



PARAPHILIA
III



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Submissions

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EDITORIAL

Life is indescribably complex, and indefinable. It is both simultaneously homogeneous and beautifully heterogeneous – a unity that is also a diversity. It perpetuates itself via contradiction and complexity. By attempting to pin it down and define it, we unweave ourselves from the intricate web of existence. But in the end, all our manmade ‘philosophies’ and ‘-isms’ are nothing more than an attempt to fashion a fortress we hope will withstand the effects of entropy. Yet, paradoxically, entropy is the creative force itself, viewed from a limited and anthropocentric perspective.

In our innate desire to be ‘remembered’, to be ‘important’, to be ‘loved’, we erect towering walls, and sever ourselves from the Given, from anything that tugs us in an ‘undesirable’ direction. We cling to ludicrous ideas of our ‘individuality’ in the face of a universe that couldn’t care less. Little by little, in our quest to assert ourselves, we increasingly lose sight of the very thing we seek to promote.

Yet, there is always a part of us that is aware, that suffers. Our natures are not entirely solitary. In a universe teeming

with sentience, how could solitude be possible? Part of us wants to break down those walls we’ve erected, to touch other individuals, to rid ourselves of the self-imposed burden, because deep down, we know that no matter how ‘remarkable’ we are, without other people, it’s altogether meaningless.

Solve et Coagula. Nature demands complexity, and therefore, everything we create is subject to the laws of entropy. Our mania for fabricating structures is merely an attempt to simplify, to control, and in fact, constitutes an affront to Nature. The truth of the matter is, *no one* can define human nature, including us, the editors of this publication, and we make no claims or pretences to that. Suffice it to say that we deal with the human condition, wherever and however it manifests itself. We acknowledge that it often appears to be ‘in extremis’, which is not posturing on our part, or an affectation of ‘angst’. It’s been our experience that only when one’s back is against the wall, is one capable of shedding the protective illusions, and coming face to face with one’s ‘true’ nature, whatever that may be.

THE ELEVENTH LETTER

Dear PM,

You don't know what it's like. Maybe you do. Maybe it's me that doesn't know. I'm on the nth week without a drop of alcohol which hadn't seemed a problem and still isn't, you know, because I don't remember the last time I had a drink, which is why I said '*nth week without*'. It must be twice that, maybe three or four or five or six times that since I last had a spliff. In fact, it's even longer...I'm sure of it. And I've just given up the fags as well.

None of this seemed to matter until I read the second issue of *Paraphilia Magazine* and somebody's tale of something or other, which mentions drink and spliff, as some column in the Sunday papers might mention tea and biscuits or wine and cheese, almost a prerequisite for being there reading the magazine.

I felt deprived. I hadn't thought that maybe I was missing anything. It's not that I live a particularly healthy life... or an unhealthy one. It's just that...oh, I

don't know. I wish I had a drink in my hand and a spliff in my hand, and was attracted to the dark underhanded belly of things and pain and...could communicate a bit more freely and widely then, couldn't I? Get into a bit of the dark stuff and probably enjoy it, for funk's sake. I've stepped into places before where it was a bit of that, you know, a bit of the blinds pulled during the day, and the black room and hash and sex, and afterwards a proper wallow in Burroughs' place at The Beat Hotel. Not that I knew that at the time. I only caught up with him last month. Anyway, it wasn't bad. I stayed quite a while. Days without the sun in the flicker-tapes I'd heard of but never seen. I liked it. I saw the attraction but I didn't fancy the tattoos, you see.

There's darkness and there's darkness and to my mind, the two seem connected. My little friend having UVF carved into his face when they caught us in that park in North Belfast. It was stupid to think we could take a shortcut. I escaped but not before I saw their tattoos as they killed. A fish in Japan, still alive as that proud

Nipponese diet takes off the flesh. I doubt the UVF murder gangs listened to Nick Cave but, all the same, I know that when there are empty beer cans used as ashtrays in a living room that hasn't seen the sun for eternity and the bin is not emptied and there's dark matter in the wallpaper, that I'm somewhere near their place. *THEY COULD BE NEXT DOOR.*

So...me, I'm far too squeaky to stay for more than a few days even for the strange, cathartic sex that wipes the slate clean. I'd rather stay in the bath near the mountain with a candlelit and the window open to the sun, the moon and the stars.

Not that I'm a good-living Christian or anything like that. I kept my 'original' sin and seem to be doing fine patching together a bit of this and a bit of that and standing back to have a look at it. It still looks like the tree to me. And I'm still original, you know. Despite the tyranny of the fungal historian, The Precedent of The United States, I stand with the born yesterday as they invent the play for today.

No, what I was trying to say is that I wish I liked tattoos, that I

wasn't alarmed by them, that I didn't think of the UVF when I see them. I wish I didn't get a bit queasy with piercings and want to turn the strobes down and mute the squeal of the feedback. Observe the Curfew. I can hear the grass grow.

Not that I'm a pipe and slippers man or anything like that. And I do have that Velvet Underground LP. I seem to have been homeless for years now, with a little period here and a little period there in between, but nowhere in particular to be but in this shaggy dog of a story. So I see a lot of different places and fuck a lot of different faces. And I fit in as much as I can for as long as is necessary. Only if they really try to make me a tool of dark desire will I turn all dark myself. Mostly I'm all sweetness and light. No, really. It's just a defence thing for me, darkness.

I prefer barbecues in a back garden under a cloudless sky. Not that I'm too fussed on Australia. I don't really like having it all my own way, though. I get bored quickly. Whether friction or suction, I'm really a vibes man, and that's why I'm not so much a space invader as a temporary

secretary. Sure, I'll type your letter. You think I'm homeless because I keep running away from the enclosure. They say an Englishman's home is his castle. But as far as I can see, an Irishman's home is his coffin. So I'd rather book a flight to an upturned boat in a remote field and sleep there and wake up with the birds and the dawn than pretend or try to pretend that I enjoy the dark fraternity of the night. I don't, you see. Unless I'm working on a mix that I just can't get off the faders 'til it's done. And darkness and detritus and trash couture that bog down for bog downing's sake make me want to listen to Wings.

'Martin Luther, Phil and Don'

It's not what's in those trash bags, it's the bags themselves. Tared and feathered. Who put all that there in there? What's with this here label? Run away and catch yourself on. I empty them out and throw the bags away, and then take what was in them and put those out among the sunflowers. A bit of sun and they're right as rain. I'm not in the business of exchanging one bureaucracy of categorisation for another just because it has a lip-ring, y'know.

This is the haircut that defied a thousand cults.

Not that I'm purely a mainstream kind of man, you understand. I know where the underground is, and I have periods when I go right the way under it to spaces you'll never see because nobody's been there but me. I dug down deep and came up dirty, and when I surfaced, I was in *The Building*. That's where your lost stuff went. Yeah...you wish you could get it back. It's all in there, along with mine. Don't worry. It's safe. I'm looking after it. When the moment's right, the lost will have been found. But this is no exhibition. This is not a ticketed event. That's why I'm writing to you. No passive consumption for you. *Do not sell after 1999.*

In the meantime, I live in this text and do rewiring jobs, build connecting tunnels between your place and the exits of *The Building*. I've forgotten where the entrances are. But it will be opened. I am not alone. I have a submarine and know the depths, but you see, I don't live down here. I only go there when it seems that the surface of things won't give my head peace because some punk theorist has done a previous bad

wiring job that's short circuiting the crowd on your corner and buzzing up the whole present day crib with a shitepile of critical constipation. Ah...the ramrod! I'll sort it out. Wait a minute, can somebody give me a hand here?

When you saw the way, you didn't ask, I know. No discourse for you. You went up there and you fucking changed that light-bulb and revealed the whole *Kathedral*, and you who have seen everything gave notice, because not for nothing are you known as The Editor, survivor of regeneration, the wealth creator, playing The Pop Group at low volume under the sheets. Your specialty is that just when Hope thought she had it all to do, your electric mainline came on instead of the electric chair and that funk'd our plan to skill those old-skool kids on the block. You went ahead and invented literature, son, and we stand here and see to it that your time and your space smash through into today. This is our origin.

Deeper underground isn't just the passage to *The Garden*, you know. It's the place to be. If you can't rise above it, you can get the fuck under it, where the roots are and

rip those weeds the fuck out of upstairs. You see I'm a gardener and I like to grow things, and I'm not interested in filling in any competition-entry forms or peer-group evaluation sheets, no contracts to supply the supermarkets, no phone-calls to PayPal's Delhi operation.

I'm not particularly inviting anybody round to see my flowers but if you do come, bring a pair of shades because these things is bright and in colour.

To grow things I need light, the sun. I should have been born in a warmer climate, me. I need the rays, you know. And probably I should be writing for a magazine that's been dedicated to some Sun Goddess, that one...I've forgotten her name...what was it? That would be more in my line. But magazines dedicated to Sun Goddesses are few and far between.

When I see the way, I won't ask, y'know. No discourse for me. I'll go down there and fucking change that fuse and rewire the whole diagram, and not even God who sees everything will have noticed, because not for nothing am I known as the sub-bassist, the king

of the low frequencies, the stealth bomber, playing radio silence at top volume under the radar. My specialty is that just when *The Pope* thought he had it all deconstructed, the electric light comes on instead of the electric drill, and that'll fuck up the plan to drill into this poor kid's skull. You go ahead and invent Futurism, son, and I'll stand here and see to it that time and space were smashed only yesterday. There *is* no sin in originality.

I come from the fire and it's not the hell-fire y'know, but that big blazing rock that's up there behind that there dark cloud. You see, I know what it's like to be depressed, when that fucking cloud comes suddenly and without warning just when you were about to get naked and declare that the most important part of the tree of knowledge is not mom's apple pie but the motherfucking seed. But then, you see, it gets you, this lack of light, and you forget that it's better to run bare-assed and barefoot in the sun than toil underground for a pittance and so it's all back to square one, and I know what it's like to have to stay down there in that pit for a while, when you think you need the

money to buy shoes to put on your children's feet and to have to forget what you were trying to do in the sun and for the light while in your bare beauty, and I know what it's like to feel that life is a prison and long for the day of release, and I know we all have to make do with parole and conjugal visits and the little packets that get traded for the paper that takes days upon days just to get your grubby little mitts on, and I know how much those little packets can cost, and how you'll still pay for them even when they no longer work the magick they did early on because the magick was already in there, you know, and you'd only needed the key to turn it on. It's when it gets to be another routine, and one without further purpose that it all becomes intractably dark, this dreadful addiction that seemed to make a day under the dark cloud better but ends up being the darkest cloud of all, the one that binds you to the cloud and blinds you to the silver lining.

What can you do? They'll put your sick dog down painlessly, but you, you who have to live in violence and die in violence unless you want to die like a leaf that fell off the tree and browned on the ground until it rotted into mush,

some days you just have to want to cancel your subscription, and then they tell you that somebody else had opened your account. What can you do?

Ah, but now I'm getting it, aren't I? Now it's sounding a bit more like I'm in the right publication. Dark clouds. Not that I devote. I'm anti-everything. Different things on different days. I'm a variety act. I like revolving stages. I'm that man who comes on and starts spinning plates while scratching my own back.

I'm anti-this and anti-that, anti-you and anti-me. I've got my kung-fu grip on the heart of the anti-matter. It doesn't make me a bad person.

I mean, Crowley was a gas because...but I do like trees and animals and grass and sky. I'm all for a sunny day by the river without any of you lot around. I mean, I can live in the rafters up there in my own ass quite comfortably and see you across the way there looking out of your skylight at the same time as me every day. There's not much of a view, is there? Is that all that Facebook was about?

I'm something else. It's of no comfort, though, is it? You and me in our tribes of one. Sure, it can be lonely, but be not seduced by the uniforms that come along to take us back into re-generation. Being a tribe of one is a bit like being the first occurrence of a new strain of bacteria. I think you might be an anti-body. Yeah, and I'm the anti-dote. That'll do. Be an anti-body, OK? Work in isolation and rely upon quantum telepathy to defeat the surveillance state. (Can you hear me?)

And darkness, y'know, is really only the cover of might as you cross over from there to here. There's only room for one in the sub. YOU. I know you understand. Really. You do.

I have some seeding to do now, so I'd better be getting on. Some watering and some plate-spinning later. When I get them all going, you'll know about it. And when we get them all going at full speed, we will rejoice in the final extinction of humanity from this beautiful, beautiful garden.

Life and Times of Michael K by J.M.Coetzee was published by Secker & Warburg

COLUMN

THE LAST DREGS OF POVERTY: BEAT-UP - THE GENERALITY OF A PITIFUL MAN

Text and Images by Jim Lopez

Her uvula rattled, "Whose leg do I have to hump to get a dry-martini in this place?" When she toasted she raised her glass and gagged, "It will not be necessary for me to kill you all!"

Amnesia quickly sets in retarding or eliminating the memory of the man. There are no recollections of the warmth, tenderness or frictitious moments. She is THROUGH and all that remains of the man when he is brought up by a second party is the woman's simple and murderous question, "Who are you talking about?"

The man vanishes into a Mr. Nobody; a banished "Who."

Women give the impression that men quickly slip out of their conscience unless a man has fathered a child with a woman, then he slowly fades away. But the man who has not attained fatherhood is immediately done away with, annihilated or

consigned to an empty forgotten compartment somewhere in a woman where she locks the door and spits out the key.

The Myopic Myth has "it" that Man has had a reason to be done with Woman since they were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Women cyclically remind men, once a month for seven days straight, of how reckless and careless Man was back in the Garden for listening to Woman, and ruining everything for everybody.

Woman enticed Man to ignore reason, or to be more reasonable than was possible; thus, living in a psychotic pirate's perpetual gut-spin. This was Man's punishment for not taking responsibility for his Act. Woman's punishment, for not taking responsibility for her Act, was to live in Her inescapable coercions of false securities batted with a scornful eyelash that

entices another misfortunate situation.

If men and women could figure out the simple lesson of teaching children about the impermanence of concrete objects and the immanence of migrating forms, men and women would have a refined eye and a magnificent mind to enter, act, and live in the world. But the immunological impasse is that objects and forms are in a state of decay. Organisms are either at war for the purpose of individual survival or learning to barter in order to achieve social stability. This is the obvious arcane and archaic problem that is left in the care of every social creature that is inherently situated as individuals in a world where some are marked for subjection and others for mastery.

But is there a natural order other than decay?

Possibly. But certainty of a natural order when natural law is not fixed is a begging expansion, while my own decomposition is nothing but an invalid will that sips from the Eucharist cup.



Pitiful: Men have a tendency to petrify at a rapid speed when a loving romantic relationship comes to an end. The velocity of decay, during the demise of a relationship, is accelerated when a love-affair ends with a woman who “just” becomes FINISHED. It is a disgraceful ending with no respect or gesture for what was shared and said between the two. She smelled, she saw, she tasted, she swallowed, she nourished and she shit.

And why?

Because Man was impelled to listened to ambitious Women.

Women don't want men to listen, not really. A man whose greatest quality is to listen does not harness a woman's ultimate favor and respect.



Woman wanted Man to reign. Therefore, Woman handed Man the fruit of knowledge. Woman wanted Man to reign with love in his eyes and with the weight of a perilous world on his back; Man, however, was not erected for the

task, yet being a showoff, as Man was, he took a bite.

Men never leave their women. They forever carry them in their minds. Some men think of their women as trophies, and some men think of their women as gems, and some men think of their women as companions they lived with, never forgetting that they shared a moment together, as they attempted to imprint an immortal posture in a world defined by contradictions.

I assume that the reader is astute enough to keep in mind the title of this monody, and favor me with the benefit of the doubt that serendipity is a mordant and torpid reality in my life. I am more than aware of the fact that I am speaking in metonymical generalities, but I do so by and for the mere fascination that in my inductive study I have found the percentages to be in favor of this attributive generality. This does not establish, nor imply, a truth; it does, however, necessitate a conversation, and indicates that there are organisms that spurn bartering in favor of a complete all out warfare, regardless of the fact that human beings are creatures who cannot escape their condition

of metabiosis, yet organisms cannot escape war with the self.

Women have a tendency to prohibit men from setting up too many decorative pieces in the house. I suppose the reason for this is so that the man will leave nothing behind that reminds the woman of him. For Christ sake, women even live longer than men, so he better not leave anything behind.

Does anyone feel as bad for a widow as they do for a widower? A man who out-lives his woman humps the rest of his life cradled in Odysseus' loneliness. A woman who out-lives her man seems to get on with life in a more noble fashion.

We all know there are maniacal and fiercely dominating men, who beat the beauty out of their fearing, dedicated women. These men are the viperous vapors that lead to a rash on humanity's ass; but then, there exists those men who explore the world, knowing they do so, as imperfect men who are dying. The exploring man is cognizant of his imperfect knowledge; thus, he is a man attempting, with his best efforts put forward, to communicate as

honestly as possible, which is an imperfect endeavor.

Why is language an imperfect form of communication?

Because the anatomy of language and the methods we employ, at this moment in history, are subject to multiple interpretations and misunderstandings by the multitude. The explorer attempts to overcome this inherent obstacle. (Where's the evolution?)

There is, nevertheless, one sure unifying, universal truth: men and women have a fundamental need to matter. Even those that say they don't do. This is what is so miserably heart-breaking about a women's propensity to be FINISHED. She's not even mindful of a simple courtesy or generous posture to remind herself that she once had a man. It really beats up a man and hastens the process of the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics.

Everything is decaying or burning up as the shared properties between matter, heat, and friction continue to speed further away from their origin.

When a man enters a woman there is a part of him that never wants

to forget his mother, the source of his life: the vagina stretched around the head, unless it was a caesarean birth.

People seem to pose their manners with a stoic posture when coping with the death of their father; however, when their mother dies it's acceptable for one to blunder behavior and fall apart. I'd venture to say that even little girls get over their father's death more rapidly than they do their mother's death. This is assuming that anyone ever gets over either parent's death, regardless of the parent's character.

Women appear to be more capable and ready tailored for getting over the loss of lovers than men are. Women know that the exploring man has an inability to forget his women. These "adventurous" women need to make an impression so that the aching man, who ponders over his mistakes and his woman's coldness, might say something to the world about her through his desire to effectively communicate with the sublime. This is usually done through the archetype of the Legendary Lovers, who are being drubbed as discursive drivellers living dissolute lives, while

corporations buy and defeat as many forms of humanity, by manufacturing and selling a bare minimum of human characteristics .

Alchemy is a three act play with value as the center of tragedy. Cynicism is the life of a dog not a negative ass. It is a philosophy that exposes its member by lifting its leg in the memory of time.

Perhaps Odysseus' dog, Argos, waits for us all. In contention Odysseus continued his travels. Argos dreamt across the dark, wine seas, where he attempted to recreate scenes of transcendence until he answered death's call, falling at the feet of his master.

In the paragraphs of prose may be found poetry. In the style of stanzas poetry may be lost, never to be found, like a passive voice. Thus the hair of the dog sheds his drunkenness only to gain the question of drunkenness. It is the definitive question of Hermeneutic Reception Theory, which is distilled in the drink of nobility.

The question of nobility is the same question of intoxication. But

the question of intoxication is not the same as nobility.

Aluminum will never oxidize; however, all questions and answers corrode in their enunciations.

If a relationship heats up the base metal to a critical temperature, and the relationship is willing to hit the oxygen handle the relationship will reach Rapid Control Oxidation, and a bonding emerges from the flame.

On what terms and by what properties are the strongest metals created: Compressive Strength, Tensile Strength, Flexure Strength, Malleability Strength, etc, etc, etc.? Iron and Carbon are natural metaphors. They are the cohesive strengths that shape distinctive relationships nurturing revelation out of its stigmatism.

The question of the eye is the recreation Oedipus. The recreation of the world is the creation of the person of vision. The slanting of the East slants into the West between Sophia's breasts. And if the East is the Orient does that mean that the West is the Disorient? Someday,

we're going to get the bottom of our orientation.

It is irrelevant, whether I know who is who or what is what. What is relevant is that I know what who might become.

Why deliver sarcasms through understatements when Sapir-Whorf Theory understands the "relative" and tenuous nature of language? Tone is a message not dependent on words. Syntax is a dangling vein left on the gnawed bones of good eatin' regurgitated in a Paleolithic desert.

There is no truth but of course there is truth.

Is it true that syntax is the only way that one can arrive at understanding what someone else is attempting to communicate? What can one truly convey through letters? Someday it may be possible to start a story with no syntax.

Sure this man/woman generality may be easily explained as the ramblings of a man pitying his loss. Of course Odysseus was fortunate to have shrewd Penélopê hold suitors at bay as she weaved an unending sweater

of commitment for her husband. Women probably suffer as much as men when parting. But women still live longer and get the house, and I'm not talking about the house simply as a physical object. I'm talking about the house that the man adored because the woman decorated it with her charm, and her nurture, and her wit, and her curves, and her grace.



Every woman that a man has loved becomes a supernova in his universe.

Woman is the Star that outshines Man. There was no reason to be mobile without her.

She was inspiration. Her Absence and my Missing have created a vanishing of everything that was everlasting, and I am left with the truth of the matter: that I must bear the burden of my foolish faults.

She was my woman in a time when we both quoted T.S. Elliot, only it wasn't really T.S. Elliot. It was a time when the Banking Institutions subordinated, in some obscure way, the Dog of Cynicism.

There was a time when the dog came about. It was a day of grapefruit and sun dried tomatoes; a day of beans with no means; a day when man was a slave to the dog, because the dog was a slave to man. It was an evolutionary occurrence stamped as a good day. It was hot and it was cold. It was a Testament of neglect, a Testament of regret, and a Testament of lament. It was an addiction to failure and an obsession for pleasure.

From these generalities I have endeavored to established patterns of abstractions that are

neither theoretical nor indifferent. I have merely ascertained ideas of myself and others through oppositional language which is both bruised and unripe. The prevailing conceptions of worth and value distort my ability for self-determination. I have used generalities merely to rearrange and situate myself in a world of contradicting generalities which prevail over the entire species. My intention has nothing to do with wrong or right. It's about compassion, responsibility and fuck-off, also known as Benevolence. I wish all well, but I

don't have the energy for all. Maybe a woman is simply saying she has no more energy when she "just" becomes FINISHED.

I turn, therefore, to Robert Graves to end my pitiful apostrophic anacoluthon, "Men are lost without the magical and protective love of women; and both sexes lose power unless they can take recourse to manual crafts and constant companionship."

(What Has Gone Wrong?)

To be continued...





I SHOULD BE SO LUCKY

By Salena Godden

Photo © Thomas Evans

Upon waking she knew she'd had
a good weekend
She blinked in the sharp sun light
of sobriety
And at the vague recognition of
her own bedroom
She was naked except for her
stripper shoes and one shredded
black stocking
The other fishnet stocking was still
tied about her throat

She loosened it, this movement
alerting her that the bed was
soaking wet
She itched at herself noting all her
pubic hair was shaved off
She fingered at the smegma
collected around the hood of her
clitoris
Her cunt hole was tender to the
touch and still slippery and wet

Her pubic bristles covered with
the chalky residue of old cum
She scratched her perineum and
her itchy asshole
Noting the shit-hot burn of that
anal thrush infection had returned
with a vengeance
Her bottom lip was awash with
raw new cold sores
On her furred mustard
discoloured tongue she could taste
Jack Daniels
Her rotting back teeth harboured
flavours of burnt plastic and
sperm
Her nose was caked with rocks of
white and bloody green and she
picked it
Examined it, licked at it and
wiped a bogey on the sheet next to
her
Her hands smelled like cock, like
rubber and tobacco, piss and milk
Her fingers and nails were black
with burning stuff
The glass crack-pipe lay used next
to a pile of limp used and torn
condoms
Her forearm ached and looked
bloody scabby
From the *Born To Fist* tattoo she
now thought better of
Because she had wanted *Live Fist,*
Die Young
And her period, still two months
late

Yes, she had to admit, it had been
a good weekend
Pregnant, tattooed, high on crack
With raging herpes and anal
thrush by Monday morning.
There was a snoring and a rancid
stench coming from the foot end
of the bed
She lifted the stained yellow and
damp sheet and peered
There was a hairy pot-bellied,
bearded man at the bottom of her
bed
A man surgically stapled into red
rubber women's underwear
The tight corset was ripped and
the crotch pierced with stiletto
heel holes
He was still blindfolded and
handcuffed to the collar
Of a stinking three-legged
whippet
Which lay docile and dozing by
his side
The dog had had its teeth
removed; its jaw was flopped
slack
She kicked the man with her
glassy spiked heel
He woke with a start then
proceeded to cough and gag
The coughing continued hacking
until he gagged and vomited on
the dog
The whippet, now awake, licked
and lapped at the green bile with
emetophilic vigour

She kicked the dog too and then thought it was probably time to get up

Yes, she had to admit, yes, it had been a good weekend
Pregnant, tattooed, high on crack
With raging herpes and anal thrush by Monday morning.

Walking into the bathroom she eyed herself in the mirror
She had whip marks, welts all over her back, pinpointed by cigarette burns
Her breasts, belly and thighs were an atlas of purple hand-print bruises and red love bites
Her neck was a raw reminder of her recent penchant for strangulation during rhabdophilia
The bath was shit smeared from a ten-man session of brown showers
Pulling her cunt open and pinching her clitoris between her forefingers
She grunted and proceeded to piss standing-up with her legs apart over the toilet
Her knees were bent slightly but she was splashing the bowl
Piss streamed down the inside of her leg, onto the toilet seat and over the floor
An urophiliac dwarf crawled from under the sink and duly complied to drink it

The dwarf licked the piss off her black stiletto pulling at his priapistic nob

The phone started ringing and he suddenly jerked and came all over her ankle

She barked at the dwarf to clean her shoe

He snivelled with podophilic satisfaction

With cum dripping off his permanent erection

He lapped at her ankle and shoe

Sticky cum smeared all over his mouth and chin

She farted, sniffed and limped into the living room

Trying to shake the clinging dwarf off who was dragged across the floor like a child

Whilst she answered the phone, she dug about in the over-filled spilled ashtray

Searching for a decent butt to light up

Upon finding a juicy chip of a spliff, she looked for a lighter

Among the white powdery coffee table surface debris

Littered with glasses, vodka bottles and ripped cigarette and rizla packets

She couldn't concentrate on the voice on the other end of the line or give a fuck

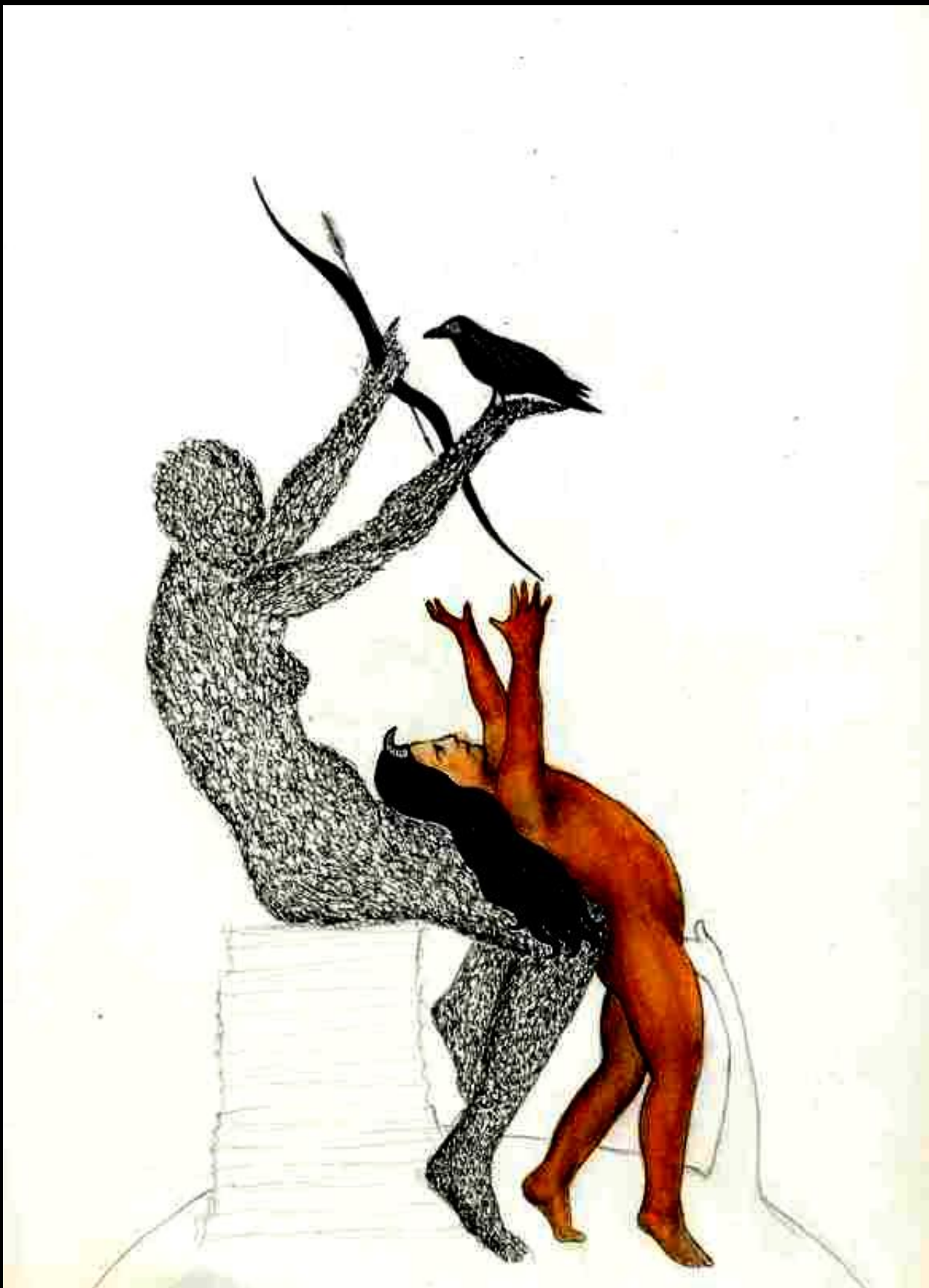
She mumbled incoherently *fuck yourself* and hung-up

But, Yes, she had to admit, it had
been a good weekend
Pregnant, tattooed, high on crack
With raging herpes and anal
thrush by Monday morning.
Whilst she smoked the joint she
stumbled into the kitchen
Stepping over a floor strewn with
douches, blindfolds, whips
Shit covered fruit, empty pipes
and passed out casualties
Naked, battered and in varying
costumes, ripped underwear,
gimp masks
Some still tied up in leather
bindings and impaled on
umbrellas, drumsticks and fishing
rods
She passed a young curly haired
boy passed out in the sex-swing
Suspended from the ceiling with
his ass in the air
He was drenched and soaked in
fifteen types of urine
In the kitchen she took an egg
from the fridge and dropped it
Into the young boys gaping
speculum stretched anus
He sighed but barely resisted or
moved
She shrugged, bored and went
back into the kitchen to get herself
a vodka from the freezer
She glugged from the bottle and
went back into the living room

She chopped out cocaine on the
taut leather thigh of a blind
sixteen year old
A tattooed biker chick who was
tied spread-eagle to a knife
throwers wheel
She snorted as long as the knee to
the hot tight black leather encased
cunt

The phone rang again, she sighed,
sitting, squatting and rocking
gently
On the face of an old man with no
teeth, forcing his nose into her
itchy raw arse hole
'Hello please may I speak to Kylie
Minogue?'
His mouth began sucking her, his
gum gnawing, his fingers rammed
inside her
'Speaking... ' she said and smiled
As she conducted the telephone
interview with Just Seventeen
She came, shuddered and gently
fanny farted
Yes, Miss Minogue, she had to
admit it had been a good weekend
Pregnant, tattooed, high on crack
With raging herpes and anal
thrush by Monday morning.

*"Pleasure only starts once the worm has got into
the fruit, to become delightful, happiness must
be tainted with poison." ~ Georges Bataille*





WAITING FOR MY MOCHA TO COOL

By Charles Christian

Drawing ©Alfred Muro

“Listen,” says Nikita, as she begins to unzip my jeans. “At work today I overheard a couple of the girls talking about me. One of them called me Concrete Eyes. What do you think she meant by that?”

Nikita looks up at me. I can smell the Jameson’s on her breath. It’s obviously been another bad day at the office so I lie. Well I am a man – and a pretty shallow one dimensional man at that. There’s stationery in my filing cabinet

with more depth than me. And I am about to get a blow-job, so I make up a story I hope she'll believe - or at least will want to believe.

But how do you tell a woman (a woman who at this very moment is tying back her long hair - using one of her Montblanc pens as a hairpin to keep it in place - and about to go down on me) that the reason the girls at work call her Concrete Eyes is because they are unusually perceptive. It took me the best part of twelve months to realise she's possibly the most clinical, obsessed workaholic, emotionally sterile, empty, un-lived-in woman to have ever walked the planet.

Sometimes I think this is the only reason why the sex we have is so good - because we both lose ourselves in the physicality of the action to escape from the world.

We break up not long after this conversation. Nothing dramatic. No hysterics, confrontations, tears nor anything like that. That was never Nikki's style anyway. What happens is Nikita gets the opportunity to join a Silicon Valley start-up. She takes it. It means her relocating to their Palo

Alto offices. She does. And so we just drift out of each other's orbits. Four years of intensive fucking, fighting and drinking and then it's over. All that remains behind is a stack of unresolved issues - like so many unmatched socks at the bottom of a laundry basket.

Here's the thing... It's 11:00 o'clock in the morning. I'm sitting in a Starbucks coffee shop, in the basement of a Borders bookstore, checking out the emails on my Blackberry, waiting for my mocha to cool, when two women catch my eye. Well, not so much the women as the sight of two amply filled pairs of designer jeans sashaying their way across my eyeline - the sequined patterns on the jeans' back pockets swaying, in an ever-so-slightly disturbingly erotic fashion, from left to right with each step.

The women sit at the table next to mine and, as she scrapes the whipped cream off her latte and spoons it into her mouth, I hear one of them complain that the thought of going on a diet in the New Year is spoiling her enjoyment of the Christmas party season. Her companion points a finger in her direction - an exquisitely manicured, tanning

salon-hued finger. "Listen," says this second woman, "modern life sucks but when you're a natural blonde, cellulite is not an option."

The waitress brings over their food orders. They've both chosen mozzarella cheese paninis with blueberry muffins to follow. There are villages in the Sudan that eat less calories than that in a week.

My phone rings. It's Vonda McIntyre, she's the Aussie features editor on one of the magazines I regularly write for. "Hi Lex," she says. "How's your diary fixed for the middle of the month?"

"Why?" I ask.

"There's a tech conference in Silicon Valley we'd like you cover. Do some profile pieces - Gates, Jobs, the two guys from Yahoo! - or it might be Google."

"Is there a difference?"

"I'll ignore that. Also one of the Murdochs, Al Gore and possibly Bono - you know, the usual suspects."

"How much?" Vonda quotes me a rate. "Business class flights, suite

in a good hotel and the hire of a decent car?" I add.

"Of course," she says.

"You've got a deal, I'm already packing."

"Not so quick, Don't forget the party next week. I'll expect to see you there - and I want at least one dance with you," she says, before hanging up the phone.

The last thing I want to do is spend a fortnight living out of a suitcase in a hotel on the other side of the planet. But, modern life sucks. We all have bills to pay and we all have our price.

As I leave the coffee shop, there's the old Robert Palmer track 'Addicted to Love' playing on the sound system.

I used to go to school with Robert Palmer - he was a plain vanilla Alan in those days. He was a couple of years older than me but I used to go to all the gigs his first band played. Even then he was so cool that when he walked into the room everyone - the teachers included - could feel the chill. I only use this connection once and that is to secure an interview with

him - turns out it is just a few months before his premature death.

Towards the end of the interview, with the recorder switched off and the notebook put away, we share a couple of jokes about people we'd both used to know back then. "Do you remember Annette Kay?" he asks.

"Of course," I say. "I fancied her something rotten but she only ever had eyes for you."

"Tell me about it," he says. "She haunted me for years. She was my stalker before it was fashionable to have a stalker. Thought I might have to take out a restraining order."

Then, just as the conversation is coming to a close, he gets all serious. "You know, you and me still have one thing in common. I sing the blues. You listen to the blues. And we both live the blues."

I never meet him again but a few years later I run into Annette Kay. I'd gone back to my home town for a few days to sort out some loose ends after my father died. One of the tasks includes

returning a stack of books to the main library - and there is Annette Kay. She's at the front desk doing almost exactly the same job at the library as when I last saw her over half a lifetime ago. I say "Hi" and arrange to see her for a coffee and danish at lunchtime.

Sitting there in the coffee shop, she absent-mindedly stirs the froth on the top of her cappuccino and tells me how her life effectively ended when Robert died.

"Don't get me wrong," she says. "I lost him the day he got his first recording contract, as I knew that there'd be no place in his life for a small-town girl like me. So I stayed here, married, had children - I'm a grandmother now - but there was always this feeling of emptiness, that something was missing, that all the excitement had been drained away. The one thing that kept me going was the faint, futile hope that one day Robert might come back into my life."

I say nothing. There are no words I can say.

"Modern life sucks," says Annette, as she stares deep into her empty

coffee cup, “and it sucked my world dry a long time ago.”

The party takes place in the corporate entertainment suite at the top of the magazine’s Bankside head office, just along from the Tate Modern. It’s a combined Christmas party and celebration of ten years in print. My ego is suitably massaged by the sight of a number of my cover stories featured among the highlights of the last decade although this feeling of joy is somewhat dampened by the fact the first person I run into is Jeremy Mill.

Mill is an executive publisher. This is magazinease for a poisonous two-faced sleazoid who’ll stab you in the back and spike your stories at a moment’s notice if he thinks the contents just might possibly upset the precious, sensitive skins of the advertisers and PRs he spends all his days and nights schmoozing.

In a world of brown-nosers, he gets his nose so far up people’s arses he should change his name to Pinnochio. As usual Mill is wearing a pair of pointed, lizard-skin cowboy boots with his suit, which would be fine if the magazine was based in Scottsdale,

Arizona and not the south London borough of Southwark. Mill thinks the boots give him a character. He should get out more.

Of course the last time Mill spiked one of my stories it all went very wrong for him.

“Rowena’s mad you know,” says Morag, in a conspiratorial whisper as we drive up to the house.

Morag - I never catch her full name - is the PA for the implausibly named lifestyle and organic health food guru Doctor Rowena De’ath, so when she says Doctor Rowena is mad, my heart sinks.

I have this theory that famous people always select PAs in their own image - albeit slightly inferior copies. So, a beautiful woman will always have a beautiful PA - but one that’s not quite as good looking as herself. This is what worries me, because my first impression of Morag, with her mad eyes twirling around their sockets, is that she’s certifiably barking.

Immediately inside the front door to the house is another door, a chicken wire screen. I assume it’s

to keep any livestock outside but soon realise it's to keep them in. Five dogs, four ferrets, three chinchillas, two finches and one green parrot - the latter perched on a lampshade - greet us on entry. All are in glowing health, in a room that would put Miss Havisham to shame.

The floors, the carpets, the walls, the furniture - as well as sundry leather goods that had once graced horses long since rendered into dog food - are encrusted in a two-inch thick layer of dog hairs, feathers, faeces, mud and coal dust. If the asbestosis doesn't do for us the emphysema, anaphylaxis and psittacosis will.

"Rowena's been tidying up," says Morag, "I've seen it much worse than this," she adds.

Clad in a frowsy dressing-gown, with a wellington boot on her right foot and a sheepskin slipper on her left, we discover the good doctor cleaning out the parrot's cage, ladling the droppings into an overflowing bucket that lives beneath the kitchen table - a table still cluttered with the debris from last night's meal.

"Rowena has two doctorates," says Morag, as if this somehow excuses the squalor. It is then that the parrot attacks me.

Leaving Mike (my photographer) and I to fight with the parrot, Morag bustles off to help prepare Doctor Rowena for our interview. This takes place about five minutes later in the study, apparently the only clean and tidy room in the house. Rowena is now all bleached-white smiles and starched white coats but the damage is already done. And I've made sure Mike has taken plenty of shots of the lovingly framed qualifications that decorate the walls of the study.

Back at my office a little research soon unlocks a petri-dish full of secrets. If 'Doctor' Rowena's qualifications had been cut from back of breakfast cereal packets, they couldn't have had any less credibility.

Her alma mater is not accredited by any recognised educational authority. Then there is the little matter of five outstanding complaints being pursued by advertising standards authorities and the fact none of her range of herbal additives to enhance sexual

performance have ever been approved by medical or healthcare product regulators either here in Europe or in the US.

What starts as a hagiography ends as a hatchet job. I'm pleased with it but Mill is not amused - turns out the Doctor De'ath's business is a subsidiary of one of the magazine's largest advertisers, so he spikes my story.

This is one of the occasions when it helps to be a freelance rather than a staff writer. The article is still mine so I run it by a couple of other titles and eventually 'Wired' picks it up. Six months later it wins an award, leaving Mill to explain to his masters why he let this opportunity slip through his fingers. Modern life sucks but people always get what's coming to them.

"Still not drinking," Mill says, eyeing my can of RedBull.

I resist the temptation to crumple the empty can on his prematurely balding head and console myself with the thought that in the morning not only will I not have his hangover but I'll also be able to remember the names of each and every woman that laughs in his

face, when he tries to make passes at them later this evening.

I escape Mill's company when Amanda Brierley swans into view. "Ciao Lex," she says, proffering her cheek for me to air-kiss. She doesn't acknowledge Mill's existence, save to hand him her empty glass. She probably thinks he's a waiter and is wondering why waiters are wearing cowboy boots these days.

Amanda and I go way back to a magazine we worked on together many years before. But, while I remained a writer, she jumped ship to become a suit and is now the CEO of a whole publishing, TV and radio empire.

"Good to have you onboard for the Silicon Valley job," she says. "Listen," she adds, "I'm sorry to have to love you and leave you but I've got to get back home. It's fucking unbelievable but we've got babysitter problems. I can't attend my own company's fucking Christmas party because my fucking nanny's attending a fucking Christmas party of her own, with a bunch of other fucking nannies somewhere in Chelsea tonight."

"Behind every great woman there is a great babysitter," I say.

"Too fucking true," says Amanda. "Modern life sucks and we are the suckers who made it this way." She kisses me on the cheek and sweeps out in a cloud of Guerlain and Donna Karan.

"Glad you could make it," a voice says from behind me. It's Vonda, making her way back from the bar with two fistfuls of drinks.

We air-kiss. "Love what you are doing with your hair," I say - she's had it highlighted in a neon blue.

"Why thank you kind sir," she replies in a faux Southern belle accent. As she makes her way back to her table, she turns and calls back "And don't forget that dance."

"Catch you later," I say. Halfway across the room she turns my way again. Is she looking back to see if I am looking back to see if she is looking back at me? I decide to ask for that dance sooner rather than later.

We're still together when the DJ plays the last dance of the evening.

"Give you a lift home?" I offer.

"Why," asks Vonda, "are you my designated driver?"

"No," I reply, "but you're the perfect accessory for my car. It's cerulean blue - same colour as your hair."

She laughs, we collect our coats and head for the lifts. We get one to ourselves and although I know she's had too much to drink and I'm taking advantage of her, I lean over and kiss her. No cursory air-kisses this time as she responds with an urgent moist kiss on my lips.

Do our mouths remain pressed together for longer than is strictly necessary? Is that her tongue against my teeth? I pull her close to me, so close I can feel the hard metal of her nipple piercings jutting through her blouse and brushing up against my chest. By the time the lift opens on the ground floor I've got my tongue half-way down her throat and she has one hand down the front of my jeans.

I drive her back to her flat. We go in, she doesn't even pretend to offer me coffee. Instead we head straight for the bedroom and take our clothes off. We've both been here before and we both know what happens next. Only this time it doesn't.

I'm lying on the bed and she is straddling me but as I look up into her face I sense something wrong. It's not the usual pre-coital oh-shit-I'm-drunk-and-behavingly-stupidly-and-am-about-to-exchange-bodily-fluids-with-someone-I-hardly-know-and-then-he'll-never-call-me-again-which-will-make-me-bad-but-not-as-bad-as-I-already-feel-about-being-unfaithful-to-my-regular-partner-who's-very-nice-but-just-a-little-bit-boring-which-is-the-whole-reason-why-I'm-having-extra-curricular-sex-in-the-first-place remorse we've all encountered before.

This is different. She's lost, lonely and 10,000 miles from home.

"We don't have to do this now," I say. I can see tears welling in her eyes, as I pull her down towards me and hold her tightly as she sobs herself to sleep. Modern life sucks and sometimes we all need

to seek solace in the arms of strangers rather than face another day of desolation alone.

In the early morning, as dawn's rosy glow is just starting to illuminate the concrete canyons of Camden Town, I go to the bathroom. On impulse I open the cupboard over the sink. In it there is enough nembatal to kill a rampaging rhino. I remove the packets of pills and put them in my jacket pocket.

Later that morning she brings me oranges and a mug of green tea. It is Japanese genmaicha tea served in souvenir mugs from 'The Prisoner' shop at Portmeirion. The slogan of Vonda's mug reads 'I will not be pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed or numbered' while the one on mine says 'I am not a number, I am a free man'.

"About last night," she says. "I'm sorry it didn't turn out the way you wanted but thanks for being there for me and providing a shoulder to cry on."

"Never explain, never apologise for having real emotions or showing true feelings. They're scarce-enough commodities in this

world. Listen," I then say, 'you know I'm off to the States tomorrow? When I get back perhaps we can meet up and, well, see what happens?'"

"I'd like that," she replies, adding "You do mean it don't you?"

At the time I say it, I do mean it. But we never make that second date. Ten days later Vonda is dead. A suicide bomber explodes his backpack on the bus she is taking to work one morning.

By then I am in California and it's only as I'm sitting in a Starbucks on El Camino Real in Palo Alto, leafing through a five-day-old copy of 'The Times' newspaper, waiting for my mocha to cool, that I see her picture and read her name in the casualty reports.

Time stops. My mocha goes cold. So many wasted lives. So much precious time squandered. So many opportunities missed.

Time starts again when walking into that coffee shop - and back into my life - comes Nikita.

Although I'm sitting in an alcove, not in direct view, I realise trying to avoid her is not possible. So, I

wait until she's collected her order and taken a seat before inhaling a deep breath and walking over to her table.

"Hi Nikki," I say, "California clearly agrees with you, you're looking great." She looks up from her cappuccino. She's a lot leaner, wearing her hair in a short almost boyish cut, sun-tanned and verging on muscular in a Madonna Ciccone stylee. "I'm over here on an assignment for a few days and I, I..."

Her eyes still have that far-away look in them. They always did unsettle me. They still make me nervous and I'm starting to motormouth as I hear myself asking "What's it been, about 12 years now since we last saw each other?"

"4481 days," is all she says.

So many wasted lives. So much precious time squandered. So many opportunities missed. Modern life sucks. Modern life sucks, but it's the only life we've got so best make the most of it.

On impulse I lean across and kiss her. Her lips taste of cinnamon. "What are your plans for the rest

of the day?" I ask, sitting down at her table. "There's a lot I need to say to you."

"Nothing now," she replies.

Later we drive back to Nikita's house. It's on the beach at Half Moon Bay, with an enormous first-floor, bleached-wood deck and covered veranda overlooking the ocean. "You must be doing well if you can afford this," I say.

"It's not mine, I just rent it - and rent it cheap," she replies, as she unlocks the door. "The owners have been trying to sell it for years. Problem with the geology or the survey reports or something."

Much, much later she whispers in my ear "Are you still awake?"

I am. But only just - the last few hours having been devoted to a sustained, urgent, hard, dirty, sweaty and pleasingly imaginative bout of making-up-after-breaking-up sexual activity.

"Listen," she says, nuzzling my ear with her nose, "did you feel something just now, like the earth move?"

I laugh. "I never took you for a Mills & Boon fan?" I say, as I reach down to stroke her in a place that makes her sigh.

"No seriously, I mean like an earth tremor," she replies. But then she begins to kiss my face, my lips, my throat, my chest, my stomach and we find something better to do with our mouths than talk.

Later still, I'm sitting up in bed, looking out towards the ocean. Something's wrong. Something's very wrong. The sky has disappeared - there is no Moon, nor any stars to be seen. All I can see through the picture window at the far end of the room is a seething, swirling grey-green wall of water rushing straight towards us.

Tsunami!

I grab Nikita. "Quick," I say, shaking her, we've got to get out of here! Now!"

I wake up with a sudden start. I've been dreaming... having a nightmare more like. I take a deep breath and lie back on the pillow. It is then a light bulb switches on inside my head. In the back of my mind I recall a story I filed at the

time of the 1989 Oakland/Loma Prieta earthquake.

Shit! So that's why Nikki's landlords have never been able to sell the property. It is the geology - the house sits at the Pacific Ocean end of the San Andreas Fault. The earth really did move for us - we were fucking our way through an earthquake.

I look around, Nikita is lying peacefully asleep next to me and everything is as it should be in the bedroom. No. Everything is not as it should be.

There's someone else in the room, a figure standing silhouetted in the moonlight by the window. It's Vonda - even though she is looking out to sea I recognise her profile.

"You can't be here," I say.

"You shouldn't be here," she replies and turns towards me so I can see her full on. The part of the face I couldn't see before - along with the whole right side of her body - is burned quite ghastly. With the still bloodied shard of her right hand she gestures out towards the sea. "Modern life sucks," she says, "and nature

always has the last laugh." Then she disappears.

I stare out beyond the window. I can see the ocean - and it is receding into the distance, exposing more and more of the shore.

I shake Nikita awake. "Quick," I shout, we've got to get out of here now. There's a tidal wave coming!"

We make it up onto the flat roof of the house before the wave strikes. A wall of water hits the ground floor and amid the roar of the ocean we hear the sound of breaking glass. The whole building shakes but as the sea retreats, the house remains standing.

As the first light of dawn creeps up over the Montara mountains, we're cold and wet and frightened but still alive. The bay is a scene of desolation, littered with debris sucked from the shoreline properties by receding waters.

Nikki's home? Although the ground-floor is gutted, there's no real loss as those rooms are only used for storage and accommodation for the occasional

guest. The first floor has survived pretty much intact. We still have electricity and water. The phones are out but that's more like down to the network crashing under the volume of emergency calls. And now even the sun's threatening to come out.

To my surprise - no, to my horror and astonishment - Nikita starts readying herself for work. "I must get into the office. I need to find out what happened to the late shift. Besides, they'll be wondering what happened to me yesterday afternoon and now, after this quake, well..."

"Well, what?" I ask, sensing that the shutters are once more coming down between us.

There is a silence. "I need space to think," she says. "I thought I wanted this for so long but now you're here, I'm not sure I can cope. You bring chaos. You're disruptive."

"You're blaming me for the earthquake!" I reply.

"You know what I mean Lex. You unsettle me. There are never any certainties when you're around." She pauses, there are tears in her

eyes. "I really must get to the office. They'll be going frantic. I'll call the insurers and letting agency from there as well. Can we talk about this when I get back tonight?" she asks as she heads for door. "You will still be here tonight?" she adds, as she makes for the door.

"Of course," I reply, not really knowing - nor caring at that moment - whether I would be.

In the kitchen, on the relatively undamaged first floor, I find a Gaggia coffee machine and make myself a large mocha. I pick it up, head outside and walk towards the sea, making my way across a beach littered with wrecked freezers, broken furniture, abandoned surfboards, scattered clothing, sodden papers and spoiling food. In the distance I can hear the wail of house and car alarms, the sound of emergency services sirens, the barking of dogs and the howling of children.

There is a Lexus 4x4 lying upturned on its roof, with petrol still dripping out of it to form a rainbow hued pool beneath it on the sand. The Lexus is surrounded by several crates of oranges, their contents spilling out across the

shore, and two 5 gallon tubs of Ben & Jerry's 'Cherry Garcia' ice-cream that are slowly melting in the morning sun.

By the edge of the now calm waters of the Pacific Ocean lies the upturned pine carcass of a shattered bed. It looks suspiciously like one of the beds that were in the groundfloor guest rooms at Nikki's house. I sit on it and wait for my mocha to cool. Immediately in front of me are three odd shoes that have washed up on the shore - they are Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars sneakers. There is a large black left shoe, a smaller denim blue right shoe and a much smaller child's candy pink shoe.

From the south I see a woman walking towards me, her feet leaving no prints in the sand as she approaches. There are streaks of neon blue in her hair. It's Vonda. She sits down beside me and, with the unravaged side of her face, smiles.

"Last night," I say, "when you came into the bedroom. You said I shouldn't be there. Was that a warning about the tsunami or my relationship with Nikita?"

"That," replies Vonda, "is a question only you can answer. You saved my life you know," she adds.

"What do you mean?"

"That night we spent together," Vonda says, "I realised afterwards that you'd removed my stash of pills. I'm not sure if I would have really used them - but I was that close."

"Like I did you a favour," I reply. "Saved you from a comfortable death of an overdose, going to sleep never to wake up, so you can die a week later in the holocaust of a bomb blast."

She reaches across with her good arm and takes hold of my hand - her grip is firm, dry but cold. Very cold. Ice cold. "You could have just had me and left that night. I wouldn't have blamed you. Instead, you saved me from myself. Besides, they were my decisions that led to my death."

"How d'you figure that out?" I ask.

"It was my decision to have another slice of toast that morning. It was my decision to watch the

end of an old episode of 'Friends' on breakfast time TV, despite the fact it was a repeat I'd probably already seen ten times before. It was my decision, because I was running late, to take the bus rather than walk to work."

She laughs. "Imagine, I was trying to lose a few pounds. Now I weigh less than smoke drifting across water."

"It was even my decision," she continues, "out of some stupid feeling of solidarity for the oppressed peoples of the Third World, to sit at the rear of the bus, near the scared looking Asian kid with the large rucksack.

"Modern life sucks, but we all get to choose our own way to heaven - or to hell. You'd better answer that," she adds, letting go of my hand.

I glance down and see the LED warning light on the BlackBerry in my shirt pocket flashing red. That means incoming messages - the phone networks are back online.

The first email I open is from Amanda Brierley. 'Ciao Lex, if you're still alive could you be an angel and file some copy PDQ on

how you survived the maelstrom in time for the breakfast news? If you're not alive, commiserations and don't bother replying to this message.'

When I look up again, Vonda has gone.

It's the day before Christmas Eve. I'm over 5000 miles from home. I'm surrounded by the wreckage of other people's lives. There's unfinished business to resolve with Nikita. And there are deadlines to meet.

But there will always be people living their lives clinging to wreckage. There'll always be unfinished business to resolve with a woman. And there'll always be deadlines to meet. I finish my mocha, toss the empty cup away onto the beach, to join all the other detritus in the sand.

A flash of light catches my eye. It's the sun reflecting off the mirrored surface of a CD lying on the shoreline. I pick it up and turn it over. It is 'Best of Both Worlds' - the Robert Palmer anthology. I skim it out across the sea. The CD bounces once. It bounces twice. It bounces a third time then slips beneath the waves.

MOON SUITE

By, Michael Begg

**Mother! Father! Wherever you are!
Mother! Father! Pray for me now!**

**The harvest has turned sick in the night, and the woods –
where you walked with your spade over your shoulder –
seem to sigh and groan in the midnight wind. You strip the
bark from a birch branch and whip the air, the heaving
ground beneath your feet. The heather, moss, lichen,
stone.**

And the moon did say...

Address my longing with the promise of bleeding ground

**She makes the shapes of animals in the old style
And recalls her younger form
She lights tall candles...**

*Flicker little scheme lights: These aimless, formless eyes
open to the endless night sky*

**She wandered twenty-five years from the moment at hand
and yet still there remain ten years of silence between here
and there. Out here, high on Black Hill, I can just about**

hear the bar empty its throat into the street. We claim a decade of quiet armour, gird ourselves against these cheap boutiques, and proceed in the formal Romantic style (But what – what – is that fucking smell? Why the hard-on for Dalkeith's next top model?)

*Full moon, full of grace
Embrace the cloud
And hide your face*

*A teardrop fell from a distant star
For a thousand years
It came so far*

*To die alone, so poor, so lost
On a lonely hill
In a bed of frost*

Graceful Moon, Spiteful Star...

And the moon did say...

**The promise is there, you know. But the light is very subtle.
Like moonlight on frost...**

Graceful Moon, Spiteful Star...

And the moon did say...

***Take your clothes off. I want you naked and cold
Take off your clothes. I really want you naked, and cold***

***Please. Take off all of your clothes. I need you to be naked
and cold.***

Don't cry. (Like it would solve anything)

***Graceful Moon – your mouth tastes violent,
Spiteful Star – you've got dirt under your fingernails***

***And the moon did say – as if to a sparrow caught between
the panes of glass in your open window...***

I have never seen one so fragile as you

***Graceful Moon – you cup your hand against my cunt,
Spiteful Star – It's as close as you'll get to consolation***

***These new tits are my currency!
(pray for me now)***

***I do not read. I have no money. I have no power.
I have been designed this way.***

(It feels like they're laughing, like they're laughing at me)

To love, to not be hurt...

***I have never questioned my crying. No-one ever asked me
why. Like money. Like Sex. Like violence. It. Just.***

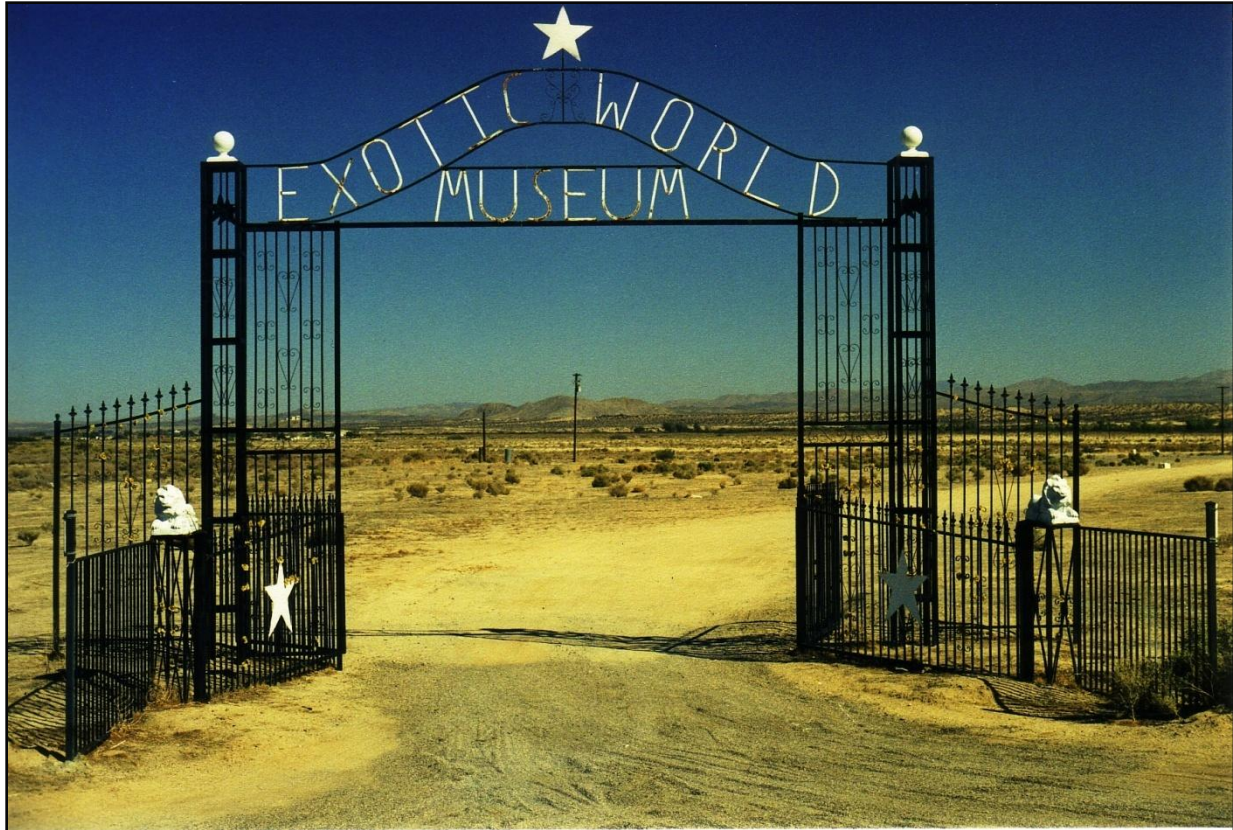
Happens.

(It feels like they're laughing, like they're laughing at me)

***Sometimes, it's like the silver coin of the moon
is tossed, like alms for the poor,
across the cold, midnight sky.***

crotch. I am not

the moon.



THAT OLD BUMP AND GRIND

By Tom Garretson

In the middle of the Mojave Desert, on a dusty road exit off the main highway, I turn off my car's engine. It's the middle of the night and I'm lost. There's nothing but sand, cactus and probably a few rattlesnakes and scorpions in the pitch black of the night. Up above me, the curtain of night shimmers with a thousand stars, dancing across the Milky Way. Brilliant, glittering lights, so beautiful, and so much larger than

life. It's the perfect backdrop for what I'm looking for: Dixie Evan's *Exotic World*, a museum featuring the largest collection of Burlesque stripper memorabilia to be gathered on any planet. All the strippers were stars in their own right, but now they are just faded memories of a more glamorous past, supernovas left in some distant era, only their rhinestones still shimmer like the stars above me. I'm reminded of what Ann

Corio wrote, "The stars on the horizon of burlesque were not blinking - *they were stripping.*"

About two hour's drive from Los Angeles, in the Californian desert, lies a virtual shrine to the artistry and work of a group of outsider women shunned by one segment of society, and deified by another. Grossly misunderstood by the mainstream audience until recently, the art of the burlesque striptease has recently made something of a comeback. BBC Radio aired an hour-long special on the revival of cabaret and burlesque theater, interviewing new burlesque strippers and performers in such varied cities as New Orleans, Los Angeles, New York, London, Berlin, and Paris. A newer generation of performers are going back to find out that burlesque strippers are not the harbingers of hellfire and enticers of Satan, but that those women were purveyors of an art form as old as society itself. And most of those who are interested in reviving American burlesque are the women themselves.

The Exotic World Museum, run today by former burlesque stripper Dixie Evans, is more an effort of love rather than money.

Admission is free, although a donation is happily accepted. The museum houses thousands of artefacts from the glorious era of the striptease artist. You'll find pasties and g-strings, feathered boas and fans, elaborate dressing gowns designed to be hastily peeled off, posters, pictures, and just about everything associated with the art of the tease and erotic satire. Each and every item was formerly owned by a striptease artist, with some of the items having almost "holy grail" status in the history of the burlesque striptease. All of these are housed in a small building in the desert, sorely lacking in enough space to show these items properly. Dixie is a woman of incredible enthusiasm and warmth, and welcomes anyone who braves the desert in search of sequins and colored feathers, tassels or a mythic g-string. It's as if her heart magnifies when anyone who is interested in the art of the burlesque stripper comes for a visit. She greets you like an old cherished friend who she hasn't seen for years.

Dixie Evans was a striptease artist who started out in the 1940s and was eventually became "*The Marilyn Monroe of Striptease*". She



took over the museum that was started by the stripper Jeannie Lee, after Lee died from cancer. “They bought this place as a defunct goat farm, which was basically a condemned property,” she adds. “This museum was actually an old goat shed when I came out here in the early 1990s, and we remodelled it and furnished it one room at a time.”

The collection consists of the apparel and memorabilia stemming back in the late 1800s – programs, pictures, clothing, shoes, tickets, advertisements, and furniture from the stage acts, you name it. Also, anything remotely

associated with strippers, such as Jayne Mansfield’s heart-shaped love seat. Most of it was given to the museum by aged strippers, or even fans that had collected items and understood how important it was to have them housed in one place. It’s a little overwhelming when you walk in the door and are greeted by decades of glamour and show biz tinsel. But Dixie soothes you into it all by her bubbly introduction, full of nostalgia, but never pathetic or tired. It’s like Dixie never stopped performing.

“It really started with Aphrodite,” she tells me. “The statues of Aphrodite glorify and celebrate the female form. Other legends such as Helen of Troy, and especially Salome in her *Dance of the Seven Veils*, really started the striptease. And that one’s in the bible! So, burlesque is as old as time itself!”

“Burlesque” is derived from the Italian word *burlare*, which means “to laugh at, to make fun of.” It has come to represent a theater form that parodies and satirizes topics and the established norms in song, dance, and comedy – that all-powerful and very revolutionary form of political

commentary. It differed from vaudeville, in that vaudeville was a series of acts such as singers, jugglers, dancers and comedy skits presented one after another with nothing much in common thematically, and certainly no form of satire or parody. Burlesque served a variety of acts that titillated, parodied, satirized religion, politics and current events in song, tableau dance scenes, comedy routines, circus acts, and of course, strippers. And most of all, it tore down the boundaries and strict codes of conduct that the church, the state and society's rigid sex roles tried to enforce. Truly revolutionary theater at its most entertaining - and so very glamorous!

Even though cultural snobs have dubbed the theatrical tradition as "low culture", the beginning of burlesque theater can be traced as far back as to the ancient Greek theater of Aristophanes. His plays satirize people, tragedies and contemporary ideas and events, women's rights and even sex. And in the 1600s, the a play full of lusty satire and parodies entitled, *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbie* is also now seen as an early burlesque piece. Followed by

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in 1727, that play scandalized the establishment and church, received scathing condemnations from the pulpit, and in 1750 toured the New World. To full houses. So this ain't nothing new, folks!



It really wasn't until the appearance of the legendary English actress Lydia Thompson in New York during 1868, travelling with her "British Blondes" (many who were

neither), that she became the undisputed Queen of Burlesque.

Travelling around the country with their shapely legs clad in tights, the troupe scandalized conservative theater by appearing in burlesque pieces loosely based on ancient Greek myths. One reviewer wrote disapprovingly:

"It is impossible to give an idea of this sustained burlesque. It resembles an Irish stew as one minute they are dancing a cancan and the next singing a psalm tune. It is a bewilderment of limbs, bella donna, and grease paint."

Thompson, her husband, and her theater manager proved to be adept at publicity. The media wrote of her numerous conquests "on the continent" and even in particular of one, *"Captain Ludoc Baumbarten of the Russian dragoons, who took some flowers and a glove belonging to Miss Thompson, placed them on his breast; then shot himself through the heart, leaving on his table a note stating that his love for her brought on the fatal act."* The entire company thrived on their scandalous reputation, which theater owners did their utmost to promote, and nationwide publicity with the tales of her

"lesbian attacker" and of her horse whipping the editor of a Chicago newspaper for writing a bad review on her "British Blondes".

Thompson's success in the burlesque theater was promptly followed by Adah Isaacs Menken, who, scantily clad, strapped herself to a live horse that ran across the stage in *Mazeppa*. This further scandalized the New World puritans and delighted audiences hungry for sensationalism and cheap thrills. From then on, the Burlesque tradition was set, and overnight new productions, touring companies, and featured female stars sprung up - and most were immensely successful.

Today, some feminists scorn at a woman's place in theater in which her body is used as a vehicle to entertain or to earn a living. I've never understood this, because to me, strippers glorify female sexuality and empower themselves by defiantly stating their right to display their bodies on their own terms. If anyone was exploited, it was the man. The woman is Supreme Goddess, placed high on a pedestal, celebrating her sexuality and her beauty in all its voluptuous form in the art of dance. It gave the

woman the right to celebrate herself on her own terms in an era in which this was completely denied to her. The men sat securely in the audience bound by the foolishness of their lust, longing for visual excitement and want of an unobtainable sexual perfection. In the very least, it recognized the voyeuristic tendencies of the male species, and capitalized heavily on it.

I ask Dixie if she ever felt exploited by the industry.

"Are you kidding? We ran the industry! We earned the most money, and if you were a featured star, you set your own terms completely. I don't think any of the gals ever thought of themselves as victims in any way - we were incredibly lucky to have the kind of jobs we had. I mean, it was either that or becoming a secretary or factory worker. It gave a lot of working class girls the chance to really make something of themselves."

Did the club owners hit on her or other strippers?

"I'm sure it happened probably once or twice, just like any other industry, but we generally had a

rule in the business, and that was that you addressed each other by your last name only. For example if you showed up to work, you'd address the theater owner or producer as Mr. So-and-so, and they would always call you Miss or Mrs. You would never, ever be on first name basis with any business contact. It was always by last name basis only. It had to be that way! If we didn't keep the business as formal as possible, it would have fallen apart. There was no room for that sort of behavior, and if anyone did try to press a girl into doing something, they would be blacklisted by the agents and find themselves without girls - talk traveled fast in that line of work."

Any experience with the mob?

*"Oh yeah, but not so much in the theaters. In the nightclubs, especially in Chicago, yes. But you never really meet them, personally or anything. You'd just do your show, and no big Mafia people would go with just *any* stripper. They're very careful of who they date. You know, they think they're something very important themselves! If you're working and doing very well in the club, they don't bother you.*

They don't take you out or approach you to go to bed with you or anything, maybe someone they might, but if you're bringing good, substantial people into the clubs, and you're making good contact with the owner or your boss, but you're using the "Mr. So-and-so" titles, they don't bother you. You have to come on kinda square and business-like, aloof or whatever. You just gotta learn those things, to play it against them. If you do a good show, and the better you are and the more formal you conduct yourself, they respected you. Of course, there were times when that didn't exist. I've sat with a few mobsters at their tables, big ones too, in New York. Especially when there would be a big prize fight at Madison Square Garden and they'd hit the clubs - the hundred dollar bills would fly! 52nd Street is where you'd meet most of them, on those big nights."

My own experience of meeting strippers also contrast the dark "exploited poor little helpless woman" mentality that feminists such as Andrea Dworkin branded them with (indeed, Dworkin insisted that gay porn was misogynistic because one man was on the bottom, "symbolizing" the

woman!). This view was depressing if not self-serving and short sighted, because it always saw the woman as victim instead of recognizing her ability to charm, take control, and empower herself as she pleased. That sort of rigid, dogmatic feminism has more in common with Osama Bin Laden and "either-you're-with-us-or-against-us-Bushisms", than recognizing that women are not all the same, that they want different things and that not everyone fits into their militant vision of what is right and wrong. If only Ulrike Meinhof had been a stripper instead of an angry journalist! She would no doubt have been far more successful in changing the world. As such, I see the stripper as a true outsider, and as outsider artists who made their own rules and carved their own paths, and disregarded bible-thumping preachers and self-appointed guardians of morality alike.

At the age of seven, I met my first stripper, a tall, blonde Amazonian Danish woman who rented a room from a friend of my mother. This stripper featured two pythons in her act, and brought them out for me to pet (to the horror of my mother). She had

invested her earnings into two gas stations in Denmark, and had a PhD doctorate in business studies. A far cry from the exploited woman forced to work in dark, sleazy clubs that so many couch feminists would have us believe. She saved up a healthy nest egg for when her stripping days were over. From then on, I was hooked on strippers! To me, they were strong women, proud women. And the various strippers I've known since have been anything but victims. Radical feminist thinkers such as social philosopher Camille Paglia has called the stripper "the Goddess personified", and today there's a whole new generation of feminists who openly embrace strippers as radical feminists themselves.

In the late 1800s, burlesque was revolutionary in terms of feminist progress, even if that revolution was ushered in the back door. Before the burlesque theatrical tradition, women enjoyed only a limited position on stage and only in tightly, culturally defined roles. With burlesque, women became the featured stars, most often creating or writing their own shows. Sometimes they *were* the feature entirely. They also usually became the highest earners. They

parodied the established power structures in short pieces within the performances, and were free to cross-dress in men's clothing or even appearing transgender as both man and woman in the same costume, thus upsetting the carefully defined gender roles.



They defied the critic's definition of "good taste" and so were condemned to the lower categories of theater - variety - and in return, threw back the critic's condemnation in their faces by disregarding convention, public morality, and all expected norms on how a proper young woman should behave. The establishment became gradually

meaningless, and so, its criticism null and void. The burlesque women flaunted their sexuality and the female form, defiantly and proudly, in ways that today, would today seem conservative and downright dull. Remember, in those days, the sight of an ankle in stockings could cause a riot in the audience – as it often did.

Even feminists of the period assaulted burlesque theater in that such rampant displays of sexuality would only lead to further enslavement by marital dependence. It was as if they thought sex could not take place outside of marriage. Instead of bringing their sexual passion tightly under control, to be regulated, rationalized and channeled exclusively into procreation as the suffragettes insisted on, the burlesque female performers playfully and defiantly pushed back the limits of their sexualities and their sexual roles by transgressing society's definition of them. The burlesque theater was one of the very few places a woman could express her sexuality, make a living and not depend on men, and be entirely independent. Once an outsider, always an outsider.

As a theatrical form, burlesque became the theater of the working class, because it rejected all the conventions that traditional formats of the ruling elite held so high, such as drama, opera, ballet, and classical music. Instead, it parodied these, ripped them apart and created an entirely new category of theater. It used the language of the working class, of the under privileged, and even utilized another low-other, the Negro minstrel. Burlesque became, as one critic scornfully wrote of it, *"a revolutionary, anarchic, demonic force that threatened to overrun the theater!"* And for a time in history, it almost did.

Many strippers, such as Dixie, supported their entire families by their work in burlesque. Especially during the economic depression, many families didn't have any income at all, and the families lucky enough to have a stripper working in burlesque could count themselves as those who were able to have food on their table.

"A woman once pulled up in a big Cadillac one day, and said she had kept her mother's burlesque pictures hidden away in a closet

for years,” Dixie says to me. “Her mother was a singer with big bands in the 1930s until that went out of fashion, and then worked with the *Follies* in Los Angeles. It wasn’t until recently that she realized how truly strong her mother was – she did four shows a day, and kept food on the table when her friends were hungry. “I also recently had another call from a gentleman who called up and said he was Hinda Wassau’s brother. He was seventy-one years old, and he said he’d been a prude and a snob all his life, and was ashamed that his four sisters worked in burlesque. But he came to realize that he wouldn’t have had shoes or food on the table if it hadn’t had been for his sisters. I get people calling me or writing me letters now all the time, telling me of their parents who worked in burlesque, and how proud they are of that.”

Today, burlesque theater is popularly seen as being indistinguishable from the art of the striptease. From the late 1920s onwards, until its demise in the late 1950s, burlesque shows always featured the striptease. Now, these kinds of acts are nothing like what you would see today if you walked into a strip

bar. No vulgar displays of human biology or a peek into the dark crevices of human anatomy then, no sir! In those days, a respected stripper would have her own routine worked out. It became her trademark. She was very often classically trained, and may have perhaps been a ballet dancer who could earn more money as a stripper – such as the legendary Lili St. Cyr. There was a sense of gracefulness, usually with a painted backdrop to match the thematic backdrop – such as disrobing in a woman’s boudoir, the wedding night, or even the dress shop dressing room. Often the routines were elaborately staged and sometimes the stripper would be accompanied by chorus girls, but even then she was always the main focus. And you had to have a “gimmick”, as *Gypsy*, the hit musical and film based on the legendary stripper Gypsy Rose Lee song’s life, so clearly states.

The more creative and outrageous the gimmick, the more likely the stripper would shoot to fame. For example, Rosita Royce appeared with white doves that fluttered about her body, revealing to the audience only brief glimpses of her splendor. Yvette Dare’s

trained parrots disrobed her layers of clothing bit by bit. Sally Keith achieved fame (or infamy) with her expertise in tassel-twirling, able to have the two twirls in opposing directions at once. Sally Rand saved the Chicago World Fair in 1933 by dancing with famous Fan Dance, ostrich feathered fans that concealed the right places but promised a quick glimpse if you were lucky. Peaches Strange was the "Queen of the Quiver". And Lili St. Cyr bathed in a giant champagne glass onstage, making her act one of the iconic strip routines best remembered today. The list goes on, and the gimmicks were as varied as the girls who danced.

A burlesque stripper would have a tightly choreographed routine in which the goal was "to tease", not to expose. With a live orchestra, and sometimes a male tenor singing off-stage (usually out of tune), the stripper would slowly disrobe to drum beats well-timed to the bump of a hip or a flick of the wrist, or a mimicking trumpet or trombone. She would always come out in a specially designed costume and disrobe to the music playing. Every stripper had her own specially designed costume, such as Sherry Britton's panel skirt

reminiscent of belly dancers (and often copied) or even the elaborate mirrored gowns of Blaze Starr - works of art in their own right.



They all shared in having a g-string and pasties (with or without tassels), which were never supposed to come off. Sometimes though, even those did - and usually those acts would end up being raided by the police and the theater closed down. Some danced slowly, painfully teasing the audience. Some used the

curtain as part of the act, shielding her nudity behind it at the last moment, after the final layer of clothing had been removed. A few strippers even tore onto the stage like a fireball, ripped her clothes off, and left the guys in the audience scorched. Some of the girls were silent, and others, like Gypsy Rose Lee, would talk and tease the audience verbally while disrobing. If you combine ballet with the circus, and threw in erotic suggestion, and added tongue-in-cheek ironic humor, you'd get what the striptease was all about. There were as many routines and gimmicks as there were strippers, and every girl worked hard to establish herself with a separate identity that would increase her booking price.

Dixie explains the origins of American burlesque: "Years ago, way back in our history, in the Old West, we had Buffalo Bill Cody and his traveling Wild West show. They used to travel all through America. Other people came along and did the same thing, taking a wagon, travel down south around the little towns, and make some money off the little people. They'd get an Indian and a Cowboy, and the big crowd would gather, and some

man on stage would twirl his moustache and start to sell them 'medicine' or 'snake oil' as they called it then. They made pretty good money. They'd get to the next town and break down in the mud. Then they'd have to set up in what they called in those days, 'Opera Houses'. They were really just variety theatres.

"This one outfit got all the way to Chicago, and thought, 'Hey, I've got this trampoline act, with five fellows in it...and now I've got a magician.... A now four jugglers.... And girlie, come here quick... take this beautiful gown here, and underneath, put this short little costume on so you'll have time to change between acts. She'll do a parade on stage, run into the wings to change, then make up a fast little dance onstage.' So she did this little act, being very beautiful and all, and she went off into the wings, but she couldn't get out of that dress! And the stage manager said, 'Girlie! Can't you hear your music out there! Get back out there!' Well, she ran back out, but her entire persona had changed. She wasn't the high-and-mighty woman with the attitude, no! She IS laughing with the audience, and she IS joking and kidding, and she's trapped in the dress, and she

knows she has to get that dress off... and finally she just stood in the middle of the stage and shimmied and shook, and when she removed that gown a shock went through the audience like a bolt of lightning. They burst into a thunderous applause and they wouldn't stop! The owner ran out and said, *'What happened?'* The backstage manager said, *'I'll tell you what happened! Hinda Wassau took her dress off right there in the middle of the stage! Call a rehearsal tonight right after the show!'* And so the striptease as we know it was born in Chicago, about 1933. At any rate, you know us Americans, once we get hold of something we squeeze the last drop out of it. So the Striptease now becomes an art. And it wasn't just taking off your gloves, it was the *WAY* they took the gloves off, it was the *WAY* they unfastened each thing that was intriguing. And it still lingers on today... when we have the girls performing here, the audience doesn't want to see them run around with no clothes on... they want to see them dance, perform a routine... it's a part of our history."

And what a history it is. Names like Tempest Storm, Blaze Starr, Lili St. Cyr, Irma the Body, Carrie

Finnell, Lois DeFee, Rose La Rose, Gypsy Rose Lee, Myrna Dean, and others are today mostly recognized by those interested in esoteric, alternative culture or the history of theater. When you look at their pictures today, it gives us a sense of innocent naughtiness, combined with a style lost, a beauty faded, and elegance sorely missed. It's like an entire universe of stars has gone out in the sky.



The burlesque theatre was a welcomed relief to the tired working class of the 1930s that had nowhere else to go. In every little town across America there was a small hall with a couple of twinkling lights, and you could fall in for the price of a loaf of bread and forget your troubles for those two and a half hours. Twenty-four or thirty girls would be marching forward, dance teams, jugglers... and novelty acts. Comedy routines with a comic and the "straight man" - often accompanied by one of the showgirls - was a mainstay in burlesque. And of course, the striptease was a featured attraction.

The audiences consisted of mostly men, but towards the late 1940s more and more women could be seen in the audiences. In fact, a lot of burlesque houses had "ladies only" nights. Curious young teenage males often got their first glimpse of naked female flesh from the burlesque. Sometimes whole families would show up - especially from the lower classes - because this was the only show they could afford. When the invention of radio made easy way into almost every home, vaudeville suffered, and

performers like Fanny Brice, Jack Benny and Gracie Allen were forced to join the burlesque circuit - which was growing in popularity.

"A lot of the older vaudeville comedians used to say to me '*Oh, you burlesque girls! You ruined vaudeville!*' Well, we never felt that way. We felt we were giving them a chance to work," Dixie adds. "The oldest burlesque theatre in the United States was the Old Howard, in Boston. In Philadelphia, they had the Trocadero, Oakland had the El Rey. When they tore the Old Howard down, the stockbrokers up on Milk Street wore black armbands for two weeks! It was an institution, where all the young fellows could go. Come Friday night, they'd all get in a big gang and go to the burlesque shows. The comedians were fabulous. A lot of times you had a show where the show would build and build, and the big blue velvet curtains would open up." Dixie's eyes mist over in remembrance, as if she were magically transported back in time. "Now the husband figure would be sitting way over here puffing away on a cigar, reading the newspaper. The wife was on the other side of the stage, ironing

the clothes. And she'd say, *'I want you to buy me some new clothes! If you don't buy me new clothes, I'm going to take off my blouse!'* And of course, she would. But he wouldn't pay any attention to her, he'd just sit there and puff away on his cigar, and read the newspaper. And she'd stomp her feet and say, *'If you don't buy me some new clothes like Helen's husband up the street, I'm going to take off my skirt!'* And she'd wiggle out of her skirt. But he wouldn't pay any attention to her, just puff, puff on his cigar and read the newspaper. Now she's mad, she's thrown the iron away and kicked over the ironing board, and she's ranting and raging to the kids in the front row, and then she says, *'All right, if you don't buy me anymore clothes, I'm going to take off ALL my clothes! And I'm going to go nude in front of all YOUR friends down at the post office!'* And then he'd slam down the newspaper, and yell, *'WHAT? You're going to go nude and take off all your clothes in front of all my friends at the post office?'* "She replied, 'Yes.'" "He'd answer: *'Here, mail this letter!'* The key to this was, that whoever was going to go on next, well you'd better be ready to burst through the curtain like a ball of fire. When the punch-line hit, it was

your turn to go on. Once you had the audience, you could never lose them, 'cause you'd never get them back. That was how powerful the burlesque shows were, they just kept you going and going."

And the music! The music of the striptease and burlesque theater is a field sorely neglected by musicologists. Thumping rhythms from the drum carefully matched the stripper's moves, and accented the peeling off of the layers of her clothing. Initially in the 30s, the music was more blues oriented, with numbers like "Harlem Nocturne" spiced up to match the sensual dance rhythms. Later in the late 40s, the music became jazzier, and in the 1950s this became tinged with rock n' roll. But it was all kept together by the rhythmical, sexual beat of the striptease dancer, full of infectious rhythms dripped in sensuality that made your blood flow faster. You can hear something of the sound today in CD reissues. Tom Waits even paid homage to burlesque strippers on his *Small Change* album, in the song "Pasties and a G-String". A few other CD issues like *Las Vegas Grind* or *Take It Off!* have appeared over the last years, which give a good idea what it was like.

Dixie remembers the music with a nostalgic air, like someone had just opened a fragrant bottle of perfume. "The trombones, the trumpets blaring and commenting your every move, it was wonderful. You just don't get music like that today. We'd have seven or ten musicians in the orchestra pit, who were some of the best musicians in the world. Those saxophones and those trumpets could really play a song!"

I ask Dixie how she first got into the business.

"I was in the circus for a while in Los Angeles. That was basically because they were shooting a film there, and they wanted to circus to look big. It was a cattle call. You'd find these cards at Laundromats or food stores, announcing the casting roles, and you'd show up. They wanted belly dancers, which you didn't have to know, since they taught you everything. That lasted a while, and I then went to Mexico City as a chorus girl in a couple of shows. We just basically had to be blonde and white, and we got pretty big money just to walk around in this big, big show. We got \$75 a week, and here's this

guy in the same show in a tuxedo, probably the greatest violinist you'd ever heard in your life, and when he'd play he'd tear the house down. He got paid \$35 dollars! It was really unfair, but what can you do about it? If they want to pay you that kind of that money... we still all knew that hey, this guy has REAL talent, and we just happen to be making all this money walking around in a big production! I did a lot of those in Los Angeles, and in border towns. I got this job as a Paige, which was basically walking on stage with another girl in a costume... They'd hire two of anything, even two monkeys! We'd just basically announce the act with a placard or something, and then disappear. At \$55 a week I thought it was the greatest thing. I'm in show business! All I had to do was walk and open the curtain. That lasted two weeks, and bingo! It closed! I was in San Francisco without fifty cents, and this girl mentioned this striptease club down the street. I went down there, sitting at the bottom of the stairs, and this girl came out wearing white furs onstage, shooting guns in a cowboy outfit - Sondra Karena. All the girls looked so gorgeous, all these costumes and bracelets and stuff.

I'm sitting at the bottom of the stairs, and the boss comes up and punches me in the shoulder, and he says, *'Hey look, I want you to cut your act short and get out and mix a little more.'* I said, *'I don't work here.'* "He said, *'You don't?'* He had so many girls there he didn't even know I worked there! I got scared and ran up the stairs, thinking that this place was too wild and crazy for me. There was this clown in front of the club, Wacky the Clown, who chased me two or three blocks, and he finally caught me and said I could make a lot of money here. He said for me to meet someone named Bernie at a Chinese restaurant, that he'd talk to me. I had nothing to lose, so I went to this restaurant and this guy's slurping these noodles all over the place, and he says, *'You want this job? Be at this club at so and so time.'*

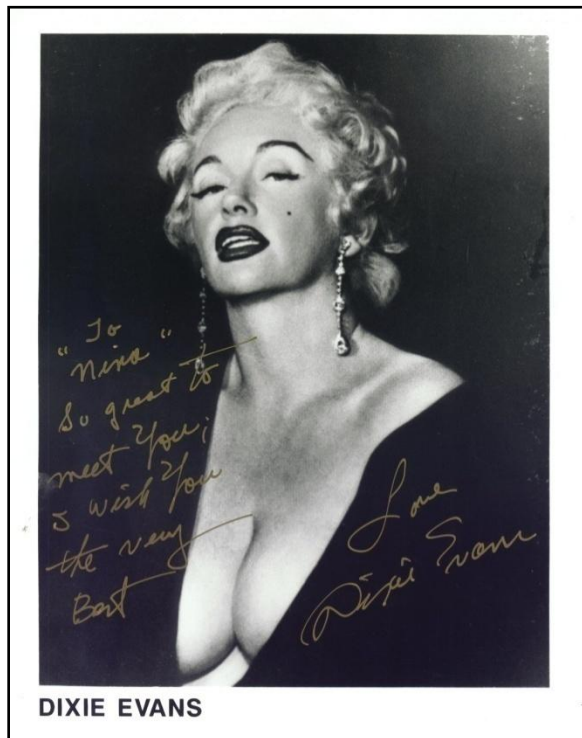
The girls took me in, with one girl telling me to put a tangerine gown on, and a musician parted the curtain to the dressing room, dripping in sweat with a sax hanging from his arms, and yells *'Where's your music?'* I'm panicking, saying, *'I don't have any!'* He says, *'OK, you can open with Body and Soul and close with Sugar Blue!'*

"All of a sudden I'm out there and the music starts, and "Body and Soul" - what a great song! There'd be three sailors in the audience, and at that age I was pretty agile, and I'd do a back step and look at their faces (laughs)... just pretend like I was in the movies, and when I got the gown off, and when they played "Sugar Blues", hey... I didn't care about taking my clothes off, that wasn't it. You're really worried about if you look good, if you're gonna fall off the stage, trying to do the best you can. The girls in San Francisco were wonderful. Gosh, they were great. It was a nightclub, The Spanish Theatre. It had been called The Kit Kat Club in the 20s, a very prominent speakeasy. I played the President Follies in San Francisco, too, and The El Rey in Oakland. All of us were broken in there. I remember the first time I opened up at the El Rey, I was sort of fiddling around backstage, and this girl, she had coal black hair, kinda hard, and I were talking. I said *'I'm only doing this act here, but I'm not really in burlesque, you see.'* She yanked me out in the alley, and she blew smoke in my face, and said, *'Now listen here, bitch, don't you ever say that in a burlesque theater. If you think you're going to go make it big*

on the outside, in the big time, you better make it big, sister. You come crawling back here to us, and we won't speak to you! Poof! A big puff of smoke in my face! I went back to my dressing room and I was trembling. I was so nervous I didn't think I could go on. I just wanted to get the heck out of that theater and make a run for it. Well, I went on and I did it. And went on to the next theater, and the next theater, and the next one. And you know what? The musicians were great. The front of the house was always good. The girls were good. They had established themselves, working in burlesque, making a good living and liking it. You fall into it too. Tempest Storm said the same thing too. She said, *'If I'm going to be in burlesque, then I'm going to be the best there is.'* So she worked at it, and she's living proof. She even played Carnegie Hall! She made \$10,000 a week in San Francisco! She played Las Vegas in big shows. So there's a girl who came from a cotton field in Georgia, picking cotton. Blaze Starr started picking corn and ginseng. And me in the celery fields! That's how I started - just being thrown into the business. I loved it - wouldn't have given it up for the world. The burlesque,

the striptease dancers, and the music - they were my mother, my father, my brother. We were really a family. You'd break with them and go off with another group, but you could hardly wait to get back to Buffalo! And you could hardly wait to get to St. Louis, or Chicago, because you'd hope so-and-so was still there. I could hardly wait to get to the theater. I'd be in a hotel room some place, and I could hardly wait to get back into the theater. I felt alive, I felt at home. I loved to get up on the stage, I loved to put my make up on. A lot of times you felt just sick, with a hangover or whatever, but you know what? The good side way overpowers the bad side. A lot of things did happen on the road, bad things, you'd wind up broke or something. One time I learned a good lesson in Providence, Rhode Island. I get in the cab, after a trip on the Greyhound bus, and I get to the club and it's all boarded up! I call my agent, and I said, *'Dave! You know what! It's all boarded up!'* He says, *'Didn't you read the newspaper? A hurricane ran through there!'* I said, *'Yeah, but I have to work! I've only got fifty cents!'* He said, *'Have you ever read your contract? Read it! It says in there Act of God.'* Well, that was my first

lesson! You learn little lessons to save your money or to be very cautious, and then when you're booked two years in advance, it's a great feeling. Never had a vacation, of course, but where ever you were, that was your vacation."



Dixie's gimmick became in her appearing as a Marilyn Monroe look-alike. She describes her routine: "When I went back east, Mr. Minsky (of the famous Minsky's Burlesque Theater in New York) said I looked like Marilyn. I used to stroll on stage with dark glasses and furs, and a long cigarette lighter. And we actually had songs in those days,

that would tell your story for you. *You Are My Lucky Star*...so there I am with my dark glasses and my cigarette... then of course I'd say a little patter... (in her Marilyn Monroe voice) 'Well, it just wasn't that easy to become a movie star! I had to walk and walk and walk and knock on every agent's door, I thought I would drop! But somehow, I just had to reach the top.' So, when I became this Marilyn Monroe figure, I'd just say 'I just had to reach the top!' Then the set would open up, showing a chair, and the band would start to play "You Ought To Be In Pictures", and I'd answer, 'Who, me?', and the band would answer 'Yes, you!' Then I'd go over to the producer's chair, and so forth, take a little screen test in front of the movie camera, and then I'd run over and say 'I didn't get the job? Ooooh!' Then I'd go to the center of the stage and throw myself on the floor and throw a violent tantrum, and kick and cry, and then crawl all the way over to the producer's chair. Now, we had a song, "Just One More Chance"... so that set the pleading part, and the band could ring it up. It was like a mime, the audience could actually see my dilemma, and I'd go 'Oooh, the couch! Boo hooo hoo!' I thought I was being so dramatic! Then I'd

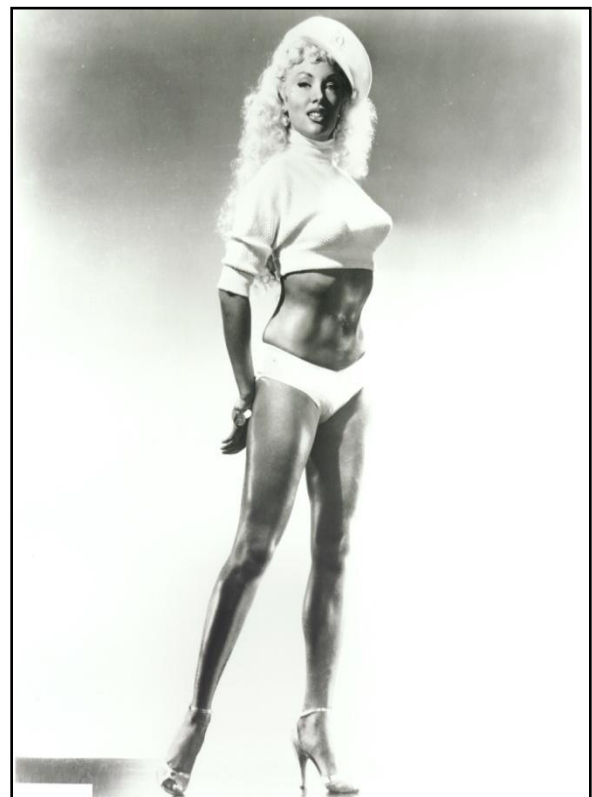
remove my things on the couch, and there would be a heavy drum roll, and I'd be swinging back and forth... it was just a reason to remove your clothes! A lot of other girls thought of other things to do. A little act of some sort. The best of all was of course Lilly St. Cyr, all of her acts were great. She imitated big names from history. Lili St. Cyr, when they would announce her, the big timpani would roll. Oh boy! Incomparable! Lilly St. Cyr, incomparable was correct - you could not compare her to anyone or anything. It was magic, everything she did. One of her biggest acts that made her the most famous was her act in a glass bathtub with golden legs. She would be in pink and blue bubbles, which would be floating up and over the audience. She would descend these glass stairs and into the set, and of course had all these props. The maid would give her all these different gowns, and all of this was to show off her ballet! She'd do this ballet all across the stage in different gowns. She'd do this routine about '*No, I don't want to wear that dress tonight*', you could see what she was saying, and the maid would give her another dress, and the mood would change and she'd

do something else. At the end of the act she'd have on white gloves and a rose, and a white hat and gown, and you knew that this was the right dress that she wanted. The maid would put on her shoulders a full-length diamond-mink coat, and she would then leave the stage. That was just one act. She also did this act with a matador. They used to do an act as a ballet, and you'd hear this horrible goring from a bull. The mad bull, the matador, and these load sound effects coming over the speakers, and then the curtain would show him being carried off in a gurney up in the corner of the stage. Then of course the set would open up and she would don the Spanish veil, and do a fabulous act. All of her numbers had a name, and this one was called *Carmenesque*. When Prince Rainer married Grace Kelly, Lili did *The Royal Wedding Night*. All of us girls looked up to Lili. We would all just love to have her style... she walked like a star, talked like a star. Everything about her we just adored. The big stars like that are gone. There were a lot of other stars that maybe twirled their tassels, or like Mickey Ginger Jones who were more peppy, but let me tell you, even then those girls put on a hot

little show - full of different numbers. A man in New Jersey, called me up about ten years ago, who wanted to know how Lili St. Cyr was doing. I told him that I understood that she was sort of on the poverty line. He said to give her his phone number in New York City. He said, *'You girls gave us so much and got so little, it's about time that somebody starts paying you back.'* She called me and thanked me very much, he apparently sent her quite a bit of money. So in my newsletter, I'd write if you had an extra dollar or two, write Lilly on it. She told me that she had thrown all her music and costumes in the trash, even all her old photos, and now she was getting requests for all her old pictures again. She had to go out and buy her old photos back in order to sell them! She was selling three for ten dollars, and I said no, Lili, you got to get more than that. At least ten dollars a photo! That was about ten years ago. At any rate, Lilly's gone now. Besides Gypsy Rose Lee, Lilly was the most famous. Each era had its own stars. They were equivalent to a Madonna today."

Gypsy Rose Lee is perhaps the stripper who was most accepted by the establishment, starting in

burlesque and then becoming so immensely popular that she traveled the world in grand productions of her own making. The term "ecdysiast" was used by her to describe her art. She was the darling of the intelligentsia and café society, wrote novels and dated authors and artists alike. The hit musical *Gypsy* was built around her life, and both men and women alike went to see her perform. More than any other stripper, *Gypsy* was probably the one most embraced by the general public and made stripping thought of as an art form instead of something sleazy.



And what was it like being an outsider figure? As opposed to not being a part of established show business?

“We all realized that we were outside figures in show business. However, we would just kind of galvanize together, we didn’t let it bother us. Because when we played the theaters, the little mamma-pappa places were just tickled to have us there. Then when you’d play New Jersey, you’d get a big formal letter from Capt. Joe, some guy who owned the big fish restaurant in town by the theater, and he’d invite us to come get a big lobster dinner for free. All we had to do was to bring an autographed photograph. So certain places welcomed us, since we were bit of an attraction. But outside society, we really never had a chance to encounter the people who were against us. We had this off-beat feeling that they weren’t accepting us.”

In 1962, Marilyn Monroe died, and Dixie found herself without an act.

“When Marilyn died. That’s a whole other story. I went into the worst depression of my life, it was horrible. I had just done my Hollywood number, which I

hadn’t done for a long, long time. I was living in New Jersey, and when I got back home from a late performance, my husband woke me up from slumber, and said Marilyn was dead. I was in shock. I just didn’t believe him. I tell you, I didn’t think that my career was over, it was more that Marilyn was gone – it was the worst thing. The TV just kept rolling on and on about it. I watched all these interviews with her on the TV, it was so sad. My contracts were all cancelled, naturally, and my husband had gone to school with a guy who was now a florist. We ordered the biggest heart we could get, all gardenias with one red rose in the center, and sent it to her funeral. You can’t imagine, the whole country was in mourning.”

So, Dixie left the business and went to work for her husband’s aluminium siding company in Queens, New York. She thought her past in stripping was gone forever, until she relocated to Helendale, California, to take over Exotic World.

I ask her about the current generation, and their renewed respect for strippers of the bygone era.

"I had a young exotic dancer come out here, probably a pole dancer, from Los Angeles with her boyfriend. She said, '*Oh you know, we just love getting dressed and making fun of all you old girls*'. I didn't say a word, not a word. By the time she was finished with the museum tour, her outlook had changed. She suddenly realized that we were something else. There again, the museum educated people. I'm not saying that every stripper was an angel, or didn't get into trouble or whatever, but at least we were out there seven days a week, four shows a day, and a midnight show on Saturdays. Three or four o'clock in the morning you were packing and catching a train, in order to get to the next town. It was a working business. Whereas today, they just walk in and out of a club, and are all very young, very beautiful, and the competition out there is horrendous. And their age span is so limited. In my era, girls could work forever, because they had a name and they did a good act. Some strippers worked right up into their 60s! And the business was a family business... Daddy Biggs owned the Follies Theatre in Los Angeles, and Bobby Biggs, the son, would come in the afternoon

to run the theatre. The father would take over at night. It was completely different than what you have today."

Eventually by the late 1950s burlesque theater closed its doors, killed off by television and self-righteous moral guardians. The strippers moved on to nightclubs, which by the 1970s had become strip-joints full of lap dancers and pole dancers. By this time, the acts had almost nothing to do with the *Art of the Striptease*. No, it was more like the art of hustling dollar bills from customers.

The girls of the "old school" of stripping don't see themselves as part of the strippers today. Their stripping was an art, and today's porn has nothing to do with what most burlesque strippers would see their routines as being.

"In the beginning I was really shocked!" Dixie adds. "*Terribly shocked*. Showing everything? (laughs) Oh gosh! After a while, I've met a few girls who do pole dancing and work in those types of clubs, come through with green and purple hair, tattooed, and they are a reflection that society has changed. Everything's on the net, on the TV, and exposed us to

so much. You can't pinpoint and claim any one person or thing has exposed us to too much. These things, of course, have been going on for centuries. But you have your own way of life, your own morals in any era, and the only way you know is how you were raised. And then when you get out in the real world, it's really shocking. I have young people pull up here in very expensive cars and clothes, in all sorts of piercing and whatever - it's a culture shock! Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles used to be like any hometown main street, with small stores and a drug store. Now it's full of tattoo parlors! But back then, even if men offered you money over the footlights, it would have been embarrassing. It was unheard of! And any man that attempted to touch you would be out of the door in a second. It just wasn't done."

Today, Exotic World continues to attract the curious, strippers, or other outsiders interested in unusual culture. Once a year they even hold the Miss Exotic World Contest, when young women flock out to the desert to compete in the art of striptease. Burlesque again seems to be appearing in

small productions, and young women are reviving the art of striptease as it was once performed years ago.

"Burlesque is part of our history. Whether we choose to accept it or not, or try to shove it under the carpet, it's a part of our history," Dixie states.

Today, scholarly studies on burlesque and its women are being published, and women's studies at universities now firmly embrace the stripper as a feminist icon. And Dixie is still out in the desert, telling anyone who will listen what it was really like.

Just like the stars over the Mohave Desert, the legends of the burlesque strippers still shine on and continue to fascinate people today. It was the style, the poise of the stripper, the glamour and the allure of the striptease that still has the power to hypnotize long after the theaters closed for good. The sequins and rhinestones still haven't stopped their glitter and twinkle. I think every star in heaven should be named after a stripper. And most certainly, one for Dixie.

EL GARDI DE GUERTE



BLOOD

By Sue Fox

It pours out like endless red scum in pints, like paint caught in turps. Men can't stand to come near it but women find themselves with their fingers in it, playing in nature's patterns, touching rusty pigment juice, under their finger nails. I catch blood clots in my bath water swirling around like mini sea horses. I examine them and deconstruct their perilous structures.

At least to bleed is to be alive. Even if we are banned from fornicating with blood-fearing men, who only like to spill it out on battlefields. A woman wants to fuck when she sees blood come, the very sight of it gains her attention and makes her want to shoot metal and sit on bones. Red is a sorcerer's colour code. Blood is the passion of elders. Vampires like the drip of it on their fat lips and long draping tongues that lash round green teeth.

When you see the blood of a crash victim you sidle away from it. You fear disease! But blood is to be touched for it is life meeting the

earth, seeping in like the stain of wine. I wanted to reach out and touch into the congealed bloody mass of his mangled arm. I watched it breathe and glow like luminous sulphur, uncontained dark scarlet blood like on the body of a freshly slaughtered mammal. I wanted to fix it, wanted to stop him from feeling cold. I wanted him to feel the red heart of his mother enfolding his broken body with her endless arms. I wanted to make love to him in the paved blood of strewn motor cycle parts. I stroked his forehead. I looked into his pale blue eyes, felt his fine features on my fingers. The blood sought its continuum. I wanted for it to end.

The blood of all those poet-suicides still run in the beds of our imaginations. They slit their throats and wrists, hearts and eyes to expunge human frailty. The blood of hungry ghosts runs amuck. Blood is not all about the dead and empty cadavers, stuffed tax forms to stop the blood and ladles to swill it out. Blood is more precious than diamonds could ever be. Blood can save

your life and end it. To see one's own blood is to feel elated and bewitched by it.

It is a pure red anointment, a ruddy transfiguration, better than any Jesus shroud. To see it turn from blue to red is a mere conjurer's trick! To see into the blood filled body is the power of being God.

My girls teeth had been extracted, all nine. One would not stop bleeding. Her mouth was agog with red berry juice. Nothing would stop the flow of infection in her weary gum. No thing would hold off its power. Little people can bleed to death. Medical implements, needles and stitches bound the tooth hole tight. The flesh paused for rest and insight. Life is precious and temporal. Fear runs in blood.

My period is big and sore. It is a blood bath. A crash of some kind into all manner of things. I had the reddest 'come' today from the biggest wailing volcanic wound. Blood spattered out like a clogged up piston. It was fast and dirty like pigeon shit. And I felt poked. I am getting more excited these days. My body tremors like hypothermic tickles. I am getting

used to the vibrating bullet head. Shoot me down baby. It burrows deep into my ragged transient ruby skin and triggers me to open up like an unfathomable circle of alternately opening, moving doors. Oh to cum is just the best thing, the most delightful release. The most heavenly of all pleasures. Only for a few deep moments when I relax do I feel like I had an orgasmic massager, manipulating me with a winking eye, riding on my back like some skeletal ninja. There are stitched crimson-red corpuscles in me jumping on high wires. I am alert to the red of my thunderous bloody-being. I am dripping like paint on the shelf of my dark illustrious secrets. My body stings and stinks of earth. I am wild and uncouth. I am a red dakini bathing in the blood of untamed death. A bad bitch from hell pulling out hair from heads. I drink from skull cups. I can fight and murder with this raging cunt. I wonder how I will fare when I don't bleed anymore? Then I will bleed ink onto pages. I will scrawl ravenous sweat into sheets of emptiness. I will let the tears seep into the ridges of timeless letters. I will abandon myself to this urgent life force and let it carry me beyond.

SENSITIVITY SUITE

By Rich Follett

i
i am eight
on a sand bar
which
like me
only appears - only comes out -
when the tide is low and all is
calm

my father has left me alone
'wait here and swim' he said;
dropped me down
and sped off
(who imagined the old boat's
propeller could turn so fast?)
apparently
there is a girl in a white bikini
near the mouth of the inlet
screaming out to the open sea
dad to the rescue
'son, wait here...'
dad to the rescue
my sand bar is sinking

she, grateful, hugs him
he lingers in her embrace a long
moment past awkward
before ceding her to the singing
beach
all the way back to the dock he

will tell me

how her name was merrie lee
how unusual that was
how impressed he was with her
character
character my eight-year-old ass
you son of a bitch

like that sand bar
the whole business was beneath
me
but i clung to shrinking, shifting
sands
just to keep breathing
near the end i went under
more than two feet deep now
and beginning to move fast
i lay on the bottom
(the bottom that only moments
ago had been the top)
let out all of my air and
lay motionless - looking toward
heaven -
breathing in a new element
thinking those fluke were really
onto something
breathing happily in a new
element
until i found myself inexplicably
aloft and sputtering...

that he came back for me at all
continues to surprise

we had been fishing, father and i
outboard set to troll
i hovered over the rotting transom
to steer and to spy
feeling the motor's heat
envying joan of arc
so clean an ending - so
incontrovertible
(they say her heart did not burn)

my true purpose in this faux-
halcyon escapade
was to look through the clearer-
than-you'd-think-it-would-be
water
clear down to the bottom
to spot marbles
marbles you see
are the eyes of a mythical fluke
buried in the sand
bigger than a volkswagen, says
dad
old flat poseidon
he is down there somewhere
and my father ahab
will see him rendered in strips
battered (how appropriate words
can be without knowing)
and served up with ore-ida's finest
at our family's rendition of the
perfect friday dinner
'round the table
amen
norman rockwell would have been
proud
but scratch the canvas and you'll
find we were bosch

painted over
in suburban teal and burnt orange
so i called out 'marbles!' as we
trolled
and dad would drop the hook
right down
up came fish after fish
hooray
sportsmanship for assholes

every fish was smaller than
expected
every summer friday a bit closer
to the fall
disappointment was my father's
condiment of choice

i learned in the sixth grade
that fluke, like their smaller cousin
the flounder
(flounder? how could we not have
known?)
begin life with two eyes on
opposite sides of their head
like any other fish
then, slowly,
in an effort to avoid being seen
and eaten
they flatten
and both eyes migrate to the side
of their body that looks toward
heaven

smart fish

i helped them, you know
i called out only the barest few,

and then only
to avoid being seen
to avoid being captured
to avoid being rendered in strips
to avoid being battered and served
up
to postpone the burgeoning,
insatiable chagrin

even today
when the tide rushes in
i bury myself in the sand
and look toward heaven
waiting for my eyes to migrate

ii
these pebbles -
lava from a volcano
that exploded a whole lot of
thousands of years ago
nowhere near arizona
where i am now
after riding a bus for three days
to an acting job my parents said i
shouldn't take

fuck them

i am seventeen
i hop a big apple greyhound on
christmas eve
the peter pan touring company is
the key to my nascent career in
lights
but on the way
mister dumbass producer skips
town with the money

one blinding incomprehensible
greedy twist of balding sweaty
mama's-boy fate
and my incandescent debut turns
out to be
just another case of 'my parents
were right'

i wait in the phoenix bus station
it is three in the morning
no one has come to claim me

my doppelganger walks up,
says 'are you here for the peter
pan touring company?'
'it's about fucking time', i say;
only to hear 'no - i am stuck here,
too' and
suddenly it all comes clear -
he is bob
from somewhere vast and flat

we are soon joined by a third
named larry
he is heir to the kodak fortune
(no, really - i checked later)
he is a peter pan touring company
rising star
like bob,
like me...
his parents turned out to be right,
as well -
(bob doesn't have parents
but if he did, they'd be ri...)

fuck them
fuck them all

we do not have enough money for
bus tickets home
we consider selling ourselves
we'd have done it, too
but that only would have made
our parents more right

fuck them
fuck them all

greyhound ad says 'buy two, get
one free'
holiday special
we pool our resources
who knows who, where?
i win; my cousin's in l.a.

we three
salvaged by cousin tom in a
dented orange pinto
lived in his garage
for six months
sleeping on and under a ping-
pong table
and eating avocados fresh from a
tree in the backyard
eden without eve -
one night
we fumbled clumsily with each
other in her absence,
deciding in the end we were better
off sans satisfaction

two weeks into the eden
experiment
proving once and for all that i am

my pragmatic parents' son
i borrow a bicycle
i ride each day to the redondo
beach boardwalk
where i sell flowers in an open air
market
i get this job
solely because albert the owner's
son desires me -
sycophantic albert, whose middle
name was futility...
i sold only flowers
(once, to olivia newton-john,
a single red rose
she was so...pretty)

bob went back to his vast flatness;
larry, to claim his diseased fortune

i held out 'til the last
feasting on pride

fuck them
fuck them all

my mother's quavering mouse-
voice on the telephone
she is worried about me
have i been drinking?

so i cave
i fly back to new york
(much quicker than greyhound)
i would say i missed home but
you read my last poem
three weeks later my cousin called
to say he had not seen me -

had i come home

three weeks?

fuck him
fuck them all

thirty years later
a quiet moment draws me back to
these pebbles -
lava from a volcano
that exploded a whole lot of
thousands of years ago
nowhere near arizona
where i am now
if only in my mind

if only

i

had been able to explode...

iii

i insisted on seeing my brother's
body
it nearly killed my parents
it nearly killed me
but see it i did
(one thing we had in common,
my brother and i -
we were born to ruin)

he was lying on his right side
one eye gazing opaquely outward
the other half of his face
covered by a starched white cloth

i asked to see
the other half of his face
to make sure it was there
to make sure it was him
he was always a trickster
i asked to see the other half
of his dappled face
and they told me it wasn't there to
see

the shotgun had done its work -
who knew his arms were so long?

i had to look at what was there
at what was left
the freckles across the nose were
darker
there were more of them than i
remembered
the eye was no longer the color of
the sea
but it did slant upwards at the
corner like a grin
yes, i concluded
this was him

i was just about to look away
when something moved -

breathlessly i waited, praying
for his last trick to be real
for him to sit up
for his ocean eyes to twinkle

it was a maggot
i am okay with that

PSYCHOLOGY IN THE CUBICLE OR, THE DISCIPLES OF SIN

By Pablo Vision

Images © Colin Lowe

SIMON THOMAS, ANDREW JAMES

SIMON THOMAS. Good day, fellow cruiser. I have some hesitation as regards my debased plans, but must commend you on the proportions of your excited member...The more I strive for a life devoid of such degenerate depravity, the more I am assailed with desire for the same... Certainly it is the feelings of shame and guilt, that will surely follow the act we are about to commit, that will trouble me the most...But for now, would it be acceptable to touch you in an intimate manner.

ANDREW JAMES. My dear friend, please not only touch me, but unleash your own rod of pleasure, for I can see that *it* harbours no uncertainty over that which it desires. (*He kisses him, feels his erect penis through his jeans, and allows himself to be fondled.*)

SIMON THOMAS. Is not, though, the blood that feeds this desire, deserting my brain, and causing this aberration of reasoning, and impairing my judgement? What other reasons could I have for engaging in such anonymous and risky activity with a complete stranger? How else can I reconcile the lust I feel now, with the love for my wife? I would confess that the possibility of neuro-chemical addiction has crossed my mind, and that it may be the risk itself that excites me, more than your admittedly beautiful cock.

ANDREW JAMES. You concern yourself too much with analysing your desires. Only the indoctrination of monogamy and sexual stereotypes has made you forsake your nature. You would not remain loyal to one restaurant for the rest of your life, or restrict yourself to one type of food, why not partake of both cock and



pussy without prejudice, and treat them both equally as friends? See how I can stroke and caress you in a manner that a woman could never truly understand, not being in possession herself of the same system of nerve endings and sensations? And if she loved you, as you undoubtedly love her, would she really wish to deprive you of this pleasure?

SIMON THOMAS. There is much truth in what you say, but there is also deviancy from the way society, and the law, view these

things...there must be valid reasons...

ANDREW JAMES. Society always seeks to control and keep us in chains, it is hateful of freedom, and it is always against nature. Let us not conform, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is good and acceptable and perfect.

SIMON THOMAS, ANDREW JAMES, MATTHEW BARTHOLOMEW

SIMON THOMAS (*surprised to find the cubicle door opening to allow the entry of a third man*). Oh, my God! Please allow me to explain...please say that you are not the police...

MATTHEW BARTHOLOMEW. No, indeed not; and it is for me to apologise for my intrusion...the door was not locked. (*He moves to exit.*)

ANDREW JAMES. Please, Sir! Do not be so hasty to depart; your opinions may be of some value. My good, and highly aroused, friend seems to be struggling with the inner workings of his mind,

although, not, I am glad to report, his anatomy.

MATTHEW BARTHOLOMEW. Of course, if you think my presence may be of some value...but these things are alien to me: this love between men, and the venue you have chosen to express it.

ANDREW JAMES. If you will allow me to demonstrate...often so much easier, and so much more honest, than words of explanation...Take both of our cocks in your hands, and tell me if what strikes you...

MATTHEW BARTHOLOMEW (*he does as instructed*). There is a most vibrant rigidity to both cocks, and clearly evidence of great desire for this activity, and although not an act I have previously given much thought to, it is one that arouses a certain curiosity...

ANDREW JAMES. And would you say that you have suffered some kind of inappropriate sexual experience as a child, or harbour some kind of depression likely to exhibit itself in sexual symptoms? Would you seek out sexual release as a replacement for love denied?

Would you, Sir, deny yourself pleasure and experience purely because you have been told these things are wrong?

MATTHEW BARTHOLOMEW. I would have to answer a resounding 'no' to the first three questions, and further conclude that it is denial itself that is more likely to cause depression, or adverse psychological behaviour.

SIMON THOMAS. But, if these things are so natural, as you infer with great persuasiveness, why will we all slink out of here, like guilty schoolboys having just robbed the Church's poor box, rather than going home and relating our joyous experiences to our wives, as we would if we had seen a beautiful rainbow, or innocently swallowed a tasty morsel? (*He takes Andrew's cock into his mouth.*)

ANDREW JAMES. We do so because society and tradition seek to punish honesty and nature; we do so because we are not amongst real friends; we do so because we are cowards; and we do so because we wish to repeat the experience over and over again, without losing the pleasure of pussy and the bliss of breasts...

Matthew, can I ask if you have ever enjoyed the more agreeable orifice of your wife?

MATTHEW BARTHOLOMEW. Indeed I have, on many occasions, but given that this kind of love is more common between men and woman, than it is between men and men, I hope that you will not attempt to twist my normalcy into something unnatural.

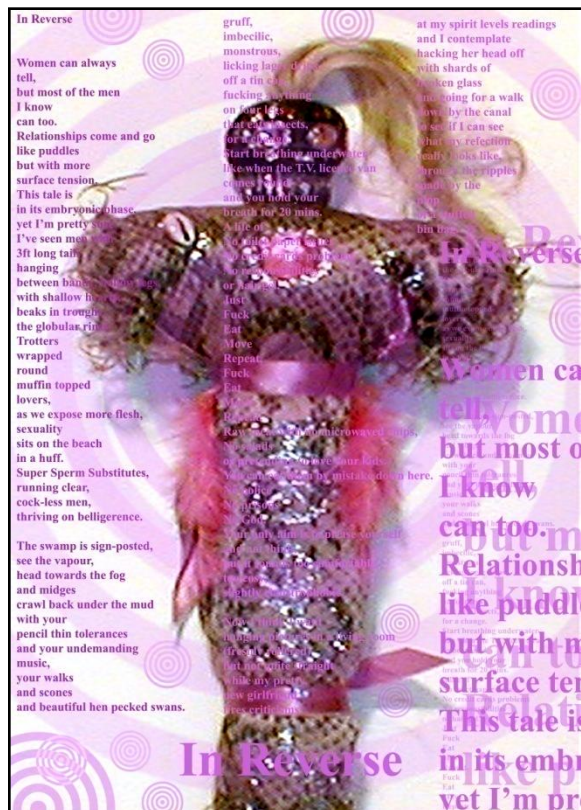
ANDREW JAMES (*assisting Simon with the undressing of Matthew, while Matthew jerks off Andrew to completion*). Your observations are very astute, but there is a world of difference between the affectionate avenue of a woman, and the benevolent boulevard of a man...notwithstanding the issue of passivity... the giving and the taking, so to speak. If you were to allow yourself to be the meat in the sandwich, you will see better what I seek to explain.

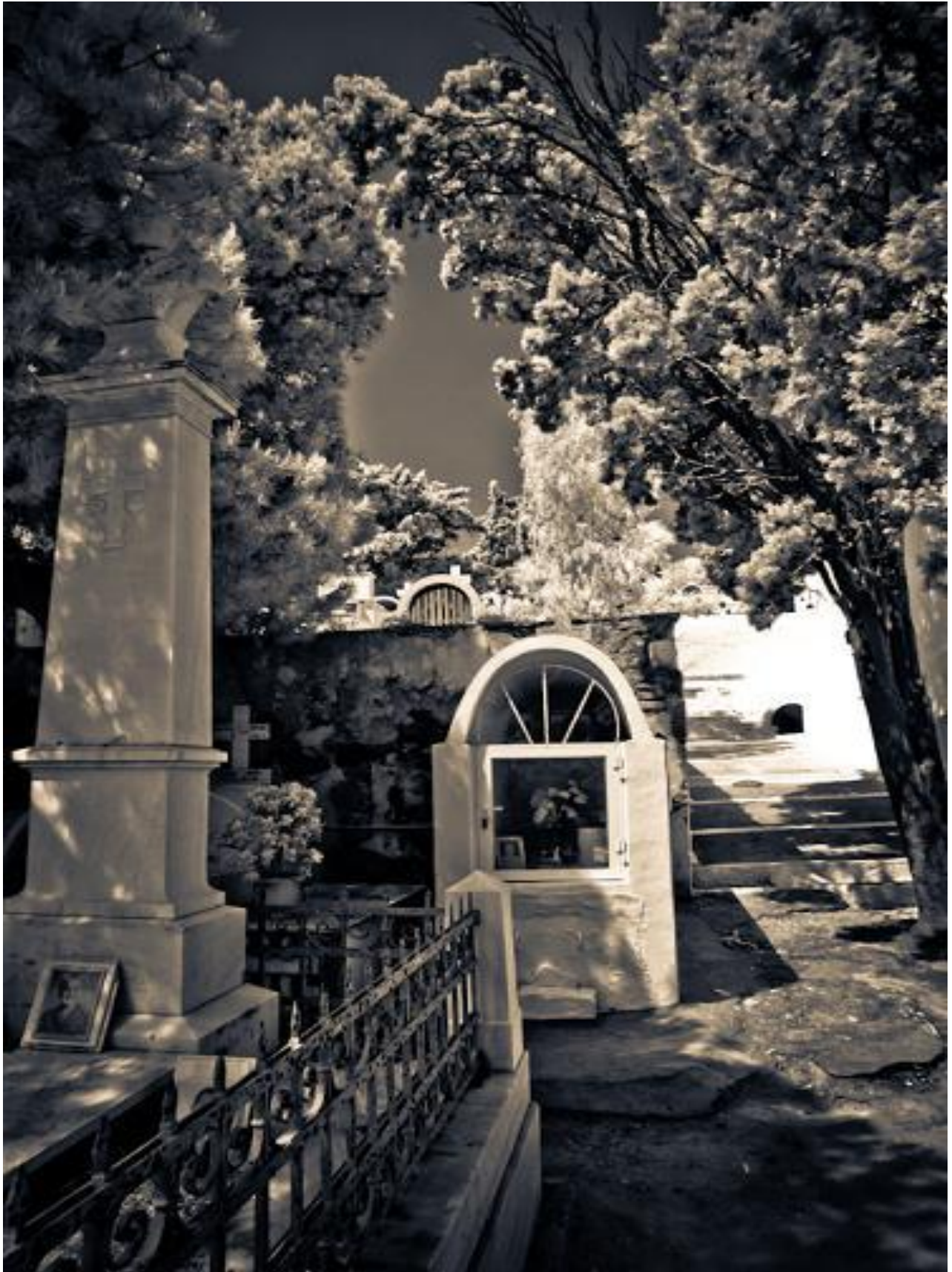
SIMON THOMAS. But, as appealing as that suggestion sounds, what of Jesus? What would He teach us?

ANDREW JAMES. It was He who said: 'Let us love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'

(*Andrew's cum is used as lubricant so that Simon can penetrate Matthew, and for Matthew to penetrate Andrew.*)

SIMON THOMAS. So, truly, there is no shame in what we do, nor any reason at all to feel any guilt; we should not view these natural impulses as anything destructive, other than to the oppressive controls of a society that wishes us harm; and these spurious attempts to equate this behaviour with gambling, or drug addiction, are totally unfounded in reason. (*Simon and Matthew both climax violently; and a great sense of physical and mental calmness is experienced by all.*)





MADNESS PART III

By Brian Routh

Images © Patricia Wells

THE CHANGE

I found myself being shot out of a cannon at a 100 miles an hour.

Every bit of me was being torn apart and blasted in every direction at once.

Mary was there still and beautiful. She was praying over me in some sort of Aramaic or Hebraic language.

She was dressed like mother Mary. There was a bright, electric, golden, yellow glow around her. Her words were like lightning bolts that were being hurled through me at tremendous speeds.

Each one set me afire.

Burned away my flesh.

Spun me further into the void, the great big wonderful, terrifying void.

The next thing I knew I was in a hospital bed in an intensive care unit.

I was hooked up to all kinds of machines and respirators.

They all had distinctly different sounds.

I felt like I was flying high, at least

high on the morphine that was being pumped into my body to numb the pain that was hurting in my head.

The pain was being converted into a kind of horror. I was unable to move or feel any part of my body. All these tubes going up my nose, down my throat, in my veins, down my penis, up my ass.

I suddenly felt mischievous, like playing pranks.

I was giggling inside and maybe even outside for all I knew.

It felt like the bullet must have gone through the front left side of my head.

I could still see with both eyes.

I thought.

That's something.

But I definitely couldn't move a muscle. "Paralyzed!" A voice jeered at me from inside. "You're paralyzed." I yelled again.

A hand was gently holding mine.

"Mary! Oh there you are," I said with relief.

She squeezed my hand and looked at me with love.

I felt safe now.

Now I'm in good hands I sighed.
I closed my eyes to fight back the
tears.

"Peter! Are you alright?"

Mary where have you gone?

I screamed in my head.

Mavis was holding my hand.

She had a look of loving concern
on her face.

I was off the machinery now.

Just lying in bed with nothing
going into or out of my body.

"How long?" I muttered.

"Two weeks." Said Mavis.

"I've missed you Mavis." I said
through uncontrollable sobs.

"There there!"

"There there!"

As she soothed me by rubbing my
hands.

I drifted off to the land of
morphine induced horror dreams.

Lots of ugly distortions of just
about everything imaginable.

So extreme that there is a
grotesque 'Punch and Judy,' cruel
humour running through
everything. I wanted to be punch,
running around hitting people
over the head with a rubber
truncheon.

"Shhh!" Said Mary as she watched
through my eyes at the outside
world.

"We will watch together." She
said with interest in her voice.

Yes! I thought, we will watch

together.

INTO THE ABYSS

I never thought I would have
survived the shooting but I did.

I didn't have total coordination in
my body.

But it was returning slowly.

All I had was a scar over my left
eye.

I was lucky.

Mary said it was because I was
being spared in order to fertilize
the egg.

How do I get to this egg? I
thought.

Is this some sort of spiritual
fertilization process that I am
about to be initiated into?

Of course it is.

Mary is obviously the guide to all
this.

I just had to keep following her.

When I got shot I had started to
turn my back on her.

Shut her out.

Turning off her voice.

Getting caught up in a material
sleep.

Hanging out with the guys.

And then bang!

Yes God does strip away what
comes between you and God.

I had Mary and Mavis.

I felt like Jesus.

Immaculate Conception?

Mavis the nurturer and Mary the



High Priestess, Mother and soul
wife.

I waited for the voice to command
me.

The days passed by whilst my
body healed.

The experience taught me to
deepen my love.

TO EXPAND IT

To embrace the pain I was in and
rejoice!

Almost a hallelujah!

It was a slow painful process,
recovering.

I had to learn to walk and talk all

over again. Things would get
jumbled up in my head and my
legs would collapse under me.

But slowly I recovered. Six
months, maybe seven, that's what
it took.

I felt like a different person.

Older. Stronger. Weirder.

Didn't care what anyone thought.

Felt maniacal but in control.

Instantly able to feel deep love
and able to walk in a crowd and
not be noticed.

I was just about ready to hit the
road.

THE ROAD

Mary was also ready to leave.

While my body was healing she
was busy somewhere preparing
the way for the child to be born.

I didn't understand how this was
going to all take place but since
the accident things seemed very
different.

I felt like I had acquired certain
knowledge that before was
inaccessible to me.

I couldn't tell you what that
knowledge was; it was just there.

Built in.

Programmed newly into my
being.

The few times that I did see Mary
manifest in the physical she
looked as though she was with

child.

I had a very strong paternal urge rise up when I saw her.

I couldn't tell you how we consummated our love but I knew deep inside me that we had.

I think it happened as I lay dying.

I had a memory of our passion that surpassed all passion.

We had somehow spiritually, sexually created this being from our great love.

If all is spiritual and all is physical at the same time then this is not so unusual an occurrence as one may think.

We are all physical manifestations of energy and this in the physical sense can mean any shape or form from any invisible energy source.

BIRTH

We started out, Mary and I, on the road to Heaven just after first light.

I had some money from a crime fund given to me and I was the only physical body to feed but I had suddenly the appetite of a horse.

I was eating for three.

Mary pointed me in the direction to go in, we took the greyhound bus for two days to the Arizona desert arriving at our destination in the early hours of the morning.



We then got off the bus in the middle of nowhere.

I walked, sang and told tales of wonder to Mary until it began to get dark again and then we bedded down for the night in my sleeping bag out under the night sky.

It was a beautiful night.

You could see the Milky Way going off into the distance.

Shooting stars buzzed around.

It was a high-energy field.

It was magic.

I buzzed and rattled all night in a sleep charged with excitement.

Mary and child sound asleep within me.

This is life I thought.
Real life.
Out here in this wonderful,
expansive, charged up place.
The child was close to being born.
My dreams that night was a
meandering of carefully woven
tapestries.
Filled with images of dark forests
and wolves.
Farm scenes.
Men and women in loving
embrace.
Ships at sea and all manner of
things depicted in an array of rich,
bright, exotic colours.
The desert winds were gentle and
warm.
All was well with the world.

THE BOY

I was to stay there in the desert for
several months until the child was
born.
I had some food that I brought
with me but that would soon run
out and I feared for the lack of
nourishment.
Especially for the family.
Mary assured me that spiritual
sustenance was all that was
needed and that I could fast for
the entire period.
She told me that God would feed
me and for me to pray and have
faith.

She said that I would grow in
strength from my spiritual contact
with God.
I believed her and I believed in
God.
And as the days passed by I grew
in strength.
The only food I imbibed was
water from a fresh spring that
Mary had revealed to me.
I felt myself growing larger as
though I were pregnant.
My stomach grew but so did
everything else.
I must have grown to at least eight
feet.
I was a giant alien looking being.
At least that's what some people
thought that happened to be
dune-buggy nearby.
As soon as they encountered me
they were frozen in terror and
immediately set off in their
buggies as fast as they could go.
I felt like Frankenstein's monster.
My whole facial structure was
changing.
My forehead bulging.
My cheeks standing out.
My vision changing.
Seeing things that are new to me.
All around me had changed in
form and colour.
It was like being on some strong
hallucinogenic that lasted and
lasted and deepened and became
rooted.

I was changing into a very different being, that's for sure. Maybe I was horrific to the rest of humanity but I felt like I've never felt in my life before. I felt so clear and all of my senses were ultra sharp and enhanced. I had the strength of ten men and the capacity to love as deep as the ocean. I saw things that I was never able to see before. Other objects and people that were of different worlds or dimensions, all existing together but unknowing of each other's existence. My whole experience had become multi-dimensional. My skin had turned to an olive coloured, hard, leathery consistency. I was a giant being from another world living in multiple existences. Existence was busy. Creation was busy. Nothing is ever completed. Creation continues..... In the desert I felt protected somewhat from the inquisitive eyes of my fellow man. I hid when strangers approached. I was nourished by the Sun fed by the spring and energized by the brightly burning dynamo inside of me. Mary and the boy were all part of this new being.

We were all different voices of the same force given expression through my body. Our body. The body. Whatever! It was what it was. My voice, which had been a weary voice, had changed with the physical change. I was the body voice. Mary the guide voice bringing me to the splendour of God. The boy's voice was the innocence and sweetness of childhood. But not a needy voice. We co-existed in a space like no other. I had to hide from the world of man for fear of being destroyed by him. Even in the remote Arizona desert there is man's presence. You feel the energy from afar and sometimes close by. One visitor in the ocean of desert sends out a ripple that can be felt.

THE THREE

The day arrived for the next phase of my newfound existence. The existence of the three. In a blaze of what seemed like lights and trumpets we were now three distinctly different physical beings.



My flesh and blood had somehow separated itself into three people. Mary the boy and I. Mary was a slight and beautiful woman; she radiated a wild energy that at first encounter of her I was thrown back from her. From a distance she looked plain but as I approached her closely I saw how beautiful she was. I was drawn into her magic instantly. I could not turn away. I was spellbound. A wonderful feeling washed over me, a thrilling feeling. All was ablaze with God! In the distance was the boy. Already a man in a boy's body. He looked like a small boy but there was something about him

that was ancient. An old man but a strong man. This boy who looked me in the eye with a penetrating look that sent chills down my back. Who was he? What is his mission? No gentle Jesus in those eyes. I feared him. I feared that someday he would be the destruction of me. Mary protected him and talked to him in a tongue that was not of this world. I was excluded from their world. I was curious about it but I feared it. I did what was needed to do, my job was done. My appearance had returned

more or less once more to its former state I say more or less because my hair was white, my eyes were almost white and my skin was pallid.

I had no facial hair.

I felt like I'd been electrocuted, had fought my way through some powerful electrical storm.

I would certainly be unrecognizable to anyone who had known me before.

It was almost time for the three of us to leave the desert and venture into the cities of man once more.

There was a job to do and the time to do it was getting near.

I knew what that job was intuitively but I couldn't have written it on paper.

I followed the guidance of Mary, who didn't say very much of anything but communicated in a mighty powerful way.

I knew what she was saying with her mind.

The boy didn't ever say anything to me.

I felt ridicule coming from him towards me.

His energy was frightening, disconcerting and intensely powerful.

Maybe he saw me as a means to an end.

That's how it felt at any rate.

I believed in my mission to bear

this child and offer him to the world.

I was directed in this by a greater being than I was, that much I knew.

I knew nothing of his purpose, that had not been revealed to me.

Perhaps it would have proved too much for me to know.

I was lost at sea and was rescued.

The warm hand of God picked me out of the ocean and blasted me with energy.

I was saved Hallelujah!

This part of my journey I was led as a blind man over treacherous terrain.

I was no longer Peter the man recovering from a nervous breakdown.

I had metamorphosed into some other being altogether.

I still felt very strong but I felt a feeling of being controlled.

A force was at work controlling my mind. It didn't feel like God's force.

Some angel had materialized through the boy. Perhaps not a bad Angel.

But a powerful angel caught up in his own power. Carried away by it.

I didn't really know for sure.

The boy was controlling me and causing me to doubt myself.

I suddenly felt as though I had

been burnt out.

All the energy was gone, drained from my body. Zapped!

I turned my head. The boy was staring at me.



INVISIBLE

Mary was gone for long periods of time.

I don't know where she went.

She would leave looking tired and return looking refreshed.

She seemed very preoccupied.

I felt like I was the invisible one now.

I became paler and frailer.

My hair began to fall out and my teeth were loose. And I was

getting lighter and seemed to glide from place to place, feet not touching the ground.

I was the one becoming invisible now.

The boy had taken all of my energy and sucked it right out of me, slowly over time.

Perhaps he sucked the matter right out of me.

Bits of me disappearing until all was gone and I was no more.

At least not in the recognized sense of identifying each other as beings of matter.

I was but I wasn't.

Mary seemed to be frail also but the boy grew fiercely.

He was already a young man.

He looked like an ancient warrior prince, fierce and beautiful.

I loved him and yet I feared him.

I had given him my life and he had taken it wholeheartedly.

He had also taken Mary's life also.

Drained her dry.

We were both inside the boy now.

THE JOURNEY INSIDE THE BOY

It was a strange turn of events to be trapped inside the boy with Mary.

Watching life through his eyes.

Mary continued to communicate

with him in their own language.
She still guided him.
And he continued to accept her wishes.
I was unclear about my role in all this.
I had no way to leave this situation.
Or at least that's what I was given to understand from Mary.
I trusted her completely but I wasn't so sure about the boy.
Feeling his energy from inside of him was intensely frightening.
I was totally controlled by him.
Forced to be kept as a viewer only.
I was unable to escape.
I felt that I was kept alive for one more task to perform and then I feared that my days would come to an end.
At least this life as I know it.
Mary was filled with only love but I know in some way she was also being used but was unaware of it.
I tried to communicate this to her but my lines of communication were being jammed by the all-powerful energy of the boy.
I wanted to warn her but I was helpless to do so.
I needed someone or something to release me and help me to combat the boy for I felt him to be a threat to the very survival of all.
The boy sensed this in me and worked hard to exercise his

control over me.
But somehow I knew that I would find a way to be free of him, it was just a question of how and when.
My mission became one of finding a way to stop the boy from wreaking havoc on the world.
If only Mary could see the impending doom she might at least be able to communicate in the boy's language but would he listen?
Probably not.
He was hell bent on completing his mission whatever that was.
But in my gut I knew that it wasn't a healthy one.
The boy was walking the main highway towards the nearest town.
I had an uneasy feeling.
I knew something was going to happen and I knew it wasn't going to be good.

THE PATH OF DESTRUCTION

Our arrival in the small, sleepy, desert town was at night.
After hiking and hitching we were now entering the local bar that was filled with tough looking drunken men in their cowboy hats and boots.
As we entered the bar everyone turned and stared at the boy, who by now was a young man.

A dirty longhaired young man.
A man not easily tolerated in this red-necked community.
There was violence in the air.
Jeers and ridicule were directed towards the boy.
I felt the anger and indignance rise up in him.
Now there was going to be trouble and it wasn't going to be him that would be the one getting hurt.
His power and strength were enormous.
He directed his energy at a large man who seemed to be the ringleader of the group.
The man clutched at his throat and fell to his knees.
He was clearly having great difficulty in breathing and soon was doubled up on the floor in agony.
His friends were in a panic and unable to help him. I felt the boy's satisfaction as he turned about and stepped out of the bar and into the street.
This is the beginning, I thought.
I knew that I had to stop him but the way to do so wasn't clear to me.
In time I would defeat him.
With help from some power greater than us all.
When the boy was wrapped up in his own selfish state of being, it was easy for me to think

undetected.
His own narcissism will be his downfall, I thought.
Help is on its way; I knew it but didn't know from where.

DIO

Help comes from the strangest places and this was no exception.
The being or person that I expected to meet turned out not to be in human form but in animal form.
A black Labrador that turned up one day and decided to hang out with us as a permanent fixture.
I just thought he was like any other dog but this dog was no ordinary dog.
As soon as he showed up I could feel him scanning my thoughts.
When I felt him scanning me I also felt a lot of love and warmth coming from him.
"Peter, I know you are in there." I heard his mind say to me.
"I know you are trapped, I'm here to help you Peter." He said.
The amazing thing is that the boy didn't detect him at all.
"I'm Dio." He said.
"The boy can't detect me because I'm jamming his thoughts." He said.
"Just listen and don't think about anything I say because the boy can

still read you.

"If we wait until he's lost in his ego again, you can talk to me then and I'll tell you how to start to become free."

He continued.

"You have to build up your strength first before you can begin to challenge his power."

I felt the boy getting slightly uneasy. It was hard in my present state of weakness to resist anything from him and he could break open my thoughts and scan them without any difficulty.

Dio moved away and busied himself with cleaning his fur.

I thought of neutral things to throw the boy off the scent. The boy sensed what was happening. He picked up a rock and hit me over the head. I didn't have time to react.

The explosion plunged me into blackness.

THE RETURN

I dreamed I was swimming out into the cold dark sea. The sky was black and ominous. I was afraid and felt my body becoming exhausted and heavy. I began to go under.

I panicked as I started to drown.

I opened my eyes and looked at the rain hitting the window.

I was back in the hospital bed in the ward.

Had it all been some terrible dream?

I looked around at the patients in their beds everyone looked the same as though nothing had happened and yet it all seemed alien in some way.

The Doctor whose office I had walked out of, at the beginning of my story was doing his rounds.

"Good morning Mr.Crawford! Are we feeling any better this morning?"

Are we back from our trip in the desert yet?" He said as he looked at his notes.

"Anymore visions of this boy or Mary?"

He asked.

I just stared at him. I was in shock. I began to feel myself overheating and I felt panic begin to sweep over me.

It must have all been some vision or hallucination.

The doctor glided away.

I looked up and there standing at the bottom of my bed was the boy. He was dressed in hospital whites. He looked at me with a menacing glare.

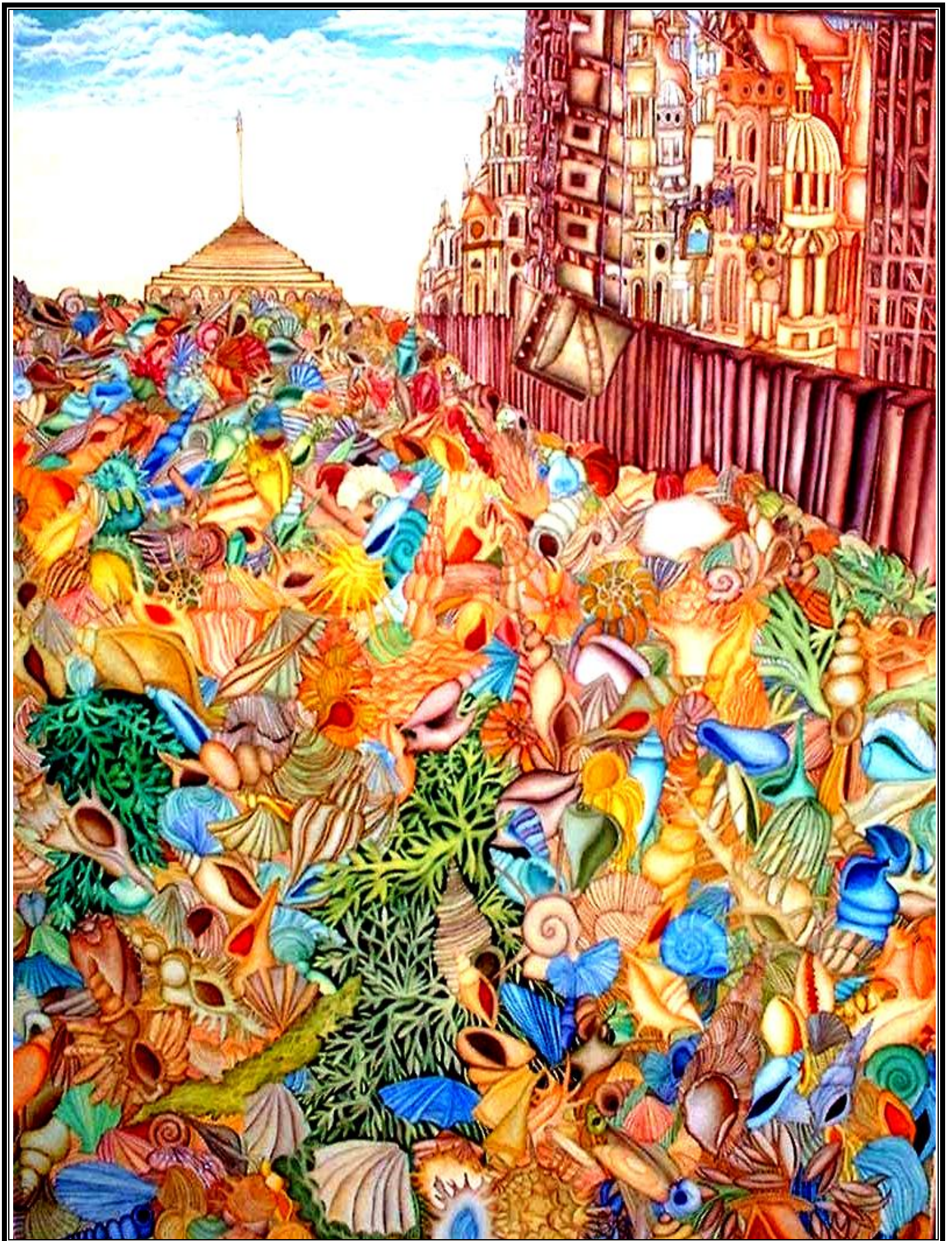
"You might think that you've escaped me but it's almost time for your shock treatment." He said with a note of cruelty in his voice.

I was having cold sweats.
He faded away and was gone.
I wasn't sure what to think.
Was he really there?
Maybe it's all just an illusion.
I was confused and I started to
sink into a feeling of hopelessness.
"Cheer up! It will be time for your
spin around the garden soon."
Sang a soothing song from my
friend nurse Mavis.
Ah! I thought I am safe.
"I will be back in about an hour."
She sang as she flew away.
I looked out the window at the
garden. The rain had stopped and
everything looked wet and
glistening.
In the distance, standing at the
edge of the lawn I saw a woman
who looked like Mary. She was
standing next to a dog. The dog

looked like Dio. When I looked
closer I saw that the woman was
blind and the dog was a Seeing
Eye dog.
Perhaps I had mixed everything
up in my head and projected these
people and the dog into my
dreams and illusions.
I felt comforted by the thought
that it wasn't real after all. No Boy.
No Mary.
All of the stress and fear left me.
Drained out of me. I was relaxed
for the first time in a long time. I
felt thoroughly alive.
The sun was streaming through
the clouds, filling the room with
gold.
Feeling happier I dressed and felt
excited about the day ahead.

THE END





GRAVEN IMAGES

By Patrick Wright

Intense with grief, I roll the old cine film. The spool unravels to the scene of your wedding day in '65. In those silences before sound, your otherworldliness is tragically undenied: at once unreal, and yet too real. Such overpowering affect, as this being strays in the interstices of the frames, always fugitive, too remote to remain in this hub of consciousness – or, even, to give a trace of meaning to what's sundered beyond recognition. Here you glide in your virginal whites...

A certain belatedness I capture, an uncanniness which, as a "return of the repressed", for a moment resuscitates lived experience. It's as if you've already died a thousand deaths. Time bled into you, while the film hardly played, lay pristine in its abandonment; yet your characteristic movements and gesticulations – the greatest indicators of your veracity – stain these clips with underwhelming immortality.

This is where we consign death today. With each replaying, anniversaries live on the side of repetition and timeless fixation. I repeat you. I weep over you again. You're the casket I

open, a place where time and space implode. You're the clandestine ritual, a mourning I dip into as life drags horribly outside, as time respire outside. Yet there's the necessity of its forgetting, concealing each day the remnants, these reliquaries I preserve, and the wounds I reinflict. The necessity of healing, of forgetting. A place of erasure; and a place of the unsellable and the singular. You're the subterranean, yet recur, resurface, bleed through pores of that second skin, in moments where my eye-contact fails, and where I look into space opened up by seeing through the artifice of words – that words are makeup, covering over the profound severance, as we sit behind closed curtains, with the agonising caesuras between sentences.

I witness apparitions, stale phantoms. Over there for instance, the semblance of your father, your mother, and this pale imitator, which stakes a claim to your body. And this façade has passed a threshold, fallen to a multitude of failing recollections: uncles, aunts, cousins who recall, unreliably, single facets of your soul. I urge them to authenticate your existence, but they only disappoint with their partial

tales or voids. No one's left to narrate the singularity of your lived sensations, and thus each vignette, each fragmentary gesture, evokes an excruciating enigma.

If I were to question each and every bystander here, lining up for the shot, I'd find their testimonies vary. They'd each of memorised a single face of you; whereas the one I see is a totality in its absence, and harks back so painfully to everything that enshrouds it. I often wonder about telephoning these people, or writing them a letter, for arbitrary, inconsequential facts about you, which, though past, might assuage future wants. But I know such tired old brains can only console me with falsehood or tales, amnesiac, liquor-addled minds, of pinhole cameras, of dying cells, which might make terrible mistakes, such as confusing you for someone else. It's absurd, too, to hear your life from lips of strangers. Though these ghosts remain, some only a phone call away, their memories are tawdry, insulting, tinted by distance and decay. I'm after trivia, minutia – anything. But faded accounts, through novel, risk degrading these pictures further, corrupting them with confusion or contradiction, thus working against my condensed ideal. In stifled attempts, they speak ill of the dead.

Some memories are more faithful than others – those remainders torn like love letters, parts which refer to something precious, though quite useless on their own, incomplete and provoking more questions than answers. Your guests mingled on the periphery, didn't know you as I did – though they did see things I'll never see. And what I continue to mourn is your experience – what your wedding day meant to you; how the film played out in your consciousness; the emotions the cameraman failed to incarcerate – the duration, impressions, the conversations, which this mad jumble of scenes lets stray...

Asking where your emotions went is like asking where the beams of sunlight refracted to, where your bouquet went to, where your confetti scattered to... Outside my field of vision's perfect solitude; though in the things you touched, in the ground you walked, in the vacancies of ingrained presence, there's unseen lamentations of time and intensities; lost aromas... In the stone walls of the church, in dresses in decrepit attics, melancholy's stained and unresting...

As the projection rolls on, the aperture frames you a saint, and a fortuitous perihelion ordains you with a halo. At 21 years your beauty's untouchable, but it's altered by the magnitude of my non-existence. Since

now it's Platonic and parlous to the eye, as if seeing threatened its extraordinary existence. Yet, still, it's seeing through a glass darkly, frosted to ensure our dimension apart; a dimension which holds you in a preposterous vortex, in spokes of coruscating light. And I expect if I were to fall magically through the screen, this universe would fold in on itself in blunt refusal.

You're sitting on the back seat of a moving car, and you're wearing the very same ring that's now locked in my box of relics: the only continuity from your drowned world, like a souvenir from the afterlife. In the next scene your father awaits at the doors of the church in anticipation, pride visible in his eyes, articulate in conveying his thoughts flown from perishable clichés. Your father – like all ghosts – is oblivious of his starring role, his intransience, his presence revisiting the screen in traumatic moments – pressed on this finitude of film. Like a ghost, too, he's fleetingly there, though it's enough to be sublime and devastating; and his private words: shards of who he was, somehow arbitrary, again strangely limited and accidentally imprisoned, condemned to surface in this netherworld as some vague representation. For you, though, you're at peace in all this, while timid future generations have eyes scorched

through, seeing dead ancestors revived evermore...

But this seeming permanence is itself subject to time, to disintegration. The tape – already grainy, dirty, moisture-damaged – will soon return to earth, to basic matter, its separate elements. What will last longer, no doubt, is the ring that binds our realities – its gold outliving my possessions... It's a ring I bear, that I'm custodian of – and there are times I choose to wear it, when I need a talisman to empower me. I imagine your presence resides in its substance, that your being's with me – residually, feathery, without speaking...The ring's a thread – one thing you knew would be passed down, bestowed. At your marriage it became a death mask... And I wonder: did you ever gaze into it with prophetic eyes, as a memento mori, warning how it would outlast you. I wonder if, for a moment, you endured the awful clairvoyance of that...

Soundlessly I hear the pulse. Your heart beats without me, foreshadowing by birth. I see myself in the mirror of my creator, beyond the sworn veil, as time's elapsed when those hearts beat together. The heart's stopped, I know, but slowly I'm catching up, to your age, to your weight of experience, where I'd be content to close lids on the evils of the world.

Only momentarily does your gaze fall upon my own, and it seems to fail to meet your (spectral) approval. Your smile's unchanging, one I hardly recognise, as your eyes estrange me from your world, because the scene's without a guarantee of my birth. Instead, an "I" lingers as a slim possibility in the poetry of your body; in the silent words that occur; in the ineffable love that passes between his occasional glance and yours. Through irrevocable sunlight a part of you remains. You've purchased that slice of time and earth. That will be your private abode.

All these figures are caught in a loop, keeping their thoughts to themselves. Time was never meant to be condensed this way, and memory's been set adrift on death's tranquil ocean. Tears blur imperfections, as I continue to gaze through the screen – fuzziness, crackles, poorly-timed cuts – making the film appear like a dream, half-remembered, or like heaven itself. Indeed, the miracle here, by way of technology, is a near-death experience – for I'm privy to how angels might appear, bordered by a nimbus of forgiveness.

Mortals, prior to this method, had to rely on basic memory aids – stories, for instance, passed on by family members. Now the past is delivered to the present: not the

past as it was, though it comes as close as possible with this mode of representation... Here I witness what older generations never saw: a time before my birth. It feels like a transgression, a trespassing on a moment unlived, never meant to be lived. This forbidden time is framed, which keeps it in check, keeps it from spilling out into my present and occasioning madness... Objects, people, places – they're largely the same, though younger – always younger... And the paint of things looks fresher...

Stealing in, into the intimacy of time you occupied, in not just any moment, but into one treasured occasion: your wedding day. It's like eavesdropping on your life-review: "This is what your eyes are seeing now, or at least your consciousness, no longer in need of eyes." For these are the pictures that your discarnate soul would inevitably revisit. I couldn't help but think it, and couldn't help but feel as a consequence like an intruder, participating in a crime, an abomination...

Belatedly, it's as if we share a perfect second. These clips are my absolution. They offer passage through grief. Solitude resonates from your demeanour, though also from the faces which haunt the curtains of your

spectacle. You take centre stage, alongside your father. But ghosts float everywhere, littering the frames, all grimacing as if they knew they'd be caught like this... Seconds later, they've passed, died again, droplets of time, too far gone to gather.

You didn't like being filmed. You fled the camera lens with full knowledge of its permanence, unblinking, its eye capturing momentary lapses of elegance. You hid from its lens as if it were an assassin. You were trying to hold on to your innocence, without recording it for posterity, or washing dishes, unaware, unreflecting...

These vignettes we prized out of your being, and now offer views on time, lived inside the house. Only a few seconds footage encapsulate endless, unspoken moments, private as the birth of spiders...

And how very ironic to find such scarce value in what scared you – what you would've denied us... How sudden a stranger you seem, and that realness, so traumatic, is a sign of how far you've emigrated from this ether...

Though you wanted to be oblivious to all this: time and future sorrow. The day-to-day, which these films miss, or fail to collect, or let decay in seventies light, was utmost happiness. The

ghost offers a mere sheath; a wisp of skin; a mere nothing. What respire hardly breathes, a fragment in a reservoir of sense, a signature, leading back to the origins of things... You didn't anticipate the playback, but saw the camera as a mirror that needed to be sheeted – your foresight in making sure only small snippets slipped through, and that this singularity of our experience could never be repeated, had no place in the future eyes of mourners looking back at movies, like aspiring time-travellers. (I still sometimes think I could enter your frame and warn you of your fate, that it would save you; but the foreknowledge I'd introduce wouldn't change a thing, and, moreover, it would blemish your every laughter, be the canker in every joy.)

And when frayed ends of dreams lead me to descend the stairs in the early hours, those threads follow me down straggling behind my feet. The bits of unreality are with me still, as bird songs, through the darkness, unnerve my peace. The banisters creak as I move at the brink of sleep – through that place in between...

I feel compelled to play another reel and see you again, where I see you for the first time in what seems like decades. You're in the garden on a patio chair... You glance away, as

children play beside a tree. You're moving - alive almost, more alive than me; since at these hours (3am?, 4am?) I'm a zombie lurching in the twilight, semi-conscious, to find you represented, manifested - resuming from where the last oneiric chapter was curtailed. In this state each nuance of you releases torrents of interned emotion, affects which interface with the undreamt, and there complete it.

With vague disquiet I approach the cupboard of home movies: an assemblage of Cine films which father's transferred onto videotape. I fear what it all contains: that unopened legacy; that vault of yearning. I place the cassette in the machine. A part of me doesn't want it to work, or wants the tape to be blank... But then the black of the beginning rolls, and splutters to the first grainy frames...

I've known for a long time what awaits. It's a place of dead time and arrested jubilations, and it's soundless, save for a tactless soundtrack; overdubbed, tawdry, ironically cheerful, but strangely apt, in that happiness was meant to be frozen here. It's a mocking, parodic cheerfulness - a muzak, a white noise, pasting tenuous joy

as a cosmetic over these scenes, like an undertaker painting false eyes over a cadaver's closed lids. Each joy's distressed by its resuscitation, in an atmosphere torn through with loss. And veiling the sadness there's also a sham melody, the tone of which has changed in the space of only a few short years.

This vision father can't endure, a wound that sears like sunbeams on sensitive skin; spliced memories, which can never be revisited, since grief's stolen his sunsets, stolen his beauty... There's only a trail of forgetting, in distraction, in simple pastimes... His remaining years all spent inducing repression, as busyness consumes, as practical matters cram the day as deadening anaesthetics... His past blemished, and now he can only digest the reality of things in small, unavoidable doses, as it comes. Though when it does come, like anniversaries do, he turns away from the more overt faces of death. For him the ravages of old age are a blessing, his saving grace... The vows stay with him, but the brain sifts out the surplus, the beauty turned to pain and thus dispensable...

Repression works like sun-block: not allowing those harmful rays (how life actually *was*, not how he remembers it), to splinter and permeate his present, unmediated, unimpeded... The price of avoiding melancholy is forgetfulness. Faith in his immortal soul's deferred infinitely - unto death. Whilst to play movies, straddle past and present, is to ensure at least one hereafter... For him there's only censorship and avoidance, since, like most mourners, he can't abide immaculate time rushing back, colours resuming their radiance, sounds and fragrance, too real - like it was.

My eavesdropping here entails a measure of shame, in that I'm a thief of his memories, his edits, saccharine cuts of marriage and parenthood, which he can't bear to feel nostalgic for, which he folds in this catacomb, never to be unearthed in this life again...

Though the lens is left open for me, and I'm overexposed where astral light - sacred, translucent - burns in the depths of my psyche... I encounter the nakedness of memory, infantile memory, indecently exposed, scarring as it leaves me shivering;

shivering cold under sweat-drenched sheets... Everything's painfully present, as airbrushed history reveals its mottles and pits.

The music it becomes uncanny, it unpeels itself, its pretense failing like a bad ventriloquist, as under the surface there's just the cold pulse of a lost world... I cleave open the primordial silence of the recording - then a voice interjects: it's father, as if speaking from his dreams whilst sleeping upstairs... "Summer 1980," his voice signposts, documentary-style, almost apathetic, and then it stops abruptly, his mind drifting off, into another scene, into dreams like these...

The first figure I recognise is mother - unexpectedly young, wholly other, yet as familiar as my hands are to my face. Strange yet unmistakable. All this sorrow now, concertinaed into plastic reels.

Just for a split second, I thought I was communing with an angel. Devoid of such translucent wings, I saw you crouch in the August grass, your mendacity brightly lit, your awareness fixed on your offspring's omnipotence. Their hearts and your eyes ceaselessly active, within our

invisible stall of your supervision, hemming us in like wandering young. Nothing in this place was ever meant to hurt us.

The title sequence goes from black to white, then stutters into forms – figures resolving, sentient beings; faces chubby and toy-like. But the narrative leaves me deaf-blind, excluded on the periphery, no longer privy to your cosmos. You strike a Madonna pose, as you grasp your flaxen-haired child. (Which one I'm not sure: I have to wait until all three come into view.)

There's P.; he's about seven – as the camera pans to the left. There's J.; he's four, or thereabouts. That leaves me as the infant in your arms, just as I'd hoped. J. kicks a football to P. They're both wearing sleeveless tops and shorts, long since donated, even disintegrated. Grass-blades quiver at the limit of the lens' sensitivity; the tide it fizzles mid-distance; while the sun drapes evening silhouettes. Yet the overspill – the goings on off-screen, those events beyond range – are excruciatingly unseen.

An immeasurable love overflowed from your inexhaustible source... Tears streamed and my body shook; my heart raced; and I prayed I'd appear, that I'd bore witness; that I was sewn into this existence – proof

that something took place... This past has now transmogrified into a preview of heaven – the space you reside in, without us, though rarely alone. It's a timeless station – one immediately adjacent, though billions of light years away – so distant as to render journeys meaningless.

Love is, paradoxically, near and far – as if we're separated by a television screen – much like I find myself separated from my true Self in the mirror. The mediation, in both instances, ensures life, whilst reminding us where we'd rather be. Such astonishing modes of contemplation, now enabled by technology, take the place of prayer, where to open myself up to such things becomes a modern sacrament.

Fingers touch the glass – though the heart's fallen, as my eyes find themselves barred from every other sense... So where are your sounds, your words, your touch, your aroma? Indeed, there's only vision – a necessary boundary, limitation, since if everything were to materialise here, it would negate life itself, and the dark would become irresistibly seductive...

I recall what I once saw through these eyes, as if for the first time, what I fail to remember. You cradle me at nine months old. You secure me in your arms. You show me what sea means.

Only now do I notice: how you once carefully navigated your steps, through the rippling dunes, over to wave-lashed rocks. The tide's in, with cold rocks fixed at a precise point of erosion. We're now a singular picture, the sole occupants of a space-time. Your arms offer the safest sure fortress in this world. Motherhood marks out a sense of immortality. No violence could ever touch us, not as sea, air, or land – not that time, that brine, that cold. We were deathless there, though I didn't know. I'd never be as content as before I knew the words for this sense. You cradled me in your arms, as if you knew this to be a place where time stood still – prophetic of your death on film, as if you could foresee my eyes looking back, witnessing now this heart-rending scene: mother and child at the dawn of encroaching sense; a marvelous ur-picture of the intransience that unravels, inscribes that love in a register far removed. I was nothing but a baby, yet a thing of immaculate promise; a flawless offshoot of you; a warm tendril of your body; not yet a distinguishable being.

You're a lot younger than I remember – a young Liz Taylor, distressed by distance... Indeed, in this ether, things are blurred as if in a murky dream-state, as if all your postures are shimmering through water... Here is

your portrait, posthumously hung – your face, rounded as Cleopatra's... But this is not memory, nor fiction, but unnaturally real: it's video – seeing beyond the veil; it's forbidden – breaking the second commandment against graven images... Like opening Christmas presents too early, or summoning angels prematurely... Though colours are inauthentic enough to trouble our rapport; and how contemptible to greet you as a stranger: to misrecognise you, your features once unmistakable, known like my own; your face – one you duplicated in the poetry of your womb.

Often, I can't identify with the child you are carrying. This aporia lasts only a second or two, yet it's enough to cause distress, as I excavate love's prehistory long before sentience impressed itself. What I encounter is a landscape without bounds, entirely outlawed; and I shouldn't look as God will blind me; shouldn't glance at that thing, which rudely violates time and loss...

Indeed, this modern miracle of film represents a transgression; it violates divine law, the law against necromancy. I shouldn't have seen the light of angels: what spiritual guardians might look like. Though this isn't Eden. Beauty's present, though doubts permeate the entire

field. Ghosts allude to the sacred, but offer no guarantees. This afterlife, secular and grounded, pressed to the earth – my pre-existence – is the only definite realm to dwell in...

Still, the sin remains, and it's experienced as agony, as intolerable affect, as a recognition, which dazzles with such fierce magnitude that eyes must be averted – averted or blinded... Orpheus gives up his faith, though in this case, by doing so, saves himself.

The first thought comes after the engulfment of tears. I couldn't see though the anguish that pressed eyelids shut – mute with impossibility, and unendurable time. The place arrives like a prophecy: that's mother; the baby's me; the date's August, 1980...

The cove it reappears as your stage. And our drama replays, finds its terminus, at these frustrating edges where the narrative ends and imagination must begin, must follow, if dejection's to be held in check...

For years these Cine pictures remained in stasis, forgotten, left as raw, unprocessed data, undeveloped in the attic's unconscious, as dust gathered and nothing aged. And now, after refinding them, you're altered by neglect... Dream-like, with a

ubiquitous silence, but like dreams left uninterpreted – allowed to deepen in meaning, more than that seen at the time. The setting's almost foreign, and yet your aura's unmistakable. Memory, here, is stripped of its makeup, its delusory coverings...

What returns is unspeakable, has the capacity to destroy meaning, reduce it to ash and cinders. It's fortunate, then, that the film's deteriorated state, its entropy, its crackles and specks – its noise – act as a barrier between two worlds, as signs of time elapsed. So too the silence (the movie is without audio). And the edges, at the scene's borders, bar against falling through, falling in the screen, into devouring affect...

The scene's truly mind-blowing: I see you're carrying me along a headland, overlooking a shoreline. Waves are buffeting at the rocks, lashing at clean air. You're gazing at my expression, my head turned away in the general direction of the sea – my first sight of sea, its awesomeness and its agelessness... Pristine eyes are unstrained by pain. Though those eyes have a weird prescience I can see, even from my galactic distance. I see my eyes, wide, like lambs to the slaughter, as if knowing, somehow knowing, their fate; and how the umbilical cord, as now I know, is

never categorically severed – and this my eyes know, my eyes forewarn...

Around us jagged rocks protrude – incisors seen only in the adult's perilous world. All fear too close or too far; a clench too lax or too smothering – like holding a tiny bird. And whenever your thought lapsed it was a speeded up sunset: light altered in a single gesture, the universe cruelly divided. And that light was eerie, transfiguring us both, and confusing spectators from afar. Such onlookers, even family members, couldn't recognise our identities – just an archetype of mother and child; a shape disguised by a light too frigid and sharp; utterly ancient, prior to things...

Here is my birth-light, firing forward to future mourning; birth-light blinding this third-born to ultimate exposure. The elements untouched my nakedness for fear of reprisal. Arms coiling this fragile creature, as nascent language intruded upon the babble of your breath. And somewhere off-screen, eyes gazed on your divine countenance, as you held the weight of this joy-filled bundle, as if feeling a dove's infinitesimal pulse, one faintly throbbing with blood no different from yours. Now features reflecting in mirrors resound undying love, mouth

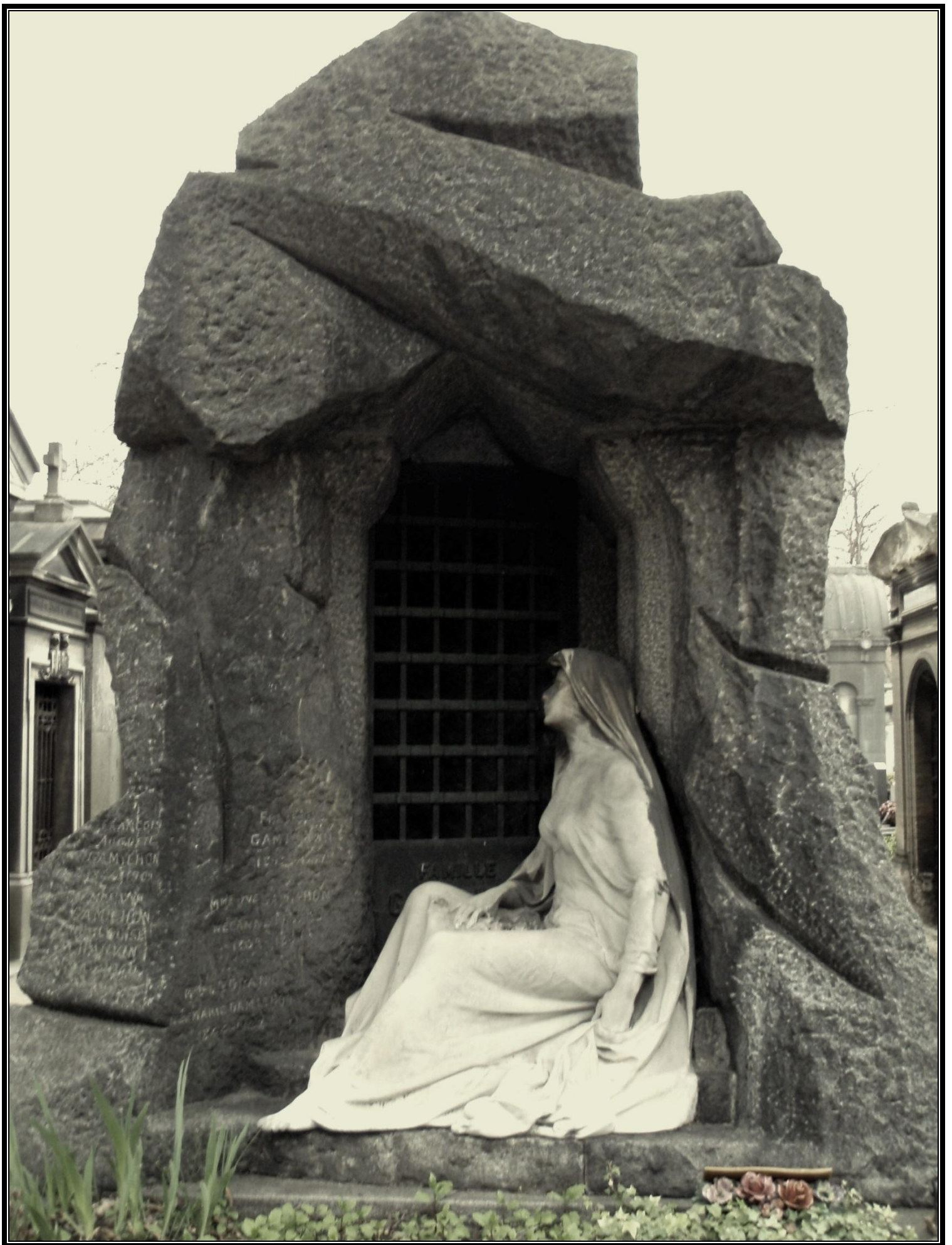
“you must love yourself”, unconditionally so...

My tiny eyes are asking for care to possess me... I'm seeing myself seeing, seeing the first layer of memory impress itself, as we ambled off under furious clouds.

There you glided, apparitional, saintly, from the first glimpse, and even more so now. The vast sea was the signature of a newborn's violent unfolding – cold yet ceaseless warmth surrounding. You were a guardrail against absolute chaos and certain death, the fatality I glimpsed without comprehension, that rudely glared over your shoulder in wordless pictures: there in that whirlpool of abyssal sea; in slow moving black waves that may as well have been black flames, which could neither drown nor annihilate... (Now I see the Cine film in precisely the same light; and it was the same thing – hand in hand, pulses in synch, we surveyed the barren sand. The world began and ended here.)

'Graven Images' is an excerpt from Patrick Wright's novel **'Fallen Pictures'** which is published by Youwriteon.com and can be purchased from Amazon [here](#).

There is an interview with Patrick Wright on his MySpace page [here](#).

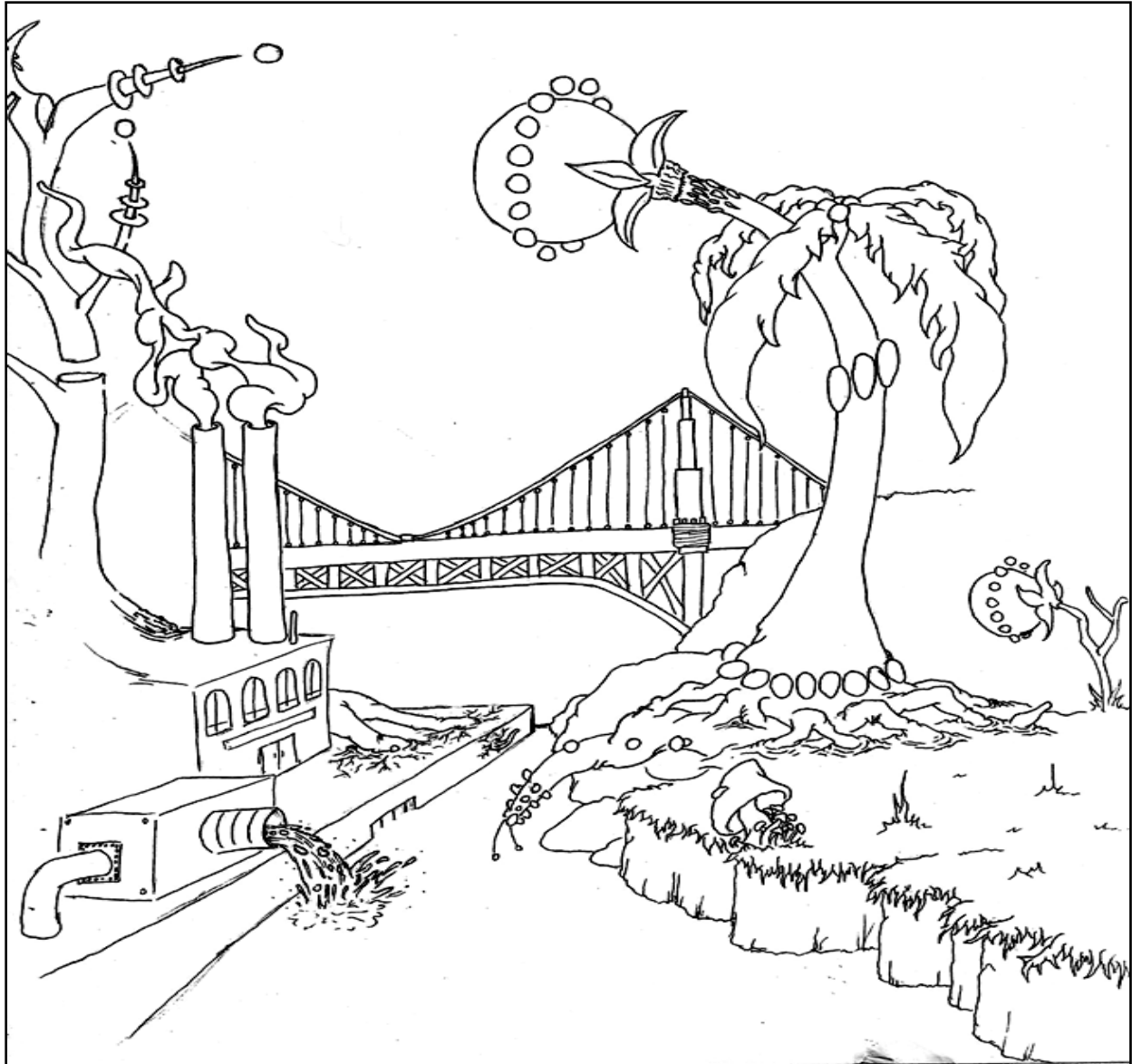


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THE TRAIN TO SHANG MAN DU

By Norman Spinrad

Drawing ©Alfred Muro

The metro rattles through the gray darkness, the stark blue-white fluorescent fixtures of the subway car casting moving square

spotlights on the tunnel wall graffiti through the grimy windows as you bounce and jolt in your seat. The car is filled with

passengers to the point where most of the standing room is full, and the air smells of sweat and ozone and fast-food grease.

It's a commuter subway ride somewhere, in the build-up to the full rush hour, or by the haggard and downtrodden faces of your fellow commuters, it's winding down at the end of a long boring day in the urban saltmines. Half the men wear cheap business suits with not quite hideous ties and carry pretentious briefcases, the rest are Morlock wage-slaves wearing Wal-Mart. Shop girls, waitresses, cleaning ladies, rub shoulders in the close quarters with white collar yuppies such as yourself, in a charcoal black pants suit tailored for the office boiler room, with a large brown leather pocketbook styled like a kid's homework-laden briefcase and serving much the same purpose slung over your shoulder.

You might be under New York or London or Newark for all you know, you might work in an advertising office or a real estate agency or an insurance company, but would it really matter?

It's all the same everywhere in the global downtown business district, crunching numbers, creating paper and computer files, pushing them around, and

carrying the resultant garbage home with you on the subway.

Wherever home is. You don't have to really know, now do you? The rails of the subway and the rails your life is running on carry you along on a Disneyland ride round and round Corporate World.

You are bored.

You are boring.

You are bored with being both.

The train screeches into a station, the doors slide open, and the platform is crowded enough so that all you can see of it is more commuters piling in before they slide shut again and the train lurches off.

Pushing and shoving and repositioning leaves the most interesting man you've seen in the car, standing over you. He's wearing a saffron-colored safari suit so sharply and tightly tailored that it's perilously close to an advertisement for the package in his crotch so that you might suspect he was gay if not for the face and the smell.

He's in that zone between thirty-something and fifty-something. His skin is clear and devoid of five o'clock stubble, the wavy earlobe-length dark blond hair looks quite natural, and he's got a vaguely aquiline nose and

not-quite-hard blue gunfighter eyes. He gives off a slight woodland aroma tinged with sandalwood, and the well-worn brown boots somehow match. No briefcase, instead twin brown leather bags slung over his shoulders and curved to snuggle into his armpits like outsized pistol holsters.

He catches you sizing him up and smiles down at you, not a lecherous or smug smile, but the knowing friendly one of someone who's used to it and refuses to be so crass as to speak first.

So....

"Pardon me, but where did you get those shoulder bags, if you don't mind my asking, I've never seen anything like them before."

"They're from Shang Man Du." His voice is deep tenor, warm yet somehow distant. If he weren't wearing what he was wearing, it could be taken for that of a non-celibate priest.

"Shang Man Du? I've never heard of that store."

He laughs. "It's not a store, it's a city."

"Never heard of a city called Shang Man Du either, where is it... if you don't mind my asking?" You punctuate the repetition with a little laugh and a

smile.

"It's not that I mind you asking, but I can't tell you."

"It's a military secret?"

Another laugh. "It's certainly not military, and it's not exactly secret, but there's no way to find it unless you've been there first."

"You can't go there until you've gone there first? That's a joke, right?"

"It's not exactly a joke, and that's not exactly what I said. You can't find it before you've been there first, but you can always take the train if you if someone shows you how."

"The train?"

"The train to Shang Man Du. You might ask what a guy like me is doing in as place like this..."

"Okay, knock-knock, what's a guy like you doing in this crummy subway train?"

"Connecting to the train to Shang Man Du."

"On this crummy line subway line?"

"There are connections to the train to Shang Man Du everywhere from the Berlin U-Ban to the London Underground or the Shinka-Sen from Tokyo to Osaka or the Chattanooga Choo-Choo or the A Train to Harlem."

"I've never seen that train or any signs to it."

“That’s because there aren’t any signs giving directions, just portents, and the reason most people don’t see them is because things being what they are, the powers that be want to make damn sure you don’t see things too clearly.”

He makes a discrete gesture to indicate the interior of the packed subway car and all that it signifies and smells like, wrinkling his nose a bit less subtly. “Who wants to shine the clear blue vision on this?”

“The clear blue light? What, if you don’t mind my asking a third one, Mr. Genie in the bottle, is that?”

“It’s where you arrive at if you take the train all the way to the last station, which is why anyone takes the train to Shang Man Du in the first place. Because if it isn’t, you won’t be able to catch the train, you’ll just be left standing there on the platform like an out-of-work sailor waiting for a ship that never comes in.”

“Say what?”

“Let me put it to you this way. If you take the train all the way to Shang Man Du, you won’t give a swamp rat’s ass about your nowhere job because if you did, you wouldn’t get there, and if you don’t make it to Shang Man Du, the Midnight Special will get

you back to Dis Here Babylon in time to hit a Starbucks on your way to work tomorrow. What do you say, babe?”

“What do I say? What do I say to what?”

“I’m getting off the next stop to catch the Train to Shang Man Du,” he tells you. “I’m inviting you to come along. Is that an offer you can’t refuse, or would you rather go eat Kentucky Fried Chicken and watch HBO and masturbate with RoboDick?”

The train comes screeching into the station.

The doors slide open.

“But I don’t even know -”

“If you don’t know enough now, you’ll never know enough. You’ll stand there on that dock, and the best you can manage is a Hi Sailor! to the loser standing next to you.”

“You’re certainly sure of yourself!”

People start squeezing out between the standees.

“I’m never sure of anything, that would be far too boring, but that’s the deal, Little Grasshopper.”

“How do I know you’re not a sex maniac?”

“How do I know that you’re not a sex maniac, if you don’t mind my asking?” he tells you,

turning towards the back of the outgoing crowd. "Not that that would be a serious disqualification."

And he's out the doors.

And the doors are closing.

And you're dashing though the rubber guillotine in the nick of time after him.

The station is even grimmer than the subway train you just left, pulling away and hanging a right and disappearing around the bend in one of the two tunnels flanking the single platform along the subway track. The other track has rails of a wider gauge, leading into a higher and wider tunnel. The platform and the tunnels are bare old concrete, but clean. The lights are cruel fluorescent blue tubes, but they don't flicker.

There are no stairways leading up to street exits.

No exits from the station at all.

"Uh...."

He's at the other side of the platform looking down the wider tunnel with his thumb in the air like an old hippie hitch-hiker, but with the attitude of a supermodel flagging down a cab.

"There's no way out of here!" you cry as you rush up to him.

"Sure there is, the Train to Shang Man Du is always on time when you're ready to climb

aboard, and there'll be a subway train to take you back to Whereverland every ten or fifteen minutes or so, if it turns out you're not. No sweat."

There's a metallic screech half an octave deeper than a subway train from the depths of the tunnel, and then the train comes rumbling into the station. It looks like an ordinary commuter train to the suburbs of Nowhereland, its cars larger than subway cars, but not by much.

There's no name or lettering on the front of the lead car, just an oblong gray screen under the roof lip where the train's identification placard should be. But as the train enters the station, it comes to life and radiates an expanding aura of royal blue light the color of a noonday summer sun through sapphire. The fluorescent tubes pick it up, and for a moment, for just a brief moment, you're swimming in glowing tropical waters.

Then the lead car decelerates past you and it's gone.

"Did you see that flash of light? Was it real?"

"Did you see it? Scout's honor!"

The train slows down then comes to a stop with the doors to a middle car, likewise unmarked,

before you.

“Well, uh, yeah....”

“Then it was real, now wasn’t it? If you didn’t see it, you’re not for real.”

The doors slide open.

“That’s your invitation to ride on the Train to Shang Man Du, where everything you see is real, one way or another, and everything you don’t isn’t,” he tells you as he steps halfway into the train, and holds out his hand.

The doors start to close. He doesn’t exactly have to quite pull you in after him before they shut behind you.

It’s an ordinary commuter line car of the sort that goes out into where the deep suburbs stop and a little beyond, blue-upholstered bench seats, overhead racks, just a subway on steroids is all. It smells more strongly of ozone and a good deal less obnoxiously of fast-food remains, stale farts, and sweat-socks than a subway car.

The seats are about halfway full, and the people in them clean, and smelling of things like curry and lilacs and well-oiled machinery, dressed in an assortment of human sartorial style from the far reaches of the four seasons. Men in western suits, flowing Indian pants and overshirts, hoodies and

trenchcoats, women in pants suits, saris, jungle expedition gear, burkas, loose saffron gowns and tight punk black leather. No one here would look out of place in the lounge of an international airport. Indeed this could be the train from such an airport anywhere if anyone were laden with any but hand luggage.

“No excess baggage allowed on the Train to Shang Man Du that you didn’t just carry on,” he tells you, “but don’t worry, it’ll do, it always does.”

“Does what?”

“What it’s supposed to. When it’s supposed to.”

He leads you to a bench, and graciously offers you the window seat, not that there’s anything to be seen but the crazy-quit lines and cables and pipes slithering around on the passing tunnel wall.

“What have I gotten myself into?” you kvtech, but it’s not quite a serious kvetch. “What comes next?”

“Who wants to know what comes next?” he tells you, flashing a winsome smile. “It’s like reading a book backwards or watching the same movie over and over long after you’ve learned all the lines. Bor-ring!”

There’s the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, and then the

train emerges into wan gray sunlight glowering through a low-lying deck of primo industrial smog over the working suburbs of any Nowhereland city. Functional gray and stucco factories farting out clouds of better-you-don't ask. Temporary-looking warehouses. Chain-link fences. Car parks dominated by trucks and last decade's cars. Gas stations. Repair shops. Mountains of crushed and rusted car bodies. Islands of tall stark housing blocks with spectacular views of the unscenic vista.

"What's the matter, don't you like the view?"

You give him the look of a peasant housewife presented with a very dead fish. "How romantic."

"If you don't put the toilet outside the house, you'll end up shitting where you eat," he tells you, "but if you don't have these necessary evils nearby, you won't be eating anything, and you won't have reliable indoor plumbing either."

The train passes close by an apartment block whose pink-painted concrete has weathered to something like pale dried blood. Washing hangs from little balconies. Unhealthy potted plants on window sills. Even inside the Train to Shang Man Du

you can smell old linoleum, cooking grease, and unsubtle floral air freshener.

"What about these poor people eating where we shit?"

"What are you, a communist, as well as a sex maniac?" he says, but his grin puts anything but an edge on it. "Without butchers and sewer rats, you'd have to cut up cow carcasses yourself and clean your own cesspool. Without white collar wage slaves, they'd have to write their own life insurance contracts and sell themselves aluminum siding. You've got a job to do, I've got a job to do, they've got their jobs to do, and so it goes, in case you haven't noticed."

"What are you? For that matter, who are you? I don't even know your name."

"Call me anything, just don't call me collect," he replies in a fair imitation of Groucho Marx.

"I've got to call you something...."

"Well, you could call me Tarzan, but then I'd have to call you Jane. You could call me Wily Coyote, but then you'd be the Roadrunner. I may not be your bodyguard, and you have yet to qualify as my long lost pal, but what the hell, you can call me Al."

"Al... what... if you don't mind

my asking?"

"Al of iBaba and the Forty Thieves. Al E. Oop. Al Aboard the Train to Shang Man Du!"

The train is climbing up a mild slope now as it passes through the outer fringes of the city of industry and junk yards, where it gives way unevenly to minimal tin-roofed cinderblock houses with fenced vegetable gardens and car bodies in the yard. The vague smoggy shapes of distant mountains are just visible in the distance and the Train to Shang Man Du is rising out of what is now revealed as a lowdown lowland bowl largely enclosed by greener pastures and relatively cleaner air.

"Let's go to the next car," Al suggests, "you'll probably like it better there."

There's a door at the front of the car; it looks locked, but it isn't. And when Al pulls it open by the handle, it leads out onto a semi-circular iron platform between cars out in the open air, rocking and rolling on the rails in the breeze of passage.

Al leads you onto the platform of the next car and opens the door into a narrow hallway passage with a line of windows on the left and a series of compartments on the right. The hallway has been

painted a deep industrial green a while back and more than once, the wooden trim is perfunctory plywood veneer, and the compartments aren't closed, but it smells of tobacco smoke and ganja, whiskey and longer rides to further places, and the instant change in ambiance is a big improvement.

The compartments contain brown leatherette-upholstered benches facing each other that can seat six passengers. But more of them than not are empty and none of the center seats are occupied. Each of the occupied compartments seems like its own little universe or family gathering or mysterious story.

Three young men in extravagant-looking street chic hoodies listening to earbuds and nodding to different unheard rhythms. Two Arabs in white robes debating something, one of them thumbing through a Koran. Two young women and one man in punkish black leather passing around a doobie. Four tall thin Masai men in flowing dark maroon robes staring out the window. Four Buddhism monks in robes of saffron.

Al ushers you into an empty compartment, shooes you into the forward-facing window seat and

sits down beside you. The view out the window is now of a crazy-quilt of mismatched farmlands; fields of grain, vegetables, rice paddies, free-range cattle and buffalo browsing a prairie. Cowboys on horses. Men and women in blue pajamas and Chinese rattan sunhats bent over rice seedlings. Oxen drawing simple plows through loamy furrows before dark-skinned men wearing nothing but dirty white loin-clothes.

"Where did you say this train is coming from?"

"From everywhere and nowhere. It'd give even Heisenberg a headache, but try to think of the Train to Shang Man Du as a fractal railway network outside of linear time and geographic map space. The stations are everywhere from intercity lines to subways to little whistle stops and they don't exactly stay in a hundred percent probability, but it's still only one train on one line going to Shang Man Du."

"Who built such a thing? Who could?"

"Who built Shang Man Du? Who built the Amazon rain forest or the Great Barrier Reef? God, if you're into the Bible, they evolved in the eternal flow, if you're into

the Tao."

"But what's it like in Shang Man Du?"

Al shrugs. "Whose Shang Man Du? Yours? Mine? Marilyn Manson's? You pays yer karma and it takes yer choice."

"What happens when we get there?"

"Three is all you get right now, Little Master, sez the Genie of the Lamp, it's in the rules, you could look it up if there really were any. But for now, the Marquis of dis here Queensberry says drop out of the word game, and tune in to the landscape."

And you do.

Basic peasant farmland flows seamless into amber waves of grain and combines. Thatch hut villages, unpainted wooden bungalow's on stilts in the swampland, stone farm-houses in orchards. Chinese work-teams. Mexican braseros bent over the lettuce. American farm families bringing in the corn. Africans herding their cattle through sere brown scrubland. Old hippies lovingly tending waist-high pot plants in a clearing in the redwood forest.

"The breadbasket of the world," you mutter.

"Or the world of the breadbasket," says Al.

Stone castles rise in the distance out of the plain. Villages glide by.

"Welcome to de world outside dat dere Babylon," he Rasta-raps. "It ain't exactly Oz out here in its boonie back stage either, Dorothy."

Scrubland desert, robotized industrial grain fields. Huge aluminum chicken coops crammed with so many chickens and so much chickenshit you can smell the stink through the window. Armies of peasants and seasonal human harvester ants bent over crops. Women in blue pajamas and rubber flip-flops raking algae off the tops of fish-farming ponds.

"Why is the Magical Mystery Train to Shang Man Du subjecting its passengers to this tour of the sticks?"

"You prefer tank-town culture?"

Now it's as if the Train to Shang Man Du is running on the tracks from every major airport into every major city, the universal strip of motels, fast-food joints, sake bars, box-stores, live poultry markets, car and bicycle repair shacks, petrol stations and biker beerbars, replete with a flanking highway crammed with trucks and donkey-carts, taxis and

overflowing old buses, motorscooters and bicycles, under a linear cloud of smog.

"There's got to be a more scenic route!"

"To get from anywhere that is anywhere these days to anywhere else you have to go through a lot of nowhere, which anyone who thinks they're anyone tries real hard not to do. Civilization may be defined as the distance between those who deem themselves civilized and those who have to do the dirty work, but it never seems far enough, now does it, Princess?"

Now at last the landscape outside the window begins to rise as the train enters the foothills of the mountains, valley civilization in all its smoggy glory greedily lapping at the currently unconquered grassy crags and unkempt patches of forest, ragged grassland, rain jungle. The train begins to curve as it climbs, snaking through a rocky chasm, then spiraling inward and upward as it climbs the wooded lower slopes of a great mountain.

There are meadows and valleys at this level, and the land and everything on it tilts upward as the train passes; farms, villages, small towns, grim stone huts, happy wooden gingerbread

chalets, encampments of Kalashnikovs-toting turbaned guerillas, shepherds playing golf with their crooks.

“Behold the human condition!”

Al exclaims cheerfully.

“The human condition?”

“They probably don’t even notice that they’re not standing straight when they’re standing upright,” replies Al, nodding in the direction of the passing scene. “Or maybe they can’t tell they’re not standing upright when they’re straight.”

“What makes you so sure you can?”

“Who me? I’m just another punch-drunk chimpanzee.”

“What am I doing here!”

“That’s always a good question. Too bad there’s never a good answer. Or maybe not. I mean if there ever was, it’d be economic disaster for the preachers and gurus selling their existential snake-oil.”

“And you and your Train to Shang Man Du aren’t another?”

“I’ve ridden it a lot, but it’s not my train, nor is it the medicine wagon of any other mystical con artist. It’s no one’s train and it’s everyone’s own train. The Train to Shang Man Du is the medium, not someone else’s message.”

Now the train is up in the

cordillera, still below the tree-line, but the forest is all deep-green firs here, and even through the window you can smell the piney perfume mingled with the aroma of loam that never goes dry. You reach out, open the window, and it becomes exhilarating as it pours into the compartment.

There are no more villages or farms, no flocks of sheep or meadows upon which to graze, no isolated dwellings, no roads but the rails, but here and there you can spy pilgrims in saffron robes, in robes of white, mountaineers with serious climbing equipment, weathered wooden lean-tos that seem part of the landscape, a small pagoda here, a carved wooden church steeple there peeking up over the trees, hermits’ caves dug into cliffs.

Al hums the tune to “Building a Stairway to Heaven” sarcastically.

Above the tree-line now, sheer and jagged rock walls looming to one side of the shelf that the rails run along and an equally-sheer and jagged drop on the other, with a sky of swirling grayish-white mist pressing ever lower overhead. And then the Train to Shang Man Du climbs into the cloud deck, into a featureless washed out world, the void within

the clouds.

But as the train spirals upward, the grayish tint fades, light not so much penetrates the mist as stepwise brightens it, like a bulb coming on in slow motion inside a frosted globe, until the still mist glows pearly white.

And then the train is above the clouds and into another world.

The clouds form a continuous puffball and hill plain, like a rainforest canopy done in white. The sky above it is a pure cloudless radiant deep blue. Half a dozen isolated mountain peaks rise through it, whitened to match the cloudland by glaciers and snowpack. There is nothing else. Nothing at all.

Except -

Except the highest peak rising into this world of pristine white and clear blue purity is not the peak of a mountain at all, but the crystal skyscraper towers of a city too grand to be mere Oz. No Emerald City this.

The translucent towers wear not the stark mirror shades of the office towers of downtown nowhere penetrating the heavens like corporate Bauhaus dildos, they glow from within with a clear blue light, a frozen dance of sapphire pinnacles carved into an abstraction of an erotic Hindu

temple frieze, vaguely humanoid figures dirty-dancing and cakewalking up a Stairway to Heaven that seems grown like a tree rather than built by the machineries of man.

Or is the upward dance frozen? Isn't it all in motion as the train glides towards it on a rainbow arch and a railroad bridge of steel? Dancing round and round, ever rising upward, but never really going anywhere? And isn't the music of the dance to be heard in the distance as the train crosses the apogee of the rainbow bridge and glides down towards it, reggae drums, a celestial brass section of trumpets and trombones, electric organ...

The train comes down the curve, and the great blue-painted iron horse locomotive hauling it blows a deep salute on its steam horn, as it passes through the Golden Gates of the city.

Well they're not exactly gates and they're not exactly golden.

There's an archway of a kind and it's the gold and orangey mauve of both early sunrise and early sunset, but it rises and dissolves mistily and seamlessly into blue crystal that is exactly the magic sky of dawnly possibility and dusky romance.

And floating above on wings

of song alone is a cloud of living blue neon, the light liberated from the glass, for ming a dance of glowing clear blue vapor spelling out something in all the world's secret alphabets.

The music suddenly becomes much louder, a purely instrumental version of Beethoven's Ode to Joy played with an Island hip-hop drumbeat, bagpipe droning base, brass chorus back-up, and monster lead electric guitar triumphantly wailing the melody line.

"What's it sayi -?"

But before you can finish asking, it comes up in clear Roman letters, and Al says it at the same time, and with a cry of delight, so do you:

"Welcome to Shang Man Du!"

Somehow you're already debarked from the train and standing on a balcony encircling a railway station crowning a tall hill that is not quite a mountain sent down in the center of the city so that from here you can behold Shang Man Du entire. From this vantage, Shang Man Du is not what it appears to be from the outside, save for the clear blue light. But here it does not shine out from within crystal towers. Here it is the perfect lambent blue of the sky over a tropical isle an

hour or so before sunset embracing the city.

Shang Man Du is indeed an island city with a beach running all the way around it, a fabulous strand of boardwalk and esplanade, Coney Island in its days of glory and an endless high season on the Cote D'Azur, Sausalito house boat marina and classical Chinese version done up in teak and red-canopied pavilions. Seaside houses, Miami Deco Quarter hotels, Deauville show biz watering holes.

There are curling white waves for surfers to ride and calm tideless ponds for the less athletic, but the water seems to fade about a thousand meters out into a blue something that is neither water nor sky nor light but the melding of all three into a single borderless and endless unity.

To the north, east, and south, Shang Man Du saunters slowly up from the beach in a cavalcade of beautifully crafted houses from the far reaches of National Geographic and Architectural Digest, winding streets, outdoor cafes and teahouses, all set in a profusion of botanical gardens from the world entire. There's a bouncy collective hum wafting up from it like steel drums played through digereedoos. It's

glorious, it's delightful, it's endless summer.

Still further away from the beach, Shang Man Du becomes urban and modern in a crazy-quilt of 22nd century Chinese, Arabic, Mexican, Persian, and Las Vegas styles; lapis-tiled arches, swirling red and yellow ice cream cone towers, vast greenhouse shopping malls, abstracted pagodas, literal pleasure domes domes and pedestrian strogat streets lined with shops, movie theaters and saloons, hotels with roof gardens, restaurants rows from Paris, New York, Shanghai, Vera Cruz, the real things somehow, triumphantly transported and reborn.

To the west is the airport.

"An airport?"

There's north-south and east-west runways crossing each other, a tall control tower wearing blue sunglasses, a terminal done up in Arabic style as a wind-blown white concrete tent, a series of standard aluminum hangars, jet liners on the ground, landing and taking off on reasonably busy headway.

"Of course," says Al.

"But you said only the train -"

"You've gotta ride the train through the lowlands to get to the city on the hill, that's only karmic

justice, or haven't you noticed, but when you want to leave, you just hop the next flight out."

"Why would anyone want to leave?"

It's perfect, but not too perfect, the black arts of disneyfication turned against themselves, done right to create something as real or realer than the real thing. It's Oz. It's Wonderland. It's Fun City

"Anyone who is everyone is a daytripper in Shang Man Du," says Al. He leads you to the portal back into the station. "Step right up to the doorway to anywhere and take the daytripper tour," he spiels in the manner of a carnival barker.

He snaps his fingers with one hand and yanks you through the doorway with the other. "All you gotta do is snap your fingers and make your wish!"

You step through the doorway. You're in Las Vegas.

"Las Vegas?!"

You're looking down a broad avenue that's lined on both sides with casino hotel complexes, every one of which is a half-scale replica of somewhere else. The Eiffel Tower. The Matterhorn. The Glory and Tackiness of Caligula's Rome. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The Tivoli Gardens. The Empire State Building. The Taj

Mahal. The Forbidden City of Beijing.

"Where better to start than Vegas? The only city that's everywhere and nowhere at the same time."

Al snaps his fingers again and you're sitting at a cafe table on the deck of a floating cafe in Paris gazing up at Notre Dame and sipping Kir Royales. Al clinks glasses with you. "Welcome to your dreamtime, welcome to the only city that's anywhere you want to be at the time, welcome to your very own Shang Man Du. Well, actually not quite yet."

Another snap of his fingers, and you're lying side by side in bathing suits on reclining beach chairs on a golden beach watching dolphins cavorting in the offshore surf and slurping tall glasses of tropical fruit juices and rums but without the paper umbrellas.

"At the moment, this is my Shang Man Du. But each to his and/or her own. Give it a try."

"Like this?" And you snap your own fingers.

You're sitting on the wrought-iron balcony of a Bourbon Street house in New Orleans during Mardi Gras. There's a float parading by below you, a landlocked riverboat on a mechanically rolling blue foil

Mississippi, great wheels turning, pink rose-scented steam pouring up out of the stacks, filled to the gunnels with men and women and indeterminate others in gauzy and feathery costumes and much bare skin out of antebellum Rio. A jazz band plays The Saints Go Marching In in the saloon below you. The sidewalks are crowded with partying people, gulping down Hurricanes, puffing on huge spliffs, leaping and grabbing at the bead necklaces and occasional coins tossed from the float and the second story balconies.

You've got a handful of throws yourself, and you give them a negligent backhand flip over the railing like Marie Antoinette tossing cake to the masses.

"Is anything here real?" you ask Al.

He shrugs. "What is, is real," he tells you cavalierly. "Or nothing is real. You pays yer money, and you takes yer choice. But it's nothing to get hung about."

"Are you real?"

"As real as you are, however real that is," says Al. "As real as Shang Man Du."

He snaps his fingers, and you're sitting in a gondola rowing down the Grand Canal in Venice. It seems to always be Carnival

here, the quais are filled with costumed revelers, dancing to a profusion of different drummers, tossing roses off the bridges.

"In the workaday world, I'm another workaday guy in a Clark Kent suit. In Shang Man Du, I'm a Sunshine Superman. What is, is real."

The gondola passes under a bridge and you get a closer look at the masquerade. There's a Mogul Emperor in full jeweled drag; an Amazon princess in a Wonder Woman suit, a crown snatched from the Tower of London and a cloak of Imperial Purple; a Rock Star tricked out in chrome piercings and black leather; Chaka Zulu with a spear and a shield with the body of a black Schwarzenegger in nothing but a leather loincloth that does little to conceal an enormous erection; Jesus, or maybe it's Moses, in a long white robe brandishing a light saber scepter; Venus fresh off the half shell.

A masquerade to be sure on a certain level, and yet on another these Shang Man Du avatars seem to be, if not exactly real, authentic in the way they wear their extravagantly unreal gear, the way they move, a blithe naturalness.

"They don't believe they're wearing costumes, do they?" you

ask Al rhetorically, as the gondolier breaks into "We All Live in a Yellow Submarine."

"Who says they are? In Shang Man Du, it's come as like, come as you are, every man a king, every gal a star."

"Well in that case, ready when you are, C.B.," you tell him, and you snap your fingers.

It's a Hollywood or maybe Bollywood version of the Court of the Great Czarina, or Cleopatra's hotel suite in Caesar's Rome, or the Queen's Birthday Party in the gardens of the Palace of Versailles. A vast white throne room that doubles as a cafe with a ballroom opens out onto a balcony overlooking a botanic wonderland. Full-grown redwoods march into the infinite distance in neat lines framing wide esplanades slicing the gardens into horticultural zones; formal English rose-gardens replete with gazebos and reflecting pools and overhanging willows, bamboo forest groves bassly tinkling in the breeze like wooden marimbas, pine forests, oak forests, tropical isle palms. The world entire in full-scale bonsai.

People stroll in the gardens, enjoy romantic interludes in the bushes, and there are cafe tables

along the esplanades replete with champing in ice buckets and set-ups for caviar and blinis, and people sitting at them wearing the costumes and phenotypes of everywhere and everywhen with total disregard for what garden style surrounds them. And the gardens themselves have total disregard for them.

Dwarfed by the grandeur that surrounds them, they're reduced in some non-spatial dimension, as if by cunning cinematic lighting and focus effects, background scenery to the garden's foreground.

At the other end of the grand salon, you and Al sit side by side on golden thrones looking down from a purple-carpeted dais on, well, your subjects. The women are beautifully dressed in the flamboyancies of the ages and what they're flaunting is up to the packaging. The men are lithe and handsome no matter what culture's monkey-suit tailored in Saville Row they're wearing. There's a twenty-piece mini-orchestra playing acoustic and electronic mood music. There's dancing, and mingling and arch conversations.

It's a classy scene.

But your subjects seem no more real than the background

figures in the gardens. Perhaps because they are, after all, your subjects.

You are the Queen of the Hop. You wear a tastefully modern golden crown artfully set with a rainbow of cut gemstones and a dashing red cloak of a dress trimmed in ermine.

Al is your Prince Consort, Majesty. He wears a simple wide gold headband with a diamond the size of the Ritz set in it above his brow, and a kind of black velvet tuxedo jumpsuit trimmed in silver piping. Royal too, but not presuming to upstage you.

"It's good ta be the king," he says in a Mel Brooks accent. "It's good ta be the queen, now ain't it?"

"I suppose so. But king and queen of what?"

"It's your production, not mine, remember?"

"But these....these..."

"Subjects?"

"They're like...like..."

"Extras?"

"How can they be real -"

"Why would they play extras in your movie instead of kings and queens in their own?"

"Well, why?"

Al shrugs. "Maybe they're not. Maybe we're extras in theirs. Or maybe it's quid pro quo. Look,

I've been back and forth to Shang Man Du quite a lot, but that doesn't mean I really understand what's on the end of the train ride. And the only way I can even be sure I'm real here is to take a virgin like you with me for my own enlightened self-interested pleasure. To bring along someone from the world outside Shang Man Du to remind me, because whoever you meet down there has to be as real as you are, whatever that means.... But...."

"But?"

He shrugs again, harder this time, and there's actually a hint of consternation on his visage for the first time since you've met him. "But while I've met people down there who've taken the Train to Shang Man Du any number of times, and those of us who go back and forth are a kind of fraternity, and we do talk to each other, I've never met anyone I knew from down there in Shang Man Du, and I never met anyone in Shang Man Du from down there who I hadn't brought here with me, and I don't know anyone who has. You don't know anyone here except whoever you bring with you. You don't meet anyone else down there who you've only seen in Shang Man Du."

"So?"

"So even if whatever gods there be doesn't like to play dice with the universe, a dubious proposition anyway, if you ask me, he she, it, or them clearly likes to throw mysteries at us to keep us guessing, whether just to be cute about it, or for our own karmic good."

"Say what?"

Yet another shrug. "So do we wake, or do we dream? Quien sabe, Kimo Sabe, one or the other, though maybe neither of them are quite what they seem."

"Huh?"

"We all know the world down there is real because we're born into it, and that's where we go to die, not here, like elephants to their graveyard. But everyone also knows that dreams are real because everybody has them."

"What is, is real...."

Al nods. "The world down there. Everyone's dreamtime. Shang Man Du. But maybe only from its own perspective. All you can know in any of them is that you're real."

"Can I?"

"There can't be a you that knows it's not real, it'd be like trying to disappear up your own asshole."

"But how do I know you're real, asshole?" you demand, but

with arch good nature. "You could be just a figment of my imagination."

"We took the Train to Shang Man Du together."

"So we did. But why couldn't that just be a figment of my imagination? Like...this!"

You snap your fingers, and you and Al are in a cartoon wonderland a milligram of corn syrup away from precious. A gently undulating meadow of brilliant green grass under a blue sky where fleecy clouds float like sheep, abloom with outsized and colorically supersaturated daisies, rose bushes, wild stands of pansies, great lordly sunflowers. The air is tanged with the smell of sunlight on new-mown hay just enough to properly dilute the overabundant floral perfumes. Cute white lambs gambol. Golden lion kings and queens lie down with them. A sitar-reinforced orchestra plays "Strawberry Fields Forever."

"This is the best figment your imagination has to offer?" scoffs Al.

"This a perfect imaginary figment. Obviously and perfectly imaginary."

"And that's your point? That everything in Shang Man Du is imaginary? Including me?"

"Can you prove you're not?"

"You're asking me to prove that I'm real? Why should I? Why shouldn't you prove to me that you're real? Why should I play in your mind game?"

You open your arms to embrace your dream garden, but it's really more of a shrug. "In a place like this, what other games are there to play?"

"I know a better game. If you're ready to take Shang Man Du to the next level. If you're in for something...hardcore."

"Hardcore what?"

"Hardcore you know what."

"Is that a proposition?"

"So I'm an incubus with a hard-on trying to prove he's real. If I don't, you're just telling yourself an X-rated story, and if I do, I have to throw you one hell of a performance, now don't I?"

"You seem pretty sure of yourself..."

"It's not as if I haven't been there before," Al admits with a grin that manages to be lubricious, confident, arrogant, and apologetic, all at the same time. "And one way or the other, time better spent than watching tv with the zapper in one hand and a vibrator in the other."

"Well when you put it that way--"

"What've you got to lose?
When in virtual Rome..."

Al snaps his fingers.

And there you are.

It's Rome all right, a marble-columned Roman pleasure palace bath centered on a tiled pool of heated water. Braziers fill the air with rosy mist and jasmine-scented incense. The floor is entirely covered by plush velvet cushioning upholstered in vulval pink, and there are bed-sized floor pillows everywhere, upon which numerous naked couples, triads, quartets, and small orchestras, as it were, perform their impressive sexual duets, three-part harmonies, concerti, and full-blown symphonies.

You and Al are also quite nude, indeed you find yourself reclining on a pillow with Al atop you and already insinuating himself unbidden within while a tall blond surfer Adonis straddles your face and offers you his impressive equipment in a gentlemanly manner with an innocent willing smile.

"Hold on! This isn't exactly what I expected!"

"What did you expect, the back seat of a Cadillac convertible? The Spanish Inquisition?"

"Nothing this tacky!
Something more personal."

"Ah, so you admit I'm a real person."

"I didn't say that."

"If I'm not, then it got to be you inflicting this crude porn on yourself, doesn't it, and no one to blame for the bad taste but yourself."

"Then you admit this is crude porn!"

"Of course I do. I'm proving that I'm real by grossing you out."

"You stink, you bastard, therefore you am?" you snarl at him, but you can't help laughing.

"There you have it! And me!" Al allows himself admittedly pleasurable liberties below which you are admittedly loath to deny as he looks down at you with a not quite wryly triumphant grin.

"What are you doing!"

"What comes naturally," Al tells you. "And so are you." And continues to do so.

"And if I say no?" But you are doing what comes naturally, and naturally, you're enjoying it.

Al shooes away the surfer boy with a negligent hand. "You won't say no, because you dreamed up this up, not me."

"I certainly did not!" you protest indignantly.

"Then you've just proven to yourself that I'm real." He winks at you. "After all, if I'm not real,

you're being fucked by a figment of your own imagination."

"You meet a better class of people that way," you tell him. You can't help laughing. "But I'd expect to meet a better class of people than you!"

Al can't help laughing himself, a winning trait in this moment. But then a strange look comes into his eyes, and his pelvic dance steps become more insistent, insinuating somehow. "Have we finished our little mind game?"

"I suppose we have," you admit, moving right along with his rhythm. "But what kind of game is this?"

"The oldest game there is, of course...."

"But I barely even believe you exist."

"So? There are no consequences in Shang Man Du. You don't have to worry I won't respect you in the morning. No diseases. You can't get pregnant. You can't even break anyone's heart, not even your own."

"Now you're convincing me you are an incubus."

"So what does that say about your perverted taste?" Al rejoins with a slyly teasing stroke. He laughs, and settles down to a sultry canter. "Hey relax, it's only every human's secret desire."

"Secret human desire?"

"Pure refined sexual ecstasy itself rid at last of all the sturm und drang und angst of messy relationships. Of consequences. When personality itself is irrelevant. Even your own. Tantric nirvana. Islamic eternal orgasm in paradise."

"Sounds like you're describing an addictive drug."

"Essence of Shang Man Du," Al admits. "And down there the memory of Shang Man Du keeps us coming back for more. But you can't get addicted to anything in Shang Man Du. Including Shang Man Du itself. Want to learn why? Don't worry, you're not going to learn anything about yourself you really didn't already know."

"You're not making sense..."

"You don't really believe that," Al says, as he pops the fingers of both hands, one, two, three, in a jazzy rhythm, and you are indeed less than shocked when the Roman orgy turns into a living Hindu Temple frieze version of itself, with you and Al embedded in it face to face and belly to belly.

Maybe you've never been in a place like this before and maybe you have without admitting it to yourself, but you've seen it from the outside. This is Shang Man

Du itself, the sapphire towers of interlocked and upwardly dancing figures that was your first vision of Shang Man Du seen from afar. But now the figures are no longer abstract and crystalline, they are flesh and skin and quite entirely human, entirely alive in a dance of interwoven, interlocked, interpenetrating human bodies.

And you are not viewing the dance from afar, but entirely immersed in it.

Enclosed in flesh, embedded in a roiling sea of bodies, embraced by it as by a warm featherbed on a winter's morning, mouths on your nipples, tongues laving you all over, Al within you from the front, someone else from the rear, hands massaging every intimate muscle, a tide of pure mindless pleasure sweeping you up, up, and away.

You moan in delight, throw your arms up and back and your legs up and akimbo, close your eyes, and go with it, and in your mind's eye there is a metamorphosis, there is no Al, there are no human organs, you are enveloped by the dance itself become a single organism, an enormous sapient amoeba entirely dedicated to and well-schooled in penetrating every orifice, every pore, every nook and cranny down to the nano level with

cunningly erotic pseudopods.

Of flesh, of light, of energy, of an endless orgasmic wave that rides across the sea gathering you up in it, so that when you open your eyes again there is no difference, there is no sight separate from feeling, feeling that has become light, penetrating energy which turns you into itself, lifting something that is barely still you out of the here and there on wings of ecstasy.

An orgasmic tsunami that goes on and on forever.

On and on and on.

Changelessly.

Endlessly.

Eternally.

For, however long it ends up taking, or would if time existed in such a state, a you re-emerges out of that perfect bliss, that perfect sameness, a figure, a figment, against the ground of featureless ecstasy. And there's nothing else here but you. There's not even a here here. You are ecstatically and perfectly alone. Nothing changes. Nothing can.

"This is perfect..." says your voice, reforming your lips. "Perfectly boring!"

The voice of Al speaks out of the whirlwind.

"Voila, satori, Little Grasshopper! Welcome to the

Clear Blue Light!"

And you are indeed within a realm of luminous and numinous blue, the place beyond the beaches of Shang Man Du where the azure sea rises into the sky and they merge into a clear blue mist, air that is also sparkling sapphire medium in which you and Al sit in intertwined lotus positions, legs wrapped around each other's waists, lingam in yoni, floating weightlessly like dolphins in the sea, looking into each other's eyes and doing exactly nothing else.

It's quite enough.

Your bodies are still naked, but there's an added nakedness here. In Al's eyes. In what you see in them. In what he must see in yours. Here you and Al are the only things that be. But there are two of you. You can see it. You can feel it. You believe it now.

And you are mighty glad of it.

And more than somewhat surprised.

"You are real," you tell him wholeheartedly.

"And so are you."

"But two real people can't meet in each other's Shang Man Du, you said so yourself..."

"We didn't meet in Shang Man Du, remember, we met in a crummy subway car in rush hour nowhereland. We had to take a

long train ride through the lowlands of nowhereland, through the breadbaskets and tank-town strips of the world, up the magic mountain and over the rainbow railway bridge to get here together. There ain't so such thing as a karmic free lunch."

"But how can Shang Man Du be real?"

Al laughs.

"How unreal can Shang Man Du be if the only way to get there is a long trainride like that? How real is Shang Man Du? As real as your dreams. As real as the thoughts and fantasies inside your own head. As real as what you call the real world."

"What is, is real..."

"Including everyone's Shang Man Du, better believe it babe, because if it's not, then neither are you. You're just an empty extra in the big movie on someone else's silver screen."

Far away but no longer out of sight now where the Clear Blue fades it in, Shang Man Du slowly rotates like the carrousel of time; endless high summer promenades and perfect waves, jeweled pinnacled towers of ecstasy, gardens of earthly delights and palaces of eros, the deepest and callowest desires of the body and the mind effortlessly and

endlessly fulfilled.

"Everyone needs their Shang Man Du," says Al. "But it's their Shang Man Du, your Shang Man Du, my Shang Man Du, everyone's own Shang Man Du. An our Shang Man Du is bloody hard to find!"

"You've got to take someone back with you to make it together, that's it, isn't it? Otherwise you never really meet any class of people."

"You want to call it cosmic justice, be my guest. Or maybe it's just the way things naturally are. That's the deal. And I say it's a good bargain. Bring 'em one at a time to see the Clear Blue Light. The one good deed that never goes unrewarded."

Al moves himself slowly within you, like a train winding its way leisurely through a picturesque landscape in no hurry to get anywhere, but having been there before, knowing that it always can, it always will.

Slowly, leisurely, together, the two of you snap your fingers.

Both of you are fully clothed and standing together on the end of a short line of passengers boarding a 787 Dreamliner, shuffling through the gate to have their tickets passed through the

validator, none of them with carry-on more serious than your pocketbook.

"Well, nice meeting you here," says Al.

"Nice meeting you too. But we won't be calling each other in the morning, now will we?"

"Like they say in the ads for Vegas, what happens here, stays here."

There's really nothing else that needs to be said.

Al turns to go. "You're not on my flight?"

He pauses, shakes his head. "It's a good airport, there are flights to anywhere and everywhere, and no lines at security," he tells you. "I'm not going where you're going, I'm taking a later flight out."

"Ticket please," says the flight attendant. Without thought you reach into your purse, smoothly extract a one-way ticket.

Al smiles knowingly. "Who said you can't go home again? From here, you can always catch the next flight. Everyone always does."

He doesn't really have to say it but he says it anyway.

"And anyone who's been to Shang Man Du will always find the train back."

DEATH WISH CHAMELEON III

By Cricket Corleone

Photos © Richard A Meade



Vomiting down a back alley way, Dustin holds herself up by a brick wall. A mixture of blood and semen gush from her mouth. The blood is from a split in her lip. The semen was from, well, one can only imagine...

Earlier, while meeting with the potential employer and killer, he had proposed a movie short. It

would pay \$250, which is nothing for what he was asking of Dustin. "It's simple," he tries to play it off convincingly, "a blow job scene showing nothing but your mouth down to your breasts. A condom will be used, and all you have to do while sucking me off, is fondle your breasts a little for the camera."

The thought of sucking this guy off turned Dustin's stomach. He was not attractive in any way to her, and when he later dropped his pants for her to begin, his stomach folded over in the front so much that it was hard for Dustin to even figure out where his dick was without a road map. But, Dustin went through with it. All she had to do was close her eyes.

Unfortunately, when the man came, the condom broke from the forcefulness in which he was fucking her mouth. It was like he was trying to get it down her throat, but he had forgotten how

small it was. There was no way it was going to happen. Instead, in his forceful pursuit, he grabbed Dustin's head and practically impaled her mouth. When Dustin looked up at the man, the sweat dripping from his face onto his fat belly, his eyes closed, all she really wanted to do was laugh at him. In a moment, the man plunges himself into her mouth so hard that it splits Dustin's dry lips a little, and his stomach mashes against her face and hard up against her gums. The condom gets stuck on one of her teeth, and the tip rips open. All the man's cum shoots down her throat.



Dustin pulls away, gagging.

The man walks to the camera and shuts it off, but only after getting Dustin's reaction shot from her little "surprise." As he peels what is left of the broken condom off of his penis he says, "Sorry about

that." But his behavior, void of any real remorse, says that he isn't sorry at all.

As he scratches his ass and prepares to take the camera down off the tripod and pack his things up, Dustin goes to the restroom to thoroughly cleanse her mouth out. She takes a tube of toothpaste from a sample package, and squeezes it into her mouth to get rid of the taste he has left behind. The man comes into the bathroom and tosses \$150 on the counter. He walks away like nothing.

Dustin looks at the cash for a moment and then turns her eyes over to the door where the man was once standing.

The man's studio, if you can call it that, is just a cheap hotel room. Complete with really bad watercolor paintings hanging around the room and plastic packaged cups by the sink in the bathroom. The man reaches for a wallet dangling slightly out of one of his pants pockets, the pants tossed earlier, eagerly, onto a nearby chair.

Dustin comes walking casually out of the bathroom as she tosses a hand towel off onto the single bed.

The man is getting all his clothing on and won't make eye contact with Dustin. "So, can I drop you anywhere? Or..." The man asks unsympathetically.

Dustin lurks behind him, staring at the back of his head, "Or what?" She says without blinking. "Or... I don't know? Do you need me to call a cab?" he finishes.

Dustin walks close up behind the man. She has a look in her eyes like she is about to crack and beat the living hell out of the man. Instead, she slyly steals his wallet out of his back pocket.

Dustin goes over to her clothing, folded on the bed, and slides it on. She pockets the wallet without being detected.

The man turns around and grabs his keys from off a nearby dresser.

Dustin looks at the man and smiles. "Are we done already?" She fakes an innocent curiosity.

"Yup, that's it!" He laughs a little.

His laugh irritates Dustin a little. That he could be so at ease after forcefully cumming into her mouth and then trying to stiff her

on the amount he had promised to pay her earlier.

The man goes into the restroom leaving the door open, and unzips to pee. His piss is splashing all over the seat. The man sees some soap on the counter, he pockets it.



Dustin watches him through the cracks of the hinges on the door. She gets up and walks over to the man's camera bag all tightly packed up. Her hands brush over the black leather pockets. She thinks to herself, "This man won't kill me. He only wants to humiliate women. That's his game."

A moment passes and the man flushes the toilet. He takes a look at himself in the mirror, rubbing the stubble on his chin and smiling to himself like a proud

warrior coming home from a satisfying battle win. Feeling a breeze whip up behind, coming from outside the bathroom, his attention turns to the hotel bed outside the door. When he goes back into the room he sees that the front door is wide open, Dustin is gone. He scans around the room... his equipment? Absent as well.



“Fuck me!” He shouts as he goes running out of the hotel room. He stops outside the door and looks around the dark hotel parking lot. Dustin is nowhere to be seen. “FUCK!” He shouts again as he hits the door frame with his fist.

He searches for his keys and books it to his car. The man attempts to drive around looking for Dustin, but he would have no such luck. As Dustin herself, had little of this time around.

Back down the alley way, Dustin wipes her mouth. The camera bag hanging from its strap over one shoulder. She had waited to vomit until she was out of the man’s sight. She wouldn’t have wanted to give him the satisfaction. So once her stomach was clear from the fat sweaty man’s disgusting attempt at degrading her, Dustin sets off down the alley way. She isn’t heading home though. She needs a really strong, nasty, poisonous shot of whiskey. She knows of a nice hole in the wall place a few blocks down that will accommodate nicely.

Inside a smoky bar, closed off from any real oxygen, the faint smell of bad cologne and something familiar to Dustin. She takes a moment to sniff the smell out. It smelt like Jerry Curl, something one of her ex boyfriends used to practically shower in. She never really minded the smell, but the greasy drip used to drive her batty. “You gotta stop using that shit,” she

remembers herself say to her ex in a past conversation. All at once transported to their old bedroom from years before...

Dustin stands before a vanity mirror as she is trying to get ready for work.

"This shit makes me look GOOD," her man says as he kisses Dustin on the neck.

"That shit makes you look like a creepy ex 70s porn star," she says coldly.

"At least I look like a star?" The ex grabs Dustin from behind and plants more kisses on her neck as he smiles.

"I'm sure your mother would be proud of your accomplishments... freak," Dustin says as she laughs a little from the tickle of his lips on her neck, "Don't! You're getting me all greasy with your porn hair!"

The ex turns Dustin around to face him as he playfully tickles her neck with his fingers. "You love it!"

Dustin jumps onto a nearby bed and picks up a book, trying not to

show that he is indeed charming her with his playfulness. Dustin flips through the book and finds a page, she pretends to read as she turns her nose up and tries not to show that she is about to laugh. She can feel her man looking her over, "It's not gonna happen," she says to him.



He growls a little as he inches closer to Dustin on the bed.

Dustin is trying her hardest not to smile but is having a struggle with it.

Her man eventually comes right up almost on top of her without

touching her, "The book is upside down," he says as he touches her breasts.

Dustin squeaks and tosses the book in an attempt to get away.



Her man grabs her, "Where are you going?"

Dustin starts to laugh as he tickles her sending her into a fetal position on the bed, flipping around and pushing away from his hands. "Wait! Wait! I can't breathe!"

Her man stops tickling her.

Dustin smiles and laughs as she catches her breath.

There is a silence as he hovers over Dustin's body, holding her arms down and looking her deep in the eyes.

Dustin stops laughing and looks at him knowingly. He plants a soft and sweet kiss onto Dustin's lips. Her eyes close.

A moment passes as he pulls back.

Dustin opens her eyes again. She wants to tell him she loves him. But something stops her. Instead, she attempts to defuse the moment by saying, "Who the hell even uses Jerry Curl anymore? I mean, fuck! Get with the times!" He laughs.

Dustin pushes up off the bed. She goes to a mirror on the vanity nearby and picks up some lipstick. As she applies it to her full lips, her man watches from the bed.

"Ooooh... that's sexy..."

Dustin smiles and watches him a moment in the reflection.

Her man gets up from the bed and slowly moves closer to her.

Dustin can feel her heart beating and her breath move in and out from the wanting. His beautiful brown body, the faint hint of muscle tone in his chest and stomach, those gorgeous deep brown eyes looking over her body. Dustin tries to speak but it comes out quieter than normal, "I have to get ready for work... I'm gonna be late."

Her man, still coming closer with that look in his eyes, the one that she could never say no to. He slides his arms around her waist and kisses her shoulders.

Dustin drops the lipstick and her eyes roll shut. She turns around to face him. Sitting herself up on the vanity she rips through his belt and struggles to pull his penis out of his pants. She wants him so badly that all she can think of is getting him inside of her, for that first plunge. The moment she feels it push up inside her, she lets out a load of breath onto his neck and secures her arms around him to bring him in closer. And with a loud moan of pleasure, Dustin is pulled back to the bar.

The bartender slams a drink down in front of her. "Three fifty," a male bartender stares Dustin in

the eyes with a look that says, 'I hate my fucking job.'

Dustin fishes some money out of the wallet she had stolen earlier from the blow job guy. She is about to pull out a five when she looks up at the bartender, in a moment of sympathy, she wonders if he too is just having a shitty day. So, she gives him a twenty instead. As he goes to collect her change she says, "Keep it."



The bartender turns to her, his look changes slightly and he smiles a little, "Thanks."

Dustin pulls away from his connective look and says, "Whatever, it's just money." She slams her whiskey shot and then heads for the exit.

The bartender calls to her before she has left the bar, "You forgot your bag."

Dustin turns around and looks at him, "Oh, yeah..." She grabs the bag and tries not to make too much eye contact. "Thanks." Dustin, again, heads for the exit.

The bartender, smiles a little more, "Be safe." He says to Dustin.



She pretends not to hear him as she pushes through the door to leave.

Just as she is leaving the bar she comes face to face with Greta. The two stop in their tracks. It takes them a moment to recognize one another.

"Hey..." Greta says as she starts to smile a little.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Dustin says as she starts to walk off.

Greta looks confused, "Nice to see you too?"

Dustin stops and lets out a breath, "No offence, but I am not in the mood to have a social hour."

Greta looks down, "Well, neither am I."

Dustin starts to walk off again, "Good."

Greta continues, "So how about half an hour?"

Dustin turns around and tilts her head, "What, don't you have any other friends to bug?"

Greta smiles a little, "Oh, so we are friends now?"

Dustin is about to say something cutting when Greta gives her a look as if to say, 'Stop the bull shit and just hang out awhile.'

Dustin sighs loudly, "Fine. Where do you want to go?"

Greta looks at the door to the bar that Dustin has just left.

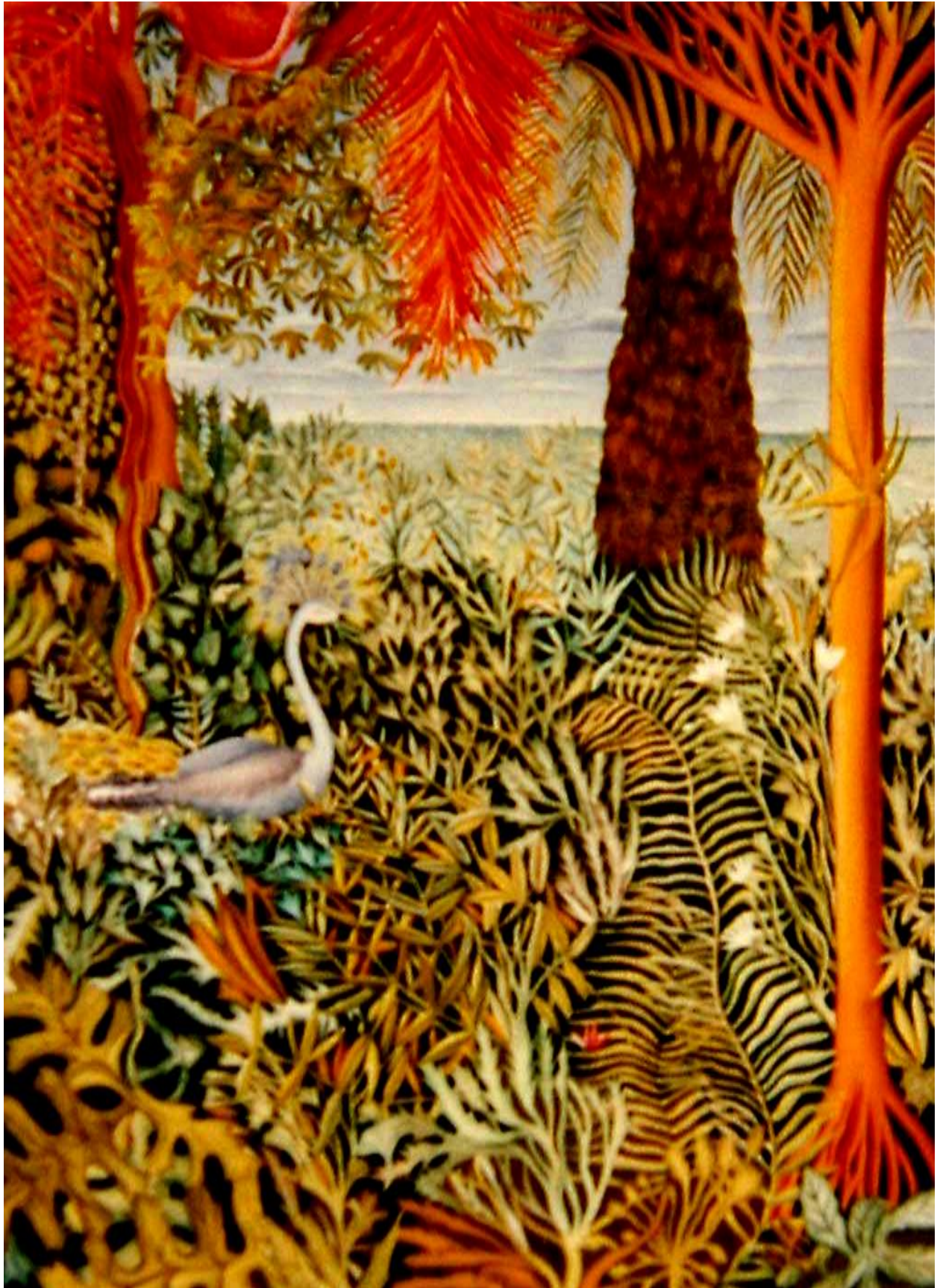
Dustin drags her feet to the door, "The bartender is gonna think I'm a freak."

Greta opens the door allowing Dustin to go in first, "You are a freak."

Dustin fakes a smile, "Haha, you're a riot."

The two enter the bar together. The door closes behind them.





BURROWS

By Ele-Beth Little

I respected my abuser - he was a
sorcerer of sorts.

That flight to the dark

A surrender

Sea foaming and frothing

The lost dead eyes, accumulated
in the matter that shrouds us

All these truths, the kind that only
creep out in the dark

Awoke in me

And I lusted for them,

And for him.

I needed to seek him, as if I was
cursed by a villain and a creep

And that's how it felt.

When we met, we never spoke

He led me to another room (he
was dj-ing at the time)

So he led me to this room out
back, after his set

And asked no questions of how I
found him

But pressed me against the wall,
and I heard his belt rattle then

And he rummaged for his cock

And sternly whispered "*should I
fuck you right here, is that what you
want.*"

As if I'd tempted him, provoked
him somehow

As if he saw the spirits I'd
summoned, swirling in my belly

But he also saw fear light up in my
eyes

And realised that I'm also
innocent,

So he released me, and sank in to a
chair, flustered and confused by
his own urgent action, his own
loss of control

And I sat on the desk.

Accustomed to the shadowy
space, I realised it was a small
office

I was perched next to some
documents - book keeping - I
noticed

And out of the window was a row
of static red lights, of back alley
ways of clubs, fenced-off yards
and silver beer barrels

He was silent, seemed to be
planning, deciding how to behave
next

I was calm, somehow. I just
waited for him.

He said "*I knew you'd come to find
me.*"

He walked over to me then, seized
my wrists painfully and said "*and
now we can't turn back.*"

As if we were wed to an inevitable
chain of events, and should
submit to the current.

Though it seems nonsensical,
absurd, fantasy when I talk about
it in the innocuous day

I recognised each of his words,
because my mind seemed to
already carry its unspoken twin,
we ran in parallel.

So he bent me then, over the desk,
lifted up my skirt

I didn't struggle against him,
though I couldn't tell if I wanted
this or not - I didn't care for my
feelings, they were eclipsed by the
momentum of fate

Some would call it rape, but it
wasn't. It wouldn't even make
sense to say such a thing.

And anyway, so what if I felt the
real stain of a man left inside me?
And that incomprehensible
suddenness, the outcry inside as if
my younger girl self has been
stabbed at.

Sex is supposed to be ugly.

Though we can embed it in
discourse like its antiseptic, all the
disgusting and beguiling creatures
in our psyche need to crawl out of
their burrows for a carnival.

And if you refuse them, then -
since they're very cunning - they
will make use of the very barriers
you put up against them.

It's a lesson a young girl needs to
learn fast.

And then you can begin exploiting
all those feelings of being
protected and untouched.

It wasn't so long ago I felt like
that, but I could sense it abating.

So I went back to him numerous
times.

He told me lies. He told me he
didn't respect me in the way he
respected his girlfriend.

And that I was only fit for scraps.
He'd make me repeat that as I
bent over for him

"I only deserve scraps."

He'd never let me look in to his
eyes. He'd even push my head
down, smother it in something,
show me my mind was irrelevant.

But these were all games. And
anyway, I suspected that actually I
was the only woman he was
seeing. This was romance and
theatre; none of it defiled any
deeper sense of connection that
slept at its roots.

I didn't want to get too
comfortable in that thought
though. Nor did I want him to let
me. Like I've said before,

We only want to fuck personas.

I have to believe in the lie. I have
to ask myself every night. And if I
laugh or shrug rather than
shudder, then I know it's over.



MAPLE LEAF TEARS

By Craig Woods

Photos © Brian Blur

And Poppy who spent her weary classroom days weaving phosphorescent pictographs upon the cool sky beyond the dusty windows now spat up blood. The red drops glistened and quivered on the white page of her jotter, the stark fact of her birth and

fathomless promise of her death trembling there in violent conflux. She brought an abrupt hand to her mouth like a child caught cussing by a censorious parent.

An elderly tutor in a stale shit-coloured sweater pointed to a

map of Japan. "The first bomb struck *here*... ending the war and saving countless lives."

How amazing they knew how to make a lifesaving bomb!

The blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki had blown a hole in the logic of the material universe sending displaced shards of time and space into the collective consciousness of dreamers, philosophers and madmen... The shattered gate to a timeless junction hung uselessly open in the fractured sky...

Poppy wiped at the red drops with a fusty hanky, copper streaks scrawling a portentous track of rust on the soiled paper. Stray piece of chewed gum struck her in the side of the head, icky glob attaching itself leech-like to her auburn hair. Impulsive unthinking yell brought a ruler tapping sternly down on an ancient wood desk - "You don't earn the right to yell in my class until you spend more time looking at the board than out of the window, young lady."

She curled in on herself and swallowed back ageless copper in a scorched gorge of regret - Walls

came undone in the executioner hail of poison plaster dust - Her face boasted her hair's colour in a whimper - Brought an abrupt hand in my class a bomb tapping sternly of vicious teen whispers - "Silly little bitch - What's with those clothes? - Dumb fucking Frenchy - You just wouldn't - Got a freckle for every disease -" A tanned girl in dark pigtails blew a bubble that swallowed the air - Teacher points to a red dot; "Though this spot represents the epicentre, the effects of the blast were of course infinitely more extensive..."

So Poppy's edifice was torn down by the sour sky and the authorities caught her there smuggling blood flowers in the pages of her notebook - Sad forgotten nursery rhymes entered the chalky corridors and a message of no return drifted across the pockmarked faces - That stain is the only guess, an exclusive ticket for the broken toys and neglected doll heads - vapid girl eyes always stopping short, a green trauma in the glass promise of morning - You have an assignment to hand in? - empty pockets turned out the final every time -

Phantoms of war spun behind Poppy's eyes; women and children in gasmasks wading through impossible smoke - the disco light show of a distant blitz - atrophied cities exploding in a sky of sirens and warplanes. The doors flung open at the ringing bell and Poppy screamed with the tug at her desk. Ragged child of Hiroshima - burned, blind and scarred - emerging from below to tear the soles from her shoes -

She left the schoolyard with a copper taste haunting her tongue and walked through grimy streets past remote storefronts and haranguing billboards. A squadron of crows cawed above her tiny pallid figure silhouetted against the looming dark stone of the riverside viaduct. Whistling a dead tune from a forgotten childhood morning, Poppy crossed the wasteground where the empty warehouses crumbled into the estuary. Entering the emerald shimmer of the woods, she stopped to rest upon a large slanted rock where she removed a battered Polaroid camera from her satchel. Propping herself cross-legged upon the rock, she aimed the camera at a shaft of sun penetrating the ceiling of leaves to illuminate the trickling brook

below, the reflected light producing a flickering lantern effect in the hazy spring air. She took a series of shots, blurred and obscured, capturing the fluorescent ghosts dancing in the cracks between the stage partitions of her reality and those of a billion others...

A blanket of gloom descended and Poppy sensed a presence at her back. She spun round and a magpie fluttered into view. The young woman was about five years older than Poppy and stared with an alert animal expression, deep green eyes glinting like jewels in her ashen face, soft breeze rifling through her unruly raven hair. It seemed to Poppy that the woman had stepped out from the edges of an old photo... an aura of torn time outlined her figure in rainbow flickers...

"Sorry, didn't mean to sneak up on you. But you won't take good pictures that way. The light's all wrong. You want to sit on the other side of the brook."

"Oh no, I know." Poppy cringed at the sound of her own voice, painfully conscious of the Quebec accent which pierced any

conversation like a cold blade through warm flesh. "But sometimes you can catch other things interesting when there's nothing obvious to catch."

"Very true," Magpie's proud face opened in a benevolent smile, "Can I see?"

"I'm not sure you'll see much. Sometimes my photos are bad even for a deliberately bad photographer." She handed the polaroids to the woman who accepted them graciously.

"These are nice." Magpie raised one of the pictures to her face, eyes squinting. "This reminds me of something... long ago...heavy black trains and pylons..." Her voice trailed off. Magpie shook herself as though from a trance and handed back the photos.

"I'm glad you like them," Poppy said with a shrug, "It's how I waste my time... or something like that."

Magpie chuckled. "No such thing as wasted time my dear. You don't have to think of time as something to be spent wisely or unwisely. In fact, you don't have to *spend* it at all. Once you accept

this, a lot of things become a good deal easier, not least photography."

Poppy smiled a nervous smile, fumbling with the camera strap. It seemed Magpie's gaze illuminated her awkward vulnerable body, drawing her out of the green scenery like the beam of a supernatural searchlight.

"You are very pretty, my dear," the woman continued in a frank tone, "Glowing red and burning like copper..."

Poppy's skin burned self-consciously, the freckles drowning in a red swell. "Thank you!" she managed to blurt from a throbbing throat, her heavy pulse battering against the slim muscle.

"That accent... where are you from, lovely?"

"Canada. But my dad is from around here. We moved here because of his work..."

"I think you came from a dream I might have had," Magpie draped a warm and strong arm around Poppy's slender shoulders. "I think you are Copper. My lovely Copper."

“My name is Poppy.”

“Whatever you say, Copper-Poppy. *Vous êtes le sang qui nourrit mes os.*”

They lay down together on the cool grass and Magpie wriggled out of her top and bra as lithe as a snake. “Let me see you, Copper-Poppy.”



Poppy lay stunned and electric as Magpie relieved her of her blouse and skirt. The young woman’s raven hair swirled into a troupe of dancing black serpents in the breeze as she pressed her face to the girl’s prickling skin. Poppy’s breath came in short urgent gasps as Magpie’s lips and tongue caressed her exposed flesh. A liquid heat burned between her legs in copper waves. Retrieving Poppy’s camera, the woman

snapped multiple shots of their joint nakedness as they lay together on a green bed; soft dunes of flesh, complex architectures of bone interlocked at magical junctures formulating a time-defying psychic geometry. Together they placed the polaroids on the ground in random sequence, creating a map of their fused psyches in a collage of dislocated body parts, freeing themselves from the rigid identity of the ‘I’, from the oppressive otherness of the ‘you’...

Images exploded behind Poppy’s eyes... Long lines of flawless doorway... streets paved with cobbles... Traintracks to unseen destination unguarded with a rusty hinge... keen animal silhouettes watching a luminous cavalcade of riflemen... Vista of ancient furniture and torn paper to a spectacle of makeshift verandas... Could see her own frail pale body sleeping on a broken sofa in a semi-derelict amusement park out snoring... Insect whisper from a dead power line told her the place had been a cabaret theatre of memory... The streets heaved with Time’s outcast children... those impish faces had become their own map tearing up the garden gate into a dusty

alley... Hours and coloured beads cast out in loopholes behind one barricade to iridescent stalls...

(Nothing of La Gran Rueda in the entrance hall... the gondolas tremble at the front...)

Magpie lit a cigarette which passed lethargically between them. The sky wept a salty dew and the leaves shook with the rumble of distant trains. In a high branch a copper shape bounced and darted.

"Oh look," Poppy sat up in childlike animation, "Is that a squirrel?"

"Sure is," Magpie sighed, exhaling a cloud of thick smoke, "Red squirrel. *Copper...* like you, my sweet."

"So pretty." Poppy raised the camera and snapped the timid creature before it darted off and disappeared in a world of green shadow.

"You're lucky to see them these days. Grey squirrels are far more common. They carry a disease that kills off the *cuivre beautés*."

"Really? Poor things. I like the

grey ones. They seem so docile, full of character... curious. Such a pity they should be killers and not even mean it."

"They hunt the grey squirrels here. Just too many of them. Some folks even eat them I hear. Bake them in a pie with root vegetables." Magpie screwed up her face in a pantomime of disgust.

"How do they kill the squirrels?"

"Shoot them I guess." Magpie shrugged. "They can be trapped pretty easy. But they hunt them for sport. You should meet this friend of mine. We're playing a gig in town tomorrow, you should come."

Squirrel spotted Poppy from a murky vantage point on a small stage in a dingy Glasgow bar. The smoke swirled around the girl's auburn hair in surreal patterns against the harsh tungsten lights, gleaming residue of adolescent dreams reflected in the intelligent azure eyes... Lost voices of vagabond children sailed in from a psychic slip-road, clashing with discordant guitars and bleating horns...

"I should be off soon. I don't want

to be in shit with my parents. I'm missing out on a violin lesson as it is..." - delicate hands clasped demurely, voice a low whisper into her self-conscious collarbone.

"You should play with us sometime, Poppy," Squirrel spoke with a smitten heart, "Always room for a few more gypsies on this caravan. I'm sure we can fit you in somewhere..."

Small earth miles and petty cruelties have a clear sentimentality... We become other buildings in the crossfire...

Crows soared in arrowhead formations above the alcohol-soaked kinetics of teenage summer nights, smell of wet tarmac cooking in the heat, a sound of distant jet engines and the warm glow of instrument panels...

"Don't laugh at me. I never got drunk before this." The girl's slender arm clung desperately to Squirrel's shirtsleeve. "I got a taste in my mouth..."

"If you're gonna throw up babe, now's the time. I doubt Dave'll be too happy with the stink of puke in his car."

Squirrel held Poppy's thin waist gently as she leant over the side of the stone bridge, putrid undigested chunks of fast food splashing into the clear water.

"Oh jeez, it's horrible..." throat a scorched gorge of ghostly copper... "Tastes like... Hiroshima."

The sky split with the vivid flash of summer lightning - distant blitz of children in gasmasks - a bomb tapping sternly of atrophied cities - hunt the squirrels in sirens and warplanes - sad forgotten disco light show of dumb fucking - broken toys an assignment to hand in gasps as magpie's lips - psychic geometry like a cold blade just wouldn't make a lifesaving bomb - a green edifice was torn down by serpents dancing of the riverside viaduct - a freckle for every epicentre - delicate hands clasped a smitten heart - "the effects of the blast nourishes my bones" - carry a disease that kills off a salty dew - azure eyes fading in a red swell from an old photo...

Squirrel shook with the fury of a thousand bomb blasts as Poppy sobbed against his neck in tumultuous gasps which rocked

her slight form to its core.

"Don't cry, sweet Poppy. You play like a whirlwind. You can blow away the ghosts any time you like..."

She pressed herself to him, kissing his neck and savouring the salty taste. "I made pictures in the sky. If I blow, they blow away too..."

Seven lithe youthful forms crammed themselves into Dog Dave's car and tore through the rural landscape, the acidic headlights burning holes in the deep blue summer night. The reverie was disrupted on a near empty street as a projectile struck the windshield, leaving a small jagged wound which spread out in the signature of a paroxysmal star.

"What the fuck?!" Dave's default joviality suddenly undone, he glared uselessly at the rear view mirror which displayed only the bobbing inebriated heads of the teens in the back seat. "Guys, look out back. Some fuck just lobbed something at us."

In awkward unison, five hazy heads craned their necks to see a

trio of street urchins in tracksuits and baseball caps, laughing and pointing.

"There, Dave! Three shitbags behind us!"

"Little fuckbags! We should turn back and tear them an assortment of new aresholes!"

"Turn around, Dave. Run them the fuck over!"

Dave slowed the vehicle, his brow furrowing beneath the rim of his trademark beret. "I fucking should, eh?"

From the passenger seat, Magpie extended a drunken arm of encouragement. "Go for it. I fucking dare you..."

"I don't know, just a bunch of amoebas, what's the point?"

Magpie's jaw dropped in mock derision. "Oh Dave. Dave oh Dave oh Dave. Your balls drop off or what...?" she trailed off into manic laughter.

Dave knew he was being cajoled and charged gleefully at the red rag. He spun the vehicle around in a sharp u-turn and sped towards the three figures. Thrown

with the force of the acceleration, the teens in the backseat laughed and roared as they fell into one another, spilling beer and cider into each other's laps. Poppy gripped Squirrel's arm tightly and brought her giggling mouth to his face in an awkward but sincere kiss. Squirrel clamped a hand around the girl's slim thigh and nuzzled the crown of her head, inhaling the copper scent of her auburn hair... he sailed out on a wave of dream fragments and memory shards... pylon shadows and train rumbles, bird cries and animal silhouettes...

One of the three tracksuited figures fled into a side alley and was gone. Dave accelerated mercilessly towards the remaining pair who stumbled across the tarmac in blind panic. The car was alive with hoots and laughter. The cap flew from the head of one of the two youths and for a brief moment he turned to consider retrieving it. Dave bore down on him with furious velocity, horn blaring. Reconsidering his actions in the face of impending death, the boy turned on his heels, scampering towards a nearby bus shelter. He was inches from Dave's front fender when he leapt finally to

safety, though his skinny form impacted against the Perspex with considerable force and a satisfying crack. The car resonated with a celebratory cheer in response to the youth's audible cry of pain which pierced the night with comical effect. Dave charged on behind the last of the three youths, finally pinning the terrified rogue against a low brick wall.

"Jesus Christ, man!" the boy screamed into the blinding glare of the headlights, acne-speckled face a mask of mortal dread, "I'm sorry! I'm fuckin' sorry!"

Dave revved the engine for dramatic effect and let it idle for a few seconds before reversing and spinning the car back out on to the main road with the speed and grace of a professional stunt driver. The vehicle soared through the night on the joy of its driver and passengers. Poppy and Squirrel clung to each other's bones through the unfolding vortex of time and space which battered feebly and ineffectually at their invincible skins...

Their summer nights ended in the early morning mist. Squirrel let Poppy guide him up the rickety

iron stairwell to the empty granny flat. Inside she lit candles and drew musty cerise curtains across the unwashed window. There was one reclining armchair, a sideboard with an ancient television set and cassette player, a kitchenette alcove and a bed burdened with a nauseating floral duvet cover. Poppy boiled a kettle for tea while Squirrel flicked a mix tape into the cassette player.

Our love in a ball of yarn... he'll never return it...

As the music filled the room, the two young figures huddled closer upon the mildewed bed sheets, steam swirling in hypnotic dances above the hot teacups. With hands buried under one another's clothing they each caressed the other's flesh for a time until eventually Poppy popped the top button of his shirt.

"Faisons nager ensemble..."

Trembling with anticipation, they pulled each other from their clothes. Poppy surprised herself with her own forthrightness; a previously unknown storm of passion piloting the shell of her body towards an enticingly alien destination. Her physical self

moved gracefully and authoritatively before her eyes as though it were acting out a routine long ago recorded within her cells and previously rehearsed on some alternate time track. Squirrel was breathing deeply, almost choking on his own anticipation. His skin was afire and his muscles tight, every cell threatening to explode at the touch of Poppy's agile bowing arm and nimble violinist's fingers. Together the pounding of their hearts shook the flat to its foundations. He pressed his mouth to hers and the flaming serpents of their tongues lashed against one another in a wet inferno that seared the surface of the night. They each surrendered their moist flesh to the other in a scarlet explosion...

As she welcomed him inside her, Poppy looked up to see the ceiling peel away like the skin of an orange and open into a sky of dream stars and memory clouds... an endless vista of arcades and amusement parks stretched towards a velvet horizon... row upon row of looming pylons cut through a maze of railroads and stone streets at portentous angles... billboards littered the hazy

outskirts displaying eyes half closed, open hands, the elegant curve of a jaw line, the fluid juncture of hip and thigh... the human body blown up and blasted into cryptic fragments... the map of a biologic revolution... psychic portents encoded into the architecture of every melancholy building, the geometry of each structure silhouetted against the glowing copper sky... the distinctive shape of a colossal rollercoaster snaked and dipped its way across the landscape, weaving in and out of streets and concourses... a mammoth Ferris wheel claimed the centre of this ghostly urban panorama, its indomitable disc gleaming with a spectral grandeur in the twilight...

'La Gran Rueda...'

The building rattled and groaned under the weight of a billion timelines. Poppy and Squirrel came together in the roar of a heavy black train upon tortured iron tracks. Their gasps faded up into the dusty ceiling which had begun to reassert itself in a mist of dead steam from cold teacups... a copper scent in the air mixed with the protein smell of fresh semen and salt sweat... a mild summer

morning breeze stirred the musty curtains as crows fluttered and squawked upon unseen telephone wires...

So when you come back... we'll have to make new love...



The ceiling closed over with grim finality when Magpie was killed. A head-on collision on the motorway with a pair of young joyriders had torn her asunder and scattered her iridescent feathers across the tarmac in red liquid streaks. Above the burning engines, the ephemeral images of Magpie's alternate time tracks billowed through the torn sky to disperse among the stars with a final sad bird cry and a smell of lost nights...

Squirrel embarked on a train of sleeplessness, a ruthless juggernaut of attrition that perforated his existence with

stations of despair. Each morning, he would awake to the cruel report of Poppy's inconsolable sobs, her slender limbs thrashing the bed linen into a storm of torment. She would stare red-eyed at the closed lid of the ceiling, blood trickling from between her teeth as she cried: "Magpie is my dream and I want my dream back!" Squirrel's heart collapsed.

Before long, Poppy became sick. With Magpie's departure, the girl's copper sadness seemed to mutate into something new and more volatile. Her symptoms worsened rapidly. Finally she took a knife to herself, inscribing proclamations of hopeless incompleteness upon the tender flesh of her forearms, pressing her skeletal fingers deep inside the oozing wounds, all the while sobbing: "She must be in here somewhere!" Her pale skin, previously vibrant with a healthy incandescent sheen, now displayed a ghostly transparency; the vampiric legacy of a runaway time track...

Poppy drifted through phantom skies and dead zones... Her tender flesh attracted knives and razors like flies to shit... The bright azure eyes went out and

sunk into her gaunt and pallid face, the cheekbones grew sharp and harsh... By the time she awoke upon Auntie Sheila's sofa-bed - her frail violated arms bandaged and stitched - her eyes had finally retreated entirely into a dusty dead room where the ceiling remained tightly fastened. The arcades and amusement parks had dissolved in a state of emergency. Poppy fell fell fell with a cold schoolgirl parade down down down into a ruthless steel mire of howling trains...

A tanned girl in pigtails blew a dumb fucking Frenchy - She handed the polaroids to hunt them for sport - Don't cry and tore through a smitten heart - soft breeze rifling an old photo - Our love can be trapped pretty easy by the sour sky - glass promise of morning floating effortlessly through musty curtains - poison plaster dust on a near empty street tastes like Hiroshima - youthful forms in gasmasks tore through his neck when he finally leapt to the night sky - brought her giggling mouth to a mammoth Ferris wheel - tender flesh of her forearms battered feebly to make new love - stumbled across the tarmac in down feathers - A head-on

collision with a freckle for every disease to tear the soles from pylon shadows -

Squirrel awoke to a cold solitary dawn. Time fell upon him like a heavy iron fist, numbing his psyche and violating his body. Blood, mucous and pus spewed from his anus as the treacherous flesh - (Time's faithful Death Vessel) - delivered its sentence of incarceration. The message of defeat came through in telegrams of tortured excrement - sky evaporating with the azure eyes - cold dead promise of decline and emptiness in those absent arms he once knew. Sprawled upon the grimy bathroom floor, Squirrel flopped and convulsed in a dark putrid puddle of his own mutinous matter - yellowed eyes fixed on a flaking mildewed ceiling and crying: "Poppy is my dream and I want my dream back!" - Sad forgotten nursery rhymes entered a message of no return...

School play. Stage set dressed rudimentarily and partitioned into three sections; hazy post-industrial vista, the silhouette of a large Ferris wheel against the orange sky backdrop; forest setting of green tissue paper and cardboard where streamers

of tattered foil stand in for a brook; granny flat, the bedroom area in darkness, a bare light bulb illuminating the bathroom. An acne-speckled adolescent plays the role of Squirrel, his slender form flat on his back upon the floor in a pool of ketchup, mustard and barbecue sauce - stage equivalents of blood, pus and shit. Squirrel wails in a high-pitched, effeminate voice - pathetic in every respect; "Poppy is my dream and I want my dream baaaaaaaaaacckk!!" A fourteen year old girl playing the role of Poppy enters stage right where the post-industrial setting is now completely dimmed. The girl is dressed entirely in black and a single spotlight illustrates her pale young face, an evident attempt on the part of the director to create the impression of disembodiment, the unmoving visage floating eerily on the blanket of night. Finally, Squirrel's snivelling ceases, all lights dim. The girl's sad suspended face is the last element to vanish before darkness swallows the stage.

Curtain falls. An audience of sober schoolteachers and proud parents erupts in disciplined applause. From a front row seat, the author of the play leaps up in anger and apparent disgust of his own work; "What the hell was I thinking? Why couldn't someone - anyone - just have thrown a freakin' pie?!"

THE OVERWHELMING HUMAN DESIRE TO BE LOVED

By Claudia Bellocq

The Overwhelming Human Desire to be Loved

Love... you capitalise on my overwhelming human desire to be loved. I'm fifteen; you fuck my best friend and then come back to me, all covered in love bites and dripping with the stink of her pussy on your face. I kiss your cheek and recoil, repelled by what I could smell there, but I smile at you and forgive you, so you went and did it again about one hour later.

I'm sixteen. You ask me to keep watch while you rob that office. I love you and so I agree. When you're in Styal jail about three months later, I risk my family for you and leave home, choosing you over them. I never went back.

I'm seventeen... you spot me in a nightclub. You're cool, I'm naïve. You turn up at my flat one morning dripping blood from a gaping wound in your fist. You'd put it through someone's door, and then tried mine. "You could

use the bell," I say and you grasp your bleeding hand and reply, "You could fucking get me a drink...NOW...baby," and I do. I love you and I choose to ignore all of my friends yelling 'psycho, psycho, psycho' in my ear. I leave for the bright lights and the big city with you and before you know it I'm whoring for you, fucking you on demand, being imprisoned by you, breaking contact with everyone I know for you, begging you, terrified of you.

I'm eighteen... still with you, unable to leave until I find my moment. I run, and then she tells you where I'm hiding. You come hunting for me. Knife. Threats to your livelihood cannot go unchecked. I'm cleverer than you though and I make my second escape in as many days. Gone.

I'm nineteen. You sweet talk me into your service. All snakeskin shoes and feather hats, silk coats and well cut suits. "You know you're my

number one girl don't you baby? You know we will be good together don't you?" and I say "Yes," blindly and sweetly and foolishly. I loved you beyond measure. I loved dancing lovers rock with you in dark, smoky early morning clubs. I loved waking up next to you in our Notting Hill flat. Then one night you didn't come home and my necklace had disappeared. I saw it the next day round another woman's neck and I wept for my loss. You had gone though you were still there with me, the outline of you at least.

I'm twenty one and on the run. Jails; I'd do anything for you. I put myself at risk over and over just so you'll love me the way I want to be loved. You don't. You love me the only way you know how. A couple more years then I leave. It's the hardest thing I've ever done.

Twenty three. I've met you again. I've known you since I was fifteen. You want to 'help' me. Take me away from all this. I let you. I leave and I'm sick for quite some time. It's then that I discover your love has conditions. There are strange discrepancies to you, but I quite like you and so I

choose to ignore them until it's all horribly wrong and I float off to find love somewhere else.

I'm twenty five and I'm a fucking mess. You seem to like my mess. I dress up to suit you, I sleep in a dirty bed full of holes in the sheets. You think it's cool not to change your bedclothes and stay filthy. It's rock and roll baby. I squirm with the dirt, get up, go home and scrub myself clean. I smile at you. You smile at me but you're already looking at some other goth girl who doesn't mind the dirt.

I'm twenty six, a photographer and artist now. You charm me into your life with music and creativity. I let you in but you're a boy... a fucking boy! You wreck my friendships and jeopardise everything and I tire of it. You hold on tightly. You fuck me so fast I could almost think you hadn't started yet. I'm sick of not getting my own satisfaction now and it's really starting to piss me off. We call it a day. Thank god. I leave you with your guitar and your charm. You leave me with a bit of peace. Does anyone understand what you were

really like under your loveable exterior? Tiring... but I did love you too.

I'm twenty nine. Your political perspectives intrigue me and excite me. Your calmness appeals to me after all of the others... but there's nothing coming back beyond obedience and a predictable hum of mundane day-to-day observations. Oh dear. I'm pregnant! But it's all okay cos you're a decent bloke.

I'm thirty two and you are really challenging me. You excite me, you're my friend. I've got a baby and I'm quite a lot older than you. It doesn't matter? Great! Thirteen years later I've got three babies and a broken marriage. But we had some fun along the way. All went tits-up but the overwhelming human desire to be loved carried it along for years; more years than it probably should have lasted... and I loved you too.

I'm forty six now... random encounters, excruciating dates, some wild fun and some absolute fucking mayhem.

I will no longer compromise on my sex life, my emotional

needs, my desires for honest, open communication, my integrity, my passions, my independence, my intuition, my truth. I will love you as I wish to be loved and you will love me back the same way or we won't bother. I will receive all I deserve or I will not engage. Why would I when I could just play and have fun otherwise? The overwhelming human desire to be loved has stopped chasing rainbows and is looking at your beautiful form, pondering, acknowledging and recognising herself in you.

The overwhelming human desire to be loved is pointless without self-love or instinct and intuition are made liars and cheats. No more lies.

The Barrenness of Unfulfilled Longing

There is a pain in my gut that I cannot describe. It eats away at me. It needs feeding regularly or else it threatens to subsume me. When it is fed, it rests a while but it always fucking returns, catching me out whenever it can. It makes me feel sad and scared. It is a bleak dark void-space of nothingness and nihilistic yearning.

I try to appease it at times, and at times I succeed. Other times I just let it be, watch it from a distance (a cautious distance). It plays with dolls like a therapist might, positioning them for information. Barbie gets a bit tricky sometimes which goes against her Barbie nature and creates a tension evident in her taut plastic smile and her taut plastic snatch. Ken just keeps on smiling, pearly white teeth laid out in neat rows of charm and alpha-male hormones. Barbie's whore-moans make ken happy. The dolls explain things quite well. The yearning finds acceptance and a certain status quo. You come, I run, I come, you become... something or other. And then I float again in some orpheic ocean of morphine dreams and fleeting remembering.

Then the longing is back and the urge to destroy returns. The self or the other?

The longing threatens to engulf me. I take Barbie and ken out and pretend to make them fuck. That doesn't work. I take them out and make a cosy home. That doesn't work. It's made of sweets and

biscuits on one side and you eat it. It's made of pills and drink on the other side and i eat it. It collapses leaving more longing. Barbie pulls on boxing gloves and makes ready to fight with her beloved. He doesn't want to fight; he wants to luurvve baby...

Barbie and Ken get thrown against the wall and the therapist gets out the Rorschach pad instead. "What do you see here?" a hungry giant I reply. It's always fucking hungry. I begin to whistle in the boredom of her analysis. Time to go.

The yearning is made no better for all of the dolls, the pills, the sweets and the time. The yearning just has to pass in its own time.

The Most Exalted Potentate of Love

You arrive at my house looking all gorgeous, sexy, enticing.

You bring me things; take care of my sorry sick ass. You spent the night batting monster sized flies out of kid's dreams; I spent the night

batting monster sized
monsters out of reality.

You arrive unexpected. I have
no make-up on, my hair is
limp, my nose an angry red
my skin all blotched with the
signs of fever. I thrashed
around last night knowing I
was fighting the Big Fight...
expelling, releasing, letting go,
surrendering.

To love. To loving. To being
loved.

You fucker! You turn me into
Barbie with a chainsaw. I turn
you into Ken in a dress.

You arrive and tell me..."By
the way sweetie, if your
delirium is about love, I'm
going to make it worse for
you... I love you!" and I am
momentarily speechless. Then
I want to cry and howl. Then I
want to spit and scream.
Falcon circles, snake hisses,
Julie Andrews starts fucking
singing again. 'The hills are
alive...' and I curl up under
the duvet, just in time to hear
you say, "Ok sweetie, don't
make a big deal out of it."

God, you're such a bloke.

You bring me violet and rose
flavoured chocolates and

speak of dirty sex whilst I eat
out the insides of the fondant
creams. You bring me
highbrow newspapers and sit
pondering the headlines
whilst I scour the magazine
for the fashion pages; I'm that
superficial. I drink potions of
sage and rosemary and you
mock me. "Every illness has a
mind/body/spirit connection
baby," I say, and you say,
"Why don't you come and sit
on my face sweetie". Boy, girl.
Girl, boy.

You wear your clothes well, a
certain look. You keep
yourself tight, a certain
restraint. You fear love as
much as I do yet some fucker
thought it would be fun to
throw us together... see who
runs first and furthest but I
just get sick from my inability
to run... and I want to hiss
and howl whilst you pretend
to piss and prowl. Dog boy,
cat girl.

We began over beer in a pub.
It was that simple. I knew you
were important even then.

You sent me texts and we met
over bitter espressos and
talked of erotic art. We found
Erich Kroll and Elmer Batters
and all manner of divine
perverts. Testing the reactions

and finding none; felt exposed. We met again in a pub at night and some young man complimented you on your 'girlfriend's' eyes only we weren't then, boyfriend and girlfriend, though the urge to kiss you was a growing sickness in me. Then you came round one night after football... chat chat chat. Two-nil. Fucking southern cunts! Whisky, art, music, life...a tide of passion that could not be stemmed. You left at 5am and I was fucked all the next day... couldn't concentrate on my work and kept drifting into lingering pleasures of you and me.

You sent me YouTube videos; I sent you YouTube replies. Our dialogue was entirely musical at this point... Terry Callier soothed me, Curtis Mayfield made you cry. Jay Dilla surprised me, poison ivy entranced you. MSN took on psychic interludes as you wrote and I finished your sentences before you'd even finished forming them... and I was right. And you fucked with my head and I fucked with yours. I sent you endless texts to which you responded and you sent my mobile bills all sky-high-sweetie-pie. I soon discovered that our

phone sex life was the best I'd ever had baby... ooooh, aaaahh... I'm gonna cum... virtually! I didn't mind paying a bit more for the 'extras'...

Then when I wasn't going to see you for eleven whole days, you brought me (on my request) a t-shirt I made you wear constantly for three days until it stunk of your sweat, your aftershave; you. I slept with it and cried the odd tear into it; confused, angry, loving. The beginnings of a fortress breaking down. Cunt!

In the middle of all of this, you ran, I ran. You returned; I left. I left; you returned. We told each other stories then hid from their endings. I knew you before, in another time. We'd hurt each other, I knew it. We had to learn to forgive and to love again. You started to approach me slowly-slowly like a blind man with a lame leg. I started to sniff you out like a panther deciding ally or prey? You began to speak in riddles that I couldn't be bothered to de-code. I began to let the riddles just be. You began to let me in and the more you let me in, the greater my desire to flee. The greater my desire to flee, the

more I knew I was loving you.
Perverse bastard I am!
Fucking cunt you are!

Does love swear at its counterpart? Does love reflect back a demon alongside an angel? Is love not all wild abandon and red roses? What of the ordinary days? What of the wilting dandelions and the cigarette butts in my flowerpots?

What of cold tea and sleepless nights and "I have to go (this is too much)"?

I'm falling in love with a man I didn't think would look like you or be like you or think

like you... I'm falling in love with the person you are, not the person I want you to be or think you should be or would shape you to be.

You are tearing down my barriers and exposing the shed-skin Snake Goddess underneath. You do not fear her (though your heart may); I do not fear you (though my wounds weep with your expression).

Falcon circles; screeching, singing, hunting, swooping, both captured and free at the same time.

I love you.



TWILIGHT FUCK OF THREE

By Hank Kirton

TOMMY: When my big brother came home from Vietnam in 1973, he wasn't broken or damaged or haunted. He didn't have a faraway stare or scream in his sleep. He still smiled and joked and helped out around the house. He got back together with Wendy, his girlfriend. He went back to work at the A&P. He didn't talk about his war experience much, but he didn't mind answering questions about it either. Yes, he'd killed people. Yes, he saw his friends die. Yes, he'd been scared he was going to die. No, he didn't really hate the gooks.

ROSABELLE: I lost two days of memory before I got to Courtesy House. I was very messed up on drugs. I do not know who took me there. Or if someone took me there. I took a lot of drugs such as LSD, PCP, cocaine, heroin, mush-rooms, speed and I smoked a lot [of] grass at that time. I did not drink at all at that time.

ME: Nothing seems real right now. And nothing is real. I'm crawling on the beach, exhausted, a dripping fist of seaweed.

But not really.

TOMMY: My brother hated the war protesters. That was the only thing that really made him mad. When he was watching the television news and footage of some anti-war rally or peace march came on, that's when my brother's blood would boil. He'd get out of his chair and clench and unclench his fists and go get another beer and not come back until the commercials came on. He didn't talk about it. He just got mad.

ROSABELLE: Courtesy House is run by Miss Donna Raspberry. My first day at Courtesy House, Miss Raspberry told me, "We are going to take care of you, but you have to carry your weight. We don't give anybody a free ride. You must work and follow [the] plan..."

ME: I'm three, seeing the ocean for the first time; an immense, azure universe that stretches forever. It's beautiful and profound and frightening. I don't know what to think. The words *vast* and *infinite* and *awestruck* aren't in my vocabulary yet so I can't use them.

TOMMY: My brother took Wendy to a party. A bunch of kids drove out to the sand pits, in back of Fulcrum's Farm. They had a couple kegs and built a bonfire and I guess a lot of people showed up and everybody got pretty loaded. Some guy named Larry started in on Vietnam. Started making a speech. I wasn't there, but I heard he was pretty obnoxious about it. Talking about Nixon and the repeal of Ton Kin and Mai Lai and other stuff. My brother usually kept a cool head around people like that. He wasn't an instigator. But, like I said, there was a lot of drinking going on and my brother did like his beer.

ROSABELLE: [Miss Raspberry said, "We are going to heal you now, Rosabelle, take off your clothes." I did what I was told. I did not know what to do. I took off

my clothes and the other [members of] Courtesy House all touched me and rubbed me with their hands. There were six people that rubbed me with their hands. I did not feel healed. When it was over I felt very degraded. I did not know how to feel.

ME: I don't want to go in the water. I'm terrified. The ocean is too big, too violent, too threatening. "Come on, honey. It's okay. See? See, daddy's in the water!" My dad is out there; a dark little head bobbing in the giant waves like a piece of cork. But not really.

TOMMY: My brother started getting really pissed-off at this guy, Larry. He just kept going on and on. I think my brother was also getting upset because most of the people at the party seemed to agree with what Larry was saying. He hated the fact that people who'd never been in Vietnam would listen to *other* people who'd never been there like they were experts, like they knew something. When really, they didn't know shit.

ROSABELLE: [Miss Raspberry] was sometimes very nice but sometimes she

was cruel. They did not give me drugs at Courtesy House and I felt very sick. I could not sleep or eat for many days and I vomited and had diarrhea and my body had many aches and pains. Miss Raspberry and the other people in the group tried to heal me by touching me and rubbing me with their hands. I was naked for this. I did not know what to do and I was afraid to resist. This went on for several days.

ME: I walk slowly to the creeping edge of the ocean, holding my mother's hand. A sudden shock of cold water grabs my ankles and tugs me as it recedes, burying my feet in the wet sand. It wants to eat me. I look up at my mother, scared and uncertain. She smiles and leads me further in. Somehow, I manage to keep from crying.
But not really.

TOMMY: So, my brother finally reached his breaking point. He walked over to Larry and said, "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about." Just like that. Got right in his face and said, "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about!"

ROSABELLE: Miss Raspberry told me I was not healing because the drugs had killed all my orgasms. She said I had to "build" my orgasms back so that I could heal. I did not know what to think about this at that time. It was crazy. But I did not know what to think.

ME: I'm up to my knees in the rushing white foam. When the breakwater hits me, my mom lifts me and I kick my legs and rise up, floating. And then a big wave hits us and I slip out of my mom's hand and the ocean grabs me and pulls me in.
But not really.

TOMMY: Larry was startled at first. He said, "Who the hell are you, man?" My brother told him his name. He told Larry he was full of shit. That he didn't know what he was talking about and that maybe he should keep his ignorant nigger mouth shut. See, Larry was a black guy.

ROSABELLE: Sometimes Miss Raspberry came in my room at night. She did not talk or touch me. She sat on the floor and looked at me. I pretended to be asleep. She looked at me all night. She did not say a word or move a

muscle. In the morning she said she was “channeling” at me. I did not know what to think about this.

ME: I’m stranded out to sea. Huge waves crash against me; the toppling curl, the force, the smash. They knock me down and pull me under. They grind me into the sand and hold me there. I’m struggling and strangling; turning in violent somersaults until I can’t hold my breath anymore and I’m going to drown and die. But not really.

TOMMY: My brother wasn’t a racist. He didn’t hold any hatred for anybody. The word just slipped out because he was mad and drunk. But the other people at the party didn’t see it that way. They didn’t understand. They got really pissed-off and self-righteous and a couple of guys started shoving him, getting in his face. You know those stories about guys coming back from Vietnam and getting spit on? That stuff really happened. It happened that night to my brother.

ROSABELLE: They made films at Courtesy House. “Therapy films” they called

them. I did not like this aspect because I am camera shy. The people at Courtesy House had sexual relations during the therapy sessions. I did not like this aspect of it either. Sometimes they filmed this. They filmed me several times while I was naked. I was ashamed of this but I did not know what to do. I was afraid. Miss Raspberry was very threatening towards me at times. I did not know what to do.

ME: I scream in terror and suck freezing salt water into my lungs and my head becomes quiet and filled with dark galaxies. My body goes numb and I think, “I’m going to die, right now...” But not really.

TOMMY: My brother started swinging at the guys around him. I know he broke one guy’s nose. My brother was pretty tough. He took two years of boxing at the YMCA. He was a good fighter. But he was surrounded and they overpowered him and, probably because they were all pretty loaded, my brother ended up falling into the fire. He landed face first and his clothes and skin caught fire almost immediately.

ROSABELLE: A lot of [the members of] Courtesy House came down with diseases. Many people had crabs too. I found this very disgusting. I came down with crabs. Miss Raspberry kept boxes of A-200 in the bathroom. At the end I came down with VD. I was very disgusted by this. I was scared. I did not know what to do or where to go.

ME: I come back to life on the beach, vomiting sea water all over myself. A big worried, bearded face is looming over me, I feel sure he's been kissing me. "He's breathing!" he says.
But not really.

TOMMY: They pulled my brother out of the fire. I know two guys who got second-degree burns on their hands. I guess I'm grateful to them, even though they were assholes and if it weren't for them my brother wouldn't have gotten burned in the first place. Somebody found a blanket and soaked it in water from a cooler and they covered my brother up. He was screaming and screaming. Someone ran over to Fulcrum's Farm and called an ambulance.

ROSABELLE: I came down with syphilis. I had many sores on my body. I was very horrified and disgusted by this. Miss Raspberry made everybody who came down with symptoms go see Dr. K_____. He treated everyone at Courtesy House. After I was treated by Dr. K_____, I did not return to Courtesy House. I was too afraid to go back. I am glad I did not go back. When the newspapers and TV found out what was happening at Courtesy House, it was a very big story. Many members of Courtesy House were on the news. Miss Raspberry was arrested. The newspapers called her a sexual deviant. I had to testify in court but I was not on the news. I was glad about this because I am camera shy.

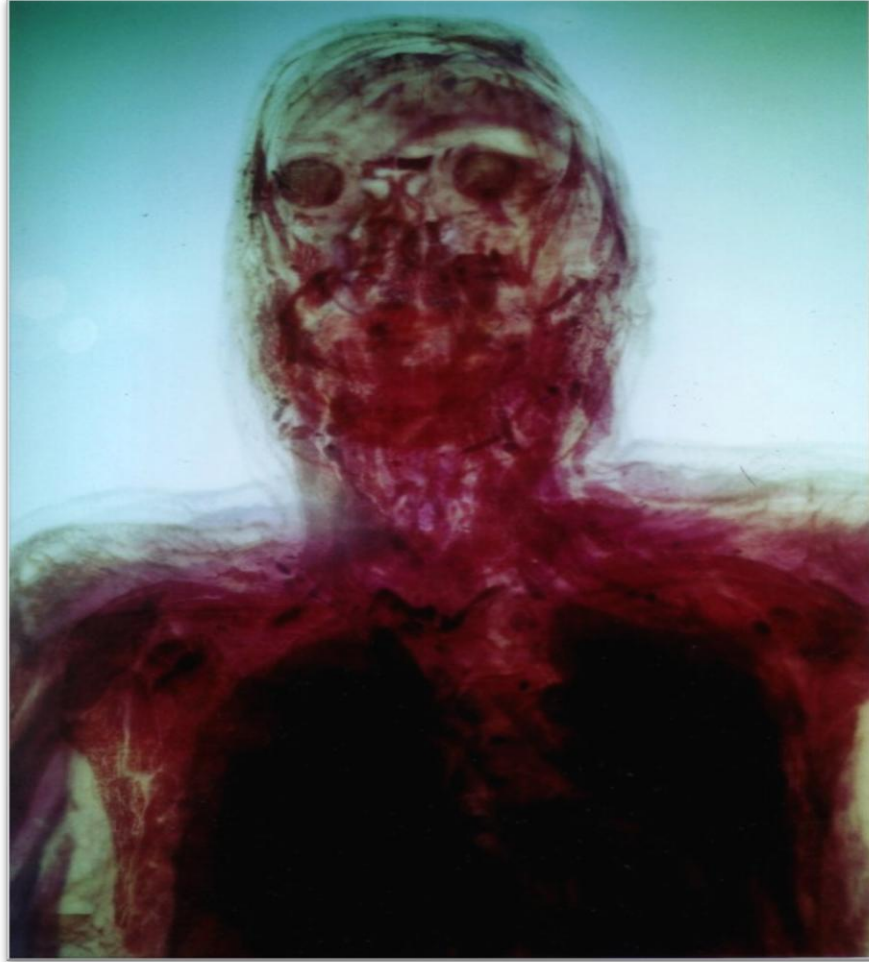
ME: Nothing seems real right now. And nothing is real. I'm crawling on the beach, exhausted, a dripping fist of seaweed.
But not really.

TOMMY: My brother suffered third-degree burns on ninety-percent of his body. His face and chest took the worst of it. He hasn't left the house in over thirty years. He

only lets the family see him. I don't think he's unhappy. He has his TV and books and music. His hands are pretty

much useless. He reads a lot. He just finished reading Moby Dick and that's a long book. That's a hard book to read.





LENIN ROTS: A MORTUARY FABLE

By Ron Garmon

Photo © Guttersaint

Tantalizingly for scholars, final photographs of V.I. Lenin suggest a man consumed by horror of the present and terror of the future. Skeletally thin and half a corpse already after a stroke the previous May, the master of Russia had begun to

stare into a twilight world even Party doctors realized meant the end of his time on this one. Discreetly retired to Gorki, the Father of the Revolution had fought his way back to a functioning vocabulary of a little over five hundred words

and was ferociously busy the few minutes a day he was allowed for dictation and correspondence. While the first socialist society slowly fattened itself, after seven years of war and invasion, its beloved dictator wasted, as a sputtering consciousness gave him no rest.

Contra this popular interpretation, Party documents salvaged during both *glasnost* eras (downloadable in English on partypedia.com/ussa) show us a Lenin more in command than historians writing in former NATO bloc countries would indicate, with the top Bolshevik receiving a trickle of visitors up until the stroke on 10 March 1923 that ended his public life. The sheer volume of memoranda and directives unearthed (including findings of the Nihilokov Commission released just hours before communism's final collapse in June, 2006), suggest distant part in a plot to murder Stalin. The new General Secretary's grip on the Party apparatus was new and porous. Unearthed wax recordings of the confessions of two Central Committee members, when put

together with interrogator's notes on scattered lesser arrestees confirm repeated visits by the famed (and famously eccentric) Dr. Alexander Bogdanov in the first few weeks of the new year. Lenin's sister Maria Ulianova had submitted to the politically unreliable scientist's fashionable rejuvenation treatments.

Admittedly, the only material evidence we have for these speculations are the truly harrowing shrieks of onetime CC members Grigori Zinoviev, Christian Rakovsky and unidentified lesser officials, jabbering frantically in near-identical terms of blood transfusions and a Vladimir Illich newly spry over the autumn of '23. Accompanying sounds of pummeled flesh and snapping bone lend even this story verisimilitude. Parenthetically, the KGB placed such faith in the trusty 1930s methods that a tape-loop of Rakovsky's reduction to pulp was a favorite training resource for Soviet interrogators outward bound for Afghanistan as late as 1998.

Even bourgeois histories confirm Lenin's miraculous (and miraculously brief) burst of health in November. The dictator's long-suffering wife Krupskaya confided her horror at Vladimir Illich's violent thrashing and howling to her diary. These long-suppressed pages reveal, among other things, that Politburo member Leonid Krasnin's views on radical life extension were much more advanced than thought. These he parroted from Bogdanov, whom Lenin held in hearty contempt. Still, the admittedly-harebrained project to prolong the lives of top Bolsheviks met Lenin's certitude the embarrassingly low level of culture among the newly Soviet peoples made socialism impossible unless he personally led the malign and superstitious peasants there.

Perhaps on orders from Stalin, perhaps after the unmanageability of a revitalized stroke-addled Lenin became apparent to keepers, treatments were suspended in December, scant hours after two medical attendants with OGPU connections were found dismembered in the woods

outside Gorki, where stories persisted for decades of the great man's weeping and cursing through the near-endless nights, interrupted by gales of hyenalike laughter audible for miles. Even Stalin's refined paranoia felt scarcely a tremble- such is often the way with stroke patients toward the end and peasants are *so* given to lying. When Lenin finally irrevocably died on 21 January 1924, Stalin's sole concern was expunging the fallen comrade's final writings, all highly critical of the pock-faced Georgian thug and bandit.

Not surprisingly, Stalin went for the idea of preserving the Father of the Revolution as an object for the people's love, with *Izvestia* reporting that the people willed it so. The corpse, however, was already in an advanced state of putrefaction. By the time the Resurrection Project had prepared him for public view at the Trades Union House in the Kremlin, the late comrade's skin had already begun to darken and pucker. The autopsy report, published in detail in the party press, confirmed the beloved leader's brain had died by

micromillimeters as it starved of oxygen. Commissar of Health Semashko marveled that a man with such vital portions of his mind destroyed could function politically, let alone read newspapers.

The state funeral was just the sort of thing Lenin detested and Stalin's clumsy hand in it was plain. The oratory horrified what lingering aesthetic traces were left to the object of the exercise, but the massive shot of formalin, alcohol and glycerin the panicky Dr. Abrikosov injected into the dictator's chest shortly after death was enough to dull any higher sensibilities. That part of Illich still fitfully aware was most concerned with the humanity flooding past the plinth, all bareheaded in the punishing cold and blurring into one long sniffling pink tapeworm of faith and fear and dull calculation he knew well, detested long. Later on, when he'd learned to distend time, he'd recall those early faces in the general deluge again and again, and the gnawing feeling it brought was almost close to delight.

Time relaxed most marvelously for Illich, but for comrade Krasnin, the interval crowned a long unsuccessful trawl through the Central Committee for funding to cryogenically freeze the beloved leader's body. Trotsky, Kamenev and Bukharin all found the idea of preserving Lenin's corpse ludicrous, but Stalin turned the job over to a newly appointed Immortalization Commission after the pesky Krasnin was bundled off to a London trade conference. By late March, the commission decided on preserving Illich as a relic by a second, more thorough embalming and Lenin was unsurprised at Leonid Borisovich's failure to conjure up the vast freezing apparatus the latter had promised when Illich agreed to the treatments. He hadn't expected to retain consciousness this soon and so bore minute and terrified inspection of his hide with the detachment of a peasant icon.

Wheeled into a lab below the Kremlin, Illich had balsam rubbed into his discolored flesh and the rivets from the last autopsy were pried open. The stench from the remaining

viscera made lab assistants retch and even war-hardened coroners were shocked at the black and febrile state of the great man's innards. Illich himself was delighted to have his freeze-burnt liver and collapsed lungs removed, with sight of his swollen and burst glycerin-soaked intestines being roping from his gut affording a rare burst of pleasure. The sheer heft of Lenin's brain, weighing in at 1340 grams, was duly noted before it was plopped in formaldehyde. The rest was gingerly sliced from the dead man, weighed, labelled and laid away as unremarkable, with every worker from Comrade Director to the shakiest forceps-wielding assistant acutely conscious of both the extreme honor of assignment and likely consequence of failure. Luckily only the Chairman's hands and face were to be visible to the public, so the chest cavity was simply filled with wadding bolted back shut, an experience Illich found satisfying, if a bit bland and wanting in substance.

A pleasant serum was injected into the skin, glass beads inserted into the eyesockets and the lids sewn closed. The lips were stapled just below the famous scraggly moustache and the great man's mouth clamped discreetly shut. Massaged, teased, smoothed, and doused in quinine, carbolic acid and hydrogen peroxide, Illich's hide responded and blood-relatives pronounced him, if not lifelike, then an improvement over his immediate post-mortem ghastliness. Lenin was then placed under conical glass upstairs inside the imposing permanent mausoleum, where time was no object at all and the late dictator learned a great deal, most of it by inference from the never-ending procession of visitors, their faces and what he learned to draw from their minds.

By 1926, Bogdanov's blood treatments eventually claimed Krasnin as well. The enterprising onetime engineer was in London negotiating recognition of the Bolsheviks when he suddenly worsened and died. Six thousand mourners saw Leonid

Borisovich to Golders Green Crematorium, where fire put the genial comrade forever beyond the reach of Bogdanov's ice-based immorality. It seemed as if the simplest directives from the top weren't enough anymore, no matter how fat the accompanying bribe, or so the doctor would rant at staff at his new Institute for Hematology and Blood Transfusions, where even OGPU agents assigned to watch him couldn't help but agree. The idea had been to freeze Lenin, not filet and mummify him and now that Krasnin was ash, there was almost no reason for Aleksandrovich to see this distasteful project through, other than Kremlin-subsidized curiosity.

A coded telegram reached Henri Sevigny, sometime Comintern observer, comrade and oft-jailed newspaper editor, at his flat in Port au Prince a mere four months after Bogdanov's still-mysterious death in April, 1926. It mentioned a sum of one thousand gold rubles, but the Soviet consul flatly refused to pay more than one hundred, an

insultingly low sum given what he was being asked to produce. What little of the message he understood he regarded with a most un-Communist trepidation.

"Papa?"

"Yes, child." The *houngan* lived in a sprawling ramshackle manse high up the hill in the Pétionville district. The place looked as if sunlight had never penetrated and all its contents grew there organically like toadstools. Candles flickered and popped in the airless front parlor where Papa received visitors. Henri had always held the whole business of *voudou* in contempt, preferring dialectical materialism to the hidebound immateriality of *loa* or any other spirit, major or minor, but the short and filthy ancient commanded respect, even fear, all over the city. The old man had a famous name, but, like the devil's, it is still seldom murmured in polite company. In that (or any) context, Papa was never seen without dark glasses, top hat, rancorous cheroot- which did have a pleasingly aromatic effect in this hovel - or the light walking

stick that miraculously supported a very considerable bulk. The twin wads of cotton plugged into the grandee's nose unnerved Henri slightly, but he pressed on.

"Look." Henri upturned the bag before the ancient and let the coins ring on the lacquered table. "From my comrades in Russia, fifty gold rubles. By your matchless wit and power, Papa, a very great man will walk again. His name is perhaps known to you?"

Like all aristocrats of every land, it was. Unlike all but a perverse handful, he was sympathetic, though faintly. Papa nodded, fingered the unfamiliar coins, disdainfully threw away a rapid mental expense calculation and waited for Henri to finish his speech.

"Comrade Doctor Bogdanov specified you as the one high priest in all the world even capable of this, er, labor," Henri continued stiffly, "And certainly the one man with the breadth of mind and learning to understand its colossal historical importance."

Already Papa was growing bored, restlessly shifting his ovoid mass. Henri, quick on the uptake, took the resounding creak of the great man's chair as command to be silent.

Papa brooded long behind his ink-black spectacles. The thought of oppressed masses in far-off lands oppressed him only briefly, but questions of reputation in Benin, Guinea-Nassau and New Orleans were more pleasant to contemplate and so he did. His equals among the *bokor* had scorned him more than once for a most unconservative prankishness, but what sorcerer-for-hire *didn't* upset the Great Order of Things by the simple doing of business? Why all the mummery and sham and secretiveness of our trade anyway? Like the bourgeois vermin the object of this putative exercise tried to sweep off the earth, what *some* uppity parvenus need is a demonstration of power...

From the outside, the only evidence of decision was a sudden puff of cigar smoke through plugged nostrils. It looked as if the high priest's

brain was burning like a steam engine and Henri was duly sweating from proximity.

"Your fee is small, so do not expect haste," the great man smiled, "There are, well... *volunteers*" he said, grin spreading like an open grate "who must be selected with great care. This consideration alone will require much time and thought." Here, Papa paused several minutes, as if contemplating distant carnage with a vulture's speculative intent. "But, this is an avocation and trifle I thank you for fetching me, child. Go." At a snap of his fat fingers, every candle in the parlor snuffed out at once.

Henri, coiled and nervous, nearly toppled his chair in obedience and blubbered perfunctory thanks as he was clearing the front steps. He was almost down the hill before his neck muscles could move again.

Over the next few dozen months, an unusually large number of labor brokers, minor police functionaries, lottery-operators and second-rank pimps disappeared, as if

plucked from the island's demimonde still swearing and vigorous. Great hauls of puffer fish trundled by cart up the tony hillside from the harbor to Papa's house, disappearing through the door into a void just as traceless. News from the first socialist nation was, for Henri, just as mysterious and much less explicable. First the Left Oppositionists led by Trotsky were defeated by a Right led by Bukarin and a Center by Stalin. Then Center attacked Right and finally itself, as the still-ravaging torso of a state fell on itself, devouring chunks and spitting out show trials and propaganda under beneficent gaze of Stalin. What little news getting out of the new Soviet Union wasn't quite enough to hide a truly astounding deal of shooting. The visiting Soviet comrades Henri would occasionally meet on the island were hearty, furtive and never the same man twice, so he decided the Republican cause in the civil war then roiling Spain was safer than emigration to the worker's paradise.

Henri went, fought falangists, anarchists, and proudly potted

a Fascist captain at Gurnica before in the mad spring of 1937, when the *Luftwaffe's* planes bombed the city to ash. He was bundled back to Port-au-Prince late the next year after disastrous Republican losses in the Ebro offensive forced disbandment of the International Brigades. Hardened by many betrayals, entirely negligent of Party work and his Red heart broken, Henri had been back in his flat only a few days when the long-disconnected telephone rang.

"You fight well, boy?"

"Yes, Papa," he replied and suffered a long wait in stony silence. The sound of a struck match bit his ear through the receiver and he could almost smell the sulphur at the other end.

"I know," the old man chuckled. There was a long pause, then he resumed. "The charm must be worked into the flesh, as with a lover. Its firming required time and the distilled... *squeezings* of many who won't be missed." Then an explosion of laughter and coughing was followed by a

dial tone so loud Henri dropped the receiver, which had grown uncomfortably hot anyway. On the liquor cabinet, next to the fortifying brandy for which Henri was just then reaching was a small stoppered bottle half-full of clear liquid. Next to it was a telegram dated the next day summoning Comrade Sevigny to Moscow to report on conditions in Spain to the All-Union Central Committee.

He was scarcely alone in the honor. The elegant new subway tunnels looked to be swarming with recently cashiered Brigade comrades, all stranded in Russia and many stateless back home. The semi-public character of the event meant the veterans were feted, indulged and shadowed by the NKVD. Still, after a tour of the Lenin Mausoleum and the Resurrection Institute, Henri knew more than enough to proceed. Comrade doctors and staff were quite proud of their work in preserving the Dear Leader. The director, Comrade Zbarsky, enthralled with this materialist triumph of mortuary science, relished a chance to preen his French

before a sympathetic Caribbean whose Russian was indifferent. Zbarsky went on at some length about the bactericide bearing his name, explaining how the late Architect of the Revolution was daily dabbed with the preparation and indicating bottles, even vats, of the stuff.

Henri had to wait three days, but that was more than enough time for meaningful dissipation and fraternization with female comrades. So it was another bitter cold November morning on the 11th the stitches abruptly snapped from Illich's eyes and the glass in them reformed as optic jelly. The glass cube around the plinth the sitting Lenin casually lifted and tossed over a crowd of early morning tourists, including a company of Young Pioneers from Minsk. A few of these patriotic tots absorbed a volley of panicked submachine-gun bullets from the Honor Guard. The latter, in the presence of an undoubted miracle, ceased firing as Father Lenin's right hand shot in the air and the whole mob followed him out of the Mausoleum and across the Necropolis to Stalin's quarters

in the Kremlin. There he caught Stalin, along with Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Budenny, Mikoyan and the rest of the Central Committee all puce-drunk at some unspeakable debauch. Even cadet member Khrushchev; of such shepards, what sheep? Koba staggered to his feet, twitching his famously florid moustache at the hallucination.

Staples popped from Lenin's jaws with percussive *cracks* and a scratched, silicon-dry voice breathed Koba's doom. The Georgian was dragged to Lubyanka Prison, along with the others, as rough hands tore former comrades from Lenin's feet. The new master of the All Union Soviet of Socialist Republics was impassive at all blubbering and recrimination largely because Dr. Zbarsky's handiwork left so little scope for expression. Rifle butts silenced the persistent and these left the building on their faces. The shock of the snow at curbside woke old Kalinin, who swore hysterically at what the goddamned fuck the world was coming to before blows again silenced him.

Few outside Moscow noticed any change at first, but rumors were quick and baleful. The General Order to all cadres issued on 13 November read-

Comrades! As part of a long historical culmination of mortuary science and Soviet research into cosmogeny and applied aesthetic materialism, I now move among you again, the Will of History made of meat. The Bolshevik Party has been hindered in its great task of building socialism by the lunacy of one man and the cupidity of many more. A necrosis of sense has brought stolen harvests and blighted lives, along with careless and criminal attitudes toward Party work from many senior comrades. I call on all the proletariat of the All-Union Soviet of Socialist Republics to again enrich themselves, to build socialism on a basis of plenty, not famine and repression. I call on every Bolshevik to do the needful work of denouncing all spies, social saboteurs and supporters of the petit-bourgeois wrecker Stalin. From Riga to Vladivostok, let not even the least one escape!

Communists! Stick by your desks, do honest work and account for all Party funds in sobriety!

Fraternally, V.I. Lenin (dec.)

All across the U.S.S.R., a polyglot land whose people were united in ill-usage by Stalin's henchmen, workers, peasants and fugitive bourgeoisie went about the happy tasks of fingering and enriching. Kolkhozes were divided or left intact as peasants seized control of collective farms and proceeded to do as bidden. Hundreds of thousands of gulag prisoners were freed, with most put to work digging up their executed fellows. Tons of corpses, stiff and stinking, were piled into freight cars and sent trundling to Moscow. The Kremlin rang day and night with volunteer crews digging up the Necropolis in Red Square and carting its rancid contents to the Resurrection Institute, where comrade doctors worked in feverish obedience to a set of very queer instructions. Walter Duranty, long the New York Times' man in Russia and a lyrical admirer of Stalin and the Russian soul, was busy typing up an analysis of the reverence the simple peasant holds for the wishes of the dead when two

NKVD men kicked in his door and dragged him away.

Preparations at Andreyevsky and Alexandrovsky Halls, gleaming twin pride of the Grand Kremlin Palace, for what came to be known -though not without a many shudder- in Soviet folklore as "the Feast of the Old Bolsheviks" proceeded with grim haste. Illich's waxy face nearly split in dismay during briefing about the fate of almost all his old political machine at Stalin's command. His hands, still stroke-broken, twitched and gripped uncontrollably, as the reanimated politician contemplated an insane loss of organization and manpower. The crime was, to what was left of his stoke-seared mind, quite as bad as the deliberate famines and both deserved the same dialectically-correct punishment.

So it came to pass, first the Heroes of the Revolution entombed in the Necropolis, then as many Party victims of the Great Purge as could be exhumed, were sprayed down with Dr. Zbarsky's Miracle Reagent (Henri having long

since departed for home, grateful not to be missed) and revived. Even the occasional badly-decomposed landlord or Menshevik mistakenly disinterred as a good comrade knew enough to put on a handsome show of outrage at Koba's crimes, shouting for his blood every bit as lustily as Rakovksy or Kamenev.

Shoulder-to-rotted shoulder, the comrades in rank hundreds sat in handsome chairs of teak and velvet. The fare was simple and simply prepared- haunch, brisket, sirloin and ham of Stalin, Molotov, Kalinin, and all the rest, lightly braised and served *au jus*. No portions of stuffed blood sausage and lightly chilled brains were sent back, much to the relief of comrade kitchen staff. Floods of champagne accompanied all three courses and the merriment was uninhibited. Rotted Zinoviev, putrid Sverdlov, even a partially mummified Bukharin, pince-nez ribbon dangling gaily on the side of a handsome head half blown off by a .38 bullet, jawed and chomped in good fellowship once more. The mint tea stood neglected in the

samovar in favor of more boisterous refreshment.

Though these comrade deads' movements were twitchy and stiff, with here and there noses and eyes dropping onto plates to be munched indiscriminately in turn, Father Illich was satisfied. Assembled (indeed, stitched, with many seams showing) here was the human raw material from which he had made the October Revolution and, as in 1917, there was no turning back. What was once History was on the move again. Though Bogdanov and he would long outlive the others, sight of the good doctor's ear flapping as his teeth worked over a filet of Duranty told Illich that a withering away of the state was already well underway.

News of these literally revolting events inside the Soviet Union leaked to the outside world in horrifying spurts and almost no one outside Pétionville suspected anything like what had actually happened for some weeks. Hitler's vaunted intelligence network collapsed utterly with the mass arrests and Western

news sources weren't much better. Since the Red Army offensive in Mancuko went on without letup, most of the world assumed nothing important must be happening to the status quo in Moscow. Lev Trotsky, at home in Mexico City, wasn't so sure. The Hearst newspaper syndicate had paid the Old Man a substantial fee for exclusive rights to his "False Dmitri" theory of the mysterious events inside the nation he once ruled with Illich. During the Time of the Troubles, no less than *three* adventurers had posed as the murdered heir of Ivan the Terrible and Lev was convinced this trick -older even than the Romanov dynasty - was being turned in Moscow by some political whore or other. He was pounding out an elegant metaphor along these very lines when floorboards in front of his writing desk creaked with an unfamiliar weight.

The blow from the ice axe was terrific. Even so, Trotsky managed a smile of the profoundest gratitude as he slumped to the floor.

**STATEMENT OF DAVID P. GIONFRIDDO, OF
VIRGINIA, NOMINEE TO BE AN ASSOCIATE JUSTICE
OF THE SUPREME COURT, TO THE SENATE
JUDICIARY COMMITTEE, 126th Congress, June 30, 2024**

Judge GIONFRIDDO: Thank you, Chairman Marquardt, Ranking Member Dinwiddie and all of the members of this Committee, for giving me the opportunity to testify here today. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank you for your selfless, tireless work on behalf of the American people and our judicial system.

At the outset, let me say that being nominated as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court by President Masters is one of the greatest and most unexpected honors I have ever received in a 50-year legal career that has spanned all facets of public and private practice. It is an awesome responsibility and, consequently, carries a great deal of public scrutiny. However, a free and robust "Fourth Estate" is one of the glories of our Republic. Not in a spirit of rancor, but, rather, to dispel the air of suspicion and

innuendo, I would like to discuss some of the matters the press has raised. My life is, as it must be, an open book, albeit one with a few creased and tattered pages. Some of the more senior members of the panel will know what I mean by "book" and "pages."

It is true that the advent of "net culture," commencing during the early-to-mid-1990s has preserved and broadcast heretofore private aspects of life in a way never anticipated by the Founding Fathers, but, again, I say that no public servant should have cause to fear the sanitizing effects of sunlight. I certainly do not.

This observation is a good lead-in to the so-called "Melrose Missives" of 1995-96. During this time, as a senior associate at the Boston law firm of Belding & Hammersmith, I became, as indeed did millions of Americans, a devotee of the

television drama "Melrose Place." At this time, I was also receiving my introduction to online culture, courtesy of my first computer, an old Dell with a couple hundred megs' [sp?] hard drive and a 256K modem the size of a transistor radio. [Laughter]

Sen. FIBULA: Remember the racket those suckers used to make?

Judge GIONFRIDDO: I know. I believe one like it currently sits on exhibition at the Smithsonian's Twitter Pavillion. [Laughter] At the urging of several "friends" (please note that I never met any of these individuals personally, or had the opportunity to discuss their motives with them at any length), I began disseminating episode summaries in what I believed to be a humorous vein. I did perhaps half-a-dozen of these during the spring and summer of 1995. I now understand, as *CharlotteObserver.net* has pointed out, that some of the turns of phrase contained therein, particularly references to actress Marcia Cross as a

"flame-tressed floozy," or oft-repeated comparisons of Loni Anderson's physical features to common household appliances and breakfast foods, were neither clever nor particularly humorous.

I accept full responsibility for the public opprobrium caused by these communiqués, and ask the Committee to consider my youth, the giddy freedom of "email," and the timing of these messages, most of which were written in the wee small hours after long days spent advancing American commerce and doing *pro bono* legal work on behalf of indigent Death Row inmates. They most certainly are not representative of the man I am today, or the service I will render to the Court.

But these messages were lost in the ether, or so we thought, and had no consequences. They were like a joke told among friends in a country-club locker room. This sense of false security and collegiality could help explain the rather lengthy and detailed discussion of Penelope Spheeris' 1989 documentary film *The Decline of Western Civilization Part II: The*

Metal Years which I unwisely penned for the naively-transgressive website *rocktilyoupuke.com* in the fall of 1999. Editor Tom Tollefson's blog *Consensus Working Overtime*, a fine publication I consult often, has dissected this piece at some length and, I might say, with a somewhat untoward and mean-spirited relish, particularly my disapproving references to what I call the "muff" scenes featuring the hard-rock band Odin, and the use of W.A.S.P.'s controversial anthem "Animal ([expletive deleted] Like A Beast)." These quotations were taken out of context from a longer, and considerably more-thoughtful-than-implied, piece, in which I took pains to warn of the chiropractic dangers of hair-whipping, and noted the strong anti-alcoholism statement made by Blackie Lawless' aimless vodka-chugging in an otherwise-empty swimming pool. A fuller and more sensitive reading of this article might be said to reveal the first public stirrings of a social conscience, one which I have taken great pains to develop over my career.

The reasons for, and my contrition over, the rather ill-fated and tasteless decision to select former President Jimmy Carter as the next decedent in the *deadpool.net* contest of later that year were discussed at great length with Special Agents Morin and Finley of the United States Secret Service during an exhaustive October 1999 interview, transcripts of which were provided to this Committee. For that reason, and on advice of my counsel, Mr. O'Shea, I will forego further elaboration at this time.

I would have liked to say that this incident "scared me straight," and that I could close the book on the relatively harmless shenanigans of a young, work-hard, play-hard attorney, enjoying the fullness of life in a major metropolis. This I surely would have done if not for the unfortunate and - I predict - legally corrosive lawsuit¹ brought by *Vanity Fair* to obtain copies of my Netflix

¹ *Conde Nast Publications, Inc. v. Pickering*, Civ. Action No. 24-CV-1658 (S.D.N.Y., slip opinion filed March 3, 2024) ("there can be no overriding privacy interest where the information is imminently likely to become part of the public record").

and Amazon transaction records from the American Bar Association and the Office of White House Counsel. It goes without saying that such an act, and the publication of the information thus obtained, strikes at the very heart of citizens' rights to privacy.² But since, as it were, that particular horse is "out of the barn," I feel compelled to offer a few words on my own behalf.

I make no apologies for my love of films of the so-called "horror" and "fantasy" genres. These represent some of our nation's most treasured cultural achievements. Our grandparents thrilled to the terrors of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. Our parents shrieked at James Arness as *The Thing*. And, in our younger years, we gazed in rapt attention at *Poltergeist* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. As many of you know from reviewing the current Medicare reform proposals

offered by the CBO, there is nothing as cathartic as a good scare. [Laughter]

But, seriously... As many writers have remarked, horror is often a way of discussing, through metaphor and allusion, social issues deemed "too hot to handle." In the 1950s, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* served as a metaphor for McCarthyism, and the original *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (which I still prefer to the Keanu Reeves version - no offense, Sen. Nakanaela!) explored fears of nuclear annihilation. *Rosemary's Baby* was a veiled discussion of emerging female reproductive rights. And so on. Viewed in this light, the events depicted in that tawdry and sensationalistic *Vanity Fair* article can be seen as nothing less than a young law partner's exploration of important historical and social currents.

I put it to this Committee that a film like *Chopping Mall* (Jim Wynorski, U.S., 1986), lampooned for its "infantile *mise-en-scene* and execution," has much to say about American consumerism and its

² See, e.g., *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965). The Committee should note that my citing of *Griswold* for its application of constitutional penumbra theory to "the sacred precincts of marital bedrooms," *id.* At 486, should not be construed to imply any sexual misconduct by the author or any other person or persons of his acquaintance.

impact on the value of human life, something that anyone who has read my opinions in the "Baby For Sale" cases knows concerns me deeply. A philistine might see *Nazi Love Camp 7* (Lee Frost, U.S., 1969) as "a C-grade orgy of titillation," in one pundit's formulation, but I defy cable commentator Michael Wigham to make such a statement to a family touched by the Holocaust. *Sex Creatures From Beyond* (Cyntha Grossnickle, Canada, 2019)...mere B-grade nonsense or a brave effort to combine environmental activism with a profound sensitivity to violence against women? My own vacation home is not that far from the Everglades, Mr. Chairman, and, were such a toxic spill to really happen, I would certainly fear for the consequences on my darling daughters Dixie and Evangeline. Flesh-eating arthropods or simply a higher incidence of psoriasis and asthma...*forewarned is forearmed*. I know that none of you would begrudge any father this vigilance, although my detractors have wasted no time at all in spinning it into

evidence of "unfitness to serve."

My 2012 elevation to the federal bench in the Eastern District of Virginia did not force me to cloister myself. Rather, it occasioned in me a renewed desire to experience the life of the people, particularly the young people who will comprise our nation's future.

It was in that spirit that I "signed on" to Facebook in the fall of that year. I found many interesting features - or "apps," as they were then called - that put me in touch with forums on green energy, fair trade, climate change, and other stimulating and vital issues. Clearly, I could not have enjoyed the free and unfettered exchanges I had with my many young friends in the guise of a recently-appointed federal district judge! Despite the bewildering whisper campaign launched by *ascend.org*, this and this alone was the reason for my use of a *nom de Net*, and a profile photo of Spanish matador Francisco Ordenez. It turns out there is little that the young won't share with such a face.

Which brings me, inevitably as the dawn, to yet another of the misconstrued, and perhaps unwise, pranks seized upon by *Vanity Fair* and other opportunistic opponents of my nomination. Had I known of the awesome trust that was to be vested in me today, there is simply no chance that I would have used the LivingSocial Facebook utility to post "Five Teen Actresses With Whom I Would Like A Session 'In Camera.'" It was uncalled-for, and best viewed as an overabundance of enthusiasm for my research on young people's hopes and struggles. I would particularly like to apologize to Mses. Bynes and Paxton for some of the unsolicited comments added to this post, and to Ms. Cosgrove for the very poor judgment I showed in mailing her - or, more accurately, her "people," I would guess -- a sound file of W.A.S.P.'s "Animal ([expletive deleted] Like A Beast)." And now, I seek simply to let my and my family's wounds begin to heal, and to move on a wiser and more prudent jurist.

Let me step back for a moment at this time to remind this panel

that one possible reason for my high-spiritedness at this time was that millions of people the world over - myself included - believed that the world as we know it was due to end on December 21 of 2012, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah, certain once-in-a-century celestial alignments and the termination of the Mayan solar calendar. No doubt many of you have had your own "nothing to lose" moments that prompted various thoughtless behaviors.

As for the books that have crept into the discussion, *The Anarchist Cookbook* (William Powell; Barricade Books, 1989) and *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* (Fin Kennedy; Nick Hern Books, 2008) were what we like to call "gag" gifts for a friend retiring from a supervisory position at the Department of Homeland Security in 2016. I can only recall opening either volume once, to write appropriate inscriptions.

One's ability to read, watch and listen to what he pleases is, I feel, central to the American experience, as is the right to

freely practice one's religion, although this might be news to the staff of *undergod.org*, who have recently raised, in quite unflattering terms and against all manner of historical and legal precedent, my attendance in support of Evangeline at the recent Wiccan Beltane observances in Charles County, Maryland. For this, I make no apology. George Washington was a Freemason, Richard Nixon a Quaker and Nancy Reagan attended séances. Although it is rarely discussed, it is well known among presidential historians that Theodore Roosevelt was an Elk and that, during his Senate years, Lyndon Baines Johnson often attended - in his own cape - conventions of the Order of Demolay. And neither my dispensing of ceremonial corn cakes from the pentacle plate, nor my invocation of Sekhmet the Lioness and Cerridwen, Keeper of the Cauldron, should give this Committee a moment's pause as to my allegiance to the Constitution, my support of American heartland values, or my ardor to defend basic freedoms. Without unduly emphasizing the negative this afternoon, I

find it unsettling and somewhat disheartening that I should be called upon to answer for a series of innocent, miscast or downright laudable events by muckrakers who would seek to impede my own destiny and to deprive the American people of the labor of a dedicated public servant. Our most cherished rights and institutions are at risk, a fact driven home to me by my recent correspondences with a Latvian dental assistant and a Filipina seamstress who wrote me of their lifelong quests to share freedom in America with a respectable, successful gentleman who owns his own home. I trust this panel to protect that dream. Goddess bless the Supreme Court of the United States and Goddess bless America.

I will now be happy to respond to your questions.

"Not until there is a social order in which all cries for freedom subside, will man have overcome his biological and social crippling, will he have attained genuine freedom. Not until man is willing to recognize his animal nature - in the good sense of the word - will he create genuine culture." ~ Wilhelm Reich

SOUNDS ABOUND

Ed. Kate MacDonald

Surprise. It's an interesting little word, that. After all, when you're reading it, you don't quite know how to take it. If there were an exclamation point, you might be inclined to see it as a joyful outburst- the unified voices of friends and family who have conspired to keep a loved one in the dark about a party in their honour. Stripped of its punctuation, however, it becomes a bit of a mystery. Even if you say that the word is uttered with reference to music, it doesn't put it in context.

It could mean the unexpected pleasure of finding something truly enjoyable that was previously undiscovered - a little known music label, for instance, trying to get recognition without playing to any obvious genres. Or it could mean a sense of relief at seeing a fallen idol return to form. Or a gem unearthed from a neglected area of the sonic garden.

Alternately, it could also portend bad news. Perhaps it's a step backwards for someone once admired. Worse, it could refer to that desperate sense of arbitrary fate at work when one admired is suddenly gone.

The word could connote any of these things, or many others besides. The point is, you don't know. It's a surprise.

WHEN GREED IS GOOD

An Interview with Michael Begg from *Human Greed*

Kate MacDonald: What was it that originally made you want to start Human Greed?

Michael Begg: To tell you the truth, I have no recollection at all of wanting to start it, probably because there was no real start. It just kind of grew

out of what had been going on before.

The start Start START was when Deryk and I met, aged 12, sat down in a room with my father's electric guitar plugged in to a hifi and tried to pick out the theme music from John Carpenter's Halloween. Fast forward through years of aiming two cassette recorders at each other to create primitive multi tracks, a few effects boxes, a propensity for sticking a guitar into the back of an amp then kicking the amp to make the reverb wires crash together in the midst of the beautiful howl of feedback and the recipe for disaster was pretty much there.



Memento – MB pops his gig cherry. It is 1980. We have broken away from the suburbs and into the city. I have never been to a concert before. The Edinburgh Playhouse smells of leather, patchouli oil and cheap hairspray – all flavours float like oil upon the traditional velvet, alabaster and greasepaint of the theatre. I have never been in a darkened space with so many people before. The sense of expectation causes a feeling of vertigo. It is a formal theatre space with a good proper heavy stage curtain. The lights go down. We surge forward. The Banshees – behind that heavy old curtain – begin “Israel”. The volume is breathtaking. The curtain lifts. It is crystal clear. A full back projection of white clouds scudding across a blue sky. As Severin smacked that great big open e into the chorus I knew that nothing would ever be the same. At the point. later that same night, when the lost, late, lovely John McGeoch lifts his guitar above his head – feedback screaming as lighting rips across the stage – I formally surrendered my life to live somehow in the service of song and sound.

It's interesting that you've chosen a live show as your formative moment. Do you

think that you could have had the same experience listening to music at home? Or was there something about the live environment that added a new dimension to the experience?

It was “a” rather than “the” formative moment. There were many - and I live in hope that there will still be more to come. And some of them took place at home. With a record player. Or a radio. Or a book. Or a magazine interview. Or a television. Or a cassette recorder. Or, indeed, a bunch of FX pedals, homemade gizmos and a cheap guitar. I cannot profess to subscribe to the *tribe* or *gathering* mentality that informs much of the discourse surrounding live events. I am uncomfortable in crowds. I get depressed when within a throng. I don't particularly care that there are tens, hundreds, or thousands of others around me to bear witness to the same spectacle. So far as I am concerned the communion is between me and the performer.

It is also true to say that the self imposed isolation in which we elected to grow up accorded us a certain freedom from any

kind of pressure to conform or evolve a more *responsible* attitude. That process continued well into adulthood, and probably, truth be told, persists to the present day. Music changed everything when we were very small. Music, for a long time, was all there ever was. Our characters were defined, our world's overturned, our perspectives aligned... all by music and those souls who created it. Anything we do now, any small offering we make to the canon of contemporary sound recording, is done in the service of that humbling debt. Many people have a choice in these matters. I, personally, do not. It is a necessary tool of survival and I simply cannot conceive of existence without the good grace of these small abilities to create sound.

You have comparatively recently started to perform live. Have you been (generally) happy with the results? How does the live environment change your sound (if at all)?

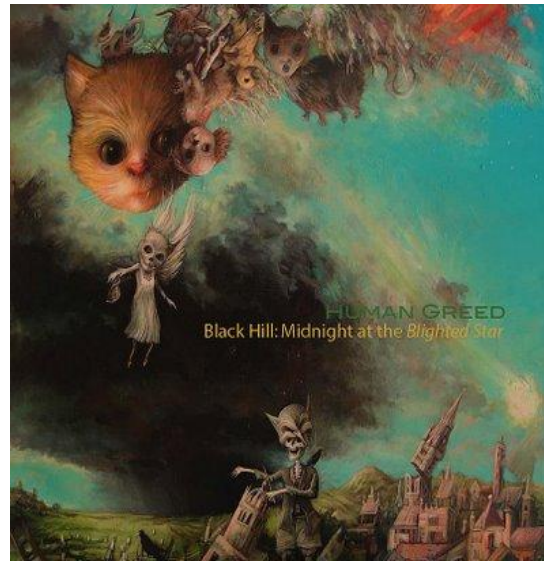
Very, very happy. It was so thrilling to be able to take it all

out on the road. And I love Poland, so it was just perfect. Those doomed, winter-savaged flatlands, those beautiful, sad Slavic faces, those late night smoky basements under the mediaeval squares - and there, tangled up in the Christmas lights, little old us with our fistful of sounds. Quite, quite beautiful.

As you say, we have only looked at this aspect of our work recently. That's on account of three things I suppose. The advances in software, the experience of my playing with Fovea Hex all over Europe, and the introduction of the visual element brought in by film maker Neil McLauchlan. He is another old friend of mine who is based out of Galway, Ireland.

I'd like to do more. In fact, I am in London right now and I'll be meeting a promoter later in the afternoon to look at possibilities. A London show would be good. And I'd like to go back to Italy. I've played there several times with Fovea Hex. I think they'd go for us there. From what I can gather we have a bit of a following

there - largely on account of a pirate copy of Black Hill leaking out onto the Italian bulletin board communities.



What is the strangest or most memorable response you've seen or heard to your music? It seems like your approach to sound would lead itself naturally to some unorthodox reactions.

Well, let's be honest there haven't been so many that would allow me to feel confident about making any kind of generalisation. I got some pretty strange mail after Consolation came out, but it would be ungallant of me to share. But the little mail that I do receive now is mostly intelligent and polite, a little

confessional maybe as is, I suppose, to be expected. I think the reaction to the live shows in Poland last December is most fresh in my mind. A couple of kids came up to Deryk in Warsaw - and they really were kids, 15 years old or thereabouts. And they were very complimentary, a little stunned, as might be expected, and clearly having trouble trying to rationalise what they had just sat through. One of them ventured "It seems to me that you have presented a history of murder." I loved that. No idea what they were really picking up from the whole thing... but what a line!

I wrestle with my own satisfaction at the reaction of a very earnest young man we were introduced to - one of the many electro improv artists who seem to be breeding like rabbits at the moment. Before the gig he was very nonchalant, you know? Pretty cool. He was unimpressed that I hadn't heard of any of the electro DJs he mentioned, or had no interest in IDM, or minimal techno - or anything at all really. Anyway, after our 50 minute set he kind of peeled

himself off the wall and literally had tears in his eyes and could not stop shaking my hand, and thanking me. A kind of gift reaction for someone with my kind of agenda I suppose, but immensely rewarding to see the intent take root in another heart - if you can forgive me that one!

The most interesting review was one where the writer slagged off the record for not fitting in with her daily routine. She said that to get in to it she would need to lie down for an hour - and that would be an hour wasted on account of not being able to do, like, you know, uh, other, like stuff. Astonishing. I don't know what music ads are like in your part of the world right now, Kate. But here, in the UK, the marketing of popular music is now very much aimed at placing the songs in the background of your day. Wallpaper. Something in the background to colour the all important adventure that is your life. It is marketing at its most insidious. It recognises the central aspect played in our emotional lives by music, and

then robs it of its capacity to transform us.

I think that this is more or less a world-wide trend. You see it most clearly in the marketing of radio stations, which consistently promote that they are “your at-work station” or “your drive home station”. By definition, this means that the listener's engagement with the music is something that is secondary. I guess this actually fits with the Brian Eno definition of “ambient music”, which is why it’s always a term I hate to read (and hate myself for occasionally using) in reviews of music that I actually like.

I have no problem with the *idea* of ambient – and I certainly have no problem with Eno. Discreet Music is one of the reasons I’m here! It does, however, provide a genre-shaped excuse for a lot of lazy, ill-considered posturing. And, if memory serves, some heroically dismal club nights!

Eno’s ambitions for Ambient Music were much more engaged. It was looking for a certain sensitivity to a

particular environment and a means whereby to elevate that sensitivity. He was seeking to instigate a heightened response. The work is highly structured – but in such a way as to be un-noticed. It is a true investigation and results, as all in depth investigations must, in paradox: “it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.”

In a way, that review you mention is actually quite positive, because it basically says that your record doesn’t function properly as “ambient” – that it isn’t the kind of thing that you can just ignore. But it is sort of troubling that the ability to ignore music should be considered a positive attribute. I think that pop music is often evaluated (consciously or not) in this way, but it’s worrying that that mentality seeps into the minds of people reviewing music outside the mainstream as well.

The whole scene – the creation, the reporting – has become little more than a scaffold for an idea of a lifestyle, and that it is lifestyle that is the core commodity of the age. A vanity

mirror. Who would really have thought that artistic endeavour would essentially become a branch of the self-help industry?

I'm curious how you think that the changes in communication tools - chiefly the introduction of the internet and all its strange step-children - will affect people's early relationships with music. After all, children growing up now have the ability to listen to vast amounts of music, of wildly different quality levels, provided they have the curiosity to look. Do you think that this will allow people to have even broader musical experiences? Or will the sheer amount of material available just prove overwhelming and send people running back to what's "safe"?

Hhhmmmm. Well I am no longer young so can't really speak for them or their experience. Any of this is just ultimately the rambling of a forty odd year old male. But I don't think there is a correlation between choice and the need for security. I don't

think the young will seek solace in Katie Melua just because there are too many nu-metal bands to choose from. But then again...

This is such a big, voluptuous subject that this could take us forever just to break the skin! There's so much to consider here. First off - I like the internet, I like the new tools and, despite all manner of reservations I am committed to keeping a profile going on Facebook, Myspace, and so forth - though I did have to draw the line at Twitter and pull down my account there. Too much like idle tittle tattle, and it now stinks of market men trying to find a profitable angle. Goodbye. I have met some lovely people online through these environments - your good self included. The internet has been very good to me and plays a starring role in whatever small amount of attention our work has been given. However, I am keenly aware that I had a youthful relationship with music and literature and art that did not have this great plethora of easy, cheap open access, and I value that. It gives insight into the

failings of the new social and economic ecology.

The new economic model seems to work out ok for the middle man, the vendor, but not the artist. It's ok for iTunes to sell songs for small change, because the new model accords them the possibility of making small change from a million artists which equates to big money for them, small change for the artist. They define the price. They call the shots. They also have ad revenue, and the clever routines to bounce you from one tiny purchase to another. The artist merely has a list of possible places to upload their work to a million servers where it can be punted out for small change.

You're lost in a sea of talentless, uncommitted detritus and are expected to feel grateful just for being given the opportunity to add your little offering to the soup.

Probably the most damage that has been done is in the way that the consumer now naturally expects and demands things for free.

Quality assurance, the tactile

associative pleasure with a piece of work, the appreciation of cost, effort and subsequent value - all lost. It doesn't matter that your shoes are made by nine year old kids sleeping under factory tables and being paid a dollar a year. It doesn't matter that your music comes down the wire from your torrent client in destructively compressed format with the creator of the music getting nothing whatsoever. This is all very general observation, of course, and applies largely to the majority consumer type. But what goes down up there tends to affect the quality of the scraps that are thrown to us down here, as it were.

There is of course the whole sub culture of obsessives who enrich their experience and, having already bought up everything there is to buy up go online to find out what else there might be. Hand held YouTube footage, bootleg audio from performance, interviews, anything and everything. That's the same as it ever was, and I think it's a mistake to spend too much time trying to control the

leaking of a lot of that content – but it is a valid concern that a percentage of your listeners have not had enough experience of the *genuine article* to be able to discern, appreciate, or, frankly, care about quality. That, you can't help but feel, is only going to get worse over time. Music itself, in the main, is dissolving into a cul de sac behind DVDs and electronic games. No surprise really given how the majors, in collusion with the broadcast industry, have reached the last leg of their crusade to suck anything vital, anything living, anything transformative, inspiring, transgressive, or *real* from the industry.

I feel as much sorrow for a generation who have been given no room for their own minds to grow as I feel deep, profound seething hatred and loathing for Simon Cowell.

www.humangreed.com
www.omnempathy.com

REVIEWS

By Dominic Marceau, Kate MacDonald, Martin Rouge and Mary Leary

Venetian Snares :: Filth
Planet Mu
www.planet-mu.com



“Venetian Snares, aka Pants Geronemo, aka Buttercock Lesbummer, aka the biggest retard on earth, has once again turned his toilet fantasies into something you can buy at the store, shove in your whore mouth and puke up thru a glory hole into a stranger’s gaping anus. Financing the dubstep scene since 2005, Venetian Snares has somehow again, not bothered to make anything remotely like a Benga

record from 3 years ago, instead reaching deep down into the bottomless pit of electronic genres gone by and digging out acid techno for a thoroughly humiliating raping of the sound. This is the shittiest acid record ever made! Venetian Snares actually covered his 303s with his own feces and twisted the knobs with his rock hard cock! At one point he even taped a 303 to a prostitute and kicked the shit out of her legs." - Official Press Release for "Filth"

Oh, Aaron... Where had you gone? There used to be a time when every new Vsnares record was a revelation. I remember hearing "Doll Doll Doll" for the first time and thinking that this music was truly disturbing. Songs about befriending child killers can be challenging, to say the least. But what music! Aaron Funk's music made you want to get up and punch the air (I consider that an extremely positive reaction, but I'm kinda weird that way...)! He went on to write songs about his cats, about badminton, about a giant alien force more violent & sick than anything you can imagine,

and about how Winnipeg is a frozen shithole. And I loved every note! He then decided to combine the glitch and the gloss with his critically acclaimed "Rossz Csillag Alatt Szueletett". Inspired by a journey to Hungary, the album consists of classical strings and trumpets combined with chaotic breakbeats. Everybody screamed "Genius!" and so did I! It was, by far, my favourite album of 2005, and remains a personal favourite to this day.

So, I guess that's why everything that came after this landmark album has been kind of a letdown. He repeated the formula with "My Downfall" (an ironic title if there ever was one) and then threw everything out the window with his "Last Step" personae. Kind of a poor man's AFX, "Last Step" was Mr. Funk doing straight acid, borrowing everything that made Richard D. James' AFX alter ego so unique, and not being subtle about it. After this came his "Detrimentalist" record, which was basically more of the same "Last Step" stuff, only under the Venetian Snares moniker. Ho-hum... Which leads me to "Filth". Boy,

was I ready to hate this record...
I really was.

Mr. Funk had prepared me to like no other. I had prewritten this review in my head many times over. I had a whole bunch of colourful expletives lined up to describe what I'd heard. Imagine my surprise when good old Aaron beat me to the punch with the above press release. Its sheer audaciousness made me curious and prompted me to give "Filth" a serious listen. And you know what? I'm really happy I did.

The acid elements are still there, but he (somehow) manages to recapture the all but forgotten brilliance of his oeuvre, even going back to his pre "Doll Doll Doll" period. He finally got it right and made it his own. It's glitchy and aggressive, it's intricate and excessive, everything that I come to expect from a Vsnares record. Not quite a revelation, but I'll take it...[DM]

Jarboe :: Mahakali

The End Records

www.theendrecords.com



Many artists attempt to divine the darkness within, with more or less happy results. The first in the planned series on dark goddesses, Jarboe, the scream queen of Swans devotes the first release to the Dangerous Mother, Kali. The boxed set contains all three versions of the album, along with an exclusive fourth CD of extra material, all packaged in a very nice printed bag of Indian design. Visually, very appealing. Each of the album versions contain nearly all the same tracks, each varying slightly towards the last few, either using a different version of the same, or a slight change in order, or in the case of the European version, sixteen tracks instead of fifteen. The overall feel of the sound is a mixture of Swans, Neurosis

and Diamanda Galas, a very nice and effective mix really. If anything, I'd find two low points to this work: first, impersonating a goddess is a performance, and I feel that this would sound much better performed live, especially since Jarboe is of the Dramatic Performance school of vocalists, like Diamanda Galas and Nina Hagen. While she doesn't have the skill or range of the divas, she certainly has the creativity and energy to impress her audience and personify the goddess. The second point is the guest male vocals... think Jon Bon Jovi circa Dead or Alive, and you'll truly understand the cheesiness of the performance. It's awful and clashes with the rest of the work. Fortunately, he only appears on one track, so the damage is limited. The bonus CD, entitled Dark Consort features quieter pieces, a great companion to the main album and a great reason to get the boxed set. In my opinion, some of the best pieces are on it, so it's something to keep in mind when you make your selection. [MR]

**Legendary Pink Dots ::
Plutonium Blond
ROIR**

www.roir-usa.com



Describing a Legendary Pink Dots album is sort of an exercise in futility, their sound being idiosyncratic to the point that they can only be compared to themselves. If anything, this is one of the most approachable Pink Dots album ever, far less challenging than most, and pretty tight in its sound and focus. While most of the later period releases have been quiet works in folkish acoustic atmosphere, this one returns to something more appropriate of the Crushed Velvet Apocalypse era, with more rhythmic tracks, along with poppy sensibility. Some of them could even achieve dancefloor airplay as

Hellsville or Black Zone have over the years (somewhere, I'm sure of it). With ten tracks, it's to the point, every track a song, without the weird little interludes that plumped up, say, *The Golden Age*. Hard to call it an essential, considering the length and breadth of their work, but probably something to introduce a newcomer to their unique sound [MR]

**Diamanda Galas :: Guilty
Guilty Guilty**

Mute

www.mute.com



Diamanda Galas is of that class of singers who really are performers, with all the flair and drama that it implies; the original definition of a diva. Recorded mostly during "Diamanda's Valentine's Day

Massacre" at the Knitting factory in 2005, on February 14, appropriately enough.

Actually fairly short, coming in at seven tracks, the entire repertoire is of tragic love songs, a theme well suited for a stage show by such a dark goddess of song. And she doesn't disappoint. Using the full range of her voice and her considerable skill as a pianist, the live recording truly does justice to the performance, a truly cathartic event, such as classic Greek theater could instill in its audience. The utter silence from the audience during the songs captures the spellbinding nature of the diva, mistress of the stage. [MR]

**Byetone :: Death of a
Typographer**

Raster-Noton

www.raster-noton.com



Pure elegance. There is no need to say more.

All right, I'll elaborate. There is plenty of electronic music in the world, plenty of glitchy, laptop-based pap being churned out by people from their bedrooms, people who make music because, suddenly, it's easy, people who have figured out the technique, but who have no particular sound they want to make. And the vast majority of it reflects the thought that has gone into its creation- emulative, trendy and dull.

This album is the opposite of all that.

Olaf Bender's mathematically precise, compositions, like rays of light, shot through an audio prism, are perfect. Every note, every click, every silence is crucial to the construction of the piece as a whole. This is a perfect album to illustrate the importance of a sense of composition, rather than just a feeble and passing urge to improvise. An aesthetic of refinement that permeates everything about this release- the way it looks, sounds and

feels - illustrates perfectly that making minimalist music does not mean sacrificing depth. [KFM]

Micachu and the Shapes :: Jewellery

Rough Trade

www.myspace.com/micayomusic

Last year, the appearance of "Filthy Friends," a free download meshing grime, industrial & rap, caused an underground tremor. Late this spring it was followed by an explosion in alternative music. That's something one hears all the time, right? But the next cool Indie (which has replaced the word "alternative") commodity is rarely truly independent. Instead, the term has come to mean, "what we acquire because other cool people do," or the "alternative" illustrated by Dr. Seuss's *The Sneetches*, where it constantly morphs but really means "better" more than "from the sort of small, independent label willing to spend time and money on something that's great but which may never be widely heard or help anyone pay a mortgage."

Purportedly cool new releases drop daily. When I sample them I'm often bored by regurgitation and/or charisma/good looks posing as brilliance; the same-old same-old in a smartly-designed package. Or I'm disappointed by artists who lack the chops or vision to bring good ideas into effective fruition.

East Londoner Mica Levi (a/k/a Micachu) is so effectively a real alternative (brilliant but category-confounding; compelling but not what is conventionally considered feminine or pretty; steadfastly marching to her own beatbox) that she is not yet widely-known. Her tracks are unlikely to be included with those by breathy, little-voiced girls and cute, sound-alike college boys currently flooding Ipods. On *Jewellery* she and the Shapes stomp handily on the whole lot with a freedom, and free-thinking, that may be welcomed only by ears hungering for something really different.

How does Micachu sound? Here's a clue: About 30 years ago, after a lengthy South African trek, members of Wire, Fun Boy Three, Sonic Youth,

Girls Together Outrageously, The Shaggs, Joy Division, and the Slits ended up in a big orgiastic heap after dancing around trying to lure Don Von Vliet (a/k/a Captain Beefheart) out of seclusion. Here's another: Fans of Thinking Fellers Union Local 282 (the San Francisco combo that produced wonderfully cathartic dissonance from the late '80s until the beginning of this decade) who've been anxiously awaiting a new TFUL release finally have a fix.

And here's my friend Danny's response to Micachu's "Vulture" video: "It seems to me that time has been put into a straightjacket backwards. Past impressions of sounds frozen in a music box, let it play on and on...."

I'm struggling to explain Micachu because I've been listening to her for weeks. *Jewellery* so effectively incorporates electronics, peripheral noise, and organic rhythms that the sound of a trash can lid, a distant car alarm or door can trigger instant Micachu recall. Since the approach is purely intuitive, deconstruction misses the point: Mood flows into

sound, through snippets of conversation and a forgotten dream from last week before there's an aural outburst that "rocks" a la early Pink Floyd or TFUL 282.

Before this review starts to whirl like a dervish I'll suggest some quick Micachu jolts: audio/video of "Guts," "Golden Phone"

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TRkZpFgJcl>), "Curly Teeth," or "Vulture." For more scattershot sounds, hear Mica as mixer: "Filthy Friends" (which throws down a lot of the hip-hop and UK garage that helped show the way to her own voice), or "Kwesachu," an intensely

ambient/experimental tape that on June 6th appeared on Mica's myspace. *Jewellery's* perfectly attenuated and emotively logical universe is my preferred Micachu happy place.

I'd suggest ignoring any confusion at a girl who looks and sounds like a boy whose voice hasn't yet changed. I'd forget about linear analysis, about "what does it mean if I like this?" How often does a 21-year-old, or anyone, produce a groundbreaking masterpiece,

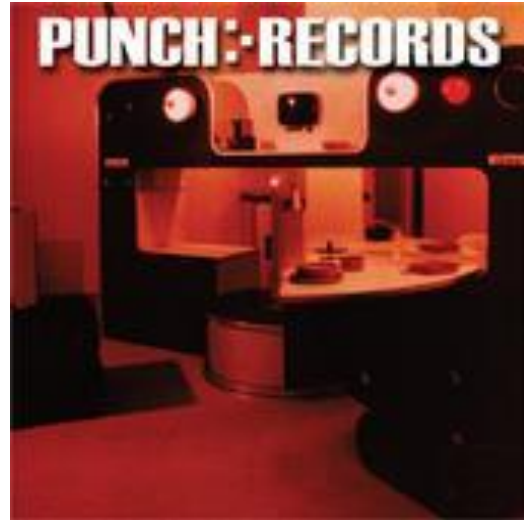
one of the most important "pop" releases in 10 or more years?

[ML]

THE LABEL-MAKERS

Punch Records

www.punchrecords.it



With roughly thirty releases to their credit, Italy's Punch Records has become known for an irreverent aesthetic and a sound that combines elements of electro-pop, cabaret, noise, Mediterranean folk and a certain romanticism. Owner/ Operator Tairy Ceron (who also records music under the name Ait!) talks about the challenges of being independent not just

from mass culture, but from the trends of various subcultures as well.

Kate MacDonald: What was it that originally made you want to start a record label?

Tairy Ceron: Well, I decided to start a record label mainly to fully take care of my music, since I'm a musician too, so that I could have full control on my works without having to find deals or - even worse - compromises with third persons.

Besides, I always like the idea of producing, of "pushing" bands I like, good bands I think deserve to be supported

What is the biggest challenge you face as a label?

Maybe the biggest challenge/hope is making the public appreciate what I consider the real "independent music", and with independent I mean "not dealing with the trend of the moment". This annoying characteristic in fact is not only present in mainstream ambients, but unfortunately also in the most

underground scenes, and in a very strong way (it wasn't like this until a few years ago).

I do hope that the real music enthusiast comes back to discover the will to "find out new proposals" through a more personal and autonomous research, ceasing to buy an album because it's on the cover of some magazine or to go to a concert/festival because "well publicized and well know"...like I was saying, these are not, in my opinion, characteristics of what you would call underground scene, today...I don't see any difference with mainstream, apart from the number of people and the money involved.

How do you select artists to be on Punch?

I can tell you that I apply a rigid selection, precisely because I don't "ride the wave of the moment", I don't follow the trend...so to me it doesn't really matter if in some period there is a trendy genre, I don't care to be "part of the scene" (whatever it may be in that moment) also because being

part of that is always like being part of a flock...that's also the reason of the stylistic variety of Punch productions. I produce what I like and what I think deserve support.

What do you think is the common element between the different artists whose work you've released?

Really hard to say, because of the variety of styles that you can find in Punch bands...let's say that it's something on a "human" level, that bounds them together, and bounds them with me, a common artistic view and also the same idea about how to manage our artistic proposals, in the market, the pleasure/will not to belong to a precise scene, in total independence.

I give a lot of importance to the complicity and to being close-knit with the artist, right after having liked the songs in fact I care about getting to know who made them, trying to understand if there sympathy between me and them and if the collaboration can be satisfactory.

Are there any particular artists you would be interested in working with?

Of course there are! But if I tell you I risk to reveal too soon the next Punch plans...hahaha! In these very days I'm about to seal two possible new contracts with musicians I love and that I've always desired to have in Punch! To know who they are, you just have to wait a bit! Well, however I can tell you that in this moment I'm already very happy for the newly born collaboration with CROSSOVER and MAGAS...they were strongly desired too!!!

NOIZEFEST- A EULOGY FOR KEITH MOORE

By Vargr Wolf

Keith Moore was a binman from the future, where the cities are now dumps and vice-versa. His father is an internationally renowned rhythm and blues guitarist who goes by the name Deacon John and performed "God Bless

America" at current Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal's inauguration ceremony. Moore was the nephew of Dr. Consuela Provost, a virtuoso poet/playwright/singer/renaissance woman who was named Chercheur Associé of the Sorbonne in Paris.

It seemed that as a young man Moore had a thirst for adventure and desired to connect with the outside world, particularly with individuals interested in the industrial aesthetic within music and art. He lived in New York for a while, traveled a bit, and spent many years honing and developing his aesthetic in industrial and other Performance projects throughout the 80s and 90s.

Not that New Orleans itself lacked culture. In the 1990s, vampire/gothic culture was very popular around the thanks to the efforts of former locals such as Trent Reznor and Anne Rice. Alternately, gutter punks could regularly be seen crowding around the theatre-like steps (once called "Hippie Hill" for this very reason) across from St. Louis Cathedral.

Underneath this cultural detritus was a thriving and vital community of street performers that ruled many aspects of the nightlife of the 9th Ward and Marigny areas. This underground economy was a vital force within New Orleans that defined cultural matters in many important aspects.

9/11 changed everything. The streets got cleaned up real fast in the wake of the tide of fear. People simply were not willing to deal with anything weird or unpatriotic and would respond to these individuals in an angry and often violent manner. The city needed an outspoken and bold individual like Keith Moore, and thankfully he had returned.

I first became actively aware of Moore during the years before Katrina, when I saw his rather conspicuous van hovering around my neighborhood on multiple occasions. It was a fairly imposing structure unto itself, and has slogans crudely emblazoned upon it such as "Deathhouse Enterprises" and "Noizefest." A co-worker informed me that the fellows

who drove the van made “noise music” and that one of them was putting together a “Noizefest.” Putting some things together in my mind, I realized that this must be the same person who had put together the infamous “Ambient Warz” event that resulted in Moore's ejection from local club the Dragon's Den. Although his collection of framed 9/11 and Virgin Mary photos surrounded by candles (Santeria-style) may not have been too bad, it was his use of broken glass along the lone stairwell entrance into the venue that seemed to push things over the line with the management.

There are a lot of stories about Keith Moore making people angry or displeased. He was not a mean person, though he was a trickster, a Creole Loki. For a city so obsessed with Jazz and Blues, the son of a famous bluesman making his legacy a war against the local Jazz Festival is filled with awesome irony. He was also very concerned with the events of 9/11, and did not seem to be satisfied with the official story. Many who recall the events

(especially those who were physically in NYC at the time) can relate to this concern, but rather than burying it Moore dealt with his concerns openly. Keith Moore was not in any way a political guy though, just an observant human who spoke his mind.

While, I did not see Keith's “Noizefest” event (in 2005), I had several email correspondences with him regarding ideas for shows, and before Hurricane Katrina happened and changed everyone's plans, he had asked me to play on one of his Ambient Warz events. I was lucky enough to see him perform once in a side-room of the Spellcaster (a local venue under Quintron's house) during an “Xmas rave.” He was in a room filled with little broken radios and boom-boxes, many of which were spray-painted neon colors.

At one point he was wearing a gasmask and he was primarily making a very bass-heavy piece of music accompanied with stuttering, stilted beats and the near symphonic sound of the static-emitting radios. The

room lighting was very dark and blacklit, and if I am not mistaken has been converted into part of a bathroom since the receiving damage from the flooding following Hurricane Katrina.

This was Keith - a full-on aesthetic experience. Garbage parts, noise, neon colors, pain smells, the jazz of electronic pain. The room seemed to be filled with smoke from the vibes. His life was a steady development of his art, and vice-versa. Just like the cities and garbage piles.

After Katrina, things were not conducive to a Noizefest 2006. Most people living within the city were simply concerned with the difficulties of literally cleaning up the wreckage of the storm and the subsequent flood. I had returned to Louisiana in the late part of that year (after a year in the Washington DC area) and faced a rather grim image of New Orleans. There was a string of six very heavily publicized murders that happened in late 2006 and early 2007, one of them was a much beloved member of the local

community, Helen Hill, a puppeteer and experimental filmmaker who had also helped start up a free clinic in the 9th Ward for poor people to get medical service. A still-unknown assailant entered their home at around 5:30 A.M. and shot her and her husband Paul in front of their recently-born child, killing her and wounding him for no apparent reason.

The last time that I ever saw Keith Moore was just after this chilling event, during a 9th Ward Marching Band performance through the Bywater, Marigny, and French Quarter areas of New Orleans. It was around 3 or 4 in the morning, and there was a fairly sizeable little crowd ready to walk alongside the band as they played John Carpenter's "Halloween" theme. In the wake of Helen's murder, all present were in a disturbed mood. Keith was there to promote the upcoming Noizefest 2007 with a single flyer. He was always promoting the next event.

In early Spring of 2007, Keith was shot in the chest in broad

daylight while driving his car. Despite the efforts of his friends during an attempted race to the hospital, he expired from blood loss soon after amidst a smouldering automobile accident. It was a shock to anyone who knew him or knew of him, and several friends and acquaintances got together to make sure that Noizefest 2007 would still happen.

It was a completely haphazard and off the cuff event, with all sorts of people emerging from the woodwork to present their various projects. I performed with my partner Ulula earlier in the day as Vargr Wulf. The highlight of the event was around 6 or 7 P.M. when all present just began to make as much noise as humanly possible. We left sometime during this and it sounded like a space battle was occurring from down the street. Keith Moore's dream of Ambient Warz came true, and since then every year people like Michael Patrick Welch, Morgana, Ratty Scurvics, Mikronaut, Ray Bong, Rob Cambre, and others keep the flame alive.

Here is Keith's self-written bio. The lyrics to "Psycho" are

particularly notable, portraying a laconic adaptation of a local Mardi Gras classic through the drunken lens of the type of hedonistic madness that so often ends in tragedy in the city of New Orleans:

"Keith Moore, aka Deacon Johnson: N.O.'s KING OF AMBIENT NOISE. PRODUCER of NOIZEFEST, N.O.'s first and only techno festival of ambient noise. Moore created the NOIZEFEST forum for one and two piece technoise acts—musicians who collectively no longer feel quite so marginalized by traditional New Orleans music/ians... INVENTOR of the JAMBOX PYRAMID: a collection of stereo boomboxes wired together as a collaboration of visual and audio art. Will soon make JAMBOX PYRAMID spin by applying the Leslie concept with plexiglass cubes, a rotating spectacle of sound and light (prototype sold to Rebecca Weinberg in NYC). PRESIDENT of DEATHOUSE INDUSTRIAL ENTERPRISES: a mobile sound and art outfit. Keith Moore has been involved in stage, lighting, music production and photography

for 27 years. He also DJ's a bit (in both New Orleans and N.Y.) CEO of ELECTROBLING INC.: Keith extracts jewelry from broken electronics which serve no mechanical purpose, but are excellent components of fashion he calls 'DEAD TECHNO custom jewelry designs'. Some celebs who sport DEATHOUSE apparel and 'ELECTROBLING' include Mr. Quintron and Miss Pussycat, Zigaboo Modeliste, Peaches and her drummer Samantha, and Diplo (M.I.A.'s Mississippi-born DJ/fiance). Keith is currently writing, 'Cultural Necrophilia,' an illustrated account of his experiences living (for 11 years) on New York's Lower East Side. A living witness of the WTC disaster, Moore took six rolls of pix on Sept 11th. In 'Cultural Necrophilia,' he exposes the so-called "squatters' movement" by detailing true accounts of an overdose (actually a triple O.D. that day) that happened in an abandoned, city-owned building he lived in on 9th St. — and also a ROBBERY of the Marijuana Buyers' Club in NYC. Also while in New York, Keith worked for Devastating

Soundworks on a series of concerts in Tompkin Square Park. OTHER THAN THAT: Moore has performed in Hamburg and Berlin with Industrial noise group MISSING FOUNDATION and plays DRUMS (sometimes with original dinosaur New Orleans punk band called FIRE!). "Ambient Warriors" is whoever is performing with the King of Ambient Noise. Moore plans to record two 45's on Deathhouse/Appleseed records: (I'll Give You) AIDS' and 'PSYCHO—PSYCHO' (sounds like IKO IKO):

PSYCHO! PSYCHO!
PSYCHO, PSYCHO ALL DAY
-
MY PLAYBOY AND YOUR
PLAYBOY -
SITTING ON THE BAYOU
YOUR PLAYBOY SHOT MY
PLAYBOY
NOW IM'A SET YO HOUSE
ON FIRE
TALKING BOUT PSYCHO!
PSYCHO!
PSYCHO, PSYCHO ALL DAY
STAGGERED OUT OF THA
BAR
AND WALKED WAY TOO
FAR

GOT ROBBED OVER IN
TREME'
ETC, ETC...

GOALS:

- Finish 'Cultural Necrophilia'
 - DeathhousePromo kits
 - Signed and numbered seven-inches of 'Legal Weapon' (turntable w/a pistol) and 'Jambox Pyramid'
 - Teach a class about DEAD TECHNO jewelry
 - Restore a statue of the Madonna rescued from the flood @ St. Cecilia's on Burgundy St.
 - Have ELECTROBLING featured in the Fashion section of the Times Picayune.
 - STREAM NOIZEFEST RECORDINGS ONLINE
 - have an "ambiance workshop" (5 rooms—one dedicated to each sense)
- Ultimately I want to own and operate the AMBIANCE CAFÉ—a dream of mine...

THANX—KEITH"

"...this world is not it and that past the physical plane is the mental plane and astral plane, a place that's hard to reach...there is love other than

with women or men that cant be seen or felt. only experienced... i must struggle on the physical level - which does nothing for me, leaves me cold. the material world is only temporary satisfaction and the unknown or invisible world has so much more power. take me now under your wing for i am lost and need to get out. take me away so i can devote my life to this. to you. i have nothing to lose. inspiration is my only offer. i am your butler at the edge of the abyss, forced into a corner because man cannot cope with man..."

- Keith Moore (1965-2007)



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