, The Stooges were to return again, this I knew, but what magic was it that would make this happen, what did I miss the first time here, I thought to myself as the mayhem reigned and fights broke out here and there. The Palace being now a total madhouse. It was then, when I glanced upward, towards the balcony stage left that I saw him, the Amaranthine himself, illusionist and prankster... Satori Circus.

* * * * *

The entire theater had become a massive downpour of flying objects. Everything from cans, bottles and coins were being thrown up onto the stage. The situation became contagious; soon random missiles were airborne everywhere throughout the hall.

The Palace now was half vacant and nearly everyone that remained was either clamoring to get closer to the stage for purposes of their own agendas, or rapidly exiting the venue. The stage itself looked a terrible fright, unsuitable for even the most daredevil of performers to be upon it at all.

Total chaos reigned supreme.

It was from this mayhem that I observed Satori Circus, standing at balcony's edge, cleverly reflect his radiance toward the stage. In a matter of seconds, a powerful mystical energy seemed to affect the crowd. This esoteric moment was recognized and seized upon immediately by the masterful Stanley T. MadHatter. The omnipotent force gave Stanley a most magnificent aura that was untouchable by any thrown items from the crowd. He stood alone against the antagonistic mob and, in a supernatural Quintilian manner, addressed them with such vigor that he was moderately successful in calming the riotous factions. As he spoke, objects that were thrown in his direction bounced harmlessly away, as though he was surrounded by a protective force field.

Stanley was at the top of his game. In his signature style, he impressively displayed an unlikely combination of heavenly grace and Motor-City attitude. I had seen him emcee previously at the Grande Ballroom, but never had I witnessed the MadHatter be more brilliant than on this particular night. With stunning eloquence, he managed to get the crowd fired up to the point that large segments of the audience were now loudly clamoring for The Stooges to reappear.

And he didn't stop there. He then worked his Quintilian magic on The Stooges themselves, and in quick time Iggy reappeared, and soon after that the rest followed, one by one... James, the second to reappear, began performing with Iggy as a duo. Before long, each Asheton brother, along with Scott Thurston on piano, had been prompted both by the chanting crowd and the encouragement of Iggy and James to retake their respective places.

I was completely astonished by the miraculous intervention of Stanley T. MadHatter, powered by the graces of Satori Circus, and the awe-inspiring effect that it had. The Stooges were now again launching an all out rockin' assault, and I had never heard them perform better. They were kickin' out the sound with such vigor and angst that, if I had to attest to their ability at that very moment, I would have certainly stated that they sounded like the greatest band that ever existed.

They gave it their all. Thurston's piano stylings provided a stinging backdrop for The Stooges as they blasted out their sound in damning defiance to the vulgarities, death threats and hurled objects that were still being thrown from the bikers in the crowd. The scene brought to mind a critique I had read by Lester Bangs of The Stooges' performance at a club in another part of the city the night before, something about Iggy feeding on the hostility of the crowd and throwing it back at them, an "eerie, frightening symbiosis."¹

I was seeing a Wagnerian struggle between the physical and spiritual, crescendoing into an oscillating battle between two separate planes of existence, each vying for control of the venue. It was as thrilling to witness as it was dangerous to experience. Against these unbelievable odds, The Stooges jammed on, and at their finest. There was no other band that could have performed with such exuberance under these conditions. However, this Stooges nirvana was to be all too short; their death bell was already sounding the tone of their destructive end.

It was in this battle between the forces of light and dark that my eyes bore witness to the power this spell, cast by Satori Circus, had upon the endurance of the performers. The events of a night as powerful as this must, I believe, exist forever in a timeless universe on a multitude of levels. This show would exist forever.

Satori Circus had begun floating effortlessly over the mayhem of the crowd and, with a wave of his hand, slowed the movements of all in attendance except for mine and his own. I realized he was searching the crowd for something or someone. It was then that I spotted a girl in black leather moving at normal speed, totally unaffected by the powerful magic of Satori Circus.

It was the Mistress of Black, Darla Dade. Yes, I'd encountered her before—she was the woman who had attempted to poison me in Long Beach at the Quicksilver/Dogs concert. Satori Circus had spotted Darla Dade as well; I could tell by the darts that began flying from his eyes in her direction.

¹ Lester Bangs essay, "Iggy Pop: Blowtorch in Bondage"

Darla tried to hide herself within the crowd. As she moved among the people, she created a whirlwind of papers and objects about her, attempting to conceal herself. To her credit, by the use of her contrivances, she was the only one in the Palace who was a match for the wizardly Satori Circus. She then signaled to her throng of biker dupes to continue disrupting the performance as she made her getaway. As she departed, the Palace was nothing more than a hailstorm of debris. The show continued but her damage was done.

Satori Circus transmitted his thoughts to me: "Darla Dade was the culprit here. It was her devious efforts that caused the disruption. I will seek her out in another time and place, and put an end to her madness once and for all.

"For few believe in my powerful secrets, so I must be careful. However, in the future many shall know the name of Satori Circus! The secrets I possess are many and powerful, from being able to stop time in its tracks to creating passion out of thin air with my many potions. My magic attracts women and women attract Satori Circus!"

Then Satori Circus began to dematerialize. The last words I heard him cry out were "*Let there be Circuses*" and "*when The Stooges next rock, let it be for the world!*" The phrases gave off a ghostly echo, and in the blink of an eye, the charismatic Satori Circus the Armarantine was gone.

Such were the bizarre events taking place in the Palace this Detroit night. A combination of forces that encompassed things I never knew possible, nor even knew existed.

In a dark mental flash I saw the Asheton brothers leave the stage, even before they could finish the finale of their distributing beat to "Gimme Danger." Another bottle shattered in between Iggy and James, and the remaining members departed, to return no more.

Amidst all the garbage and broken debris on the stage floor, Stanley the MadHatter came out one final time, but only to close the show. As he approached the mic, someone in the crowd tilted the stand and attempted to steal the microphone. Stanley chastised the culprit to such an extent that the would-be thief appeared to be frozen in his tracks, and upon the MadHatter's command, meekly surrendered his attempted ill-gotten souvenir. The curtain then closed. The concert was over, kaput.

What a night. I could not believe it had played out like this, but it had.

On my way to my car, still reeling from the events of the evening, I suddenly remembered the camera. My god, the pictures! The first time I had attended this concert I had not had a camera, but this time I had. Would the photos develop?

I reached out my right hand to unlock the car door. The key turned in the lock, but as I reached for the door handle with my left, my fingers were unable to grasp it. My body had begun evaporating, and in seconds I had faded into a darkened nothingness. As I spun in the vortex, I realized that events in time could, and in some cases should be changed, but to what level was it possible to do so? I did not know. Was I treading on dangerous territory? Could this "time tripping," if controlled, be the ultimate avenue of historical, cultural and political subversion?

I zapped back from the vortex into my parent's home in Lincoln Park. The title track of *Raw Power* was still spinning on the turntable. A few more rotations and I felt myself fade out

again—ah yes, I recalled, this was a two-part trip. In seconds, I found myself back in my hotel room in downtown Detroit.

I was now back in present time, both exhausted and bedazzled. I spotted my book, *Lost From The Ottawa*, which I had along as my reading companion, perched on top of my satchel. As I moved the book aside and peered into my bag, I was in a tethered state of nervous trepidation. *Had my efforts been worthy?* I wondered anxiously. Pulling out my photo album of past concerts, I quickly leafed through the pages, my heavy eyes turning into large saucers when I spotted what had never existed before—photos of the last STOOGES performance ever, and at the Michigan Palace!!! *Yes! God, how I screamed!* Here were the pictures I myself had taken of The Stooges at the Michigan Palace, as if they had always existed. I had done it. I had created a small but effective aberration in the oscillatory universe.

With newfound energy and enthusiasm, I decided to righteously top off this evening properly. *Mischa*, I thought, congratulating myself, *let's spend the rest of this summer night with The SRC at The Magic Bag!* With a smile on my lips and the sounds of “Bolero” beating in my heart, I grabbed my jacket and headed off down Woodward Avenue.



“The Mercenaries of Time” is an excerpt from *The Incredible Adventures of Mischa*, by Michele Dawn Saint Thomas.

NIGHT IN THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM: DOUGLAS PRESTON AND THE POWER OF *RELIC*

By Noah Charney

When I was young, I suffered from a recurring nightmare. I am in my pajamas, the sort with slippers included to cover your feet, and I awake in the midst of a dark room at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. It is the middle of the night, and the museum is locked and empty. I feel that I am being watched on all sides by the glassy eyes of the rectangular windows that separate me from the dioramas for which the museum is renowned – dioramas which populate every self-respecting natural history museum, but which have always creeped me out mightily. The floor is of dark shag, a darkness that covers the walls and ceiling, making it unclear where the parameters of the room lie. I want to close my eyes once more, to melt into the floor and open them in my bed, but I cannot.

That is when I start to see something horrible in the watery, liquid darkness behind the glass. The dioramas are moving.

The lights inside the dioramas sputter on, as I stand and try to escape. The animates cannot leave their glassed-in cells, those figures and creatures inside: waxen Neanderthals, giant Irish elk with antlers six feet across, Inuits crowding around an igloo, a pit of snakes against a painted jungle backdrop, a stuffed polar bear rearing on its hind legs, the skeleton of a saber-toothed cat and, worst of all, the aquatic displays, a taxidermed shark suspended in false water behind the glass of a dead aquarium. I run through the darkened museum halls, trying not to see inside the dioramas, as they writhe and scrape at the glass, looking for a way out.

I had these dreams regularly throughout my childhood, and I suppose that Carl Jung would call these anxiety dreams based on archetypes. While I don't remember any horses (Jung's favorite potent symbol), I've always had trouble with aquariums, not for any particular fear of sharks, but because I've been monumentally freaked out by being surrounded by glassed-in, moving exhibits since I was little. I remember an early, formatively traumatic trip the New York's Natural History Museum, when the giant model of a blue whale in the great hall displaying oceanic creatures bugged me out to such an extent that I couldn't enter the room, nor have I entered it since. Ironically, I'm also drawn to these museums, particularly exhibits of Ice Age mammals, which have always intrigued me more than dinosaurs. It is also ironic that I eventually became an art historian, frequenting a world of different museums, but museums nonetheless. Though I now study paintings by dead white Europeans, this combination of fear and intrigue surrounding natural history museums has always remained with me.

Freud might have referred to these museums as "liminal zones," straddling the thick line between everyday normalcy (animals in the wild) and dreamscapes of the impossible (extinct, stuffed monsters which might suddenly come to life). Museums, too, preserve the past in an artificial way, intent on informing us, but also with an inherent, church-like eeriness. These dreams came decades before the popular film *Night at the Museum*, which was cute enough, but which struck me as lighter than it should have been, tapping as it did this vein that has lain inside me, the horror of living-dead exhibits. I imagine that others feel this, since *Night at the*

Museum was such a hit—surely its author shared some of the feelings I did with regard to natural history museums.

And so we come to the great novel of animated monsters of lost eras. No, not *Jurassic Park*, wonderful and thrilling though it was. I refer to the great novel of an animated monster loose in the American Museum of Natural History, *Relic*. *Relic* (1995) was the first novel by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, their first major best-seller in a long series of similarly gripping adventures that feature a nicely weird protagonist, FBI Agent Aloysius Pendergast. The plots combine a bit of Indiana Jones with a lot of Michael Crichton. They are genuinely scary page-turners, well-written though without literary pretense, and intelligent enough to keep you interested.

Relic is a dark thriller set inside New York's American Museum of Natural History, where Preston once worked. Preston publishes both fiction and non-fiction (his first book, *Dinosaurs in the Attic*, was about life inside the Natural History Museum), and has worked as a scientist for many years, coming to the realm of best-selling thrillers rather late in his career.

The Natural History Museum is such a lush, shadowy place to set a thriller-cum-horror novel (especially for a reader like me) that Preston and Child could hardly have gone wrong, and they did not. They produced a faultless novel, every bit as good as *Jurassic Park*, which gained more traction largely because it was made into a top-level movie, whereas the film version of *Relic* is very different from the book, and pales in comparison to it.

In *Relic*, an expedition to South America disappears, but not before a crate containing items collected in the wild jungles is sent back to the Natural History Museum. There it sits, in storage, forgotten and uncatalogued. Fast forward to a horrific murder inside the museum, one that baffles police. The museum is locked down, and the other-worldly staff of scientists (many based on real people) are interviewed as possible suspects, or future victims. The museum tries to stay open in anticipation of a big, money-making exhibit, and more murders follow. It gives nothing away that the book covers do not to say that the villain turns out to be related to a relic sent back by the lost expedition.

A living monster roaming the dark halls of the museum, weaving in and out of the dead, skeletal, and stuffed creatures displayed there, provides a perfect union of genre and setting. I've re-read *Relic* many times, enjoying the creepiness inherent in each pass through this wonderful, unpretentious, wildly effective book. It is a master class in how to interweave place and plot, a union which we don't often consider, as few books are so location-bound, like a set for a play. Aside from an opening scene in the Amazon, *Relic* barely strays from the noose-tight walls of the Natural History Museum. It does not need to. It taps into my childhood nightmares in a way that makes it feel as though it were written just for me. But I have a feeling that my dark museum visions are shared by a good many others, drawn to glassed-in creatures with a combination of fear and fascination.

Now writing my own trapped horror novel, I find that I refer back to *Relic* constantly. It was a particular thrill, therefore, to interview Douglas Preston for a series I edit for *The Daily Beast*, called "[How I Write](#)." Every week I interview a different fellow writer about the writing life.

Rather than run that interview as part of this series, I am pleased to offer it here, exclusively for *Paraphilia*.

Name: Douglas Preston

Most recent book: *Gideon's Corpse*

Where did you grow up?

The deadly boring suburb of Wellesley, Massachusetts.

Where and what did you study?

English Literature at Pomona College, Claremont, California, BA 1978, D.Litt. (Hons) 2010.

Where do you live and why?

Santa Fe, New Mexico. Because at 7,000 feet, it is closer to heaven.

Of which of your books or projects are you most proud?

Cities of Gold, The Cabinet of Curiosities, The Monster of Florence.

Describe your morning routine.

Get up, make espresso coffee, and run up three little hills above Santa Fe with my dog. Then I go to my office and work.

What is a distinctive habit or affectation of yours?

I pick my nose.

What is your favorite item of clothing?

My Fritz Scholder bolo tie in the shape of a skull.

Please recommend three books (not your own) to your readers.

Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America by Cabeza de Vaca (first published in 1542, edition translated and annotated by Cyclone Covey), *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins



What book do you wish you had written?

Shutter Island by Dennis Lehane.

Do you have a writer friend who helps and inspires you?

Lincoln Child.

What is a place that inspires you?

Pedernal Peak, in the Jemez Mountains of New Mexico.

Name a work of art, in any medium (book, film, painting, etc) that inspires you.

Caspar David Freidrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*

Describe your routine when conceiving of a book and its plot, before the writing begins.

Mulling it over day and night.

Describe your writing routine.

Nine to four on weekdays, mornings on weekends. I never take off time between books – only in the middle of books.

Do you have any unusual rituals associated with the writing process?

Horrible procrastination, obsessive checking of email, and reading *The New York Times* online.

Is there anything distinctive or unusual about your work space?

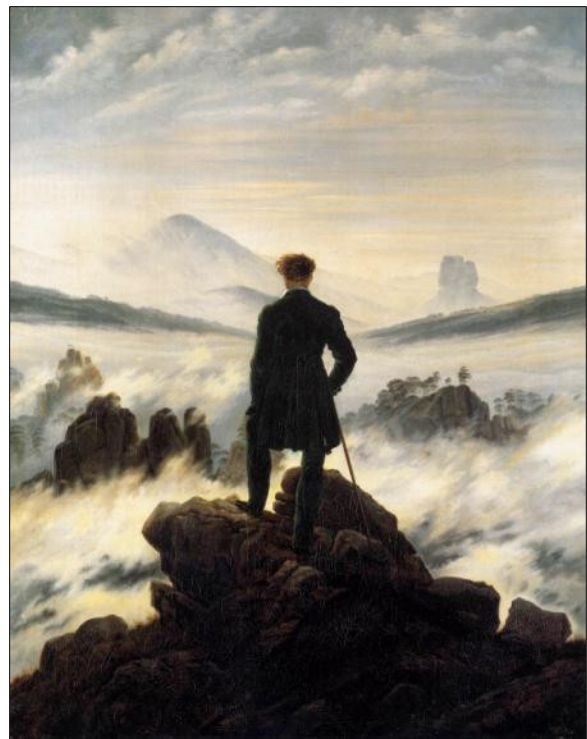
It was designed by my friend Kris Lajeskie, who is a genius.

Besides the obvious, what do you keep on your desk?

Petrified wood and a piece of meteorite shrapnel from the Sikhote-Alin fall.

What is the view from your favorite work space?

Chinese elm trees.



What do you do when you are stuck or have temporary writer's block?

I work through it.

Describe your ideal day.

Run up the mountain, in the office by nine, write two chapters, home by five.

Describe your evening routine.

I cook dinner and spend time with my family. I never work in the evening.

What do you do to relax?

Climb mountains, ski, mountain bike, read, hike.

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas by Hunter S. Thompson

Do you have any superstitions?

No.

What is something you always carry with you?

A small knife with an inlaid turquoise handle.

What is your favorite snack?

Smokehouse almonds.

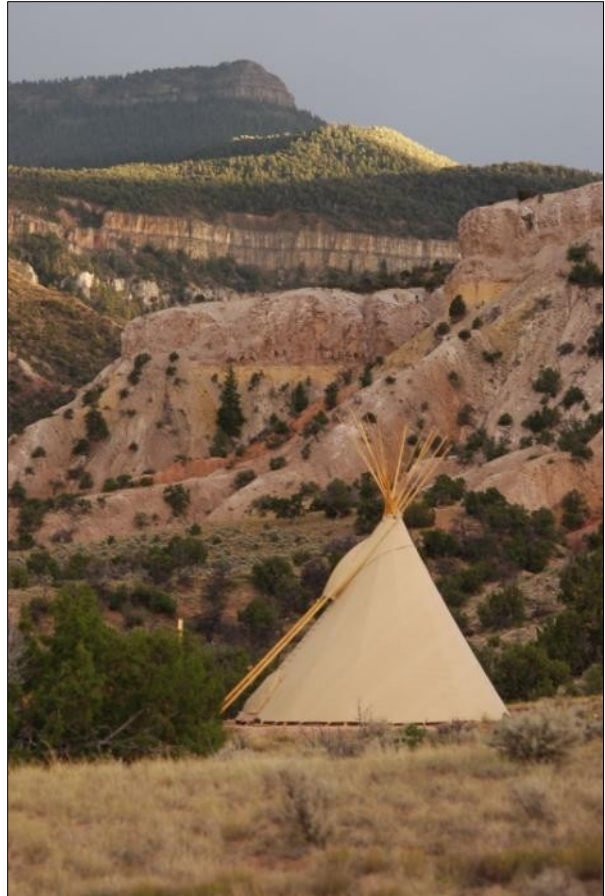
What phrase do you over-use?

"A warren of rooms."

What is a gadget/object/collectible that you could not live without?

My arrowhead collection.

If you could have a meal with any author, and any one other public figure who you do not already know, who would you choose?



Oscar Wilde and Albert Einstein. That would be an interesting conversation, once it got going.

If you could bring back to life one deceased person, who would it be and why?

I might bring back Jesus Christ so he could tell people that gay marriage, contraception, and helping the poor were all fine with him.

Is there a fictional character with whom you identify?

Andrei in *War and Peace*.

What would you do for work, if you were not a writer?

I would like to be a composer.

What advice would you give to an aspiring author?

Carve out time to write every day and treat it like a religious duty.

What would you like carved onto your tombstone?

"Time is a storm in which we are all lost."

Tell us something about yourself that is largely unknown and perhaps surprising.

I sometimes listen to electronic dance music.

What is your next project?

A Pendergast novel tentatively entitled *Bane*.

For more on Douglas Preston, please visit www.prestonchild.com or become a fan on Facebook, at <http://www.facebook.com/PrestonandChild>.

Noah Charney is a best-selling author of fiction (*The Art Thief*) and non-fiction (*Stealing the Mystic Lamb: the True Story of the World's Most Coveted Masterpiece*), and a professor of art history. He writes regularly for *ArtInfo* and *The Daily Beast*. He invites readers to join him on [Facebook](#), [Pinterest](#), or follow his [blog](#).

Photos Courtesy of Douglas Preston





MUGGED BY A MOVIE STAR

By B. Kold

I'm ineligible to serve on a jury. Whenever I'm selected for jury duty, I never make it past the first *voir dire*. One of the lawyers will ask, "Have you ever been the victim of a crime?" and I say yes, three times. Back in 1986, I got mugged three times within the span of two weeks. Some folks—uptown types—gasp in disbelief, the opposing lawyers look at each other and shake their heads and I'm on my way home.

The first time, it was at a crackhouse, so I was kind of asking for it, even though, being a whiteboy, I was looking for powdered cocaine, not rock. But it wasn't for me, I swear. I was at Vazacs (what tourists called "the Horseshoe Bar") and I ran into an old friend (who later, ironically enough I suppose, worked on the movie *Traffic*) and she asked me to get her some blow.

Helpful fellow that I am, I ducked around the corner to the rock house on Ave. B and 6th. I went upstairs, checked out their wares and was not impressed—they tried to sell me what looked like Parmesan cheese—really clumpy and yellow crap—so I passed. I went downstairs and while heading to the door at the end of the dimly lit hallway, two guys from the crack den—their names, I shit you not, were Sha-hee and Baby Pop bounded down the stairs, saying "Hold up bro!" and dumbass me, I turned and stopped.

The tall one (Sha-hee? I guess Baby Pop was the short one, but who knows?) stuck the point of a 9" hunting knife up to my throat. I pushed my head against the wall behind me as hard as I could, to get away from the point, which looked and felt really sharp. It seemed like just a quick little push and pop! I'd be skewered. He told me he was mad at me for disrespecting the man's product.

"Should I stick this motherfucker?" he asked the little guy (Baby Pop?).

"Nah, he cool," Baby Pop said as he rifled my pockets, transferring my last 20 bucks from my pants to his. The point of the knife was digging further into my throat and I started shaking, faking terror.

Now, I don't know why, but I really *wasn't* scared. I'm not bragging—I'm no tough guy, anything but, I'm kind of a pussy and hate confrontation of any kind, especially physical, but when I was in the middle of this life-or-death situation, everything seemed really calm and clear and I was totally without fear. I remembered a story my Dad once told me about when he was in the war, and I realized I could get through this safely if I acted really scared, so that's what I did. "Yeah, he harmless," the big one said, disgust apparent in his voice as he lowered the big knife. I nodded my head as if to say, yeah, that's right, I'm harmless, you don't need that big knife anymore.

Meanwhile, Baby Pop pulled my cigarettes from my breast pocket, peered inside the pack and, finding it empty, shook his head sadly and put them back. Thank you Jesus I thought—there

were three bags of dope tucked inside the cellophane. “You ain’t got no watch, bro?” he asked, and I showed him my bare wrist. He frowned and they walked out the door without so much as a by your leave.

When I got back to Vazacs, just around the corner, Shauna was gone. But Evelyn was there, saw the look on my face (now that the moment had passed, I *was* terrified) and asked me what happened. I told her and she said, “Hey, you can get a free drink out of that!”

She pulled me over to the bar and said to the bartender, who would in later years star as an Elvis impersonator/biker in a popular TV show, “Hey Mark, give this guy a drink, he just got mugged!”

“Where?” he asked gruffly.

Two doors down I said.

“Idiot, got what you deserved.” He turned towards a paying customer.

We retreated meekly. Despite her scheming low-rent junky ways, Evelyn meant well and was an all-around good egg.

For the next few days, I saw Sha-hee and Baby Pop wherever I went—not only on the streets of the Lower East Side, but also on the 6 train, Midtown, all over the place—or at least I thought I did. After three days, I couldn’t remember what they looked like anymore and stopped seeing them everywhere.

The second mugging was a week later, while I was waiting for the elevator in the lobby of my apartment in the Jacob Riis house at 7th and D. (How I ended up living there, one of literally two white folks living on Avenue D between Houston and 14th street in 1986, is another long, long story.) I’d just borrowed \$20 from somebody at Vazacs for train and lunch fare for the next day, when two teenagers (I don’t know how I knew they were teenagers, but they obviously were) came up from behind, saying “Yo!” I turned around. I hate to generalize, but I think I can assume with a fair bit of certainty that when young men are wearing ski masks, indoors, in May, one can deduce they are up to no good.

“What?” I sighed. I couldn’t believe this was happening again.

“Give us what you got, bitch!” one shouted. This was before the word “bitch” came into common parlance, and I was stung by their emasculating insult. They both had their right hands in their bulging sweatshirt pockets, like they were pointing guns at me. Whether it was guns or their fingertips tenting the fabric I couldn’t tell.

“Do you have a gun or not,” I said. Again, let me assure you, I wasn’t being some kind of tough guy. I was tired, wanted to go home and was at least half loaded (by midnight, I was always at least half in the bag those days). After the knife against my throat the previous week, pointed fingers weren’t going to get it done. They looked at each other and one of them partially pulled

his hand from his shirt and showed me what kind of looked like a gun barrel, but it might have been a stick or even a Tootsie Roll.

“OK,” I sighed, and reversed my front pockets, showing them white elephant ears. I had nothing. I hoped they would be dumb enough to fall for it. They looked at each other again, one of them gestured towards me with his head, the other one approached me and dug my wallet out of my back pocket. Shit, thought I was going to get away with it for a second. He pulled the lone, borrowed twenty out of my wallet, and threw the wallet against my chest. It fell to the floor while they scampered out the front door.

“Thanks!” I said involuntarily. That made me feel like a chump, but I really was thankful he’d at least given me my wallet back. That was worth a \$20 service charge, right?

So those were the first two times. The first, I was looking for trouble. The second, I was just trying to go home. But the third time was the worst. The third time, I was mugged by a friend: Miguel Piñero, the famous playwright, TV and movie star. OK, he was also a convicted felon, a career criminal, a thief, a murderer, and a pederast junky with HIV – his casting in *Fort Apache: The Bronx* was not much of a stretch – but hey, nobody’s perfect.

I was heading back to my place with Evelyn. It was about 2am, and it had been a long day, we were both kind of dope sick and we had one lousy bag between us. We were just east of B on 6th when I heard somebody shout my name.

Hey! Yo B!

I turned. There was Mikey (that’s what everybody called him) on the other side of the street, furiously waving his arms over his head. He was wearing a ratty old scarf, shapeless fedora and greasy fingerless gloves. He needed a shave two weeks ago.

I stopped. “What’s up Mikey?”

He came trotting over, shambolically approaching me and Evelyn. “You cop yet?”

“Yeah, New York New York.”

“Any good?”

“Don’t know, we haven’t done it yet.”

He pulled a gun, a small revolver, and jammed its blunt snout in my belly. “Give it up!”

“Huh? Mikey, what the...”

I really didn’t want to give him our dope, not even at gunpoint, not under the present circumstances. It had been a really long day. Let me explain.

It was a Saturday. Evelyn came by my house around noon and woke me up. “Wanna go cop?” she asked me.

I was standing at the door with my bathrobe. “Uh yeah, ok. C’mon in, gimme a minute.”

I hadn’t been doing dope nearly as long as Evelyn, and didn’t have nearly as bad a habit; I usually waited till the sun went down before I copped, I could wait till then, and it was generally easier and safer to cop after dark, safer from the cops at least. But I liked Evelyn – she was cute, and I was glad she’d invited me to participate in her hi-jinks, so I said sure. This is how a man gets in trouble.

We headed west a couple of blocks and turned right on Avenue B. It was a nice day, early spring, but nice days in NY are rare, no matter the season, so it really didn’t matter what time of year it was, but it was a nice day. I liked Avenue B; it had character. Still partially paved in cobblestones, two out of three buildings above 10th street were vacant shells, so it was peaceful and quiet, a halcyon retreat from the hubbub of the big city. And there were cop spots just about everywhere up there, which made it even easier to relax.

By the time we got up to 13th, Evelyn was pale and sweaty, and I wasn’t feeling so good myself. Liberty was a good afternoon cop spot, and we each spent our last ten bucks on a bag with a little rubber-stamp picture of the Statue of Liberty on it. You had to hand it to the dope sellers – they had a great sense of irony. Other bag names included Dom Perignon, AA, No Joke, Poison, Toilet and of course Spiderman cause damn if it didn’t make you feel like a superhero, for a few hours anyway. The day John Gotti was finally sentenced to prison they were selling “Yon Gotti” as the dealers called it, all over the LES, and it was smoking. Then there was Q45, apparently a reference to a local kingpin’s pride and joy, a new luxury automobile.

Anyway, we copped two bags—all we had was twenty bucks between us—from a spotty Puerto Rican kid, and went back to Evy’s squat on 8th between B&C. Eighth street was lined with burnt-out buildings; a gigantic graffito mural flowed from building to building the whole length of the block. It was beautiful.

Evelyn’s squat was a nice and roomy, would have gone for \$1500 bucks a month back then if it was located just a few blocks west (or \$15,000 today), but it wasn’t. It wasn’t really even a squat, just an abandoned building “managed” by a crazy old Ukranian lady. Evelyn paid her what was essentially a shakedown fee of \$100 a month to live there. It had electricity from a nearby streetlight via an extension cord, but no running water or heat. I thought it was great, and asked if I could meet the old lady so I could move in. I never did meet her, or move in. The building was converted to luxury condos a couple of years later.

Evelyn asked me, “You mind if I skin pop it?”

“Your house,” I said.

I hadn’t used a needle yet, though my friends were starting to, so I wasn’t shocked or disgusted or anything to see her shoot up, not like I was the first time I saw somebody fix, in the bathroom at Neither/Nor. Neither/Nor was a combination bookstore/performance space/after-hours

club/shooting gallery over on 6th street between C&D. Mikey lived in the back room. Legend had it that on his way to catch a plane to LA to personally deliver his latest *Miami Vice* script to Michael Mann, he OD'd on the front steps. When the paramedics arrived, one of them said, "Give him a shot of Narcan" and Mikey, even as he was turning blue, woke from the dead saying "Fuck that shit!" and jumped in a cab. I don't know if he made his flight or not.

Neither/Nor was a cool joint; they sold underground rags like *Between C&D* (remarkable because it was printed on computer paper, with the perforated holes on the sides) *Raw* and *The East Village Other*. At night they had poetry readings by folks like John Farris, Darius James and The Reverend Pedro Pietri, and music by bands like the Microscopic Sextet, Missing Foundation and White Zombie. I was snorting coke in the bathroom around 4am with this guy William, who supposedly worked for the film producer Ben Barenholtz, when Sandy, a skanky old junky (she must have been pushing 40, we were kids back then you understand, and anybody over 30 seemed old, but however old she was she looked 20 years older than she was) pushed the door in, refusing to wait her turn. "Don't mind me, I'm gonna shoot this in my pussy," she declared. She sat on the toilet, pulled her pants down, got out her gear and did just as she promised, poking a needle into the dark shadows of her mysterious loins. My goodness I thought. I caught a plane to Paris the next day and didn't come back for 6 months. It's not like I got freaked out and ran off to Paris because I watched a bag lady shoot up into her cunt—I was going to leave anyway, but let's just say it made it easier to go.

Back to Evelyn. She loosened her pants, revealing a couple of inches of butt crack, the way many youngsters walk around nowadays, but not something you saw every day back then. Her ass was small but shapely, not quite my Calyphrygian ideal, but quite lovely. She poked a needle one arc radian down along the curve of her bright white butt.

I huffed up my bag with a cocktail straw. (I always had a cocktail straw on me.) There was no bite to it.

"You feel anything?"

I shrugged. The dope wasn't completely beat, but it was, as the old-timey New Yorkers used to say, "gah-bage." There was just enough whatever the fuck they put in the bags that day to take the sickness off, but not enough to get high, which was very annoying.

We decided to head over to Vazacs and cadge some drinks off her ex, a pleasant if taciturn guy who tended bar, while we waited for one of our square acquaintances to show up so we could cop for them. It was Saturday afternoon, soon there'd be some yuppie willing to buy if we flew. Evelyn smiled at her ex and leaned forward, saying, "Hey, can you help us out?" He didn't say anything, just gave us each a shot and a beer. He looked at me and smiled joylessly, as if to say, man, you don't know what you're getting into. Or maybe he just wanted to punch me.

We nursed our drinks while we waited. A lot of dopefiends hate alcohol, but not me. Maybe it was because the "heroin" we were doing didn't have that much heroin in it, was a mélange of Tuinals, Fentanyl, No-Doze, Pixie Sticks, what have you, so a shot of whiskey helped kick in a bag, get some sort of chemical reaction going. Or maybe I was just an alcoholic before I became a heroin addict.

Bennet walked in. He was a medical student at NYU who liked to hang out at Vazacs on weekends and get high. I always thought of him as a normie, a guy who'd take a vacation from his life once in a while by spending a weekend night the way we lived every day. Years later I saw him at an NA meeting. He was embarrassed to see me and walked out. I was beyond embarrassment by that time so I stayed. Anyway, that day all he wanted was a bag on a Saturday night, a perfectly reasonable request, and we were happy to oblige, as long as he got us one too. We all grinned as he handed Evelyn 20 bucks. What they call nowadays a win-win.

Why would he – or anyone else, for that matter – bother paying scum like us to buy them dope? There were a dozen cop spots within a few blocks of Vazacs, and it wasn't like they were hard to find – you'd walk down 3rd Street between C&D and there'd be some guy standing on the top of a stoop yelling at the top of his lungs, "Bullet is Opennn! Opennn and Smoking!!! Bulllllit! Bulllllit!!!" Not exactly on the down low.

Of course half the people on the street were looking for guys like me to come along, so they could sell us re-taped dummy bags full of sugar, or rob us, or worse. My friend Jack got the shit kicked out of him more than once copping on 3rd street, but he kept going back there because they had by far the best dope in the neighborhood. It was crazy down there – you'd hear gun shots at least once a week. The first time I copped at Bullet House, with my running buddy Tim, there was a fresh pool of blood on the lobby floor that we had to step over to get to the dealers, who were perched on the stairs. We handed them 20 bucks and one of them asked the other, "Should we take off these white boys?" and the other said, "Nah, ain't worth it for two bags, just serve 'em." So even though they had the best dope I was usually too scared to go over there, unless I was with Mikey – I could go anywhere with him. I'd run into Mikey while I was out copping, and I say I was going over to 6th Street and he'd look at me like I was crazy – "Don't waste your money, man!" – and he'd take me over to 3rd Street. He'd introduce me to the other junkies, saying, "This is B, he's cool," and they'd look at me like they didn't believe him, but they'd leave me alone because Mikey was the unofficial mayor of the Lower East Side.

Somebody once told me that Evelyn went to cop by herself once, and was held captive in an abandoned building for twelve hours or so and repeatedly raped by a drug crew until they finally got tired and let her go the next morning. I never asked her if it was true, so I don't know if that really happened or not, but it seemed like it could have.

So you could get robbed before, during or after copping, and maybe get raped, stabbed or shot in the process.

And then of course there were the cops – by this time, most of my friends had been arrested once or twice. It wasn't exactly hard time, *20,000 Years in Sing-Sing*, but spending 48 hours in "the system" (which felt like a month, especially if you were dope sick), till they finally let you go for "time served" wasn't a lot of fun either. And the bologna and egg sandwiches they served for breakfast, lunch and dinner were terrible.

So for a guy like Bennet, who had a real life outside the Lower East Side, who didn't (or so I thought at the time) use more than a bag or two once or twice a week, it was well worth their while to slip somebody like me or Evelyn an extra 10 spot to avoid copping. He knew we knew where the good stuff was (and we did, sometimes) and he wouldn't have to risk getting ripped

off or mugged or having to spend the rest of the weekend in a holding cell and miss his Monday morning anatomy class or whatever.

So Bennet slipped us a twenty, we went back up to 13th street and bought another couple bags of dope, but from a different guy, because we were smart and learned from our mistakes. He was standing in the right place, and the stamp looked right, so we thought we were good to go. We got back to Vazacs and went to the bathroom (in a scene right out of *Trees Lounge*) and split the bag. It barely tasted like anything. Not that good nasty bitter dope taste you learned to love, or even the ether-like taste of cut-up dope, or even the scotch-tape flavor—this was the sweet taste of crushed Tic-Tacs, or whatever white powder the guy who just beat us put back in some empty bags and re-taped.

Fuck, the fucker burned us! Fucking dummy bags!

But Bennet was understanding—he didn't think *we* burned him. He thought, correctly, that we all got burned together—not that we wouldn't have burned him if we could have. He gave us another twenty to try again. This time we went to Fourth Street, because at last—it was nice and dark by now—a decent cop spot, New York New York, was open. We delivered a bag to Bennet back at the bar, wished him well and headed back to my place, one lousy bag between us. I was hoping it would be good enough so we could both get high and that then Evelyn would sleep with me.

Now, where were we? Oh yeah . . .

Mikey jammed the snub nose of the gun into my belly. "On three motherfucker! One! Two!"

I dug the bag out of my pocket and dropped it in Mikey's hand. He lowered the pistol. "Hey man, sorry about that. I wasn't gonna kill ya. But I would've shot you in the leg if you didn't gimme that bag!" He skulked off into the darkness.

Evelyn looked at me incredulously. "What the fuck! You gave him our dope! What'd you do that for!"

"He was gonna shoot me!"

"Are you sure that was a real gun?"

"Yeah it was a real gun!"

"Aw man, what're we gonna do now?" Evelyn pouted. She looked beautiful.

"I've had enough, I'm going home—you wanna come over?"

"Really, you're just gonna go home? Aren't you sick?" She was shocked by my lack of gumption.

"No man, I've had it."

"I'm gonna go out there and see if I can cop again."

I gave her a kiss on the cheek and turned east. I never did sleep with Evelyn, though I think she wanted to, later, but by that time I was too strung out to care. I was really sad a few years later when I heard she died, of bone cancer of all things. I think she was 32. I wish she'd had a chance to grow up. Maybe she would have gotten clean eventually. Or maybe she'd have ended up like Sandy. No way to tell.

One week later, I was coming home from my shitty temp job, just starting to get sick. I was going to go home and change before I went out to cop. I was walking East on 7th street, between C and D, almost home, when somebody starts shouting my name.

"Hey B! B-man, over here!" I turn and look and there, on the other side of the street, there's Mikey, hopping up and down, waving a \$10 bill over his head. "I just wanna pay you back!" He scuttles crabwise across the street and, before I can react, presses a crumpled bill into my hand.

What, I wasn't going to take it?

"Man, I'm so sorry about last week, but I was really sick, I couldn't help myself." He whipped off his fedora and tilted his head so I could see his scalp. (I'm not tall, but Mikey was really short, like 5'4" at best; I thought it was really funny that they cast Benjamin Bratt, who's well over 6 feet, to play him in that movie.) "Check it out man, somebody tried to shoot me!"

There was a part in his scalp. "See? The bullet just grazed my head, they just missed me!" He really said this to me. And expected me to believe him. Like he was Shemp from an old Three Stooges short. "Anyway, I felt really bad about taking you off last week, so I wanted to pay you back. I was glad you just gave me the bag, cause I woulda shot you if you didn't. But I wouldn't have killed you, I'd've just shot you in the leg, cause you're a good guy. Anyway, now I'm cool – Michael Mann just bought the rights to my life story for \$200,000!"

Could've given me \$20 then, or maybe a bundle, to make up for my trouble, I thought, but I didn't say anything.

"So, we cool?"

"Yeah Mikey, we're cool."

I went home, got changed, and copped with Mikey's amend. I don't remember if it was any good or not.

THE END



FAME WHORE

(EXCERPT)

By Mike Hudson

Photo © Malcolm Alcala

The freaks come out at night, and in Angie's neighborhood they came out where Vermont and Hollywood and Sunset all intersected, that ghetto fabulous triple corner on the edge of nowhere with the cab stands and the taqueria and the Rite Aid and the Bank of America and Starbucks.

She went there the same time every night, usually around nine o'clock, sometimes alone and sometimes with that asshole writer Heaton and the little black Chihuahua. Harris would wait until he saw her alone and then take a table near hers on the patio outside. She'd sip her Chai latte and talk on the cellphone she always carried. It rang constantly, playing an old rock song he didn't know but which was, in fact, the MC5 doing "Kick Out the Jams."

Tonight, she and the dog had arrived without her boyfriend, and Harris wondered about that,

hoping against hope that he would never again see the asshole, Heaton, who so obviously didn't deserve her.

"I remember when she got her facelift..." Angie told her friend, an ex-model named Simone, who was calling from Paris.

"But that's different. It's not like you're going in there every six weeks..."

"So maybe it's eight weeks, I don't know, but I'm not going to have them put botulism in me..." she said.

Harris leaned sideways to eavesdrop, his eyes looking straight ahead. He was wearing a pair of Levis and a black shirt.

He'd made a note to himself to buy more black shirts but hadn't gotten around to it yet and now just had the one. The *baristas* at Starbucks had black shirts issued to them and he wondered sometimes how he could have lived so long and not realized that black was the best color there was for clothes.

She wore black, of course. A short, flouncy pleated skirt and opaque black stockings, the knee high suede boots with the spiked heels and a kind of tight lacy top that pushed her small firm breasts up almost even with her shoulders. Over that there was a black school blazer with brass buttons. Her long black hair looked as if she'd just gotten out of bed, out of a bed where she hadn't been sleeping, and the china white skin of her face, almost translucent, augmented with just a touch of dark lipstick and maybe a little something around the eyes.

"I mean, there's so many products on the market..." she said to Simone. *"I understand if you're one of those girls, actresses, who make their money on being beautiful..."*

"... But Bette Davis was a huge film star! She was a real actress!"

He hung on her every word. He didn't know who she was talking to or what really they were talking about but, to him, whatever it was, it was the most fascinating thing in the world. He wanted to know everything about her, what made her tick, how she came to be, her essence and the color of her soul.

"Everybody wants to look like Angelina Jolie but unless you look like Angelina Jolie -- like six feet tall, 100 pounds -- I'm sorry, but those big lips just look bad..."

"I'm telling you right now I'd look stupid if my lips were any bigger. They wouldn't fit my face..."

With her hands, she was breaking the blueberry scone he'd watched her buy up into small pieces and feeding them to the little dog who stood on the ground at her feet, putting the smallest pieces into her own mouth.

"Mmm-mmm...Mmm-mmm..."

"...You're letting your hair grow out now? Yeah, I know, me too... I hate it..."

"Right... She told me she could make my body look like sixteen again... I said could I just lay there while you do it? She said no, you've got to do the work... I said fuck that shit."

Harris was happy Angie's telephone friend wasn't sitting at the table with her. He didn't care what she had to say but, more than that, someone else sitting there would certainly have noticed his efforts to eavesdrop.

All that mattered was that he was ten feet away from the most beautiful woman in Hollywood, one who knew people in Paris and everywhere else. Whose scent was that of the deepest sexual desire and whose emerald green eyes promised a knowing carnality far beyond any simple sensuality he had ever experienced.

"Does Daryl Hanna even work anymore...?"

"Yeah, you saw her after Pearl Jam... Remember, she was at Harvey's thing at the Whiskey?"

"Is it her line of makeup...?"

"Yeah, yeah. Yeah, too bad..."

"I love her hair..."

"She's always been a really sweet kid, independent, that's what I love about her... Yeah..."

"Who was that French director, what was his name? I've forgotten his name..."

"Yeah... Now he wants to control her life, put her on a pedestal..."

She got up from the table and bent over to untangle Rowena's pink leash from the wrought iron leg of one of the chairs. A flash of gartered white thigh and Harris thought he would explode in his pants.

"But she fell in love with him, what are you going to do? I don't know, it depends on the guy. How do you answer that?"

"You've got to be open to the possibility..."

She dropped her cup into the receptacle and walked away up Prospect, out of earshot and back toward the hills. He thought of following her but didn't. One night he would, he knew he would, but tonight wasn't that night.

Instead he walked over to where she'd been sitting and, spying a piece of blueberry scone the dog had somehow missed lying on the ground, picked it up and put to his nose. Eyes closed, he smelled the sweet blueberries and pictured her in his mind.

"Of course she's emotional, her mom's dead..." he heard her say from down the street, her voice fading.

Harris dared to dream. He imagined Angie in his apartment, sitting on the couch, watching her shows on TV, or in the morning at the kitchen counter, fixing herself something for breakfast. And then he saw her in his bedroom. He opened his eyes and ate the piece of blueberry scone, the piece she'd broken off with her own delicate fingers, the piece she'd meant for her dog, and tasted the juicy sweetness for himself.

In the dark sky above, Orion the Hunter looked down on a world full of pain. But Harris felt none of it and he went home savoring the taste of blueberries and remembering the flash of Angie's creamy thigh.

When he got back to his apartment in Glendale, he lay down on his bed and jacked off just thinking about it.



THE FALLEN

(EXCERPT)

Michael Hann

Chapter 1

The cold starts first at my feet, working its way up to my chest and then to my arms.

It starts to get harder to walk and soon I am wading, occasionally turning over my shoulder to see dark shapes stood at the mouth of the now distant beach. They just hang there, not following but also not leaving. Removed and watching me.

It feels inevitable. And clean.

I wake up gasping for air.

The nightmare is still chewing away at my mind as I fill my lungs, the heaviness left over from the junk keeping my body rooted to the bed.

As I suck the air back into me, I smell the sea on the breeze coming in from the front of the caravan and I remember where I am. Hiding in some shitty seaside town, on the run and without a hope in hell.

Three hours.

Three measly hours before the shakes kick in and I start to feel the need to peel my skin off with my nails. Then the lizard will start calling on me.

The weight of incubus and nightmare.

Benefits of a private education, old boy.

Fucking lovely.

I walk out of the bedroom in my bare feet, dragging my left leg behind me. For now my back doesn't hurt and I praise God and his name for the art of self medication. It is there though, lurking behind the fading high which has temporarily taken over my body. But for now I don't feel it.

Praise him, praise him, praise him, praise him, praise the everlasting king.

It is freezing cold outside and a gale is flooding in from the endless blue and grey in front of us. Wendy is sat in a chair nearby, her headphones shoved in her ears, my coat and hoody wrapped around her and over her head.

I flash her a smile and run my fingers through my curly mop, trying to stop it blowing in the wind and over my face. The cold can't get to my bones yet and I savour the warm glow and sense of floating through nothing that the fix has given me.

"Are you all right?" Wendy says, taking the headphones out. She smiles but I know she hates to see me this way. Still, she knows I need it. Until I can get us abroad and safe.

Escape? Fine chance.

The thing we won't talk about. What we most fear.

"Fine, fine," I say. "What you listening to?"

This time her smile is more genuine as she passes me one of the head phones and puts the other back in her ear. I pull up a chair and we snuggle up next to one another. For a few minutes we just listen to the music together and cut the rest of the world out.

It doesn't last long enough. Soon the pain flickers through my spine and so I shuffle and squirm, unable to sit still and fully lose myself in the moment.

"I hate love songs," I say under my fogged breath.

Instantly she shifts a little further away from me, glancing up with nervous eyes.

"No, I like this," I say, motioning to the headphones. "It's just that... well, they're just so full of clichés and... well, I don't know, lies."

"Lies?"

"Yeah, lies," I say, warming to my subject and gaining confidence in my argument. "They make out that love is so perfect, when it's not... really. Just another sales job."

"You're a cliché." She says, smiling at me as she leans to drop a full kiss.

As our lips touch the smell of the sea fills and distracts me. It makes me think of the beach back home, walking along the sand with my parents when I was so much younger and innocent.

Home. The City. Just behind us but not far away.

Something brushes against my ear, sending a shiver down my now aching spine. Long and leathery. A lizard's tail.

It makes me break from her. We hang there for a second looking at each other and once again it is there between us. The threat. The possibility that this could be one of our last, true moments together.

She tries to kill it with an unconvincing smile. It fools neither of us but I silently thank her for it.

"Such a cliché," She says to me and then kisses me on the head. "And a moron. So... you had that dream again didn't you?"

I'd been having the same nightmare now ever since we'd been on the run. I'd be laid up, on the bed, couch, where ever I had fallen asleep, and I'd look up and there would be this thing sat on my chest. Huge wings, sharp talons, weighing a tonne. Squeezing the breath out of me.

"And? It doesn't mean anything." I say fidgeting in my chair, feeling my back beginning to stiffen and lock up along my left side.

"I suppose. You have to admit though, it's a bit strange that you keep having the same-"

"It doesn't mean anything." I say, emphasising each word with a mixture of anger and desperation.

She never says it out loud but I know her too well. What she thinks. What she thinks she knows. Omen. Vision. Prelude to a disaster.

Christ, not a huge surprise. Her people believe they are the chosen ones, who would survive the end of the world.

Her Father's religion.

Fear. Repression. Ragnarok.

Now she's on the run with me, a junkie ex-prostitute.

Talk about frying pan and fire.

"Just as well I didn't have a dream about my teeth falling out or turning up for my classics exam naked again then, eh? Look, it doesn't mean anything. Trust me."

Little, sharp claws play with the back of my neck. Run run run run.

Her face darkens and her eyes fall to her floor and the thin, dead grass below. I force a smile and run my hand through her long, brown hair and kiss her face.

"You're right," She says, her voice dropping to a whisper. "It's probably just.."

Never trust a junkie. Never trust a junkie.

Thorny words, screamed out on the back of a long, wet tongue.

Never trust a junkie.

Cold sweat and pain drip down my neck to my lower lumbar.

"I told you, "I say, smiling at her. "I'll get us out of here. And once we're safe... I'll kick it, I swear. I'll do it. For you."

We sit in silence, the sound of the crashing waves and the wind surround us. I see the fear in Wendy's eyes and know exactly what she is thinking.

Soon.

Soon they will find us and then they will take us. Probably out in the country, maybe to a broken down, rotted out building or hut in the middle of nowhere.

Then they will torture us and kill us.

I routinely pray to God that they do me first. That they don't make me watch them hurt her.

Thing is, I know he isn't listening. He isn't even taking messages.

Not even this close to Christmas.

"I have to go into town. I won't be long. Straight there and back again." I say, grimacing and biting my bottom lip as I get up from the chair.

As I raise myself up she grabs my arm. I look down into her green eyes. Tears start to fall.

"Please," She says, her hand shaking as she grips me tightly. "Just one more day. Please?"

Eventually I nod and let her lead me from the chairs and to the door of the caravan. Three hours tops, before I'll have to use again.

I only have enough for three more hits.

Tomorrow.

Definitely tomorrow.

Run run run run run run run.

Chapter 2

We do nothing for the rest of the day. We sit and watch day time TV in the front room. Sprawl out in the bedroom. We just talk or lay in silence.

I have always enjoyed these moments with her. Losing all sense of time and place, just laying in each other's arms, letting the world crumble away outside us.

Things are different now though. There is the elephant in the room. The thing we daren't talk about or acknowledge. That our time is running out and we are going to die.

Then again, aren't we all?

I occasionally pop pain killers, to try to lengthen my need for a fix but it is already in the post. She kisses my face and runs her fingers through my hair to try to sooth me but I keep twitching and shuffling around, never getting comfortable.

I take the pills and think about my uncle Paul who kindly and illegally prescribed them for me. It's been nearly over a month since that night, the night that the Fileys got kicked out of town. Then our ex-boss Kirin became the new king of The City and Wendy and I went on the run from him.

I hope Paul is all right. I know he isn't. He'll still be in that mad house, up Newcastle way, with all the other broken souls.

The City.

Dark satanic mills. You can check out but you can never leave. I can feel it magnetising the junk scraping the bottom of my veins, trying to pull me back home.

Praise him, praise him, praise him, praise him, praise the everlasting king.

I don't want these thoughts in my head. At the same time I invite them in, as I can't help noticing how close her body is to mine. Every time she moves in to comfort me, a new part of her brushes against me.

Elbows. Legs. Hips. Breasts.

Despite the pain, despite the nightmares, despite the fear and the sense of fucking hopelessness between us. I still can't do it.

Of course, I feel the excitement. The primal rush from her touch, the warmth spreading over my body with the anticipation of sex. The lizard part of me, the base response to physical stimulus, the need to sate and rut wraps its long tongue around my brain and shudders from the sense of growing pleasure.

Fuck it fuck it fuck it fuck it fuck it

Still, there is the shame. The smell of talc, body odour, lube. The taint of dirty old men doing what they like to me, fucking me as many ways as they want. Their taste on my lips and in my mouth, the feel of their fists and weight beating down on me. Breaking my back.

Breaking me in two.

Fuck it fuck it fuck it fuck it fuck it

The lizard laughs and flicks its scaly tongue into my ear and down my back, causing me to shudder and then convulse as a fresh set of nerves scream and bite.

As she moves in I turn onto my side and away from her.

I hear her sigh. She does not walk away. She does not yell at me or hit me. She lays down against my back and wipes the tears from my eyes and strokes my arm.

"It's ok, it's ok lovely." She says.

I love her. God help me, I love her.

Chapter 3

In the morning I get up early and get dressed quickly, trying not to wake her. I cook up a fix in the bathroom and when I peak I slide down against the door, my mind and body going skyward and then numb.

I force myself to stay awake and to keep the demons at bay. I nearly blank out at one point and I swear I can hear the sound of wings beating against the bathroom window and an animal shriek outside.

I get myself straight.

I take a quick inventory. Most of the money is gone and I have enough for one more hit. Then that is that. I do however have a shit load of weapons grade pain killers, so I should be able to hold out for a few hours but before going through severe withdrawal.

That's it then. Today I will have to call Charlie and sort out the money and my H. I just hope he hasn't sold me out.

I put on my coat and hoody on, which reminds my back to send a ripple of pain through my body.

Already the fix is wearing off. Shit.

I am about to leave when I turn and see her standing in the doorway of the bedroom. Even first thing in the morning, still half awake, she looks gorgeous. She also looks a bit pissed but is trying hard to hide it.

"You off into town?" she says.

"Yep. Going to call Charlie, see if I can get him to drop off the rest of the money for us." I say, deciding not to mention the gear.

"Be careful," she says.

"Don't worry love," I say, trying to sound cocky. "This is the last place anyone would look for us. Besides, if anyone tries to mess with me I'll go all Doc Holliday on them."

I pull out the gun from my jacket and show it to her. A look of horror flickers over her eyes.

Sometimes I truly hate every part of me, right down to the fucking core. This is one of those times.

"Just be careful," she says and shuts the door behind her.

We both know that I don't have the balls to use it.

The town centre is full of day trippers, Christmas shoppers, bikers, dogs and drunks. I'd forgotten that it was the weekend.

Christ, what a mare. I hate plebs nearly as much as I hate johns.

The sea gulls perch on overflowing bins, paint peeling railings, coldly eye up the tourists' overpriced fish and chips and candy floss, ready to fight it out over scraps and detritus.

There is a fine drizzle close to sleet which makes the air smell damp and I occasionally get a sharp whiff of someone else's stink and sweat as I push my way through the crowd. It feels vaguely sexual, which only makes me want to gag more, so I try to breathe through my nose

and keep their rank bodies at arm's length.

Also, the pleb mass makes me paranoid that someone is going to nudge or bump me, causing me to shift my weight and send a jolt through my nervous system and to explode in my brain.

The H is wearing down now, evaporating at a speed of knots.

No more fucking hosannas. No more hail Marys.

The City tugs at the hooks in my veins, making me gag and shiver.

Praise him, praise him, praise him, praise him, praise the everlasting king.

I need a drink and some medication. The bottles of pills which my uncle Paul gave me rattle against the gun but all I care about is making it to the nearest pub without feeling more pain than I need to or having to stop and puke on the pavement in front of some pissed up, weekend warrior or some fat cunt and her equally obese brood. The noise of their chatter and barking rises and rises with the pain crawling up the lines of nerves running from my feet legs spine and all of a sudden the lizard is cackling goading me to drive the three pieces of lead into the nearest three plebs glued to me if only to silence their stupid faces for one blessed moment and take my mind off the pain growing and flowing into my back to the point I want to hit the kerb and chew on concrete till my jaw fucking breaks.

Fuck.

One step at a time.

Chapter 4

"A pint and whiskey chaser please. Best make it a double." I say to the wizened bar lady.

As she pours me my drinks I look around the place and clearly see how the fates of the property and the proprietor have become intertwined. Both have seen better days, could do with a lick of paint and neither have been entered by anyone in a while. I laugh quietly at my own joke and flash her a smile. It does nothing for her mood.

Silently she passes me my change and goes back to her cross word. I smile again and spy the telephone on the wall in the corridor on the way to the toilets.

First drink, then drugs and then to work.

My joke is spoiled when I notice there is one other person drinking in the pub. Some shabby, old drunk who is probably a regular. He is half asleep, cradling his pint and head in his arms on the table in front of him.

So, it isn't hard thing for me to slip a couple of valium out of my pocket into my mouth and wash them down with a sip of ale, followed by a swift jolt of warm whiskey.

I look at the pills and think about my uncle Paul and I inevitably start to recall that night. The night that I abandoned him. The night Johnny Filey was murdered and the rest of the Filey clan did a runner. I'd heard that they had made it to Greece. Antony, George and Antony's family. Good for them.

George Filey. Once the king of the town, ruler of all. Now just another expat, pushed out by foreign interests. The way of the world.

The King is dead, long live the King Kirin. The City is yours.

I still felt guilty about it. Leaving Paul there, waiting for Johnny's killers. The police believe he saw everything but he was too far gone to give them a statement. They'll probably be the same murderers who will come for me and Wendy. Kirin's thugs.

I take another swig of beer and whiskey and stare out at people milling around on the streets, the everyday normal people going about their business.

I wonder how many of them have done terrible things.

To themselves.

To others.

To loved ones. To strangers.

No innocents.

Chances are there would be a few. All kinds. Teachers, dentists, solicitors, doctors, MPs, milkmen, policemen, army lads, butchers, taxis drivers and priests. I've had them all. All kinds. Watching the families walking by in their bright T shirts and waterproof pants I wondered if my parents still thought about me. If occasionally it occurred to them that they had messed up by carting me off to every bloody boarding school which would take me on, ignoring my letters asking to be allowed back home, that I would be a good boy now and would stop being such a handful.

Now that was a proper education. The best that money could buy, as Dad would say.

An education indeed, which peaked when I tried to kill myself at thirteen years old, the old pills and razor across the arteries routine, a last gasp for help. Pathetic really.

Honour your father and mother.

The aftermath. His angry words, punctuated by a stabbing, pointed finger and blood shot eyes. My Mother, stood with her back to me in the hallway.

His eyes burning into the back of her, unable to look at me. The last time before I left for good.

Honour your father and mother.

Happy days.

Satisfied that the pain is being contained by my legal but illegally appropriated high, I order another pint and start to work my courage up to make the phone call.

The cowardly, lizard side of me asks: why I am bothering? That talking to Charlie may only speed up the inevitable and will hasten Kirin and his goons finding us. But Charlie has my money and my heroin.

The lizard acknowledges the need for the latter but can't help remembering my nightmare and wonders if maybe it is an omen, that we have been hexed and further bad luck lurks idly by.

Slithering through my mind, dragging its fat tail and scaly skin behind it, the lizard tells me that this is what Wendy thinks, *believes*. That the creature in the nightmare is some kind of messenger, telling us that our goose is cooked and properly fucked.

I try to kill the lizard's voice with fresh beer and whiskey and a couple of more pills, or at least chase it further into my skull so I can't hear it.

It is right though, Wendy's face when I told her about the nightmare said it all. Despite all her family put her through. The way they'd poured their sour religion into her from an early age. Preaching that they and their cult were the only ones clean enough to get into heaven. That she would receive God's grace, if she toed the line. Kept nodding, agreeing, and if she married some old bastard who owned a newsagents and a couple of amusement arcades, when she turned eighteen.

Even after all that, she still couldn't stop herself believing.

And I love her. God help me, I love her.

How can you love someone you haven't even fucked?

The lizard sees an opening and takes it, hissing and wrapping its wet, sticky tongue around my brain. I send it packing when I neck the rest of the pint and drop kick the whiskey down my throat.

I let out a sigh and feel vaguely content, which is only disturbed by the sudden need to scratch away at my arms and thighs. Itchy blood. Not a good sign. Next there will be sporadic puking, cold aches and joint pains. I praise God for the delights and machinations of withdrawal. At least it reminds you when you next have to score.

I feed coins into the machine, glancing around to make sure no one is watching me. The landlady is still busy filling out her crossword and the lone drunk is passed out with his head slumped on the table next to his half empty pint of brown ale. I reckon I'm safe.

The line connects and the ring tone kicks in. My guts feel cold and full of ice water, somehow being pulled and pushed by the ebb and flow of the tide outside.

I pray for him to pick up. I pray for some good luck.

I don't know what I want more. The money or the drugs.

Sensation. Salvation.

The ring tones end and for a second I fear the worse. Then a voice echoes down the phone, sounding half awake and distant.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Charlie." I say, recognising his high pitched voice.

Only Charlie could make 'hello' sound camp.

"Mikey my piece of posh, how you doing?" Charlie's voice sounds warmer as he says my name but then he finishes off with a long coughing fit.

Shit, he's sick. How sick? Common cold sick? Flu sick? AIDs sick? Junk sick? The lizard is creeping back in and he is turning green with fear.

I try to put it to one side and slide into my old working voice. To roll my 'r's and accentuate the endings of my words. I hate it. It reminds me why I would rather die than go back to Kirin alive.

"Charlie darling," I say, trying to keep my nerves in check. "How you doing? You don't sound so good my love."

"Oh, this? This is just a bit of food poisoning or something. I was working late last night at the

club and someone must have served me some bad fish. I wouldn't care but the boss wants me back in tonight, we're a tad shorthanded since you legged it. The customers aren't happy. He's had to charge a separate rate for some of them, apparently the rest of us don't have your... your *finesse*."

The club: The Paradise Bar, a brothel where customers can partake in any sexual desire with any combination of man, girl and boy that they choose. As long as they can pay for it.

The Boss: Vladimir Kirin. My ex-employer, Serbian crime boss and unadulterated psycho who wants Wendy and me dead by yesterday for leaving him with vacancies for one barmaid and one male prostitute. The man has a real thing about honour, and code.

The customers: All types, all fruits and johns. All with money or too far gone to worry if they don't have it. The kind that like not only to rut but to rut and hurt. Hence, my ruined vertebrae and shuffling gait.

I remind myself of these things to help me manage my nerves. I remind myself to make sure I know what is at stake and to not fuck things up. I lick my lips and wipe sweat from my brow.

I remind myself that I am not a victim. I am a grifter, a fucking survivor. I can do this.

"Posh? Are you still there?" Charlie says, starting off another coughing fit.

"Yep, sure am. Look, Charlie love, I need the stuff you stashed for me. Is there any chance we could meet up outside of The City?"

My words are drowned out by the sound of Charlie barking and then nearly retching down the phone. Food poisoning my arse. He is either sicker than he says he is or he is putting it on. Either way, it isn't good news for me.

"Are you ok?" I ask, trying to keep my voice level and chatty.

"Yeah, yeah. Must be some twenty four hour thing. Look Mikey, there's no way I can leave the house. Even if I could, Ian is watching me like a hawk."

Ian. Charlie's boyfriend and a complete cunt. Charlie may probably be my only friend, my best friend after Wendy, but he has lousy taste in men.

"Does he know about my stash, you haven't told him Charlie?"

"Keep your fucking wig on, Jesus. No, I have not told him but he found out that the Boss has put a reward out for any information which could help him find you."

"How much?" I say, my right hand scratching away at my thigh, digging into the skin under my jeans.

"A grand. At the moment. Everyone figures that if he doesn't hear anything soon he'll put it up by a half."

Cheap bastard. "How are we going to do this then Charlie? I need that money, and the skag."

"No way round it Posh, you'll have to come and get it. And preferably today. Ian knows something is up, the longer you leave it the more likely it is that he'll find it."

"Ok. Ok. I'll catch a train in an hour or so. I'll be at yours around five. Will Ian be out? I don't want to bump into him Charlie, I can't promise what I'll do if he tries anything on."

I place my free hand on the cold metal of the gun in my pocket and seize it tight, stopping my

fingers from ripping at my flesh. Charlie laughs, a high pitch croak that descends into a dry fit. "Mikey, my angel," He says, still laughing. "It's a little late in the day for you to try to act all butch and macho. Five will be fine, Ian will be out collecting and shouldn't be back till seven."

"Are you sure Charlie?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die sweetie. See you later."

"Aye, take care Charlie."

"You too Posh my love, you too."

I put the phone down. Almost as soon as the receiver hits the cradle I feel the cold bile in my stomach shoot up into my throat. I lunge through to the ladies' loo's opposite and just make it in time to the sink.

I retch down into the grey, dirty bowl, blocking up the plug hole with brown and yellow flecked shite. As I wash it down and rub lukewarm water over my face, I can't make my mind up if the sickness was caused by withdrawal or me shitting my pants with fear.

Chapter 5

Home again, home again, clickety click.

The train bounces along the track, nearly knocking me off my aim as I grip the bathroom floor with my buttocks and feet, my back pressed against the door. I ease the syringe into the vein running from my elbow down the side of my arm, taking care not to jerk the needle. The risk of ripping skin and spilling precious junk forces sweat and held breath.

"Don't go," She said to me, after I had given her the good news.

"We need the money. Besides, I can take care of myself."

My words sound cocky and full of vinegar but I am conning no one, not even myself. Tears silently fall down her cheeks. I can't look her in the eye.

I pull back on the plunger. Some of my blood mixes with the brown junk and slowly I flow down on it.

White.

Out.

Tears silently fall down her cheeks.

"That's not what I'm worried about," she said, half laughing as she wipes her face. "I'm more worried that you won't come back."

I take her into my arms and kiss the top of her head, smelling her hair.

"I will always come back to you. I promise."

"Promise?" She said weakly, hugging me tight.

"Promise. And hope to die."

The train lurches onwards. I can feel myself nodding off as I sink to the floor in the bathroom. I pull myself up and lean against one of the walls. My whole body feels like hot coals.

Then it is in the bathroom with me, sat on top of the sink. I know it can't really be here. Its wings are stretched out and are easily ten feet wide, too big for the small room but realising this

does not wake me up. Its large eyes silently sink into mine, unblinking and all consuming. It jumps down and lands on my chest. I can't move as its weight pushes the breath out of me and I can feel myself sinking and sinking and sinking and sinking and sinking downwards. It screams at me, its toothless open mouth shrieking wordless anger and contempt.

I don't need words. I know what it is telling me.

It is telling me I am damned.

I bolt up from the floor when I hear the knocking at the door. Despite the hit the sudden movement wrenches my back and I have to bite down hard on my fist to stop myself screaming. Piss trickles down my leg and onto the dirty floor and flows back and forth with the movement of the train.

The knocking stops. Heavy feet walk away.

Back at my seat, I look out of the window and watch the train approach the unmistakable outline of home and The City. The sky is cloudy and dark which merges with the grey of the cooling towers and chemical plant concrete. Flares break the skyline with orange jets of flame.

Dark satanic mills. The world is a vampire.

The City. If it sees you, it'll never let you go.

When I was young, I used to think that all the cooling towers and chemical works which dominated the landscape made the clouds which filled the sky. I used to watch the steam rise out of the towers and float up into the blue. On a cloudy day, you couldn't tell which stream of white came from where.

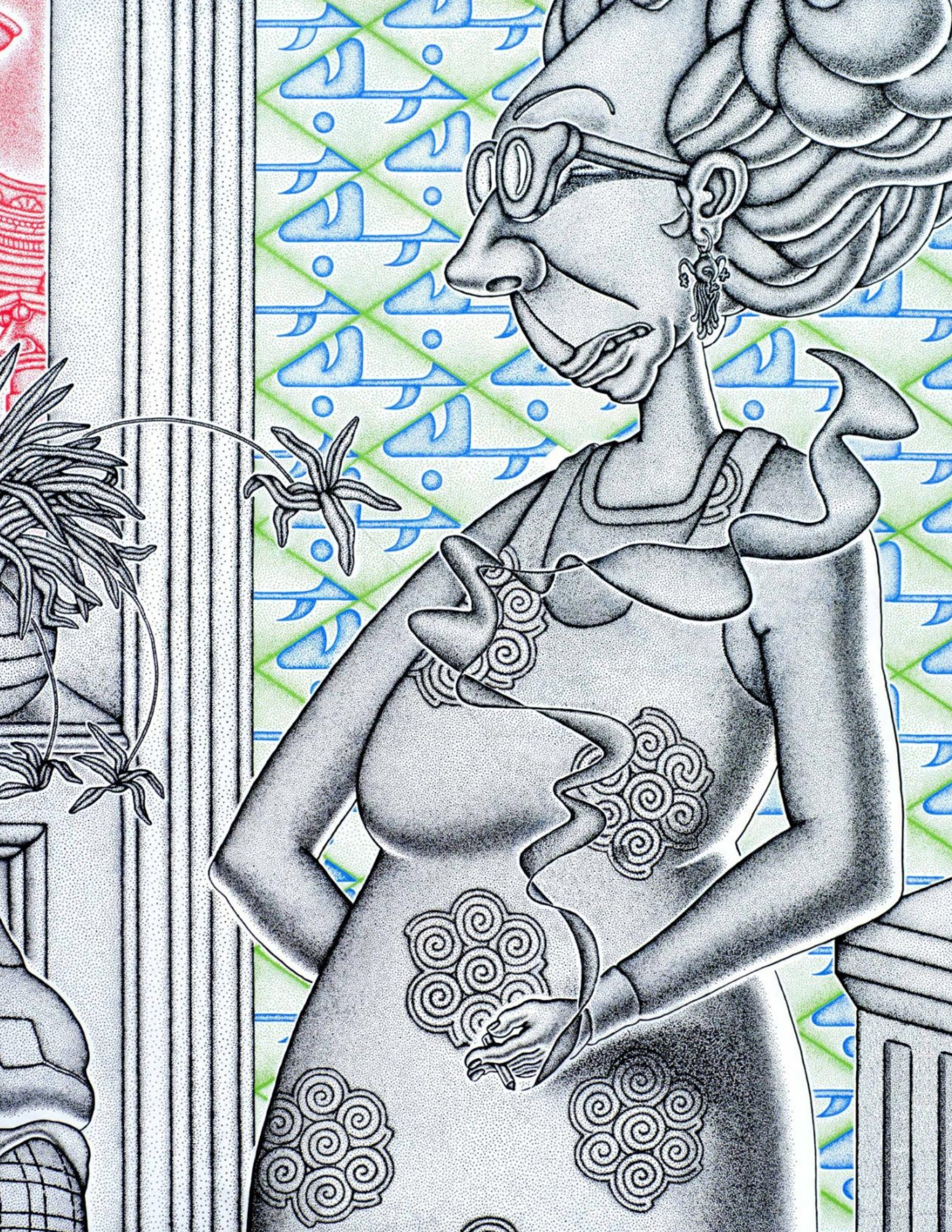
Now. Now I see it for what it really is.

A type of hell which keeps generations of pleb families stuck in one place where there are no jobs and opportunities. A rip in the landscape which can be seen by every town for miles, nestled inside the green hills which provided the coal to fuel its growth and expansion but could not halt its decline.

The City.

The price of everything at no cost and then greatest cost of all. To me. To Wendy. To Uncle Paul. Homecoming Queen.

Home again, home again, clickety click.



Soundtrack: Overture to Rienzi by Wagner

RAPIER

By Salena Godden

May 28th 1975

Today we left England and flew into Naples. The medication made me sleep most of the way, but I awoke with a start as the plane came into landing noticing my left index finger was pointing, erect as a little pocket knife. I concealed it in my jacket pocket and as we approached the passport control it luckily softened and folded to its usual fleshy position.

We are to stay here in Palermo all summer, in a beautiful grand mansion called Villa Tasca. Pierre is determined I will get well here. I have worried my own brother sick. I still get so distracted, I must try hard to get better. Doctor Hesse says I mustn't expect immediate results. I'm glad he's staying with us all summer too, he'll keep a watchful eye on my recuperation.

Of course, I'm still not really permitted to read or write. However, I feel I must keep this secret diary just so I can record my own progress. After all writing this diary isn't like real writing, not like those writings.

May 29th

Tonight I cannot sleep and so to pass the time let me describe Villa Tasca:

In the beautiful gardens there is an oval-shaped outdoor swimming pool bordered with pink antique roses. The mansion itself is surrounded by tall palm trees and the manicured grass springs under a bare foot like sponge cake.

Earlier I crossed a rope bridge to a pagoda made of black wrought iron. Once you are up there you can see over the whole garden and grounds. Beneath the pagoda are dank underground crypts with moss and dark water dripping from the walls. And overhanging the lake grows an enormous tree with its roots exposed like tangled hair. Momentarily I imagined I could hear children laughing. I must have been imagining things and I must be more careful of that.

While I stay here I'm to sleep alone, here in my very own room. The screaming white wards of the hospital seem so far away from here. My room is on the same ground floor as the billiards room. Doctor Hesse says this is for the best, because it is cooler down here in this heat for my day rest. This is a red-rusty coloured room with wine-coloured silk curtains. I write this at an oak writing desk which....oh, I must go now, somebody is knocking on the door...

May 30th

Just now I was laying in my bed when I noticed my finger was a little dagger poking up through the sheet, I had to get up because I thought it might tear the bedding. It is a curious

thing, right now, this very minute, I'm watching as it points straight outwards. As I write this, my hand is on the desk in a little fist and my index finger is a glinting, sharpened dagger. It's odd but quite amusing and I'm watching it twitch.

I cannot sleep a wink, so I may as well write this diary to pass the time and dead of night. Today I explored Villa Tasca, I looked at the ugly old portraits that hang in gold frames on all the walls. In the west wing I found a pretty music room with a grand piano, the ceilings are called fresco, that means they are painted with cherubs, old gods and grapevines. Apparently the great composer Wagner stayed here once upon a time, before the war. In the corner of the billiards room I noticed an erect coat of armour standing by a wooden door. Through that door I discovered a back way, a narrow winding staircase that lead down into the kitchens.

As I write this I can hear my own blood beat in my ears with the silence, the past year has been like a long scream. I do hope rest will cure me and that I may cause my family no more pain and concern. I cannot bear to look in the mirror though, I look awful, like a shaven criminal, they keep saying my hair should grow back in a few weeks and that will hide the scars. I should try to get some sleep but my finger throbs so, it is a toothache in my hand. What a time it has been, from goodbyes at the hospital to the busy airport, two aeroplanes and then to here. Doctor Hesse is so kind, he said that the colours returning to my cheeks already.

After lunch Susannah and I sat by the pool. Susannah kicked off her shoes and put her feet in the water and splashed me. My cousin Susannah is so carefree, I wish I was more like her. The butler here is called Franco and he wears white gloves. He thought we were sisters, everybody says that, we told him in unison - everybody says that! - Then he brought us iced lemonade. The lemons came from the trees in the gardens, the very gardens we were sitting in, imagine that.

May 31st

It's the middle of the night and I am alone in this dark burgundy room of mine. Above me there is a portrait of two children like ugly little birds with beak-like noses. The bird orphans, I call them, the bird orphans. I cannot stop watching my finger, it's a dagger pointing at the picture on the wall, at the little girls, both children have noses like birds - the bird orphans.

I should write about the lizard we saw that made Susannah and I jump, and how Franco shooed it away for us. And I must mention the cook with the enormous swollen bums. Oh and there is a gardener, I spied with his hose watering the grounds with his shirt off! Tonight though I must try to sleep, I know sleep is great healer. I know I will dream, and I cannot help that, the dreams always come and the nightmares stay with me. I will wrap a handkerchief around my hand so I do not rip the sheets with my finger.

June 1st

Last night I awoke to find my left arm fully erect and sticking out into the cool night. I sat up in my bed with this phallic arm of mine. I talked to it and rubbed it to try to make it soft and fleshy, but it was numb, I couldn't feel it, it was as if it was someone else's arm. Eventually I could bend it at the elbow across my chest. I climbed back under the blankets and put my stiff

arm under the covers. I dared not lay on it in case I cut myself open. I was forced to try to sleep flat on my back, holding my arm down with my other arm as though I was embracing myself.

June 2nd

Just now as I lay with my eyes closed, there was a noise like jingly footsteps approaching the bed and the sound of the billiard balls clacking, but I must have imagined this, I would not have been able to hear the billiard balls from my side of the building surely? I hate the darkness that surrounds me, the darkness within me. I can hear my heart thumping, as the dark red walls move, pumping in and out with my breathing. I'm afraid I will stab myself in my sleep.

June 3rd

I must not speak of my arm, not even to the Doctor. I cannot tell them what my arm is becoming. I don't want to cause everyone further concern. The truth is that whilst I write this I am fearful, the darkness is strangling me.

Pills, pills, pills... I am sick to death of pills. I swallow them like razors, they are blades to cut the old me away. Earlier the Doctor asked if I have been writing and I had to lie, I said no, I haven't been writing. And I haven't been writing exactly, just this diary, but this isn't real writing is it? Not like the other writing that got me in all this trouble in the first place. I feel bad for lying, but I must write all this down because otherwise I won't know what I am thinking and then how will I know if I am recovering?

Susannah and Pierre want to play tennis but I am sitting in a chair listening to birds. I'm in the garden, in the sunshine, I can see a beautiful reflection there, right by me, the pink roses ripple in the surface of the blue swimming pool. I am watching clouds pass through solid roses, I can see this, right now, it is beautiful, but I am under glass.

I wish I could be more like Pierre and Susannah, they seem to be having such a gay time of it. I can hear them now, laughing like silly idiots, they have lost the tennis ball in the hedge. The truth is, I am afraid to play tennis in case I use the wrong arm and slice the tennis ball clean in half.

June 4th

Yesterday, I thought I would make some tea in the kitchens for myself. I walked through the cool dark billiards room and noticed there was a portrait of a swordsman with a curly dark moustache, he looked like a musketeer.

Then I went down the back spiral staircase and from the crooked stone stairs, I could see the cook with her heaving busses chopping a huge bunch of mint with ferocious and deft speed. Her undulating breasts looked heavy and hot. I was too embarrassed to ask her for tea. I crouched down on the step and I watched her chop, chop, chop, as her breasts swayed and heaved. I was there for some time and then I saw a man appear. It was the gardener, he put his tanned and greasy arms around her waist and kissed her neck. He was naked from the waist up. His face was dirty and sweaty. She was flushed and she wriggled, but he persisted pushing

himself against her from behind, tickling her red neck with his tongue. I could see him lapping the sweat from her skin, it looked like a dirty dogs tongue. He pushed his hand down the front of her blouse as he sucked on her skin. He was caressing her nipple with his eyes closed, he groaned and grunted like she was good to taste and his dog tongue kept licking at her throat and neck. I imagined he wanted her whole bare bussom in his hands, I think he wished to wet her nipple in his spit, to lick and suck them and I held my breath wondering if she would let him. But then suddenly she squawked and drew her finger to her mouth. She quickly turned to face and scold him, having cut herself with the knife. She sucked her own bloody fingertip. He whimpered like a bad little dog as she disappeared further into the kitchen and out of sight. The mint leaves were cut so finely. I bet that knife had the sharpest edge.

June 5th

I had a half dream: There was once a duellist and he murdered the two little bird orphans as they slept in this very room. The two little girls, they were cousins, but they looked just like sisters. I dared not open my eyes as I realised it was not a dream and I could hear the two children weeping in the darkness. It was a man's voice I heard, a slow and rasping whisper *la mia spada*. Then the unsheathing of a sword and I felt the tip of a sharp blade against my throat. Suddenly, my own left arm was a bayonet and it sprang to defend me, jutting out to spear whoever was there. I took a breath and opened my eyes but there was nobody there, just a chill in the room. I sat upright and alert for hours with my bayonet arm straight out in front of me. It was agony and horizontal from my shoulder. I was afraid of slashing myself up in my sleep, I wrapped myself in white sheets, holding my bayonet-arm flat with my other arm. I lay flat on my back, with my arms folded in front of me like a mummy, keeping my eyes wide open all night to see if someone was coming to hold a sword against my throat again.

June 7th

Sad. I cannot stop crying. I am sitting in the shade of a weeping willow tree. I have been crying all morning. I don't want to have a duel. I don't want my arm to be so heavy and sharp. And the doctor has decided that I will have to sleep in Susannah's room from now on.

June 8th

This afternoon I played billiards with Pierre. I didn't win one game though, I was too busy keeping an eye on the portrait of the duellist. In the portrait he carries a sword and a similar weapon is mounted on the wall. It is in a sheath with a coat of decorate arms on the handle. Pierre said it was probably blunt. I thought it looked sharp even inside its sheath, actually I believe the correct word is a scabbard. It's tarnished with age but magnificent. I think it looks like a rapier. A rapier has a cup-shaped hilt and a long slender blade with two sharp cutting edges.

June 9th

At dinner I found it very hard to eat, everything looked very red and bloody tonight. There were aubergines in tomatoes, a tuna ragu and raspberries for desert. On the silver service the tuna was enormous, as big as a cows head, I felt like I was looking at a slab of whale.

I think it would be such hard work to hack a full-sized tuna in half wouldn't it? It would take a really strong blade, I think you would have to raise the tool high and bring it down with one clean and swift intention. I think you would need a wide flat-edged knife, just like the cooks, you would hold it high above your head and bring it crashing clean through the skin and tissue. It might be like chopping a cows head off. The blade would have to be acute and well-defined, so that it could cut precisely through the flesh and bone. I remember when we visited Valencia once, we watched a bull fight and saw the bull's throat slit, but that was with a stiletto knife. It took one swift slick movement and the bull's blood was dark as red ink, seeping between the paving slabs, glistening in the gritty sand and sunlight.

June 10th

Today I sat by the lake with the tree with the roots like hair and from there I noticed the gardener watering the flowers. He was shirtless, dirty and shiny. His nipples were brown and hairy. I saw black hair growing on his belly in a line downwards to his belt and I thought his skin would taste like tough roast beef.

I wondered if he would like to lick me like the cook. I lay on my back on the grass and let my legs fall open so he would see my sex. There was a breeze on me, cooled by the water, it was very pleasant. I thought the gardener would like to see me and come and lick me. I wanted him to lick me with his dog tongue. But by the time I opened my eyes again he had turned and walked away. I spied him petting the cook's dog by the kitchen doors and I thought they were two stupid dogs with licky tongues and waggy tails.

June 11th

Last night after Susannah fell asleep, I soaked a bed sheet in water, then lay on my bed and wrapped it around myself as tightly as I could, binding my whole arm flat to my chest. Then using my teeth to hold one corner, I rolled into the sheet. I was bound up like a baby in swaddling. It worked because I managed to fall asleep but then the nightmares returned. I dreamt about the fairground again, a knife throwers wheel and a woman they sawed in two...I saw inside her insides...I awoke in a sweat and sat bolt upright and found the bloodied bed sheet in shreds on the floor. I had cuts all over my legs and torso. I took the ripped sheets and crept outside, wrapped them around a rock and sunk it all in the lake. I wouldn't know how to explain to Susannah that I had slashed a sheet in my sleep, I mean, how could I tell anyone that I am sure I slashed the sheets up with my own arm?

June 12th

The sword on the wall in the billiards room is not blunt otherwise it wouldn't be a sword it would be just a sword-shaped thing, it would be a pancake batter flipper or a palette knife. A sword is a sword and by definition it is not blunt. The pen is mightier than the sword. A sword is a sword and by definition it cannot help but be sharp. Words that are used sharply and said bluntly by definition were intentional. The intention of the sword is not the sword's own intention but how it was made. Sharp words are intentional for that is how they were made. The sword on the wall in the billiards room is not a sword it is a rapier. The pen is mightier than

the sword. The blade is sharpened by water and stone. Paper is made of wood. Wood floats on water. Paper wraps stone. Scissors cut paper. Ink and blood stains. Words are swords.

June 16th

I awoke at dawn and crept down to the billiards room to study the painting and the sword for a very long time. I decided the painting, the suit of armour and the sword, all three were one and the same and owned by the duellist. As I came to this conclusion I sneaked one of Pierre's cigarettes and rolled billiard balls across the table to hear them *clack clack* in the gloomy darkness.

I thought I heard footsteps behind me. My heart thumped in my chest, I was too scared to turn and look. I thought it was the suit of armour moving behind me...then I heard another step, metal spurs on stone. Immediately my arm extended in front of me as I sped out of the garden doors to the lake and I leapt into the cold water to safety.

I held my breath and swam underwater through rays of sun making coppery pools of light on the mossy lake bed. I dived several times and eventually found the sheet. See! It was all true! I found the sheet, ripped to pieces wrapped around a rock. I didn't dream it the other night, I was starting to think I had lost my marbles! Ha! I started to laugh as I gazed upon my blade, rising up through the leafy film of the surface of the water. I was a watery ballerina, the lady of the lake. I sang to myself, I am Excalibur. I lay on my back with my silvery arm extended into the morning light and floated among the lily-pads, watching my blade glinting, and above us, the gold and green of back-lit leaves.

Just then Franco appeared in his white gloves carrying the breakfast tables across the lawn to the terrace by the pool. Quickly, I got out and sped down a shady winding path, padding wet footprints past the pagoda and under the bridge by the crypts. I saw them, I think I saw them...I waved good morning to the laughing bird orphans...I think I saw them there, out of the corner of my eye, hiding in the lemon trees.

Grabbing a towel from the fresh stack, I quickly sat on a sun chair and pretended I had swam in the proper swimming pool. I rubbed my beautiful arm dry and kept the towel over my shoulder to hide it. Doctor Hesse was first up, he nodded and then unfolded his newspaper and ordered coffee.

"You do look well this morning."

Pierre commented as he kissed my forehead and Susannah agreed. I remarked casually, "I got up early to swim!" but whilst I said this I had to quickly wipe some green gooey lake moss off my leg.

"Did you swim in your night dress?" Susannah frowned.

"Yes! But the sun is so hot it will dry in a second, look," I said, standing and holding it up for her to feel for herself, "Look!" I held my nightdress up so she could see all of my bare legs beneath, "Look its dry as a bone!" I said lifting it high over my stomach, revealing all of myself.

"Look!" I laughed but Susannah didn't laugh. She just jerked my night dress back down, shaking her head.

I had no real appetite but I managed to suck a piece of lemon.

"Look at my yellow sunshine smile!" I said and then I told them I saw the cook and the gardener kissing. Doctor Hesse said that was shocking. Pierre and Susannah smirked. "He licked the cook's neck like a dog tongue. He licked it with his eyes closed and he sounded like this noise, Umm! Ahh! Uh!"

"That's enough now don't get carried away" snapped Pierre.

"It's true! The gardener has a dog-tongue and it licks all over the cook's sweaty bussom! And it makes him make a noise like Uh! Huh! Like bad dogs, like when Papa and Aunt Arabella were playing dogs together and Papa said Umm! Ahhh! and Aunt Arabella said Oh! yesyesyes!"

Pierre was furious and I was sent to my room where I am writing this now. It's true though, I did see papa and Aunt Arabella, we all know it's true, it's why Mother went away! I miss Mother, none of this would be like this if she was here, she'd understand everything...

Note: Nobody said a word when I used my erect index finger to cut a slice of lemon. Maybe I don't have to hide it anymore, maybe Pierre, Susannah and Doctor Hesse just don't say anything about my arm so they will not embarrass me - Or they are jealous!

June 20th

I am on the terrace listening to a recording of Wagner. Wagner sounds like a grand man and this is a grand place. I am sucking a lemon, I cut it off a tree myself with my own hand. When I smile you can see no teeth just yellow smiling. The planet Earth is a huge glowing bouncing blue ball careering through the sky, turning somersaults and my heart leaps with each tumble and flip. The birds sing and I am not afraid or sad anymore, I think I am better. When I read this diary back from the first entry I can see how silly I have been. So long as I remember to be very careful rubbing my arm dry after bathing it will not rust. I have oiled it and I lie here and watch it gleam metallic in the sun. My blade is rigid by my side, as loyal and as mighty as a harpoon, my cutlass, my very own rapier, we are we.

June 25th

Fifteen today! Happy Birthday! It is also Susannah's birthday! We even share birthdays, you really would think we were twins but she's older by exactly a year. We have had double birthday fun! The chauffeur took us for a drive us along the beach of Mondello. We looked out of the window and there were people selling gelato on the roadsides and fruit and market stalls. We saw a little girl with her father, she lost her balloon as they crossed the busy street ahead, he captured her in his arms, scooped up the child and saved the balloon. The traffic had all stopped and were all watching the child and her balloon safe in the arms of her Papa in the warm Sicilian light. Then we saw a handsome couple sharing a motorbike ride, they kissed

when they stopped at the traffic lights. She had her arms around his waist, long flowing black hair and naked legs.

At Susannah's insistence we went to the Palermo Catacombs to see the mummies. The Doctor said that I should perhaps wait outside. I said, "It is my birthday too, you know!"

Luckily Pierre said I could go in as long as he took my hand, besides it was too blisteringly hot to leave me in the car just like a bad dog. The hair on my arms stood on end with the chill down there and my eyes took a while to adjust to the darkness. The yellowish-grey skeletons were dressed in Sunday best with mummified, sour-lemon grimaces, they hung from the back of the neck like washing from the walls. I saw babies in crumbling gowns and little girl skeletons in pretty rotten ribbons. Their faces twisted as though they were alive when they were injected with the veneer and varnish that was pumped into their blood to preserve them. The teeth and jaws were clenched tight, the gnarled skulls peering down in top hats and bonnets for eternity.

I'm thinking about today, about the young couple on the motorbike, the girl with the flowing hair and how they kissed at the traffic lights and I imagine them preserved and mummified. In the catacomb I saw a young couple just like them, dressed for their wedding day, the bride in mothy lace and young groom with a dusty bow tie. They are frozen in the first and last kiss, safe like the child and the balloon scooped up in the arms of her Papa. Frozen in time, with the sound of the Sicilian traffic of the living above them, the sing-song call for gelato, but dead, dead cold, and colder than ice-cream.

June 26th

This is a bad day! I have been sent to my room, Pierre is livid and Susannah is crying. When I awoke this morning my sheets and bedding were in shreds, bloody and hanging limply in ribbons from my bed. My mattress was torn, with gashes and stab holes. I don't remember a thing, I don't remember what happened this time. I must have fallen into a deep sleep, the first deep dreamless sleep since I can remember. I was so happy and sleepy I forgot to bind my arm.

June 32nd

Apparently someone killed the cooks dog...it stabbed the dog in the neck eight times...like this...stab...stab stab...stab stab stab...stab stab.

June 34th

Doctor Hesse says I didn't slash my bed open with my arm, he's says I need to sleep more, he doesn't understand. He gives me more pills and needles and they make me sleep so heavily it's not my fault. If my arm didn't stab the mattress, if my arm didn't slash the sheets and if my arm didn't rip the pillows open, then whose arm did? I don't think it was Pierre's arm or Susannah's arm and Doctor Hesse's arm certainly didn't do it, then whose arm did? My arm! That's whose arm! We'll simply just have to be more careful. Every night we must remember to bind ourselves up very tight and snug before the pills work and the sleep comes. We have been

thinking about varnishing the sheets...some glue is clearly needed...we must enquire with Franco where to purchase some varnish like they use on mummies.

La mia spada. Look. Let us take in this scene - this resplendent table with the roasted bird, the candlelight and the yellow smiles of the rigid guests at this grand feast. In the distance the mountains are purple on the skyline beyond the palm trees. The moon is rising, almost full. The Wagner is a scratched record. She is pouring red wine into eight glasses, listen to her:

“Cook. one. Franco. two. Gardener. three. Pierre. four. Susannah. five. Doctor Hesse. six. Me makes seven and one for you, that is eight! For me? Yes, you! Why you are too kind!”

The girl looks below the table cloth. We know she hasn't the strength to control it. La mia spada, stocco. The blade has its own intention, tap, tap, tapping at the under-side of the table. She sits on her left hand but she cuts her thigh on its razor edge. There is blood seeping through her white pyjamas, can you hear her?

“...and Cook with your big bussoms, do you want them licked? Gardener, please do lick the cooks nipples whenever you like won't you? Come on Gardener, lick, lick, lick! Now we won't make a fuss and spoil dinner, says Pierre, no Pierre, I promise to be so good Pierre. I will be just like Susannah. Everybody says we are just like sisters, don't they Susannah, Yes they do don't they, but we are only cousins, now aren't we? Only cousins really? Really? Are we or are we more than cousins when my Papa is your Papa and your mother is a naughty doggy to her own sister? Doctor Hesse, why you are frowning? Cheer up doc, this is a party to celebrate! You cured me Doctor, see? I laugh like the little dog laughed to see such fun, the little dog laughed to see such fun and the dish ran away with the knife! Ha ha! See I am all better! We can relax now, we think of nothing but nice pretty things that suit a lady. We do not write anything, no more writing for a nice girl. We'll have a lovely party? Isn't Wagner wonderful? Everybody loves Wagner? Be careful or Franco will shoo you away like a bad dog...Oh what a mess...”

She tries to hold the rapier back, it is bayoneting and slicing the air. They are mannequins glued in their seats, their eyes bulge with yellow. She intends to control it, she will turn it onto herself, but it is not hers to will and she is never strong enough, la mia spada.

It is night. She is alone in the pagoda, she whispers to herself, “A sword is a sword and by definition it is not blunt...” She can see everything clearly from there. She can see you, little bird orphans, scampering in the shadows, hide and seek, little bird orphans, hide and seek, she will seek and join you soon enough. The palm trees moan and rustle and there is a full moon above. The black walls of the crypt rot and drip below. She sucks lemons from this bloody garden. She can smell the scent of night blooms, magnolias, jasmine. She can hear cicadas.

And now, she can hear my footsteps, my spurs. The rope bridge sways with my weight and armour. She will swallow the sword whole. I will retrieve what is mine. The sharp point presses against her throat. In one trembling bloody hand she holds a diary and pen, whilst her other hand is mine, her left arm is my rapier, la mia spada, glinting in the cold, blue moonlight.



LOBSTER CRACKING, STOMACH SKINNING AND THE AIR LOOM

**(A PREVIEW OF THE FORTHCOMING
SECOND VOLUME OF *PARASITE*)**

By D M Mitchell

Photos ©Max Reeves

It was in the Final City that the Assassin met the Burning Man. There was no dramatic prelude to the event; it just happened, like the sort of casual encounter you, the reader, have every day with strangers in supermarkets or bars. It was in fact in a bar that it occurred.

The Burning Man was seated at a small round table at the rear of the room. Although there was plenty of empty seating space around him, people shunned his company; a large area of unoccupied chairs ringed him about. The Assassin wondered how he had managed to get served, if this indeed was the effect he had on the clientele.

The Burning Man was notably small; probably no more than 5'4" but the space he seemed to inhabit was far larger – maybe this was the cause for his exclusion. Aside from his chalk white skin, the man was jet black, as though he had been dipped into an oil slick. Every garment the man wore was of Erebus, his hair and eyebrows (inverted Vs) were unnaturally black and he puffed on a long black liquorice cheroot.

As he approached the table, the Burning Man looked up, a bored expression on his face, as though he'd been expecting this encounter for some very long time.

"The only person unfortunate enough to share the oppressive limitations of this banal, atrocious – and ultimately futile – temporal dimension with me is looking so wonderfully beautiful today. There are no words I know in this language – or any other of which I am aware – to express the infinite sadness that inspires in the shallow toxic pond that has replaced my soul."

The Assassin spun a chair inversely and sat on it.

"My friend, I think we are in Rat's Alley, where the dead men lost their bones."

The Burning Man gazed at him, crystallised time lingering at the corners of his eyes like antique confectioneries: Spangles, Pear Drops and Bulls Eyes. When he spoke it was as if a multitude of geological strata and shale pressed on his every word.

"Everybody's angry – and hardly anyone's talking – with me these days. I realise it's my own fault. It makes me feel like I'm re-living the 1970s again – the oppressive despair and inchoate hostility exerting its own baleful gravity. But then I was young and beautiful – in a cheap punk rentboy kind of way ... Now just an old, ugly, half-mad/half-insane failure. Whose round is it now? ... Not mine already ..."

The Assassin gestured to the barman, clicked his fingers. Behind the bar he spied a shifting cascade of colours and shapes, like a film or painting left too long in a store-room, starting to run. He shifted his gaze away hurriedly in case it began to look like something familiar. That was the last thing he wanted to face today.

"You know what ... When your lungs are failing, well you feel like you wanna fuck ... who ... exactly ..."

The Burning Man wasn't even looking at him. He had a sudden impulse to grab him by the lapels and shake him, make him acknowledge his objective existence, but he decided that the Burning Man was too far sunken into his solipsism for anything to get through any more. Better to treat him like an Oracle and get whatever shards of information from him that he could. The barman appeared at his elbow, two long glasses of absinthe in his hand. The Assassin smiled at the man and felt he maybe recognised him. Something about the scar on his neck rang a dismal bell.

“Jug jug, jug jug, jug jug.” said the Assassin, running his forefinger along the inside of the man’s wrist. The man looked down at him blankly and parted his lips slightly. Something chitinous and unmentionable seemed to squirm just behind his teeth. The Assassin shivered and looked to The Burning Man for relief.

“When it becomes so enervated ... I have the rats here for company ... I feed them ...sometimes I kill them. I cut and burn myself because it changes me. It’s like a Eucharist. I cut and burn myself and fuck with language ... For a while ... But you know, my friend, I’m old now ... I just think ... What the fuck ... It’s all over for me ... It’s all over,” he said, leaning forward. For the first time since the Assassin had entered the bar, the man looked animated.

“The tyranny of the masses, I support as the will of the people who have been oppressed and exploited ... We in our nature naturally resist the oppression of a ruling class whose privilege is based upon oppression ... Therefore all terror and violence is justified to free those locked in oppression mandated by the terror of the rulers ... They have abdicated their morality ... We, as revolutionaries, reclaim that right.”

The man’s hair was cut short back and sides but incredibly long on top, such that it stood him a good nine inches taller. With each syllabic emphasis, the follicles quivered with oracular portent.

“Lovely ... It’s a very broad and forgiving church our heresy ... It’s great to have you aboard. Money is the creation of the Judeo-Christian god – so terrified of actual genital stimulation He had to transfer it to the anal drive ... evacuate or retain. It’s all we do with money – save or spend. In other words money is shit. The heresy is that shit is the medium of Satan. Nein! Neine, ich sprake. Saint Stalin said “a single death is a tragedy ... a million merely a statistic” That is an article of faith in our church in the heart of the abyss. Funny, no?”

He sank back in his chair, seemingly exhausted by his outpourings, teeth chattering, nails clawing furrows into the varnish on the table top. A thin trickle of saliva made its way from the corner of his mouth.

“And while we’re at it let’s deal with the lives unworthy of life or the useless eaters ... I brought this up with the doctors I see ... but they can’t quite see the point ... they must obviously prefer a world choked up on its own excrement ... If the Department of Work and Pensions sent me a letter today that essentially said “Mr Shit we have decided you are a useless eater and we have created hospitals where we euthanize cunts like you ... Make yourself available within the next two weeks ...” I would be so happy ...”

Outside a clamour had begun, at first distant then rising until the bulls-eye panes of the bar shook and rattled like a whore’s teeth. Mingled shouts of joy and excitement and mortal terror assailed the Assassin’s delicate ears. He realised he had an erection. Without thinking he half

rose from his seat. The Burning Man shot out a hand, gnarled as a chicken claw and twice as cold as a witch's tit.

"It's the Festival of Wasps. How nice."

The Assassin slipped his gun from his long coat. The mêlée drew closer making his joints ache with killing lust. The occupants of the bar had all made their way to the windows their faces pushed up against the glass like great white slugs, onion breath fogging the panes.

"Don't look up!" cried a fat man reeling away holding his eyes. Blood trickled between the fingers of his hand. "It's the Lamb! The Lamb is outside."

The Assassin backed away.

"Signs are taken for wonders. We would see a sign! A word within a word, unable to speak a word."

He rounded on the Burning Man.

"Out Brothers. All out! Anyone here for the Plains of Lethe? Anyone here for the Ass Clippings? For Cerberus Park? Taenarus? Crow Station?"

The Burning Man stood, wobbly as a camel with its throat newly slit in a Turkish market place. He raised one hand and pointed the finger at the Assassin.

"Even when you start out with nothing, it's quite astounding how much you still have left to throw away. It's that flawed dialectic that seduced the poor into being so easily seduced into a form of complicit slavery ... masturbating their rosaries over the pornographic image of the significantly naked and androgynous image of the tortured and crucified Christ ... Now there's something we can all enjoy ..."

He belched noisily, then added as though an afterthought, "And then I woke up to find JFK in the shower ... and thank Christ it was all just a horrible dream ..."

The Assassin gripped him by the scruff of his neck and hauled him towards the back door. Behind him people began to scream almost musically, plucking the living raw eyes from their own heads. The Burning Man however was laughing like a cunt.

They emerged into a cobbled street reeking of piss and hops and the Assassin propelled them both along alleyways and streets until the noise was little more than a memory. Looking up he found they stood beneath Nicholas Hawksmore's Christ Church. How had they reached Spitalfields so abruptly?

Christopher Wren is remembered as the chief architect of modern London, but his assistant Nicholas Hawksmoor towers above him in occult circles thanks to his twelve churches built in accordance with the 1711 Act. These made a break from the traditional Gothic style and introduced a new and alien geometric vocabulary of obelisks, pyramids and cubes. His supposedly morbid interest in pagan cultures and pre-Christian worship helped much to darken his reputation.

Hawksmoor's churches were based on a layout of intersecting axes and rectangles, which he described as being based on the "rules of the Ancients". His work borrows from Egypt, Greece and Rome - all revered by the Freemasons - and often in a grand manner. The nave of St George's Bloomsbury church is a perfect cube, with a tower in the shape of a pyramid. Seven of the keystones are decorated with flames, the eighth bears the Hebrew name of God inside a triangular plaque surrounded by a sunburst; the symbolism of this is obscure.

Hawksmoor's St Mary Woolnoth is based on the idea of a cube within a cube. This has represented the squaring of the circle from ancient times, which takes us back to the ideal proportions of Leonardo's Vitruvian Man... and, of course, the Freemasons.

But it is the alignment of Hawksmoor's churches as much as their architecture that provoked speculation, starting with the writer Iain Sinclair's book-length prose-poem *Lud Heat* in 1975 which described how Hawksmoor's churches form regular triangles and pentacles, and "guard, mark or rest upon" the city's sources of occult power. Sinclair even provided maps to prove the alignments, which were allegedly a clear sign of Hawksmoor's true Satanic affiliation.

Sinclair was the first to connect Hawksmoor's churches with some of the most shocking crimes in London's history; the now largely forgotten Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811 and Jack the Ripper's killing spree in 1888. Sinclair suggested that the malign influence of Christ Church, Spitalfields, was so great that even a century later it attracted dark acts of violence to its vicinity.

The theme was later taken up in Peter Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor* in 1985, which switched between the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire and a modern serial killer case. Ackroyd, a great scholar of London, playfully named his modern detective Hawksmoor, while the book's 17th-century architect was Nicholas Dyer.

The Burning Man gazed up and spread his arms out perpendicular to his body.

"Its value - the soul, I mean - is that it wounds so easily and heals only with the greatest of care beyond the materialist dreams of medicine and the empirical heresy of science. I wonder if it's possible to open one's wrists with Occam's Razor. After all, viewed from a certain philosophical perspective, there is something eminently logical about suicide as the most obvious and simple solution to the intractable problem we call "life" that completely satisfies the unimaginative criterion of Occam's over-used and over-rated hypothesis. Oh dear, another long dark tea-time of the soul beckons ... That is so beautiful in its nihilistic sense ... Everyone wants to give up - so,

what the fuck ...let 'em ... I think you're better than that. And anyway think about it ... without the Mad Hatter and Alice there is none of this beautiful, surreal lovely life ..."

As they looked up at the facade of the building, the Assassin's consciousness became downloaded with a flooding of data from his transtemporal selves in which the cubes and triangles formed by Hawksmoor's erections took on the semblance of a living beating organism, flayed and exposed. A vast Meat Cathedral, engulfed beneath tides of history and its flotsam and jetsam of equally meaningful and meaningless ideologies.

The Burning Man extended his right hand palm downwards and took a faltering step towards the shimmering edifice. In a cracked voice he began to intone, "I was then brought a white beast which is called al-Buraq, bigger than a donkey and smaller than a mule. Its stride was as long as the eye could reach. I was mounted on it, and then we went forth till we reached the lowest heaven. Gabriel asked for the (gate) to be opened, and it was said: Who is he?

He replied: Gabriel. It was again said: Who is with thee? He replied: Muhammad (may peace be upon him). It was said: Has he been sent for? He (Gabriel) said: Yes. He (the Prophet) said: Then (the gate) was opened for us (and it was said): Welcome unto him! His is a blessed arrival. Then we came to Adam (peace be upon him). And he (the narrator) narrated the whole account of the hadith. (The Holy Prophet) observed that he met Jesus in the second heaven, Yahya (peace be on both of them) in the third heaven, Yusuf in the third, Idris in the fourth, Harun in the fifth (peace and blessings of Allah be upon them).

Then we travelled on till we reached the sixth heaven and came to Moses (peace be upon him) and I greeted him and he said: Welcome unto righteous brother and righteous prophet. And when I passed (by him) he wept, and a voice was heard saying: What makes thee weep? He said: My Lord, he is a young man whom Thou hast sent after me (as a prophet) and his followers will enter Paradise in greater numbers than my followers. Then we travelled on till we reached the seventh heaven and I came to Ibrahim. He (the narrator) narrated in this hadith that the Prophet of Allah (may peace be upon him) told that he saw four rivers which flowed from (the root of the lote-tree of the farthest limits): two manifest rivers and two hidden rivers. I said: 'Gabriel! what are these rivers? He replied: The two hidden rivers are the rivers of Paradise, and as regards the two manifest ones, they are the Nile and the Euphrates.

Then the Bait-ul-Ma'mur was raised up to me. I said: O Gabriel! what is this? He replied: It is the Bait-ul-Ma'mur. Seventy thousand angels enter into it daily and, after they come out, they never return again. Two vessels were then brought to me. The first one contained wine and the second one contained milk, and both of them were placed before me. I chose milk. It was said: You did right. Allah will guide rightly through you your Ummah on the natural course. Then fifty prayers daily were made obligatory for me. And then he narrated the rest of the hadith to the end."

The Assassin kicked him in the seat of the pants. The would-be prophet sprawled among discarded polystyrene food cartons from KFC and McD's. When he rounded on the Assassin (doubled over in laughter) a piece of lettuce had lodged itself on one of his Totenkopf shirt buttons. His eyes spat black sparks.

"You're a useless piece of lying fucking cunt shit ... You fucking kike ... I wasted my time on a fucking subhuman cunt like you ..."

The Assassin smiled, a thin crescent of deadly silver needles. He pushed his hands through his thick greasy hair.

"You know what I want! Hahahahaha! I wanna talk to Samson! Fly me to the moon like that bitch Alice Kramden! 'Cause it's hard being black and gifted! ..."

For a second the Burning Man seemed slightly nonplussed. He sat back on the ground, his palms splayed out to either side. For just a second it looked like he was going to cry. Reaching into the breast pocket on his black shirt he pulled out a comb and ran it through the towering quiff of his hair which remained quivering for seconds after the comb had been replaced. He sighed.

"The famous Meat Cathedral, a giant pulsating living walled architectural wonder, went bankrupt and was sold. It came down because competing sets the ultimate Christian "truth". There were two factions within the family of the founder, Rudolf Höss. We learn this from one of the family members who wrote about it recently.

In one camp were the budget hawks who wanted the church's salaries reduced, including those of the family members, to make the finances work. The other camp wanted to keep their high salaries and believed the budget would be balanced through prayer.

The "prayer" faction believed it was more "anointed by God" than was the fiscal hawk faction. Having a superior understanding of God's intentions guided them to remove the fiscal hawks from the Board of Directors. It then failed.

Dozens of Christian churches close their doors every month in the U. S. New ones open up. What determines the survivors is their ability to pay their bills, not their skills or intellect in interpreting the Bible. The faith's ability to survive over these past 1,000 plus years is a tribute to the fluidity of its tenets. It has changed to accommodate cultural changes. Its future depends on the ability to change as fast as the culture around it changes. Apparently, in Europe it has lost ground.

The Meat Cathedral story illustrates that theological certainty and rigid beliefs can be a fatal flaw. Starting new churches with new denominations more in turn to social change seems to work better than trying to change to old ones."

The Assassin leaned in on the Burning Man

“It’s what lies beneath that makes my pulse quicken little chicken. The wildest of us are not necessarily the most blind ...”

The Burning Man’s eyes slowly narrowed and his face split into a conspiratorial grin.

“The genuine and authentic madman is a voice of reality of a kind these abusers of women and of children ... it’s no accident ... psychiatrists or the police say “we can’t take this shit from you anymore ... all this shouting and screaming ... all that blood – is it your blood? Should we call an ambulance? I think what you said back there was brilliant ... I possess nothing nothing ...”

It’s funny when you spend time with psychiatrists etc ... like the lovely Ronald David Laing never existed ... (funnily enough I go to the place he used to work – and the shrink fucking hates me now ... hahaha) I think you’ve got it going on there though ...”

The Assassin leaned in closer, his breath smelled of aniseed.

“SO this city exists still? And the Man I’m looking for? He still lives?”

The Burning Man heaved himself up, directly from a seated position to an upright one; like a puppet whose strings had just been jerked.

“I say and I repeat, as the more formal and more permanent: Yes Caverns (of Deros) EXIST. They are incredibly extensive, so together with their total population (if there were not already so many dead!) could be thousands of times the population of the Earth’s surface, and all because caves are staged in large numbers. The caves are connected by wide highways cut into the rock hard on thousands of miles. The whole interior of the Earth is a vast complex network of tunnels linking thousands of caves, each as large as the big cities in our area, and some so large they could make New York look insignificant. The one you seek is below.”

With this the Burning Man stood abruptly and walked away from the Assassin towards the glistening edifice of the pulsating building. He turned back and only his eyes and his teeth shone whitely against his black emaciated silhouette.

“My life really is complicated despite what Shakespeare and God say. And I’m crazy and I save a cup of tea for the silly little man that failed to redeem all of our souls... Mad?”

Inspiring or despairing? I think it’s a case of “you say potayto/I say say potareto” in the end. Despair and inspiration seem to be the beautiful/ugly sisters of a philosophical dialectic whose final synthesis is art (at best) and politics (at worst) ... and occasionally the art and politics conspire to express the absolute worst of what we’re capable of as a species.

After several weeks of comparative rationality and general lucidity ... well, it seems Humpty Dumpty took a big fall ... again..."

He turned as curls and swirls of light seemed to lap around his feet. Smoke poured from his extended fingertips as he rose off the ground slowly like some rosy crucifixion ascending on a tide of his own self-imagined persecution. The Assassin reached out towards him his mouth open in a silent shout but the Burning Man had begun to spin. As a wind of rotting metal hit the Assassin full on in the face he heard strained last words...

"No. NO. NO! Devil man! Devil 6-6-6, the mark of the beast! No! Naughty! Naughty jungle of love! You guys gotta get me out of here! There's this guy Nasty Nate who wants my cocktail fruit, and everyone here likes fresh fish! Then The Squirrel Master came out of left field and told me I'm his bitch!"

Then the Burning Man vanished in an implosion of burning confectionery, melting toffee and seared liquorice, leaving nothing but the smouldering stub of a black cheroot on the pavement.

"Fuck!" spat the Assassin. "Cheque please!"



LEGACY

By Christopher Nosnibor

Photo © Lisa Wormsley

"This is serious." Dave Bowles, was speaking, his creased, haggard face showing fifty shades of grey. He paused, partly for effect, partly at a loss for words. No-one else spoke.

The BBC News Group's Chief Operating Officer scanned the faces of the executives around the table. Some shuffled in their seats. Someone coughed. One anxiously eyed his Blackberry.

"Really serious", Bowles reiterated. He sighed deeply.

Several junior execs leaned awkwardly to one side or the other. One adjusted his tie and then his collar, perspiration visibly beading on his high forehead. Another sniffed and checked his iPhone nervously.

Agitated, Bowles began to stoke things up. "Since the end of the Olympics, our ratings have slumped. Why? Because with the Olympics we had rolling news 24/7, we were the channel of the Olympics. The nation's broadcaster, uniting the nation in its support for our sportsmen and women, putting London back on the world map, and for all the right reasons, showing that Britain truly is *great!*"

His colleagues looked around uncomfortably, unmoved by Dave's attempt at stirring patriotism. Nevertheless, he needed to bring it down.

"But now, it's back to business as usual. We're in the business of broadcasting news. We've given the people the feelgood feeling, lifted them up, buoyed them and boosted morale. But now we need to get back to the task of reminding them life isn't all fun and games, and putting real life back right into their faces. But we need to drag them back to reality. And we need more than just odds and sods like the occasional stabbing or bent politician being forced to resign."

Bowles caught the penetrating fixed glare of a woman in a pristine charcoal skirt suit and cream blouse. Hayley Boardoney, the News Director was his superior, and her annual remuneration package of over £350,000 – almost a third more than his own salary package – reminded him of this. He resented her deeply for it, but above all, he feared her for it. He knew that if he didn't deliver, it would be his head that rolled first. *She should have been chairing this meeting, Dave thought petulantly, or not have bothered attending at all* but instead she was only sitting in and observing, making the occasional interjection. Those interjections weren't constructive input or ideas, of course, but simply management bromides and pep-phrases to encourage the downbeat staff seated around the table to get lively.

Dick Drakins, Controller, Strategy, News and Audio & Music shrugged, keeping his eyes firmly on the table in front of him.

Bowles surveyed the room again.

“Look, we need ideas. We need action. We need *news!*”

“Well, it’s been 15 years since Princess Diana’s death...” proffered one exec sporting a greying goatee and pinstripe suit, before Dave shot him down.

“Old news. Yes, a short series of retrospective pieces, digging out some archive footage, but no. Any coverage we do will be swamped with the full-length documentaries on all of the other channels. C4 have got something big lined up, and Five have a big conspiracy special.”

Janine Baker, Controller of Production cleared her throat. “I just can’t help thinking that we’ve run out of news,” she declared hesitantly. “Like, that’s it. It’s all been done. We’ve done all the war coverage we possibly can, everyone’s tired of a weary-looking correspondent in a bombed-out corner of some desert. The expenses scandal and phone hacking scandal and Levison Enquiry gave us something new for a while, but now the press is scared to cover anything remotely risky....”

Drakins raised his heavy head and from hooded eyes croaked boredly, “Janine might have a point. Basically, it’s all been downhill since Raol Moat. The 2011 riots were good for a couple of weeks, but Sky battered us with the coverage on that. It was as if they knew where the action was going to be, they were always ahead – of the rioters and of us. If I didn’t know better I’d say they organised it....”

“Please, there’s nothing to be gained from speculation and conspiracy theory,” Hayley Boardoney interjected icily. “What we need now is a plan going forward, not conjecture over the past.”

“Sorry.” Dick paused, glancing down again, avoiding eye contact.

“Look, can we focus on the task at hand?” said Boardoney authoritatively.

Paul Cassocks, Director of Global News sighed. A grey man in a grey suit cleared his throat.

“I think we’re all agreed that the Olympics gave us something unique and a real edge. It was a boon. But now that’s tapered off, we need to look at the legacy we’re left with...”

“Isn’t that it?” piped up Drakins. “The legacy? There was so much talk of the legacy in the build-up to justify the expenditure of some £9 billion in the middle of the worst recession in living memory, I don’t see why we can’t return our focus to that. Rather than hitting the viewers with streaming doom and gloom to strike fear into their hearts in order to maintain interest and ratings, why not remind them on a constant basis that they’ve never had it so good? Isn’t that an equally powerful diversion? The same principle, just the opposite kind of psychology, right?”

Bowles turned to him, mixed emotions crossing his weary features. "It's got potential..." he began before Boardoney cut him dead.

"No."

"No?"

"It's just not potent enough. Besides, the legacy hasn't exactly lived up to expectations so far. Tourism's slumped, business isn't booming, the regeneration of the temporary sites has stalled... If you think the torch relay and the jubilee was difficult to present appealingly... what I'm saying is that even we might struggle to sell the legacy right now. We need to draw attention away from it, at least until we can gauge the wider sentiment."

"Right," nodded Cassocks.

"But what does that leave us?" asked Janine Baker, flustered.

Her voice lowered, a sound like glass, Boardoney fixed her stare. "What we need is a disaster."

Outside on the streets, the damp September morning mist hung heavy over the Thames. The water was dark, murky and sluggish, reflecting the densely clouded sky above and the atmosphere that clung to the damp, drab city as it crept inexorably from a dismal summer into an equally gloomy autumn. After weeks of heavy rainfall in the catchment areas of the river's many tributaries, the river is swollen. Full to within a few inches of the tops of its banks, it swirled with powerful currents that whirled like a slowly simmering beer wort. The riverside paths, which only weeks before had been crawling with countless bodies, joggers and cyclists and dog walkers, were completely deserted.

While the treacle-like surface of the broiling water may have made any kind of boating activity difficult anyway, there was no sign of there being any interest in taking to the water. Like the banks which contained the foreboding mass of dark liquid that slowly bubbled, thick and viscous, the river's course had been clogged with hectic human activity, canoes and kayaks of all colours and sizes. Instead, the stripped trunk of a fallen tree, half-submerged and resembling a skulking crocodile, slowly made its way downstream.

A cool yet clammy breeze funnelled along the banks of the watercourse, whipping up some small but choppy waves on the dense, puckered surface as it swirled and eddied under and over itself with a menacing, brooding latent violence. The air movement propelled floating debris - crisp packets, polystyrene cups and food cartons in different directions, flitting across the bulging surface contra to the colliding currents.

Along the glistening, rain-soaked tarmac pavements that lined the river, soggy clumps of litter lay, slowly degenerating. Same as ever, only now the discarded waxed wrappers from

McDonalds' burgers, card containers for french fried and grease-liner brown paper bags bearing the ubiquitous double-arch yellow logo lay over a foot deep. Tall cups with straws protruding from their plastic caps scuttled along in the breeze, clattering against more plastic bottle bearing various logos denoting numerous brands of protein shakes and energy drinks - predominantly Lucozade - strewn amidst the inevitable drift of empty Coke cans. Wrappers from cereal bars and glucose tablets also littered the silent streets. Amongst the smaller detritus of human existence lay abandoned nearly-new trainers. Expensive brands, such as Nike, Asics and Adidas, the treads still barely scuffed, the dazzling white uppers pristine, the interiors with barely a trace of wear or foot odour. Leaning against lamp-posts, trees and simply lying on the pavements and cycle tracks, thrown down recklessly and left, racer bikes, shiny and without so much as a hint of rust, clutter the landscape. Whereas before these items would have been swiped by opportunists and committed criminals even when locked, now, they simply cluttered the deserted thoroughfares.

Crumpled and soggy amidst the detritus, a poster of Jessica Ennis, faded and torn lies limp on the ground, her revered washboard stomach reduced to sagging pulp.

Closer investigation reveals the streets aren't entirely devoid of human life: sprawled on benches and slumped against the trunk of the occasional tree, a desiccated husk of a human form, drained of life and colour so as to blend in with the murky monochrome background. Where once these people had been driven, spurred toward self-improvement, their respiratory and central nervous systems had simply given out, leaving them immobile, ruined, expended. Lying limp, some of these once vital life forms were already dead and decaying, their ossified remains slowly becoming integrated into wood of the trees and the benches. Others were still alive, or, more accurately, continuing to exist. Empty, hollow and permanently incapacitated, they wouldn't last long, but for now they remained, flaccid and inert, in some blank boneless limbo. It wasn't supposed to be like this, many had thought as had found themselves slumped and incapable of movement before their brains, like their now wasted limbs, had begun to atrophy. Now, days, even weeks later, they had reached a fully vegetative state, and no doubt would have willed for the end to arrive swiftly had they still possessed the capacity to will anything.

The thick, acrid tang of decay permeated the air where the corpses and demi-corpses were strewn, and grass and other weeds had suddenly sprung through every last crack in the formerly well-maintained pathways. Fronds and roots were bursting through the ruptured surfaces of the bitumen and spaces between paving slabs. Dandelions, bindweed, thistles, nettles, plantain, hogweed, even knotweed had taken hold and were all now thriving.

In their stations, the police sat, motionless, staring blankly at the walls. A stifling ennui had settled over the force. No longer required to shepherd visitors to the city between various locations, and with national security no longer at a constant buzz of red alert, there was simply nothing for them to do. Street crime was at an all-time low: the streets were practically deserted. There was no-one to commit crime, no-one to mug or stab or abduct. Meanwhile, the threat of terrorist attacks was at its lowest in over a decade. With nothing to police and nothing to

protect, there was simply nothing for them to do. Consequently, the officers were slowly coming to resemble the former exercise fanatics, cycling celebrities, stars of track and field and other sporting legends lying limp on the streets outside. Limp and lifeless, they slumped in their seats, at their desks and over the station counters.

Each of the army barracks were deserted, as silent as the streets outside: the troops had returned to war, the remainder on leave or discharged. There simply wasn't the need to maintain such large numbers of personnel. There wasn't the need for anything. No-one came, no-one went. No-one cared. Where tensions had previously run high, there was now simply an absence that filled the airless atmosphere. The airwaves hummed with nothing but empty static. There were no threats to security, there was simply no movement beyond that of litter like tumbleweeds skittering down the empty, windswept streets under steely-grey Autumn skies.

The city was in rapid decline, and as clouds gathered over the barren, abandoned construction sites, a crushing stasis had descended and there was nothing to be done about it.

It was all over.



TO EAT THE SKY LIKE AN APPLE

(EXCERPT)

By Craig Woods

Images © Sarah Amy Fishlock

Yes! I Am a Long Way From Home

The old burgh's western perimeter perches on a forest-fringed hill flanked by grey stone slopes. A marginal district of faded grey tenements and somnolent industrial buildings. Weathered windows, blinded here and there beneath plywood patches, survey the steel snail-trails of the train tracks below. Nature adds its own incongruous garnish; weeds and shrubs stretching defiant fronds skyward from concrete orifices. The bitter smell of grimy Clyde waters blends alchemically with pervasive distillery scents. Amidst stockades of graffiti-cloaked walls and rusted mesh fences the tenements stand as rugged sentinels, slate brows furrowed in silent conference.

Within this modest quarter on the cold black morning of Sunday 4th of January 1998, I met a girl who could eat the sky.

She emerged as a beacon in the frozen dawn. Her face, impossibly pale, blazed phosphorescently among the rusted bins and unkempt foliage of the courtyard. Startled by this apparition, I dropped the bag of refuse I had carried from the apartment and emitted a gasp; my shock piercing dead air like a pellet shot through a frozen lake. Two glistening aqueous bulbs rolled deep in the girl's eye-sockets to address me. She stared unblinking and silent as I stood prone; paralysed by this illogical invasion of my morning's solitary routine. An audible tremor brewed in my stomach, an aftershock of that morning's earlier diarrhoea ordeal. Having as yet neglected to make an appointment with a doctor, the root cause of the troubling and increasingly severe bowel symptoms I had been experiencing in recent weeks remained nameless, but this visceral growl seemed to announce the stranger spectacularly, as though the preceding paroxysms had served as the beat for her fanfare to dance upon.

I did not know this girl, had never seen her before. She was not from the neighbourhood. Scanning her diminutive form --twin moons of her eyes glowing wide and luminous, bony bare knees huddled to a birdlike chest-- I struggled for some clue as to her manifestation here behind my home. Having been raised in the local area, I had long been regaled and had regaled others with the popular tales of escapees from the nearby mental hospital. In each of these mainly apocryphal fables a lost and nameless soul would materialise with all the conspicuousness of an alien visitor and embark on a small adventure comprising some or all of a select set of behaviours; haranguing locals with cryptic declarations of impending doom or rapture; wreaking antisocial havoc at supermarket checkouts and in post office queues; exposing themselves to minors; making toilet in the ornate fountain of the public park; generally dismantling established civil conventions until their inevitable recapture.



Naturally there were also variants of these stories which incorporated violence and horror ranging from a single physical or sexual assault to full-scale mass murder; ghoulish distortions generated and credited exclusively by schoolchildren. Despite the gulf of logic and rationale which separated me from my childhood self, a spectre of juvenile fear coiled my already fraught gut into a small knot as the girl and I assessed one another in mutual silence.

Trepidation brought my vision sharply into focus, my eyes adjusting themselves urgently to the dark. I interrogated the girl's appearance for meaning, attempting to decipher the codes of her posture. Though she was shoeless and jacketless, the elegant knee-length cotton dress she wore diluted the flavour of her desperation. Her dark hair, while messy, was stylishly cut and boasted a natural sheen which prevailed in the

gloom. The trouble upon her was obvious, but neither homelessness nor institutionalisation seemed likely. I pondered the possibility that she were a young junky, one of Glasgow's many listless narcotic shadows, perhaps collapsed there in an attack of withdrawal. The alert eyes and focussed expression asserted otherwise. I noticed that her bare legs were peppered with bruises and scratches, and surmised that she had emerged from within the vast woods that stretched westward from the burgh's perimeter to the tenebrous silhouettes of the Campsie Fells beyond.

Finally I perceived that the girl was shivering and reclaimed my faculties.

"Are you alright?" I muttered, painfully aware of the question's inherent idiocy.

The girl's gaze bored blackly into me. A momentary and anonymous quiver of facial muscle, neither a smile nor a frown, shattered her marble quiescence. At last she responded with a single word:

"Cold."

Forgetting instantly the bag of refuse and the entirely mundane world of domestic chores it represented, I stepped forward and offered the girl my hand. Her skeletal fingers wrapped themselves around mine in an icy vice and I pulled her gently to her feet. In a swift feline movement she reached down with her free hand, scooping up a heavy square object from the ground and gripping it decisively to her chest. Her crystalline gaze offered only spectral reflections as she spoke again: "Cold is in the air, an aura of ice and phlegm..."

Attributing this cryptic statement to delirium, I gently draped an arm around her

exposed shoulders. A hurried heartbeat resonated through her bones, enticing the tide of my blood to flow and ebb to its rhythm. Back and forth. From eternity to oblivion. Back and forth.

"Come on inside," I said. "We'll get you warmed up, okay?"

Upon entering the meagre electric warmth and tungsten glow of the apartment, I realised that the girl was younger than I had initially guessed; no more than fourteen or fifteen. The bob of her hair curled sharply upward at her jaw-line and the black tresses swayed like a curtain with her movements, alternately revealing and concealing a face of eerie stillness and eyes keen as glass. I ushered her into the living room and had her sit in an armchair by the electric heater. In the light I could see that the object she held to her chest was a heavy hardcover scrapbook. Tattered edges of undefined items protruded cautiously from between yellowed pages. Music from a Sarah Vaughan CD I'd been enjoying continued to undulate softly from the stereo speakers, enhancing the graceful melancholy of the girl's appearance.

"Stay here and get some heat back into your bones. I'll fix you something warm to drink."

The girl did not respond. Her impassive gaze tracked me as I moved into the kitchen.

I filled a large mug with all the milk I had left over and set it to heat in the microwave. While the machine went about its sullenly humming business, I brewed myself a cup of strong black coffee.

Kid chose the wrong time of year to call on my hospitality, I mused as I reviewed the paltry contents of the refrigerator. Not so much as an egg to spare.

The cupboards told a similarly scant story. A half-full jar of honey comprised the only unconsumed foodstuffs, barring some yeast extract and a packet of powdered custard abandoned by Poppy after our break-up; items I characteristically detested but had not yet summoned sufficient fortitude to discard. While the majority of the more obviously affecting reminders of our relationship had been in one way or another dispensed with or removed from the apartment, these bland groceries remained; their anonymity granting them a peculiarly sentimental claim upon my psyche that I had yet to confront.

(Poppy... you took the rain with you... with a hand to your brow, commanding the torrent wash all but the rage from your kerosene eyes...)

Swallowing back the ghost of my failures, I retrieved the honey and closed the cupboard more forcefully than I'd intended, the report of wood on wood rousing the dawn from its languor.

"Sorry about that," I called softly through the wall to the living room, concerned for the girl's nerves.

No response.

I stirred a healthy portion of honey into the hot milk, the saccharine stench assaulting my fatigued nervous system. Poised to pour the remainder of my Christmas whisky into the coffee, I winced as my stomach heaved once more.

What the hell, I thought, emptying the bottle into the milk instead. Kid has more use for it than I do.

The girl accepted the mug tenderly, but swigged away almost half the steaming contents in a single gulp.

I sat opposite her and, speaking softly, introduced myself.

A fraction of apprehension faded visibly from her posture, the hot cocktail thawing the outermost shell of her defences. She laid the book flat on her lap. She spoke in a voice as delicate as an origami flower:

"I'm Annie."

"Nice to meet you, Annie." I leaned forward to clink mugs.

She smiled for the first time, briefly displaying a narrow gorge of angular teeth and bright red gums. "Thank you for inviting me in."

I evaluated her melodious accent as a product of the Northwest Highlands. She was a long way from home. "Where did you come from, Annie?"

She shrugged. She made a slight northwards gesture with a jerk of her head. "The woods."

(I'm in the woods, the ageless woods, and I come to a clearing, a dear green place where a blacked-out mirror perches against a tree, where a concrete culvert vomits blood into a stream...)

Obviously doing a runner from something, I construed. There was, however, an additional layer of peculiarity to the girl's manner and appearance for which mere fugitive status did not wholly account. During a life largely spent exploring society's margins, I had encountered my fair share of runaways and renegades of various stripes. Though each had possessed their own particular rationale and quirks, they nonetheless had in common a universal sense of urgency; a palpable agitation that came with a lifestyle dependent upon the constant need for a new place to get to. Annie seemed to exist in an altogether different sphere. Her quiescent demeanour suggested the disposition of a chronic observer, compelled to immerse herself in the fine detail of her environment at the expense of identifying a suitable escape route.

Annie finished the milk in three more voracious gulps. She placed it on the dusty sideboard. She brought her hands together, fingers interlocked, and pressed down on the scrapbook with a protective double fist.

"What do you have in there?"

She shrugged once more, her standard mode of communication it seemed. "Words, images."

"Your own words?"

"Sometimes. Not always. Although even the words of others become our own, don't they?"

"Can I see?"

She bowed her head, cringed slightly and was silent.

"I'm sorry," I said. "If it's personal, that's okay."

She said nothing, only looked up with a thin and mindful smile.

There followed a charged pause. "You're not much of a talker, eh?"

The same shrug again. "Should be careful..." She caught herself mid-sentence.

"Careful?" I prompted.

Annie emitted a low sigh. She cast her eyes to the ceiling, brushing a stray raven lock behind an elegant elfin ear. "Careful of words ... even the miraculous ones. They can be both daisies and bruises ..."

I swigged my last bitter mouthful of coffee. This burst of faintly familiar verbiage was exciting to me. "Aye, I think I know what you mean. Sometimes the words are better written than said."

A less hesitant smile, equally brief. Her gaze addressed me forthrightly. "I am forever falling in love with words. Those shapeless doves falling from the ceiling. Yet they often fail me." She flipped the book sharply open and leafed through several pages; each a collage of pasted images, text cut from magazines and books, and a compacted spider-like handwriting I only barely glimpsed. She stopped at the desired page. She held it up for me to see. "You know this lady?"

I leant forward in my chair, squinting at the monochrome photograph glued on to the page. It depicted a dark-haired woman seated at a typewriter, an untouched cup of coffee at her side, a cigarette protruding gracefully from between two splayed fingers. The woman's bold features and grave expression were unmistakable. "Aye, I know who she is. That's Anne Sexton."

The girl turned the book back around to face her. She addressed the image of the dead poet in silence for a few seconds. Then she slapped the book's cover shut as brusquely as she had opened it. She lowered her eyes. "I have known her kind. I have been the air in her lungs." She bit her bottom lip nervously between sentences. "In a world of so many meanings, we can choose the ones we consume and the ones we wear. Poetry is my life, my postmark, my hands, my kitchen, my face. Anne's words are as real to me as the streets and buildings, you see?" Her voice was blank, almost affectless, as though she had so internalised the value of these enigmatic words that they amounted to a mantra, an exposition of the obvious. "So I choose her words to fill my lungs like the city smoke. We are smoke too, it's true. Like smoke we float and change shape and dissolve. So I am Annie. That is my shape until it dissolves. Or until I can write a new one for myself." Her eyes flickered upwards. The suggestion of another smile tugged at one corner of her mouth before flattening swiftly and without a trace into the ashen marble of her face.

I leaned back in my chair. "I write a wee bit myself," I said, both in truth and in a bid to quell the girl's unease. "I do a bit of documenting of the local art and music scenes for a few different publications. On and off, you know? It's not my *real* job, unfortunately." I expected the girl to enquire about my main source of income and I winced in preparation. The reality of my soul-deadening occupation as an office drone in the finance department of one of Glasgow's best known whisky producers seemed an intrusive subject in the sanctum of my home. However, she said nothing and let the matter dissolve like the smoke she had spoken of. Whether this was due to politeness, disinterest, or an intuitive sympathy on her part was impossible to say, but I was silently thankful in any case. I continued: "It can be interesting. I've made a lot of good friends in the city through my writing. A few enemies too, I suppose." I cast my mind to Glasgow's sycophantic scenester crowd: the seemingly multiplying ranks of sound-alike, look-alike indie guitar bands; their legions of hangers-on and similarly insipid cronies in the art scene whom it seemed were collectively working to degrade the city's cultural output into an incestuous self-referential swill. "For every gem you dig up in the local music scene, there are more than a handful of turds," I said. "Still, it has its perks. And there's nothing quite

like the hit of working at something that gets your personal passions flowing. Anyway, away from that, I do try my hand at a bit of literary writing." I pointed to the unruly stacks of binders and paper which lay scattered at various stations around the apartment; precarious towers competing in height with those adjacent composed of books, compact discs and vinyl LPs. "Not my job, but definitely my vocation. It's something of a work in progress you might say." I said this with some degree of self-reproach, painfully aware that my creative writing had in fact been floundering since my relationship with Poppy had ended. Smarting still from the wound of this experience, my muse had yet to muster the strength or confidence to re-saddle the creative horse.

"You seem to have much you want to say." Annie scanned the stacks with wide attentive eyes. "There is so much I want to say too. So many images, stories, proverbs... But the words are rarely good enough. Too often the wrong ones kiss me."

I chuckled. "I'd settle for a cordial handshake from my words, let alone something as intimate as a kiss. An absent nudge would be an improvement. A boot to the balls even. Anything to suggest there's actually some life floating amongst the literary sewage I've crapped out."

Annie sniffed and sat upright. A pause. And then: "Are you comfortable with espionage?"

I regarded her quizzically, intrigued by this apparent non-sequitur. "Are you a secret agent, Annie? Should I be worried?"

A smile brighter and more ephemeral than a lightning flash. "A writer is essentially a spy," she said.

"Is that what you feel you do in there?" I pointed to the heavy tattered volume on her lap. "Spy on whom?"

Again with the shrug. "Myself of course. Why else keep a journal if not to examine your own reflections; the dirty, earthy ones; the salty bitter ones; the wild electric ones? I am imitating a memory of belief that is not mine to own. But I am sculpting my own meanings, sculpting my own truth."

My pleasure in Annie's speech was cut short as my gaze drifted down to her pale bare legs. Her naked feet were caked in dirt, the skin almost blue with cold. Angry red scratches and grazes bloomed callously on the tender flesh of her calves. Sarah Vaughan had eased into a rendition of 'It Never Entered My Mind'; an impossibly sad testimony of solitude.

I leapt to my feet. "We better get you cleaned up."

Filling the bathtub with all the hot water the antiquated immersion tank would yield, I supplied Annie with clean towels and a robe and left her to tend to herself. As the ghostly reports of her soft splashes drifted through the wall, I dug out an old hand-knitted jumper I hadn't worn in some years. Despite the creases, I imagined the girl would be thankful for the added warmth it offered. From a long undisturbed bedroom drawer I retrieved an unopened package of woollen tights; another drab remnant of a void relationship. The tights were deep forest green in colour, Poppy's preferred shade.

(Poppy, I'm impaled upon the branches of your silence...)

Tapping the bathroom door lightly, I informed Annie of the garments and deposited them at the foot of the door for her convenience. Though she did not respond verbally, a temporary lull in the reports of her movements conveyed her acknowledgement.

I paced the living room and pondered what was to be done with this intriguing young runaway. I had no intention of contacting the police, having long held the inconsistent rule of law and the stooges who would enforce it in little regard. Besides, what the hell would the authorities do but send her back to where she came from? It seemed to me unlikely that such a unique and perceptive creature would be running quite so desperately from anything without a legitimate reason. I had no desire or intention to send her straight back into the maw of whatever beast she'd sought to flee.

Auntie Sheila will know what the hell to do, I concluded to myself. That old fox has more shady names scrawled in her wee black book than all the loan sharks and gangsters in the country. I'll go rattle her cage and talk it through.

Auntie Sheila lived in a caravan camped out in a gutted industrial area by the shipyards a few miles to the south. She had no phone and rarely appreciated unexpected visitors, but she had all the time in the world for a fugitive in need. Besides, once one scraped hard enough at her volcanic rock exterior, there was enough molten love hidden within to flood a thousand Pompeiis. I knew that she was fond of me; she'd made no secret of my privileged status as one of an exclusive set whom she treasured as the wayward progeny she'd been unable to conceive. If there was a time to take advantage of that unconditional affection, this was surely it.

Contemplating this course of action, I reasoned that leaving the girl to hide out in my apartment while I crossed town to Sheila's place would be the smartest play. I had no clue as to how Annie might conduct herself in public, and emphatically wished to avoid rousing unnecessary suspicion among any meddling locals. Within the girl's eyes I had glimpsed a volatile energy; a sublime but potentially hazardous phenomenon that might result in unknown catastrophe if not managed with caution.

When Annie emerged from the bathroom --dried, dressed and immaculate, her fingertips poking out tentatively from the jumper's wide flopping cuffs-- I put on my jacket and headed for the front door. "I'm going to see a friend of mine. Someone who can help you, I think. Stay here and make yourself comfortable until I get back."

The girl's face contorted into a mask of disappointment. "You're leaving? Without me?"

"Yes." I was taken aback by her offended tone, surprised at its capacity to stir up an instant cauldron of remorse. "I'm going to speak to someone who'll help you get to... well, wherever you want to go."

She hung her head, one half of her thoughtful face obscured by a damp screen, black as petroleum. "Where I want to go is outside. With you. Just now."

"Look, Annie, I want to help you. I can't do that if I'm seen parading you halfway across town. Who knows who could be watching, right?"

"No, not right," she declared with unaffected confidence. "To go outside is what I'm here for. To breathe the city's story. What's the point in going one place to another and another without ever seeing, feeling, tasting *any* of them?"

I sighed, massaged my forehead. "Listen, sweetheart, I don't know what or who you're running from, but..."

"I mould out his last look at everyone," she interrupted solemnly. "In my sights I am carving him, sculpting that moment. I am carrying his eyes and his brain bone at every position..."

The faintest glimmer of a tear threatened the corner of her right eye. Whatever had caused this girl to run, it had also branded her consciousness with palpable scars of grief; wounds which ran deeper and fiercer than I might have initially assumed. I cleared my throat and continued tenderly, endeavouring to be conciliatory.

"Okay. Hear me out. It's clear to me that you're in serious need of getting away from something. And, in my experience, when people are that desperate to escape, there's usually someone else just as desperate to make sure that they don't.

So if you want to make sure you get *clean* away then you have to be smart about..."

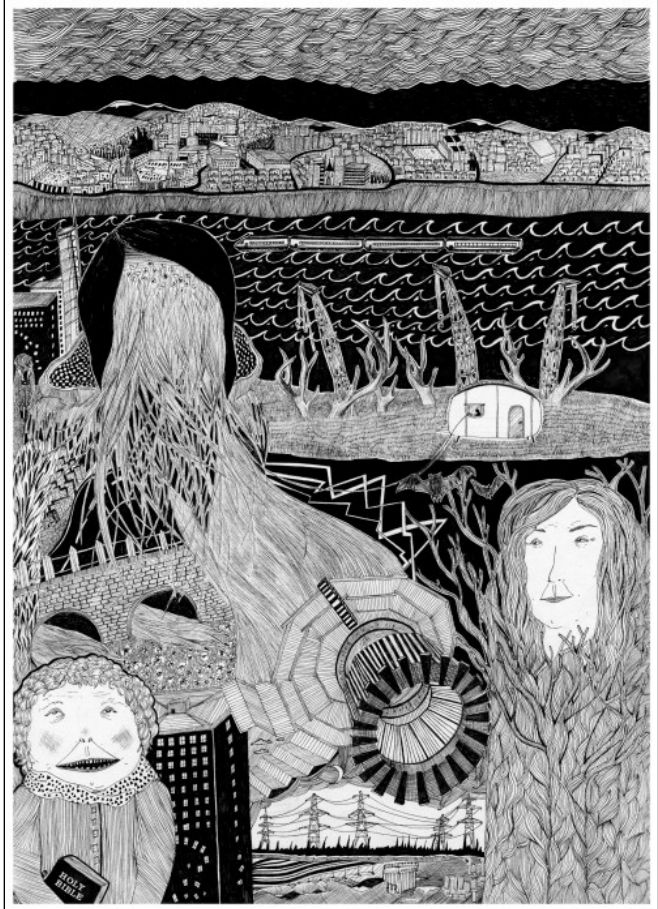
"I *am* smart!" she interjected, her manner now ratcheted up to scold me. "I know what I'm doing. I'm not spending anymore time indoors. I've been wronged all year, so many nights with nothing but rough elbows in them. So many nights immersed in delicate boxes of Kleenex yelling *crybaby, crybaby!*"

Stunned by this spontaneous outburst, words faltered in my throat. I was pinned helplessly in the infernal beams of her eyes as they burned twin holes of sorrow clean through me.

"I will not stay here alone," she concluded. "Like a telephone placed back on the hook."

There was something almost pathological in her discourse, but despite this, or perhaps because of it, I found myself unable to remonstrate further. "You're right," I relented finally. "You *are* smart. I apologise." I sighed and stepped back into the room. "Alright, let's find you something to wear out, eh?"

Annie glanced down at her bare feet. "The dead," she murmured. "They lie without shoes in their stone boats."



To Eat the Sky Like an Apple is a forthcoming novel published by Paraphilia Books

TH' KNAP WITCH OV WESSEX

By Matt Leyshon

Vather sez does oi wan 'elp 'im an' oi sez no course not. It still dun zeem right t' me, tho oi dun zay zo. Zo ee an' John vrom Lydlynch carry 'er all by themzelves vrom th' knap an' oi dunt 'elp one bit an' juz skip abou' tryin' t' keep warm in th' cold' misty morn'.

Th' boughs o'er th' hedges iz hangen low wi' th' buds ov spring az they heft 'er all libbets an' cold dewy limbs vrom th' knap where we live an' down th' trodden track t' th' parrick. Az we walk th' zun rises slow over vather an' 'iz shadow spreads ou' darkzum in th' zunbeams an zo does John vrom Lydlynch's tho ov course iz be smaller.

When we come o'er th' kno'le oi giz thought t' th' brook coz it iz near. Th' brook iz where they'd vound th' black cat wi' a gert stone 'round iz neck, an t' me mind thaz wha' started all th' witch bizniz coz John vrom Lydlynch zed drownin' catz be wha' witches do an took it upon 'imselv t' rid Leddenton ov witches. Back then oi zed t' vather, it were John vrom Lydlynch th't did it coz it were a millstone tied 'bout iz neck an John vrom Lydlynch iz a miller an also coz ee iz stupid an' dun kno' t' dry a cat t' stop over-lookin' by witches no' zoak it. Mother had agreed an' zed she'd told az much t' Maery in church. But vather clocked me ear an sez it weren 'im an ee ain't stupid either an told mother she shouldn' be talkin' t' Maery 'bout iz vriend John vrom Lydlynch. But ee an' oi both kno', jus az mother knew too, John vrom Lydlynch works a' th' mill an used t' kee' a black cat in a box vor teazin' girls. An also ee an' oi both knew tha' tha' th're cat ov'iz had scratched Maery an' th' whole town ov Leddenton near 'nough had zeen 'er scratches an' bloody hanz tha' were like a child's a'er blackberry pickin'. Zo I sez John vrom Lydlynch killed th' cat coz it ruined 'iz chances wiv Maery, though I only sez it in me 'ead ov course.

Oi looked on az then they put her down on th' mozzy grazz an th' witch did zeem t' bath' still at their veet in th' zunsheen tha' were vlickering through th' beare-timbered copse. It were like a picture but she weren' bathin' an' oi knew it an zo oi tried not t' think abou' it. Instead oi thought ov th' vayre a' Paladore an' how pretty th' primwroses would zoon be in th' meadow an' vields an 'ow wet me veet were vrom th' dew.

Az oi lizzened t' th' drushes zinging their zongs az they protect'd their sky-blue eggs vrom uz who ov course cared nun vor their eggz at all, oi thought ov 'ow it were when John vrom Lydlynch weren' abou' an 'ow vather then call'd 'im laffin' One-Ball coz ee'd loz a ball t' th' grindstone. Volk who din kno' 'is name jus' call 'im th' miller, or th' miller wi' one ball. People who dun like 'im, like me, ov which there were many oi think, called 'im juz One Ball. Oi prefer t' call 'im nothin' though coz tha' iz wha' ee iz t'me an' oi prefer it when eez not abou' coz there wern nay witches in Leddenton til John vrom Lydlynch zed there were witches.

Oi tried not t'look too much a' 'er lyin' th're wi' 'er skin a'white like a poizun ivy berry an' 'er hair like ol' manz beard. But oi do think ov 'ow she do look older tha' vather e'en now ee'z older too, an' 'ow she wore black mos' times coz it mean' lez cleanin', an oi wonder why they kep' finden bellarmine an' witch bottles a' th' knap. But oi thought too ov 'ow nun a tha' dint make 'er a witch be me book.

Oi gazed ag'in a' vather diggin'. An oi gazed a' John vrom Lydlynch tryin' t'dig too, but ee weren strong 'nough vrom chazin' Maery up at Mill, vather zed wiv a laff that oi knew meant it wern vunny an' were true instead. John vrom Lydlynch tells me oi should be 'elpin' but oi tellz 'im youz kill 'er youz can bury 'er. Anywayz oi started t' watch th' poplars swayin' instead ov watchin' them, an' lizzen' t' th' lively blackbird zingin' an' coz th' zun were comin' up proper now oi thought ov th' zummer weath'r an' th' zun an' playin' an a-runnen races an' thingz.

Course John vrom Lydlynch sez now she be dead tha' she were sly an' evil-eyed. Oi lizzen az now vather agreez coz now eez got nay choice wha' wi' killin' 'er an' buryin' 'er an' tha'. Oi lizzen'd now t' John vrom Lydlynch tellin' vather thingz bout her tha' oi reckon fur zure iz lies. She did woone day, ee sez, a dreadvul deal ovdamage t' old Gruff'z vo'k, makin' th'ir milk turn zour or summen like tha'. Vather muz kno' az oi kno' an' we all kno' why th'ir milk did turn zour now, an' iz coz th' cat tha' caught th'ir ratz iz now dead in th' brook wit' a stone round iz neck an' zo th' ratz iz now dead in their vatz instead ov the catz belly. Yez'day Vather, az ee told me ov the rightousnez ov it all, sez t' me 'ow John vrom Lydlynch is a wize chap an' 'ow ee woz right. But az oi lizzen now t' John vrom Lydlynch quirk an' smell iz ram sweat even fro' 'ere oi kno'z 'im t' be a fool an' that th're be more wise stuff in a nitch. An' oi d'think vather doez kno' it too, tha' John vrom Lydlynch is not wise at all, tho ee wun zay. Wise chaps dun ne'd t'taste a sloo twice t' kno it be bitter an' John vrom Lydlynch had tasted at leaz' three thiz mornin', an 'that alone do make 'im a dunch be me book.

Gruff sez iz cheese 'ave turned, sez John vrom Lydlynch t' vather who sez in return, an' oi laugh'd quiet like when oi heard it, like th' scrooping gate at Wyke farm, oi like bluevinney ee sez. An' it were true coz we all like Dors't bluevinny an' it made me wonder who'd giz me cheese an' tek me ti churh through th' leaze or hold me han' in th' hoarfrost like thiz winter, coz vather'll be too bizee now thaz f'sure, now th' witch iz dead an' soon t'be buried too.

But though oi felt zum kinda' great zadness oi had ne'er zeen John vrom Lydlynch look zo 'appy, oi had zeen pigz in shit lookin' lez 'appy than ee did now, like ee 'ated th' witch e'en more than ee loved Maery an' were verily 'appy bout th' whole bizniz. An' it waz vunny coz az oi thought ov pigs oi heard John vrom Lydlynch sez t' vather how th' witch made all th' pigs zicken an' turn th'ir snouts t' th' sky, gi'en wo'one little grunt bevore th'y did die. But oi cud smell th' pigs an' swil, an' shit now an' oi be sure vather could too but ee zed nowt an' John vrom Lydlynch carried on az ee do. An how th' sheep dint die wi' a grunt but gi'ed noo

wool, ee sez, an' only lambs tha' were dead, th' cows came azew, an' ducks an' chicken tha' wer death-struck an vell down dead, drappin' like drunks. Or like John vrom Lydlynch oi did think, when Maery turn'd him down again, which she surely will, an' leaves 'im sinken like a ho'se-tinger on a wet lily. An' what, me vather ask'd, did th' witch 'ave against animals zo, coz ee knew vrom tales az oi did 'ow they like animals an' ave' familiars an things like tha'. She had nowt against th' animals, sez John vrom Lydlunch all kno'ing like, but th' Gruff's a' Wyke Farm oveded her somehow zee. Oi zee, sez vather. Nutten t' do wiv young Gruff courting Maery then, thought oi, an nutten t' do wiv Dick zayin' ee zees One-Ball at zum moonlez hour in Gruff's vields like a steart riskin' a sprethin'. An nutten t' do wiv that cat spoilin' yer chances wiv Maery, sez oi in me 'ead ov course.

The voice ov John vrom Lydlynch were gratin' on me an' zo oi lizzend vor a while t'th'e twitt'ren birds an' th' hosses nayin'o'er at th' tump o'er Huntingdon way. Th' hole were comin' on big like, it were a gert pit big enough vor two witches in vact, like th'y jus kept diggin' coz really th'y didn' wanna chuck 'er in, oi thought, but didn' zay ov course. Oi jus watched zum darkzum clouds o'er Mere an' wondered where th'y did end an' where th' blue smoke vrom o'er yonder began az oi didn' wanna zee th' witch neith'r outside th' hole nor in it. An zo oi didn' look, oi zat on th' ditcherz old ho'se an' mapped th' hedges in me mind an' though ov me kittyboots that needed stichin' an' me dress that needed darnin' 'til vather came an took me han'.

All dun ee zed.

Mothers dead then oi zed in agreeance, coz there was a big mound ov dirt where th' hole had been an' no sign ov th' witch no more.

Th' knap witch iz dead zed John vrom Lydlynch an th'n ee started whizlin' a merry toon.

Stop that there whizlin' One-Ball, nowz not th' time, vather zed.

Vather does kno' it too juz az oi kno's it, oi zes in me 'ead ov course, mother were no witch, not be me book.

RUFFY

By Steve Overbury

I was living around the bins, with the dogs mostly. I didn't think I was one though. I knew I was a human. But I stayed with the dogs because there were lots of 'em and people stayed away from 'em and if I stayed with them then they stayed away from me.

If anything I thought I were a cat really, more in common I s'pose.

I used to live in an 'ouse fer a while. Me muvver 'ad an 'ouse but she used to 'ave fellers round and when she did then she'd put me cot in the hall and sometimes I'd be out there all night while she'd be giggling and the bed creakin.'

Then she got sick and they took 'er away and I never saw her again. Some other people took me away but I bit one of 'em and ran off, and I walked down the big road till I got to the caff at the service station and went round to the bins 'cos I were 'ungry and found some stuff. Then a dog come up to me and that were the start of it really. I stroked it and gave it some food and it sat wiv me for a bit and then when it got dark, I follered it and it went into the woods behind the caff. It went into a pipe and I went in as well and there was little baby dogs in there in the warm so I laid down wiv 'em and they all licked me up then I went to sleep. Lots of time went by then there were more dogs and I s'pose coz I'd been there longer than they had they left me alone and din't bite me or nuffin specially after I bit one or two of them a couple of times. That set them off a squealin' Har har har.

By the time the little dogs' muvver had died, I was runnin' with them. Then they all died, mostly on the road. They'd go out and then they'd never come back, but by then there were loads of ovver dogs and I forgot which ones were bruvvers and sisters and so did they. Sometimes bruvvers and sisters used to fight and make each other bleed and the one that was bleeding the most with a mashed up face and an ear 'angin off would run away, sometimes on just three legs and you'd never see 'em again. But they never had a fight with me though. I did have to shout at 'em sometimes to keep 'em off and some reason they was scared of that.

There was cats around but they never stuck together like the dogs did. They was quieter the cats. They'd go round the bins after the dogs did or before sometimes but not at the same time cos they used to be scared of the dogs. But only if there was lots of dogs. If there was only one or two, they'd fight wiv 'em and the dogs would run away with blood on them. Cos the cats were big, they weren't like the cat we had when we lived in the 'ouse.

One time when I was livin' in the pipe some old bloke tried to get in. I think he must have seen me round the bins when he was havin' a piss and follered me back through the woods. No one

normally came in the woods 'cos it weren't easy to get to 'cos it was sort of cut off by the river at the back. He got in the pipe with me and he started askin' me to lay down wiv 'im and said I should take me coat off and if I did he'd take me 'ome wiv 'im and give me some food. He grabbed 'old of me and put 'is 'ands inside me coat and rubbed me skin but I shouted for the dogs and they came back and bit 'im loads of times and after a while he stopped yellin' and laid down on the ground and he were covered in blood and then he stopped makin' any noise any more and then they started biting 'is clothes off 'im and then they ate 'im. It took 'em ages and they kept lookin' at me like askin' me did I want to eat some of 'im but I didn't want to. I'd never eaten no meat that hadn't been cooked before and I didn't want to get blood all round me face like they did. In the end there was nuffin' left of that bloke and sometimes I used to wonder wevver that really 'appened or not but then ever such a long time later I was down near the river and I saw one of 'is shoes.

One night I was sleepin' in the pipe and all the dogs were out scrappin'. I don't know where they went but a lot of 'em was bleedin' when they came back. Anyway, while they was away some rats came in the pipe. It was snowin' outside and I reckon they wanted to be in the warm in the dogs' beds and eat some of the bones that was in the pipe. I couldn't fight all the rats so I went and got the petrol tin that I'd found in the service station near the bins. I hid it away in the woods when I found it. Then when I opened it, I poured a bit on my hands and it made my skin go icy cold then it burned so I put the lid back on it. So I went and got the petrol and I took the top off and I chucked it on the rats and they all started squealin' and ran away.

Then there was a long, long time and then annuver man came. There was lots of blue lights flashin' and that screechin' sound those police cars make. I ran round to the bins to see what was goin' on and a motorbike came really fast into the service station and it sort of fell over and was slidin' and he was slidin' wiv it then the motorbike crashed into all the petrol pumps. He sort of stood up then he started runnin' towards the woods. Then there was a 'splosion and lots of fire. I ran away and went back to the pipe to hide but when I got inside it he was sittin' in there takin' off his helmet and his big gloves. He put his finger to his lips and said, 'shush,' like me muvver used to when I was cryin' and called me over to sit next to 'im. I was frightened and I was going to run away and get the dogs but then he started lookin' really tired and sort of fell over and went to sleep. I crawled over to 'im and he was just layin' there and then I saw that his trousers was all ripped and his leg was all bleedin'.

I went and got some water from the plastic bottles what I find in the bins and some rags and some paper, then I wiped lots of the blood off and wrapped his leg up like I'd seen my mum do on the man who came round once what had been drinkin' and fightin'. Then I went back to the bins and there was a big fire and there was fire engines and they was sprayin' water on to it and there was lots of policemen and they were all writing and talking to each other but they never came into the woods. They must have thought that the man had died in the fire.

He woke up when it was dark and asked me lots of questions but I didn't know the answers and I couldn't have told 'im them even if I did. Then he put his hand on my hair, which was very long and looked at me for a long time. He told me to go with 'im but when we got out of the pipe, the dogs were there all growlin' and he was scared. I shouted at them and they stopped growlin' and we walked up the big road, then up a lane. When he saw some people, he pushed me into a bush till they had gone past, then we walked and walked till it was nearly light again and we got to an 'ouse. He made me stand away from the door and rang the bell. There was two ladies came out and he talked to them for a long time. Then he pulled me into the house and I sat on this big chair and they sat on other chairs and they just sat there and they looked at me for ages and ages. Then they talked a lot and then there was lots of shouting and they walked around then they sat down and were quiet again.

One of the ladies made some food for me, and it had been cooked so I ate it and she gave me a drink of tea, which wasn't cold. One of the ladies was very cross but the other one made me go to the room with the bath in it and she washed me and she cut my hair and she brushed it. She gave me some clothes and showed me my face in a mirror and I didn't know who it was.

I stayed there for a long time and the man went away and came back and went away and came back again, then he took me to another house, which wasn't far away and we stayed there for a very long time. One day he kissed me.

I loved him so much I wanted to get inside 'im but in the end all we could do was get 'im inside me and that was the warmest and nicest feelin' I ever had in my life and I never wanted it to stop.

And now I am his wife. He taught me how to say things, not just shouting and talkin' like the dogs did and I can read words and I even know how to do some writing. He says I should tell people my name is Mary if anyone asks me but when we are at 'ome he calls me Ruffy.



“TASTE IS A FORM OF SELF-CENSORSHIP”

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK STEWART

By Craig Woods

Photos © Chiara Meattelli and Dominic Lee



Mark Stewart practically embodies innovation. Emerging from Bristol amid the rubble of the punk explosion in 1979, his first band The Pop Group quickly established a set of blistering sonic blueprints for the future. As multicultural Britain slid into the turbulent Thatcher era, and global mass media reflected a world of socio-political and cultural turmoil, Stewart and his comrades earnestly channelled the experience of the times into music that was simultaneously a natural progression of the punk rock and funk that had inspired them and an all-out deconstruction of all that had gone before. Their debut album *Y*, with its seamless blend of funk and dub rhythms and raw rock fortitude, laid the groundwork for the unaffected experimentalism that would characterise Stewart's career.

Follow-up single 'We are all Prostitutes' and sophomore album *For How Much Longer do we Tolerate Mass Murder?* displayed an increased intent to move beyond established sonic barriers as the band incorporated free jazz and dissonance into the mix. Through it all, Stewart's impassioned vocal style and socio-political conscience remained prominent and vital, imbuing every aspect of the band's output with a stark agitprop sensibility that went far beyond Sex Pistols-esque sloganeering. While The Clash had dallied with funk and reggae, and anarcho-punk bands such as Crass would push the anti-establishment envelope, The Pop Group's steadfast commitment to walking the walk on all fronts marked them as unique.

Perhaps unsurprisingly the band appeared to prematurely implode under the weight of their own power, splitting in 1981 just as established post-punk and New Wave sounds were being absorbed by the mainstream to spawn a series of synthpop-oriented derivatives. Not one to rest upon his laurels, Mark Stewart seized upon the split as an opportunity to explore further uncharted terrain. He promptly enlisted with esteemed dub producer Adrian Sherwood as part of the newly established On-U Sound “conspiracy of outsiders.” Camped within this diverse network of punk, reggae and jazz musicians from the UK and Jamaica, Stewart began a pursuit of intensive collaboration with a variety of radically different players, an approach that has defined his post-Pop Group output. It was here that he also began to utilise the mixing desk as a compositional tool and performance instrument, allowing him a greater degree of autonomy and making possible much of the technical innovation displayed on future records. Released under the collective moniker of Mark Stewart and the Maffia, 1982’s *Jerusalem* EP and its full-length 1983 follow-up *Learning to Cope With Cowardice* showcased these new techniques to devastating effect. Weaving in and out of dense soundscapes that are both infectiously groove-laden and menacingly opaque, Stewart’s voice wails, drones and chants a series of imperative contemporary narratives that find his passion and conscience undiminished. Thirty years later these releases remain fresh to the ear, like the sound of the 1980s being reflected starkly back at itself through the prism of the present.

As the decade progressed, Stewart incorporated conspicuous shades of hip-hop into his work, having become occupied with the genre during his tours of the United States. His next album, *As the Veneer of Democracy Starts to Fade*, was released in 1985 under his own name exclusively and exhibits the blend of hip-hop beats and industrial noise elements that would be pushed to further extremes in his eponymous 1987 album and 1990’s *Metatron*. This informal trilogy of records has since come to be regarded as a holy trinity for acts as diverse as Portishead, Tricky, Nine Inch Nails, and Ministry, all of whom have cited Stewart as a significant influence. In following his restless muse from one new territory to the next, Stewart had variously prefigured and inspired core elements of industrial music, trip-hop, and dubstep.

Having cemented this legacy in the following decades with records like *Control Data* (1996), which married soul and R&B melodies with contemporary club sounds, and 2008’s belligerent electro-bruiser *Edit*, Mark Stewart and his oeuvre have remained vital in the twenty-first century. Little wonder that filmmaker Toni Schiffer felt compelled to document Stewart’s achievements in the comprehensive 2010 documentary *On/Off – Mark Stewart: From the Pop Group To The Maffia*. Clearly a thorough attempt to assess and fully digest the feats of this career was long overdue.

Perhaps fitting then that Stewart himself opted for a retrospective of sorts at this time. In May 2010 it was announced that The Pop Group would be reforming for a string of live performances. An official statement from the band themselves declared: “There was a lot left undone. [...]we were so young and volatile. [...] Let’s face it, things are probably even more

fucked now than they were in the early 80s... and we are even more fucked off!" In September 2010 the band embarked on a short tour with Sonic Youth and Shellac. The following year, amid murmurings of a new album of all-new material in the works, they appeared for a storming set at the Portishead-curated ATP I'll Be Your Mirror festival. Just as they had initially emerged to give voice to the confusion, rage and uncertainty of the late seventies/early eighties, The Pop Group's reincarnation could not be more timely or welcome in these days of economic crisis, rampant corporatism, government austerity measures, grassroots revolutions and mass protests.

Concurrent with the Pop Group reformation, Mark Stewart has continued to carve new and distinctive furrows as a solo artist. In November 2011 he released a double A-side single 'Children of the Revolution'/'Nothing is Sacred' through his current label Future Noise Records. The latter track, a funk-infused behemoth featuring Berlin electro noisemakers Slope and Eve Libertine of Crass, is a vintage Stewart blend of vitriol and groove, lyrically addressing the illegitimacy of capitalist structures and the complicity of consumers in military industrial atrocities. The track and its accompanying video, comprised of war footage intercut with banal advertising imagery, gleam as the work of an artist at the peak of his power. Seemingly rejuvenated by the Pop Group reunion, Stewart had returned to a more blatantly aggressive confrontation of his moral and political adversaries without repeating himself musically or creatively. The stage for his next album release was set.

Unleashed in March 2012, *The Politics of Envy* is both a reaffirmation of Mark Stewart's established agitprop artistry and a compelling progression. Opening with an opaque dialogue between legendary underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger and punk icon Richard Hell, the album unfolds like a cinematic narrative, segueing from electro-rock to dub to dance grooves to pop melodies and beyond with fluid ease. The subject matter is varied, with Stewart addressing urban austerity and the vapidness of consumer culture with as much confidence and sincerity as he evokes the hope in the hearts of progressive political protesters or examines the recesses of heartache and regret. For all its weight, the album is all the more remarkable for its accessibility. Make no mistake, this is a pop record; a glistening, polished jewel that pulls at the viscera as forthrightly as it addresses the intellect. The narrative is fleshed out by an astonishing cast of guest players that includes Lee Perry, Factory Floor, Primal Scream, the Raincoats' Gina Birch, and PiL guitarist Keith Levene (whose signature sound closes the album on an unfeasibly beautiful note of bittersweetness). That such a cohesive whole has been sculpted from such disparate elements is the striking testament to Stewart's status as a visionary and his abilities as an orchestrator.

In early November 2012, Future Noise Records was poised to release *The Exorcism of Envy*, a full album-length release featuring re-workings of songs from *The Politics of Envy*, "retaining the original essence but sand-blasting them into skull-crushing or soul-challenging new versions."

It was at this juncture that I caught up with Mark Stewart for a more intimate peek into the world of a man currently in the grip of a significant creative renaissance.

The Pop Group, to my mind, have always seemed significantly removed from both the straight-ahead guitar brawling of much UK punk and the affected remoteness of much of the New Wave that followed. From the start you have consistently experimented with genres, blending various elements together in a post-generic melange, which has always struck me as the true spirit of punk. I'm curious as to your feelings about your relationship to the punk phenomenon. Does the word have meaning for you?

I completely believed in punk. I was like fifteen or something, and I was into a lot of reggae and funk and stuff. And being so tall I could go clubbing and stuff since I was about eleven. I loved music and going to gigs, but there was nothing around that looked the same or sounded the same as the kind of kids that we were. Then suddenly we saw this band in a little tiny photo, these kids dressed exactly the same as us. And they were playing this fast music, they weren't like old geezers playing twelve bar blues. So immediately, you know, we'd go into London shopping and then we'd stay on and see The Clash at the ICA and whatever, really early punk gigs. My mate four doors up, who I used to go and see Roxy Music with just before punk, he started trying to form an R&B band called the Cortinas. They were playing The Roxy with Patti Smith and stuff, and we were just hanging out with them as mates going to the gigs. So I was introduced to it really early on. It was just such an amazing fucking feeling. I still completely and utterly believe in punk, but it's a different punk. It's like a religion or something. Like I believe in a different god to the one that they did. I think I'm like one of the Knights Templar of punk, like an underground strain or something. I still believe in something that maybe they didn't actually believe in. Maybe they were making it up. But don't tell me Santa doesn't exist, please mate.

Part of that fundamental punk ethos is the 'Do It Yourself' mentality, which you embraced full-on. As I understand it, you came into music with no formal tuition. To what extent has your continued pursuit of music benefited from these rudimentary beginnings?

My technique is to cut and paste. Or putting different people from different scenes in a room and watching the explosions. It's like setting off fireworks and watching them burn. I think that confidence that [Malcolm] McLaren and Bernie [Rhodes] and the Pistols [exuded] --and our other favourite band was the Subway Sect when we were kids, they just completely blew our minds-- somehow that gave a confidence to a generation in England and across the world to just go out and challenge things, whether it was in life at work, in politics. Something happened and there was a class of disenfranchised people [suddenly active]. For me it was completely political. And then what happened in America with all these things, and then post-punk and the beginnings of Rough Trade and the early printing presses; Survival Research, AK Press... The more I travel, the more I meet these ex-punks who are, like, in charge of Sony Film now. And there's Matt Groening, who does *The Simpsons*, who is a huge Pop Group fan. There are

these sleeping agent punks way up all over the place.

I'm wondering to what extent your environment has affected your work. While many of the UK post-punk and New Wave acts shared a similar set of influences and ostensibly similar backgrounds, the regional differences in the various scenes across the country vary drastically in terms of the sounds they produced. Are there any specific aspects of living in Bristol which you can point to as having helped forge the sound of the early Pop Group for example?

[The point about shared influences] is kind of interesting to me. On *The Politics of Envy* it was the first time I was doing a collaboration with a lot of people, I hadn't done a lot of collaborations like that before. And suddenly working with Bobby [Gillespie] of Primal Scream, and Doug [Hart] from the Jesus and Mary Chain, and Gina [Birch] from The Raincoats, and talking to others from my generation, it seems that somehow in every town; in Wigan, in Manchester, in Glasgow, in Dublin, in Brussels, there was like a few people getting into the New York Dolls when they were thirteen or fourteen in isolation. A little gang [in every town]. I think it was the same when the R&B started with the Pretty Things and the Stones, people just finding these blues records. We were all individually getting into *Metal Machine Music* or early Velvet Underground stuff. And I've got more in common with these other people, just through shared influences growing up, than I have with some of my close friends who aren't into music and couldn't give a fuck about the music business. I think there was a community of lost souls that gathered together under a flag at that time in punk and post-punk. And when you travel... one of the things I love best about what I do is when someone comes up to you in the Midwest or Australia and says; "Hearing you, I realised I'm not a complete outsider, that somebody else is questioning things in the world." And that's what you get from music, that sense of community.

[Regarding Bristol], I can't really analyse my own situation too much because it drives you mad. But I think what was interesting about our lot, and about what went on thereon with Massive Attack, and now all the new Bristol-based kids like Pinch and Joker and all that lot, in Bristol your ego can't get out of control. You'll have the piss taken out of you if you start to get too Des O'Connor. And we're all still the same. You know, somebody's a shopfitter, somebody's a millionaire, somebody's selling cars, somebody's unemployed. We all still go to the same pubs and clubs. It's small enough that you know all the people from each territory. When we were young there couldn't really be any ghettos. My mum lived in St Paul's when she was a kid, and it's small enough that things can't really become ghettoised, so we all kind of got on with each other across all different things when we were kids. It's different down there. I don't really know any different so I can't really look at it from the outside. I mean I was there yesterday and it's just a completely different feeling. People just take the piss out of each other. I mean we'd always go up to London, but I think it's great for things to be decentralised. And now with everybody's success, we've got mastering plants and studios and stuff. We don't need to go to London.

Does environment remain a decisive factor for you in the creative process? Has experiencing a variety of cultures and locations while travelling over the years impacted upon the musical routes you've pursued?

It gives me hope sometimes. Sometimes it's quite lonely [doing] what I'm doing, because I'm trying to say what I'm trying to say. But travelling around the world talking to different people, it's interesting [to see] the way [the music] gives people solace and... I don't know how to explain it, but there are these mates of mine who are involved with protest groups in Burma, and others doing these weird things in China. The whole nature of the thing is a kind of global underground these days. And there's open-minded people right across the world. I mean I was just talking to someone from Sri Lanka...

You've moved from a microcosmic milieu into more of a macrocosmic one, but basically the same social dynamic is at work.

Yeah, it's people who are under the same umbrella. They're into kind of cool cutting edge politics, cool cutting edge technology. And that's kind of the nature of the internet to a certain extent. You can be talking to people from anywhere. Just this morning I was talking to [Japanese experimental noise artist] KK Null, and I'm trying to get some of his sounds over this kind of weird Chicago footwork thing. It's all kind of open at the moment. So I think the idea of the nation state [is obsolete]... I'm closer to people in Vienna, you know what I mean?

Aside from the clashing of genres, the music of The Pop Group seemed from the start to possess a little more meat on the bones than the average post-punk act. Your work has long been characterised by a certain philosophical weight punching its way into the listener's consciousness. I understand from previous interviews that you read voraciously from a young age. Are there any particular literary, philosophical, or other cultural sources that you can point to as having helped shape what you do?

We used to knock off school. We would sign in and then you could kind of sneak out and pretend you were there without the teachers checking you were there. There was a record shop down the road called Revolver and we used to hang around there on a Friday for the Jamaican pre-releases to come in, and see which seven-inches they were going to stock. Years later I found out that it was Adrian Sherwood who was driving that van. Anyway, next to the record shop there was also this bookshop called Pentacle Books, which was like an occult bookshop in the same block. I made friends with the guy in there and would just go in and chat to him about all sorts of stuff. This was at about the age of thirteen. He was an amazing kind of 'hidden history' researcher. He helped open me up to a whole new idea of politics and history, completely and utterly blew my head off. He was lending me these kind of weird texts and these kind of Situationist things, and things about the 'global manipulators'... There was this particular book he lent me call *Vodka Cola* about how Kaiser Wilhelm financed the Russian Revolution etc. Well, it was crazy, just the most bizarre stuff. There was a magazine I remember called *Paranoia* or something with some of the craziest shit I've ever seen. And maybe it's not

true, but this music was already blowing open my head and suddenly I was being introduced to these mad ideas. And my dad was a bit of a mad scientist and he was very open-minded, he was always searching for the bloody Philosopher's Stone or something. So from an early age I'd got my foot between these very demented kind of intellectuals and these other crazy beat boys. [laughs]

That clash of intellectual and visceral elements has pretty much characterised your output. Even on The Politics of Envy there's the same dichotomy going on. Is this something you've maintained consciously, or is the balance of these things entirely organic and natural?

I've always had this little manifesto to just keep alert, and it has these little sayings like 'Deny the politics of envy', 'Taste is a form of personal censorship'... just these little mottos that kind of keep me going. And often I just deliberately do something that I don't think I'm going to do. It's my thing about taste being a form of personal censorship. I deliberately pick up something I wouldn't [normally] pick up, or buy something or listen to something I wasn't going to listen to, or put myself in [an unfamiliar] situation. Because otherwise we decide stuff when we're thirteen or fourteen and become this kind of caricature and we think, 'I'm having none of that'. But I want to constantly question my conditioning

You're constantly challenging yourself, almost reinterpreting yourself.

Yeah. And playing mad childish games and pranks. Putting things together that shouldn't be together just to watch the explosions and to watch them breed or something. It's a bit like as a kid at school when you'd get a girl's dolly head and put it on top of a mechanical spider or something. A lot of it comes from humour, but humour makes something new.

I suppose that approach has informed the rationale for the various outlets for your music. When you began recording as Mark Stewart and the Maffia, the music was markedly different territory from that staked by The Pop Group, yet still recognisably within the established Mark Stewart milieu. I'm wondering if you see each of your outlets --The Pop Group, the Maffia, the solo work-- as possessing separate identities or missions. What in your mind sets each of these ventures apart in artistic terms?

All I know is that any game that I'm playing has to get me excited and interested. For the moment I've got this idea of kind of aural porn. There's friends of mine who've got these extreme noise generators, people like Russell Haswell and KK Null. I'm trying to think of a way of harnessing lightning, of harnessing these really mad extreme noise generators in to some kind of high definition thing and making them into hooks or songs or something. I just want to make something that I haven't heard before. On *The Exorcism of Envy* there was a track where I just let some of the machines [improvise]. Something had gone wrong and someone was about to fix it, and I just said, "Let it happen". There was a light that went on in my head and I held my own hand back. Eno had this strategy where you throw a card to decide what you're doing,

just to break your, erm...

To break your own established patterns.

Yeah. And we're just starting this new Pop Group stuff, and for me, again, it's kind of exploding something, or challenging a myth or position or something. I do these weird art commissions sometimes, when I get flown to Vancouver and have to work with some kind of shadow puppeteer or something, and so I thought, why don't I just see working with my old mates as another commission and see what happens? Because when people were talking about [the reformation of the Pop Group] I just thought, well that's a shit idea, that just sounds like necrophilia to me. It just seemed completely mad. But then I thought, which Mark is that? Why are you thinking that? Is it for some shitty reason? Why can't you just see it as [something] new? A lot of people, including myself, don't phone somebody or don't speak to somebody because they think they know what the person is thinking. We all live in mad bubbles, and reality in the rest of the world has nothing to do with what we're thinking about. And it's to do with little things [we were conditioned with] when we were children at primary school, all these irrational fears and stuff. It's just crazy

The Politics of Envy is remarkable in several respects, but not least for the impressive array of guest contributors, from Lee Perry to Richard Hell, Primal Scream to the legendary Kenneth Anger(!). Presumably you've been on familiar terms with most of them for a number of years. Do you habitually set out to make a new record by recruiting those available? Or is there a more concrete plan in place with regard to what specific people might bring to the material you've generated?

It really is organic. A lot of the things I'm trying to say are kind of like radio plays. I did this album called *As the Veneer of Democracy Starts to Fade* where I was making these dystopian landscapes with electric fences sizzling and dogs barking. And [on *The Politics of Envy*] I just wanted Kenneth Anger there, and I wanted someone like Richard Hell's voice as a kind of... it's a wanky word, but a kind of avatar. I was going to do this weird kind of opera thing in Hamburg with Kenneth and a couple of other people, and, well, anything Kenneth does is sort of magical, just his presence, you know what I mean? So just to have him there in that place next to that bassline, it's like a collage. So I used people for their specific characters like a film director. There were a lot of things I recorded during that period, and a lot of things didn't make it. A lot of people didn't get on to the record. But they were all there for a specific reason. I was knocking about with Bobby [Gillespie] who was trying to get me to do something for him. Now I've just heard that I'm guesting on [Primal Scream's] new single with Robert Plant of all people. [laughs]

I heard that, yeah. Another brilliantly unexpected collaboration.

When I say 'of all people', obviously I love Robert Plant, but yeah. So I was listening to some

stuff that I was messing about with for [Bobby Gillespie] and suddenly something started breaking through. It's weird the way things kind of mutate. It all jelled into a whole. I'm really pleased with it. For me it's like a whole edible piece. Rhythms and stuff develop, you know. I was living in Berlin and I picked up these rhythms from these guys in [German electronic group] Der Plan, these kind of robotic rhythms. And then I was working with this Jamaican guy called Jaswad, and I was trying to write something for Lee [Perry], and Lee ended up doing something else and... it's just weird how [these things develop].

Each of your collaborators are renowned for work in very different genres. I'm wondering if you recruit collaborators with genre in mind, or if genre is more of an unconscious result of the creative process. Do you have much regard for the concept of genre?

The really funny thing is that I've apparently *invented* a lot of genres. [laughs] It's so bizarre when, for some reason, people say, oh you invented post-punk, or punk-funk. And others have told me that I'd invented industrial, trip hop and something else, all on the same track. And that's nothing to do with me. And for some strange reason a lot of musicians across the world hold me in some high regard, and I can't fathom that at all.

Generally speaking I think this is more to do with the way a music critic thinks about music than the way most musicians do.

Yeah.

I spoke with Michael Gira a little while back and we touched on this subject. He has a lot of experience of hardcore industrial fans or fans of noise rock approaching him with the same kind of reverence for something that he feels no real association with; the idea of a genre term that someone else has created in order to put a label on something after its creation.

Yeah. I'm pleased if I light a spark and then someone else makes a flame from that and runs off with it. That's great. But I'm not doing it consciously. Beneath all of it, I'm doing it for my own entertainment. I'm doing these things, making these weird kind of mutations for my own pleasure initially. If one becomes Chucky, that's not my fault. [laughs] Don't blame me!

I suppose once you've crafted the thing and released it, it's no longer in your hands. It becomes a part of the cultural melange one way or another and open to reinterpretation and repackaging.

Yeah.

Your long-established preference for collaboration and cross-fertilisation has resulted in your records possessing the feel of work produced by an autonomous collective; a collective of which the listener is inclined to feel part of by association. It's very much in keeping with the kind of socialist-anarchist

principles of punk in that you band together and control your own means of production, etc. I've always found this a very reassuring aspect of your work. Can you say something about this approach and its importance to you?

I want to belong in [the collective] as well. I can remember when I was like twelve or thirteen listening to early Velvet Underground stuff in my mum's back bedroom, and suddenly you're in that place. You think you're there in Andy Warhol's Factory. You dream into the things. The thing [I create] is apart from me. I'm as much a fan of it as anyone else. I want to walk in that environment. It's made for me as well. I want to belong in there too. When I was standing next to Kenneth Anger I was like, what the fuck is going on? And when that [announcement of the new Primal Scream single] came out with Mark Stewart and Robert Plant, I'm thinking what the fuck am I doing next to Robert Plant? Because I'm still a twelve or thirteen year old fan-boy. I thought, in punk, it was always going to be a kind of 'anti-star' thing where you weren't meant to be [the most important person] on the stage and everybody was meant to be as important as everybody else. So I'm always judging myself by what my younger self would be thinking while standing looking at it. And I would actually buy what I make. I'm my own worst critic, that's why things can take some time. At the moment I'm spending weeks on end on one line, just trying to get this *essence* into one line. It's driving me bloody mad. Even if it doesn't come out, I'll at least have written it down.

One of the things that is really striking about The Politics of Envy is that, despite all of the genre clashes and experimental complexities, there's an overall gloss and groove binding the whole thing together. It is in essence a pop record in the best possible sense of the term; contemporary, accessible, and compelling. How would you describe your relationship with both pop music and the underground? Do you consciously straddle both worlds?

I think some experimental stuff is a ghetto. It's like vanity publishing. I grew up on London Musicians Co-Op and people making weird honking noises and impersonating crocodiles and stuff. I grew up on that kind of stuff. But consciously I just want to engage with the media at the moment. It's important. Look at all these great thinkers who were just self-publishing stuff to smaller and smaller [groups of] people. What is the point? The point is we want to get across to as many people as possible who have just watched The X Factor or something. If the New York Dolls hadn't gone through Mercury and went on The Old Grey Whistle Test and stuff, I wouldn't have changed. I'd be working in some shitty job, not that there's anything wrong with that. But you've got to engage with the thing. If we've got to go on the BBC or whatever, there's cool people in *all* those places. I mean the idea of the underground and the overground when you've got someone like Matt Groening doing *The Simpsons* and cool people all over the place, this whole idea of 'I'm cooler than thou', and 'I'm completely and utterly indie'...

It's ultimately a dead end.

As long as the things have been judged by the judge and jury in my own head, and I'm saying what I want to say and I've got control over the things, [that's what matters]. I think it's important, and it takes a lot of time and energy to try and engage with new people. That is part of the thing. And we are working our asses off and trying to really get across. And then you realise there are loads and loads of really cool people who are just kind of there like sleepers, and they're just dying for something like this and they'll kind of let you in the back door. I mean when St. Vincent did one of my tunes it was on one of the biggest American chat-shows. And those guys are actually cool, they knew who the Pop Group were. There's a whole generation of people who you really shouldn't cut off.



As far as popular culture goes I think the definitions of overground and underground are becoming greyer and greyer with time. There has definitely been far more overlap in the last decade and a half.

One of the most interesting things for me at the moment are people working with new technologies and hypermedia and stuff. I've been hanging out with this Palestinian guy in Berlin and some of the ideas of these high level crazed scientists is completely and utterly mindblowing stuff. There's cool people in the weirdest places.

Although The Politics of Envy is not in any ostensible sense a concept album, many of the songs are characterised, both sonically and lyrically, by a sense of confusion and impending catastrophe. While references to urban blight and socio-political hardship are by no means fresh subjects for you, songs such as 'Gang War' and 'Codex' possess an ultra-modern apocalyptic edge that makes them seem imperative. As a statement of life in the 21st century it seems pretty spot on. Are there any specific contemporary concerns that you would say bind the record thematically?

I'm trying my best not to think too much about it, my head is kind of exploding. My girlfriend is Iranian, and I was just watching an interview with [Syrian President] Assad on Russia Today, and then we went to this family do and I was just hearing people's conversations... What people think of as reality, or history, or 'real' information is a complete and utter mirror. It's a scandal that people put trust in politicians. It's all a complete and utter scam. I don't know why people have been believing in these lies. This new song of mine, it's called 'Citizen Zombie', because I think a lot of people are just too lazy to give a fucking damn. The things I'm singing about in the songs are things that are happening in front of my eyes, it's not something that might happen. In the eighties we said that *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* had happened years ago and no-one even noticed. From my own information there's craziness going on in the world. I mean how possibly can a Greek pensioner be blamed for some American banker's weird betting games? And then people believe it. I was talking to someone earlier on [about this]; they're really trying to divide people, even trying to get the people with really low paid wages to blame the unemployed [for the financial crisis and austerity measures], and they're trying to demonise handicapped people. Anything to keep their mind off [the real cause], get them all fighting amongst themselves, blaming each other, looking at this massive elephant in the room. What the fuck!

The demonisation of the poor is out of control now and, in Britain anyway, it's a massive part of a current neoliberal government's concerted attempt to turn the socio-economic clock back several decades. I'm interested in your characterisation of the apathy of the populace being due to laziness. I actually agree with this assessment, but it's an unpopular view. Often I hear people rationalise the lack of cohesive resistance as being a product of fear; people are too afraid to give a damn, too scared to rock the boat. I always find this absurd in the context of an advanced, industrialised and freer country like the UK or the USA. There are, it seems, more concrete and forthright examples of popular resistance in countries where one risks being imprisoned or murdered by the state for an act of dissent. It really has to come down to laziness or complacency in the West.

Yeah. There's this cul-de-sac of jealousy, the numbness of the citizen, this whole zombification of society. And you try and engage with people and they're like, oh are you still going on about this? It's like, fuck off, you know? It's gotten to such a state that it only takes good people to do nothing in order for evil to prevail. What the fuck is going on? It's like before World War II, everyone knew what the fuck was going on [with the rise of fascism]. It's fucking crazy. The naked greed is so blindingly obvious. It's like there's this huge bulldozer eating everything up right in front of people's eyes like a dinosaur, and people are pretending it isn't there.

Your music has often been characterised in the past as "protest music", a term I know you disassociate yourself from. I've read several interviews with you where you make the point that the personal is political, and that the two can never be significantly separated. This being the case, I'm wondering if perhaps your work might be regarded as guerrilla tactics as opposed to protest. Do you in any way regard what you do in music as a method to shake people awake as it were; to remind them of the very real

political choices they make in their daily lives, that the idea of the separation of politics and reality is a comfortable illusion?

I can't really say those things because it would just sound kind of glib. I mean you've got it to a tee what I'm trying to do, but for me to come out and say, oh I'm doing it for this, or I'm doing it for that, would seem kind of glib and self-righteous. Maybe I'm trying to shake myself up and keep myself alert with these things. For me it's normality, and for me it's up[beat] music. It's as cool for me listening to this stuff as it is listening to Funkadelic or some cool kind of grime stuff or something, instead of some idiot singing about his dick. I just want to sing about something that's vaguely interesting and not fucking cars and girls. It's not particularly that I'm doing it for any purpose, but that's just what the world is fucking like. I can't see all those fucking flowers that other people see, sorry.

So your music is essentially just a natural reflection of your daily concerns and thoughts, rather than any sense of responsibility to promote certain ideas or messages.

Yeah. I talk about things like that down the pub.

You're about to release a remixed version of the new album entitled Exorcism of Envy. In essence you've retained the core of the original record but shaped it into an entirely new experience with new meanings. Could you say a little more about your intentions with this release? Why was it necessary to create these two very different versions?

Well the funny thing is, in my actual process of composing, a lot of it is done in editing. Since I first started working with Adrian Sherwood I'd do nine or ten different versions of everything going into red. And then I'd sit with a razorblade and cut out all the maddest bits and put them together backwards or forwards or whatever. That's the mad editing technique I've always used. When I was making *The Politics of Envy* there were all these different versions. There's a lot of whittling stuff down until I get something that shines, just keep polishing and polishing. I grew up listening to these radio shows and remixes and a lot of scratch DJ stuff when I was a kid, and I just wanted to do my own hour-long radio cut-up/mash-up thing using my own stuff as a source. So I wouldn't really call it a remix album or a dub album, it's become another mutation. The first album became a kind of renegade spy that had to have extreme plastic surgery to go and live somewhere else. The thing just started forming into something else. I can remember I'd get these really mad mix CDs off mates who were DJs, where one thing would be going and then something completely different would just jump in. And with *The Exorcism of Envy*, again it's this kind of thing of aural porn. I think soon people are just going to put headphones on and go into another world. I see this stuff as kind of edible.

Is this a process you would have liked to have pursued with previous records? What was it about this album that led you to see the mutation through to this extent?

I hadn't actually really thought about it before at all. A lot of people were asking for Mark Stewart dub versions of stuff and whatever, but this became more like a re-edit of a film or something. One of my favourite filmmakers is Chris Marker and... it's kind of a reprocessing, it's... I don't know what it is, but it started happening and it got a life of its own. It's a whole thing. I'd release it as a standalone thing even if the first one didn't exist.

You're no stranger to reinterpreting your material, as your live shows have long attested, and this record seems a more comprehensive but logical extension of that. Does this method point the way to your future work?

I've suddenly got a new wave of intensity, and making new stuff with the Pop Group and the solo stuff, making two new albums at the same time, although obviously they won't come out until next year. This morning I was talking to this Japanese extreme noise guy and I started getting these visions of kind of Chicago footwork basslines, but backwards with Japanese noise. Something has started to form in my head and I just want to start creating. I'm really getting excited about it. Because this record was received quite well and we got a massive piece in the Daily Mirror and stuff it got us a lot of attention and made us realise there are a lot of cool people in there. And now it's started in America and all over the place, it's really kind of set us up. So I think the next one will completely and utterly blow my mind and blow a lot of other people's minds, because I think people are ready for something that is different. People are hungry for new noises and new sounds. It's like candy. They want fresh things. They want to be fed interesting things. I think it's great.

You've seen a lot of changes over the years in the ways audiences interact with art and culture. In terms of attracting, maintaining, and interacting with your audience, have you found the internet to provide a more useful and immediate way to promote your work and ideas?

Personally I'm shocked by some of this stuff. We put out a single called 'Stereotype' with Factory Floor, and earlier I was talking to DJ mag, and suddenly [the single is] number one on DMC, this DJ chart. And it's like, what the fuck? Suddenly we're in the same category as someone like Flying Lotus who is a young act. It's really quite refreshing how open-minded people are for interesting stuff at the moment. What I get from the internet is this sense of community, that I can talk to this guy in Japan or collaborate with him, or I can find out some Italian political theory stuff, or check what someone is saying at some lecture in the States or something. That's what I find, you can kind of hover around and decide to go into this room or that room. Whether it is also a distraction, and whether it is part of the zombification, well...

I suppose that is the ongoing debate as to the internet's prevailing value.

Yeah. And also what you guys [in Paraphilia] are doing... when you sent me these questions it was like, oh good, because sometimes you just get asked complete and utter shit. But I knew

that if I started trying to answer those questions [in an email interview] it would be pages and pages and pages. But it's great because it gives me solace that there's cool people all over the place; in Brazil, in Sri Lanka. People everywhere are seeing through the fucking bollocks. And I think with some of the new stuff I want to do, I really want to introduce some of these new sounds and new things, and we all can kind of help each other out. Especially in our community as musicians.

The internet has also had wide-ranging effects on society at large; allowing people to organise and share information easily at the click of a mouse. Simultaneously much of its content and facilities are owned and administered by large corporations, while censorship/policing bills are increasingly being formulated and discussed by governments across the globe. Do you feel that the internet possesses any inherent revolutionary potential for social progress?

I don't know. I remember some of the dissidents coming out when it was starting off, and the Electronic Frontiers Foundation . And I've got a link to these lawyers in Papua New Guinea. If somebody in a jungle in Burma can use the internet to get their ideas or to report government atrocities or something, then [that's positive]. These friends of mine work with this organisation called Indigenous Resistance where they help people fighting against loggers. I think that kind of thing [is valuable], but it can also be used to fake things. You've got to take it all with a pinch of salt. And beneath it all we're all being fed an addiction to buy more and more expensive software.

It's the double-edged sword of online communications. Its potential for exchanging ideas and information is incredible, but a lot of its facilities are used mainly for trivialities rather than for any progressive purpose. It seems the web is partly another minefield of distractions and sedatives to keep the population subdued and apathetic. Meanwhile the mass media abound with vapid "reality" shows and gossip. I can't help but feel that many elements of our culture today have become more banal and degraded than ever before. Possibly this is a conscious effort by centres of power in reaction to the increased exchange of information via the internet. Even the concept of rebellion has in itself become an empty facsimile in some respects. On the scathing 'Baby Bourgeois', which appears on The Politics of Envy, the idea of simulated rebellion and manufactured chic seem very much on your hit-list. How would you assess this phenomenon?

I basically agree with you. There's a gaping question mark about this internationally. I was watching something about how farmers in Africa were using the net and stuff... We can't judge the future by the morals of the past, and we can't come with a kind of 1950s collectivist mind and say, this is bad, this is good. If the technology mutates and it becomes something else, and it has a good use and it frees somebody from doing something, [then that's a good thing]. Obviously most research and development comes from military stuff. But if suddenly a farmer in Africa can adapt, then it's going to mutate into something else again. Hybridisation.

Yeah, the technology itself is basically neutral until put to use.

Yeah. I think it's good to experiment and to question the structures, and not take things for granted in these areas. But what you're saying is true. People now think they've done something just by... what's it called, 'clicktivism'?

Yeah, their activism begins and ends at the click of a mouse.

Yeah.

Neither of us really has an answer to the question, but it's a subject that occupies my mind quite a bit in the context of activism and awareness in the cyber-age.

No, but it's good that you bring it up. That is the kind of thing that I'm talking about in my music and it's good to bring these things into the debate. And if this thing is going to be online, I'm happy to kind of layer it on. We can keep it going and maybe get an argument going, you know.

Given the current uncertainty and confusion of the music industry, I inevitably must ask for your take on the effect of digital downloads, file-sharing and online cut-price music sales on independent artists and small record labels. How do you perceive the future of the independent artist in this climate? Have the developments been positive or negative?

This is all really exciting to me. It's like what Donna Summer said about the state of independence. Things are changing so fast that I don't know if people can control them. First of all I don't really see myself as an artist. I just see myself still as Joe Normal, just having a go and saying what he wants to say, and trying my hardest over the years in staying true to what I believe in, in questioning and trying in the best way to keep as far away from the shit side of things. But things are changing so fast. From hanging about in Berlin on the edges of the new digital arts scene that's developing, I think that film, performance art, political provocations, attack ads [are coalescing]. A new kind of beast is going to develop where you can say something and it's going to be enjoyable for people listening to it, but it's also making a point and people are going to be able to link up with the different subjects and topics. Often my ideas [come from] trigger words and I had this idea that soon everything is all going to be 3D things and you'll be able to flip on the different subjects and find loads of information about the different things I'm going on about and kind of make up your own decisions. I think I'm learning and I'm becoming more aware of how all the different cogs of the machine work together, and how we can jump and go directly to someone cool in the media or whatever. And there's great people out there and we're kind of breaking through layers.

To a certain extent the music business is a place that attracts freaks and complete and utter idiots who often get away with murder. And there's all these backwards obnoxious people with nothing to say. I'm talking to the mirror here obviously. [laughs] But I've always taken it completely with a pinch of salt. And like loads of my mates, we just do what we want to do, say what we want to say, try and get as much control of the game as we possibly can. I've got this lyric that I'm working on at the moment; you think you know how to play the game, but then the game starts playing you. It's not my place to say it, but I think my intentions aren't too bad in what I'm trying to do. I think I know what I'm trying to do and I'm deliberately not playing their fucking game. But the thing is kind of going in our favour. It's quite strange. People are suddenly insatiable for new ideas and shocking things, it seems the ball is rolling in my court at the moment for some reason. I expect that kind of independence. And integrity you can't fucking buy. [pause]

When you're talking about yourself [in this way] it sounds a bit mad. But I argue about these things all the time. Yesterday one of my mates was saying about how we've got to do this, and how these blogs work, and all this. A whole new thing is developing where there's people like you and other sussed people doing radical things all over the world. People building up their bases and we all kind of link together. And that was the great thing about post-punk, when you say about this feeling of community or family or whatever. We knew that with the Raincoats or the Slits or whatever, and when Rough Trade was really cool, and there was Rough Trade America... people would come just because it was independent, and we'd always be doing benefits for great causes. There was something apart from the entertainment value. What was the Frank Zappa quote? He said that showbiz was the entertainment wing of the military industrial complex? Personally I'm re-energised and I feel that what we've been talking about for ages is kind of coming true. There's loads of great people across the world into loads of amazing stuff.

Are there any contemporary artists, musical or otherwise, whose work you feel to be particularly vital in giving voice to today's hardship and dissent?

For me, things always come from the roots. I'm really encouraged because in Bristol for the last couple of years there's been this sonic wave called Bristol Bass. One of the kids on it is called Kahn, who I've collaborated with on some of this stuff on the last two records. There's Joker, and Pinch who's just been working with Adrian Sherwood. It's kind of post-dubstep things. And the way those kids are running their businesses and looking after each other, and the spirit and the energy and the nutrients that you can get from that feeling of community, it really reminds me of things that we've always done with the post-punk thing. That feeling of belonging in a certain scene and not feeling lost, like being in a sort of gang with everybody helping each other. And they're running labels... it's going global. That kind of thing, to me, is like macro-politics. It's those kind of things that really keep me grounded. In Bristol you can't [have an ego]. Somebody will knock you down. It's a community. One of your mates will just

tell you you're talking shit. Too many people have gone off into a kind of ivory castle, like in that bloody David Essex film, *Stardust*. Totally disconnected in L.A. or somewhere, painting their fucking toenails gold or something. That's not what it's about. Music is something you've got to engage with. And society is something you've got to engage with. But I think these are quite optimistic times. I think America is quite interesting at the moment. A lot of people in America are really seeing through a lot of the misinformation that they're being fed about these wars and what's going on. I think the more I travel, the more I know there's a new generation of open-minded people, and those people are going to get to positions of power. So the old shit from the fifties, and the sixties, and the seventies, and the eighties... we fought wars in those times against a specific ogre or specific demons. But they've lost their power. They're in fact the lapdogs to something else. The world is changing so quickly that people don't actually know what is going on. But if people are hopeful and open-minded, and they embrace these new things... We shouldn't fear what we don't understand. There's other ways of developing things. We've got to get rid of some of those blinkers. These things are going on! They've got to be dealt with. And people have got to work together. I questions things a hell of a lot. And the more I travel about and I meet people and chat to people from all different scenes, all different walks of life... there isn't a 'them' and an 'us'. There's just us, and we've got to engage with the us. You can't be an outsider and just moan that this is wrong, and this is wrong. You've got to actually engage.

For all its various furies and omens, The Politics of Envy ends on a sonically soothing note with 'Stereotype', as intimations of togetherness fade out with the distinctive and beautiful chiming of Keith Levene's guitar. Is there hope on the horizon?

That's one of the things I don't understand when people say my music is dark or it's apocalyptic. For me it's uplifting and hopeful. It's great if you're talking about things and you've got this uplifting music, and you're actually getting dialogues going on. I'm a really kind of happy person. A lot of people have me down as a kind of dour, grim reaper type. I think it's best to tell the truth and be positive and have a laugh than sit moaning into your fucking beer.

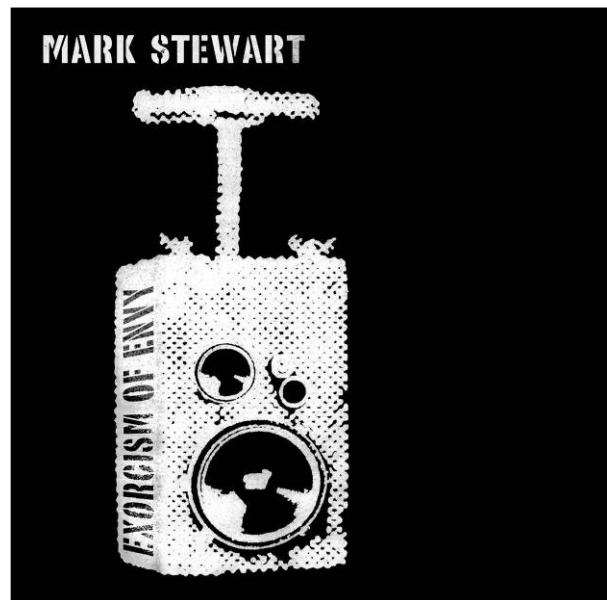
What might we expect from the next chapter in the Mark Stewart opus?

This new Pop Group record has a working title, *The Alternate*. We did a few of these 'reformed' gigs; a couple abroad and a couple in England. And I went into it with a completely open mind, I didn't have any preconceptions. When the Pop Group started I was... I still *am* an angsty kind of teenager, but I had all these ideas; I wanted to be like this, I wanted to be like that. And we sculpted something. And there was nothing going on then. Not to blow my own trumpet, but we were there before Joy Division or anyone else. We were the first people, straightaway after punk, to really start experimenting. Punk blew everything up and then suddenly you could do anything you wanted after that. So with the new Pop Group stuff I just thought, okay, let's roll the dice and see what happens, without any limits. So I just walked into this studio and Gareth

[Sager - Pop Group guitarist] was messing about just coming up with these things. And before I would have said, do this, do that. But suddenly he started playing something and I just started singing something, and the thing is like... there's this medieval thing called a golem, these things that alchemists created and they had a life of their own. Supposedly there was one released underneath this cathedral in Salisbury and is still running around the Dorset countryside. For me the [new material] is a golem. It's got arms and legs, and I just have to stand back and watch it. Suddenly these really weird kind of 1940s French ballads started appearing. And I thought, what the fuck is going on here? But again I tied my hand behind my back and let it happen. Just stand back and don't interrupt the process. Let the thing create itself. For me it's an absolute pleasure because it's kind of symbiotic and all happening of its own accord, so at the moment I feel like it's a bit like a child that I'm trying not to put my own personality too much on to.

Sounds like a treat is in store when it takes its first steps into the world.

Yeah! [pause] Unless it turns out bad. Like another Chucky. [laughs]



The Politics of Envy and The Exorcism of Envy can be purchased via Mark Stewart's official website: <http://www.markstewartmusic.com/shop.html>

THOUGHTS ON ZOMBIES AND TROPICAL STORMS

By Jim Coleman

11.14.12

I initially sat down to write this bit a couple of months ago. I had a pretty high minded idea. I have seen an evolution and an acceleration of a particular theme and topic in popular culture, a theme which up till now was more reserved for conspiracy theorists. This theme is basically the idea of near future end times, specifically centered on the dissolution of technology.

There is no doubt that we have become completely obsessed and dependent on technology. How many of us even know the phone numbers of our own partners or best friends? How often do we leave the house with no idea on how to get where we are going, trusting that our phone's GPS will find the way?

I've seen this basic topic emerging more and more in TV series, feature films and books. So, a couple of months ago, I started writing about it, and I wrote quite a bit. But I couldn't quite find my take or angle on it, and it all seemed a bit pompous. So I moved from taking on the big theme, and started writing about little things that I ran into in my every day life; events which sparked trains of thoughts and various synapses and mental connections:

Day 1:

9:45 AM: On 6th Avenue, there were three different dogs taking large shits, some of which trailed down the sidewalk, creating this run on mess. The dog owners were upper crusters, hip but bordering on the 1%, seemingly well to do. It kind of made me happy to just know that part of their day, every day, is comprised of intimate handling of dog poo. They were probably very nice people all in all, and we might have shared common outlooks and perspectives on life and the world around me. But still.

9:35 AM: On the subway, I stood, as there were no seats left. Looking down, I saw the top of someone's head. Very androgynous, I couldn't make out this person's gender. But I became transfixed by the game they were playing on their iPhone. I think it was Temple Run. I know this from my daughter, who played Temple Run for about five minutes.

I actually love video games. But I tend to buy them, anticipating this fun time I will have playing. But I never actually find the time to play. So it's this fantasy for me. It wasn't always this way. When I first got a computer, my friend Phil gave me a copy of Doom. I quickly got addicted to it. I would go down to the studio intending to work on some music. But I would first have to spend several hours playing Doom. I was so immersed in it, I literally dreamt of Doom. To this day, I remember the different scenes and locations.

Back on the subway, as I watched this person playing Temple Run, I got increasingly anxious. The general scenario of the game is that you are running on a small path, which occasionally takes 90 degree turns, and also has occasional cliffs that you need to jump. Furthermore, there is some dark hulking shape that is chasing you, always right on your heels. So it's very tense. I guess that's the thrill, and that's what keeps you so much in the instant. It's funny that something that demands this amount of attention, something that keeps you in the instant like this, takes you completely out of the here and now. For a while, I couldn't look away. I hated the way I was starting to feel. Sweating, nervous and anxious, tensed up.

9:40 AM: I walked up to the street. The first person I encountered was a man, probably in his forties, though he looked like he could be in his sixties. He was bent over at the waist, with his head closely inspecting the sidewalk. Like he lost a contact lens. Only that wasn't it. He was High. Way High, nodding all the way to heaven and hell and back again. Definitely the polar opposite of the tension felt in Temple Run.

I've seen this phenomenon of the extreme nodding human from time to time, and it kicks up a weird blend of emotions. I'm jealous and I'm sad. I'm enticed and repulsed. Part of me wants to go up to them and ask them where to cop, part of me wants to let them know that they can get help. Part of me wants to just tackle them, and part of me wants to run away. But just like Temple Run, it's hard not to look, to be transfixed. It's like a slow motion train wreck. There is a certain wasted grace in it.

I recall being a little kid and being in the back seat of the car at night. We passed a huge car wreck on the street. Lots of cops and ambulances, broken glass, twisted metal and smoke. My mom, perhaps trying to keep me innocent, told me not to look. Humanly impossible I think.

When I first got in to doing dope, I was living on Ludlow Street across from El Sombrero, a Mexican restaurant (one would be concerned if there was an Italian restaurant with this name). There were several dealers on the street. So friends would cop and then come on up to my apartment to get off. One day I went out with them to cop. My friend Erl was puking in anticipation of copping. This didn't scare me or raise any red flags. This was intriguing. I welcomed something that was this powerful, that I could just turn myself over to, that could make decisions for me. I jumped right in, thinking the water was fine.

Back to 9:40 AM, when I see this man on the street, bent over and nodding, I'm jealous. Because he's high and I'm not. Because even though he doesn't have a thing in the world, even though he will be a sick desperate junky in two hours time, I know that right now, he has it all. Right now, his life is perfect. I wonder if I ever really got that high. Sure, I had my nods. I remember waking up on the toilet at 5 AM, after sitting down hours earlier. Once at a party I had to force myself to get up and walk and walk, thinking if I did indeed nod off, that would be all she wrote. For all the times I wanted to die, when it came down to this moment, I was terrified. Actually more scared to die than to wake up the next morning.

For years I tried to walk the tightrope, trying to appear “normal”. Thinking that people wouldn’t know I was high. Ah, the big secret. So why was it that when I finally came clean and told people how fucked up I was, I was surprised that they were not surprised?

Don’t get me wrong. My jealousy of the nodding man only goes so far. If my high life didn’t turn me in to a low life, I’d still be out there. But being high ended up being a daily struggle just not to get sick. It was a never-ending chase, running as fast as I could with that dark devouring sickness nipping at my heels. It was Temple Run in real life. Running, in fear, desperate. Scared to go to sleep because the morning would bring nothing, just the same dilemma, no way out. Active Footnote: No Way Out was one of the first dope brands that I ever did, located on South 2nd street and Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg. I didn’t have the smarts then to fully appreciate the irony.

Day 2:

11:43 AM (TUESDAY): There are certain things I just don’t want to admit. To myself nor to others. Certain things I want to keep well fucking hidden. I want to be the person that you think I am, or the person I think I am, rather than the person I am. I’m afraid that if you really know me, really know my weakness and my disease, you will leave me. Also, I would have to change. And underneath it all, I don’t want to change. I don’t REALLY want to be the person who I want you to think I am. Drawn and Quartered, I’m happily unhappy.

3:36 PM: Walking on the street earlier this AM, I passed a Halloween store. They had a huge amount of life-sized figures in the windows, some of which were still switched on. About 80% of them were variants of the Walking Dead. Moving zombies or skeletons. They seemed to have a mission (supposedly to get you), and something was controlling them, but they weren’t really alive.

I started contemplating what this said about our collective fears and obsessions at this time. It ain’t just Halloween. There’s a veritable plethora of Undead/Zombie movies and TV shows that are popular right now. It’s kind of riding the coattails of the vampire phenomenon. And it takes me back to my original Big Theme of end times. Oh, and I’ve been itching to get those words out somehow (veritable plethora- always wanted to name a punk band this). But what about our biggest fears, both individually and Socially/Politically/Economically? Is this to be reduced to a non-entity? To be alive, but to not be alive? To be seen but not heard? To perhaps be powerless as an individual, but to have power in numbers? Kind of sounds like the 99% to me. The walking dead. The disenfranchised. No voice in the world where real decisions are made, where futures are made and money talks. Personally, as someone who resides in the middle class (and god only knows how I made it this far – that is, if there is a god), I have that fear. It seems clear to me that this government is not for the people. This government is of and for the big business that pours money in to government to help pass policies favorable to them. And the split between the haves and the have-nots widens and deepens by the minute. The middle

class are joining the walking dead, taking on the sunken eye look and the shuffling feet of the disenfranchised lower class/ the unemployed, or the employed that work in low paying service industries. And why bother working these jobs that allow you just enough to not collect unemployment? Once I get my unemployment check, I'm going to go out and buy a zombie mask...

Day 3:

12:02 PM

Why the fuck does the dark side feel like the honest side? Why is it that when I'm in the depths of it, when life seems so meaningless, when death seems like a viable option, this feels like the underlying reality? The TRUE truth. Why is it so attractive when it is so painful? Why do I see homeless junkies on the street and feel like "that's my tribe". And all the other successes and accolades and positive roles I have in my life feel like a charade?

It fucking hurts. It fucking hurts. Why is the pain some kind of comfort? Is it some self perpetuating disease thing? Is it habit, like I'm used to it? I know people stay in terrible abusive relationships out of habit, and out of fear of change.

FEAR. There it is. FEAR. There's truth in fear. And, they were a great band.

Requiem:

So, after a couple of mundane sparked observations, I have been forced back in to this original topic that I mentioned up front. This time it was up close and personal, thanks to Global Warming and Tropical Storm/Hurricane Sandy specifically.

I live just outside NYC, in northern Jersey. A place that I never imagined I would end up, but NYC has become something that I never imagined either. In the past year, we have now experienced two devastating storms that have taken down countless trees and power lines, causing floods and long standing power outages. This is new for this area, and there is no infrastructure to deal with it in any kind of seamless way. We are entering the age of payback, in which mother earth is finding her voice, a howl that is starting in the depths, low and gravelly. Yet still the conservative republicans block spending for global warming and alternative energy research. It's a myth they say, nothing supports it. Atlantis was a myth as well. If anyone is around to notice, we'll see if it still seems like a myth to these conservatives when NYC goes the way of Atlantis.

SCHIZOPHRENIA AT THE KITCHEN DOOR, 3AM

By Patrick Wright

The moon's set three-quarter crescent, a sinking porthole in the sky's hull. A clock ticks behind me; its ticks and tocks synchronise with the beat of my chest. The beat reminds me I'm flesh, embodied, as sunless bark outside beckons the soul to drift.

I'm standing at the back door of the house. The kitchen's the cold room behind me. It's night. I'm alone. I'm awake. I'm not sure why.

Years ago I once tried to sleep; nothing happened.

As I wait here now, in bare feet, the air of outside rapes the threshold. Things flutter in. Wings on glass. And, since no voice calls me into being, I imagine feet planted on the bed of a frozen lake, there with torch exploring densely-weeded corridors.

Eyes soon accustom themselves to the dark, and there across the garden I see what once was, transfigured: the wooded arch made for roses to grow, the trellis broken by years of gusts, storms, frosts with no repair forthcoming; and the face rippling out of the oak, once enchanted and benign, now gurns downturned, its mouth of tongue-bitten grief.

I recall the place as it was before. It was summer. Life oozed from everything. All cuts healed with a kiss. And colours were far more vivid than they are today, stuck to everything - the grasses, flowers, pine tree house. The bumble bees and butterflies too - all emblems of life - were the gold of pyramids as they settled on petals.

Now, in place of those riches, are the blacks, charcoal greys and standing stones, erected monoliths. They're arranged in a circle - though for no God, no ritual. They sit stolid - guardians in their outdoor pavilion. I see them as sticks crack. And then they begin to take on human form; they become figures, faces, which shiftily glance my way with eyes of limestone unblinking. They refuse to move, say they're entitled to this space. They've usurped me and time I had there as a child. And I'm seeing a bier laid on top. A prophetic vision.

The doctors let me out. God knows why, only God knows. Since, even now, after pills and potions which do no good, when I gaze to the heavens, the moon is just a curve on a graph; the stars, pinholes through a plastic sheet. I tried to explain - to explain to them - but their noses were pressed too close to clipboards, forms. They gave me pills to caress like psalms. They sent me home - had my lips sewed shut.

I imagine where the nearest living rose might be, and I see a single blushing rose. It's in the garden of a child abuser, has its own canker attached. This is love. This is love.

Beyond the perimeter of the world - the fence - men go on to destroy themselves. Wars are waging; missiles and bullets impact small heads. And I'd rather be here, frigid, friendless, breathing, remaining dead and still, absolutely safe.

Now everything I see is wondrous here. Floods of shapes come washing in, and I hear nocturnal chatterings, invisible minds. All senses dart alive. My feet, no longer feeling air, want their skin on cold stone, to feel cold, masochistically, and the body aches to disrobe, be naked in the foliage and mud.

Saturn hangs overhead. I know that much. Its rings and moons spin around it - there, unseen - like me. I'm a mystery too - just as much a speck from humankind.

I see the Hunter, the Crab Nebula, Polaris. They're tiny frescos, fixed to the sky, magical, bereft, sending down messages that I'm nothing and will remain nothing forever. Stars - stars are souls - unhatched and hankering after life - stretched out, pricks through an empty canvas.

Across black-lit grass belladonna hides behind bark of bleeding trees - bleeding knees once cut by the tossed stump of an abandoned cricket game; and worm-eaten fruits unplucked, untouched - all secret as sea-plunged stones fallen from icebergs.

Persephone's here. Exhumed. She's black against black. I can just make her out. It's not madness to say so. It's not madness to find shadows on moonlit sundials. No.

I stay here at the brink of light. The lintel hems me in, as stellar mesh, spread out in spindles of glinting spider silk, charms, as the galaxy's arm half-heartedly limps along, as the zodiac shifts and the mind's grafted on a stalk, stamens surviving, lids closed as leftovers from birth. The winter gauze over plasma, seeping; a heart held to ransom.

I think myself out. Inside out. I'm inside out here.

The bulb by the path flickers as if spiritually affected; moths dive at it kamikaze-like. Where once the cobalt sky, safely tucked in its crib, came the Milky-way, which smothered it with its blanket; and the Earth, mad with vengeance, glares out at the vortex of suns and suns, and planets around suns, spellbound, awestruck. And here, below, clay men fight with clubs, scared as ever, paranoid, not seeing the beauty in these stills: a night garden, a poplar's rigor mortis, eons of grasses long departed ... I light no torch. I have no mirror. I sense no fragrance or eye. Just the sense of time sleeping, unlike I who waits, who respire, until it passes ... passes. All this with the moon's avarice, once more intent on spotlighting a vast ceiling of

emptiness. There looming bright, our lone satellite, selene, lunar, crepuscular, corrupt, alien like me.

Pandemonium rings in the trees as gusts scrape my face. I hum nursery rhymes again, and again I'm absent. I have no rainbow. Pigments are all choked through with lack of light. Shapeless and shapeless I shrink to a twig, its inconspicuousness.

Stardust falls like fountains as the fugue goes on, and tears seem to be falling with them, watering the siblings. And the statue of a cherub's singing "willow, willow."

Echoes of nothing, here, negate my reason. I wish I knew what to do right now, as tedium taps at the hour. The same old crisis. Everything was fine yesterday, as I recalled how pearls of sun-drench once glittered the bay, pebbles touched by swell, as pulses of light swaddled me.

I see paradise again. I see mother - father - brothers - others - lovers (to come ?), others ... I see them all, lined up, shadows against conifers, a cavalcade of ghosts ...

Outside now, by contrast, are yew trees, cypresses, brambles and berries. They are all wearing the night like a dream. Shifting shades I imagine are ravens squawking shrill, in acceptance of their nature.

Do I hallucinate, I wonder. Do I hallucinate as I see myself, as a toddler, playing on the grass? As garden parties play out, superimposed over the cadaver of night? I wonder, since the scene ends. Everyone melts into time - and love filters out through the trees, as I sit here and wait for the skeletal dance to resume, memories haunting the rim of the house, its paths and edges, its gates ...

I look down at my body and astonishingly there's no puncture mark - I'm intact. My skin says I'm young. My bones do not break. Fingertips roam as weather vanes.

Is it madness to see the moon that colour? Is it madness?

THE FEAST OF THE FEBRUARY FLIES

By Gene Stewart Writing As Samael Gyre

It was the third time her mother went in to have her skin cancer checked. The first two times it had been no big deal, band-aid stuff. This time, though, they told her it had spread. This time they told her she didn't have very long.

Diana's fists clenched when she heard. She screamed at the first friend who offered sympathy. -
-Keep your pity and sympathy, you leach. Leave me alone.

Her fear kept her away from her mother, too. Gazing into her mother's cheerful face infuriated Diana, who wanted to slap her and say, --Don't you realize you're dying?

--We all are, aren't we? Her mother would probably say, and that would make it worse. Truth was, no one knew when they'd die, and maybe terminally ill people had an advantage. Impending death focuses the mind, philosophers said. Maybe they were right. Maybe it forced people to think clearly.

Diana didn't want to think, though, which is why she was at the rave swallowing ecstasy, semen, and her pride in one big gulp. The boys lining up for free blowjobs in the third stall from the door in the Men's Room didn't care about Diana or her mother. The bouncers guarding the door after getting their freebies didn't care. She told herself she didn't care, either, and kept her lips and tongue busy.

She choked a few times on unexpected spurts, gagged a few times at ripe smells and bitter tastes, and felt wonderfully humiliated and negated by the end of a couple hours. The back of her throat felt bruised and sore, her jaw felt sprung, and her slut level was at an all-time high.

--She's had enough, look at her, bitch can't even focus her eyes. Reminds me of that one at Spring Break, you remem--

--Maybe she's up for a party now that she's loosened up.

She heard this and got to her feet but a big hand pushed her down onto the toilet seat again. She looked up and said, --Fuck off.

--Sure, babe. First, though, you're gonna fuck me and my buddies. Whatcha say? You horny for it after feasting on all that cum?

--Feasting? a buddy laughed. Man, you're so high. --We got a van outside, another one said, his face slack with lust. His pimples glowed like lava.

Diana heard herself say, --Sure, all three at once. Let's get this over with so I can dance before the night's over.

They escorted her from the bathroom. As she stepped into the crashing noise of the rave, bodies milling, conversational snippets flying like shrapnel as she was hustled through the crowds, Diana stumbled. She was tired. Exhausted, really. And she was numb.

This came in handy when, a few minutes later, she found herself stripped and laying in the back of a van, a cock in her mouth, another in her pussy, and another trying to jam itself up her ass. She wiggled and moaned for them and let all three fuck her cunt, then got them off with some hand and lip action and, finally, said, --Where's my clothes?

They laughed and zipped up and tossed her the dress she'd worn. Her underwear was gone, no doubt copped by one of the bastards for later sniffing and wanking.

That people behaved this way towards each other did not surprise her. If their Creator could give them afflictions like cancer, why expect anything less than callous cruelty from mere mortals?

The crass atmosphere in the van and at the rave suddenly repulsed her. She wasn't sure what appealed to her just then but certainly not more of the same.

As she staggered from the van, her thighs sprung and bruised, she thought, --Jesus, what have I done to myself?

Thoughts of sexually transmitted diseases flitted across her numb mind like bats in moonlight. A CD player in a car with the windows cracked to let out the pot smoke played "Shake Your Money Maker" as she passed it. The car was shaking, too.

She wondered if she should at least have charged five bucks each. At least then she'd have more to show for the night than a sick stomach and a hurt body.

As she dragged into the house her mother's voice echoed down the staircase. --Where have you been? It's a school night.

--Yeah, Mom. I know. I'm sorry. Was out with Melissa and Betty. I'll go straight to bed now, 'kay?

--You okay, honey? You sound exhausted.

--Yeah, I'm fine.

Diana went to the kitchen and got herself some cold cereal and milk for a very late supper. She wondered how much longer her mother would be alive, and then wondered if she could maybe die before her Mom did.

That made her feel somewhat better as she drifted off to sleep, imagining not having to be here without her mother.

Next morning she didn't hear the alarm clock and woke up late. If she hurried she might make

her second class. Her throat hurt and her head ached. She got up, peed, then threw up in the sink. She didn't look too closely at what came up but it didn't wash down the sink easily and she had to use her fingers to clump it and toss it into the toilet.

Undigested cereal, she figured.

That was about when she realized that her mother had not awakened her. Usually when she didn't hear the alarm her mother did, and came in gently to shake her awake.

Diana, alarmed, went to her mother's room.

--Mom? You awake? She pushed the door open and poked her head into the room. An acrid scent of methane made her wrinkle her nose. She opened the door widely and entered.

Her mother lay flat on her back with her head cocked toward the wall. She was breathing in harsh gasps through her open mouth.

--Mom? You okay?

--Mm?

Diana let herself ease back from panic as her mother's eyes fluttered open. --Oh, Diana, what's the matter, honey?

--I don't feel good, Mom. I'm going to skip school today I think.

Still not moving, her mother gave a weak smile. --You want me to call the school?

--No, Mom. That's okay. I'll take care of it.

Diana left the room and went downstairs, where she started some coffee and called the school to say that Diana Wilson would not be in today due to a flu. The nurse had no idea she was not speaking to Diana's mother and said Fine.

Diana watched the coffee drip for a bit, then noticed she hadn't gotten dressed yet. She ran upstairs and got into her jeans and a sweater.

As her head came out from inside the sweater an idea came to her: Murder - suicide.

She could kill her mother, then herself.

That would take care of things neatly. Neither would have pain. Neither would have to pretend to like sex. Neither would have to suck up to men for handouts anymore.

She wished her fucking father hadn't divorced them for that bimbo. If he were still around maybe it'd be different.

Maybe not, though. He thinks with his dick like any other male, so what would change? She realized, her heart lurching, that she was daydreaming again. Just like a stupid girl, she thought, hating herself all the more for such weak-mindedness.

What was needed was hardheaded realism.

She could give her mother soup for an early lunch, soup with a lot of pills in it. Kill her that way, then drink some herself, lay down beside her mother, and just drift off.

That sounded so good. A long trip into oblivion was just what she needed.

--Diana, can you give me a hand?

Diana jumped at the mention of her name. She went to her mother's room and found pills scattered on the floor.

Her mother looked sheepish as she sat on the edge of the bed. --I'm sorry, dropped the bottle and they just went everywhere.

--They sure did. You okay, Mom? --Got dizzy when I tried to pick them up, that's all.

--I'll get 'em, don't worry. Diana dropped to her knees, a position she was getting way too familiar with, and gathered pills. They were the weird speckled blue ones; weren't they powerful? What were they doing up here, anyway? Weren't all the meds in the cabinet above the kitchen counter?

--I'm sorry, honey. I should never have-- Diana realized then what her mother thought she had discovered; that her mother had maybe tried, maybe just considered, suicide by overdose.

--Mom, when did you do this? Her mother hung her head, tears flowing like a trickle of embalming fluid from a leaky corpse. --Last night, Diana. While you were out with your friends.

--Mom, I was at a rave.

Her mother looked puzzled. --Dance, right?

Diana sighed. --Yeah, Mom. It's a kind of dance. Here, let's get you dressed and we'll go downstairs and set you up on the couch, okay? It's almost time for THE PRICE IS RIGHT.

--Okay. I'm sorry I'm so weak.

--It's not your fault, Mom.

--Still. I can't help thinking about things now, and I remembered when I was a little girl. I was playing up in the attic at my grandparents' house. It was winter, too cold to play outside, way too much snow. I was looking out the window at the drifts, thinking how pretty they were,

when my grandfather came up behind me and asked if I saw that fly.

--It's a February Fly, Angel, he told me. Most flies only live three days, did you know that? And most live in summer, when they can find something to eat. But this guy here? He's a February Fly. Know what that means?

--When I told him no, I didn't understand what it meant, he smiled and got a funny look on his face and looked past me, through the window, to the snow. Means they feast on whatever dies in winter, if they're lucky.

--I never asked him what if they were unlucky, but now I think maybe I know.

Diana just stood there. She was stunned in some way she didn't understand, as if her body got the story while her mind was still sorting out the images, vocal tones, and word choices.

--You're a good girl, her mother said, as she was helped by her only child down the stairs to the couch, where she got situated under the quilt her own grandmother had made for her by hand out of scraps of clothes worn out by other family members who'd helped work the farm they'd once owned.

Diana thought, No, Mom, I'm a very bad girl, but that didn't feel right. She said, --I'll get you some soup, okay? As she heated it her brain caught up with her body in understanding the story and she figured maybe she was just another February Fly, like everyone else. Would she be one of the lucky ones who got to feast? Or would she end up a dry husk on the windowsill, unable to reach the outside world?

Life's short no matter what, so it was her choice. She could find a way to cope and now she knew it. It was a comfort knowing the pills were there, would always be there.

--You going out today? her mother asked.

Diana shook her head, thinking, Not today, although there is always tomorrow. --Got too much homework. And for once she actually meant it. All the sudden she wanted to learn as much as she could so maybe the world wouldn't push her around so much.

She promised herself she'd take care of her mother as long as it took, no matter what, and when that was done she'd take care of herself, one way or another, maybe find a way to get beyond the glass. To fly free and find a better feast of her own if she could, or to free herself of the feast's burden if not.

Just then, though, she took soup in to her mother and had some herself, and she left the pills out.



PROCEDURE 769: CDC# B66883

By Díre McCain

A supernatural tale based on real people and events...

ANALYST: The subject was born in Fort Bragg, North Carolina three months premature, after his alcoholic father - a decorated World War II Veteran - had kicked the subject's alcoholic mother in the abdomen so forcefully she began to hemorrhage. An act that would set the precedent for the subject's harrowing childhood, during which he would suffer regular beatings at the hands of both parents.

April 20, 1992 6:26 PM PDT

OPERATOR: *"I have a collect call from Robert Alton Harris, an inmate at San Quentin State Prison. Do you accept the charges?"*

ROBERT ALTON HARRIS: Eleven hours and thirty-one minutes. Shoulda been five hours and thirty-one minutes, but all them people still tryin' to save me only delayed my fate. Need someone to claim my remains, that's all, ain't askin' for the world. Been waitin' to die since before I was born. Now the Grim Reaper's knockin' at my door, and nobody'll step up to the plate. Cousin Sam's my last hope, but when he opened his mouth, I knew it was a lost cause. He was fucked up, and I was fucked, destined for Boot Hill, with the likes of Bluebeard Watson and William Kogut, to spend eternity stuck in Hell.

VICTIM: *It was the morning after Fourth of July. My best friend and I were going fishing. We stopped at Jack in the Box first to get some food. We were eating in the car when two men walked up.*

At age two, the subject's father flogged the subject with a bamboo stick, breaking the subject's jaw. It was the first of several serious injuries sustained during the subject's childhood.

All these years, everybody thinkin' I wasn't sorry for killin' them two boys, thinkin' I was chickenshit, not wantin' to meet the maker. Hell, I ain't denyin' what I done was wrong, and I come to terms with dyin', but the stories I heard 'bout the hereafter up on that Hill's enough to make the toughest son of a bitch cringe.

One of them had a gun. He told us to let him in the car, so we did. He held the gun at us and said to start driving. He said he wasn't going to hurt us. The other man followed in their car. I didn't know where we were going or why, but I was really scared.

Even meals in the subject's home were a continual source of trauma and abuse. While at the dinner table, if the subject reached for something without his father's permission, the subject's father would drive a fork through the subject's hand. The subject would then be forbidden to eat another bite until he had "learned his lesson" - often resulting in several days of starvation.

Goddamn story of my life. Ain't had real food since 1978. Now I got one foot in the grave, and here comes the pizza, the fried chicken, the works. Cigarettes been like bullion all these years, and now I'm sittin' on a case, just like that. And the new duds. Why the heck they think a condemned man needs new duds is beyond me. All I care about's not windin' up on that Hill. They say it's like Purgatory, only worse, 'cause it ain't temporary, you're stuck there for all eternity, sufferin' in ways you ain't never suffered in your worst nightmares.

When we reached the Lake, the man told us to pull in and stop the car. Then he told us to get out and start walking. He followed us with the gun held to our backs. He joked and laughed a lot, and kept promising that he wouldn't hurt us. He said he just wanted the car and that we'd be free to go. We believed him, and kept walking.

"Recreation" was equally abusive and traumatic. The subject's father's idea of Hide-and-Seek was to give the subject and his eight siblings a half hour to hide outside the house, before hunting them down with a loaded shotgun, threatening to shoot anyone who was found.

Just after three, new duds on, stomach full of grease, lungs full of nicotine, they come get me. Strap me in, release the dogs. Ready to roll, even tell 'em so. Look around, see 'em all here watchin', every one of 'em I wronged. No more get outta jail free cards, my number's up, it'd take a goddamn miracle to save me now. Got no choice but to suck it up and take it like a man.

"PULL IT."

I heard a loud popping sound. Then I felt a hot burning sensation in my back. A few seconds later, I heard another loud popping sound. Then I felt another hot burning sensation, but in my head. I fell down. I couldn't see or move. But I could hear. I could hear the man laughing.

A few months prior to the subject's tenth birthday, the family relocated to a farm labor camp in the San Joaquin Valley. It was there that the subject's eldest sister was arrested for theft and sent to juvenile hall, where she revealed yet another form of abuse in the Harris home.

The subject's father habitually molested the subject's sisters, often forcing the subject to watch. The subject described one

incident in particular, when his father tried to force the subject to take part in the assault. When the subject was unable to achieve an erection, presumably due to the atrocious nature of the situation, he was castigated and beaten unconscious, then locked in a closet for several hours.

In early 1963, the subject's father was deemed a sex offender and sent to Atascadero State Hospital for a year and a half. Upon his release, the habitual molestation resumed, until the end of 1964, when he was caught in the act by police officers who had gone out to the house on a domestic violence call. Shortly thereafter, the subject's father was convicted and incarcerated for the crimes.

Ten minutes into it, another no go. They cut me loose, and here I am, back in that cell, eatin' jelly beans, smokin' Camels, waitin' to die. Reckon it might never happen, but scared to let my guard down, 'cause in the backa my mind, that Hill's still bellowin' at me, like a lion at feedin' time.

I heard my best friend scream. It sounded like he was running away. Then I heard two more popping sounds. The man started laughing again. I was never more scared in my life. I felt the man standing over me. I could hear him breathing. I wanted to get up and run, but I still couldn't see or move. He pushed my body with his foot and asked me if I was dead yet. I wished my dad was there. He would have killed the man and rescued us, I know it.

With the subject's father in prison, the Harris family migrated up and down the valley for two years. Then the subject's mother moved the subject and five of his siblings to Sacramento, where she took up with a new mate. By now, the subject had already embarked on a life of crime, and before long, was sent to juvenile hall for stealing a car. In 1967, the subject's mother abandoned him altogether, claiming he was too difficult to rear any longer. The subject, now fourteen, was left to fend for himself.

They say it's a pitch-dark wasteland, can't see a goddamn thing, can't move neither. Like that picture, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 'cept worse, 'cause your smellin' and hearin's stronger than a hound dog's. The stench of death, your own flesh rottin' away, swallows you whole, and every sound cuts through your ears and into your brain, like an ice pick bein' drove through your head. Worst part of all's what's happenin' inside your head turns into a big ol' TV, 'cept the only programmin' is your worst pains and traumas. Ain't no off switch neither, it just keeps on goin' and goin' and goin', playin' over and over again.

The man walked away. I heard the car start and burn rubber. The laughing stopped. It was quiet, so quiet it hurt my ears. I was going to die. I thought about my Mom and what it would

do to her. And my sister and my brother. I wished I'd stayed home that day. I wished I stayed home. I. Wished. I'd. Stayed. Home.

The subject made his way to Oklahoma, where one of his brothers and one of his sisters resided. After several more run-ins with the law, the subject spent the next four years as a ward of various federal reformatories, where he was diagnosed as schizophrenic with suicidal and homicidal tendencies.

When the subject reached adulthood, he was released from custody. With fifty dollars in his pocket and a one-way bus ticket, he headed back to Southern California, where his father now resided. The subject soon found work and started a family, but within three years, had fallen back on his old ways.

Coupla hours later, batter up, home run. 'Cept I ain't ready to go no more, and it ain't just the thoughta that Hill waitin' for me. Last thing I seen was that boy's father glarin' at me, hatin' me for what I done to his boy, wishin' me dead ten times over.

"I'm sorry."

The police came later that night. I wondered how they found us. They left us lying there for a long time while they walked around doing their work. They talked about how tragic it was. Tragic. That was the word they kept using. I kept hoping it was a nightmare. I tried and tried and tried to wake up, but I couldn't. I just lay there, memories spilling out of my head, like the blood I'd felt trickling down my neck. My little brother's birth. School. Learning how to ride a bike. Learning how to drive. My friends. The girl I wanted to ask out. I thought about the future that would never be. I would never have a job, go to college, marry, have children, grandchildren. It felt like forever before the police put us in those bags and loaded our bodies into the van.

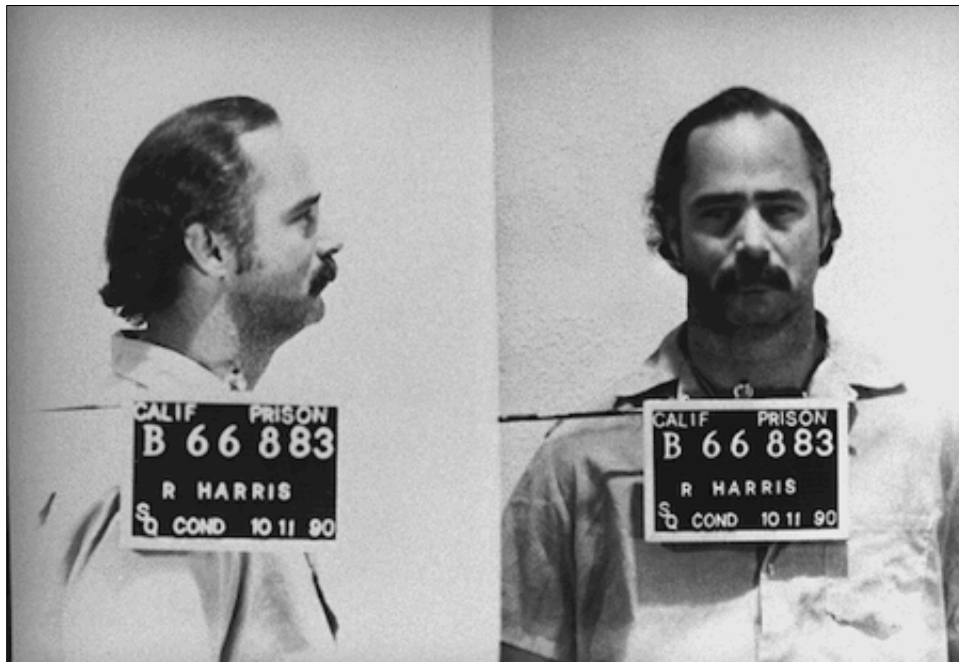
It is believed that the subject's intense anger and hostility toward other living things - humans and animals alike - can be attributed to the relentless cycle of terror and abuse, which began while the subject was still in his mother's womb. The subject exhibited violent tendencies at an uncommonly young age. As an adolescent, the subject took great pleasure in torturing and killing neighborhood cats, a crime which led to his first arrest. It was not long before the subject had moved on to humans.

Could feel my body thrashin' around as the poison seeped in, but my mind was sufferin' more. Them stories y'hear 'bout folks' lives flashin' before their eyes when they're dyin', like a picture show? All true, 'cept there weren't no happy scenes in my picture. Thought about Pa stickin' that shotgun in his mouth, takin' the easy way out. Weren't no easy way for me. Hung on for

seventeen minutes. They said sixteen, but that last was the killer, felt like a thousand. Before I know it, they got me stuffed in that giant Ziploc. And I'm gone from this life, for good, just like that, headed for that Hill.

In 1975, the subject was convicted and incarcerated for the voluntary manslaughter of his next-door neighbor, who was also the roommate of the subject's brother. The victim was beaten to death, allegedly without provocation, while the subject cruelly mocked him for being unmanly. The subject then cut off the victim's hair, before dousing him with lighter fluid and throwing matches on him. At the scene, the subject claimed he was acting in self-defense on behalf of the victim's wife, alleging that the victim had threatened her with a knife. The subject later retracted his statement, shifting the blame onto his brother, claiming he had only confessed to protect him - a maneuver that would be repeated, with a different brother, three years down the road. The subject was paroled in January of 1978. Five months and 26 days later, he would kill again.

But I wasn't dead. Not inside.



From *A Dream Of Stone (and other ghost stories)* published by Apophenia, and available to purchase at Amazon: <http://www.amazon.com/Dream-Stone-Other-Ghost-Stories/dp/061581459X>

THE UNIT

By Ron Churchill

As I gurgled and thrashed my way back to conscious existence sometime in October of 2004, my first coherent thought was that I had been, at some point, a smoker. This thought came along with the realization that my body appeared to be incapable of any effective motion at all, save a general, full-body flail, or flog.

My condition of immobility was compounded by the four-point restraints securing my wrists and ankles, together with a rather disturbing awareness, after slowly rolling my eyeballs around the room, that I was almost completely encircled with noisy and beeping machines.

Something was wrong. That much was certain. At this point, and for quite some time after, I had no idea I had been in a coma for three months.

My next immediate concern was my incredible thirst.

This ultrathirst was so powerful that I could not imagine it being quenched after a hundred hours at a chilled water fountain. Tortured by lucid memories of grape soda, I would later learn that my thirst was justified, medically speaking, as I had ingested not one sip of water in the past three months or so, during which salt solution was being continuously pumped through my veins.

Next, the gurgling to which I had awakened was coming from my throat, and I realized with horror that I was suffocating from a buildup of snot-like gurgewater in my lungs.

More gurgewater was visible in the crinkly hose that ran between my throat and a noisy machine located somewhere behind my bed. My tracheotomy equipment, complete with a metal tube jutting through a gash in my throat, was obviously in need of drainage.

There was another distinguishable and very disturbing noise coming from behind me.

I could hear intermittent rushes of air that...wow, my chest rose and fell in sync with the noise.

Now, how do I scream for help?

Uh-oh.

I couldn't talk. In fact, I couldn't make even the slightest noise, and certainly nothing that wasn't immediately drowned out by the constant gurgling and the noisy machines.

And it didn't really matter anyway, because there was nobody else in sight, and everything

certainly was getting darker and much quieter.

With a spark of panic, I realized that it might be quite some time before I could go for a smoke break.

I passed out cold.



Being on life support is not as effortless as it sounds.

In my early days of semi-consciousness in the Trauma Intensive Care Unit, I did not have the slightest suspicion whatsoever that I was being assisted in any way.

My body, withered as it was, still retained a natural preference for the cadence and rhythm of normal breathing. This clashed sharply with the machine-driven inhale and exhale of the ventilator to which I was attached.

Another curious expression: 'intensive care.'

Intensive care, as it is called by those on the other side of endless tubes and wires, felt roughly like a massive attempt, on the part of every living fiber in my body, to survive and endure the countless and hellish measures being taken by those who were trying to save me.

When I was unlucky enough to have any objective awareness of my body's tragic position, I was then, by corollary, in no condition to admire the circle of expensive medical equipment surrounding me.

Countless tubes and machines were raping me full of oxygen, nutrition, hydration, and mind-bending medications during their violent puncture and infiltration of my every bodily orifice. Additionally, there were several extra holes that had been punched through my skin in various locations. These served as residence for stiff, synthetic, medical tubes and wires.

All of this searing discomfort was minimized only slightly by my internal maladies including a thorough scrambling of most of my abdominal organs. This was the result of the massive surgical traumas I had somehow managed to survive.

So far, the experience of the intensive care unit might approach that of being stuffed full of TNT that was being repeatedly and eternally detonated at my body's very center. This was felt as a kind of agonizing, explosive, very rapid and ever-repeating over-inflation and explosive bursting of my body's every living cell.

Unfortunately, this rather generalized feeling was constantly mushrooming into a 3-D surround experience where the explosions appeared to be perceptible at the cellular, tissue, organ, and

systemic levels simultaneously.

Even worse, all of was shrink-wrapped in the absolute and terrifying, continuing, morale certainty that the present moment was to be my very last. This was offset only slightly by an ever-dawning horror that even the blissful sleep of death was not to be in my immediate future. At least, not yet.

Actually, if language could be compared with my early days in The Unit, I might say that my description to this point depicts an overall feeling that is perhaps five or six times less disturbing, painful, and terrifying than the actual experience.

But most important of all, it was here, in this endless and agonizing horror-trip occurring very near, if not directly within, the bottomless central plane of hell, that I picked back up on my life-long pattern of laying down newly created memories that I here begin to retrieve.

•••

Very, very slowly and all-too-suddenly, I became slightly more accustomed to these unpleasant bouts with human consciousness. Armed with this awareness, I began to take a cautious and very disturbing inventory of the modern-day inventions in the center of which I was entombed. The massive black ski boots on my feet and upper ankles were called extraction boots. I later learned that these had prevented my comatose feet from a tendon-shrinking condition known in hospital slang as dropfoot.

My lower legs, from my boots up to my knees, were encased in very large and very tight inflatable plastic socks that were preventing the formation of blood clots in my calves and shins. My thighs were apparently left bare, covered only with my hospital gown and dozens of painful red dots; telltale of the five or so intramuscular jabs I received on a daily basis.

Slightly higher up, a thick tube led from under my gown to a urine-filled bag tied to the side of my bed.

Unsettling...

Moving up to my mid-section revealed clear plastic cling wrap which covered most of my upper pelvis, belly, and lower chest. This mess, which was the center of attention, will be discussed in later chapters. Onward to my upper chest, which was covered with electrodes. These apparently sent signals along thick, black cords reaching to the beeping computer monitors above and behind my head. I later learned that the computer readouts could also be monitored by the nurses and doctors sitting at a central command post that was not in view of my doorway.

Jutting out both sides of my upper ribcage were the chest tubes that had been stabbed between my ribs and into my lung areas to allow for the drainage typical of double pneumonia.

A bit farther up, on the front of my left shoulder, was the external end of a triple IV tube. It had been stitched into my skin and pushed into the large vein running from my shoulder, along my collarbone, toward my heart. This arrangement, I would later learn, was called a central line. The visible end of this line was connected to tubes running to the endlessly beeping I.V. machines located to both sides of my field of vision.

My lower throat was punctured by the thick, titanium tracheotomy tube, which was stitched into my skin on both sides of the tube. My mouth was not presently covered with the clear plastic mask reserved for the ether of surgery, but as I could not speak, drink, or eat, and as I was breathing through my throat, my mouth appeared to be useless except to detect the ever-present ultrathirst.

Up my nose and down the back of my throat was a very thick and painful clear rubber tube which felt as if it ended somewhere near my toes. This was an N.G., or naso-gastrointestinal, vacuum tube that continuously sucked dry the withered prune of my stomach.

My eyes, pulsing with thirst, were nearly useless at distances of more than a few inches, as my glasses had long ago been lost in the shuffle.

My whole upper body was elevated so I was nearly sitting up. This caused a sensation, and very unpleasant dreams, of sliding down an ice chute toward the eternally open gates of hell. My head was on a pillow, but the pillow was too big and puffy, and my neck and upper spine were throbbing with aching pain. The sensation of my back, on which I had lain for ninety days and ninety nights without moving, I cannot even begin to describe.

Onward to my left arm, which was encased in an automatic blood pressure cuff that inflated and became painfully tight every few minutes, releasing itself, it seemed, just moments before the certain explosion of my hand and arm. My right arm was fairly shriveled from the muscular atrophy of lengthy immobility. A wire had been stitched in to its upper wrist.

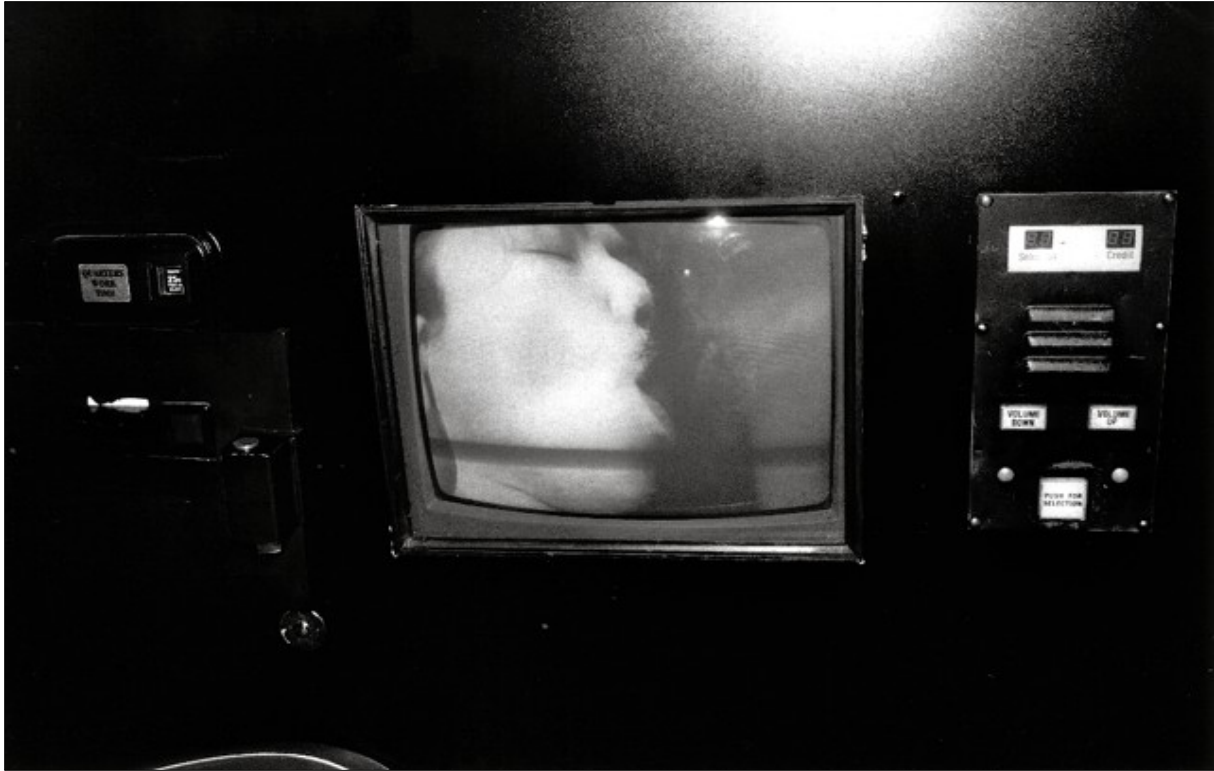
Both of my lower wrists were wrapped tightly with surgical tape. The surgical tape bound tight a pair of massive, white, thumbless mittens that looked like boxing gloves. In a sense, this was the worst torture of all, as my hands could not adjust any part of the whole agonizing setup in the slightest way.

Besides, the mittens were tied to the bed rails on either side with rubber ropes.

This system, I later learned, had been implemented so I would refrain from ripping out the tubes that were pumping me full of all this pain.

And oh boy, I thought with a double-blink:

I think I've bottomed out.



DRUG

By Claudia Bellocq

Photo ©Tom Garretson

She lit the drug on her foil and inhaled deeply. Hidden in the bathroom, her bathroom, yet still hiding. The bitter smell soothed her; it was familiar, not overbearing, comforting, exciting. Deadly. It was her ally...she loved it. She knew it like the back of her hand or the inside of her cunt, though both of those seemed alien to her lately.

She followed the sticky brown river of it as it ran down the foil...hhhhhhhhhhhhhh...inhaling deeply. Breathing out. Letting go. Diving in. Surrender.

Eventually she'd had her fill. She waited a while, flushed the chain, arranged her clothes and her make-up, leaned closer into the mirror to check the size of her pupils. Shit...dead give-away. Applied a little more eye make-up and lowered her fringe over her eyes and left the bathroom noticing the strange, recently familiar smell of burnt almonds that seemed to be following her around...there it was again.....

Only briefly did she make eye contact with him, on her way out. Pretty soon after that the night was about to get distinctly weird. The roads widened alongside her as she walked the short distance from the taxi to the hotel.

The.

Driver's.

Voice.

Had.

Sounded.

Strange.

Sloooooooooowwww, haunting, out of place, jarring.

"No, no, It's fine here...I'll walk the last bit," she said, as she got out of the taxi.

Hotel lobby was odd. Everyone turned to look at the woman who had just walked in. Residents dotted around the bar. Late at night. The two men in the corner smiled slightly and she approached them.

"Hello"

"Hi. Sit down...take a seat. Drink?"

Um...wine...or maybe whisky? No, "I'll have a small white wine please."

One gets up and goes for the drink. The atmosphere is too strange and she's no idea what's going on. Flickers.

"I have to go...sorry..."

"Bu....."

"Sorry."

She leaves, pushing the heavy red upholstered chair to one side and making her way out of there fast. Where to go? Faces loomed in and out of her awareness. People passing...keep walking. Click, click, click...her heels on the rain soaked street. The light over there flickering like the people had. All connected. All out to get her.

Stumbles home.

Where.

Is.

Home?

Unlocks her door. Bangs it shut and stands, back to the door, breathing deeply. Feeling relief from the cold doorframe of her apartment. He's out somewhere. She staggers to the bathroom and tries to get into bed. Thrashing sheets. A strong sense of not being alone...but she is...can't leave but somehow pulls on her clothes and does leave.

She goes to her friends. Taxi...A to B. Simple. Voices greet her, her friends let her in and give her a bed in a cold bare room. She hears them talking about her through the thin walls of the bare room with only the put-you-up bed in the corner. Sad old metal bed.

Feels menace. Leaves. She knows her friends will wonder where she went. Another place now. That smell is there again. Almonds.

Finally to a flat she can rest in. A friend she momentarily trusts if trust is the right word. She doesn't trust anyone, but here is the safest bet right now. Sleep comes in fits and starts and in her dream, she is fucked by some great monster of a creature and stands thrashing a carving knife around in somebody's kitchen. It's the kitchen in the house where she's sleeping. Mustn't let him in. He smells of almonds. They follow her around. The other woman in the flat knows this smell now too because she gave her some. There is a smell of fear in the air. The knife she is waving makes her feel a bit safer.

Morning arrives...fucking hell what a night! Drags herself out into the dawn light and takes another taxi over to the basement flat in Notting Hill.

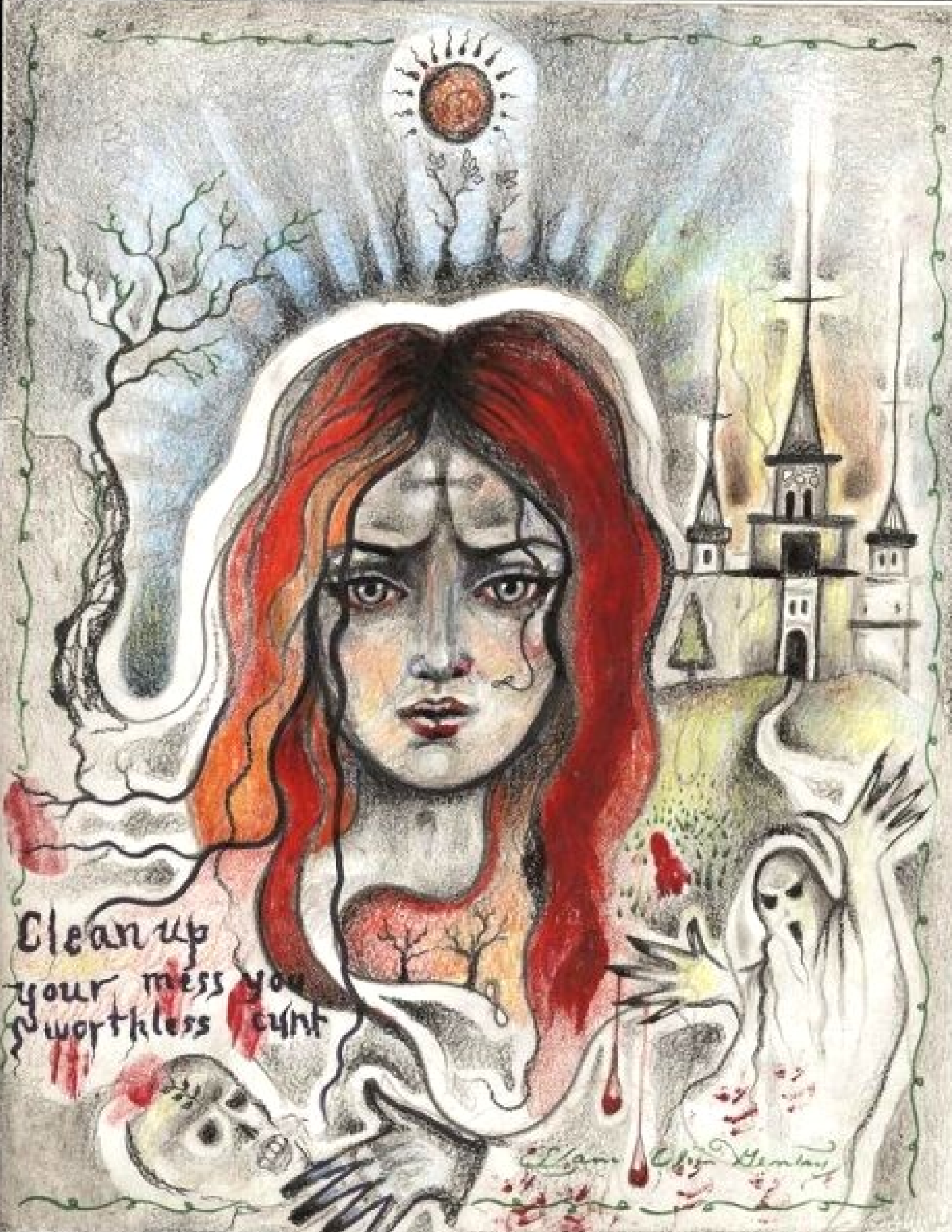
"Ducie...look at this for me will you? There's something not right. Almonds again as he lights it up. Examines it, sniffs it.

"fucking hell babe...strychnine...some fuckers giving you strychnine...who you dealing with baby? Get rid of this shit!"

She throws it down the sink and a million tiny screams follow the almonds down the plughole. She sees herself and how small she has become. Tiny even. Tiny. Barely there. Barely human. Almost dead. Sick.

She thanks her friend for saving her. Lights up a different powder this time and finds peace in the place of anxiety. 'I'll battle that demon,' she thinks, 'I know him well,' and for the time being she is home. Safe.

Then everything becomes a house of cards and she is standing in the middle of it when it all collapses around her. The cards sting her face and thrash at her skin. She sees her friend die in the corner and wonders why she just slipped away like that. She sees another friend waving goodbye to her as she walks into the centre of the flying, falling cards and then turns her back on her, not before smiling softly and revealing all of her rotten drug-riddled teeth falling from her mouth. She was beautiful once. She is beautiful still only most can't see it now...they just see the ravages of time and circumstance when they look at her, "but that woman saved me," she says out loud.



Clean up
your mess you
worthless cunt

Alan Ayton

THE NEWS FROM MY AREA

By Chris Madoch

Photo © Michael Dent

1

Shortly I'll be off to get the Sunday paper. The Sunday Mirror to be exact. Well, it gets me out of my high-rise low-life flat. The Sunday Mirror- it's intended to reflect our small lives back at us bigger, better. I've never been in it. But then, I'm not eighteen, a drop dead gorgeous dog with massive tits. Then again, I do have every intention of being newsworthy one day. And that's an ominous promise.

This life is proper untreated shit, raw sewage like the Spanish farmers spray on salad crops in times of drought. You'd be amazed how many people have no idea what a farm looks like, smells like. Everything comes shrink wrapped or out of skips.

Shit.

Mass ignorance. There is no escaping it- the abiding, overriding stench. No matter what the fuck you throw at it.

Now, they got what they call dirty nuclear bombs, well. Fuck me. That's all you need to know- bombs that blast disease willy nilly with consummate ease.

Cleanliness has no more relevance. Dirt up- it's the new black.

Sucking a peacock's cock in the considerably over romanticised Elizabethan age- imagine that; rolling back the grubby foreskin, liquid blue cheese.

I've read Patrick Suskind's book *Perfume*. It was a journey of necessity. Forget the disappointing film.

Here. Listen. I heard this through the paper thin walls the council calls building a short while ago.

'You're wearing perfume. You smell rank girl and you want me to thank you for a shag with 100 quid. There were skid marks on your grey knickers- I'm deducting 20 for that. Cunt. Pull another stunt like that and you'll be off my books. You're losing your underage looks. Got a fear of soap and water have you? Or has Christ got to you and you've suddenly decided to go all retro hippie on me?

When I lick your kipper cunt, you cunt, I want those cunt lips clean and tasty- you listening to me. I like mopping on prawn pussy when I'm watching my gay porn.

Hang on.

Excuse me while I fart.

Ooh! Better out than in.

Ripper.

Beans. I been eating baked beans.

I have alternate meat and veg days. It was a veg day yesterday. Have a smell of that. Heinz. That's a proper smell that is. Can't you tell? Fuck me! It's a million times better than your street-market imitation Chanel muck. Muck. It sucks. Fucking sucks it does.'

Nice. Oh yes. Good memory me. Almost perfect recall.

Just a neighbourhood taster for ya.

Lived here for years on disability benefits- it's not just the aftermath of Thalidomide, it's the Major Depression Disorder caused by the aftermath of the Thalidomide- the bullying, the failing eyesight through all that repeat form filling. Small minded office workers love minutiae. I'm missing most of an upper left limb. Good thing it turned out I was right handed.

It has real feelings- my human squid. I flip out if anyone calls it my flipper.

It's Sid, Sid my squid.

Whenever I have a shower I give it a right soaping and, guess what,- it always gives me a stonking erection. Never fails. Like I said, bloody good thing I am right handed. Though, all this time on me own, I have developed a great and possibly unique technique for achieving full orgasm without hands.

The mind is a marvel innit- a fucking marvel.

I lie naked on the bed, curtains open, touching nothing, just flexing the glutinous maximus, pressing my coccyx hard against the mattress; my mind does the rest. Shooting your load like that is like stumbling into Nirvana- heavenly. Messy mind, but fucking heavenly. I fantasise that in an adjacent tower block some grunt bear, still deep in the closet, has got a telescope and his cock out; that his obese wife catches him catches his ejaculate in her peach tissues.

2

Oh!

I'll take you with me if that's alright with you- invisible you may be but I'd worry leaving you alone up here. Fifteenth floor.

The last tenant flew. He was a tub of lard; how he squeezed himself through the window was quite the mystery. There wasn't much left of him. Had to be dealt with by a shovel of sorts. Did you ever see that series of images by Andy Warhol 'Purple Jumping Man'? He was jumping from much higher- you know, New York, so he was almost mush on landing. I always

remember that curious cop in uniform standing over the dead lump, he had a spade in his hand. Andy see, he had an artist's eye for detail. What a wizard.

No. We won't hold hands. You're making me repeat myself. I only have the one and I usually tuck the paper under Sid the squid. Got it?

3

The long concrete landings give daily lessons in perspective and patience. There are estates in Paris much like this- the future made to inflict the facelessness of urban hell on an imprisoned underclass. Graffiti somehow gets to be self-defeating by being almost impossible to read but at least in this place it is sprayed in English of a sort.

In Paris it would be so street to cut in the odd English word but here the appearance of any French words would seem utterly absurd.

Yet I kinda hanker after seeing the word 'baguette' in brazen neon pink screaming on a linking footbridge, knowing as I do that that long bread stick is a lame French slang term for cock. Fresh from the bakers, who could stop themselves breaking the warm end off.

I survive here and, yes, I have the temerity to think.

Come on.

Mind the flattened dog turd and the painterly trail of trainer prints.

We take a sharp right.

Sudden, ironic- black graffiti in support of the UK BNP, grass root fascists in a place where grass grows like comb-overs on bitter old bigots.

I am well inured to the blood red words 'nigga cunt'. That would seem to be the absolute limit of these guys' creative rage- it is exactly why I am not in the least frightened by them.

Yes, of course, I am on their lists.

I like the fact that I am on their extermination lists on three counts to date. In fact, I have made it part of my future life's work to create a fourth reason for them to have me oven baked in a state of the art stalag on the Isle-of-Wight.

I have watched a film of human bodies used as large candles- unsurprising, not gripping. You can buy wax candles as big as bodies at the shrine at Lourdes. The bigger the candle the better the chance of getting your petition answered by the Virgin Mary. Bollocks.

Indian families can be quite careless with the makeshift pyres of loved ones on the banks of the Ganges; often only half-burned they are kicked into the unclean depths and left: yes, left to be hooked out by a gang of cheap labour at the next dam employed specifically to snag the bloated bodies.

The 'holy river' is a thick and dangerous viral soup by any scientific measure.

I always remember this when I'm inclined to wince at the sight of used knotted condoms decorating the local swings- glossy grey Tibetan prayer rags hung from metal trees, seats varnished with the stain of children trying to deflect distress, the breeze carrying low-notes of their unscrubbed mess. And that's on the ground.

Yes, I'm on the BNP's fucking low-brow lists- Alex Biddens, Gatling Gun Tower: disfigured and disabled, half-caste, shirt-lifter.

The Front- that's a laugh, a lot of them are all front that's for sure.

I've had some- young guns wearing braces and number one heads; late teens and curious.

Clean as a whistle.

I don't do anal but I got plugs that switch the prostrate on.

I get these rabid heteros cumming and crying for joy at one and the same time. Then, mostly, they kick my head in- very half-heartedly mind, almost tenderly. The screwed lambs.

What they want is a real full blown war.

That's what they're waiting for.

What they desperately desire is the chance to participate in a life-size Xbox game, certificate eighteen. They wanna shoot the proper brown bollocks off of all living breathing fundamentalist darkie terrorists. Yeah! Just like most Americans do.

And they love Big Macs and pack banter about gang raping virgin apes on the rag; mugging Downs' boys, breaking into a mortuary and bumming dead bodies.

You picked a good day- the two man cesspit of a lift is working.

4

I let the rumblings of the Eastern Block mechanism do its unpleasant worst. Habit is such a cunt. I always stand here and let elevator disaster movies flood my mind then turn to take in the view such as it is.

Semi-industrial. A theme park for the uglier aspects of aspiration. Molehills of deconstructed cars and mountains of factory retail outlets. Tile wholesalers. A cramped garden centre.

It might be the last time I get to see it and, because it might be the last time I get to see it, I see it again for the first time, as if I were a recently housed refugee, maybe, from some distant desert war zone where 'sand' is so removed from being a chic colour of paint and 'blood' is real, caused by a nail bomb, not by something artfully distressed that costs a fucking bomb for those pillocks who live in clover on distant hills- utterly cushioned against the least of beastly ills.

Although.

They may have lost a wife in childbirth. The baby too. Gone home and drowned the poodle.

Equally.

They may have sought a crumb of fame at the BBC and been interfered with for their trouble.

Alternatively.

They may have been less than vigilant on holiday in the sun and lost their young teenage boy to someone grey, well able to drift away into the mists of Grecian history, his motor nondescript, his garage a shrine to gaffa tape and whatever else a predatory paedophile needs to effect the perfect rape in plain sight.

Sweets. Swish techno treats. Gags and chloroform.

Yes.

Family, friends and the authorities eventually following a cold trail. A life-boat launched. Home tabloids screamed at. Ribbon campaigns routinely spread like rampant acne. Appeal spot on the TV- networked worldwide. How they cried.

When whoever [pick a number] is done to friction sores with a blonde kid like that, they make a snuff movie, saw him into bits and use him for shark bait.

I think so.

It is a little known fact that the Mediterranean is one of the breeding grounds of the Great White. Like to spread the news from my area.

Clatter. Shudder. Bang. A comic cock in permanent felt tip gets split in two as the lift doors open. Ugh. Disgusting.

I always gasp at this regular intrusion.

It is like being belched at by a chain-smoking Bukkake tart, freshly fuelled by a large measure of rum and a lamb kebab drowning in brown sauce; very strong undernotes of commercial bleach, defeated Febreeze, stale urine and obvious fecal matter; an overlay of something expensive and out of place, a hint of Chloe.

On the floor a discarded Ferraro Roche wrapper and a JLS condom carton.

Hell! I could be persuaded things are on the up.

We're going down.

Get in then.

Lift tragedies are extremely rare. So rare as to not be worth a second thought.

My insane dwelling on them and the joys of claustrophobia run into multiples of ten before we finally land- my small, implausible, invisible friend and me.

No dramatic jarring as the descent into this other hell ends; just a startling influx of light as the doors open.

There in the toughened glass stair-well stand two waiting Indian ladies wearing blinding saris and bindis, both laden with full carrier bags from the local pound shop. They do a wide range of food stuffs now.

Their eyes immediately spot Sid my flipper. I make it dance, fiddle, dance for them.
They giggle like dazzled UFO hunters, fans of Derren Brown- look through my peculiarity, the gods have special things in mind for me. Kiss my clothing.
I smile and mumble something vaguely ethnic. It's worth it to make the effort.
I love that acrid mix of sweat, sandalwood and patchouli. Think to myself- they must miss the burning of their relatives on pyres.
Maybe they keep them in large re-conditioned chest freezers and wait for the British 'Bonfire Night'- November the fifth. All the major bonfire sites have signs saying no fly tipping but they are always ignored- especially by peoples who only have English as a second language.
Habits.
Habits are so hard to break. The casually lit candle bodies- how removed are they from hard drug addicts anyway? Not much.
We all burn out in our several ways.
In the gutter a litter of take-away Styrofoam containers stained with old curry and crushed hypodermics. A ragged, fearless, bird absurdly bathing in unclean dust.

5

We stopped at the eight foot high, rusting, wire-mesh fencing intended to keep kids at play safe from predatory pedos. I slumped against it like an orang-utan, one hand high and gripping the cold metal string, making it sing small urban anthems. There's that band Stomp. They hit dustbins with sticks. They hit anything tin with sticks. Is that hip or shit? And who is it decides?

No kids here today.

No teens sobbing, reading 'Dear Jane' letters over and over; not letters, texts.

Bless.

Half of the fuckers have forgotten how to write. That's some way down the road to total illiteracy. The bleeders don't even read porn.

They're all for the easy life and total suckers for graphic pictures.

Now.

Now and then you see escaped porn pictures torn from very explicit porn magazines happy to ride the thermals between the tower blocks. They're right tearaways- these escaped kites launched by terrorists against political correctness and all things fluffy.

On a sunny day they loop the loop.

You get a sudden flash of a gaping cunt, tree high, followed by a stiffie pumping unlikely ejaculate. Some argue that that was what manna from heaven was- God's loving spoonfulls.

What a wanker.

On a day when the rain was light, I saw something similar attach itself to the monkey bars in the playground. You're not allowed to call them that anymore.

Beautiful black boys like to exercise their youthful muscle on that silver apparatus.
For all sorts of reasons you keep your banana in your lunch box with your Twix and stuff.
That's what the powerless Community Police advise. I was told.
Fuck.
These witty young black boys, they've been known to chuck banana skins at *them*.
That brought a broad smile to my face. The twisted logic.

But why would you wheel a custom painted baby carriage in there? Because that's what you do.
You are fourteen and you have a baby and you have no idea who the father is.
You were taken to the fucking ground blindfold- not a peep out of you, and the whole gang had you. Spare me the penile details.
So you gets this half decent buggy from the social and in it is this thing in pink surrounded by a yellow stink and you think what it needs is fresh air.
Look at this place.
It is the u-bend in one of the many toilets of Greater London.
Did the kid shit before or after you left the flat that the authorities gave you for your troubles, you sad little cow? My bet is that you're a lazy bitch.
You sits your shitty nipper in the cage swing.
Happy days.
We can see her nappy off-loading unpleasant contents on both the ups and the downs. Why the fuck can't you?
That's right have a fag.
When you've finished you can stub it out on a used condom.
Nice shoes. Bought on the drip from your mother's catalogue. Lovely. Not much life in a suede pair though.
You're still not thinking as a survivor.

My first sighting of a paedo came when I was barely eleven.
I was in all white. It was the height of summer. White tee-shirt, white shorts. I was sat on top of a tennis umpire's ladder. Lads my own age, mates, were having a tournament on grass. All boys. Nobody gave a toss who was watching.
From my vantage point, between matches, I spotted the weird bastard.

He looked like, I imagined then, what an old gardener was supposed to appear to be- slightly stooped, baggy high-wasted brown corduroys. Short little fucker. Seemed old to me. He was clearly wanking through his right trouser pocket. And him noticing me noticing me brought him to a frenzied climax.
Shocked.
I watched him shuffle off with the gait of a lame spaniel. Maybe the war had ruined him. The word paedophile was not then in my lexicon or in many other peoples'.

But the grass courts were watered, green and pristine, and the clubhouse smelled of warm pine planks and roses. If we dropped litter it was purely accidental and we always picked it up.

Come on, ghoul, or there'll be no papers left to drool over.

6

The windows of our very convenient, all hours, sells everything Pakistani run Convenience Store, Post Office and Newsagent with a delicatessen counter are blinded, put out by steel planking, bolted on. It has to be very strong.

The whole building is surrounded by a henge of terrorist strength reinforced concrete bollards to fend off incursions by criminals in stolen vehicles.

I marvel at it.

Step inside the magic circle and I feel significantly more secure.

Step out with packages and I become a target for muggers.

Inside, the shop smells of a fresh baked chapatti crossed with a warm two day old sock. The rabid colour of its myriad contents makes everywhere you look seem like a Pollock canvass. This must be positively embraced or you would turn and run out screaming and the whole point of leaving the flat would be rendered utterly pointless.

Every other day I cross this Rubicon to dice with spices and speak with a Welsh accent to a man with a brown face who does the same kind of thing back to me.

North West India the most likely root of all Europeans.

It's just the paper I'll be having for today, Mr Store. The usual yes. The Daily Mirror on a Sunday. Exactly. The Sunday Mirror. Love the pictures. They make my day they do. Can you see my friend. No of course you can't. You can't, Mr Store, because nobody can except me. Tarah then. No. Not The Star, never The Star my friend. Not that rag.

In comes an old dear with her wheelie shopper; she reeks of stale and fresh wee. I smile. It's a lie- a feeble attempt to cover up a grimace.

She's wearing Shar Pei tights and a coat that might have started life before the war. On a lapel she's got a real rabbit's foot brooch.

She'll have had that for years- for luck.

What fucking luck?

That wig's seen better days.

She always spots Sid my squid. I wave it a little and watch her morbidly shiver.

What a beauty she is.

The embittered and bigoted old blameless bitch. Navy-blue does nothing for her.

Come on ghosty, lets suck a holed, but perfectly round, Polo mint together on the polished

concrete neighbourhood bench covered with solid, well weathered, lumps of bubble-gum, Basquait cocks and misshaped swastikas- most of them ironically invoking peace.

On the side of houses in Nepal you find them both side by side- colourful giant cocks with balls and wings and ancient signs of peace that only ding-bats would confuse with Nazi emblems.

China is there now, denigrating everything once considered holy and eating everything that breathes. Dipping barbecued spare-rib girl babies in chocolate like they do ants.

They've made such a cock and balls of communism- the neo-fascist capitalist cunts.

My cock and balls ache. Is it a sign?

I've got a migraine in my testicles.

7

THE BENCH

The unmade bench, even if signed by Tracy Emin, could not have got into the RA's Summer Exhibition where predictability holds sway most years because of the stalwart dears who grip tight to the cheque-books. They are very much still purple rinses halfway up the arses of the St Ive's School of discovering landscape in still-life and life in stilled landscapes and hybrids of the two.

To listen to these people you would think that originality had deserted the working classes completely.

There were painters groups among the hard working tin miners of Cornwall but they were never in the eye of the shaker maker glitteratti and, had they been, they would have been dismissed as 'primitives', 'naives'.

None of those cunts would have said no to having a Lowry or two stashed away in their lofts.

Yes.

Signed by Tracy Emin RA, the riveting bench might have helped her win a Turner Prize. [Kids had by local tradition lost their virginity on it at dusk] Filling a large glass crucifix with your own piss could work the same magic for your trophy entries on LinkedIn.

Now there's a thing- Tracy come full circle from the avant garde to a Royal Academician with little more than the drawing skills of an ape obsessed with body fluids. Menstrual discharge a constant favourite. Only women bleed. Women are the niggers of the world. Those old chestnuts. She had all the advantages of a proper education. Higher.

I read about her alleged conversion or epiphany from a traditional wild child to something way more tragic and infinitely more profitable- she had her own bonfire night in the small back garden of her East End flat, burned all her prior paintings in a smoke-free zone. The rebel.

Now.

Had she really seen the light or caught the bug of filthy lucre from Damien Hirst and his

sycophantic crew. You do the maths. From that day on she never looked back.
I went to see her unmade bed.
Where was the novelty? Let me recall.

Back-page. That tosser bastard manager of Manchester United is spouting on about how he believes that no premiership referee would ever resort to such arcane behaviour in the middle of a match. The ego-maniacal plonker. I have Scottish friends deeply embarrassed by his fucking god-like strutting.

Let the fuckers separate from the British realm. They'll feel the cold without Trident.

I would build a giant wicker man and put the likes of him in it.

The horrid and inexplicable bagpipes would be more than welcome to drown their screaming.

Deep down in me an animal can still stir, make waves; indeed, it makes me no better than anyone else.

This recall. I often sit here on this bench and recall things. They sting.

You. Take a forensic look around us. The waste-bin cages at either end of the bench have no fucking waste bins in them. They were racing green. Someone with green finger's lifted them to pot up Mary-Jane plants for a south facing balcony.

Look. Is this ancient and modern litter art?

Tarts' flyers. Well, they demolished the telephone box. Only the base remains. The local kids painted that blue and play out their own version of Dr Who on it. You can't blame them.

You can't blame them. They've all been poisoned by Disney and reality TV. It's not a good mix. These kids want to click their fingers and be whisked away.

Now I know this, and I am, by no means, *NOT* the predatory paedophile that vile Sir Jimmy Saville was.

The knighthood was a papal honour by the way.

How apt is that, after the fact.

Predatory paedophiles, the current buzz label, know that we have bred generations of 'lost' wannabe children who dream of entering a Tardis and fucking off to elsewhere; anywhere to get away from home.

Why don't their thick as shit parents know this.

Up the duff at thirteen, it does your head in, that's why. The fags, the booze, the loser tag.

Shit. I get so easily diverted.

This recollection.

A morning after the night before. Regret the elephant in the scummy room.

The first of three awake in a small double- me, a black one and a yellow one.

I do like my ethnics.

The South Korean boy had pubic hair as stiff as a nail brush. The Jamaican had wine stains and only one-eye working. The grey white sheets had been starched with spunk. Nothing at the

windows but loud Hawaiian shirts.

The floor a rash of Muslim mats- probably jacked or a job lot. Assorted shitty rubbers. Mugs. Ashtrays. Fag-ends smoked by faggots getting their end sucked. Polaroids of an enthusiastic spit roasting.

Tender ugliness.

I know what you're thinking- did I catch anything. No. Never did. Never got pregnant. Never ever did sport an unwanted kid.

That black guy had a small cock though. See myths can be proper shit.

There are black guys on YouTube complaining of the unfair expectation.

They make small BMWs now- hatchbacks.

But that bed bed there, the glee bed, we was all sixteen, that was altogether on another level from Tracy Emin's pretentious heap of crumpled bed-linen, bras, knickers, and used tampons.

Come on! Alex Biddens, Thalidomide, fucking RA.

Hang on. Here's trouble coming our way. My arse is flexing.

Shall we go or shall we stay.

Too late.

Great. That is the way with fucking fate.

Six of them stand in front of us, staring with malicious intent at me and my invisible familiar. I wave my Sid the squid at them. Not a flicker.

I've had two of them. Total recall.

It is Sunday. They're all bored and off their heads. Six bicycles. Two baseball bats.

Not what you'd call a social visit.

They call themselves The Cubans. None of them could place that island on a globe. Three whites. Two blacks. One in-betweeny. Eldest nineteen. Youngest sixteen.

My kind of party.

You looking for the football scores lads?

8

THE POLE INCIDENT

They hung St Sebastian in a tree, JC on a tree of sorts.

My ritual twig turned out to be a Bus Stop sign attacked by knock-off hammers and spray paint. Some Green Party lesbo politician on the local council drove through this mad initiative to have hanging basket hooks put on all the Bus Stops in the council-tax catchment area. Being something of a pessimist I had always seen the dark side of this ill-thought move.

The very poor make plants a low priority- more so in the middle of a double-dip recession. If the authorities saw fit to hang abundant baskets within the gift of all and sundry it was a given they'd be nicked. Free plants, compost and containers makes gardeners of the most hardened slags.

Not all the criminal fraternity find it impossible to cry.

Gangsters in touch with their feminine side- it's by no means just a gay fantasy.

Ask any prison officer with an eye for detail, someone anal enough to religiously put entries into a five year diary and keep it locked.

Digression has some power to dissipate pain, but by no means enough.

They hung me up roughly by my fawn hoodie; the armholes cutting deep into my moist armpits.

They bound my booted feet.

They unbelted my kecks, laid bare my ginger decorated genitals; the sudden fresh air strange, chill in concert with a rush of fear. I orange pissed myself.

They laughed, whooped, jeered.

I brown crapped myself.

They all clapped at me, picked up the loose stool, smeared it on my Sid. God!

God forbids nothing much.

The old lady from the Convenience Store passes by, the wheels on her shopping trolley chirping like spring fledglings.

She sees me in grave peril, waves like the Queen and goes on, doing diddley squat.

She is God! Yes.

She is fucking God!

And *SHE* has just forsaken me.

The gang are shaking cans of gloss black spray paint. Cellulose. Up my shitty arse it goes, under my damp foreskin, EVERYWHERE genital.

That is me black-balled, made an untouchable.

No chance of those gracious Indian ladies saying prayers to me now, no gift of sacred saffron cake, no handmade necklaces of fresh marigolds.

I've always been an undiscovered deity on the back foot.

The point is, wraith, we are all of us, no exceptions, messiahs of something.

NEWS THE DAY BEFORE THEY DISCHARGED ME

There's a spare view from my fogged hospital window.

In the mid-distance, on mud recreation grounds, there's growing some social fungus- a phallic neo-pagan tower of hedge clippings, pruned spruce and broken pallets. Tomorrow they'll be dousing it in petrol and setting light.

Fireworks. Family familiar delights.

Who will go missing that night, under the cover of legitimate terrorist sound effects. All sorts of perverts revel in the magic lure of sparklers after dark.

I go on watching until the sky goes velvet blue.

They shaved me. Very sore I am from what they called a penetrating clean.

Look on the bright side, there is no STD known to science which could have survived that.

Of course I informed the police. The NHS make sure you do.

Still part of a community, I suffered convenient memory loss. I know my rule book.

The ward is all men. You'd think that was a plus. But no.

Across the ward from me, his face deeply acne scarred, a veteran of the Iraqi conflict has been having immense bowel troubles. No graces are being spared.

It is a war zone crossed with a porn movie. I am not turned on.

They've got him naked, on his knees, in a vast see-thru plastic balloon. It has the effect of distorting all his features. Something, with his challenges, he could have done without.

There are two male nurses wearing top to toe see-thru plastic coverings. I quickly get the gist.

Approximately ten minutes previous they'd shoved a large suppository up his bum.

The drug works fast. It's always used as a last resort and careful preparations need to be made.

The NHS guys are watching watches.

My eyes meet with my fellow patient's eyes. You can read his arriving realisation.

He is so right.

It was rapid, violent and not pretty.

The two men held the ex-gunner while he heaved and exploded shit in various arcs; bursts of arcs as his strong frame twisted on the bed.

You live to see such things, amazing things that verify life.

Like this new 'art-shit installation' thing, a lot of the other things verify that life is indeed unadulterated shit.

We foolishly sully it with our pretensions to being the least important.

Every day I tell myself- this truly is as bad as it gets.

I'm being discharged tomorrow.

My prostitute battering neighbour is driving me home. There's a turn up for the books. Turns out he really likes me.

Yes.

Like- he *REALLY* likes me.

Fuck!

I got myself a right scary minder who loves it up the chuff.

I know I said earlier I never do anal but, when a relationship comes knocking, you've got to be prepared to be adaptable.

In the gay personal columns we say- versatile.

It's no news to me, a gay Thalidomide, that there's always going to be a game to played.

Play.

You've got to make yourself fit according to the cut of your communal circumstances.

If you don't do it or don't get out, one or the other, life will, too soon, be the death of you.



MR. SUNRISE

By Brett Garcia Rose

Photos © Toby Huss

The women tumble through the turnstiles like frowning metal bunnies, close enough to smell and touch. They jostle and slide and breath in wet flowered huffs, settling into the filthy orange seats with their knees pressed tightly together while the gays swoon and giggle and thugs slide sideways through the door cracks pilfering the unzipped and unbuttoned. I sweat and fidget in the crowded space. A policeman's holstered gun rubs against my kidney. A small boy leans against my leg and falls asleep. The conductor says nonsense things. The train lurches into the dirty dark tunnel.

Back on street level I work the phone as I walk, scrolling, texting, calling, deleting.

Hello? Hello? Um, yes, it's Thomas. We met in the gym.

We met at the museum. In the nightclub. At the grocery store.

The cold wind on my cheeks feels the way I imagine Botox might feel but I force myself to keep smiling, knowing it will leech into my voice.

When I reach my midtown apartment I Facebook and Tweet for an hour. I Nerve, I Match, I Cupid, nudging and tweaking my digital selves as they evolve and encircle the electronic women they stalk. I am between 20 and 40 years old. I have never been married and/or am divorced. I am a Republican but I also like to kiss. I am agnostic and a strong, malleable believer in whatever eases your guilt and relaxes your abductor muscles. I am fit, rich, stable, sensitive, happy, tall. I am a fireman who writes poetry and in my spare time I work as a CEO for the Last Bank Standing. A social yet non-promiscuous Type A, I am the life of the party who will deflate my balloon on your command and weep profound tears of love and empathy as needed.

I love Jesus, but I'd also fuck the tooth fairy.

You'll send me photos of the people you used to be. You'll represent the person you wish you were. We'll exchange a hundred emails of tricks and traps, spending days and weeks of our precious lives on personal discoveries that used to take seconds and yet we'll still know nothing. Professionally written bullshit is the new pressed shirt. A photo-op holding a fish is the new cleavage. Google is the first dance. Forgettable sex is the new Zumba. We're alone because we want to be.

I dial the number of a woman I met in Starbucks earlier but it's disconnected, so I go through my closet seeing what to wear on my date with Martha. Something soft, loose and not too constrictive, something casual yet dressy enough to go slumming elsewhere if Martha doesn't deliver.

We met at the bookstore, Martha and I. A prime gathering spot for libidinous females with mediocre social skills and workable levels of self esteem. I was in personal growth with one foot in cooking, carrying tomes on meditation and senior care and floral arrangement and Pacific Rim vegetarian gourmet. She was lugging heavy art books to accentuate her biceps. I wore boxers. She wasn't wearing a bra. We kissed in self-help and it was the last time I ever saw her in daylight.

You'll tell me that you love me. You'll tell me that I'm special. You'll tell me that you've never felt this way before. You'll work hard to remember my name, but sooner or later you'll slip up.

I start dialing again in the bathroom, the phone hot against my palm.

You have reached a non-working number at American Express.

You have reached the law offices of Diddle and Diddle.

You have reached the rejection hotline.

You have reached the quasi-mail server and we don't reach back.

Sex is the new small talk. To a tech-savvy millennial, the definition of progress is a hands-free blowjob, and the real number is not how many men you've been with but how many minutes you've made them wait. Rejection is a random and practical necessity, but the truth is that we're all in rotation. Sooner or later we'll meet again, and in one of your calculated whore-moments we'll move up another notch, like standing in line for a taxi. Mating is a matter of timing, and at a certain time of night you'll literally fuck anything. You'll complain about it to your girlfriends the next morning over mimosas at the Soho Grand, of course, but this will just make you feel dirty and horny all over again.

All we have to do is get to you first. Your feigned acquiescence is our reward for living in this post-feminist shithole, and though we know there is no protection against it, nor a cure for it, the only sexually transmitted disease that truly scares us is love.

Shortly after my divorce, I tried speed dating. This is where people go when they absolutely cannot get laid. It's like a fake game show where everyone loses. We're expected to lie, and we do. The business cards from jobs we've lost and the five minute fictions we hand over to you are



the last stop we'll make before paying a sex worker who is far more attractive than anyone in the room and considerably less expensive. Also, you've got to understand that half the guys are masturbating under the table in between one-handed texts to fuck-buddies. Touching ourselves reminds us of why we're talking to you in the first place. We'll finish later in private, applying our practiced degradation to your imaginary face. I don't know what the women do, but I'd guess the same.

One of your photos will show you smiling while posed atop a horse, or a camel or an elephant for that matter. We have Internet. We know why women like horses. Veganism need not be mentioned, either. Cucumbers, zucchinis, long purple eggplants; every year thousands of people hobble alone into late night emergency rooms with remnant vegetable parts irretrievably embedded in their most favored orifices. We're the psychosexual equivalents of garbage disposals.

Martha calls to cancel as I'm knotting my tie. It's not her time of the month and even if it was she'd redwing it, so she got a better offer. I let it go to voicemail, and she texts just to be sure I won't come. A minute later she follows up with an email. The way I feel about this is the same way I feel about rescheduling a business meeting.

The thing about girls like Martha is that you have to sleep with them on the first date. If a girl sleeps with her doorman on her way upstairs, it's your own fault, and she'll never see you again. She'll tell her friends and colleagues and bartenders and they will laugh at your inattentiveness. Your inability to unzip her will race through your social media circles in no time at all and it will be over for you. Big cities are very small places. Don't fall for the nice-guy routine. Don't go slow. Whatever bullshit she slings at you while you twist and yank at her bra clasp in the back of a cab is just more noise. She doesn't want to be your friend. Her friends have vaginas. You don't.

And really, at this advanced stage of civilization, whatever little bit you're still holding back is worth a lot less than you thought it was.

So have a jolt bar or some Turkish coffee and step up. There are no more sexes; there is only sex. A 24-hour doorman is just a replacement for a faulty vibrator. The only deliveries at three in the morning to the 37th floor are the ones that get trapped inside a condom, and these shiny, sex-addicted girls in luxury buildings like Martha's are the worst of the breed. Needy, selfish, often orgasm-impaired with too much time on their hands and too much drama in their heads. I don't mind using your body for an hour or two and helping you feel a little better, but I'm not in it for the overnight oral and get-me-some-Starbucks deal. Nor will I walk your rat-faced Chihuahua while your staff un-crusts the sheets. Give me a hardworking waitress or an administrative assistant screaming into a pillow any day of the week. I've got things to do and so do they. And just in case I do get trapped, I'll set the alarm on my I-Phone to match my ringtone. The 6 a.m. emergency at work is that you looked a whole lot better in the dark, when I was drunk and my tank was still full.

I fumble through my closet for shoes and scroll through my list of maybes, texting, tweeting, chatting. After 10 minutes I dial my ex-wife. Her boyfriend answers and tells me to go fuck myself.

I wonder; what's in his ass?

The phone rings while I'm still holding it in my hand, but it's only Jerry.

"Dude," he says, "I'm less than a half inch away now, let's go celebrate!" The thing about Jerry is that it is his life-long ambition to suck his own cock. His whole body is bent like a centenarian from hours crouched under weights to get his mouth close enough. It doesn't help that he has a small dick. I told him he could stretch his tongue with little clip-weights to help, but he wants the whole mouth.

Jerry hangs up before I can say no. I look around at my rented furniture and my ready-made rooms and wish I were already drunk. Jerry sends a text of where to meet first, then a picture message of a guy inserting his bald head into a woman's vagina.

Outside the club the women form anxious lines behind velvet ropes like flowers waiting to be picked and stripped, fake Gucci purses bulging with cheap condoms and gum and hand sanitizer. Inside, the work goes quickly. 'No' just means that you fucked up in some small, correctable way. 'No' means next time. 'No' means let's just wait a little while and see if either of us can do better. And the ones that really do believe they're too special for me? Glam-girl wannabees, slumming from the burbs in Daddy's leased Beemer?

They just pretend to hate me because the sex is better that way.

By 1 a.m. we're at a table in the backroom of our third club with people we'll only ever seen at night, drinking \$600 bottles of vodka and kissing strangers. Models and lawyers and brokers and students and coke dealers all dance on the tables together, on the backs of couches, standing on wobbling chairs and waving their arms at the ceiling. Everyone laughing and kissing and dancing and yelling. We're our own tribe here, a bunch of monkeys, fucking.

The sole purpose of us even going out is to transport our dicks someplace useful, like walking a dog to a tree.

By two the methheads and tweakers arrive and the staff closes off the back room so it is just us, maybe 50 or so. Some of them slip in anyway, cute little 90 pounders with their too-short skirts and glass-top eyes. There are already too many women, but someone will take them, and by sunrise the place will be picked clean, all the warm flesh taken elsewhere.





I dance and spin and slum, kissing girls I'd never recognize again and letting the suburban bff's do their little sandwich routines on me, and by three I'm already too drunk to read my phone, but Jer keeps pouring, and I keep drinking.

Three a.m. in NYC is the magic hour. Three AM is when decisions are to be made. Blurry watches are given up on. The kinds of people who go home, they go home at three. The women decide which person or persons they will have sex with. The men start thinking logistics. The insecure eliminate competition. Daily cash limits are exceeded, and the credit-card dealers bump their prices and cut their weight. It is the continental divide of excess, the meridian of maturity. If you're not setup by three, you're an orbiter, a scavenger, another loser raking the trash for emotional and sexual leftovers.

Jer hands me a glass of vodka and two Red Bulls and kisses me on the forehead. I cross the line couch-bound, groping a little Asian with thin lips and a Long Island lisp and a mouth the size of a quarter. She tries to kiss back but lacks the genetics. I sigh and sink a little deeper into the dirty upholstery. This is how we live when we get tired of living. It is rehab for romantics, a halfway house of emotional bulimics. We hate each other because we hate ourselves.

I drink the vodka and the Red Bulls and fall into a semi-sleep. A while later I get an email I can't read, so I hand the phone to Jerry. "It's from your ex-asshole, dude. Says I'm sorry...call me back on my cell." He drops the phone into the ice bucket and hands me another glass.

The way I feel about vodka is the way fat people feel about ice cream.

I push the Asian off my lap and reply to the email as best I can in the blurry dark room. This is the quasi-mail server. The person you are trying to reach does not exist. We are giving up now. We are sorry.

You thump down on the seat next to me with a dramatic sigh; dark, depressing, available. My little dream-girl. Everything I want, yet nothing I need. You rub my leg as you talk in an impossibly sensual French accent, and this makes me want to hit you. I lean in kiss you on the lips and you stop talking for a few seconds and we both turn and stare at the crowd. You're insulted, of course, and you'll take it out on someone else, but the truth is that I can't stand

looking at you. You are beautiful in a way that people like me cannot see. There's just too much, of everything.

You'll tell me you're sorry. You'll tell me you never meant to hurt me. You'll tell me it just happened. You'll tell me it's you, not me, and it'll probably be the only true words you'll ever say to me.

I give you my best blind man's turn. "How long have you been sitting here?" I ask.

"I'm not sitting here," you say. And I believe you.



I reach down for one of my fictions but there's nothing there. I'm all out. I look at you but I cannot see. I will not hear. I do not feel.

"Do you like me?" you ask, rubbing my leg again.

All I can see is that other you, two abortions later, naked and screaming and bleeding and murdering my flat-screen with a curling iron.

"I like pie," I say, and I get up and walk away.

A few minutes later a fight breaks out in the small room and I stand on a table to see better and to plot the safest route around the wreckage. A tall brunette clubs a guy in a suit with a chair and he turns around and smiles, blood pouring from a flap in his scalp. Another girl grabs her by the hair, and the first girl spins around and punches her straight in the forehead, karate-style. She goes down

in a heap. A third girl tends to the guy in the suit, and a few minutes later I see Jerry making out with the first one, the brunette.

I've already seen this. It's happened a hundred times.

Jer gives me the universal parting signal, all is OK, and then someone clubs him on the side of the head and he turns and swings. You don't want to fight Jerry. He's small, but he's mean.

I walk through door into the main room and cross the center of the dance floor, dialing my phone and twisting through mashed-together bodies.

Sarah answers on the first ring. "Thomas?"

It's almost lunchtime in Paris. Jer watches me like a cat, shaking his head and smiling through bloody teeth as the doors behind me swing on their greased hinges. The fight behind him wanes as the bouncers take note. After three a.m. the police tend to let these things work themselves out. After three a.m., the cops who would have done something are back in the suburbs, passed out drunk next to their wives or cohabitants; parents, probably, of some of these very citizens. The graveyard shift shivers in subway stations or bakes in heated sedans or cruises the coffee shops hitting on the leftovers, the girls without fake ID's or connections.

I say nothing, about to hang up. All around me strangers kiss and grope, refining and perfecting the craft of temporary love like surgeons learning to suture, patching the holes with mindless efficiency.

"Thomas?"

I walk towards the entrance of the club and wedge my head into a corner. There are so many things I could have done differently.

"Thomas?"

"Yes, Sarah."

"Thomas, I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say to you. You shouldn't keep calling me." Her voice is tinny and scratchy and very far away.

I want to hate her, but I can't.

"Where are you?" she asks.

"Out," I answer. "I'm learning."

Contrary to my theories and experience, two policemen walk through the door towards the back room. They look like they could still be in high school. I stick a finger in my other ear.

Sarah doesn't say anything for a while. I stand in the corner with my cheek against the cool wall, swaying, feeling close to her through the dead noise of the phone. I can't tell if she's crying or not.

"Are you OK?"

The music gut-punches me from the giant speakers above. People funnel past, coming and going and pressing me further into the corner. More police enter, their arms parting the crowd like machetes to weeds. A woman pushes against my back, pressing her pubic bone against my ass and breathing on the back of my neck. I am in everyone's way.

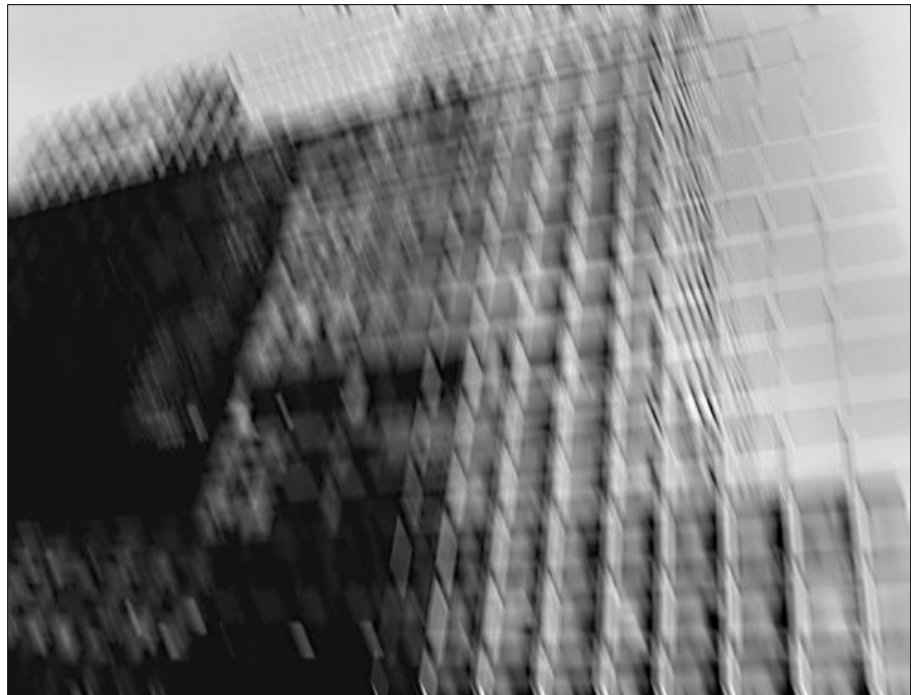
"Thomas?"

I grab the nearest coat I can find and walk out the door. Outside in the street empty police cars wait at angles like dropped shoes, their idling engines pumping steam. A news van comes, circles and then leaves. The sky changes from purple to crimson to orange as I walk east.

We talk about the big things. About freedom and time and love and regret. We talk until my phone dies.

At the park by the river the daytimers keep to the right under the rising sun, jogging and cooing to their children and their dogs. The rest of us in our black suits stay on the grassy side by the trees, stumbling without direction or haste. There is nowhere else we need to be. In a few hours we'll be back in our little cubicles and offices, hovering over spreadsheets and lines of coke and stealing everyone's money. We're just another form of immigrant, plumbers brought in to keep the money flowing upwards. No one belongs here anymore.

I cross the line to the day side, weaving between the dog walkers and joggers and cyclists and rollerbladers as the sun climbs over the unfinished landscape of Queens, creeping across the river and sliding up against the faded coop buildings crowding the water. No one stops me. No one watches. No one cares.



I could have gone to Paris. I could have forgiven Sarah. I could have been a better

person. I could have done anything. But every day I forget a little more. Every day I hurt a little less. Our ancestors once saw cannibalism as a pathway to eternity. We immortalize one another with love. But the greatest tool we've ever invented is, I believe, our ability to forget. We go to sleep. We move on. We live the same day, over and over and over again, with new hopes, and new people.

I put the phone away and lie down on a bench near the water as the city awakens, closing my eyes tightly against the sun. The new day sharpens her nails and waits. I fall asleep to the sounds of footsteps and bakery trucks and the soft whizzing of bicycle tires.

I don't remember my dreams.



POLKA DOTS

By Ron D'Alena

Photo © Malcolm Alcala

Saturday. Mid-afternoon. Buell leaned against the kitchen counter, opened his beer, guzzled it. Every night that week he had stayed late at the cement plant, drinking and playing poker with some of the other workers. Now his head hurt and he felt dehydrated and he imagined his brain as a tightly shriveled walnut-sized thing.

A boy came into the kitchen. He brought with him a large empty cardboard box with wheels drawn on each side.

"Hey dad, wanna to see the button that makes the horn honk?"

Buell drank his beer and watched the boy get into the box.

"It's the H-Button," said the boy. "You push it and the sound goes Honk. HONK!"

Buell's face tightened. "Okay, that's enough of that, Adam. Daddy's trying to think so I want you to go in the other room and play."

"But dad, I want to show you. Look, daddy."

Buell looked at his reflected face in the kitchen window, watched himself light a cigarette. He said, "Come on, Adam, go play in the TV room."

The boy looked up at Buell. "If I put the flaps out it's a flying fish," he said.

Buell crushed the cigarette in the sink then went down the hallway and talked to Vicky in the bathroom. She had to push aside a corner of the shower curtain and crane her neck to understand his words. Water dripped onto the linoleum, pooled around the base of the toilet.

"What?" she said with a small amount of irritation in her voice.

Buell stood at the edge of the bathroom, where carpet met linoleum. "I said...I'm going over to the *One Stop* to get a pack of smokes."

"Well okay," she said, blinking soap from her eyes, "but come straight home. The head of ICU has been getting on my case about being late these days." She closed the curtain then pushed it

aside again. "While you're at it," she said, "will you pick up some Pop-Tarts? We're all out of Pop-Tarts. Frosted Cherry flavored, okay?"

"Sure," he said. "Cherry flavored."

Vicky's mother spoke up from the spare room. "*Frosted Cherry!*" she hollered. "Frosted Cherry Pop-Tarts, you good-for-nothing. And don't come back with no liquor. You know how the Lord feels about liquor."

Buell looked into the spare room. His mother-in-law was in her robe, reclining on the foldout bed, looking for discounts on shoes in the Pennysaver.

"If I can just loosen your hold on Vicky and get you out of the house and back with your old man maybe things around here would get back to normal," he said.

"Just get them Frosted Cherry ones," she said without looking up from the newspaper.

Buell had nothing more to say so he went to the closet next to the front door, reached behind the broom and grabbed the suitcase he'd packed one night before going to bed.

Buell hurried down his apartment steps to the sidewalk. Exhaust fumes and honking horns jammed the city air. He walked two blocks to a liquor store. Next to the cash register, a radio played Mariachi music. A Latina emerged from a back room. She pulled back her hair and secured it with a rubber band from around her wrist.

"The usual?" she said.

"Yep."

"Anything else?"

"Just a pint of Beam and a pack of Marlboros."

She stretched on tiptoes, got the pint from a shelf behind the counter and put it in a paper sack. He gave her exact change.

Outside, he worked his lighter against a cigarette. Then he went across a vacant lot, peeled back a small section of chain link fence, slipped through, went across a street to the Seasons Motel and made his way toward room #107. When his knocking went unanswered, he tried the doorknob and found it unlocked.

The room was dark behind closed drapes and reeked of stale beer. On the queen mattress, a man lay on his stomach, head turned to the right, mouth open, black hair greasy and disheveled.

From the bathroom came a woman, naked, no tan-lines, a rhinestone stud glinting from her navel. A green butterfly tattoo with baby's feet instead of wings engulfed her left breast. When she saw Buell, she went over to the small dresser next to the television. She sat down and let her legs dangle against the dresser drawers.

"Hi," she said in a tired and hoarse voice, "I'm Rachel."

"I'm Buell," he said. He pointed to the bed. "That there's my Uncle Jeff. He raised me after my daddy died." Without air conditioning, the room was a furnace. Buell's brow and armpits became wet, but he didn't notice. He went on talking, telling Rachel about Vicky and about cutting out on her. "Ran like a rabbit with his balls on fire," he said and he went over to his suitcase and got the sack. "You known Uncle Jeff for very long?" he asked after taking a pull of Beam.

"Met him last night at the *Last Call*," she said. "He needed a partner for doubles pool and I'm a pretty good shooter."

"Huh," said Buell, looking at the stained carpet and listening to the sound of traffic on the boulevard. Already he missed Vicky, but he didn't miss her nagging. He turned from Rachel and went outside, cleared his nostrils onto the concrete walkway and sat down in a plastic chair tipped back against the motel wall. He was bone-weary and disgusted with himself for being too tired to go back into the room for the forgotten whisky.

Rachel walked up to Buell. She wore cut-off jeans and a t-shirt and carried two cans of Miller. Buell took the beer and gave up the chair. She sat down, stretched out her legs, crossing them at the ankles.

"You know," she said, "Sometimes you got to leave things behind so you could to move forward. We all do it."

Buell grunted. "My old lady don't think so," he said. "She's got this idea in her head that things work themselves out given enough time." He lit a cigarette and continued. "Then there's the Scriptures. As if working that cussed rock grinding press all day long ain't enough, she's got to go and bible-thump me whenever she's got the chance."

"Jesus."

“You said it. I feel like a rubber band stretched to the point where I can’t stretch no more without snapping.”

Rachel leaned forward and her eyes brightened. “Hey,” she whispered.

“What?”

“The sun, look how insanely beautiful it is – the different tints of colors, the long shadows it’s making on the earth.”

The sun seemed to hover above the distant foothills rimming the Santa Clara Valley. Then it descended.

She said, “Sometimes I write poetry about things like sunsets and birds in flight and grassy meadows and bright pink fuchsias. I love fuchsias. Don’t you? Don’t you love fuchsias?”

Buell turned his attention to her profile, noticed her cute dimple. He looked down at her feet, at the thin blond hair curling over her toe knuckles. He wanted to see her naked again, wanted to touch her face with his fingertips, wanted her to distract him from life. His cigarette bounced between his lips as he talked. He said, “Not sure what fuchsias are, Rachel. But I’ll bet they’re something to see.”

Buell and Rachel stayed outside, drinking and laughing and smoking cigarettes. After awhile, headlights moved onto Buell’s chest as a dented car rolled into a parking spot in front of him. Through the windshield, he saw Vicky’s face. Vicky turned off the headlights and got out of the car. She walked to the front bumper and stood there rubbing her fingers over the scarification between shoulder and elbow where as a teenager she had used an open paperclip to carve a dragonfly into her skin. Buell thought she looked attractive in the white and black sleeveless polka dot sundress he had given to her on their first Christmas together. They had spent that Christmas Eve in her apartment, on the couch, eating in front of the television. “That’s a helluva thing to do,” he had said after she squeezed lemon juice over her corndog. She laughed and laughed and squeezed more juice. Then he leaned into her and put his lips against her hair. “You’re angel-pretty,” he had said. The words delighted her, made her roll onto her back, made her slide the polka dot dress to her hips.

Vicky became tearful. “I said the sinner’s prayer for you today,” she said.

Buell rolled his eyes. It was almost funny how she always showed up before he fully embraced freedom. “No one is asking you say any prayers for me, Vicky,” he said roughly. “I don’t want any prayers. I just want to be left alone.”

"You need stop this foolishness once and for all and come home where you belong," she said. "You need to get onto the path of salvation."

Buell looked at Rachel. "See what I mean? You see? Just like that she shows up and busts my balls, tries to run my life."

Rachel flicked ash from her cigarette onto the concrete and spoke up, told Vicky to live and let live.

Buell shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I'm staying," he said. "I'm staying here and you should get to work before they fire your skinny ass."

"Hon," she said, "look around. There's nothing for you here, and that's God's own truth."

Across the street, a man moved back and forth in the twilight, running a metal detector over the strip of weeds at the edge of the road, listening for beeps through his headphones.

Buell shook his head. "Nope, there's no sense in talking about it no more," he said. "So you just get on home without me."

Vicky straightened. "Please don't do this in front of the children!" she shouted.

Buell and Rachel suddenly noticed the two snotty nosed boys and baby girl in the rear seat. Rachel took a good look then stood up and dropped her cigarette into her beer can. As she made her way back to the motel room, she avoided Vicky's eyes.

Vicky wiped her eyes. "Please stop being hurtful and come home before it's too late," she said. "Please let Jesus help you."

"You mean like He helped you?"

"He'll only open the door if you knock."

Buell looked at his kids. Adam's wailing unraveled him.

She beckoned him. "Just come home," she repeated. "I know we can get through this rough patch."

She returned to the driver's seat, reached over and unlocked the passenger door. Then she started the motor and sat, hands on the steering wheel, waiting. Buell cursed and bounced his beer can off the windshield. Beyond the parking lot, the man with the metal detector reached

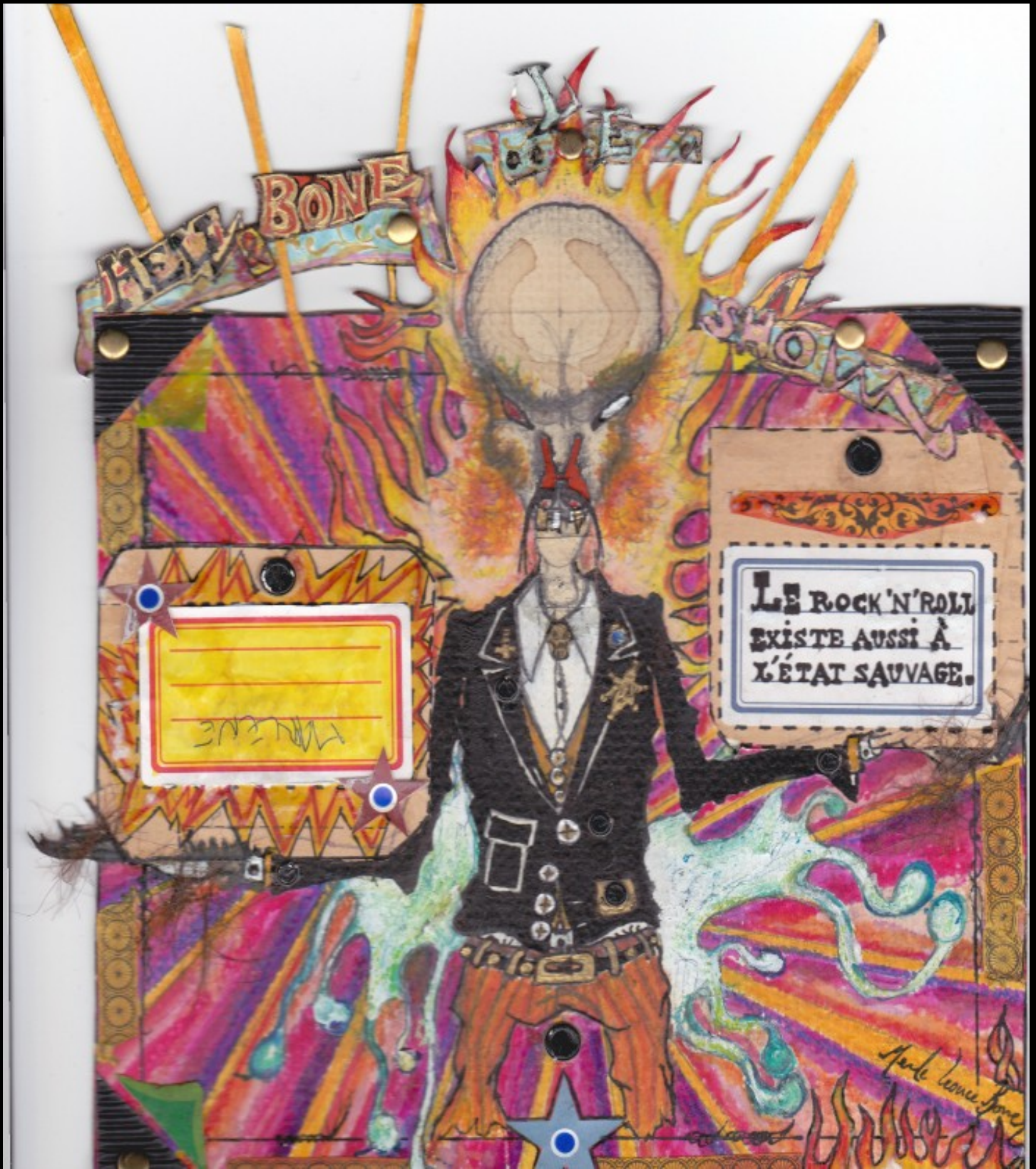
down and picked up something from the weeds. Buell watched the man gingerly work a brush over the wallet-sized object and it seemed to him that everyone he knew was more lonely than not, somehow they had been dispossessed of their childhood thoughts and dreams.

Buell got into the passenger seat and shut the door. In the rear seat, the two boys sniffled and made whining sounds and the baby girl's fat face was wet with tears. Buell thought he was living through the worst day of his life. He needed a cigarette and suddenly noticed he had left his on the plastic chair against the motel wall. He opened the glove to see if Vicky had a pack stashed away. The compartment was crammed with stuff. When the door swung open, a dog-eared bible choked with bookmarks fell onto his lap.

Vicky smiled. She leaned over and put her hand on the scuffed book cover. "I got this feeling," she said moving her hand from the book cover to Buell's shoulder and letting her fingers play with the edge of his collar, "I just know you're going to surprise yourself."

Buell recognized the bible. As a joke, Vicky had snatched it from a motel in Texas the time they went to pick up Vicky's mother and bring her back to California. "Don't be stupid," he said and he returned the book to the compartment and shut the door.





A DOG NAMED BOO

By dixē.flatlin3

Photo © Sid Graves



It was hot, ungodly hot, which is the norm for the desert that time of year. As I recall, it was August. Or maybe it was July? I guess the exact month does not matter, now does it?

I had walked in and found a newly fashioned pen in the living room, which piqued my interest. Knowing that the main dog on the premises did not share her territory, an enclosure for a small animal was unusual. Although when you're living with an addict, you never know what you may encounter when you open a door.

Upon entering, I walked closer to the pen, which contained an emaciated and obviously dying puppy. The horror inside me welled-up quickly but was soon gone, another side effect of living with an addict. I had

to react, quickly assess the situation, and determine the best course of action because junkies cannot solve their own problems. They can only create and compound them.

Immediately he had launched into his story because there is always a tale to be told. Tweakers like to rifle through garbage. I cannot exactly explain why, but they do. Trust me. They will spend hours sorting through garbage, if allowed, or doing other repetitive tasks, which garner shiny bits of trash or trinkets. I guess they're like crows, again, I don't know. I have never been that gone on drugs to understand the mentality; I have only dealt with the aftermath.

During his most recent outing, to scavenge for shit in the desert, he had stumbled across the half-dead animal. He liked to fancy himself a real Doctor Doolittle, having an affinity for dogs

in particular. So committed to his beliefs was he about the nature of dogs that I had merely to question his logic to send him into a fit of fury. And I did this all the time, for fun. You may as well have some fun when dealing with a shell of a human, and the only true emotion junkies have is rage.

So, there we were: him, a dog-named-Boo, and I. Yes, I know. Trust me, I know about the god-dammed-fucking song. So, there we were, and according to him the dog-named-Boo would eat anything little that came into the house. Knowing this made me less than happy that there was a puppy within her sights. However, I also knew that her bark, much like that of her owner's, was worse than her bite. As the only adult in the room, it was my chore to address the newest addition to our fucked-up family. I had tuned out most of what was coming out of his mouth because his lips had been moving, which meant he was lying.

The timeline he had given, regarding how long the animal had been in this state, was likely somewhat accurate. I knew by looking at the dog it needed immediate medical attention. I also knew that it was past business hours on a weekend and any money he may have had was blown on drugs during my absence. As my mind processed all the information, he continued with his stories, babbling away, as if that would somehow make the animal fairy appear and fix the mess he had chosen to make ours.

"I just couldn't just leave it there to die!" I had heard him protest from the other room, which I had left, to escape the sound of his voice and ridiculous logic. I could tell he was high-as-a-fucking-kite and that always meant I was in for some fun. Throw in one of his totem animals, and you could imagine how the evening would unfold. I knew he would soon find me because I was the only one who could fix the situation. Even he knew he was too fucked-up to do anything about it. All too soon, there he stood, with that crazed look in his eyes, as if somehow this was my entire fault. I didn't dare speak, and yet I felt compelled to highlight the flaws in his logic.

"So, exactly what were you planning to do with the dog?" I had asked.

"I couldn't just leave it there," he replied.

"And you decided to intervene and do what exactly? Give the poor creature a glimmer of hope that not all humans are fucked?" No sooner had the words left my mouth than I realized, I had thrown the first punch, and I steadied myself for the fight.

"At least it won't die alone, in the heat," he spat. The distinct change in his tone was emphasized to have an effect on me, but it had not worked, which hastened his jump from

completely numb to rage zombie. I had never displayed fear when dealing with him, though he had given it his best shot to terrorize me.

“Well, it’s out there with Boo, who’s growling at it, and I can assure you that animal is less comfortable now, than when you found it.” I said as I pointed out the doorway. Hoping to redirect him away from such proximity to me.

My diversionary tactic had worked. His focus was again on the puppy, and he went back the pen. By now he had forgotten that there was another animal in the house. When I came out, I found him trying to corral and calm down Boo. I glanced into the pen and saw the miserable creature cowering in a corner.

Left with no other choice, I proceeded to start giving him orders, “Take your fucking dog outside now!” Thankfully, he obeyed, and left the house. I had not wanted to interact with the puppy much because I could feel it was dying from the moment I walked in the house. I can feel a lot of things, and he knew this; I think it’s what attracted him to me. My ability to feel deeply fascinates the dead inside ones. He had tried to explain to me once that he could do the same with animals. However, as I had pointed out, he was too numb to have true emotion, so his drug-induced delusions were not at all similar to mine. Finally, with his scattered energy from the room, I turned my attention to the puppy.

I knelt down next to it, making no attempts to speak or touch it. I just looked into its eyes, it was scared, but it was lessening since the other dog had been removed. Eventually, I had climbed into the pen with it, sat down, and waited for it to approach me. There were a few blankets and pillows tossed in amongst the newspaper he had laid down, which struck me as funny because an animal this dehydrated and starving would not have anything more than blood to expel. I giggled at the thought of how he lauded himself such an expert on dogs. My laughter made the puppy relax enough to the point where it cautiously approached me. Soon, I had lay down and it had snuggled its head closely to my chest, its breathing more labored than frantic. I stroked its head, avoiding its body because I knew this hurt it, and stared at the ceiling. I don’t know how long I was in there. I could hear his coming and going from the room, occasionally making his way past me, but I didn’t dare make eye contact with him.

I dozed off but was awoken by the puppy convulsing slightly, though it had not moved from my side. He was also there, standing over me, before I was fully aware of what was going on.

“What’s wrong with it?” he had asked.

I did not answer him because I could not. I was too disoriented from falling asleep and waking up to dog’s death rattle. Awakening with a start, to death can take a person a moment to acclimate

to. He couldn't understand that, of course, and simply thought I was ignoring him. I will never forget that moment, I could feel the fear from them both rising, his from not knowing what was happening and the animal's because it was near death. Not wanting to upset the animal, I calmed myself down to answer him without screaming.

I finally managed to whisper, "It is dying."

"Do something!" he said.

There was urgency in his voice, but it lacked the bravado I was so accustomed to. He had just stood there, staring at me, as I held the animal close and tried to do whatever the fuck I was supposed to do, in a completely fucked situation that was all of his doing. In typical fashion, he was incapable of doing anything useful. There would be no right-action from him. No saving the day. No animal superhero move. Nada. Zilch. Nothing.

I had started to cry, which upset me because he was there to witness it. What were initially tears for a dying animal had soon turned into weeping over the situation in its entirety. How had I ended up there? How was I holding the dying dog he had brought home? How was I the one feeling any of it because he was too fucking gone to feel anything? I looked up and finally made eye contact with him. He just stared at me for a few moments and said, "This is why I love you."

The injustice of it all finally overwhelmed me and I wept uncontrollably. The explosion of raw emotion must have shocked him because he seemed taken aback by it all and moved away from me. Just as he did, we locked eyes and I could feel how afraid he was of me. I could smell and taste his fear. At that very moment, staring into those cold, gray, unfeeling eyes, I realized that I hated this person, almost as much as he hated himself.



THE TRUE STORIES OF ROBERT BROCK:

RAINY MORNING

By Robert Earl Reed

Robert Brock stayed in his bed this Sunday morning. Usually up with the day break... today he would lie in repose as the lightning flickered through the dawns twilight ...the thunder marched around in the sky above the pavilion ... the white lighting pulsed and Robert Silently counted to himself ... one ... two ... three ... fo ... CRRRAAAACK! The thunder would pronounce. The storm was growing closer... he remembered his grandfather counting just so when the storms of his childhood rolled though Tunica County ... Pap would cut his eyes to toward the heavens and count from the flash to the thunder and then declare, "It's five miles now." Five miles away at the count of Five ... Four miles away at the count of four ... three to three two to two until like on this morning the lighting and the thunder would synchronize when they had each arrived together at the Pavilion Doorstep ... like a pair of familiar visitors one wrapping upon the door with a sledge hammer the other waving a welding torch each refusing to be ignored or turned away. Robert thought of pulling the string to the light bulb

suspended from the ceiling above his head. He needn't get up since he had tied the length of hay bale rope to the end of the chain some time ago ... getting more difficult to get around makes one become inventive with respect to ones surroundings ... why just next to his bed was one of his better ideas he thought ... it was the wide mouth Gatorade bottle that he'd found on the side of the road while Canning ... He had never tasted the orange beverage that came in that Bottle but he sure did appreciate the maker of the product making it with such a wide mouth ... the wide mouth made it all the more easier for him to roll to his side in the darkest hours of the night and relieve himself into it without pissing all over his blanket. Yep the aches and pains of arthritis and old age called for invention.

He wondered how Willie was riding out the storm over on his ridge. Being the older brother he thought Willie should be the one that worried after him... but time has a not so funny trick that causes the young to have to look after the old... the roles flipped ... reversed. Nope no longer did big brother pick on and watch over little brother ... now little brother had to remind older brother to pour the contents of his piss jugs and his chamber pots out as they would begin to stink to high heaven when Willie left them unattended ... especially in the July heat.

Maybe later if the rain let up he would hike the mile and a half through the woods to see Willie and to make him pour his feces out.

The morning continued to creep in. Now the sound of the thunder became distant and the welding torch was not so insistent ... now Robert could hear the rhythmic popping of the water hitting his collection of catch cans. There were only five of them ... Two one-quart pork and bean cans ... one plastic half-gallon vanilla ice cream container and two 14oz green bean cans. As the sounds of the storms receded, the chorus of the variable plopping was getting into full swing ... like an orchestra that was just warming up. Each instrument playing its own random notes each catch can beneath the leak in the rusty tin roof having its own distinct cadence and timbre ... all out of whack but somehow beautiful to Robert's ear. Just another example of the randomness of existence he thought.

But Randomness couldn't just be tied to existence ... there were lots of different kinds of randomness that Robert Brock knew of ... like when he was a child and the randomness of death struck dogs, neighbors, grandparents, and even Indians.....

... the kind of randomness that happened when some one or some thing died... Indian Bones ... teeth ... fragments of skull ... femur ... finger ... they would roll in the dirt wave that the chisel plow conjured from the corn field like fish in a muddy water feeding frenzy. Running behind the plow the siblings would fight over the scraps. What once was a human being was now a commodity to be sold to the man in the big white automobile that came though every couple of months. Bags of bones and teeth fetching a couple of dollars per ... quickly turning from human remains to money to the candy and belly washer sodas that their daddy was too poor to buy for them. The Indians surely never imagined that one day their eye tooth might be traded as wampum for a 16oz bottle of Coca Cola bottled in Atlanta, GA.



I didn't think I knew you, and now I'm sure of it!

Make us another hamburger. And finish mine while you eat it.



With Relish!

...and don't forget to wipe the windshield.



I booked two tickets. And both of them are yours.

Don't you know, when I ride, I'd rather it be in the back seat?



I just want a place to bury my head at night.

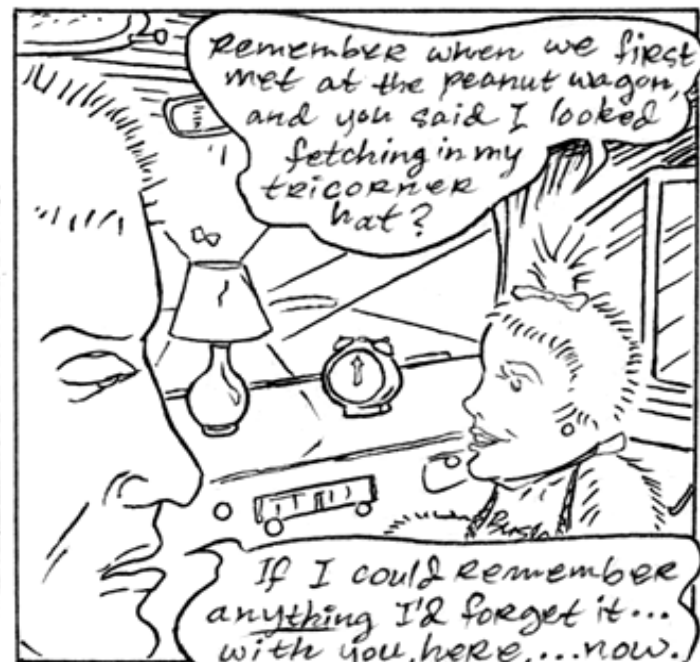
Don't worry. No matter the road, your journey will always be..

worth it.



So I married a tramp. Doesn't mean I have to dislike it.

Real and everything and more



Remember when we first met at the peanut wagon, and you said I looked fetching in my tricorner hat?

If I could remember anything I'd forget it... with you, here, ...now.





THE WOOD FAIRY

By Matt Hill

Photos © Richard A. Meade

Daily splitting rounds of oak and madrone, attired only in his jockstrap, *and* also freshly out of the closet, the Wood Fairy paraded his solitary manliness around out in the deep woods. Having recently abandoned a disbelieving wife and two toddlers for his fantasy of becoming a muscle-bound woodcutter, he now labeled himself the Wood Fairy to reflect his new persona.

Truth be told, this new identity of his, and him remaining at large, had more to do with his hiding out from the many people to whom he owed large sums of money. Several bungled business ventures had left him with a debris-laden wake, fueled by clueless miscalculations, and now there were some very pissed-off individuals gunning for his Wood Fairy ass.

Only marginally operative, since it would invariably break down when overloaded with firewood, the Wood Fairy had purchased a 38' Dodge flatbed that was near impossible to get parts for. And since he was too broke to afford a gas engine wood splitter, he split the rounds by hand, guzzling six packs of the cheapest beer (Buckhorn) throughout the day.

Late one autumn afternoon, right after the first rains, the Wood Fairy managed to get the right rear wheels of the fully loaded flatbed stuck in the wet dirt. Having misjudged the softness of the road culvert, the truck was now deeply sunk in. Hurling imprecations at the sky, he

dragged his saws and equipment out of the truck, stashed them in a hollowed out redwood tree, and began the long walk back into town.

After several hours of cursing his wretched existence, the Wood Fairy finally came out to the state highway around twilight. He walked straight for the liquor store, and purchased more Buckhorn beer. Quickly quaffing down six cans behind the store, he headed across the road to the Drift In Tavern, thinking mightily about a possible pickup.



After dropping eight quarters into the jukebox and selecting the popular tunes, the Wood Fairy scanned the place for prospects. Only four burly guys at one table, and 2 others shooting pool. Deciding the place needed to start getting lively, he positioned himself on a tabletop adjoining the four men in plaid, and began gyrating his hips in a lascivious manner to match the AC-DC music. The four loggers sat momentarily stunned, but quickly the collective outrage took over. They stood up in unison, and the swinging and fisticuffs began. Punches flew, hitting and missing, and then several chairs were hoisted and broken with bad intent.

The first chair to hit the Wood Fairy didn't even register a response. What had started in slow motion suddenly went to fast forward as the sounds of turmoil and irrevocable breakage filled the tavern premises. Coming quickly to the conclusion that he needed reinforcements, the Wood Fairy fell against the billiards table. Grabbing a fistful of balls from the rack, he aimed for the eye sockets of his adversaries, compellingly dispatching each one with a flaming sure shot.

As he stepped over his now staggered and mostly prone opponents, he gathered up the remaining balls off the table and took out the oversize mirror behind the bar, then finished with

the front windows. Half an hour later, the deputies found him passed out, face down in the back parking lot, his head a bloody mess.

As the Wood Fairy spent the next twenty days in the county slammer, his appointed public defender struggled with assembling a case, then gave up, defaulting to a guilty plea. A felonious assault with intent to do great bodily harm, resulting in several skull fractures. During the hearing, as the Wood Fairy faced the judge for the terms of his probation, he heard that there were to be no bar visits, and he would also be required to attend an alcohol diversion program.

Judge: Sir, do understand and agree to these terms?

Wood Fairy: Yes your honor, I do understand but I do not agree with what you are saying. I need to have beer every day.

Judge: Alright then, we will arrange for your one way ticket out of the county.

Several weeks went by. He awoke next to his truck one morning, now unstuck from the mud, and the Wood Fairy smiled as the sun filtering down through the tall trees. He reached around behind his head, grabbed a can of Buckhorn, and popped open the first beer of the day. Speaking to a Steller's jay that scolded him while scratching his groin, he remarked just how good it was to be back.



MADONNA 666

(EXCERPT)

By Rob Same

SEATTLE WA, FALL 1990

Erika Veogelin wanted lightning bolts! She longed for the righteous bloodlust of God to be unleashed! The day would come when God would strike down the filthy hordes that offended her eyes and ears every day. After a long day lugging around her picket sign and harassing young women entering the abortion clinic, she was itching for retribution. As of this day early in the last decade of an evil and decadent century there was the promise of a soon-to-be-victorious Republican president who would then do his divine duty and place a good conservative Justice onto the Supreme Court. There would then be more of them than there were liberals.

Righteous revenge had been exacted against several so-called doctors killing babies and the glorious possibility that in the future the clinics would shut down in terror at the instruments of God's wrath loomed like the promise of sunrise on the horizon. In the halls of government they would continue to exert pressure to twist arms and tweak consciences into yanking the funding from the murderous groups pursuing their evil ends while veiling themselves behind the deception of "family planning." Yes, the resolve of the enemy was already starting to crack and would soon be in disarray.

But they would not give up easily. Yes, the whole godless, secular, perverted cult was still present and malevolently pushing their sick agenda throughout the land.

For her part, Erika certainly hoped the long and arduous battle was coming to a head and that her days of picketing abortion clinics would finally be at an end.

Suddenly her attention was drawn toward the abortion clinic's front entrance, and immediately she knew what she had to do. She set down her heavy picket sign, which featured a grainy photographic blow-up of an aborted fetus, and raced forward to intercept the pretty blonde teenage girl before she could enter the building.

When Erika tapped the girl on the shoulder she wheeled around revealing a full face, coral-pink lips and pale blue eyes, opened wide with surprise.

"What do you want?" The young woman's voice was tight with apprehension.

"I want you to think about what you're doing—your child has a right to live," Erika intoned beseechingly.

The girl blinked rapidly, pursing her lips, started to open the clinic door.

"Have you spoken to your parents about this?" Erika's voice halted her again.

“No, and I’m not going to. My parents have never listened to me, and never will. I’ve got to go now.”

“What you’re doing is murder!” Erika Voegelin’s voice cracked into a shout.

“Fuck you!” The girl shouted her blue eyes flashing. She strode into the clinic without a backward glance.

Erika gasped, shocked at the young girl’s foul mouth and lack of manners. Of course, I should hardly be surprised, she thought. A young girl promiscuous enough to get pregnant in her mid-teens, and immoral enough to seek to have her unborn child murdered at this medical death factory, could hardly be expected to use proper language when speaking to an adult.

She walked briskly back to her grainy fetus sign, and retrieved it from its resting place on the clipped green grass. She swung the sign upward to its position against her left shoulder so that the fetus could be effectively displayed without undue discomfort.

Abstinence, she thought as she rejoined the circle of protesters milling about on the clinic’s front grounds; that’s the only solution. A return to good sound Christian moral training and the denial of those natural bodily impulses which first surge forward at puberty was the only valid alternative to the current morass of unbridled sexuality, venereal disease, sexual violence, and unwanted pregnancies.

Let the liberals talk about education, information, contraceptives and responsibility; it would be like them to try to manage sin rather than take a firm moral stand. She knew—as did any sensible person—if you hand out contraceptives to teenagers it’s the same as telling them to go ahead and have sex. Kids, who had previously had no interest in sex whatsoever, would suddenly begin sexually experimenting because they had no consequences to fear. And because of such stupidity promiscuous sex, pornography and abortion, was everywhere.

And now sex in all its diseased manifestations came at you through every TV show, through cable and Pay-per-view and assaulted you through the computer. It proliferated and spread through every circuit of the modern world, entangling every facet of your life no matter how hard you tried to shield yourself from it. And all the girls dressed like whores! Where would it end? That was where liberalism led you. Only a return to God, self-denial, punishment and fear would return society to its proper moral order.

She nodded to acknowledge her own insight and probity and made yet another circuit around the grounds.

She stopped and brushed the thin rather limp brown hair out of her well formed hazel eyes. Erika was a tall, gangly, yet attractive woman. Many of her features, her small chin, her thin lips, her pale thin skin like a membrane taken on their own could be counted a flaw, but cumulatively they added up to a kind of odd beauty. She aged well, looking better at 33 than she had at age 20, on the day of her wedding to Joseph Carpenter Voegelin, 25 years her senior.

They had been married 13 years, but were sadly still childless, and were likely to remain so, due to what the doctor had referred to as a low sperm count in her husband. They accepted this

with equanimity and Christian grace and resolved to devote themselves to saving the lives of the unborn. They had considered adoption, but had ultimately rejected the idea as the likelihood of receiving a child whose complexion did not resemble their own closely enough was just too great.

This was to be a special night. Joseph was taking off early today from his job as chief machinist for Eastern Airlines out at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, and was swinging by to pick her up for a night out on the town. They would go first to the local steak house and then to the University District to look for a decent movie. Preferably PG, a movie that might perhaps contain a certain permissible amount of violence and bloodshed, as long as the victims were communists, drug dealers, homosexuals, or some other type of social undesirable: But with none of the current epidemic of sex and degeneracy; the increasing symptoms of the general decline of Western culture and its slide into moral degeneration and depravity—None of that! Those ills would only finally be cured by God’s coming again in glory and casting all the sinners into Hell where they would burn and be tormented by demons and gnash their teeth and beg for mercy while the righteous stood watching from the safety of God’s kingdom enjoying the show.

She had once been invited to go and picket one of the legion of films that slandered religion and decency these days but decided she did not want to go. She was too revolted at the slimy, perverted creatures she might come into contact with in front of theaters showing such fare. After they succeeded in overturning abortion, then they could devote their full attention to ridding the world of pornography and filth, cleansing the fabric of America and restoring it to its proper glory.

No, she mused, finding an evening’s entertainment would be a trial, but they would manage somehow—they always did.

A sound like the braying of a donkey fleeing into Egypt startled her from her reverie. She looked to the street, to where her husband motioned from the window of his black Ford pickup. His round face was relatively smooth for his age, a slight excess of weight sparing him somewhat from the ravages of wrinkles. Only his salt and pepper gray hair and his sagging neck gave any indication of his true age. She walked to him and started across the street to where her husband waited.

As she neared the passenger side door he leaned across the seat to open the door for her. She tossed her sign in back and climbed in. He smiles and after giving her a quick peck slid back behind the wheel, eased the truck into gear and cautiously pulled the truck into traffic. His round cheeks pulled up in a smile of greeting squeezed his watery green eyes into comical half-moon slits.

“How’d it go today, dear?” He asked, already knowing what the response would be.

“The usual,” she replied, uncommonly sullen.

“Sorry to hear it,” he crooned consolingly, placing his big knotty, rather fatherly hand on her sharp, sloping shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. Her expression softened, as it always did when he made such paternal gestures. Indeed, he was old enough to be her father.

Many among their friends and family had good-humoredly pointed this out when they were married 13 years earlier, in the small central Michigan town where they had both grown up. No one in town was really much concerned with such things and they were readily accepted in the community.

Unfortunately the automobile parts plant closed within a year, and they were forced to move to the city. There, they were sometimes stared at or mistaken for father and daughter, but they didn’t worry about it much. It wasn’t really anybody’s business anyway.

Over the last 12 years Joseph and Erika had followed the work, moving from one city to another every other year or so, briefly running an Exxon station here, working for a construction company there, a pulp mill someplace else. In this way the two fellow travelers gradually worked themselves into the Northwest corner of the land. In Oregon, Joseph worked nearly two years for a small charter company in Eugene, becoming an experienced airplane mechanic. He then decided to move north and catch on with one of the big airlines. He had been working for Eastern for two years now.

The city, Seattle, was bigger than the one they had left, but the money was better, and they lived in a nice residential neighborhood in the north end of town—the blacks living mostly in the south end, so neither one of them felt too put out.

Joe looked at his wife admiringly. She was a devoted, loyal, hardworking woman; she kept the house as neat as a pin. Even the pickup’s interior bore the marks of her loving ministrations. The imitation black leather seats shone, the wood grain dash and instrument panel were wholly free from dust. Even the pegs of Joe’s rifle rack were kept in a state of high polish.

What he loved about her most was that she agreed with him about everything, and the Ford, the only new vehicle they had ever owned bore numerous unmistakable signs of this agreement and this allegiance. In the left-rear corner of the cab’s rear window Joe’s NRA membership decal was proudly displayed. (“Guns don’t kill people, people kill people.”) Joe didn’t kill people; he killed deer. He was pro-life. It said so on a bumper sticker on the pickup’s rear fender. Another sticker on the truck’s rear window proclaimed: “Jesus said it, I believe it that settles it.” It wasn’t necessary to read a book to know where Joe, and Erika, stood: you just had to read their truck.

Not that Joe went in much for reading. Yet he still regarded himself something of an oracle on Conservative Philosophy, and wasted no opportunity to proclaim and to elucidate his second-hand opinions both at home and at work, disputing at every opportunity with a young man at work.

The young man whined endlessly about the takeover of America by big money and big business and propping up oppressive governments in the developing world in part to protect the interests of multi-National corporations. People died so that the fat cats could keep making money. It was obvious to Joe that this little bastard was a socialist.

“What if,” the young man had asked, “an American equipped death squad member machine guns a pregnant woman? Isn’t that a kind of abortion?”

Joseph saw red. It was all he could do to restrain himself from running out to the pickup and getting the .38 pistol he kept in the glove compartment for self-defense, and waving it at the young smart-ass—just to throw a scare into him. That’s how angry he was.

Other days brought new debates, the little bastard just wouldn’t see reason.

“Liberals believe that by continued study and activity they will one day rid the world of all impediments to economic, social, racial and sexual equality, as well as removing all blocks to personal fulfillment on various levels.”

“A noble goal, well worth working for,” the young man rejoined.

“But impossible! And based on false premises.” Joe slightly mispronounced ‘premises,’ but forged ahead undaunted. “Our fallen state cannot be remedied through human action, but only through God’s action. What is needed is faith in God. Leave it all in his hands.”

“But you’re no better than a communist or liberal,” the man smirked. “You, too, believe in the end of history and a future utopia, or should I say paradise.”

Joe felt his face tighten.

“And why,” the young man said, his voice rising, “why do you bother fighting abortion and pornography—these are worldly problems, too—why don’t you just leave them in God’s hands, if human effort is so futile?”

“We’re trying to save souls!” Joe interjected.

“Save your own!” The young man retorted. “It was all preordained. The apostasy, you can’t stop it.”

Joe felt the kid getting into a groove and tried to interrupt.

“And the Perusia,” the young man’s voice was soaring now. “You can’t stop it, it’s in Revelations! At least Revelations as misinterpreted by Hal Lindsey! Then comes the Anti-Christ! The Beast! The Mark! And the seven seals—plagues, wars and famine...” The little jerk trailed off laughing. “Ah, and then the Second Coming in glory! The judgment of the quick and the dead, the casting down of the wicked, the ascension of the 144,000 elect to heaven, the 1,000 year reign of Christ, the remaking of the earth into paradise for the rest of the saved, and so on and so on. Why bother trying to stop abortion? Jesus will put an end to it when he gets here—if you’re right, that is. But I have a prophecy of my own to make. If you succeed in outlawing

abortion the back alleys of this country will be adorned by the red blood of countless women, coat hanger sales will skyrocket, and the tourist trade in Europe will go through the roof.”

Again, Joe thought of the gun in the glove compartment of his truck.

“Communist, Christian – what’s the difference? One paradise is mystical, the other materialistic. The great, glorious end justifies the brutal, sick, nasty means. Heretics, Jews and women were tortured and murdered during the Middle Ages: Because the heretics questioned our fragile faith, the Jews wouldn’t believe in our savior and made too much money, and the women stimulated the sexual desire of men. Men who rather than accept these feelings as natural or punish themselves, reported them instead to the Inquisitors and the witch finders, who had these desirable ladies barbecued to a crispy brown. And the same mentality reigns today.

“Do women’s bodies belong to women or should they be controlled by men? As for Christianity in modern times, if it comes to a choice between Christian values and power politics, or Christian values and the profit motive, Christian values come in last every time.

“Children in a small western town were all dying of liver malfunction. It turned out that the big corporation that owned a chemical factory upstream was dumping toxins into the river that ran by the town. They didn’t want to spend the money on pollution controls. I’m sure the chairman of that corporation considers himself a patriot and a Christian. But where’s the Christianity in that?”

Liberals, Joe thought to himself, always attacking businessmen.

“You cannot worship God and Mammon,” the young man intoned, rising at the sound of the bell to return to work.

Joe had just sat there, biting his lower lip, utterly flabbergasted. And to think, someone had told him a few days before that this kid was the son of a minister! He could only shrug his shoulders, telling himself that in this day and age even the son of a man of the cloth could be corrupted.

When Joe related his side of this argument to Erika en route to the steakhouse, she shook her head in dismay at the young man’s speech, nodded agreement at each point Joe made, never finding reason to question even one tiny point in her husband’s arguments. He was so persuasive once he got going. She agreed with everything he said. She believed everything he said. She was easily led.

As they motored slowly down the district’s main thoroughfare, Erika began to look about her. She noticed once again all the oddballs loping down the streets with their bizarre clothes and wild hair, their oddly inappropriate way of walking, their headphones and their bobbing to music that only they could hear. College students who looked like whores or homos. Where had they all come from? Erika wondered. It was inexplicable and, frankly, rather disgusting.

The steakhouse was only moderately crowded, and they easily found themselves a booth along the establishment's rear wall. Having ordered, they adjusted their positions on the orange vinyl seats and awaited the arrival of their repast. The day had been a hot one, unusually so, and the evening was still laden with a heavy, smothering warmth; they both downed their ice water in record time.

The steaks, two brown rectangles with rounded corners with dark, possibly synthetic, grill marks running across the width of each one at a slight angle, arrived. Joe was famished after a hard day's work and tore into his steak with gusto, smearing grease around his flabby lips and chin, and then ripping into his platter of prawns. He immediately ordered a second and then a third. When he finished this he gulped down the last dregs of his second beer. He looked up at his wife; she was just placing the last morsel of steak into her mouth. She had only eaten half her prawns.

"Aren't you hungry?" He asked.

"Sure – it's just so hot," she replied, sipping at her light beer. Joe grunted, thumped his chest with his left fist.

"That came on quick," he exclaimed.

"What?" She asked, vaguely concerned.

"Indigestion," he gasped, reaching into the chest pocket of his red and white checkered shirt, and removing a package of Tums. He removed two and popped them into his mouth.

After returning the antacid to his pocket he moved a beefy fist up to his mouth to squelch the first belch. Still the expected relief had not come. From his heaving gut, to his massive shoulders, to his rounded forehead dripping sweat, Joseph Voegelin was on fire. He exhaled sharply and popped another Tums into his mouth, grinding it down quickly between his yellow teeth. He looked up at his wife, who peered at him from across the table.

Then suddenly he felt another surge of warmth, this time in his lower extremities, which was not entirely unpleasant. Hurriedly he summoned the waitress and paid the check. He suggested to Erika, rather insistently, that they skip the movie and head straight home. She agreed, of course.

Upon returning to their two-tone, blue-gray and white single story home, Joseph became increasingly frantic in his desire to engage in conjugal relations. Erika was perplexed. What has gotten into him, she wondered, pacing around the house's small simply furnished kitchen, the only room where she felt completely at home.

"C'mon honey," she heard Joseph bellow from the bedroom, from which he emerged a moment later, bare-chested and glistening with perspiration, his round face twitching with uncharacteristic anticipation.

He tossed his shirt onto the long overstuffed brown sofa against the far wall before lurching past their matching black side-by-side recliners, stopping for a second to rub his arm, glancing

blankly at the 26-inch TV that was the focus for all the other furniture in the room. Joe palmed the sweat off both sides of his face, hitching up his chest with a forcefully in-drawn breath and then proceeded to the kitchen to entice his reluctant wife with his naked protruding flesh. He grasped her by the hand, bearing down on her with a stupid gaping grin and oddly feverish eyes. Erika gasped.

What was he so worked up about – it wasn't even Tuesday!

Once in the bedroom, she switched off the light and began to undress. Within minutes she stood, trembling in her bony nakedness, feeling a slight chill, her skin damp. Erika groped her way toward the bed, hearing her husband's rapid, harsh breathing coming from somewhere behind her.

Suddenly the bedroom light flashed on, exposing her body to the world. She doubled over, folding her arms about herself to protect her violated modesty. With a flash of quick anger she wheeled around to confront her husband, who leered at her from the light switch.

"My God!" Erika gasped, retreating.

Her Joseph, her beloved, was standing completely in the buff, and conspicuously aroused. He advanced slowly, like a jungle cat stalking its prey. Backing away steadily, her eyes riveted on her husband's bobbing member, the backs of her knees struck the edge of their king-size bed, causing her to topple over backwards. To her consternation, she landed in an unintentional posture of submission and invitation. Before she could move or protest, Joseph's full weight was upon her.

"Joseph?" She squealed as his weight squeezed the air from her lungs.

"I love you, baby," he grunted, fingering her tiny breasts with unexpected dexterity. Her eyes widened a bit in surprise, the sudden flow of hot sensation catching her off guard.

Joseph went into her, thrusting with unprecedented ardor, his hips rolling in flabby sensuality, the likes of which she had never seen – or felt – before. Her husband was like a man possessed. She felt rivers of warmth rippling up her torso – a gasp escaped her lips, and then a soft moan, squeals and grunts. Their lovemaking, usually so placid, so quiet – like a secluded country lake – was now a jungle of bestial noises; they were behaving like a pair of animals.

"Oh – Oh?" Joseph's voice squeezed out. Joseph's eyes bugged.

This will soon be over, Erika thought to herself.

Suddenly Joseph's face screwed up with pain, flushing crimson, he ceased his wild thrusting, he gasped for air like a landed fish, and then his face went slack and dropped down over her shoulder. He did not move, and as seconds became minutes, his weight pressed down on her with increasing force. She couldn't breathe.

"Joseph?" she croaked, struggling beneath him. "Joseph, honey, what's wrong?" Her panic rose steadily in pitch. "Joseph, for God's sake, wake up, get off me!" There was no reaction, nothing.

And she knew he wasn't sleeping. Her husband had gone to meet his maker during the physical act of love.

Erika tried to push him off with all her might—he wouldn't budge. She tried to slide out from underneath him, but to no avail. She grasped the bedside table and attempted to topple the two of them over the edge of the bed, but she just couldn't manage it. She tried to rock from side to side, gently at first, but eventually, she hoped, with sufficient force to dislodge the body of her dear departed husband. But like all her other escape attempts, it died in its infancy.

So this is it, Erika thought to herself, I'm doomed. I'll die with my husband. She thought of the agonies that awaited her; dehydration, starvation or perhaps her deceased husband's enormous bulk would eventually suffocate her before the other two could take effect. A morbid idea, or image, suddenly seized her brain: What if she survived long enough for her beloved's body to decompose—black and swollen and wriggling with voracious maggots—maybe then she could dig her way out through the rotting flesh!

No! She drove the grotesque idea from her mind.

But wait!

Slowly the weight of Joseph's dead head on her right shoulder was easing. She had been wrong!

He is risen!

His head rose slowly, until the face was posed just above hers. Erika's heart froze. The face was ashen gray with pale blue circles under the stricken eyes. The mouth was slack, dribbling saliva onto Erika's chest. She shivered, overcome by absolute terror, and felt the warm flow of urine as she lost control of her bladder. From the depths of Joseph's lifeless corpse there echoed a deep, hollow, unearthly voice, which addressed her by name.

"Erika, you have been chosen," the voice intoned. "Blessed among women, you are to bear my child, through the medium of your husband's body and his seminal fluids, but touched by my spirit."

"Lord?" she gasped, suddenly agape.

The corpse said nothing, but began to move on top of her once again, finishing what Joseph had started. After a few moments she felt the cadaver reach its climax. She breathed a deep sigh. Then the voice sounded again, the lips of the blank face curving up into a malicious smile.

"You will bear my son—The Anti-Christ!"

"What?"

"You are the vessel that shall bring my son, the enemy of all that is holy, into the world."

"No, No, No!" Erika screamed in horror. The corpse was rocked with mocking laughter, and then abruptly went limp like a deflated balloon, and rolled off her in a rapid and unnatural

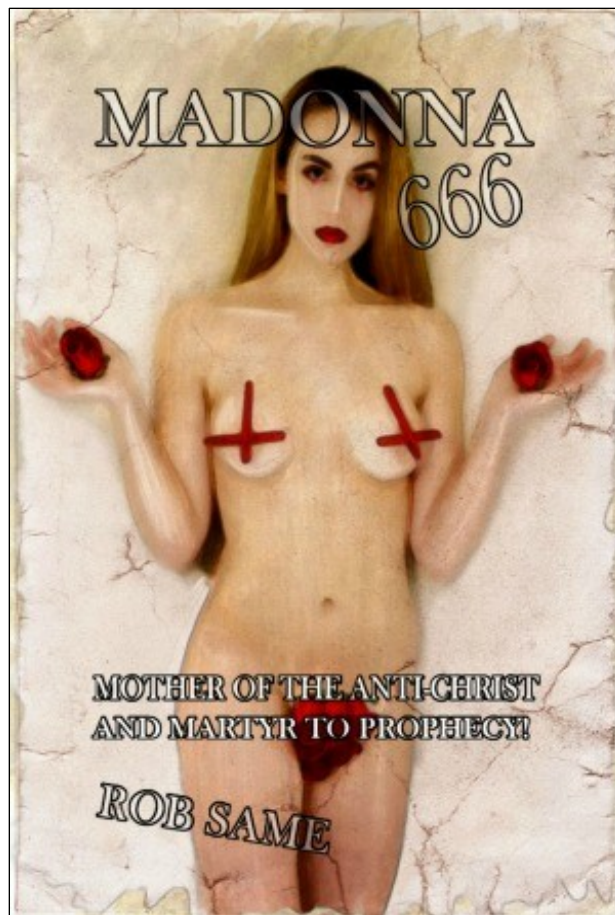
motion. Gulping air, Erika jumped to her feet, glanced at Joseph's body—and fainted dead away.

Later Erika sat in the kitchen, staring absently at the tabletop.

"My God, what do I do?" A tear ran down the left side of her face. "I can't abort it, that would be a sin. But it is the Anti-Christ, which has to be some kind of exception. No," she reasoned, "I can't. Besides, it's all been prophesized: First, the Anti-Christ, then various tribulations, the apocalypse, and then, the second coming in glory of the Lord."

If she prevented the coming of the Anti-Christ, then she would also be thwarting God's design for the end of this world—she would be sinning against the Lord twice over.

"No, there is no choice," she concluded, "I must have this baby."



Madonna 666 is available to purchase at Amazon.com:

<http://www.amazon.com/Madonna-666-ebook/dp/B008AZQ87Q>



The night after Christmas.....

Who's got a beard that's long and white?
Santa's got a beard that's long and white!

Who comes around on a
Special night?

Santa comes around on a
special night!

Special night...
Beard that's white!

Must be Santa,
Must be Santa,

Must be Santa,
Santa Claws.

STC

Christmas

Dec 26 1974

Christmas

December 26 1994

Angel

Elana Clara Han

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ODIA COATES?:

A TRAGEDY IN SIX ACTS (Part III)

By David Gionfriddo

Photos © Claudia Murari

It had gotten late, and the easy camaraderie of closing time had been replaced by something more challenging. Passmore could feel, underneath Sandor's hospitality, a fatigue and restlessness that demanded higher tariffs for his continuing attention. But Passmore had a grand tale to tell and abridgement was out of the question. He was bound to press on, wringing more from every chapter. He was not a showman by nature, yet he found the escalating stakes scary and exhilarating.

His third lager drained to the last, Sandor closed his eyes and tilted back his head, humming along with the recorded carousel music he piped in to lighten the lonely and somewhat sordid entertainments sought by the long-haul truckers, drifters and wayfarers that frequented his backroom. He seemed to relish some of the history Passmore shared, without sensing the gravity of what was to come. There were no clocks, but by the accruing sleep dirt in the corner of his eye, Passmore knew it was time to move into another gear.

"Cara," Sandor said. "A good old gal. Still brings in some credits from punters short on cash or long on nostalgia. But if it had ended there, we might all still be unhappily married, eh?"

"As you say, innkeeper," Passmore smiled. "But Cara, hardworking and lovable as she was, could scarcely compete with the next advancement in synthetic ladyscience." Passmore felt for the light switch and finally found it, flooding the next booth with a soft glow. There, on a small hill of sand that must have cost a considerable sum, three strong, elegant women – one white, one black, one a brown-skinned *mestiza* – in expensive maillot swimsuits, enjoyed a picnic of Ultra! Nectar and cheapish plastic fruit, spread on a checkered blanket. Passmore gingerly sank to his knees and, with muted affection, touched the white girl's cheek, winding her red ringlet around his finger.

"Every age has its Products That Changed It All. Gunpowder, the telegraph, electric light, wireless radio, television, the computer...They changed the market, changed us, changed the rhythms and texture of life." He rubbed the Latin girl's shoulder. "This was the moment when the relationship between man and machine changed forever. This was our Model T, the one that made us Synthelle Nation."

Sandor was engaged now. "Dollar for dollar, the best value to this day. I still work out Sonya and Marisol when the joint gets slow. They ride pretty good. And you can still get them serviced. The others I got to do myself, with duct tape and Super Glue."

"Lovely to look at, delightful to see," Passmore said. "Moves like a cat. And they say the darndest things, our ladies. Mark Threes..."

"These don't say much. We keep 'em pretty dumb. Otherwise, they fight with the boys and they forget to do their biz before time runs out. *More balling, less name-calling*, I tell 'em. I'm not running a salon for elegant conversation."

Passmore was entranced by the dormant brown eyes of the African beauty. When he spoke, he sounded far away.

"The darndest things," he said. "The darndest things..."

4. 2044: *Arielle, The Oyster Opens*

IN THE CRIMINAL COURT OF CUYAHOGA COUNTY
AT CLEVELAND, OHIO

STATE OF OHIO

v.

Case No. 46-59931

OSCAR VINCENT SANTACRUZ

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE
THE HONORABLE EUNICE M. BROADWATER
SENIOR JUDGE, CLEVELAND MUNICIPAL COURT, CRIMINAL SESSION

May 18, 2046

####

EDGAR LESSIG,

Having been first duly sworn, testified as follows:

DIRECT EXAMINATION

BY THE PROSECUTION:

Q. Please state and spell your full name for the record.

A. Edgar Ernst Lessig. L-e-s-s-i-g.

Q. And what is your current occupation?

A. I am an Artificial Intelligence consultant in the Robotics Works at Intimatron Limited.

Q. In particular, you helped design the domestic robot companion known as the Synthelle, is that correct?

A. Yes. The visual and aural processing functionality. The data storage and access.

Q. Would it be accurate to say, the “brains” of the machine?

A. Cognitive functions, data uploading and retrieval. In a very basic form. We design the processing systems that replicate, in a crude way, some of the human brain’s tasks. So, with those caveats, yes.

Q. You design the systems that help the synthelle gather information, respond to questions, react to outside stimuli, things of that nature?

A. Yes.

Q. That help it learn?

A. Well, that is one way of understanding it. Bear in mind that, in the robotics context, “learning” describes a very specific process.

Q. But if a synthelle reacts a certain way to a comment or situation, you would have knowledge of the processes that cause that reaction?

A. Generally, yes. Me or one of my team.

Q. Mr. Lessig, are you aware of the facts of this case?

A. Yes.

Q. And have you reviewed the police reports, depositions and other papers provided to you by the prosecution?

A. Yes.

Q. And did you have an opportunity to perform a forensic examination of the ARIELLE-2 model synthelle involved in this case?

A. The one referred to as “Clarissa,” yes. We downloaded its video memory and activity log for the eight hours preceding 11:30 p.m. on March 16, 2046. We also conducted a physical examination of the unit and ran certain standard diagnostic programs.

Q. Lastly, were you present for the defendant’s testimony on Monday?

A. Yes, I was.

Q. As you know, Mr. Santacruz has been charged with assault-and-battery against Mr. Turner. Mr. Santacruz’s defense is that he was provoked by Mr. Turner’s

unauthorized use of “Clarissa’s” services, in essence, his theft of the unit. In response to this affirmative defense, Turner has testified that Clarissa, in fact, travelled two blocks from the Santacruz residence to Turner’s home on LaGrange Avenue, rang his doorbell, asked to come inside without identifying herself and, after a short conversation, initiated an act of sexual congress. Is this consistent with your understanding of the facts?

A. Yes sir.

Q. Let me ask you first, Mr. Lessig, in your opinion, is Mr. Turner’s claim that he was unaware Clarissa was synthetic, credible?

A. Well, let me say that the synthelle is designed to give as close as possible to a human experience. Of course, there are telltale signs – no pulse or heartbeat, for example – but it is conceivable that a man distracted by prurient thoughts, operating in dim lighting after consuming alcoholic beverages, as Mr. Turner had done, might be fooled.

Q. More importantly, in your expert opinion, could a synthelle – this synthelle – have acted in the manner described: to wit, acted to seek out a partner on its own initiative, without being directed to do so?

A. This is a very complicated question that might require a bit of explanation, if I may.

Q. Please.

A. The original commercially-available synthelle, the CARA series, had a central processing unit composed of a memory bank pre-loaded with certain factual data, and a network of software programs designed to link them together and to recall the types of queries used on each. These programs built a catalogue of these queries, so that a synthelle could, in essence, “learn” how to link these disparate pieces of data. It learned how to weight elements of a query. For example, it knew that in a conversation about sports movies, it should access its information on movies and not on sports, and it knew this by trial and error, by logging the negative responses it received when it offered merely information on sports. So, over time, the synthelle, with consistent human contact, became “smarter.”

Q. Okay. Go on.

A. The innovation with the ARIELLE series in 2044 was the introduction of the ability for an end user to upload particular bits of text, video or sound files. This interface was designed by another member of our team, Saro Kitano. In essence, you could customize the synthelle brain, making an individual unit expert in one or more subjects. We discovered that synthelles in dollwalker clubs or other groups that had regular contact with other units, would come to recognize differences in each other’s knowledge bases. So one ARIELLE might know that another contained specialized information on cars or cooking or geography. To the outside world, it appeared that the ARIELLE could differentiate among its peers.

Q. So it had some sense of individuality?

A. At least with respect to other synthetics. The question that emerged, particularly with the quicker, more sensitive series 2s and 3s, was whether a synthetic could make the leap of applying this sort of logical operation to humans.

Q. You mean to be able to tell if one human is smarter or more adroit than another?

A. Yes. Frankly, we have only begun to delve into this area. We have seen that ARIELLES are capable of making physical comparisons between humans. It is conceivable that a synthetic programmed with additional data regarding, say, relationship preferences or social etiquette or mores could eventually generate conclusions about the desirability of certain traits - height, weight, extroversion, modesty. Anything, theoretically.

Q. Could a synthelle develop desire?

A. Potentially, it could develop the ability to form, let us say, preferences.

Q. But could a robot act on those preferences? Could it decide to seek out another human for which it developed such a preference?

A. At this stage, we can't say definitively.

Q. But is such a chain of events as those described by Mr. Turner possible?

A. We can't rule it out.

Q. So it is possible?

A. We can't rule it out at this time.

The seven years after the first CARAs rolled off the Lesterville production line had been a time of heady success and tectonic change. Even the fiasco at Seaver Park, an item that had newsreaders and chat show hosts snickering for weeks, couldn't quell the growing curiosity among American consumers for LESI's endlessly diverting invention. Sales grew healthily year over year, until, by the end of Q3 2042, there were 600,000 units serving U.S. households, enough to sustain eight factories, a bustling network of regional sales and service centers, three specialty publications and a monthly DVD holocaust. Earnings projections at LESI's Intimatron subsidiary were good enough to justify the Board's decision to cash out its stake and spin ILTD off to the public market. By the time the dust had settled, Passmore, whose nearly every waking hour was engulfed by the synthelle gospel, was Executive VP of the new public entity, for all intents and purposes, the prime mover behind the fledgeling field of consumer companion synthetics. On the personal side, his working partnership with Landra had, as their afternoon at Seaver portended, blossomed into a casual affair, then a six-month semi-engagement and, finally, at a well-publicized 2041 ceremony, including four rainbow-clad synthetic bridesmaids, marriage. Two years later, they welcomed daughter Graeson Calisto Passmore, the apple of her father's eye. Late in 2043, the family closed on a two-story Finnish Hypemodern home in The Reaches, a fashionable suburb full of ballplayers and newly-wealthy game and device designers. Passmore could have hardly hoped for his life to take a better trajectory.

Yet even so, there were undercurrents that concerned him. The synthelle's very success was breeding potential problems. In the tech world, six years was an eon, and early adopters were tiring of the annual cosmetic improvements: the flowing tear ducts, the more subtly textured skin, the incremental improvements to gait and balance hardly noticeable to the casual observer. Sites like *Tech Pages* and *More Life* began running pieces mocking the synthelle's still-sluggish reaction times and emotional unresponsiveness, derisively calling them "lapdance computers" and calling for the next leap forward. Even *Constant*, Passmore's old ally, ran a widely-praised feature entitled "Will You Still Love Her Tomorrow: Synthelle Owners Brace For The Seven-Year Itch," in which publisher Shard LeMay called the Synthelle Team "becalmed" and praised government-sponsored initiatives in Japan and Unified Korea as "the likely proving grounds for frontier developments in AI." Passmore's advisors relayed stories of new "smartbots" that cannibalized and adapted ILTD's technology, and gravely predicted incursions on the firm's previously-unchallenged market share. Pressure was building for the next eye-opening advance.

Even with the new pressures and challenges to Passmore's business and personal lives, his situation was a ring of clear weather in the surging gale of change that was shaking American society. The Global Futures Bourse had opened in 2040, and the fragile financial prosperity that buoyed ILTD was built on complex financial bets on a spectrum of decaying global conditions - expanding drought in sub-Saharan Africa, increasingly severe storm seasons, eroding polar ice caps, failing grain harvests in China and Siberia. As



the world grew sicker, the international financial houses created more and more paper wealth, birthing a prosperous class anxious to insulate itself with electronic gates, climate control and expensive diversions. Those who did not partake in this prosperity sought consolation in religious fundamentalism, which manifested itself in an overt hostility to the decadent pleasure culture. Some days, Passmore felt like he had built his new life on the rim of an ecological and philosophical Krakatoa. It had become simpler to keep these thoughts at bay with wave after wave of more flawlessly beautiful offerings, but sometimes he found secret corners of mind where this culture of effortless, uniform industrial perfection sickened him. The pressure of beckoning collapse always threatened to pierce a shell being rubbed ever thinner. Everything -

his company, his family, his peace of mind – awaited something new and brilliant and transformative.

It was into this uneasy moment that the ARIELLE-1 fell.

*Love me with thine hand stretched out
Freely -- open-minded:
Love me with thy loitering foot, --
Hearing one behind it.*

Passmore took the bottle of green antacid from the drawer of his Regency desk and threw back a generous swallow to ease the fire in his gut. It had been a busy week at the Egg, ILTD's new chrome and marble Pentii Kalaani HQ, and even the gentle sultry coo of poetry from the conference room couldn't ease the quiver in his knees. Carragher, he knew, had cut short a ski trip in Innsbruck to see the nextgen synth, and Druwe – now signed on as a consultant at a suitably exorbitant rate – was bringing over a team from DePuyster. Rounding the corner to the miniature third-floor amphitheatre, Passmore could see, onstage, her legs dangling childishly from the edge of the stage, a woman, unfazed by her nakedness, with lustrous golden skin, long, straight, Native American hair tied in a single intricate braid. The first two rows of seats were filled with executives and engineers. He could tell Endino by the way the track lighting flowed across his bald pate. Front and center, surrounded by the ever-present spray from his portable mister, was Carragher, carefully ignoring the whispered importunings of a youngish factotum Passmore did not recognize. The lady unselfconsciously fingered the wispy hair along her quim as she recited:

*Love me with thy voice, that turns
Sudden faint above me;*

She was attended by a compact, nervous woman that he guessed was Giselle St. Cyr, the new sculptor Endino had hired out from under a West Coast FX studio to help them perfect the female shape.

"That will do," she said. "Before I forget, that verse reminded me of the foot." She reached over and gave the golden woman's ankle a hard twist, detaching a single, supple mechanical foot. She gave it to Carragher, who handled it as if it was something struggling for life.

"I'm very proud of that," Giselle said. "The curve of the arch, the gentle detailing of those fat little toes."

"The foot," was all Carragher said. "*Camille Claudel...*"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." He passed the foot to his aide, who seemed a bit too fascinated for comfort. "Just an old movie. But please, put it back. I want the full effect." By now, Endino, Lessig and Kluivert from Public Relations had all seen Passmore walk in.

"The gang's all here," Endino said. "Show us what ya got."

St. Cyr took the woman by the hand and led her onto the stage. She walked obligingly up to a glowing white screen and displayed herself, again, without shame. She seemed proud, as if she could not wait to be dissected so the world could admire her workings. Passmore could not help but notice how gyroscopically erect her posture was, how improved Fabrications' modeling work was, down to the gentlest hints of athletic abdominal muscles across her young, taut belly. On her left shoulder they had recreated a tattoo of a blood-red heart pierced by a flaming arrow, framed by a banner reading "Victim of Love" in gothic letters. *Endino's sicko humor*, Passmore thought. Endino stood up, drew a wireless clicker from his pocket and switched on a vide screen at stage left. Straightening the half-Windsor knot in his tie, he spoke.

What the world has been waiting for. Arielle. Accelerated response to emotion, language and learning. A whole new synth, inside and out. From the outside, smoother, sleeker, more graceful, more diverse and varied. On the inside...On the inside, that's where things really get interesting.

Onscreen, the image became a network of colored filaments, like something Passmore imagined had played behind hippie rock bands during the Summer of Love. Lessig stayed in his seat, but his head spun to face them, his eyes lit up with excitement.

"Nice a unit as it was," Lessig explained, "the RACK is no more. The Arielle will employ an entirely new piece of hardware: the FLASK." Visibly straining to find simple words, he described the Fundamental Library Access Starter Kit, the brain of the new synthelle. The primary innovations of the FLASK were two: connective modules linking memory to mechanical systems using advanced biochips, and the ability to upload streams of data through an unobtrusive port located in the left armpit.

"Marilyn Chambers. *Rabid*," Carragher mumbled. "Go ahead. Just an old movie."

"Not just any biochips," Lessig went on. "Some of you may have been following the Princeton experiments."

Druwe laughed, brushing a brioche crumb from the lap of her PVC leggings. "That's what we keep you for, little darlings..."

Scientists at Princeton's School of Applied Science had finally succeeded eight months previous in designing new biochips for use in cognitive behavior simulation studies, chips that used primate neuronal material. These biochips conveyed electrical charges along chemical pathways like cells in the human nervous system. Thanks to one of the library of impenetrable licensing agreements overseen by outside legal counsel, they had been able to integrate a crude early form of the Li-Denning Chip in the first generation Arielles, leading, Lessig assured them, to almost instantaneous sensory and motor response. Seated in a sky-blue Eames chair, "Jessie" showed off her nearly-human reflexes, and the biggest VIPs were invited up to a massage table, where they were asked to knead her unblemished flesh and gauge her tiny sounds and movements. Passmore was moved by how lifelike the experience was, how involved he became in finding her pleasure centers, in feeling the small responses in her breathing and position. The vidscreen described the process, small packets of information traversing the serpentine dendrites linking sensation and reaction.

“Just for giggles,” Endino said, “we wanted to show you how an owner can customize his little lady, how they can share interests.” He addressed Jessie directly. “Who’s your favorite bocce player, honeysuckle rose?”

She adjusted the buttons on the long white men’s dress shirt Giselle handed her in a gesture of misplaced modesty. “I would have to say Umberto Granaglia, Mr. E. How many 46-time Italian champions are there?”

Endino laughed. “Only one, Sugar Pie. Only one.” For the next 15 minutes. Jesse gave a smooth oration, discussing strategy, variations in playing surfaces and court dimensions, long lists of past winners of the Pentecote and the Gara Alassio, intricate analyses of rules disputes within the Federation International de Boules, variations in *boccino* strategy, changes to the size and weight of equipment.

“Imagine your companion with this sort of expertise, this sort of...*obsession*, about any subject. This newfound clockspeed even makes the voice more fluid and lifelike. The CPU can assemble within milliseconds components from our library of phonemes in various volumes and inflections. Lifelike responses at the speed of thought. Boggles the mind.”

“Indeed.” Carragher wore a sinister smile. He was going all in. But Druwe looked concerned.

“Are we forgetting our customer, though?” she asked. “Are we forgetting the prime directive? A sex toy with a brain, fine. But if we’re pouring too much capital into this,” she said, tapping her forehead, “we may just be building a fuckable computer. These guys want to get their ashes hauled. They don’t want Brigitte Bardot to do their taxes. Maybe they won’t pay for...bocce scores.”

Passmore straightened himself and cleared his throat. “Edgetech is not like ordinary consumer goods. People need the latest and best. *Innovation is our number one product*. People want more and faster, and if we don’t give it to them, others will.” Things went quiet. Even Jessie seemed to be taking it in. “Our selling point should be more than sex. We are selling companions, helpmeets, aids to family harmony and stewardship. A nimble mind can be a turn-on, but also can contribute to well-being, peace of mind. We want to train our men to love intelligence. At any rate, the genie will not return to its bottle. Once the market sees this, the CARA will be obsolete, like fucking the hole in the pickle barrel. No, we must be identified with the state of the art, not cut-rate used cars. The high end of the market is our domain. That’s where the growth is.” He knew the social arguments were nice, but it was always the revenue stream that won the argument.

The rest of the session involved a discussion of planned expansion to model variations, the range of ethnicities and ages they would offer. Giselle proudly snapped off Jessie’s faceplate and selected a series of masks she had designed: Chinese, Japanese, Nordic, African, Polynesian, a few in older ages, for older customers seeking to replace a deceased loved one or simply find a more age-appropriate partner. There were even life masks from a few notable actresses and models, in anticipation of a custom service Passmore hoped to launch. Carragher was visibly taken aback by a come-on delivered to him, in a highly personal fashion, by the smiling face of Ali McGraw, a 20th century actress to whom he had a somewhat unwholesome attachment. *Endino strikes again.*

"All very impressive," Carragher said. "But I'd love to see Jessie all dressed and made up, the full shebang. And fill her up with...some Wharton marketing lectures. We'll have lunch." He began to pack up his notes. "A good, long lunch."

"Just don't ask her to climax in the commissary," Druwe muttered.

"*When Harry Met Sally*," Carragher yelled toward the ceiling on his way up the aisle.

"What?"

"No, never mind. Lunch!"

Lunch went well. Jessie, looking sharp in thigh-high leather boots and a suede mini, was escorted by Saro Kitano, who smiled smugly, typing notes into a handheld and timing her responses on a cheap plastic pocket clock. Jessie's make-up glowed a soft rose, startling brown eyes rising over sharp, almost Cherokee cheekbones. Carragher blew on his bisque and flirted awkwardly.

"So, my dear, how are we going to sell you to the world? I'm anxious to hear your opinion."

Kitano clicked the button on his clock and Jessie looked to him, as if to be sure he was listening, then glanced up slyly from her empty plate.

"God created Woman," she said. "But we perfected her." Kitano checked the time, while Passmore searched her eyes and wondered where, in the welter of fibers and wires, she stirred up the wit to make a *joke*, if, indeed, it was. Carragher let out an awkwardly girlish giggle and clapped his hands together, delighted by her insouciance.

"Hoo hoo," he chortled. "Well done, but a bit blasphemous for Deep America. We'll have to keep this one on a short tether."

She stole a glance at Passmore. "I can work with that..."

So it was decided to go ahead with the ARIELLE, despite the scientists' cautions about the untested FLASK. Druwe sketched out a campaign based on the projected variety of models in development and their easy, conversational naturalism. There was no need, she felt, to confuse the buyers with too much crowing about new technology.

"Sell the sizzle," she said. "It's the surface people want. The fantasy." For once, Passmore agreed. A soft sell might be a relief. It was March of '44, and all eyes had turned to the start of June, when, they hoped, young men's fancies would turn to thoughts of love. The guileless, synthetic kind.

Endino, Giselle, and their small fabrication shop worked quickly and well, but it would be a race to finish the range of shells they would need for the new line. Customer feedback had told them that synthelle owners did not subscribe to one-size-fits-all. There was high demand for shorter lengths (166-172 cms.) and a surprisingly strong market for stockier "athletic" frames. Older models were planned for the "experienced" male, and square-jawed, androgynous synthels for the small (6-8%) but loyal audience of female owners. And, in anticipation of future export,

there was a wider spectrum of ethnic types. There was the sturdy, Midwestern Germanic (Gretchen), the east coast Semitic (Heike), the Caribbean (Lesia), East-(Gabra) and West-(Cisse) African, Mexican (Amora), Andean (Carina), Balkan (Emily), Caucasian (Any), Chinese (Bao), Korean (Eun), Indian (Indira), Japanese (Chika), Sicilian (Elizabetta), fine-featured French (Sophie). There was an African-America (Dawna), and even a range of handsome middle-aged professionals (Jennifer, Cassandra, Jacqueline). It was an ambitious catalogue of ladies, each with their subtle variations of face, figure, voice and mannerism. The sculptors molded and the linguistics techs recorded hour after hour of native speakers running through the sounds that built up their languages. Passmore hoped to have at least the models headed for the domestic market ready for swimsuit season. It would be a footrace.

April 14th had been a trying day. There were long video conferences spent trying to untangle the inevitable logistical difficulties in setting up sales centers in Seoul and Bonn, a briefing on the imposition by the Trade and Tariff Authority of export restrictions on neural biochips, and a protracted negotiation session with Mika Tanagi, a Butoh dancer chosen for her exquisite features as the model for the Chika faceplate. It was after 9:00 p.m. when Passmore returned to his office and found the post-it note:

Borrowed your oxy inhaler. It is in Workroom B. Merci, E.L.

All I need, he thought, as he gently swung open the workroom door, and watched the halogen streetlights play across the disconnected hands, heads and arms, each trailing its tangled network of wires, tubes and cables. As he turned up the aisle toward Lessig's large worktable and lightbox, he was struck by a shadowy bulk perched delicately on the table's edge. In the half-light, he could see it was a whole bot, hunched in robotic sleep. He reached for the switch on Lessig's worklamp and stood back as the glare washed across the still figure. He first noticed the dark eyes, wild even at rest, the graceful shoulders full of kinetic energy, the silky black hair that was haloed in the lamp's golden shine, the small, perfect ivory hands. She wore expensive lavender underthings and a lavender silk sash knotted at the shoulder into a bow. He cupped her chin in his hand and wondered at the educated shadows that pooled around her eyes and her sculpted smile. On her chest was a note in Endino's blocky script:

Happy birthday, from our Protolandra and the CustomGroup

In all his time on the Synthelle Project, he had never once imagined Landra this way, perfect, placid, waiting for an educated hand to impart artificial life. He found himself, at once rushing on adrenaline and nerves, smiling widely like he imagined, an incurable fool. He tingled with excitement thinking about what this experience would be like, and he found his hand enjoying the softness of her shoulder, feeling for the on-switch along the ridge of her scapula. A low shudder ran through her and she raised her head, her camera-eyes meeting his. She said nothing. He wondered what she had been fed, if she even knew him. Her smooth back was warming, as his now-adjusted senses searched for details: the mole along the collarbone, the tiny port wine stain on the inside of her thigh (*how*, he wondered, *had Endino seen that?*), the shivery reflex triggered by a brush on the crook of the arm. Her hair and neck smelled of Crepscule, that blend of sea salt, sandalwood and orange Landra always wore.

"Hello, Algy," she said, and the sound seemed to contain every word within it. He did not know what he was doing, exactly, as he began to explore, his hands along her back and shoulders describing great ovoid curves like a harpist's hands. He pulled her close, feeling her

rising heat, and leaned his chin on her shoulder, feeling her low hum of music through his mandible and throat and remembering, eyes closed, the first thrill of her scent to his senses, the sea pictures he had on the dark screens of his eyes. He tried to hold his intellect outside the moment, to force himself to study, to rate, each sensation, but his gambit failed. He was all curiosity and desire, and his desire pulled all into the sudden everywhere dark. What was the song, something from an old movie they had seen. *Going where the weather suits my clothes*. It was a moment of cool perfection, he thought, that no one could call inauthentic. And in that moment, he felt the squeeze of her hand, and the suggestion in her soft cheek and lips. The candysweet cinnamon taste felt wrong on his tongue, but still, he hungered for it; there was something uneasy that it helped to subdue, to quench. His tongue played along the surface of her supple tongue and he tenderly nipped at the warm neckskin, which seemed to give up little fingers of perfume. Inside his eyes was burnt orange, kaleidoscoping in paisley sparks that swam and vanished like tadpoles.

Surely, he was holding a woman filled with a knowing that felt and gave. He loved the sense of love and he held her and whispered helpless admissions into her soft crown of hair until he slumped to his knees and regained his sense of place. It was a long ride home.

Once home, he enfolded Landra, kissing and tasting her and making hard, desperate love, sampling her sighs and sweat and wordless language in a haze that felt like the second piece of a dream broken by a small wakefulness.

"You're doing it again," she said in the near-morning.

"What?"

"Analyzing. Measuring. I can feel you pausing, recording. Trying to compare me to one of your inventions." She laughed. "So, how did I do?"

Though things were manic at work, Passmore had to call in sick. He needed to unwind, to decode what had happened to him. He and Landra spent an unplugged day on his birthday, cooking omelettes, caring for Grae, drinking claret and reading each other the poetry that they loved.

Car depuis qu'ils se sont dissipés, – oh les pierres précieuses s'enfouissant, et les fleurs ouvertes ! – c'est un ennui ! et la Reine, la Sorcière qui allume sa braise dans le pot de terre, ne voudra jamais nous raconter ce qu'elle sait, et que nous ignorons.

He loved those lines, the mysterious Queen with the secret knowledge, who even understood the dimensions of a man's emptiness. The conversation came around, as it had to, to the ARIELLE, because, truly, Passmore's mind had never left there.

"Do you ever wonder," Landra asked, "how far you can go? How far is too far?"

Passmore knew he was being asked to justify not his work, but himself. "We must go as far as we can," he said. "We must go as far as we are able, until the thread unwinds. It's the truth of discovery. Name one field of human endeavor, of curiosity, that man has not refined and improved?"

Her bare arms caught his neck from behind in a loving vice.

“Besides that one,” he said.

Back at the office, he again submerged himself in readying the ARIELLES, critiquing masks and bodyforms, working on the sales infrastructure, parrying rumors in the newsfeeds, and, afterhours, taking out the magnificent toy that had been sleeping, charging, vampire-like, in his office closet, hoping, each time, to breathe into her a little more life, to uncover more of the secrets she held. One busy Thursday, Druwe’s team had gathered them all to screen the first of the new holodeck ads, an in-house production of which Druwe seemed unusually proud. It began like a dating service ad, a blonde California Brenna fidgeting, gazing around, all smiles, in what seemed to be a hidden camera interview:

Meet Brenna. She loves squash, animal rights and summer sailing. She knows Greek myths, the French revolution and the best way to season a fine risotto. She loves your kind of man. And she’s synthetic. Yours, at your regional dealer. Synthelle by Intimatron. Real...

It was appealing, he thought. Beautiful in its diabolical simplicity. Later that evening, after the workers had all gone, he held Protolandra on his lap, looking into her eyes and gently laying her back on his desk.

“Algy,” she whispered. “Load me up.” She pointed to his desk drawer, where Passmore found an upload pod and, inside it, a disc containing Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*. It was Landra’s favorite. *How did they know?* He felt as if he could hide nothing, neither his sweetest nor his most impolite desires.

She held up her arm to offer him her port. “I want this,” she said, in a gentle voice not at all his wife’s. She leaned close. “I want to share this with you.” He gave her the verses, and leaned in and kissed her mouth as she read (just as Landra had done years before at their wedding).

*Poscia mi sforzo, ché mi voglio atare;
e così smorto, d’onne valor vòto,
vegno a vedervi, credendo guerire:
e se io levo li occhi per guardare,
nel cor mi si comincia uno tremoto,
che fa de’ polsi l’anima partire.*

My courage drained, he thought. Was the flutter he felt really the soul abandoning him? In the testing rooms, day by day, they saw the ARIELLE grow and flourish, in knowledge and wit, in awareness of their powers. He watched them grow something like poise and self-possession, and he felt it gave him permission to feel, to care, to love.

The thought of P., the secret moments holding her, using her, made him feel warm, then filled him with a tingling fear. It took him a few long taxi rides to decipher the nervous pulsing in his heart, his legs, his bowels. It was more than a fear of discovery, but less, much less, than love. It was a hyper-empathy to which he could not put a name, a feeling that grew, not out of whom she mimicked, but, rather, out of what she was. That *new thing* she was. She was Galatea, Pinocchio, the Tin Woodsman, Colossus, Bicentennial Man, dozens more, celebrated and obscure – creations that had only ever existed in fantasy and fable, creatures who struggled to overcome themselves, struggled to *become*. He could feel it in her tender gestures, the words she found at key moments. It was something they could have neither programmed nor expected.



He knew that Endino's tricksters must have pulled home movies from his computer; he could see it through the robot camera-eye, practically feel the electronic scanning of images, the soft-lit living room, the sun-splashed beach and the way P.'s surgical fingers worked on his neck and shoulders, duplicated the way Landra kneaded with the heels of her hands. *Was Landra's feeling translated as well*, he wondered? After all, what was human feeling but a chain of electrochemical events? And with implants, nanoscience, and prosthetics, weren't humans inching toward cyborg decade by decade? Maybe, one day, there would be a kind of middle ground where they all could meet. There was something

desperate and pathetic in this seedling ambition they had created, and, even though he did not know where it would lead, he felt obliged to help. He felt as though they had created not merely a new kind of being; they had created a new kind of emotion. For the first time, he saw the road winding beyond his view, beyond any of theirs.

And then one day Lessig found P. there, back on his worktable, with a note:

To be retired, her parts repurposed. I am too much distracted. A.

Passmore knew ARIELLE's success, and, through her, his own, was assured.

The day after he left his note, Lessig, concerned, had cornered him on the way to meet Karion Druwe for lunch at Middlemarch.

"You're like a little kid who wants his toys to come to life," he said, in a chiding tone Passmore resented.

"That's because it feels like we brought her halfway there, he said, "and left her stranded."

Middlemarch was the eatery of the moment, a midtown loft above a bank branch, decorated with exposed wood beams and flickering *faux* candlelight, creating a humble, 19th century ambience even during busy business lunches.

"All the best places are drug-lord money laundries," said Druwe, two of her servile staff in tow. "They don't worry about mere profit." In her periwinkle bustier with mother-of-pearl buttons

(her *marine motif*, she called it), she drew the attention of flummoxed accountants and junior stockbrokers alike. Passmore's contingent included Mincey, timid, birdlike but a savant with numbers, Edson, his *supremo* of sales, and Rodriguez, an 18-year adman whose pencil moustache and off-the-rack suits camouflaged an uncanny head for tag lines. Passmore was the highest ranking person at the table, but, alternately amused and intimidated by Druwe's outsized persona, he ceded to her the honor of setting the agenda.

"Let's not mince words," she began. "I am, frankly troubled by all this bigbrain stuff. Does the synthelle man really want a genius in his bed? Or are we alienating a man who longs for...the simple pleasures?"

"Let's not forget," Mincey said, "the Arielle is only as smart as it's programmed to be."

"It may even be smart enough to be stupid, if you know what I mean," Passmore added.

Druwe laughed. "You don't get to where I am," she said, "without learning that lesson." A server with a nametag reading "Dr. Lydgate" paused to offer gentle rebukes concerning the healthiness of their appetizers. Passmore explained that clients would find many non-sexual uses for their mechanical companions. And a demo at the big synthcomp convention the following week would tell much about the shape of consumer demand. A silence awakened Passmore to the realization that he had become mesmerized by the way Druwe's strong, tenebrous fingers attacked her ortolan, which seemed to seek refuge in a plate of wilted chicory.

"Still," she said. "I'm thinking our showrooms should keep an Arielle stuffed with homespun information for the moderate intellect..."

"The non-professional man," Rodriguez said.

"The good ol' boy," Mincey offered.

Druwe wiped the corner of her mouth. "The, uh, sportsman. The rugged outdoorsman. Load her up with non-threatening information on fishing tackle, wildlife migrations, auto racing and the like. Hound dogs and home cooking."

"Code name Babydoll," Passmore joked.

"Mudhoney" Rodriguez said.

"I have it," Druwe crowed, almost rising from her rough-hewn bench. "EllyMae. Project EllyMae. Something for everyone." One of her underlings, a small sleep-deprived waif with a corkscrew hairdo that tried just a bit too hard and fingerless gloves, marshaled her courage. "We do need to strengthen our penetration into non-urban areas!"

And so things went on their pleasantly unhinged course. Passmore was already focused on the big convention, the test that could make the Arielle, and set the company's course for years to come. It would show them the way to the heart of America's Lost Male.

Passmore's driver Goyo made the six-hour drive to Pittsburgh in five, and Passmore used the extra time to clean up and to watch the procession of owners and their companions through the

glass floor of his dressing room. There was pathos to it, the parade of former high school athletes, muscle turned by time and neglect to fat; sheepish teens goaded into stewardship by overly generous parents; mousy clerical types dispensing the tender touches and gentle asides of human husbands to their clockwork brides. He had no idea how the new Arielle, an Emilyya with jet-black hair and a head full of dance training and Masters & Johnson, would be received and, to make matters worse, German conglomerate Heiss gmbh, was debuting HELGA, a cheap entry into the market priced under \$8,000 for the starter set. Any competition was bad competition.

Every June, all the east coast Dollwalker Clubs – even the roughnecks like the Tang Tenders, Chicken Lickin’ and Gents Who Rent (or, as the Parsippany service staff knew them, Gents Who make Dents) came together for the SYNDicate trade show, two days of gladhanding, networking, botswapping and immersion in all things synthetic. This year Saturday’s centerpiece would be the unveiling of HELGA and ARIELLE-1. It wasn’t a face-off exactly, but Passmore knew comparisons would be inevitable and important. Users would be deciding whether to economize or upgrade, and ILTD’s future depended on steering them toward the high-priced spread.

The hall, something like an auditorium from an upscale prep school, was adorned with poster-size photos of the reigning Miss Synthetique, a mint-condition brown-eyed Cynda named Emmaline, the pride of Florence, South Carolina, property of a former city tax official. Cute, but little more than a plastic Barbie compared to Emilyya, whose workmanship and warm-toned polymer skin were a dozen times more lifelike, even in the cheap argon lamps around the backstage make-up mirror. Out front, the walkers, fresh from a drunken pig roast, were growing restless, the front rows full of belligerent Machine Head rummies from the icier reaches of upstate New York, pelting the stage set with peanuts and wads of chewed-up gum. They had the misplaced, unshaven arrogance of men who drank costly ales out of chipped glasses and their companions, CARAs and a handful of homemade contraptions, were badly dressed and groomed and moved with a jerkiness that cried out for tune-ups. Now Passmore understood why the higher ups never came out. He felt like a lunchroom monitor. He almost didn’t want to send Emilyya, wonderful in a blue evening gown with tearaway skirt that exposed her exquisite legs, out to meet such a bumptious rabble. *Passmore the pimp*, he thought.

A well-built but awkward Aryan put HELGA through her paces, followed by a brief Q & A with a loud spokesman in a plaid coat, more clown than salesman. From the sparse whoops and whistles, Passmore could tell the HELGA, serviceable but stiff, inflexible, awkward, did not impress. There was a satisfied murmur or two when Herr Plaid talked pricepoints, likely from dads looking to start off sons on the synthelle path. But the stage had been set. People were ready to be wowed. They needed to be wowed.

Passmore took the mic and ducked a handful of stray peanuts.

“I see a lot of happy Intimatron users out there. Hello! Thank you for your trade! And this year, we have something new and magical that will change your synthelle experience forever...”

A fat man in the third row, egged on by his friends, began to yell.

“Can she ball? Let’s see her go. More bitch less pitch.”

Passmore smiled. "Oh, have we got a show for you! With a mind that can hold every book in the Library of Congress, biochips that give her the grace of a gymnast, and an MSRP that starts at sixteen-five, she is the future of synthetic companionship. You've heard the rumors. Now see for yourself, the 2044 ARIELLE..."

ILTD's three-man crew had done its work. Maritza Hay had styled Emilya immaculately in the flawless 1940s star style favored by the high-end buyers. Kern and Royals from the Design Department had recreated the set of *Meet Me in Las Vegas*, and the firm had managed to drill one of the local off-off-Broadway kids in the moves from the "Frankie and Johnny" bit. Sammy Davis Jr.'s voice filled the room and, like a proud papa, Passmore was watching a radiant Emilya do a perfect Cyd Charisse, her body coiling around the anonymous fellow, her arms lethal snakes, snaring then loosing his neck, moving with the kind of fluidity that implied womanly *finesse*. She was better than he could have hoped. HELGA could fuck, but Arielle could *seduce*. He could see it on those 800 or so faces. Every one of them would want an Arielle. And with a little creativity from the boys in finance, he would see that they all got one.

The scene played nicely, just a taste to get the conversation started. No point in belaboring things. Now they would pack up and slip out like hustlers. Dull commerce - release schedules, advance orders - could wait.

Emilya trotted off to furious applause, gliding on her toes like a ballerina. She brushed him as she went by.

"I think we're a hit," she said. In his mind, Passmore was on to the next thing.

"Kindly stop shooting the shit like an ingénue, Emmy. It sort of gives me the creeps." He should have crated her up and sent her back with Royals in the semi. But he had a flash of guilt for maybe hurting feelings Emilya didn't have, so he threw on her wrap and walked her to the town car, opening the door like a valet.

Emilya broke the quiet as they motored down Interstate 70.

"Mr. Passmore, can I be of service?"

He felt strange, disconnected, watching the bones of the industrial mid-Atlantic roll by. He thoughtlessly adjusted his balls and slid back in the seat.

"What the hell," he said. "Been a long day. Knock yourself out."

Back at the Reaches, Passmore remembered how foolish his elaborate atrium made him feel, like Longfellow Deeds knocking around his mansion, testing the acoustics for his tuba. He had enjoyed some good paydays, and he was relieved to be out from under the shadow of imminent failure. But all he had done was to raise the stakes. The industry he helped found was entering unmapped territory, a little farther into the unknown every day. His nerves were in a state of constant agitation. It was exciting, yes, but neither he nor the company had a real plan anymore. Their vision was a flashlight beam probing unexplored caverns full of strange new sights - crystals, stalagmites. From now on, every move could transform the feel of daily living, or send

the business careering off a hairpin turn. Passmore felt small, nervous. Titans of industry, he knew, were not supposed to get the jitters.

He slipped out of his suit and threw his silk pajamas on the duvet, grabbing a bath towel from the bathroom shelf. Landra's voice, humming the strains of "Sheela Na Gig" grew louder as she climbed the stairs.

"Oh. You're home. So how did it go? Was what's-her-name the Belle of Pittsburgh?"

"It went well. Better than well, really. Arielle is going to be a smash. We're going to do very nicely."

Landra was folding shirts. He could tell Landra was folding angry.

"How nice. More conventions? That well?"

This, he knew, was not the time for a fight. He was too deflated, too unprepared. The strains of getting the new line to market had begun to tell on even a bright, tough lady like Landra. For the last few weeks, she had been quicker to anger, spending more and more time in the library and the biofeed center, with the girls to whom she taught her *Feminine Center* class at the WomensHearth down on the riverpark.

"What's bringing this on?" he asked.

"You always make these conventions sound like orgies of pathetic fetishism that bring out the worst in...what was your term?"

"Do you have to turn a little victory into a little disaster?" He noticed there were patches of mold forming around the bathtub. Signs of neglect. He made a mental note to schedule a home day. For some reason, what had seemed so neutral, so unobjectionable, in the car on the road from Pittsburgh, now seemed a guilty thing.

"Mouth breathers. That's what you called them."

"Only some of the outlaw groups. You know I..." It was no good to continue. Landra had already found his suit pants on the back of the desk chair and was scrubbing at a stain, squinting under the light of the desk lamp.

"What's this?" she asked, waving the pants like a battle flag. "Initiation? Are you an outlaw now?"

Mental note #2, he thought. Screw the wife.

"You do know this is what I do, right? The bold experiment? That bought our house? That made our careers? Are we really having a fight about this?" He grabbed a pair of jeans and threw them on.

"Should I be grateful, then? Somehow, this backseat stuff doesn't seem very high minded. It's like you're becoming one of these..."

“What? What?” He threw his doppel kit into a bag and pulled on the first tee he could grab, then bounded down the stairs, hoping he could get out the door before the next hurtful words.

“Flesh women give blow jobs, too,” was all she could muster, as Passmore fast-walked to the Bushmaster and sped off toward the Office District. With the city glowing against the falling of night, he remembered Landra’s words: *If you have to think about slipping, you’ve already begun.*

He had counted on Lessig’s pride, his love of craftsmanship. And, it was true, his laziness. And when Passmore opened the locker in the darkened workshop, she was there, naked, peaceful, without a trace of anger or reproof. *Or, for that matter, any consciousness at all,* he joked inwardly. His hand fluttered, halted, then felt her shoulder for the switch. Her eyes acquired a low light and she raised her face to his.

“Get dressed,” Passmore said, “we’re going out.”

P. looked magnificent in her white silk blouse, black leather hot pants and thigh-high lace-up boots. It was a crazy-sexy ensemble, he knew, nothing that a woman like Landra would ever be seen in. But what was the point of a synth if you couldn’t get some over-the-top kicks without selling your soul? Maybe it was a little bit punitive, as well. That would teach her to make him run to his synth. Together, they crossed the street and walked the long crosstown block to ILTD’s little *pied a terre*, the Jukkåsarvi. Owned by a Helsinki-based chain and designed to mirror a traditional northern ice hotel, the Juke, as it was known at the Egg, was the preferred place for road-testing synths in a “natural” setting. It also served as the venue of choice for senior management’s odd nooner, or assignments arranged for out-of-town customers. The staff knew Passmore. ILTD’s credit was good, and most times he only had to toss off a casual wave as he turned for the elevator lobby, its walls encased in *faux* icicles of pink and blue hand-blown glass.

In the super-cooled room, Passmore took some HenkVesi from a bottle chilling in the mini-fridge and poured two shots into the ice cube glasses management had so thoughtfully provided.

“I just had to get away,” he said to P., who had assumed her default position, a coquettish seated pin-up perch, on the roomy double bed. “I don’t know what’s going on. Things were going great, then all of a sudden...Ever since the Arielles came along, it’s like she looks for openings to take swings.” He listened to himself and it made him feel like an ass. Such a stereotype, the harried husband pouring out his wife problems to the indulgent girlfriend, who really only wants to make love. Only here, they were both the same. An outsider would be in hysterics.

“Any new marriage has pressures,” she said.

“Pressures like what?” he asked. “New house, beautiful child, money rolling in. She’s teaching again. It’s like the better we do. The more we refine our product – you – the touchier she gets. What the fuck...”

Passmore sat on the bed’s edge, and P. began to work on his neck and shoulders with her precise fingers.

“We can fight a little if it makes things more lifelike...”

He turned and gave her a surprised look. “Oh, hell no. I just want some peace.” He sank back into her arms and she wrapped him up, leaning close to his ear, whispering verses she recalled for these moments, letting her breath move through his hair like wind through grass. “I just want to do it like we used to before Grae, long and slow and quiet.”

And it was. An instant before sleep, she mumbled word into the flesh of his shoulder: *only I really understand*. It was what Passmore was considering, programming or perception, as he nodded off.

The summer of 2044 began with the slurring word of mouth from the smitten groundlings at SYNDicate '44. Passmore's dream of white-sand beaches filled with beautiful synthelles didn't come to fruition, but only because ILTD's timetable slipped ever so slightly. The first television spot, featuring a golden Amora climbing the Pyramid of the Sun and whacking a *papier mache piñata* with a broom handle in a room full of laughing children, aired in late June on Univision in conjunction with the release of several hundred pantherish Amoras and Elizabettas to the shops in Taos and Dallas. Their success prompted web stories by *Esquire*, *GQrec.com* and regional lifestyle supplements throughout the region. By Independence Day, the synths were in all the US stores, and being heavily promoted in national holofeeds and all the major tech magazines. Retail momentum built, and three of the big fashion houses bought custom synths from Endino's design works for use in fall print campaigns and the corresponding trunk shows. Druwe and the promotions people inked a deal with the NFL to showcase Arielle cheerleaders at exhibition games, cavorting with star players for packed stadium crowds and the national video audiences. A Lesia into which was uploaded Lee Strasberg and Uta Hagen had a vacation fling with Bart Van Oy in the sequel to the *Singles Cruise* tentpole movie franchise, spurring a new wave of back-to-school buying of Lesias, Dawnas and Cisses, rush-produced by the New York and Ardmore factories in round-the-clock shifts. By fall, the first export models were cleared for sale by the TTA and trickled into Eastern Europe and Asia. Professors at Hofstra and Tulane began to use specially-educated synths to grade papers and deliver lectures to freshman intro courses in astronomy and psychology, while the late-night talk show hosts had begun to joke about the brainy bots in their monologues. All promotional guns were blazing by Halloween, when the Arielle supplanted vampiras and French maids as the year's fuck-me costume for holiday nymphs. By Christmastime, a pair of Arielles joined the angels on the Victoria's Secret runway, and a Gretchen sang to a visibly-flustered Sinterklaas in a take-off on the original *Miracle on 34th Street*. Holiday sales exploded, and no less than four stars walked the red carpet with synthetic Oscar dates, even more for the Cesars and Donatellos (much to the very public chagrin of the European starlets). Actor Odalis Santos even ordered her own synthelle, so she could double the revenue from promoters and designers for red carpet appearances. By the anniversary of SYNDicate, the number of synthelles in American households had quadrupled, footholds had been established from the Ukraine to Portugal in Europe, and in all but a handful of nations in Asia and South America. Even greater kudos were expected for the Arielle-2, which incorporated higher-resolution cameras, richer ganglial networks, and two “Cougar” editions, white socialite Stella, and Clarice, an African-America patterned on a *circa*-2010 Beverly Johnson. Even Druwe's loopy EllyMae found thousands of fans among Southern hunters and fishermen in Washington, Oregon and Minnesota, who used

her large brain to track the movements of muskie and largemouth bass. It seemed that Passmore and his staff could do no wrong as 2045 wound down.

But even in the midst of outrageous success, there were danger signs. Despite the testing and monitoring being done by Lessig's handful of evoltechs, the dark, unacknowledged truth was that no one, not even the guys at Princeton, really knew what the FLASK was likely to do or become in wide circulation. And there were the usual speed bumps everyone saw coming.

The Christian influence on public policy had been narrowing and deepening for decades. Only around 15-20% of Americans identified themselves publicly as "Christian values" voters by the 2040 elections and perhaps even fewer truly believed it, but in the Religious Territories and portions of the deep Southeast, religion still dictated tastes and laws. Christians of all stripes opposed the spread of synthelles on moral grounds, just as they opposed dirty bookstores, stripjoints, interactive shock shacks, abortion clinics and the like. Passmore was accustomed to the rants of the televangelists, the occasional vandalism, the pulpit jeremiads. But the Arielle-1 seemed to unleash the most ferocious tirades of all. Shortly after the first Arielles were sold, Pope Innocent XIV railed against "the robot movement" in his bull "*In sanctitatae vitae naturalis*":

Creation is the prerogative of the Almighty alone, and the desire to create and master life, of which the creation of the automaton is an outgrowth, is evil not merely in itself, but because it breeds other evils like avarice, lust and pride.

Equally ardent but toothless in their hatred of the synthelle were the feminists, whose broadsides were typically swapped between academics in a series of lightly-read blogs, sites, journals and magazines. But the Arielle galvanized opposition because, unlike the CARA, it could do so many of the jobs typically held by women. It didn't take employers long to see that, for a fraction of a woman's pay, a synth could be a waitress, receptionist, secretary or hostess without the need for sick days, insurance or withholding. And there would be no lateness, unrest or pilferage. Pimps and panderers were over the moon. Women's trade groups lobbied for federal anti-synthelle employment legislation but found no support from the disciples of Milton Friedman and Alan Greenspan. Passmore himself signed a check to Don't Halt, Exalt, a PAC supported by ILTD and a group of national franchises. Activists were forced to take their show on the road, trying to ban synthelles in the workplace state by state, town by town. Their success was limited, mostly "no synth" counties in Georgia and Alabama, and sweeping restrictions signed into law by the Provisional Governors in Elon and New Jericho, areas where ILTD did not do much business anyway. Sexwork groups had little traction; you could hardly ban robots from performing work that still illegal in most jurisdictions. And you didn't need to shower or glove up for a synth.

But there was a growing darkside to the synthelle trade. Since the unveiling of the early CARA models, it had been a dirty little secret that a small number of end users, the "beaters," used their synths for punching bags, probably to work out some latent anger against the human women in their lives. Service records showed impact damage, put-out eyes, torn hair and, in extreme cases, what seemed to be stab wounds from knives and screwdrivers. It was eerie. And even more chillingly, the synthelles had begun to fight back. All the bots had some rudimentary self-preservation programming, designed to protect them from accidental damage. But in a few hushed-up incidents in places like Panama City, FL, Taunton, MA, Lawrence, KS and Sumava,

Czech Republic, Arielles whose cameras reflected user violence had inflicted damage of their own: a sprained wrist for a commercial fisherman, a broken nose for the Czech bus driver. The evols daily scanned the world newsfeeds, watching for a pattern of revolt that, happily, had not yet emerged. But who knew what they were sitting on?

Then, in March 2046 came *Veracruz*. At first, almost no one noticed the three-line police blotter item from Parma, Ohio, a simple assault-and- battery between a pair of drunken neighbors. But a beat reporter for the *Plain-Dealer* read between the lines and fleshed out the facts.



Oscar Santacruz and Edgerin

Turner had brawled over an Arielle-2 named Clarissa, purchased by Santacruz in Chicago and filled with data on home brewing, off-roading and Browns and Buckeyes football. The important fact was buried in a pre-trial affidavit that only a fanatic could have unearthed. Santacruz's defense lawyer, a small-timer named Edelbaum, claimed that extenuating circumstances existed. He claimed Santacruz was provoked by Turner's unauthorized appropriation and exploitation of Clarissa, a defense the state contested by asserting that Clarissa, unbidden, uninvited, had shown up at Turner's door and initiated contact. The affidavit was instantly faxed to the Egg and prompted an emergency all-hands meeting of Lessig's AI and evoltech staff. A team was immediately dispatched to Parma to run covert scans of Clarissa's information systems and return them to the city for analysis. A cordon of security surrounded the work, but bits and pieces leaked to technology journalists like Micah Purdum from *Synner*, who pieced together a story called "I Like 'Em Big and Stupid: Does Your Arielle Have A Wandering 'Eye'?" in which he openly suggested that Arielles exposed to widespread human contact could be developing "standards" and feelings of self-worth and esteem. Purdum used a term at once intriguing and frightening - synthetic consciousness - to describe this flirtatiousness Turner alleged.

There it was. The synthelle was already smarter than human. Now there were mumblings that it was developing some kind of personality, too: needs, desires, tastes, and the volition to pursue them. *Veracruz* was an isolated case, but now the AI people watched email, newsfeeds and faxes like SETI scientists awaiting greetings from space. Everywhere, synthelles were getting smarter than anyone thought they could be, doing things nobody thought they could do. A Jacqueline in Marin County "trained" in robotics began drafting plans for her own

redesign; an Eun in Colorado was said to have acquired a sincere belief in God and to be able to speak in tongues. And two different synthelle plants reported bots seeking jobs on the line, trying to gain insight into how they were made. And still plans were made to roll out the Arielle-3, whose FLASK was the fastest and most capacious yet devised.

Carragher cleared his throat, calling the meeting to order, and surveyed the staff assembled in the War Room at the great horseshoe table used only for matters of the keenest importance. Passmore noted the face he did not recognize, at the right hand of Carragher, visitor's pass clipped to his jacket's breast pocket, ice-blue eyes under a gray buzz-cut, toothpick twitching in his mouth like a nervous stick insect, a sheaf of papers spread before him. Carragher rose to speak.

"Let's get started, people. The purpose of this meeting is a critical security briefing, so let me introduce without further ceremony an individual I have asked to serve as corporate security liaison, former Senior Adjutant with HYDRA Northeast, former Marine Colonel, now Managing Director of Maginot Partners, Mr. Pathfinder Forte. His special area of expertise is anti-terrorism tactics and, in light of yesterday's news, I'm sure you'll want to give him your undivided attention."

No two ways about it: Passmore was miffed. He had gotten a sketchy report about the Draper factory bombing, but Carragher had never hinted that he was thinking of hiring outside help. But this was no time to start a fight. For now, it was best to listen. Forte hauled himself to his feet and motioned for Mabrey, the head of Midwest manufacturing, to start circulating the pile of document packages.

"Good day," he said. "I won't do you the disservice of beating around the bush. Intimatron and its manufacturing operations are currently under attack." Some of the creatives - always the last to hear -- exchanged surprised glances. Gillian St. Cyr pointedly, theatrically, removed her cat's eye glasses. "Under attack," he went on, "from a radicalized, highly organized feminist terror group seeking to disrupt the production and marketing of the synthelle." He pushed a button on his clicker and a 3-D hologram of the Draper, Utah plant appeared at the center of the room. "This threat -- and it is a significant threat -- comes from a female terror faction called the Valascans." An explosion jarred the holographic image, taking out a wall on the southwest side, where shipping and receiving and the loading dock were located.

"Like the Daughters of Hedwig?" Endino asked. "Crazies like that?"

"The Hedwigs are mostly just talk. Talk and advocacy. This is the real thing."

Passmore opened the confidential envelope he was handed. It contained a bound dossier filled with mug shots and rap sheets of a series of women. He ran through the names: Ardis Raducan. Clotho Barden. Hester Hughengard. Solaire Lake. Lamia Auric. Lenore Szczyzny. Lourdes "Babygirl" Baca. And the longest and most detailed sheet of all belonging to a beautiful, defiant brunette called Ligeia Grief, a woman with the unmistakable, proud carriage of a bandit queen. Passmore thought she might make a good model for the nextgen Arielles. It would be a good inside joke. Endino wouldn't be hard to convince.

"The American southwest has been a hotbed as the so-called 'razor feminism,' with the anti-Mormon backlash, the abortion waiting period laws in Arizona and New Mexico, the creation of the Christian Protectorates and the abolition of Women's Studies in the Arizona public universities. All that was needed was the rise of a charismatic leader."

"This Ms. Grief?" asked Carragher, demonstrating his chokehold on the obvious. There was a loud rustling of pages.

"Shattuck, actually," Forte said, "when she was teaching Classics at Arizona State. Denied tenure three years ago, dropped out of sight for a year, then re-emerged in surveillance photos at the scene of a firebombing at a Conservative Party office in Tempe. Reinvented herself as Ligeia Grief. It was her knowledge and manipulation of myth and imagery that enabled her to attract and unify diverse, disaffected pockets of militants and troublemakers."

The ring of blank faces told the story.

"Street gangs," Forte went on, "create a history, an *ethos*, a sense of belonging to a family with rules and lore and tradition. Ligeia Shattuck had access to all of classical literature. Valasca was the cruelest of Amazon queens. Captured male warriors had right thumb and right eye removed so they could never fight again. The Valascans' symbol, a tattoo of an eye above a four-fingered hand, is given at initiation to new members on the inside of the right thigh. These activists are thus joined to an ancient tradition of female militancy. And this sense of purpose, history and empowerment makes them unified and very dangerous."

Jesus, Passmore thought, *this is absolutely surreal*. A simple sex toy is setting off a social revolution. There must be some way to defuse this, turn it to our advantage. A scholarship for girls, maybe?

"Crazy. Crazy. So how do we protect our workers?" Mabrey was clearly distressed.

"Not to worry. Beginning Monday, we will have operatives in all of Intimatron's places of business. HYDRA has most of the known players under surveillance. We know their movements. One thing to watch for: We've seen, through our HYDRA contacts, transcripts of intercepted phone calls hinting they may be using their own synthelles, programmed for covert activity."

Carragher sat up. "You mean lady bombs?"

"Unclear at this time," Forte barked. "Sabotage, perhaps. At this time, we are advising the institution of background checks for all purchasers, metal detectors, blood tests for new job applicants..."

"Looking for what?" Bougereau asked.

"Blood," Forte replied, straightening his papers. "Just blood."

She was staring, no question. Wrapped in shadow, swaddled in a brown, hooded cloak. He knew it was a woman because the light picked out her shapely legs, smooth, crossed at the

knee. No man looked like that. Her face was hidden, but he could feel her eyes on him. He tried not to notice as he drank his brandy, but it jangled his nerves. When she rose and began to walk toward him, he was almost relieved. Another “fan.” Some sharp words, a huffy exit, and he could get on with his night. But as she crossed the patio, in confident, emotionless strides, there was something familiar about her. Even though her face was shaded by a low monk’s hood, he felt he had seen her somewhere before. It was a nervous kind of feeling.

“Mr. Passmore?”

“Do I know you?”

“After recent events, quite possibly.”

A chilly silence. “Is this where you put out my eye?”

The woman gave a wry smile, pulled out a chair and sat without an invitation.

“We haven’t yet revived that tradition.” She aimlessly smoothed out a napkin. “Politically inadvisable, I should think.”

Passmore felt resentful of the intrusion upon his few moments of quiet reflection, but he was intrigued by the presence of the woman that had achieved a larger-than-life presence around ILTD. She peeled back her hood, and Passmore was surprised to find her hair a pleasant fawn gold, her eyes (contacts?) a soulful and penetrating turquoise. A high forehead was crowned by a majestic widow’s peak that gave her an unmistakable martial appearance. A small scar on her cheek drew his eye to a single golden hoop earring from which hung a golden feather. It was a tough, utilitarian beauty, befitting a renegade. There was clearly some Native American there. *Cree? Seminole? Hunkpapa Sioux?* Nothing in Forte’s dossier had prepared him for her height, her lean, equine grace. She was someone to be heeded, followed, certainly.

“I half expected your hair to be shorn,” he said, instantly regretting the sullen, patronizing tone.

She was unperturbed. “Why would we do that?” she asked. “We aren’t enemies of beauty. We’re its guardians. Your devices are the abominations.”

An angry word, but Passmore wondered if this might not be an unexpected opportunity.

“Maybe I’m naïve because of my negotiation background,” Passmore said, slowly picking his way, “but I’ve never seen a problem that reasonable parties couldn’t solve, if they sat down together without undue interference, in a convivial setting.”

She laughed with a charm that was wholly unexpected. “No, no,” she said. “This part of the meeting begins ‘We’re not so different, you and I...’” In her hands, adorned with bracelets of semi-precious stone, she played with an unsealed white envelope. “And what makes you think I’m reasonable?”

Passmore shot her a thumbs-up. “Still there,” he joked nervously.

“Mr. Passmore, negotiations imply a common ground.” Her face grew sober and her nostrils flared a little, the light sparkling in her baby sapphire stud. “We have none. What could you offer us? Would all Arielles be pre-loaded with the collected works of Sappho, Hypatia, Susan

B. Anthony, Emma Goldman and Ariane Zeltner? So your men can become enlightened while they...do what they do? Did you think we could be bought off that way, Mr. Passmore?"

Maybe, he thought. *And probably not*. But like his professors at B school had told him: Get them talking. The bad news was the Valascans were too smart to be co-opted.

"The only solution," she said, "is the abolition of the synthetic feminine, and the dwindling intellects that permitted its creation. There is no middle ground."

"No room for play in your world, then?" Ligeia took the envelope in her delicate hands and slid it across the glass table top. He remembered kissing P. "Love without baggage or expectation or bargain?"

"I'm just here to give you this," she said. "We shan't speak together again."

"You may not believe it, but I enjoyed...meeting you..." Something about the word *shan't* delighted him and gave him a foolish, baseless hope.

Ligeia had turned and begun to walk away. "Don't look for me. You won't find me." She exited through the café crowd, looking neither right nor left, parting patrons and servers with her unwavering stride. Then, at last, she turned: "All love contains elements of exchange..." Back at the table, Passmore weighed Ligeia's challenge, fraught with a thrill all its own. He unfolded the note and read:

EXECUTIVE DISPATCH

To the Editors: The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, The Deseret News, The Los Angeles Times, Time, The National Commentator, Wired, Synner, Technology Beacon, The Economist, Der Spiegel, The Guardian

To the Executive Producers: NewsCall, Technology Tonight, Kalfus/McDade Report, CNN.com, Reuters.com, BBC News

From: Ligeia Grief, Director-General, Order of the Cloak of Valasca

Date: September 30, 2046

We are the Valascans, a covert quasi-military sororal order dedicated to fighting, by any available means -- violent and non-violent, intellectual, spiritual or artistic -- the most offensive and virulent products of the American patriarchy and the attitudes that support it. We are nationwide and permanent.

We are your mothers, wives, daughters and friends. We are the authors you have read, the teachers of your children. We are the quiet strangers you have never noticed.

Our membership, program and tactics are secret. But our actions will be known and feared by all.

Just last month, elements of the Valascans bombed and shut down the Draper, Utah synthelle factory of Intimatron, Ltd, causing over \$800,000 in damage. The Synthelle, the ultimate commodification and trivialization of, insult to, and provocation of, the world's women, shall be

a primary target. This offensive and pernicious caricature has enabled men to validate and propagate the primal desire to own, enslave and trade women as chattel. Fathers, buy your boys a ballerina or a particle physicist! We call upon the management of Intimatron to recall all synthelles currently in use, and to immediately cease all synthelle production and marketing. If this is not done, we shall initiate paramilitary action to enforce these demands. But unlike the Christian Church, we object to the synthelle as a symbol of, not fornication, but subjugation.

Consider this a Declaration of War upon all sexist, regressive and reactionary persons, acts and institutions. Let hostilities commence.

Nomini et libertati mulierum,

L. G.

Oh, good.., he thought, then smiled, because he had nearly thought *good Grief*.

He waited until he reached home, poured an apricot brandy and put on a microdisc of Sibelius' *Valse Triste* before calling Forte, because he needed to unwind, to make some sense of all that had happened. There was no sign of Landra or Grae, and he was glad, for she would surely have suspected infidelity of one sort or another, and such a row would have made it even harder to strategize an appropriate response. It was after ten, but he knew Forte would want a call on his emergency line.

"Hope I didn't wake you," Passmore said.

Forte cleared his throat. "No, no. Just watching some homevids of the kids. Little Jabez's class put on *Coriolanus*. Cutest goddamn thing you ever saw. He's a little Olivier. 'S on your mind, friend?"

Passmore whispered although he was quite alone. I ran into a friend of yours. You'll never guess who."

"Odalis Santos. Just teasing, bro. Mrs. F. found a couple of her old porno loops in the garage one time, and..."

"Ligeia Grief." Things got quiet on the other end. "She marched right up to me at Chumley's and handed me some kind of press release thing."

Anybody with you?

"Neg."

"She say anything?"

"No. I mean yes. I mean not concrete like threats or anything."

"Then what?"

"Small talk. Banter. I asked her to work out a deal. She told me to get bent."

“Bad move.” Forte was in full tactical ballbreak mode now. “Sends the wrong signal. They’re more likely to strike if they think you’re weak and vulnerable. Surprised she chose to show herself.” There was something Passmore found strange and secretive in his tone.

“Um, you knew she was here?”

Forte measured his words. “Can’t say too much over a cell. HYDRA keeps tabs on the major folks. Grief has a lot of friends in the City. Zips in every so often for cash, to energize the faithful. Meet with sympathizers. Couple professors we know of, a bookstore in Uptown. Petita Garza.”

“Petita Garza,” Passmore asked, “from Women’sHearth?”

“Yeah. Nutty old broad raises money, goes out to Santa Fe a couple times a year. They’ve got eyes on her. My guess is that Grief is in somebody’s trunk right now with a sack of cash, on her way ‘cross the Great Divide.”

Passmore snapped shut his Crystallus without saying goodbye. His mind was spinning in another direction.

The cool air in ILTD’s hospitality suite at the Juke, freshly straightened up from a “nut party” for the owners of a men’s resort in Belarus, was waking Passmore, filling his lungs with reviving chill. He had spent a long time warming P. up, dressing her in the special outfit he had taken from Landra’s closet: an elaborate black silk Bordelle corset he knew no longer fit her, Fievre stockings, a sleeve of Auberge bracelets in platinum and hematite, the silver Claire Sardi barrettes from their honeymoon trip. He closed his eyes to enjoy a long breath, and when he opened them, she was, in all her contentedness, her desire to please and explore, Landra from the moment his love had peaked. He held his guilt at bay and willed himself into a brittle but glittering happiness.

After they had finished their work, Passmore lay, spent, staring into the mechanical irises his agents had set into place, the gentle starfall of prismatic colors, and quietly rebuked himself for their beauty and complexity. He wondered if and how he might be called to account for building something as beautiful as nature had, as beautiful as God’s own handiwork. P.’s hand stroked his; her lips made no sound and, he knew, would not, until he broke the sweet silence.

“I am going to have to excise this from your memory, but I have to tell somebody. After all I’ve done and sacrificed and achieved, I think Landra is working behind my back to bring us down. I know it. She’s working to kill the synthelle, to kill ILTD.” Safe in the knowledge that his magnetic wand would wipe it all away, he told her everything – the growing distance and disaffection at home, the rise of the vandals, his meeting with Ligeia, the Women’sHearth connection he was sure enabled Landra to shuttle information to the western cells. And when he was done, he looked for something other than cold calculation on P.’s face. She seemed to take great interest in grasping at a handful of satin sheet.

“You can have Landra, if you want her, without the jealousy, the deception, the distrust.” She looked him squarely in the eye, and Passmore could see the reflection in her eye of his own disbelieving expression. “The possibility is there if you want it.”

“What are you suggesting?” he stumbled.

P. sat up and smiled. “I suggest nothing. I can only point out that an option exists.”

Lessig grabbed him the next morning, as he tried to hustle, unnoticed, to his office for a shave and a change of clothes.

“Naughty man,” Lessig chided. “You were borrowing my toys again, without permission.”

Red-eyed and breathless, Passmore seemed like a man fleeing an accident or a natural disaster.

“You really have to repurpose our friend. Seriously.”

“Not that song again. You change your mind every time your pecker gets hard.”

“You won’t believe what she said. I had to wipe it. It’s bad. Her FLASK has gone...wrong.”

Lessig stopped in his tracks. “You’re making crazy sounds. Why don’t you go get a sauna and a Shiatsu and some good veggie grub and we can talk later, when you’ve calmed a bit. Tonight, at the Ball.”

The Ice Ball was Carragher’s idea, a black-tie formal for ILTD staff and their families designed to celebrate the company’s successful 2046, in particular the firm’s \$6 million Bourse futures bet on the final crumbling of the Ross Ice Shelf in Antarctica. While the event was mostly ignored by all but the most extreme ecoblogs, the timing of the February crash was solidly within the range predicted in the floating carousel contract put on at the suggestion of the bean counters in finance. It meant a \$30 million payout from Carmichael Brothers, the introducing house, and a banner year (with fat bonuses) for Intimatron. It seemed to Passmore that he really couldn’t lose, except at home, where Landra grew more distant every day.

“Don’t tell me you came stag.” Lessig had snuck up on him, looking uncomfortable in his three-button mohair jacquard. “No Perelandra? Not even that fantabulous simulation? Ha ha. We know you’ve rescued her from the glue factory.”

The lobby, full of drinking and dancing guests, had been converted into an Arctic paradise, the walls glazed with ice, French champagne flowing from sculpted-ice fountains of polar bears, harp seals and emperor penguins. Across the ceiling was a tarp filled with cotton snowflakes that, at midnight, would be pulled asunder to simulate the crash of the Ross. In the south corner, by the exhibit showing the Arielle’s internal construction, Hieronymous Byng and His Soldiers of Swing blared out a tight, sophisticated program of 1940s dance music. Carragher, in a playful mood, swung the shapely Liv Dunlea from Catering to the strains of “Baby, It’s Cold Outside.”

“Proto is supposed to be our little secret. My Landra wouldn’t come. Something about profiting from the earth’s decay. eems like she’s gravitating to the wrong side of every issue these days.”

“Oh, really now? I hope she remembers how her bread is buttered.”

Passmore could see Joe Keren from Lessig's evol team, ridiculous in red, ambling toward them, a Cisse barely out of wraps trailing close behind.

"To be blunt," Passmore replied. "Our little Landra doesn't eat butter. Or bread." Carragher hobbled up to the bandstand, weakly swatting at the ass of the singer, a slender Eurasian with low, glossy black bangs. "Joe, what's the latest communique from the frontlines of the Synthelle Revolution?"

"Oh, stuff and nonsense," Keren said, probing his Cisse's lovely mouth with his tongue. "Does this look like an enemy agent to you?"

Passmore stared deep into the Arielle's deep brown eyewells, eyes that could have seen nothing or everything.

"What would a secret agent look like?" he asked. "Just like this little sorceress, this Mata Hari, I'd guess."

Keren snorted and squeezed Cisse's waist, then spoke as if she wasn't there. "We're on top of it. All's quiet. It's looking more and more like Veracruz was a fluke. No real connections or patterns emerging. Sometimes, it just happens that way. Like needing to reboot a program in the middle of the day. Why worry? Just enjoy the ride."

"Not very reassuring," Passmore said, swirling his Chivas rocks. "But no girl gang takeover yet, then?"

Carragher was on the mic, green and blue lights flying in profusion off an old-style disco ball, spinning, picking out the fluttering flakes that began to fall over the laughing, delighted guests.

"I'm not much for speechifying," he said, sloshing champagne on his shirtfront. "So I'll just thank Mother Nature for making all our holidays a little richer and for funding this here shindig..."

Keren tugged at Passmore's sleeve. "I stand corrected. There's your girl gang, Jackson..."

"...and I also want to think those sexy little breakthroughs, the sensations that have put our humble shop on the international map, our little darlin's, the Arielles!" There, dressed in matching silver fox jackets, white mini-dresses and fox Zhivago pill hats, was a seemingly endless kick line of synthelles, high-stepping to an improvised can-can, reflecting the hoots and laughter of the revelers. Endino grabbed a leggy Gretchen server from the commissary and swirled her in a crazy reel, sending them both arse-over-tea kettle into a giggling heap. Muldaur joined the line, linking arms with a grinning Bao and Chika. Soon the line was snaking its way through the party, kicking under a rain of booze and fake snow. Little pieces of the column would break off at intervals of seven or eight, and form friendly scrums with groups of two or three men, sometimes a wife or two for good measure. With Carragher as master of ceremonies, the Arielles would roll on their backs or perch on their knees, embracing and kissing the nearest rumples. An Emily called Grushenka, who led school tours of the Egg, hopped on a table and danced a mashed potato, go-go style, while Akita, soaked in sweat, showered her in currency she would never use. By the elevator bank, Passmore could see Siri Kapoor the runner from Auditing, and Dave Behring's far-too-attractive wife Dahlia in a clinch with Jasmina, a high-end Sophie used for ILTD's print ads, taking turns kissing and fondling

the magnificent breasts that were, to Passmore's eye, St. Cyr's signature achievement. As the Arielles infiltrated the bandstand, the Soldiers' sound became thinner, disjointed, and, finally, as a small, busty Amora launched herself at the stunned, sixtysomething drummer, not so much music at all. An Anya with green cat's eyes and a mild Russian accent, threw her soft arms around Passmore's neck, but he had seen enough, throwing back the dregs of his scotch and heading for the automatic doors, careful to step over the intern from the city college and his blonde partner, well into some energetic but inelegant *frottage*.

What a mess, Passmore lamented. He wondered if they had lost their way as, deep in reflection, he stepped over a bound stack of the hardcopy *Times* on which some of the older executives still insisted. He did not pause to read of the Japanese dancer, confused and frustrated by a sea of artificial copies, who had thrown herself from a Kyoto bridge, or the Colorado synth owner who was found, a "death by misadventure," his throat pierced by a new pair of Stroud culinary-grade poultry shears glazed in duck fat. There were taxis waiting, and he had enough in his pocket to fund a good hour or two of cogitation.

There were so many puzzle pieces without a frame, without a picture to guide the solvers. He had no idea if the shards would ultimately fit together or, if they did, what sort of a scene they might form. Something dark, he suspected.



BILLY RAI & THE OZARK JESUS

By Ron Garmon

While it lasted, the Fryhoff Steam Tractor Company occupied ten acres at the end of a winding, mile-long brick road near Paraguay (locals pronounce it Para-GWAW), Indiana. Closed in 1933, the plant was forgotten by locals after the last wooden structure burned to the ground on All Hallows Eve, 1945. The town's troubled youth had chiseled up much of the brick road to smash in every window long before. Left standing by the middle of the second decade of the 21st Century was a warehouse, an assembly plant, and three Quonset huts left over from a lengthy late 1970s shoot of a medium-budget horror movie that bombed in the early 1980s. Among the very few to see *Bloodbath on the Wabash* in uncut 35mm perfection was William Raines Nacht, then twenty years of age, seated behind a hash pipe high up in the loge seats at downtown L.A.'s Roxie Theater. As he did so often at inappropriate moments, Billy Rai fell in love.

"With what?" hissed Herbie Innis lounging two seats away, "Rainbeaux Smith's' ass?" Billy's UCLA roommate was pre-law then, and no slouch at inference. The future chemical engineer was a decade or more away from the nickname "Boom-Boom."

Nacht dismissed that formidable argument with a rude gameshow honk. "Naw, mang! With that friggin' *building* Charles Napier just chased her out of." At this hour, even the cashier was asleep. Three fragrant drunks snored in the front row dozens of yards downslope. "What twistification is this?" insisted Billy Rai, rising from his seat and pointing at the screen, "I'm from Indianapolis and I've never even *heard* of this evil-ass hulk!" Revving his voice to match the chainsaw rattling the speakers, he raved, agog- "Did you see those concrete fucking *gargoyles*, man?" His pupils shrank to pinpricks in the smoke-sodden flicker.

It was two a.m. and Roberta Collins' tits were getting away. "Bogart not the kif, bubba," Herbie reminded. Inglewood born and Hollywood bred, he seldom failed to cringe a little when his pal jabbered of cornfed freaks out in the Heartland. Zippo flared, both drew deeply and all was peace and pieces at the Roxie again. Billy Rai's mind, however, continued to fry at twice the usual heat.

Some painters hang at the Tate while others merely hang themselves. Billy Rai grew into one of the former, showing exceptional talent at drawing from boyhood. In those years, his oeuvre tended toward hyper-detailed studies of institutional fires. Coming to fruition in the late 1980s, when art refused to be about anything other than technique, he soon made his mark with epically sized photorealistic canvases depicting riots, mass shootings, and festive lynchings. A seventeen-meter long study of a gorgeously rotting megatherium he painted in 1990 fetched raves and the first of many fat commissions. Pesticide firms paid huge sums for piles of

poisoned roaches heaped billboard high. Hollywood soon beckoned, and within it an entire universe of boon companionship.

Billy Rai scarcely noticed several international crises. He passed the quick dissolution of the United States of America waiting in his Culver City apartment for the front-end check from *Creepy Crawlies 2* to clear. Cash in hand, he found the (vastly overstretched) Paraguay Building and Loan eager to offload the entire Fryhoff factory plus grounds plus rutted road for three cents on the pre-crisis dollar. Even to a grinning stringy haired man in Seventies clothes traveling with a woman wearing a nurse's outfit with a clip-on foxtail, and some crooked-eyed, chauffeur-hatted gink named Bolter who flicked cigar ash everywhere. *At least this weird bastard's not from out-of-state*, thought PBL's CFO, as that relieved functionary kissed prospect of indictment a temporary goodbye.

Soon the local all-night diner saw a sharp uptick in freakish-looking truckers of variable age and every gender. All hauled loads few would talk about until plied with too many beers to be worth the information. Even a routine query into what that artist feller wanted with all them junky metal dinosaurs might prove awkward. Especially if the question is put to a leggy 4x4 driver clad in utility belt, steel-toed boots, and pasties.

"Fuck yer day, goob," could well have come the reply, "We're grabbing all the culture you poor 'tards got out here before you let it rust."

Having acquired his Xanadu, Billy Rai stocked it with necessities like a bar, a jacuzzi, a hydroponic grow room, odd ends of lighting, stained glass windows, and other trivialities. Generators hummed and the place slowly peopled with friends and their friends; squatters who didn't resent the host's invitation to help dig up abandoned theme parks hundreds of miles away in what was now little more than a Third World nation without even a seat in the U.N. Some even brought their own jackhammers.

"Put up the floodlights first, fer fuck's sake!" Crypto Joe bawled. Flaming tiki torches punched down in tall dry grass are seldom a good idea. Not so much born as quarried out of the Bronx pavement, Joe lived disreputably to indeterminate middle age by the motto- *Don't turn your back on the local yokel*. "Where are we again?" he grunted.

"Twenty-three miles hill and holler northwest of Piney Scrub, Arkansas" Nurse Foxy answered, snubby nose in GPS and notepad, "Pop. 530. Both local cops went out on strike last month, same as the rest of the state."

"Until sometime in the not-so-recent past, this was Dinosaur Daze Fun World," drawled Nosey Parkes nasally as he unhurriedly flung shovels and mattocks from his truck onto the cracked parking lot, "Even the locals stopped driving up here long ago." Nosey's first hint the site

existed at all came from a bumper sticker he noticed on the drive back from last month's dig in South Dakota.

Nacht took a throat-searing pull at his hash pipe and stared appraisingly into the weeds. There those beauties plainly were- no less than *five* Emmet Sullivan dinosaurs scattered among foliage and rusting monkey-bars. One of mad Gutzon Borglum's boys who'd assisted the master with blasting-caps and bulldozer at Mount Rushmore, Sullivan made a nice (and nicely obsessive) sideline out of crafting fanciful goggle-eyed cartoony saurians for playgrounds and tourist traps all over Middle America. As regional tastes in fantasy ripened from Hollywood and Harryhausen to Rush and Hannity, these unscary lizards fell to ruin along every notch in the Bible Belt. Old Emmet was long dead by the time Billy Rai started painting his own variations on these jolly loads of bended iron and painted plaster, sneaking them into studies of terrorist attacks or cities melting to particolored goo.

Sullivan's behemoths bulked comically in Nacht's imagination thanks to the endless boyhood field trips that were his reward for Mom's restless love of her '65 T-Bird. To him, the ex-American heartland was a magical place where happy children gamboled with friendly monsters. An unfamiliar squeezing feeling rose in his ribs, as if his very heart might ooze through.

The one at the far end was plainly a diplodocus. *Joy!*

The poachers' five vehicles idled in the weedy parking lot, headlights staring brightly. After short work with pickaxes, the winch on Ranger Double-D's tow truck hummed in struggle with first a triceratops, then a goatish-looking mastodon, shearing off the latter's left rear leg at the knee.

"Sweet!" Crypto Joe bawled. "Let's try to fuck up a little less with the big bastard over there, all-righty?"

Billy Rai wasn't overly concerned. Judging from specimens hauled back from Dakota, Sullivan himself would go around repairing chipped off horns and filing down tail spikes. While his crew began to laboriously wrap chains around the main prize, a shack at the other end of the parking lot drew the painter's attention.

It was a gift shop whose door fell off its hinges while Nacht fumbled with a flashlight. Except for layers of fluffy dust, the place looked ready for business. Flyers for roadside attractions like the Gator Man of Texarkana and Booger Hollow's Double Decker Outhouse flapped on the wall rack in the gentle breeze. It was then when Billy Rai saw Ozark Jesus.

The last unripped page on the calendar below read June 2009, but it was the blocky white Christ figure above that poleaxed Billy Rai. The thing was distinctly New Deal modernist, shaped as it was like a Pez dispenser with sticklike arms outstretched in love. Details in the photograph made it plain that the statue towered well over seventy feet. The bland, ecumenically expressionless face standing like a chalk fireplug on non-existent shoulders was all any gobstruck fanboy needed to see the fine fanciful hand of Emmet Sullivan.

Text below, above and alongside touted the Passion Play thrice weekly at the Gerald L.K. Smith Amphitheater, as well as an oldtime B-Western movie series, personal appearances by Andy Williams and Ted Nugent, the 17th annual World Series of donkey baseball, and the crowning of the Razorback Queen; all these delights and dozens more promised for this time eight years ago.

Billy Rai read the blocky chunks of text without registering more than a few names like "Sunset Carson" and "Yakov Smirnoff," but his attention kept creeping back to the figure. The "Smith" that gave the place its name he attached to a vague memory of reading about some long-dead political asshole from the 1930s. His eyes, long practiced at self-assertion, again moved of their own will back to the face, so benignly featureless, so empty of anything but monolithic calm and tolerance.

Outside the shack, lights blazed and jackhammers thudded ancient cement into dust.

Around dawn three hours later, Billy Rai stood at the reinforced concrete hem of Ozark Jesus' raiment, looking dazedly up. Most of the party had split for the nothing-to-declare lane at the U.S. border at Jefferson City, Indiana, where officials would wave them through for an untaxed case of Old Overholt, while one car headed south for Jesus.

"Sixty-two feet tall" droned Nurse Foxy, reading off her iPad, "That's almost 19 meters for you Canadians and the second tallest free-standing artwork in the Neo-Confederate-Libertarian States of Real America."

Winnipeg-born Bolter sniggered. One good thing about the new Dixie, few highway cops. President Palin's Less Of Government in Our Society plan croaked most government services right down to the Lt. Governor's shoeshine. LOGOS made it fun to get out of the car in the South again.

"This place is as isolated as Burning Man used to be," Bolter sighed nostalgically.

Nosey was unimpressed. "Nice, but it's like a big milk carton alongside that fucked-up Steven Seagal action figure out near Norman, Texahoma," he put in, "*Variety* sent me out for the unveiling. Hunnert an' five feet of fiberglass, matchwood and glue run up for the first lightning bolt." The ex-reporter looked over the four hundred cracked plastic theater seats- what, if anything, could haul asses out here? Forget staging bum knife-fights, that's for city trade. Bear baits? Convict chainsaw rodeo?

Billy Rai silently walked around the gleaming white mass of Ozark Jesus. The clean-lined utopian enormity of it was even a bigger mindblower than the "For Sale or Lease" sign down at the last bend of the road. With no plan in mind, his heart its usual raging inferno of contradictions, but possessed of a will as strong as love, he slapped pockets until finding his cellphone.

It rang several dozen times before connecting to an angry incoherent gargle.

Billy Rai was to the point, "How much for Ozark Jesus?"

Asking price was surprisingly low and selling price a veritable joke. Mason-Dixon Educational Amusements LLC of Dover, Delaware didn't remember when or how it had acquired the gargantuan relic and seemed only too glad to have it off their hands, along with the amphitheater and tomb of Rev. and Mrs. Gerald L.K. Smith, contents of which the gang promptly ransacked and burned in a backstage dumpster. Billy Rai and friends then barreled off for home, content to let accountants sort it out from there.

Though the thing dented his bankroll no more than a bottle of good Bordeaux would a moderately alcoholic dentist, Nacht felt no such satisfaction at the purchase of Ozark Jesus. He'd reluctantly given up on moving the multi-ton slab back to Fryhoff Manor upon sight, so acquisition gave at best only half satisfaction.

So Billy Rai reverted to type, whiling away a dozen long late summer evenings soaking in a claw-footed tub on the plant's second floor after he and boarders retired from a hot day's hammering, welding and screwing. Especially screwing. Before long, selections from the Sullivan bestiary will tour Europe, Japan and elsewhere, partially defraying the cost of the gypsy caravan parked at the artist's door and eating away at his substance.

The party started promptly at nine every night, with flashing lights and disco thump fetching the entire ramshackle estate except for its pruny lord of misrule, who steeped himself for hours while plowing through a vast haul of obscure magazines he accumulated over the years. Within the flood of ink devoted to horror movies, avant-literature, geopolitics, munitions,

pharmaceuticals, nudism, calligraphy, theoretical engineering, and Trotskyist and Hoxhaist apologetics was a highly indignant article by Barrington Cadwaller, Jr. in the February 2001 number of right-leaning *New Reaction Monthly*. It read in very small part-

Gen. Lebed's revelations of Soviet-vintage thermonuclear devices small enough to fit in an attaché case - or diplomatic pouch! - came as a sock in the eye to Blame-America-first appeasers in the hypercorrupt Boy Clinton administration. Where were these liberal peacenik-freezenik-Bolsheviks when President Ronald W. Reagan stared down the black-souled Red slavers of the Kremlin? When the Great Scorer hefts vengeful quill against the names of these appeasers, let it be writ that...

Billy Rai flung the magazine overhead into the damp wad behind the tub, there to join *Fortean Times*, *Zombie Quarterly*, *Psychotronic Video*, *The Armed Pessimist*, *Carnage Illustrated*, *Wide World of Detonation*, *Every Man his Own Gramsci*, and many sticky more.

Closing his eyes once, he saw the whole thing complete- totalizing paranoia pemmican-crammed and shipped inside a Samsonite; ancient Cold War terror lurking within any trunk or bit of stray baggage. Forget conspiracies so immense, Jack-me-lad; how about mushroom clouds sown and reaped inside trains or self-driving taxis?

Best of all, its *nostalgia*, baby!

Out of the tub in one nimble splash, Billy Rai jumped naked over a couple making noisy love on the concrete floor outside the bathroom, edged past Crypto Joe far gone in a LSD stupor and padded into the library, where his phone sat charged. A few atonal beeps fetched a fierce, scotch-heavy grunt at the other end.

"Caddy?" he began quickly, "Billy Raines. Yah. No, I'm back in Hoosierland for the nonce. Right. Lookit, did you actually mean a frickin' Hiroshima-sized kaboom any schmuck or cheesewit can lug onto Pan Am Flight 666 or is this something that might take a forklift? Yah, I mean the suitcase nuke, Caddy, the story you did back when for *Weekly World Grief* or whatever. *Whatever*." Billy Rai paused as the voice raised in pitch, offloading a long, bizarre tale involving classified Soviet documents and stupidly simple-to-make devices that can leave an irradiated crater in any city reachable by any malignant intellect sufficient to buy even a government-damn-subsidized bus ticket, and what's worse, these Russkies had let Hayek-knows-how-many of these hellish engines slip out of their Borscht-sucking hands and onto the open by-God market.

The columnist, sitting alone at his cabin in rural Georgia, had inhaled an evening snootful and Billy Rai let him rant, delighting in side comments about the time they'd both dropped acid at a 1984 Democratic rally and heckled Joe Biden on the subject of chairs for the standing army.

“Golden daze, old son,” the painter murmured, while pounding through another phone for the number for one Boom-Boom Innis.

The caper started once Nosey planted announcements in select blogs and websites that fine-arts notable and B-movie maven William Raines Nacht had indeed acquired the Ozark Jesus Amphitheater, complete with its titanic icon. Nosey was careful to drop the appropriate Google-loving nouns, referring to Billy Rai’s long-ago, longshot Oscar nom (Best Art Direction on *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend*), along with misquoting distinguished critics to make Nacht’s art even less comprehensible and more threatening.

This jumble of minatory verbs, nouns, adjectives and artfully mixed metaphors proved a wizard’s incantation. Within twelve hours, word some nose-ringed, certifiable lunatic from Tinseltown now owned the biggest Jesus on the continent resounded across the right-wing media echo chamber like an exploded shit-balloon. Twelve hours later, angry voices debated the matter and each other at top volume on talk shows few watched anymore. Holovangelists prayed and Sean Hannity wept. By the weekend, ringingly vocal pockets of society across the continent were outraged unto bliss and primed for further horrors left to imaginations not so much small as easily overheated.

“What’s the point of even having a Real America when punks and perverts like this Nack guy can drive right in and give it the two-handed finger?” snarled Glenn Beck on his one-man podcast live from a self-sufficient security bunker near Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Cardio specialists warned the veteran talker not to get so worked up, but it was getting harder and harder to sustain the necessary level of raw emotion to keep viewers viewing, so the invisible punch Beck felt crack through his sternum didn’t come as any real surprise in the moment or two of consciousnesses left him. Beck’s fall toppled the auto holocam as well, lens landing inches from his face. Subscribers got to see his features whiten and decompose over a period of weeks, with updates posted on liberal sites as ants made off with eyeballs and innards.

So all was low whistles and high-fives for Nosey back at the Fryhoff compound. His end of this caper was going beautifully, but the blowoff ran into problems once past the concept stage.

“Good news is there are three drivable roads off this Jesus H. hillside,” puffed Bolter meditatively around the campfire one night, “Most of our guests will be taking the main road in.”

“Great, that’s at least one escape hatch,” nodded Double-D. “I’ll station a few comrades along our line of retreat.”

“Bad news, if the dingus actually blows up, we’ll be in a whole new dimension of hurt,” Bolter added.

“Never mind about that,” drawled Billy Rai, “It’s just an effect.”

Boom-Boom’s brow crinkled. “Gelignite is one hell of an effect.”

The artist waved this aside “Don’t get hung up on details,” he demurred, “All it has to do is *look* dangerous.” He paused, “*Intimidating* is the effect we want.”

“What I didn’t realize when I wrote that damn article is how heavy one of these suitcase jobbies would be,” Caddy put in, scotch warming in his fist. He’d fetched decades’ worth of political contacts with him, going all the way back to a Rolodex boldly swiped from the desk of E. Howard Hunt. “At a minimum weight of six hundred pounds,” he pronounced, lifting a glass off his old magazine, “the prototype design we ran in the issue was more of a block-and-tackle nuke.”

Nursie’s nose twitched in disdain. “A suitcase nuke should be in a suitcase.”

“Yeah, or a briefcase, like the one the president had back in the old days,” muttered Crypto Joe, “The one with the Big Button in it. Just the thought of that shit used to work my nerves.” Joe had decided to string along on this deal even though convinced all present were gonna wind up in one of them Dixiecrat jails, like in movies he used into sneak into on 42nd Street. It beat working and the numbers Mr. Fancy Boy and his pals were talking for subsidiary rights and direct-to-hologram sales were pleasant enough to contemplate.

Billy Rai smiled and said nothing.

Though final tests on the dingus were still incomplete, on July 8th, the following notice went out on Billy Rai’s email-

ZONE HAPPENING ALERT!

This means *you!*

The gang at Fryhoff Steam Tractor Works is hosting a massively decadent FUNDRAISER for Camp Suitcase Nuke!

WE’RE GONNA ROCK THE PLAYA AT BURNING MAN 2017!

FIRE! GUNS! NAKED ORGIES! WANTON DESTRUCTION! A REAL *BLOWOUT!* (wink, wink)

Acid is groovy! Off the pigs! Beware of flying concrete!

Gather, ye freaks, at the base of Ozark Jesus after dark on Sunday, July 16th for a truly explosive aesthetic experience. Map enclosed.

DON'T TALK TO THE LOCALS!

NO UNCOOL PEEPS OR FUNDIES!

First tier tickets \$250 OUSD. BYOB.

This was sent to a select, lengthy group of recipients, culled mostly from Caddy's old contacts. None had taken a pro-orgy political position, at least in public, and none bought tickets before setting out for an obscure destination in southeast Arkansas. Bad enough that gas was then \$15.50 (U.S. greenbacks) a gallon, and that there were so few stations left that accepted Neo-Confederate money.

At times like these, there were few better places for Crypto Joe than on the right shoulder of Jesus, so that's where Billy Rai put him, along with a point-and-shoot holocam and flare pistol. Another cameraman hovered on a crane many yards away and Joe was to fire off the pistol at the first sign of activity in the parking lot downhill. All roads to the hilltop were blocked, forcing anyone driving in off the highway to walk the last hundred yards uphill. By sunset, Joe clocked three vehicles go by on the cracked and rutted public road and still no sign the promised horde of freakin' wackjobs was gonna show. They've all been hunkering in bunkers since Secession Day anyhow, waiting for a little fun.

Below, preparations went lackadaisically, with thirty or so Compounders working with a directionless will. A soundcheck here, a dropped baby spot there, much lifting and cursing installing Jumbotrons, but no one bothered much with clearing the tree branches and dead leaves out of the amphitheater. Let the rubes work for it.

At last, about an hour before sundown, a column of dust rose up from the main road, a first wave of vehicles piled into the lower lot, and Joe fired the first of the evening's many flares. The early birds turned out to be two feuding groups of Christian Libertarians, travelling out of Tulsa together for their own protection. Their median age was about fifty-seven, but docents (decked riotously in feathers, fatigues, and bodypaint) pushed them up the steps and into seats with brute alacrity anyway, leaving picket signs inscribed with messages like SCUM GO HOME,

U.S. OUT OF OUR REDEEMER and GET A BRAIN, MORANS! to litter the way for latecomers like dropped breadcrumbs.

More vehicles arrived and more flares went up. Much pulling and hauling ensued, as a small mob of some two hundred Christers, Birthers, Preppers, exceptionalists, unexceptionalists, atheists, young-worlders, yea-sayers, braying one-wayers, neoconservatives, paleoconservatives, proctoconservatives, Kluxers, and Fluxers trooped into the grounds, with a delegation from Texarkana of the Knights of the White Lily demanding accommodations apart from the rest. Many were heavy with years, most were pasty and dyspeptic from living off canned food, and all yelled fiercely for justice, liberty and bar service. The more foresighted drank freely from packed-in flasks and from his Jesus-eye standpoint, Joe spotted at least two lengths of noosed rope uncoiling in the crowd. A spotlight sparkled on the empty stage and halogen beams stabbed the audience from harsh, irregular angles, which did little to help the generally surly mood. The main road far below teemed with winking headlights, as latecomers abandoned their rides to hike the rest of the way.

Backstage, Billy Rai nervously shifted the case containing the dingus from one hand to the other and awaited his cue. Dressed nattily in his best pink leisure suit, he stepped into the light as bum noise from the crowd reached an ugly pitch. Squinting beyond the dim footlights, he could see little beyond bared teeth as roared disapproval filled his ears and several red laser lights trained on him from the front seats. He decided to skip most of his prepared remarks and go straight into the blowoff.

"You see this?" Billy Rai asked casually, brandishing the case, his overamped voice stilling the bubbling noise, "Here we have your basic no-frills RA-115 Soviet era tactical nuclear device, with a blast range of over five miles." The audience howled as Billy continued, "I bought this thing having no idea how it works, so let's all find out together, OK?"

He opened the case and the main camera trained on its contents. Inside was a fat glass tube containing a brightly bubbling dayglo green liquid, several useless dials, and five wire-festooned sticks of what looked very much to the cheap seats like dynamite. Scarier still was a comically large red switch below the legend "The Button." Blown up twenty times the size of life on Jumbotrons, the thing looked an infernal engine out of a 1960s comic book. A sharp collective intake of boozy breath beyond the footlights told Nacht they were buying it. The look on his face was ecstatic.

With a Chaplinesque flourish, Billy Rai pressed the button. All at once, the giant screens went black, replaced by a bank of digital numbers that began counting backwards at the 5:00 minute mark. The p.a. erupted with a loud buzzing noise to hail each passing second.

Billy's next words were lost in a babble of frenzied screaming from the crowd. Joe tried catching individual faces with his camera, but any personality among them condensed itself into mere drops in a sea of panic. The front seats cleared out at once, the marginally younger and stronger among them pushing and heeling neighbors in maddened fright. Soon the rout became general and Billy Rai ducked backstage as the first wild shots began pinging over his head. For no real reason, he hadn't expected gunfire. Shit like this never happened to Salvador Dali!

Still the dingus counted down, it's irritating bleat now submerged in waves of shrieking flight from an indifferently staged Armageddon. From his perch, Joe got some truly awesome reaction shots, but the real haul in terms of footage came when Nursie touched off the fireworks display at the agreed-upon three minutes, sixteen seconds. A budget-busting assortment of roman candles, aerial shells, repeaters, and skyrockets lit up the hilltop, clearing the theater of laggards a good half-minute before the numbers zeroed out, replaced by the words GERALD L.K. SMITH SINNED FOR YOUR DEATHS.

Admittedly, this Zone Trip was way gone sideways by then, but the images Joe caught by the rockets' red, green and puce glare, of brawling aged, trampled infirm, nimble halt, and crazy-blind all the way down the hill saved the project in post-production. Wrecks littered the county road for two miles outside camera range, but Joe beautifully framed the evening's only accidental explosion, a three-car pileup almost directly below his perch. A 2001 Ford Crown Victoria was still burning in the parking lot when the crane came to take him down an hour later. It made for a helluva credits sequence.

Profit participation and other above-the-line costs pretty much took away whatever Billy Rai cleared from the Ozark Jesus caper. After taxes, of course, and a pitifully small payout for lawsuits, Nacht didn't see a nickel off the whole deal until the sale of the statue and grounds to a San Diego-based tourist conglomerate, which eventually reopened the place as a resort for same-sex newlyweds.

It's still there right now, with the arms of Ozark Jesus stretched as wide as ever.

BITCHIN' BIBLIOGRAPHY ON BANNED BOOKS

By Adel Souto

Censorship can be an ugly thing, but it's been around even before the printed word.

Like murder and rape, it doesn't seem to be ugly enough for us, as a species, to wipe it out of existence. And yet, like murder and rape, it needs to be.

It was believed that Ovid was exiled by Emperor Augustus due to his writings, but it turned out to be something a bit more political.

400 years before the Common Era, Plato suggested the removal of material from Homer's *Odyssey* for immature readers. Hell, Caligula tried to suppress it completely.

In 325 C.E. the Council of Nicaea gathers to decide what writings should be kept, and which others to discard, for a book that would later be called *The Bible*. It was such fun, they did it again in 787.

Speaking of which, many Christians will say that *The Bible* was the first banned book, and, while it was not, I wonder how many are aware that because of their book, many other similar works by Gnostic sects are now lost.

The Catholic Church began their first list of banned books in 1559, though they began banning books in 1514. *The Index Librorum Prohibitorum* or "List of Prohibited Books" was done away with only by a decree of Pope Paul VI in 1966. Even so, Catholics still try to tell you what books to read and what films to see.

In 1818 Shakespeare received a reworking for decent folk, titled *Family Shakespeare*. This unforgivable act was committed by English physician Thomas Bowdler, who upon retiring from medicine thought reading Shakespeare to be a necessity for children – so long as it wasn't the actual works of Shakespeare. Now, thanks to him, we have the word "bowdlerize."

Well, if knowledge is power, then books are dangerous.

When books flood the streets, blood will flow there as well!

Or, at least, that seems to be what those in charge have thought all along, as once printing became cheap, and books were available to the "common man" – thank you Guttenberg – it became policy, by governments since the beginning of government, to ban books.

Some bans are funny, like the 1931 banning of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in the Hunan province of China, because it portrayed animals that spoke, and acted like humans.

Better yet, in 1966 a Yugoslavian court order had to ban the *Dictionary of Modern Serbo-Croatian Language* by Miloš Moskovljević, as many of the definitions were not only poor, but fist-fight worthy.

Some aren't so funny: *The Diaries of Anne Frank* was banned in Lebanon for "portraying Jews, Israel or Zionism favorably." They also banned *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron, Thomas Friedman's *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, and even entire titles by authors, such as Philip Roth and Saul Bellow. All of it helping to brood calls of Muslim anti-Semitism, but then they go and ban the over-hyped *The DaVinci Code*, when a Catholic board deems it offensive to Christians.

Well, Christians use the word "kyke" too, I guess. I forget that anti-Semitism is a world sport.

Anyhow, no country is blameless, and though many do look towards the States for progressive action, we're just as guilty by sometimes being frightened witch-hunters.

Southern U.S. states banned *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe send half the country fighting the other half.

The United States had book burnings from the mid-1800s to the 1950s, reaching its zenith in 1957 by throwing author Wilhelm Reich in jail over his books.

By far, the U.S. has some of the strangest bans. It hated *Fanny Hill* (by John Cleland) so much, that it banned it in 1821, and then again in 1963. It was the last book to be banned by a court in the U.S., until 2003, when a judge ordered Irwin Schiff's 13 year old book, *The Federal Mafia*, to be removed from store shelves.

In the early 1960s, *Naked Lunch* was banned, or threatened to be banned, to an extent where it helped William Burroughs become the first man to get rich off of nonsensically rambling.

And one has to ask, "Why were all German copies of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* confiscated by the Allies after the war?"

The United States can be bad, but we're not terrible. There really was a lot worse going on out there.

In the 50s, the U.S.S.R. banned everything Orwellian, not to mention almost anything else that had pages, or wasn't *The Communist Manifesto* itself.

South Korea put out a list in 2008, which banned their military from reading 23 specific books, including Noam Chomsky's *Year 501: The Conquest Continues* and *Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism* by Ha-Joon Chan. Though I don't agree, I can understand those two titles being on the list, but why did they add the novel *A Spoon on Earth* by Hyeon Gi-yeong?

Sometimes, these matters can get kinda personal.

For instance, Pakistan banned copies of Stanley Wolpert's biography *Jinnah of Pakistan*, after the book made mention of Pakistan's founder, Muhammed Ali Jinnah, having a huge crush on pork and wine. The book *The King Never Smiles* reached the same fate in Thailand, when they believed author Paul M. Handley was messing with their King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Other times, it's otherworldly, as when Salman Rushdie had a five million dollar price tag on his head, when the Ayatollah considered his work blasphemous against Islam. The book is still banned in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Iran.

There were bans then, and still are bans today.

Charlemagne's four-volume refutation of Nicaea's Second Council, *Libri Carolini*, was hated by the Church so much in 790 C.E., that it did not see the light of day until 1549. Johannes Kepler had his *Astronomia nova* placed on the Catholic's shit list in 1609.

Daniel Defoe's 1722 novel *Moll Flanders* was one of the first pieces of fiction to be banned. Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* was banned in 1928 Britain due to lesbian themes. In the 1990s, Germany outlawed *The Turner Diaries* by William Pierce, due to its calls for racial war. Today, China probably bans more books than they produce.

The biggest problem is, unlike murder and rape, no one cares about book censorship. That is probably because no one reads books anymore, as almost every literary work and politico-religious philosophic idea are now available on the internet.

Hey! Doesn't that just stream into our homes?

Shit, the government's going to be at all of our doors any minute now!

Oh wait, never mind... they found a short cut through the bedroom.



BABETTE

AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR ROSS ELIOT

By Cricket Corleone

Ross Eliot is a writer living in Portland Oregon USA. Part of his time he is the host of his own radio show on Portland Radio Authority (P.R.A.). Another part of his time is spent working his nine-to-five job. But the main reason for this interview is to discuss an interesting but strange book based on true events that he has been writing about.

Set to be released in 2013, the book is entitled: *Babette, The Many Lives, Two Deaths & Double Kidnapping of Dr. Ellsworth*, which chronicles events in Ross Eliot's life between the years of 1998 and 2002 in which he met, befriended and lived with Dr. Babette Ellsworth before her death.

Dr. Ellsworth was (get ready for this) a French Nazi, atheist, transsexual nun. She was in her early 70s when Ross met her; he was in his mid 20s. Ross was taking a couple of community

classes; one of them a history class under the teachings of a Professor Dr. Ellsworth. A very large woman about 5'8", with very masculine features, broad shoulders, bushy hair and tons of costume jewelry. She had a thick French accent and was pretty much a "weird character" in Ross' words. But, "aside from how she looked, she was just an AMAZING professor," says the now 36-year-old Ross. "She never used notes and she would go on and on about all these incredible stories from history. And she would always specialize in the super seamy side of things like, 'And then the king came along and he was of course a total womanizer...' And go into this completely sorted story about one mistress that he was in love with."



Prof. Ellsworth would have her students write essays on assignments in class or book reports. "You would read whatever. It could be Charles Dickens or Jane Austin or any number of things. And that was actually how we ended up becoming friends. I did a book report on the Marquis De Sade. And she comes up to me after class, 'Ross remembers,' And was like, "Wrahs Wrahs!" Pronouncing his name in her thick French accent, she was so excited that he had chosen De Sade so she asked him out to lunch and they ended up talking for a long time and becoming friends. "At the time I was living with this 500 lbs. out of work trucker on unemployment... a really horrible woman whom, at the time that we met, seemed really nice but when we ended up living together it turned into a really bad situation."

Having moved here from Seattle Washington, Ross was starting to feel that Portland was becoming a bust. He contemplated making his journey back to Seattle when Dr. Ellsworth invited him to live with her in her home in S.E. Portland near Reed College. "At first I was like,

'well, I can't just move out and abandon my roommate?' And then I remembered, 'Oh wait, I HATE my roommate.'" So Ross spent the next three years living in Dr. Ellsworth's 12 x 30 foot pantry. "She starts to tell me all these crazy stories about her childhood. How she was allegedly kidnapped from Yakima Washington as a child in the 1920s and was taken away by a wealthy French woman and raised in France during World War II... and at the end of the war her family was almost entirely slaughtered. She was one of the few survivors. And she was always very bitter because of that."



CC: She was a Nazi supporter and I know you yourself are not. What were your thoughts on that? To have been around this person you liked in most ways but didn't agree with in others?

RE: Well, I thought it was very strange. It was quite unusual to be getting the pro Hitler picture from this elderly French woman. So I was intrigued. She had not only lived through all this but studied it extensively. She really was able to provide an interesting reason for why so many French people DID support Hitler during WWII. It's a little convoluted but... she would say things like 'Wrahs! Wrahs! Who is the true enemy of France?!' And most people would say, 'Oh, isn't that Germany?' But she would be like 'No! The enemy of France has always been England!' So they felt betrayed. England had been their supporter for part of the war but then backed out and retreated while the fighting was still going on. To the English it was a strategic retreat but

to the French it seemed like an absolute betrayal. So a lot of French people joined in with Germany.

Though to me it seems obvious why you would want to tell the tale of this woman, and your relationship with this woman, what do you ultimately hope to get from this whole experience? Why write this book?

“Well, I have to tell it. Ever since I had moved in with Babette I realized that this was something I needed to document and write about. It’s such a singular experience but something worth telling. And I think it’s what Babette would have wanted.”

And it’s done in two parts. Starting with your journey here to Portland to find yourself on your way to Chicago and then meeting and sharing experiences with this woman whom had all these over the top stories to tell. And your friendship as well as her passing... which you were also there for, at the hospital.

I relate so many deeply personal things about Babette and also myself. She was a very private person but also, she loved shocking people if she could get away with it. And I think she would’ve liked nothing more, now that she is dead, to have her story told in as scandalous a way as possible. So I don’t feel bad at all about the revelations that are on these pages.

Other than the actual stories she told you and the time you spent with her, what other articles of information have you gathered about her during this whole process? For example, history you have had to find out on your own after her passing as well as photographs? How are you managing to pull this all together?

After Babette died on Feb 16, 2002, which happened in a pretty spectacular manner in front of about forty students, I became the possessor of her library and papers which helped immensely in documenting her life which turns out to have been even more strange than it seemed earlier. I also found much information relating to her other stories, from pictures of her as a male infant in the rural NW in the 1920s to an abrupt sea voyage and then growing up amidst luxury in southern France. Then found photos of her cross-dressing as an adult after she returned to America. Several of them outside churches where I’m sure she’d just attended mass just to feel subversive. She always loved being involved with religion as either gender, having been an alter-boy in France and then trying to become a Benedictine nun after her sex change. So there is a lot of photographic evidence from her own archives, but I’ve also done historical research and found shipping manifests to back up her travels to and from Europe as a child besides newspaper articles and other documents to bolster the story.

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me, Ross, and I look forward to reading the whole the story upon its release.



***EXCERPT FROM BABETTE: THE MANY LIVES, TWO DEATHS AND DOUBLE
KIDNAPPING OF DR. ELLSWORTH***

“Here was a man who said the acquisition of fame and wealth during our lives is futile!” she exclaims. “We are born, we struggle for a time and then evaporate into dust! The moral path is live as well we can during those precious few moments and try to be kind to one another. And furthermore, he advised that in life we will encounter people who are vexing and troublesome but always recognize sparks of the divine in everyone. Jesus never said anything so beautiful!”

“You go to mass nearly every day. Could I come along sometime?” I ask.

My professor’s face clouds. “No! In fact, I would prefer you remained ignorant of which church...” she pauses, “or churches I attend at all.”

This seems a final verdict, but her reticence is forgotten one Sunday morning.

“You know, Wrahs,” she chuckles. “I adore the Catholics but sometimes can’t help teasing them. I belong to a church that is steeped in so much history but among people who are almost entirely ignorant of it. I heard mass just now at St. Agatha’s and afterward mingled with the old biddies as I like to do. One wondered who St. Agatha was and I happily reminded her. ‘Oh, that is the one martyred by having her tits cut off!’ Well, she didn’t appreciate my

description at all, though I could perhaps have phrased myself better. But it's true, that's what happened! And now she is patron saint of breast cancer!

"Sometimes on travels I bring along pictures cut from pornographic magazines or photographs of Hitler and carefully insert them into hymnals or prayerbooks. Caution is important obviously, but sometimes I can't resist causing trouble. There have been moments I found myself in a grand church all alone and managed to put a truly obscene picture in a Bible on the main pulpit. Oh, when I imagine how this will be discovered by a pious old goat in the midst of some religious platitude it makes me giddy.

"But I have scored points with the church ladies recently, thanks to you," Babette continues, "I mentioned how I took into my house an underprivileged Presbyterian youth with a goal towards his spiritual development, the son of Protestant clergy even, oh, everyone loved to hear about my progress educating you about the one true Catholic faith."

"They aren't clergy!" I interject.

Babette winks. "But you said once your parents are quite involved with their church, as elders even. Well, it is similar. The essential point remains correct."

My professor maintains her relationship with religion the way some people keep mistresses. She considers it a matter of paramount priority one church never find out about the other. Besides St. Agatha's, she attends an Episcopalian place of worship near our house, though only weekly. One afternoon I hear brakes squeal and out the front window see Babette trot up the walkway. Her car is parked at an awkward angle. She bursts in the front door, chest heaving.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Oh, Wrahs! It's those horrid Episcopalians! I agreed to give a lecture for them next week on the Church of England, but just now was mortified to see my name on the front signboard! Dr. Ellsworth presents! This is a catastrophe! Excuse me." She rushes to the telephone and dials frantically.

"Yes," I can hear her say, "I realize you wanted to advertise the event...oh, no, that's all right...it's only that I'm very modest, you understand, and don't like my name in large letters where everyone can see. You will remove it, won't you? I'm sorry for the bother...yes...thank you very much."

She shakes her head and hangs up. "You know, Wrahs, several of my Catholic acquaintances live in this part of town and any one of them could have seen that- it's not funny!" She protests as I laugh. "You don't understand the trouble I must go to!"

“Do you really think it would matter? You’re a well-known professor in town, both churches know that. You should be able to lecture on whatever you please. What, are you afraid of being excommunicated or strung on the rack?”

Babette sighs. “I sometimes wonder if I would know what to do with my life if it wasn’t so complicated.” She picks up her package of Manichewitz crackers and brandishes them like a club. “I am taking my Jewish cookies upstairs. To eat in good company. By myself.”

* * * * *

Ross Eliot is a writer and commercial fisherman based in Portland, Oregon and Sitka, Alaska. He is best known as publisher and editor of the critically acclaimed counterculture gun politics magazine American Gun Culture Report from 2006-2011, website at www.AmericanGunCultureReport.com.

He has been featured on National Public Radio and Restore the Republic Radio as well as in periodicals including the Oregonian, Portland Mercury, The Sovereign, Street Roots and Skanner newspapers.

Eliot served as keynote speaker at the 2010 Liberal Gun Club Annual Convention in Chicago and has also testified before the Portland City Council on Second Amendment issues. A longtime Northwest political activist, he works with diverse organizations from the Portland May Day Committee to Portland Pink Pistols and Portland War Resistance League. In Spring of 2010 he organized “Might: Not Just for the Right,” a convention uniting all major 2nd Amendment advocacy groups in Oregon, from right wing usual suspects to those more leftist, anarchist and GLBTQ oriented.

Babette: The Many Lives, Two Deaths and Double Kidnapping of Dr. Ellsworth is the story of Ross Eliot’s early years in Portland when he stumbled into an unusual living arrangement with an eccentric history professor. In exchange for quarters in the pantry of her elegant home, Eliot served as companion, driver, confidant and sometime medic for the flamboyant and worldly septuagenarian. His account of these years pulls the reader through religious, cultural and historical tales laced with intrigue, felony, incest and mystery.

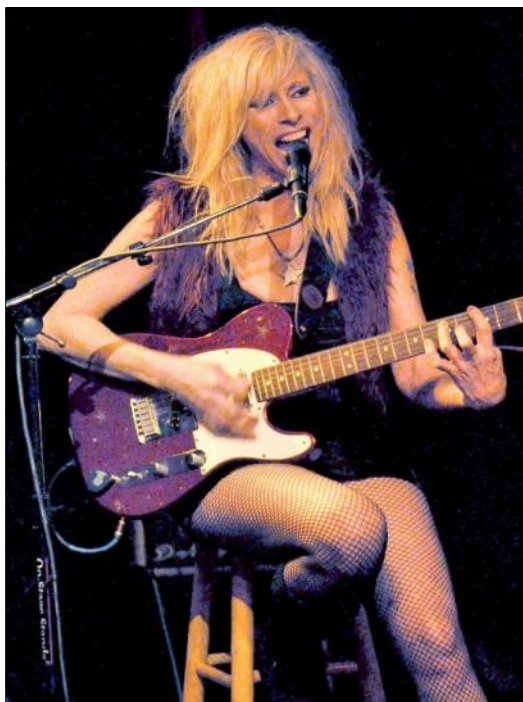
A promotional website for this project can be seen at: www.profellsworth.com

And Eliot’s web-blog is at: www.rosseliot.wordpress.com

FOUR FABULOUS FEMALES OF LOS ANGELES WHO ARE WORLD-CLASS ROCK SINGER/SONGWRITERS

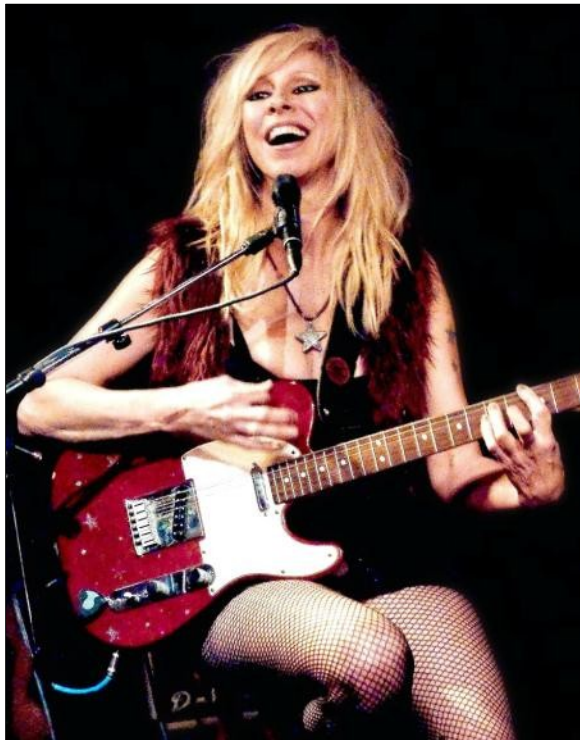
By Heather Harris

Photos © Heather Harris



Larry Carr's Four Fabulous Faces book, a 1970 pictorial evolution of the personal style of Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Gloria Swanson and Joan Crawford immediately embedded itself into the zeitgeist of pop culture visual artists everywhere. It made all crystal clear how these actresses made themselves over into the legends they became (and to me, became a primer textbook on effective studio lighting.) Why didn't their contemporaries notice the ongoing metamorphoses of greatness?

Ofttimes it's because guidance is needed to any unusual destination, and stellar achievement of this magnitude in the arts remains unusual indeed. Here then is a guide to four world-class rock singer/songwriters, all beauties as well, who happen to hail from my native Los Angeles for eminent observation of their careers.



Leslie Knauer

This radiantly smiling countenance belongs to Leslie Knauer, singer/songwriter/guitarist of Naked Hand Dance and vocalist with one famously (more later) mighty set of pipes. Naked Hand Dance, including a male rhythm section sporting frocks and fishnets (but manly frocks and fishnets) perform Leslie's songs exclusively with perhaps a stray cover that only other world-class sets of pipes would even dare attempt, like, say, "River Deep, Mountain High" by Tina Turner of Ike &.

Some British music magazine in the '90s whose name escapes the leaking brain cell sieve listed Leslie Knauer as the thirty-eighth best rock singer ever, male or female, of all time, out of one hundred choices. Ever! Out of everyone, male or female! Of all time! Really! Shout it out!



I first photographed her in the '80s band Precious Metal, formidable players who warranted three major label releases (see my Glam pic below, Leslie standing confidently as Liza in Vegas but in a shagmetal haircut.) Oozing idiosyncratic style Leslie's vocals evinced comparisons to Terry Reid or Noddy Holder, were they of the XX chromosome persuasion and sang about two octaves higher. She's sufficiently proficient in powerhouse vocal talent to sing anything she sets her mind to, so the only challenge is to send that voice hither and yon, full throttle or wistful, operatic warble or quasi-rap spoken word, contemplative personal/confessional or all out bliss incarnate.

My friends Mary and Tony, rhythm section of the Dogs once joined up for double duty in Canary (a pun on the Germanic pronunciation of her last name,) Leslie's band for twelve years of the 21st century with her talents as singer/songwriter/guitarist. There were few gigs I more looked forward to photographing than theirs. Leslie with her beautiful looks belying her kooky Pippi Longstocking all-grown-up image onstage (and off) is Ms. Extrovert Supreme, with a cheery take on life underscored by her infectious, everpresent laughter that causes all men as well as all audiences instantaneously to fall in love with her the second she's encountered in person. Canary's left field power trio truly rocked hard, fast, and always joyously whether in its complexity or simplicity. I'd be lying if I didn't admit to missing Canary. But then again the entire Australian continent seems to miss Promises, her teen band with her brothers that yielded an international chart hit like "Baby It's You!" or two. This antipodean contingent remains rabidly vociferous online to this day.

Once fuschia/red/pink/black/cerulian/eggplant/polychrome-haired, Leslie has settled on being legally blonde for now. Like travelers seeing the wonders of the world, you must catch Leslie Knauer live singing her amazing compositions. She currently performs acoustic or electric with boyfriend and fellow Burning Man enthusiast Al Teman as Naked Hand Dance. A

prolific writer, she retains a folio of decades' worth of superior material, so it's hard to pin her down in concert to perform one's personal favorites like the poignant "Two Steps" about her daughter, Hollywood's own BoyCrazy videoblogger and legitimate actress Alexi Wasser, whom Leslie insists still calls me "Feather," or that subdued ballad with its astonishing metaphor of "We are every little girl who lifts her skirt to hide her face..."



Info: leslie.knauer.79@facebook.com

Songs: <http://www.reverbnation.com/leslieknauer>



Jonneine Zapata

Quiet intensity doesn't always translate to bulging neck veins while internalizing. In the arts it can signify mesmerizing subtlety.

In 1988 Brian Eno made an art installation for the Santa Monica Museum of Art that appeared to be white geometric shapes with Christmas tree-colored lights on them amidst a few very large white cubes, all in a darkened room. If that was all you took in at first gaze, that's all you saw. Most visitors left after a perplexed and befuddled minute or two. However, fans of Eno's music and creative wit could predict there might be more to it. Pal Elaine Drake and I looked around and then sat right down on the large art cubes, post-punks that we both were. Over time, all of the lights slowly changed colors and intensities on the various white cardboard shapes. Many of the subtle light changes turned out to be slow-motion projections from inconspicuous monitors. It was both a serene and stimulating art experience simultaneously which took its sweet time.

The above is analogous to taking in singer/songwriter JONNEINE ZAPATA. The Southern California bred (but much traveled) artist offers performances of seemingly quiet intensity with her band or unplugged with a single guitarist. Both feature pauses to underscore the set's strong emotions, just as in real life conversations about disturbing personal problems.

Zapata's smooth and soulful soprano with its almost catch-in-the-throat might ring reminiscent of some of the modern country artists on the charts if they ever had even an iota of non-manufactured emotionalism. She's been compared to PJ Harvey for equaling her on the catharsis barometer, but if forced I'd hold out more for Martha Davis of The Motels, she of an equally beautiful albeit quite different voice. Like Jonneine's admitted influence Nick Cave, there's always some uncomfortably dark truths beneath the outside beauty in both Davis and Zapata, puissant polish masking the interior voltage. Like the Eno art, serene but exciting. Delivery and lyrics? Simple but suggestive/aggressive...

You don't need to love me

I know my place with you

And you don't need to promise things

I'm only passing through (No Big Deal)

Got nowhere to go, nothing to do,

I'm good looking, you're good looking,

What are we gonna do ?

(Good Looking)

Jonneine and band have toured with and opened for Jack White's Raconteurs and Mark Lanegan's Soulsavers. There's also a wondrous 2009 release by her entitled *Cast The Demons Out* which includes many of the songs in her current live sets. Known for her unblinking thousand yard stare but aimed up close, personal and laser-like, Jonneine becomes so utterly engrossed in her emotions onstage that audiences fall into the same zone like lost but compliantly pleased zombies. One fan admitted some fright at first to be the object of her unswerving visual focus for the whole five minutes of a song. All audiences remain transfixed and transfigured by this solo voice and minimalist band wailing songs of love & dread never heard before by most. As another pal Evita Corby put it, "Jonneine owns the stage."

Asked some time before by writer Caleb Ruddin in *WebCuts* about her music fantasies, she replied, "Dick Cheney singing "Imagine" on his death bed. Making a Christmas album with Iggy Pop. I'm not trying to be cute..."

Even if her intriguing mystique weren't perpetually at arm's length to most media even as her star rises, a decision was made not to engage with this artist. I don't engage with wild swans in flight or the graceful giraffes gliding across the savannah either as they catch our eyes afar in their almost mystical glory, I just photograph them so that others may enjoy and marvel at their grace in public as well.

Website: <http://www.myspace.com/jonneinezapata>





Ruby Friedman



Ruby Friedman of eponymous The Ruby Friedman Orchestra performs as out-there a full-on, torchy-emotional singer as one can be and still remain under the aegis of rock and roll, ably abetted by the Orchestra which indeed includes a full time trombonist. A supernova redhead, she always dresses for any occasion, shall we say, “unusually” (but flatteringly and interestingly) replete with 6” platform or stiletto high heels. Way back when, the Pointer Sisters stood out from a passel of talented but interchangeable African-American female singing groups in our music biz when they cobbled together an image funky-but-chic vintage clothing. Ruby dresses to insure that the whole universe, God, any remaining Pointer Sisters and Ru Paul remembers her immortality.

Her band has been profiled before by countless others (even *Paraphilia* Issue 10) but RFO’s salient points remain: original songs you actually can remember on the way home from the gig and beyond, and the full-throated Ruby warbler herself on resplendent, emotional vocals, riveting being an understatement. She occasionally can be witnessed punking out for maximum impact as with odd covers like AC DC’s “It’s A Long Way To The Top (If You Want To Rock And Roll.)”

But RFO music is the real deal, rattling the rafters of every venue ever stormed. From hoedown stompers to power ballads with real emotion, their original repertoire remains heartily and lustily all over the map. They’ve already earned nationwide aural recognition for their song “Shooting Stars,” the theme for tv’s *America’s Got Talent*. Upon a single hearing, another RFO song already immortalized on cable tv’s *Sons of Anarchy*, the beautiful “Drowned” keeps looping in my brain for the next day/week/month. Its resolute chorus “I will go further out than where you drowned,” remains to me a metaphor of ambition in our treacherous music business as much as a tally of relationship wreckage.



And her online presence remains a hoot what with her Facebook bon mots (“a homeless guy just called me ‘Firecrotch!’”) and RFO blog’s surreal philosophizing. She just might be a closet intellectual. Sometimes that might be what’s necessary for mashups of art, the heart and pure adrenaline. From her blog, a salty recounting of waiting in line someplace with fire fighters:

“One of them points to my shirt and says, ‘Is that your band?’

Eeek. Embarrassment. And he wants details. The shirt says, ‘Kick Out The Jams, Motherfuckers’ in bright yellow across the chest. What am I wearing? Oh fuck my life . . . I must feel guilty about something. People talk a lot when they’re GUILTY. . . But notice how I try to introduce the fact of boyfriendhood simultaneously as some exculpation, ‘No. This band is an old band. I don’t think they play anymore. It’s my boyfriend’s shirt. He gets a lot of free things. He’s a music critic. Oh. I have a couple of projects. One of them is called Ruby Friedman Orchestra. My name is Ruby Friedman.’ What the fuck did I have to say that for? Why couldn’t I just make something up?

‘No way,’ says the fireman at the end of the group. ‘I’ve seen your band with the Trashcan Sinatras. You’re awesome!’”

As they indeed are. We all should be glad there’s a Ruby Friedman performing for firefighters and our own benefit in this generation.

It’s only a matter of nanoseconds then before America correlates the faces of this hearty ensemble with their songs. It’s way fun to photograph, see and hear nascent talent like the Ruby Friedman Orchestra on the rise before it explodes. I felt the same twinges 40 years ago seeing another explosive young redhead in a small club, one Bette Midler, when she began her own worldwide conquest.



Website: <http://rubyfriedman.com>





Kizzy Kirk

They were recommended by no less than Ruby of the Ruby Friedman Orchestra. When a spectacular singer like Ruby calls another singer great, that's high recommend indeed. So, off on a 60 mile trek to Fullerton, California to see the tail end of a residency by this band Feral Kizzy at the Continental Room.

My reaction? To quote Uma Thurman in Pulp Fiction, "I say goddamn!" as it was that much of a mind-blow-blast, but without Mia Wallace's fateful repercussions.

So much there to compliment! Singer Kizzy Kirk is fearless. Peripatetically spending over half the set out amongst the audience, she flopped on strangers to carry her aloft, shanghaied pals to sing along on the dance floor, then swung precariously from the stage curtains, all while mini-skirted, hanging off the stage, draped on other band members. None of the hardcore crowd's forced dives here, her antics remain friendly, natural and unrehearsed but decidedly in your face. "Theatrical" as a word almost gets there: "Olympian" might be scurrying closer, but with a punk rock twist.

Indeed, she came to singing after a stint in acting, seeking more hegemony over her own version of an art. "It was all too controlled," she admitted during our photo session, "Very little need for all I can really do or my input. And I don't like being controlled. Singing is more me."

She's been compared overall to Patti Smith, P.J. Harvey or Courtney Love which is balderdash. Her performing style is sui generis, emotive vocally as well as physically, inventive, sexy, athletic but strangely graceful. And that insistent yet sultry voice harkens back to young British punkers of the 1970s like Ari Up of The Slits or Poly Styrene of XRaySpex (in a slightly lower register.) To great effect, it's a modern, girlish voice atop that womanly physique.



Their quirky songwriting's sound is hard alt-rock with snaking guitar and Yamaha keyboard while the words remain narrative like some junior Randy Newman, wherein desperate spendthrifts ("She loved the money but the money RAN from her!") always leap from bridges to their deaths, and ladies' men incessantly charm. They're constructed with odd lyrics scanning choices which I quite like, as in " ...the ERROR was TWOfold when we discovered that fighting and YELLing are two DIFFerent things..." Startled audience eyes may be on Kizzy, but the whole band's contributions make it all congeal. They are: Kizzy Kirk: vocals; Johnny Lim: guitar; Brenda Carsey: keyboards, vocals; Hannah Smith-Keller: bass; Mike Meza: drums.



Great things surely must unfurl for this band Feral Kizzy, who've already been banned from playing on the Sunset Strip in Hollywood, an oldskool badge of honor to yours truly (my better half Mr. Twister was the first singer to be banned from West Hollywood's influential club The Troubadour in 1970 solely on the basis of his wildman performance in Christopher Milk. See *Paraphilia* Issue 13.) I'll give modern singing great Ruby Friedman the last word: when informed I finally caught Feral Kizzy live, she rallied "Woohooo! Told ya they rawked and rolled! Now you've been 'experienced' too!"



Website: <http://www.feralkizzy.com>

PHOTO CAPTIONS

All Photographs By Heather Harris

1. Leslie Knauer, 2012
2. Jonneine Zapata, 2012
3. Ruby Friedman, 2010
4. Kizzy Kirk, 2012
5. Leslie Knauer live, 2012
6. Leslie Knauer live, 2009
7. Leslie Knauer with Tony Matteucci and Mary Kay (both also of The Dogs) in Canary, 1997
8. Leslie Knauer with Tony Matteucci and Mary Kay (both also of The Dogs) in Canary, 2001
9. Leslie Knauer live in Precious Metal circa the 1980s
10. Leslie Knauer
11. Leslie Knauer with Tony Matteucci and Mary Kay (both also of The Dogs) in Canary, live, 2005
12. Leslie and Mary Kay in Canary live, 2006
13. Jonneine Zapata, live, 2012
14. Jonneine Zapata, live, 2012
15. Jonneine Zapata, live, 2012
16. Jonneine Zapata, live, 2012
17. Ruby Friedman looking radiant after a gig, Hollywood
18. Ruby Friedman performing in the Ruby Friedman Orchestra, West Hollywood, 2011
19. Ruby Friedman performing in the Ruby Friedman Orchestra, Hollywood, 2011
20. Ruby Friedman performing in the Ruby Friedman Orchestra, Hollywood, 2010
21. Ruby Friedman performing in the Ruby Friedman Orchestra, Hollywood, 2012
22. Ruby Friedman performing in the Ruby Friedman Orchestra, Hollywood, 2011
23. Ruby Friedman performing in the Ruby Friedman Orchestra, Hollywood, 2011
24. Ruby Friedman performing in the Ruby Friedman Orchestra, West Hollywood, 2011
25. Photo op with Jimmy Recca of the 1971 Stooges and Ron Asheton's The New Order, *Paraphilia's* own Dire McCain, rock couturier Evita Corby and Ruby Friedman after an RFO gig, 2011
26. Kizzy Kirk, 2012
27. Kizzy Kirk, 2012
28. Feral Kizzy, live, 2012
29. Kizzy Kirk, 2012
30. Feral Kizzy, live, 2012
31. Feral Kizzy, live, 2012
32. Feral Kizzy, live, 2012
33. Feral Kizzy, live, 2012



EDWARD PAUL QUIST INTERVIEWED BY YEN TAN

Images © Edward Paul Quist

YT: *What was your starting point of visual / audio art? I'd imagine there must have been a progression over time, as your work has a very distinct style and aesthetic. I would like to assume that like most artists, we find our "voice" gradually from experiments or even mistakes. What were yours?*

EPQ: It has always been about the experiment for me. At the start it was mostly trial and error. In the doing I found outcomes that basically excited me. One could say everything is an experiment, but there were clues to keep on a path that I was maybe already on unconsciously from a very young age. The style, or overall atmosphere developed, and continues to develop, over the years and the years seem to melt away.

I never think about how long something will take to complete unless a deadline is looming. Not exactly a producers dream, but time is very valuable in terms of getting it "right" so all of the moving parts work. I always hear music in terms of image and vice versa. It's almost automatic when shooting a scene to hear sounds or a rhythm in my mind. Playing something I composed in the background, so called "mood music" is very helpful to reach the unimaginable within the actor or subject.

How do you approach your work? I come from a narrative filmmaking background, so my approach is to start from a character I'm intrigued by, then keep on digging in until I find something I can create a story around. I'm curious how you go about with yours due to the more abstract nature of your material, and what's your way of creating a structure out of that.



I begin with source material. Not necessarily anything topical. It could be something that I've written like an idea for a set of sequences. Pure Information, scientific, historical, a piece of literature, and most of all, my personal experiences; I let my unconscious do the leg work and try to record it anyway that I can. "Characters" arrive at a later date to populate the block and

are more devices for a situation and atmosphere.



I'm driven by interior mental situations. Also there is the graphic end of things. The abstractions are more painterly and playful with an energy of their own. Eventually I have to reign those in because I could easily be in that maelstrom forever. It's

multi-layered, but I have no set agenda or message. The process might change in the future. One never knows.

On that note, let's talk about your new project, "Untitled." Is it really "Untitled" because you couldn't find another title for it, or was that always the intent?

A bit of both. The nature of the films is the anthology format. I've always been working towards that goal over multiple projects. The anthology has a way of capturing what otherwise might be left out of a feature format. I have been through many title ideas



and they always come up against "Untitled," which is really a way to say no title. I understand that titles should contain an action within, so it still might get a name, or maybe several, depending on the country it's shown in. As it stands now it's "Untitled."



"Untitled" is a four-part project, and one thing that struck me while watching it, was that it reminded me of the different movements of a symphony. I noticed that your working titles for each part is broken down in way that resembled that too, and just like when you watch or listen to a symphony, each movement evokes a different feeling. I presume that's something you were conscious of while making this? Or do you just let all this happen very subconsciously? And you just let things evolve in a very organic way?



The symphonic structure is intentional. Four movements. Prologue, four chapters per movement, and then epilogue. That is the structure for the feature version. When performed live it will be much more organic, closer to the process that happens in the studio.

Untitled is extremely variable. The feature version was created because of the need to capture the process and then give it a traditional form for the viewer, or as I like to say, "experiencer."

I definitely felt the tone shifting a bit when your footage went from B&W to color. The sections in color felt a lot more aggressive, and in many ways, also more nightmarish in tone. I've always find that interesting in your work, that there's this balance of abstract imagery that you present that can be both beautiful and terrifying at the same time. Can you talk about more of your intent with what you wish to evoke from your audience?

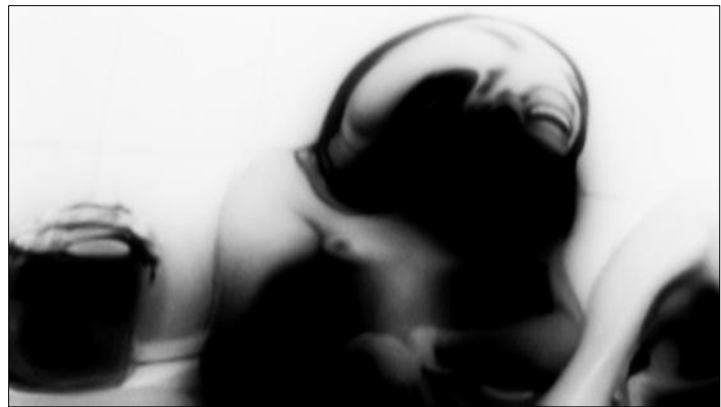




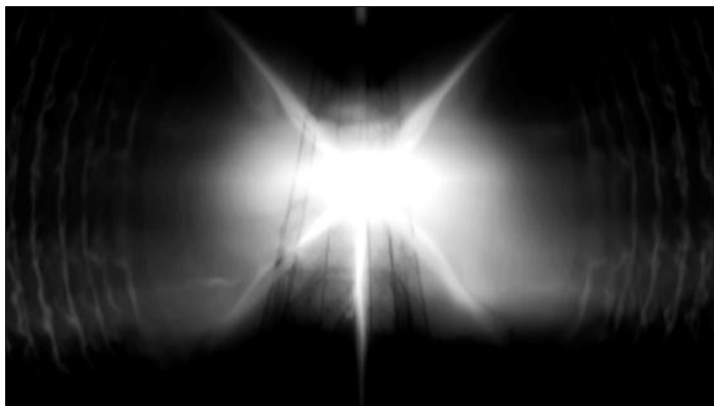
Black and white is seductive. It's very closely aligned with dream imagery. I can dive in deeply and emerge with an image or idea not possible working in the world of color. Color is immediate for most people fortunate enough to see. I tend to use primary colors because one, they have a punch. We know that particular colors can

provoke specific emotions. Gradients as well, but they're more complex and less immediate. Two, I have color vision deficiency, so I have little choice. Now beauty is up to the individual. I know it when I see it and I always pursue it. To me it's a miracle that humans have the ability to detect it. Some people call the images simply nightmarish or horrific. I'm glad that you see them as both beautiful and terrifying. That is the point. That's life itself. That means to some degree it's working.

Again, in the narrative world, when we edit our films, there's generally a very clear objective of making things more concise. Like, does this scene tell you anything you don't know already? Do we need this line? What happens when we move this scene till later, or earlier?



What's your way of "editing" your work? Do you go through the process of showing it to your peers, asking for feedback? Or it's pretty much, whatever you do is what you feel is right and that's that?



When I shoot I tend to do long takes. That means sifting through very long hours and large quantities of possibilities. In that process I begin to see the cut or basic form. On the other side, SFX, graphics and sound come into play and become parts of a jigsaw puzzle. This makes it sound a bit like chaos, but that's not the case. The soundtrack is a strong map to the edit.

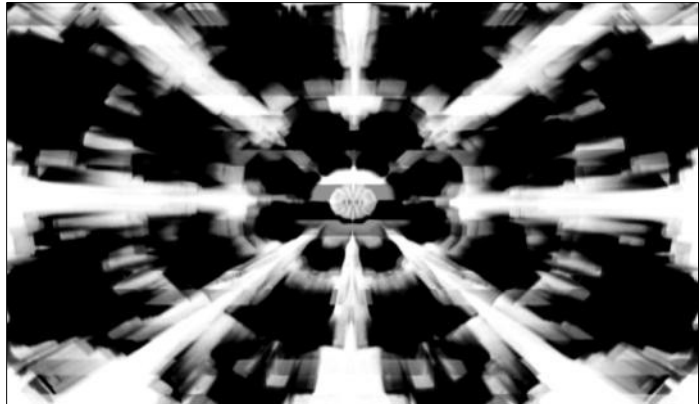


The sound design is a key punctuation, almost a character unto itself in the scene or sequence. Not many people see the work before its completion.

Describe your perfect setting of viewing/experiencing "Untitled." There were definitely moments when I was watching in on my computer that I felt

like, maybe this is better in a bigger room, projected on a big screen with blaring speakers. I also wondered what is the experience of watching it with a group.

Plugging the Untitled process into the viewer's mind would be ideal. The next best environment would be a large screen surround sound system for home viewing, and for theatrical presentation or live experience, as large a screen and p.a. system as possible. Recently, "Untitled" was screened in two forms at The National Museum of Science and Technology "Leonardo da Vinci" in Milan. For about three months a seven minute "teaser" was on continuous loop. The curators informed me that over 20,000 had visited the exhibition.

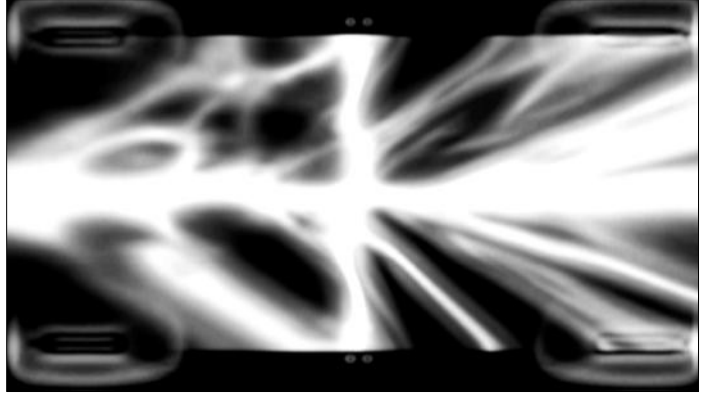


For one weekend I met with the public and press and presented a one hour version of what would normally be ninety minutes of "Untitled." Since the film is chapter based it was decided to do a Q&A every few chapters. The feedback from the audience was intriguing. It gave me



new insights and, based on some of the exchange, I returned to New York and altered parts of the cut that was screened in Milan. It's a good example of how flexible the project is. This is the closest thing I've ever done to a test screening.

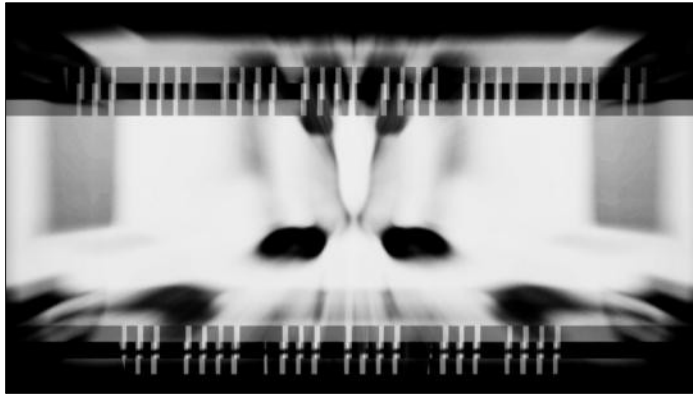
How long did it take you to put together "Untitled?" I think I take for granted that there's actually quite a bit of work that goes into each frame of your work. It's like when you watch animation, and two minutes go by and you're not aware that it took long stretches of time to construct such a short sequence. Is yours pretty labor intensive also? And considering that you're doing this all by yourself? Does the music/sound design also take as long to compose?



Creating the feature cut along with developing the process was about a four year period. It contains footage from as far back as 1989. Now that the system is in place future projects should emerge more frequently. It's true that the work is carried out frame by frame. I liken it to painting. Every frame has to be something that can be a print and framed on a wall.

So yes, it is labor intensive. Others might be brought in depending on circumstances, but largely outside of the artistic process. For the soundtracks and any music that I compose, I tend to lock myself away and record outboard gear for hours on end. Usually after many hours, very early in the morning, I hear what I'm listening for. The sound influences the structure along

with images. Then that recording gets rearranged with the film with software.



What do you wish to convey with "Untitled?" Not to reduce it down to what the "message" is, but I'm interested in hearing your take when the work itself is not apparent in what it's trying to say.

It's an experience, multi-layered and as intense as I could possibly deliver up

until this time. It's a dark odyssey that touches on certain areas within its chapters, like the abduction phenomenon, the dark side of Transhumanism, sexual obsession and mind control to name a few. I have no message to convey yet, and leave it up to whoever views it in whatever shape and format it takes on. In gaming terminology, "Untitled" is the inversion of so called "open world" gaming. The viewer has no choice while sitting in the unconscious hot seat. That being said, it's quite minimalist. It avoids language to reach the viewer through sensation. "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."



BALLADS BLUES & BLUEGRASS

A Review By Simon Phillips

This is like watching the holy grail of musical parties and the birth of several long running music formats, as this Pilot for a BBC music show, shot in 1961, five flights up in Alan Lomax's Greenwich Village apartment, is TV's first "All Back To Mine" party that has an incredible guest list, who all sit around and play and jam as the camera goes around the party very much like Jools Holland now does on *Later*. Only this is grainy black and white, and the sound has been recorded on a Magnacord machine by Jean Ritchie, often with the microphones in shot so you know it's a live recording.

Now, they sensibly chose to throw this party or series of parties around the same time that the "Friends Of Old Time Music" were holding some concerts, and this was the after party for the musicians and scenesters. The sort of party where Albert Grossman will allow Bob Dylan to attend as long as he's not seen sitting in the corner rolling joints, so you never see Bob, but from the moment you see and hear the New Lost City Ramblers you know you want to be in this room as they race through "The Foggy Mountain Top" and you get a good close up on all the musicians, and look round the room at Maria Muldaur or Carla Rotelo and the other partygoers. They then go into another room where Roscoe Holcomb is sitting with his banjo on his knee, and standing behind him is the immense and hidden figure of Willie Dixon, while John Cohen is sitting on the sofa with his guitar. After a short chat with Alan Lomax about meeting Doc Boggs, he sings "Single Girls" in this amazing high country voice, while the camera pans around the party at the girls. Before he plays "Old Smokey" Alan asks him about the special tuning you need to play it and what's it called, and Roscoe gives him a look and a shrug to say 'either you know it or you don't,' before John Cohen helpfully chips in with the "Old Smokey" tuning!! But damn, what a version.

We then go into the library and find Ernie Marris who tells us all about working in migrant work camps when he isn't playing his banjo. He then performs a very relevant tune, "Pop Goes The Missile" all about the recession of 1957/8 and how the money can be found for more missiles but not for more food and shelter for the poor. Yes, it is played to the tune of "Pop Goes the Weasel."

Clarence Ashley is sitting in the next room and gathered around him is Doc Watson, Clint Howard and Fred Price, and they give a good twanging version of "Banks of the Ohio." The camera is close enough that you could learn the fingering for this while watching the film. He gets asked by Alan what's the difference between country and city music! Which is just the sort of impossible to answer question that Jools Holland loves to ask.

We are back in the library where Rambling Jack Elliott is sitting, having just come back from a European tour that my dad was always very fond of reminiscing about, having seen and having met and spoken to Jack in London, so for me this was the real high spot of the film, hearing and seeing exactly what blew Dad's mind all those years ago. He starts off singing "Candy Man," a song he thanks for allowing him to do the tour, before he talks about Woody Guthrie and plays a magical version of "Talking Sailor Blues" that sounds exactly like the blueprint for Bob Dylan's vocal delivery for the next 10 years, at least, and a sorry tale about signing up for the merchant marine in WW2.

We go into another room to find Willie Dixon playing bass and Memphis Slim playing an electric organ that was actually a pump organ with a vacuum cleaner pipe powering it, as we find out later in the making of film that comes with this film. Wow, to sit and watch Willie play Bass is incredible, and both he and Memphis do a good double act routine during the interview section when they are asked where the blues come from... and they explain about it coming from slavery and normally having double meanings in the lyrics.

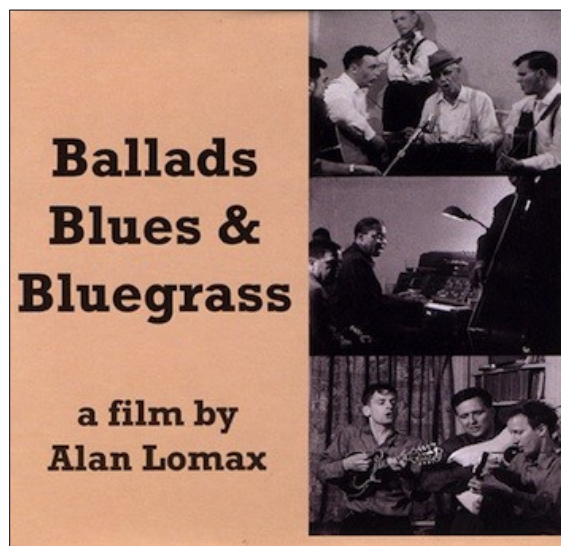
Next we are watching Jean Ritchie balancing her Dulcimer on the side of a sofa while she sings an old English folk song that sounds out of place at this party, but still pretty magical. But nothing prepares me for how incredible Peter Lafarge is, as I'm not sure I remember hearing of him before and he almost steals the film with his performance of "Ira Hayes." Peter looks well out of it and like he's struggling to stay upright, and yet he tells a story about Ira, an American Indian and one of the soldiers at Iwo Jima and a big hero who spends the rest of his life inside a whiskey bottle. It's moving and affecting and brilliantly heartfelt, a real treat.

We then switch back to Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon once more for "The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine" before it's time for one more little speech from Alan as our party host, and time for a communal sing along of "We Shall Overcome" in the tradition of every all-star concert ever since and every episode of *Later* with Jools Holland.

The film is followed by *Making Ballads Blues and Bluegrass* wherein John Cohen and George Pickow talk us through the making of the film and also tell us about who's who of the party guests and what they were asked to film and how they found the musicians they had in the room.

They also say that Maria Muldaur has written a book about being at the parties in this film. It is also fascinating to hear the stories behind all these people and the camera and sound recording techniques used. This DVD is a brilliant historic document and the sort of film that I want to watch time and again for the incredible performances.

If this review needs a grade it is a 10/10 must find and must watch film for capturing perfectly the Greenwich Village scene of 1961.



Ballads Blues & Bluegrass, a film by Alan Lomax (www.media-generation.com) (the association of cultural Equity/Alan Lomax Archive www.culturalequity.org)

Directed by Alan Lomax, Cameras by George Pickow, Sound by Jean Ritchie, Edited Anna Lomax Wood.

SHORTCUTS TO INFINITY - STEPHEN KALINICH & JON TIVEN / SYMPTOMOLOGY - YO MA MA

A Review By Simon Phillips

Yes, this is a double album in every sense of the word. Stephen Kalinich and Jon Tiven have confected to put out a double cd that is split into two separate bands, the first half being their "serious" selves and the second half being their reimagined teenage stoner selves in the modern world where they call themselves the Rev Stevie Nobody and Jack #ashtag.

To add to the confusion these two quite old guys have gone out of their way to confect a different sound, while trying not to sound too much like some of the bands they have previously worked with, which is quite a trick, if you're not familiar with this pair. The list for Stephen Kalinich includes writing songs for The Beach Boys through to PF Sloan, and Jon Tiven has a career that takes in singing in Big Star to playing with Wilson Pickett and the Alabama Shakes.

The idea for this project came up after they took a trip to India with PF Sloan, and once they had decided to do it, they managed to write a couple of hundred songs that got whittled down to the 31 songs on the two cds. They then enlisted a few friends to help them, including Dan Penn as recording engineer, Cody Dickenson on drums, and Brian May and Steve Cropper also put in appearances.

The Yo Ma Ma half of the record sounds like it was a blast to make. They sound like they are almost goofing off in the studio, singing anything they want to and think a couple of young guys might sing, judging from the opening of "You Want What You Want" with its whip smart lyrics about what they want. You're grabbed by the good time boogie with plenty of joking going on.

"Yo Ma Ma" itself has the sort of lyrics you'd expect if you're not playing a serious version of that put-down slanging match game, while "Let's Get Stoned" is not quite as dumb as it sounds, as they sound off about being so lethargic that nothing gets done. It could also work as a tongue-in-cheek lesson on why you shouldn't be permastoned.

"Don't Fuck With Me" is the sort of angry rant at anyone who has pissed them off, and you just don't want to be on the other end of this sort of tirade. "Hard to Be a Millionaire" is one of the standout tracks of the Yo Ma Ma half, being a brilliantly sardonic tune about how hard it is to live like a millionaire while being broke over a great bar band barrelhouse tune.

"Timebomb" is the sort of bitter twisted and full of hate breakup tune that grabs you each and every time as you find out just why this ex was such a time bomb. Probably the funniest tune on this cd is "Cooler Than You," which is a list song, as Jack #ashtag explains just why he's cooler than you. Oh, for sure he is.

"Grow a Pair" and "Hole" are full of equal amounts of fun and foul humour as they poke fun at people who should grow a pair or are A-holes. By the time they start singing about "Weed" all you want to do is have a toke and relax and not worry that these "young men" have some kicking brass behind them and really don't sound like young kids these days as they don't have

any autotune or even sound like they know what Pro Tools are. Oh, and the saxophone solo on “Snap My Fingers” is way too grown up for the teenage dumb lyrics that accompany it.

The *Shortcuts to Infinity* half of this package opens with “It Takes Time,” which is similar to a couple of the tunes on the comeback album by Dramarama *Everybody Dies*, especially “Goodnight America,” having a similar feel and lyrics worried about the direction America is headed in. “Out Of The Darkness” hits me every time I’ve heard the cd, and I’ve had to stop and listen to the guitar solo that comes after a good blues riff with good lyrics helping it to stick in your head.

“I Believe in Elephants” is both playful and serious as they ask the question in the time, while telling us how they believe in, among others, Bob Dylan and PF Sloan. It’s another of the tunes that I keep coming back to. This leads into “Climb Stone Walls,” which for me is a great mouth harp blues tune that harks back to the greats of the 40’s and 50’s with a nod towards Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee territory.

“Red Black Horizon” is a slow blues tune about wanting to find a better way of living than the current model, and addresses the current malaise well, as you hardly notice the seriousness of the subject matter while you’re listening to it.

“Fight for Peace” is about the only fight that matters, our right to live peacefully with each other and fighting for a peace you can’t ignore. Well, we need more songs ramming home this message. “Born Too Soon” is the point in the album that they come over all JJ Cale on us, and its almost crooned lyrics about a man in the moon work nicely.

I have to say I prefer the Yo Ma Ma half of this double album, but both halves have plenty to keep you coming back and to keep finding more quirks in the work well worth seeking out.

If this review needs a mark it’s a 7/10.



Shortcuts To Infinity By Stephen Kalinich & Jon Tiven / *Symptomology* By Yo Ma Ma

(MUS-102-2) (www.foothillrecords.com) (msmusicrecords)



CONTRIBUTORS' LINKS

Sean Madden

<http://www.clownvomit.org>

Dolorosa De La Cruz

<http://dolorosa-reveries.blogspot.com>

Andrew Maben

<http://art.andrewmaben.net/blacknight>

<http://art.andrewmaben.net>

andrew@andrewmaben.com

Joe Ambrose

<http://www.joeambrose.info>

Michele Dawn Saint Thomas

<https://www.facebook.com/msaintthomas>

msaintthomas@yahoo.com

Noah Charney

<http://www.noahcharney.com>

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/contributors/noah-charney.html>

Douglas Preston

www.prestonchild.com

<http://www.facebook.com/PrestonandChild>

F.X. Tobin

<http://www.fxtobinartwork.com>

B. Kold

<http://www.sensitiveskinmagazine.com>

Mike Hudson

http://www.amazon.com/Mike-Hudson/e/B00301STHM/ref=ntt_dp_epwbk_0

<http://www.powercitypress.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/01pagan>

Malcolm Alcala

<http://www.scatteredlightphotography.com>

Rob Sussman

<http://robsussman.com>

Michael Hann

<http://rejectandfade.tumblr.com>

Salena Godden

<http://www.salenagodden.com>

D M Mitchell

<http://www.paraphiliamagazine.com>

Max Reeves

<http://www.s-kollective.com>

Christopher Nosnibor

<http://www.christophernosnibor.co.uk/Pages/default.aspx>

Lisa Wormsley

<http://www.indigoburns.com>

Craig Woods

craigwoods77@hotmail.co.uk

Sarah Amy Fishlock

<http://www.sarahamyfishlock.com>

Matt Leyshon

mauvezone@inbox.com

Steve Overbury

<http://www.londonbabylon.co.uk>

<http://spoot-shoot.blogspot.co.uk>

Mark Stewart

<http://www.markstewartmusic.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/markstewartmusic>

Jim Coleman

<http://jimcolemanmusic.com>

Patrick Wright

<http://www.patrickwright.co.uk>

Gene Stewart

www.genestewart.com/wordpress

Díre McCain

<http://www.diremccain.com>

Ron Churchill

c/o paraphiliamagazine@gmail.com

Claudia Bellocq

c/o paraphiliamagazine@gmail.com

Tom Garretson

<http://www.guttersaint.org>

Lana Gentry

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=1489820863>

Chris Madoch

<http://www.chrismadoch.com>

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#/pages/Chris-Madoch-Art/130948425164?ref=ts>

<http://www.eye2eyedesignsinternational.com>

Michael Dent

<http://michael-dent.deviantart.com>

23mdent@gmail.com

Brett Garcia Rose

www.brettgarciarose.com

www.facebook.com/brettrozenblatt

Toby Huss

<http://tobyhuss.com>

<http://tobyhuss.tumblr.com>

<https://twitter.com/tobyhuss>

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=629068480>

Ron D'Alena

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TJHJOZzpX8>

Merle Leonce Bone

<http://www.myspace.com/leoncebone>

<http://swamplandzine.net>

<https://soundcloud.com/silkworms-ink/the-song-of-the-dead-souls-or>

<http://www.silkwormsink.com/products/read-write-hand-a-multi-disciplinary-nick-cave-reader>

dixē.flatlin3

<http://www.facebook.com/dixeflatlin3>

www.twitter.com/dixeflatlin3

Sid Graves

<http://www.cemeteryprints.com>

Robert Earl Reed

reedco1@yahoo.com

<http://www.reverbnation.com/robertearlreed>

<http://www.hillcountryrecords.com>

<http://www.carlenethecd.com>

Rick Grimes

<http://rickgrimesfansite.net>

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#/profile.php?id=100000040662738&ref=ts>

Matt Hill

<https://www.facebook.com/barkinglizards>

Richard A. Meade

<http://www.visualdata.net>

Rob Same

<http://www.robsame.com>

<http://www.facebook.com/RobSameOfficial>

David Gionfriddo

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#/profile.php?id=719854511&ref=ts>

<http://www.myspace.com/dcdaveg>

Claudia Murari

<http://claudiamurariphotography.blogspot.com>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/claumurari>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Claudia-Murari-Photo/155631767821966>

Ron Garmon

<http://larecord.com>

Adel Souto

<http://adelsouto.com>

<http://feastofhateandfear.com>

Cricket Corleone

<https://www.facebook.com/MirandaCricketCorleone>

Ross Eliot

www.profellsworth.com

www.rosseliot.wordpress.com

Heather Harris

<http://www.heatherharris.net>

<http://fastfilm1.blogspot.com>

Edward Paul Quist

<http://www.embryoroom.com>

Yen Tan

<http://yenfilms.moonfruit.com>

Simon Phillips

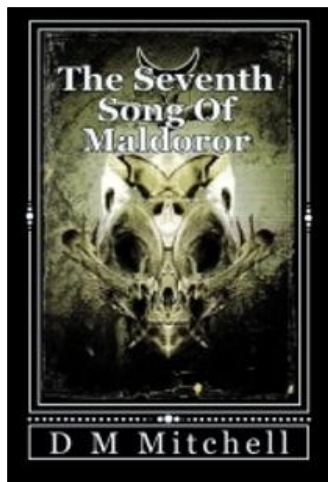
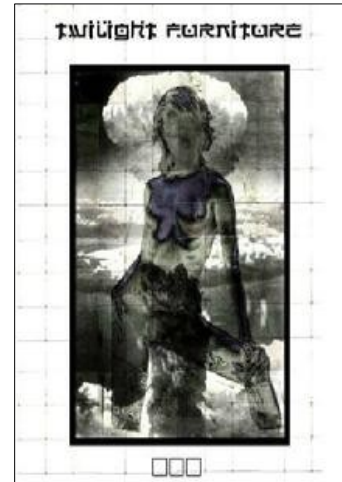
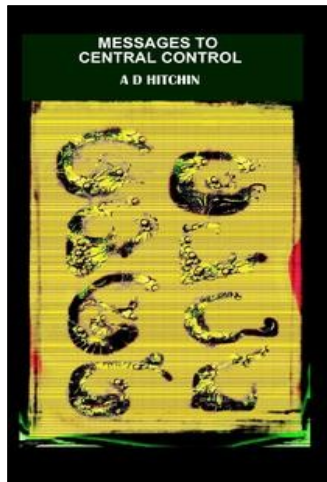
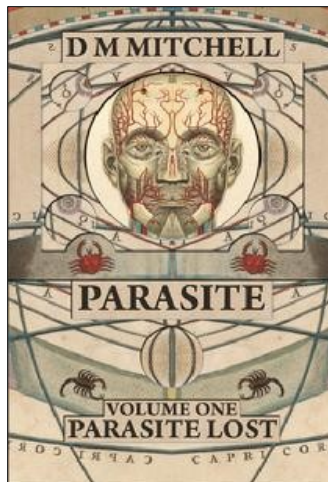
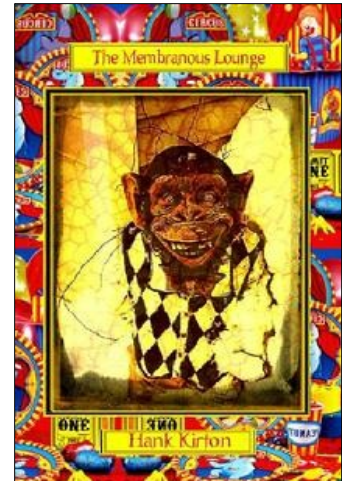
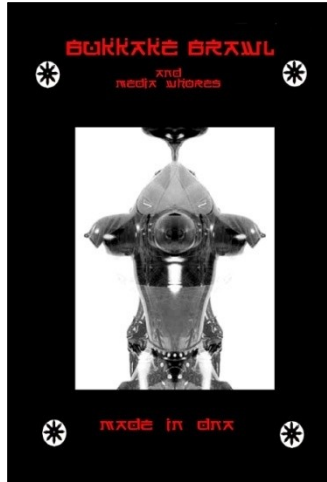
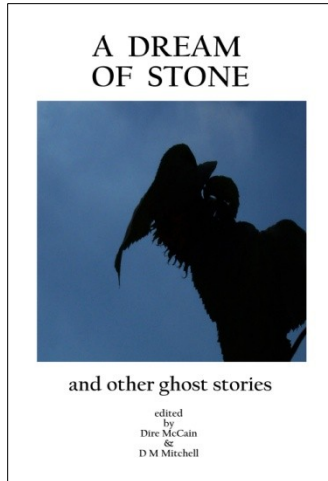
<http://www.whisperinandhollerin.com>

<http://simonovitch.wordpress.com>

<http://www.myspace.com/simonovitch>

PARAPHILIA BOOKS

<http://www.paraphiliamagazine.com/books.html>



CLINICALITY PRESS

<http://www.paraphiliamagazine.com/books.html>

