

PARAPHILIA IX



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INTERESTING TIMES: GROWING UP

By Andrew Maben

It's probably fair to say that most, if not quite all, the volunteers for the Digby were losers and refugees like me, seeking any escape, even should it prove to be from frying pan to fire. Which it wasn't. Mr. Curry, the new House-master was progressive, an optimist who appeared to be genuinely concerned for our

welfare both as individuals and as a group. I had taken French lessons with him and vied for first place in the class with a boy named Irons. At the year's end it was Irons who won the prize, but I gave him a good run. I would have occasions to remember him later in my life. So I already had a

comparatively friendly relationship with Mr. Curry.

At the first House meeting he told us he meant to run the house democratically. Later his catch phrase was "this is your house, and you can do what I want!", but he continued to be fair and generous in his treatment of the boys. The first exercise in democracy turned out to be over corporal punishment. He briefly offered arguments for and against, then put the question to a vote by show of hands. More surprising than that dispensing with the cane carried was that anyone at all chose to vote for retention. I do not remember at all, but I imagine the vote was largely divided by age, older boys feeling that having endured they had earned the right to enjoy. Did I feel at that moment that a prayer had been answered?

I had been listening carefully, and perhaps selectively, to the readings from the Bible in chapel and at Sunday services in the Abbey. I was attracted to Jesus' offering of kindness, gentle love, which I began to believe might be an achievable alternative to my schoolboy agonies as well as what I was increasingly aware of as the hell that was life for so many of

the world's people. Perhaps I feared that my future lay in that hell. Mr. Curry and I discussed going through with my Confirmation. After some moments going over Christian doctrine he asked why I felt convinced now that this was what I believed. I replied that everybody must believe in something. Which surely we must? And surely being kind to each other is a worthwhile occupation for our time and energy? I believed so then, and have clung, stubbornly, desperately to that conviction. I decided that I would make kindness and honesty the keystones of my character. As we shall see, I have all too often failed to attain even this simple standard. Am I to be condemned for that? A question I have often asked is whether it is more culpable to fail to be good than simply to be bad. Or perhaps the hypocrisy of making this choice in the hopes of finding kindness or even love in return is even worse? Who knows? Certainly not I. One way to look at my life is as alternating between attempting to live up to this ideal, abandoning it in self-disgust, and then struggling to redeem myself by trying to find my way back to it. I

became very fond of hymns like *Jerusalem* and passages from scripture, notably the Sermon on the Mount. I began all too soon to become aware of the gulf separating this message of love from other deeply held convictions. Most insidious was the conviction that England owned the right to command the world. Insidious and rather obviously false, as the Empire slipped away. The level of hypocrisy required to profess simultaneously a belief in brotherhood and the certitude of the right to be master of other men is beyond me. It became fairly obvious that the church was a gathering place for those hypocrites. As I neither have the desire to be any other being's master, nor will I under any circumstances concede another the right to be my master, it was not long before I became alienated from the Church.

There was a young South African physics teacher who announced one morning that he had something more important than physics to talk about. Much more important. He spent the lesson describing, in tones of bitter outrage and accompanied with ghastly photographs, the massacre at Sharpeville. I was

indignant, and ashamed of my inherited part in this awful crime.

Mr. Curry's enthusiasm and encouragement prompted an interest in sports. I swam, dived, sailed, even became a tolerable rugby wing-forward, and eventually became captain of the House target shooting team. Perhaps a description of my sporting persona should begin with shooting.

I had been given air rifle for a birthday and was allowed to shoot in the garden. Shooting at bottles and tins and targets was much less fun than shooting at starlings. There were huge flocks of these birds and they were classified as a pest. I cut rather bloodthirsty notches in the stock to record the kills, when I added crows they earned rather longer notches. Dad also had a couple of .22 rifles, and used to take me out of a summer evening looking for pigeons visible from the road. They were seldom close enough to be an easy target and I only killed one, a lucky shot through the bird's eye. We had pigeon pie that Sunday.

One morning a fat pigeon settled in the lower branches of the beech at the bottom of the garden. I ran

to fetch a .22, loaded and took aim through the window in my parents' bedroom. I fired. The bird flew away and I cleaned and put back the gun. That evening I was summoned to the living room, where I was surprised to find Dad in the company of the village policeman. Had I fired a gun this morning? I said I had shot at a pigeon. Well, it seems a farmer living almost a mile away had been combing his hair in the mirror when he dropped the comb. He bent to pick it up, heard a crack and stood to see the mirror before his face cracked by a bullet. The police were called. Lining up the holes in mirror and window pointed directly to Court Cottage. Whether it was my luck, the farmer's, or both, we each had escaped an ugly fate. I was a little shaken at the thought of having come so close to killing a man. And I was lucky again that the policeman chose to decide that as he saw only stupidity rather than malice, and no lasting harm had been done, he would not arrest me.

What finally cured me of the desire to kill living creatures for sport was an early autumn morning hunting hares. The first hare we put up I managed to kill cleanly with one shot. The second

was not so lucky. Evidently badly hurt it still managed to run. I gave chase, cursing as I stumbled through bracken and thorns. At last the poor creature's legs gave out. It looked at me piteously as I stood over it. I could think of no reason at all why it would or should forgive me for what I was about to do. All I could think to do was level the other barrel to its head and fire. A twelve-gauge at close range. There was a fine spray of blood. Where the creature's head had been was a flap of bloody skin from which hung an ear, and a six inch crater in the ground. My discomfort was not too great to allow me to enjoy the jugged hare mum served a week later. The other I sold to the village butcher.

So ended my hunting days, but I was still a good shot and so continued as I had begun, shooting at targets, until I left school.

I have no idea what possessed me to take an interest in Rugger, up to now I had shown even less aptitude than enthusiasm for the game. Perhaps a lingering desire to find a way to make Dad proud? I won't bore you with an account of games played, making it to the school semi-finals and being

awarded my House Colors. Frankly I'm even more bored than you...

But I can't touch on the subject without recalling one gloriously inglorious moment. One of our three-quarters had kicked ahead, almost to the opposition goal line. I was in completely the wrong place, which happened all too often, offside by the right touch line. But then one of their full-backs caught the kicked ball, just a few yards in front of me. None of my team-mates was anywhere close, so it was up to me. I charged. He saw me coming and evidently calculated that he had time to get off a return kick before I landed on him. He got off the kick. The ball was headed directly over my head. I leaped to make a heroic interception. Except I rather misjudged the situation. (Feel free to draw parallels later in this story). So I leapt. The ball was not ascending quite as steeply as I had thought. There I was, again, suspended in the air watching doom accelerating directly towards my face. The ball was suddenly huge, and smashed into my nose...

Next thing I knew I was opening my eyes. Flat on my back, boys from both teams gathered round,

looking down at me, the teacher who was refereeing was kneeling at my side, looking concerned.

"Do you feel alright?"

"How the fuck do you think I feel? Someone just kicked a rucker ball in my face!"

Shocked looks from the boys, you just don't speak to a master that way. Oh, I'm probably in big trouble now. But no, he was solicitous as ever.

"Do you think you can make it back to the House on your own? Or should I send someone with you?"

That night I found I'd actually earned a little kudos with the boys, so perhaps that was the spur to play?

Meanwhile after so many years of character-building punishments, teasing and other low-grade victimhood, I was at last taking an active part in developing my own character, and there were teachers who helped as well. I certainly count it as a blessing that corporal punishment was a thing of the past, I was certainly aware by now of the chain of sadism whereby small boys suffered at the hands of bigger boys, only to

later have the opportunity to inflict suffering themselves. I was aware, and I was disgusted, but to be honest I cannot say with complete certainty that I would not have learned to love to hurt had I been presented with that *carte blanche*. But I was not, so instead I began to build in my heart a growing hatred of violence in all its forms.

By now I had somehow earned a place at the R.A.F. College Cranwell. But by now I had also come to recognize that those beautiful V-Bombers, those Victors, Valiants and Vulcans were instruments of cruel and indiscriminate mass-slaughter. I had begun to realize that I wanted to be no part of any war machine.

While never working at my studies any harder than I needed to to get by hovering somewhere in the middle ranks of my classes, I nevertheless somehow learned that most essential aspect of an education: a love of learning for its own sake. I guess we've already seen how Whittaker's crude approach actually stood me in good stead in my rivalry with Irons, but one teacher at least relied on his ability to inspire. Mr. Neale taught English, both Language and Literature, and

managed to instill in me a lifelong love of both. He taught me to understand the beauty of carefully constructed syntax and well chosen words. *The Canterbury Tales*, or parts of them, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and, perhaps fatally, *The Autobiography of a Supertramp*. To be honest Chacer didn't offer much but the sounds of the words. But *A Midsummer Night*? Oh my! The idiocy of lovers, the wisdom of fools, the painful dance we're led by joy. "There is a bank...", "Lord, what fools..." and of course "Ill met by moonlight..." Tender mockery, and mocking tenderness. Tragic misunderstandings, misunderstanding tragedies. If only I had known..! And then *Supertramp*, what were they thinking when they put this on the O-Level syllabus for 1964? Let's put it this way: how many happy, glazed smiles of recognition when I would mention the book two, three or more years on? I suppose it seemed an enlightened idea to some academic somewhere. Let Britain's callow youth gain a taste of the vagabond life. But the Swinging Sixties were upon us!

Tamla-Motown and Stax were infiltrating the pop charts. There

was a raw new voice from New York singing angry songs against war, racism, injustice. A screeching quartet from Liverpool who seemed to me a sad shadow of the Four Seasons. Then one night, something else. I remember the night, falling asleep as usual, transistor radio under the pillow tuned to Radio Luxembourg. From the opening bars I was hooked, mean bass, cat-howling harmonica and a defiant angry voice. I pulled up the pillow, turned the volume all the way up, held the speaker to my ear. It ended much too soon. "...something new. The Rolling Stones... 'Come On'... released today..." And I slid a little further...

At school I sailed through the O-Levels and entered the final two years. I moved from the Common Room and got my own study. This afforded privacy, and a chance to decorate to my own taste, and I was allowed a record player! The first LP I had purchased was Peter and Gordon. Alright, I know... Then had come the utterly gorgeous Françoise Hardy with her plangent odes to loneliness, definitely a step in the right direction. The Stones, the Who, I still have the first Who album, in mono, ordered as soon

as the release was announced, Five Live Yardbirds... And my walls were soon lined with magazine photographs of beautiful women. *The Sunday Times Magazine* had a feature on up and coming young actresses, including Julie Christie. And then there was *About Town*. This magazine had a huge influence on me. I bought every issue I could from the age of sixteen on. Aesthetics, style, beautiful women! Not *Playboy* by any means, there was seldom so much as a nipple to be seen. I still recall "Oh, You New York Girls": text from an old shantey "Oh, you New York girls, can you dance the polka..." Baby Jane Holzer, Warhol superstars in extraordinary black and white portraits... And yes, I did read the articles! Tom Wolfe's *The Pumphouse Gang*, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, and fatally(!) *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* were all published as articles in *Town*. Well, I guess we'll come back to that...

The Lyme Regis holidays had come to an end some years back. One summer we took a completely uncharacteristic car tour of Cornwall. Highlights of the tour were Fowey where we

crossed into this, to me, *terra incognita*, Jamaica Inn, Land's End, St. Ives, where I remember huge breakers at a long white deserted beach, Tintagel for some Arthurian mystique, and Polzeath. After that summer we moved our summer base to Polzeath. But Polzeath marked some kind of turning point, offered a taste of freedom, opportunities for adventure that just were not on offer in the safe, comfortable, prototypically English seaside-atmosphere of Lyme. We rented a house on the cliffs between the Polzeath beach and Daymer Bay. The days were pretty much my own. I could hike, try to conquer my fear of heights scaling the cliffs at the bottom of the garden - I'm still trying to overcome the fear, and never became a rock climber. Daymer Bay offered a lazy beach and the placid waters of the estuary to swim. The ferry from Rock to the tiny port of Padstow was there if we wanted a dose of shops, cafes, naughty post-cards. But soon I would be spending every moment of the incoming tide in the breakers of Polzeath. The beach faced due West into the open Atlantic, no other land before the East Coast of America. The sea was seldom calm, and

after a storm the waves could be spectacular. The only surfing equipment available was plywood body-boards, but once I had one I was addicted. I soon taught myself in shallow water to catch a wave and ride to the very edge of the beach. It was not long before I was swimming out to deeper water, beyond the last line of breakers to wait for the big ones. The exhilaration! To see a peak rising above the other incoming waves in the distance, the express-elevator feeling as I sank into the trough, the frantic paddling as the monster would rise beneath me, then if my timing was right the magic of being at the peak as a line of foam broke out around me, the plummeting fall as the wave broke into the trough ahead, and then the surge of acceleration as the rushing water thrust me forward. And if my timing was off, to either be left behind, disappointed, or to be caught in the roiling waters of the breaking wave, powerless in the colossal force, spun, thrust deep, sometimes to be pressed against the sea-bottom, then left to struggle breathless, shaken, defeated, to the surface to await the next opportunity. Young, impressionable seeker that I was, it is no surprise that this became

my central metaphor for living my life. Sometimes I have managed to time my actions in concert with the events around me to be swept forward towards success. All too often my timing is wrong and I find myself left stranded. And all too often I have found myself overwhelmed, caught in a maelstrom, out of control and caught in the grip of a crushing despair from which I have to somehow escape to return to a surface sanity, somehow collect myself and stay afloat for the next wave.

There was a tiny sailing school on the beach at Rock. It was not, I swear, just because there always seemed to be pretty girls embarking on lessons, that I leapt at my parents' offer to pay for a course of lessons. I took to sailing, as much as, and later even more than I loved the surf. And I won't pretend that it was not a distinct pleasure to meet girls. Three sisters in particular have always had a special place in my memories, Caroline, Vanessa and Diana. Caroline was a beautiful, blonde, English rose, sweet, generous and outgoing, while Vanessa was raven-haired, equally beautiful, haughty and proud. For the first time, but, I regret to say, far from the last, I

found myself half in love with two women. My shyness helped not at all, and I was unable to detect any reciprocal feelings from either, nor to make the choice and make my own feelings known to either. I suppose I could call this sad, but really it is just pathetic, don't you think? And Diana, less stunningly attractive than her sisters, she made up for it in wit and intelligence and she offered me an open and genuine friendship that I was glad to reciprocate.

My parents signed me up for sailing at school, and bought me, at some sacrifice, a racing/cruising dinghy. Sailing opened my social world, and surely raised my confidence, testing both my skill and courage. At Rock there were races every Saturday, and during the week there was the estuary to cruise. One memorable day a group of us took our boats beyond the estuary into the open ocean to sail around the rocky island off the head. And I found a heady way to combine the joy of sail with the exhilaration of surf. There was a sand bar across most of the mouth of the estuary, exposed at low tide and covered with deep water at high, there was a point between the tides where the water was

deep enough to sail, but shallow enough that the waves would break. By sailing out of the channel and circling back, I found I could sail in on the crest of a wave to ride the surf as it broke. This required some skill, and in certain measure courage, as there was some real danger. But the real test came the day I decided that the stiff breeze in advance of an approaching gale was the perfect opportunity for a solo sail. Jubilantly I sailed out of the estuary into the Atlantic waves. However, when I finally decided that perhaps it would be wise to turn back I found it more than I could manage to handle the boat close-hauled amid the fearsomely large waves. For a few moments, in rising fear, I managed to stay in control. Then a vicious squall blew in. As the boat capsized I faced the real possibility that I might drown. I was half a mile out to sea. The beaches were deserted, and I was sure no one would have noticed that I was in difficulties. I was far from confident that I would be able to right her in these rough waters, and quite sure that even if I did manage that I would not be able to control a swamped boat. I was very afraid. Somehow I swam to the centreboard and climbed onto

it, took hold of the jib sheet and with less struggle than anticipated managed to haul her upright. Head into the wind we were pointing straight up the estuary. That is where I needed to go, but there was no question of baling, waves broke over the sides far faster than I could manage to scoop water overboard, and there was still less chance of keeping the boat upright close-hauled in this wind, these waves, and full of water. I sat for a moment, completely at a loss. Still no signs of life ashore, and the wind and the estuary's flow were slowly bearing me out into the Atlantic. If I didn't think of something soon, obviously I was lost. Well, Daymer Bay was on my aft beam, perhaps I could bear away onto a broad reach and make it to the shore. Once there I would be able to drain and beach her and plan what to do next. So that is what I did. She fell away from the wind sharply enough, and even with both sheets let fully out the sails caught enough wind to start to make good headway. I began to breathe more easily. Enough wind? More than enough. Even with me sitting as far aft as possible, the bow started downwards. Water flowed forward and in seconds we were

making a fine impression of a U-boat crash diving. As the bow went down, the stern rose and there I was, four feet above the waves as she slowly gave up the struggle and lay down once more on her side. But the shelf of the Daymer beach is very shallow, and although still several hundred yards from shore, to my delight, my surprise, and most of all relief, I found that I was standing on the bottom. Neck deep, to be sure, but standing. Once more I righted her, but now I did not re-board. I was able to push her from the stern at a sharp enough angle to the wind that the sails did not fill. It was hard work, but the danger was past and eventually I could pull her up onto the beach. For several long moments I just sat on the sand beside the beached boat, recovering my breath, my energy and my courage, and considering my options, which were not many. I could just sit it out here, but that might possibly be a cause for some alarm, as at least a few people had seen me set out, and I had told Mum I was off for "a quick sail". If I wasn't back for lunch she would surely worry. And then at the thought of lunch I realized I was famished. Very well, I would have to get back. I

could tow her back along the shore, but that would mean slogging through thigh deep water for a mile or more, which would take forever, I did not want to wait that long to eat, and it would be humiliating if any of my friends were to see me, which they surely would. Which left returning under sail. So I reefed the sails down to the size of ladies' hankies, and very chastened, beat my way back up the channel.

Sailing also brought me face to face, for the first of what by now feels like far too many times, with one of life's bizarrely cruel tragedies. The Sherborne sailing club used to go for weekends in Poole harbour. Leaving early on Saturday morning, we would drive down to Poole and sail out to an island where we had a camp site. The short summer nights allowed for a good day's sailing before returning for a camp fire supper and then to sleep in army surplus tents. After sailing again all day on Sunday, we would sail back to the slip, beach and trailer the boats and drive back to school. One Sunday a family group shared the slipway with us, beaching a large, powerful and expensive looking speed boat. Vehicles were prohibited on the

slipway, and as the boat was heavy they were having some difficulty getting her to the top. Among the party was an extremely attractive girl, bikini clad. Naturally a crowd of sixteen to eighteen year old boarding school boys were quick to notice her ample and shapely breasts. Equally naturally, she seemed pleased at the attention, and was perhaps paying, on that account, less attention to what she was doing than she should. She was pushing from the stern, and standing below the high water mark. The slipway was carpeted with slippery green algae. "One. Two. Three. Push!" called a man, presumably her father, from the bow. As she flexed her body to push, we were treated to the view of her lovely straining legs and delightful derriere. But then suddenly her feet both slid away from her. She let out a pretty gasp of mock fright. And then she completely lost her footing. Her legs flew backwards and for a moment she seemed to hang suspended, horizontal, a few feet off the ground. Then she fell. The whole weight of her body landed on her right breast, with a frightful sound that I will not try to describe. At first no one realized what had happened. But

as she stood, it became obvious. Her breast had literally exploded under the force. Where once, seconds before, had been that shapely flesh that we had admired, of which she had been so proud, now... Now the green cloth of her bikini bra was soaked in blood, what was once a beautiful breast now resembled nothing so much as some unmentionable piece of offal on a butcher's block, good only to be thrown out as waste. She stood there, sobbing, gasping unintelligible words, whose sense of inconsolable grief and pain were nevertheless all too clear. Someone wrapped a jacket around her shoulders and gently led her away. Someone else ran to call for an ambulance. I was seventeen, you may imagine it left a deep and indelible impression. For my own part I am quite sure that this incident was responsible for my discomfort with large breasts, my lifelong preference for small breasted women.

Jane. I hope you have gathered that I had essentially no contact whatever with girls, and altogether too much with boys. My ideas on romance, sex, love were constructed haphazardly from pop music, books, magazines like *Town* and others

rather less salubrious, the lonely longings of my heart and hormonal activity. My parents left a sex education pamphlet by my bed one night, which did little, beyond supplying some Latin terms, to increase my knowledge of the biology. As to the psychology or the social niceties of romance, I was on my own. True, I had a sister, but we were not close, certainly not close enough to talk sensitively on this topic. And I've already mentioned her teasing me about Christiane. There was a remark dropped when she strayed into the bathroom to find me naked in the tub. There was a scandalous note of hers that I found and used for the purposes of blackmail for a day or two. My mother would occasionally remark, rather unconvincingly, how handsome I looked, but that seemed irrelevant as I had apparently already decided that character was what was important. Romantic, over-sensitive, awkward, shy, utterly inexperienced, in a word I was clueless. And yet...

In the summer of 1965, it was decided that I should acquire some social graces, and off I went for dancing lessons. I blush at the memory. Two left feet? More like two left hooves. I eventually

managed the simplest of waltz steps without endangering my partner, but for the rest I was completely inept, too stiff to find the rhythm, to shy to relax. The lessons continued in the winter holiday, culminating in a Christmas dance. I have no clear memory, but I imagine I spent most of the evening carefully not dancing, probably snacking on the canapés, drinking glass after glass of the sugary non-alcoholic punch. But at last the lights dimmed for the last waltz. The end in sight, I finally relaxed a little. And then, consternation.

"Would you like to dance with me? Please." She was so pretty, long dark hair falling in waves over her shoulder, bright blue eyes, a sweet smile. Could she really be talking to me? Hard as I found it to believe, she was. How could I refuse?

"I'm not a good dancer," I told her.

"That's alright. Come on." And she took my hand, led me onto the floor. To tell the truth we did not so much dance as shuffle, but that did not seem to matter. We spoke a little, enough at least to exchange names. She pulled me very close. She nestled her head

on my shoulder, I could feel her breasts pressed against my chest, her hands in the small of my back, stomach, hips thrust forward. I know I wondered, why me? Then she lifted her head. Looked at me. And then, as the song says, she kissed me...

When the music ended she gave me her telephone number. I remember it to this day. I promised to call. A smile, a quick kiss on my cheek and she was gone.

This had not been my first kiss. There had been Claire's friend Ginny, who came to Rock that summer. We had an evening of guilty, furtive kisses and clumsy groping. And Theresa at what must have been a farewell party before we decamped to Eastbourne. Theresa flirted, kissed me and promptly switched her attentions elsewhere. But Jane's kiss was the first truly generous kiss, the first that had felt actually meant for me, in a sense the benchmark against which I have measured kisses ever since.

I kept my promise to call Jane, and we spoke often, but the thirty miles that separated us might have been thirty thousand, and

we only saw each other three more times.

Before I get back to those articles by Tom Wolfe, and my ongoing explorations of some kind of provisional ethical, political framework for myself, I think I hear a critic or two complaining. "This is no more than a collection of anecdotes strung together," I can hear them say, "What about narrative structure?" I guess they were just skimming, because I could swear I touched on this in the opening pages. Perhaps they were expecting some attempt at a stream of consciousness *tour de force*. "Stream of consciousness"? Surely the most pretentious literary device ever invented. And narrative structure? Listen, I'm just talking about my life here, the way I remember it, trying to put the events more or less in chronological order, in words that attempt to provide a reasonably accurate and coherent description. That's all. If you don't like it, you know where the exit is, just don't let the door hit you... Excuse me, but really, all that literary theoretical, writers' workshop posturing just makes me ill.

Besides my athletic and amorous adventures, I was still at school, studying for the A Levels in

preparation for University. As it was to turn out, this plan went somewhat awry. It started with my curriculum. Somewhere within the depths of the Education Ministry had been born the proposal to modernize British Education. Of course this chiefly affected State schools, but we felt ripples. We had grappled with the New Math already, and now it had been decreed that a more rounded syllabus was called for at A Level. Pupils heading for a liberal arts degree at University were required to take one science subject, while scientists were to study one in the arts. I think this was at least in part a reaction to "The Two Cultures", but whatever the reason it was, at least on the face of it, a noble idea. "On the face of it", alas, there lies that infamous rub. As I had been doing so well with English, I even won a prize if I remember, it didn't take a great deal of thought to decide that Maths, Physics, English would be my subjects, and I had hopes of leaving the University graced with my BSc, a literate, if not a literary, engineer. Of course that was too easy. No the school could not fit those classes together, English was definitively out of the question.

"So what can I take?" I asked, naively imagining that there would be some options available. French, perhaps, even Geography. Actually, no, it turned out that the sole option on the table would be the combined Economics and British Constitution course. Hooray. I would be hard pressed to think of anything that interested me less. But this proved to be fateful. Also fateful, in fact life changing, was my decision to take Art as an easy option that I hoped would allow me to unwind from the rigors of Maths and Physics.

I have already touched on the erosion of my rote conformist conservatism. Economics classes were to strike a fatal, albeit unintentional, blow to the taproot of that misbegotten ideology, and a good thing too. The teacher was blotchy-red-faced, jingoistic blowhard who repeated *ad nauseam*, and beyond, in an insufferably pompous tone that "the British Constitution is the best constitution in the world", not as a reasoned opinion but as uncontestable fact. I was already ill-disposed towards this whole course that I felt I had been shanghaied into taking, and this man's teaching methods served only to further alienate me. Every

lesson seemed to provide excuses for virulent diatribes against Marx, Communism, anything, really, to the left of the Liberal Party, which merited mere disdain. So following the adage about "the enemy of my enemy", I came to the conclusion that anyone who could inspire such hatred in this man must have something. I checked out *Das Capital* from the library and started to wade through Karl's turgid prose. I confess that I was dragged to a standstill long before the end. I was struck by two things, though. Firstly the way in which Engels gathered all his damning evidence from those he sought to damn, an example that should be followed more closely by contemporary social critics. The historical overview of pre-capitalist history was at complete variance with our textbook's version. In particular the heartbreaking injustice of the highland clearances infuriated me. I took up the hobby of annotating the text book with references to counter-arguments from Marx, sometimes crossing out entire sections. Needless to say that when it came time for the A Level I was lucky to scrape an O Level pass from my efforts.

My fifth form year passed fairly uneventfully, scholastically at least. The maths and physics were challenging, and I caused the physics teacher no little annoyance as I sought explications of electricity that I could actually grasp, rather than simply memorize relationships between what seemed, and still seem, mysterious if not downright mystical qualities.

I continued to be a voracious reader of fiction. From war stories I had slid into mysteries and spy dramas from the likes of Buchan and Ambler followed by Fleming and what became a lifelong love of Deighton, Le Carre and Greene. I also developed a taste for science fiction. I had begun with the standard classics, Verne, Wells, Conan Doyle. Then I stumbled onto Wyndham's "Day of the Triffids" after which I set myself the goal of reading the entire Penguin Science Fiction library. I was primarily seeking entertainment, certainly not wishing to collect a combustible array of intellectual influences. But that was what I succeeded in doing.

Over the summer holiday of 1965 we were set the task of writing on one of several set topics in

physics. I chose Relativity. It was an enormous challenge, and I cannot claim anything like a complete understanding. However, thanks to Einstein's lucid explanations, I did manage at least a tenuous grasp of the Special Theory, enough at least to get high marks for my essay. More important the notion of the fixed of our own perceptions was shattered forever, and my eyes were opened to the worlds of wonder revealed in physics and cosmology.

My sixth form year saw a thorough reappraisal of all my beliefs, desires and ambitions which resulted finally in their almost complete reversal. I should point out that this was no conscious, thoughtfully reasoned intellectual exercise. No it was the desperate groping of my cowed, almost defeated, spirit, a search for some way of being, of living my life, that might give me some glimpse at last of freedom, a chance, perhaps, at happiness. And partly I was simply caught up in the currents of what still seems to me to have been an extraordinary era.

There was music of course, but rock 'n' roll was merely the most blatant expression of what was

being called a "seismic upheaval" of England's long entrenched class system, an upheaval that demonstrated itself most forcefully among the young. "Teddy boys", "beatniks", "rockers", "mods" in turn and together scandalized the bastions of the status quo. One day, shopping with Mum in Wellington, I had been a little shocked, and secretly a little pleased, to hear a passing child tell his mother, "Look, Mum! A *beatnik!*". Evidently he saw in me something I had not yet recognized for myself.

My revulsion for war led me to attend the CND Easter March during the spring holiday of 1966. Although I had come to the march alone, I found there were hundreds of other young people there. Young people who did not question or challenge my public school diction, united across classes, geography, and yes, even race, by their common passion for peace, for justice. We shared our food, our stories, our dreams and our fears. And we believed, from the bottom of our innocent hearts, that not only we should make a difference, change the world for the better, but that we actually could, and in fact would. Foolish? Naive? Unrealistic? Oh, in

retrospect it is all too easy to pass those judgements. I prefer to believe now, as I did then, that there was something beautiful, something truly noble in these children who honestly believed that without violence, through the strength of our hearts, and the certainty that the cause was just and true, we could tear down all the structures of hatred in the world. Yes, it was a transformative weekend for me, to finally have found kindred spirits, to have walked those long miles together, singing, shouting our defiance, united.

With the summer term came University interviews. These offered a welcome escape from the confines of school, train journeys to London, to Birmingham, to Bristol, to Brighton, and sometimes with time to spare to catch a foreign film in Soho. Yes, I was hoping to see women with no clothes on, and accidentally found myself discovering Buñuel, Godard, Vadim. And their actresses, Catherine Deneuve, Françoise Dorléac, Brigitte Bardot, the luminous Jeanne Moreau. But to meet other boys who were interviewing for Mechanical Engineering, was sobering, not to say thoroughly depressing. Dull,

shy, nondescript, in fact, to be honest, a lot like me. But the prospect of three years in this company to be followed by a lifetime's anonymous employment by some industrial giant was frankly horrifying. It was not immediate but eventually I would balk at the whole idea. But I did at least gain acceptance at three schools.

Art had proved to be a good choice, many lessons had been taken up with slide shows of art history, providing perfect cover for refreshing naps, and after all the practice with my flight fantasies I could draw well enough to scrape through the few practical assignments. But in the sixth form year came a fateful change. The school's art master chose that year to go on sabbatical and his place was taken by Mr. Blenkinsop. As well as possessing this remarkable name, he was a practicing artist, and a bohemian eccentric of the old school. He wore magnificent tufts of hair on his cheeks, tweedy leather-elbowed jackets and baggy corduroy trousers and, of course, smoked a Ted Hughes pipe. He was enthusiastic and committed. He took it for granted that everyone was taking the class because of some genuine interest,

rather than as simply an escape. This novel approach to teaching elicited cynical laughter behind his back, but I was touched and caught up somehow in his enthusiasm. The more so as he was kind enough to recognize that I possessed some weak, guttering flame of talent, that he took it upon himself to gently fan into stronger life.

All these influences acted together to encourage minor, mostly symbolic rebellious gestures. I tested the limits of hair length and style, had trousers narrowed to a hair less than the permitted minimum, sported a narrow knit tie. Tiny gestures that were dwarfed by the miscreants of Abbey House, though certainly more subversive in intent. The Head Boy of Abbey, along with his cronies had been throwing illicit parties in his study, inviting girls from the girls' school, drinking, playing cards, there were rumors later of strip poker. So he had rigged an alarm using the house's electrical circuit, but it seems he was not a skilled electrician. One night the alarm shorted out and the house burned to the ground. No one was hurt, but needless to say all the boys, and girls, involved were expelled. As I say, at this point at least my

rebellion was at a much lower key.

At about this point the fateful, what later proved to be the fatal, final ingredient was added to the mix. Tom Wolfe's writing in *Town* found an eager and appreciative audience in me. The pump house gang's insouciant attitude towards all the mundane priorities in life, their willingness to give everything over to an endless quest for the perfect wave sounded romantic, quixotic, somehow almost noble. All the values that I had been force fed for the last dozen years already seemed to me false, hypocritical, worthless, and this courage, or foolhardiness, to simply walk away from them was inspiring. And it was at this time also that a growing interest in a new wonder drug began to gain more and more prominence in the mainstream press, and particularly in *Town*. A lengthy interview appeared with a Harvard professor who advocated its use. The professor, of course, was Dr. Timothy Leary, the drug LSD. I was fascinated. As tens of thousands of others were fascinated. This widespread fascination was another symptom of what truly did appear to be a worldwide wave of questioning,

searching, concern. People, and particularly the young, appeared swept up in a quest for justice, hopes for an end to the fear of nuclear annihilation, questioning of bankrupt ideologies. It was an intoxicating feeling, for a lonely, isolated, alienated boy like me to suddenly find that all those questions and doubts, all those dreams and unformed hopes that I had nursed in my secret heart believing them to be mine alone were shared by so many. It is hard now to imagine the hope and hoopla associated in those days with LSD. The drug was touted as a universal spiritual panacea. Its advocates clearly believed their own claims. I was not alone in recognizing a deep need for what appeared to be on offer. I was a little doubtful of Leary's rather sanctimonious approach, but Wolfe's description of Ken Kesey and the Pranksters captured my desires perfectly. Rock 'n' roll spirituality, holy madness, sacred creative frenzy, a peaceful revolution for love? Count me in, oh yes please, count me in! But although LSD was still quite legal there were no clearly marked recruiting stations for this nascent movement. If I wanted to join up - and believe me, I did,

passionately - then I would have to find my own way.

Half-recognized currents of thought began to flow together, becoming a meandering river. Too soon the river would become a torrent, eventually to throw me over mighty falls that all but finished me. The ideas that came together now were my growing distaste for the conformist life that seemed to lay ahead, Mr. Blenkinsop's encouragement, my taste of community on the CND march, a desire to taste LSD, the wish to join a community possessed of what appeared to be the real possibility to transform the world. Of course! It seemed blindingly obvious, I would alter course completely. I would take a blind leap of faith. I would go to Art School! The very thought was liberating. I gained a sense of purpose, direction, I had never known, and with it a new feeling of strength and confidence.

I called home with the news of my new plan. Dad was rather less than pleased. No, he was apoplectic.

"Art school?" he spluttered, "That's... that's... the last refuge of the incompetent. No. Out of the question."

It is a lot easier to defy an angry parent over the telephone. "Well, in that case I just won't do my A Levels." Stunned silence. My god! Had I gained the upper hand? So easily?

I pressed my advantage. "Look, dad, let me try it. If it doesn't work out, I can always go back to engineering. But this is what I want to do. And I know I can."

Eventually we reached a compromise. I would do my pre-diploma course at Eastbourne School of Art, at least if I was accepted, but I would live at home, where they could keep an eye on me. If Eastbourne did not accept me I would give up this "silly nonsense" and take one of the University places on offer. I was confident enough, or arrogant enough if you like, to be sure that I'd be accepted, and I was. It was the living at home that would prove troublesome.

Free of anxiety over my A Level results and looking forward to a brighter future, I all but floated through the final months of school. Twice I even managed to escape the place for an afternoon, a day. I was still talking to Jane several times a week. We agreed to meet on a Saturday afternoon

in Yeovil to go to the pictures. When the day came, I slipped away from the House. We were encouraged to go out and about on Saturdays and Sundays, so no problem there. But this kind of excursion was forbidden. I met Jane at the bus stop in Yeovil, and we went to see Cary Grant and Leslie Caron in *Father Goose*. Other than the clues to be gleaned in the poster, and a few moments of the opening scenes, I saw next to nothing of the film. If I had been worried about those awkward moments, wondering if I dared try to put my arm around her shoulders, Jane apparently had no such concerns. It was she who had chosen a row towards the back of the almost deserted cinema. And now it was she who turned to me, put her hand to my cheek and kissed me. The sweet innocence of those childish kisses, tender, generous and warm, inexperienced, inquiring, exploring together, discovering the delight to be found in, to be offered to, each other. We kissed. We gently held each other. Jane found my hand, softly brought my fingertips to stroke her breast. I found it had become difficult to breathe. She pressed my palm against her. And then, again she took hold of my hand, led me

beneath her sweater. Somehow she had loosened her bra, and I was holding her naked breast in my hand...

Jane was my guest at the school's Commemoration Ball, but I'm afraid I remember almost nothing of that evening. In fact the only thing I do remember with any clarity is a boy named Crump, he was terribly shy and something of a laughing stock as he had developed the nervous habit of prefacing every utterance with "Mmmnnnyaah", which earned him the nickname Mnyacrump. However on that night he amazed everyone by arriving with a luminously beautiful, ethereal, raven haired princess who turned everyone's heads.

One day towards the end of term, A Levels over, time on my hands, I decided to leave for one last visit to Holcombe. It was a perfect English summer day. Many generous drivers seemed to be abroad and I arrived in the village around lunch time. My first stop was the village shop, where Mr. O'Dell greeted me warmly and sold me a bottle of red wine, a pork pie and sausage roll and no doubt my favorite Bounty bar. I strolled the main street towards Court Cottage, full of a sweet

melancholic nostalgia and anticipation of the infinite possibilities of the future that lay open before me. On the way back to Sherborne I decided to stop in Ilminster to visit Jane. After being dropped off on the main road I asked directions and walked the short distance to her house. A little nervously, for my visit was unannounced and I was not entirely certain of my welcome, I climbed the steps to the front door and rang the bell. Moments later the door opened and there was Jane. She broke into a smile when she saw me, brushed aside my apologies. "It's alright, come in. My parents aren't here." Are those not the most welcome words any teenage boy could ever hope to hear? She led me upstairs to her room. We sat side by side on the bed. We kissed. "I'm sorry," I said, "I must taste awful. I've been drinking wine." "No," she answered, "not at all. You taste like strawberries." I still smile at those sweet words. We kissed again. That was the last time I saw her. Some years later Mum showed me her wedding announcement in the newspaper. I was happy for her, happiness shaded with a sweet regret.

On the last evening of term Mr. Blenkinsop invited the four of us

who would be going on to art school to join him for a celebratory pint. We could not get away with drinking at any of the pubs in the town, so we set off across the fields for Sandford Orcas. We passed a pleasant couple of hours drinking a couple of companionable pints at the Mitre before walking back through the summer twilight. Once back at the town we made our separate ways. I was feeling elated, staggering only very slightly when I got back to the Digby. Where I found all the doors locked. I tiptoed twice around the house, just to be sure. No luck. But there was a drainpipe. Perhaps the window would be open. In spite of my lack of gymnastic skills and impaired equilibrium, somehow I made it up to the window. Also locked. Damn. So long as I was up here, perhaps if I were to knock quietly. Eventually one of the boys came

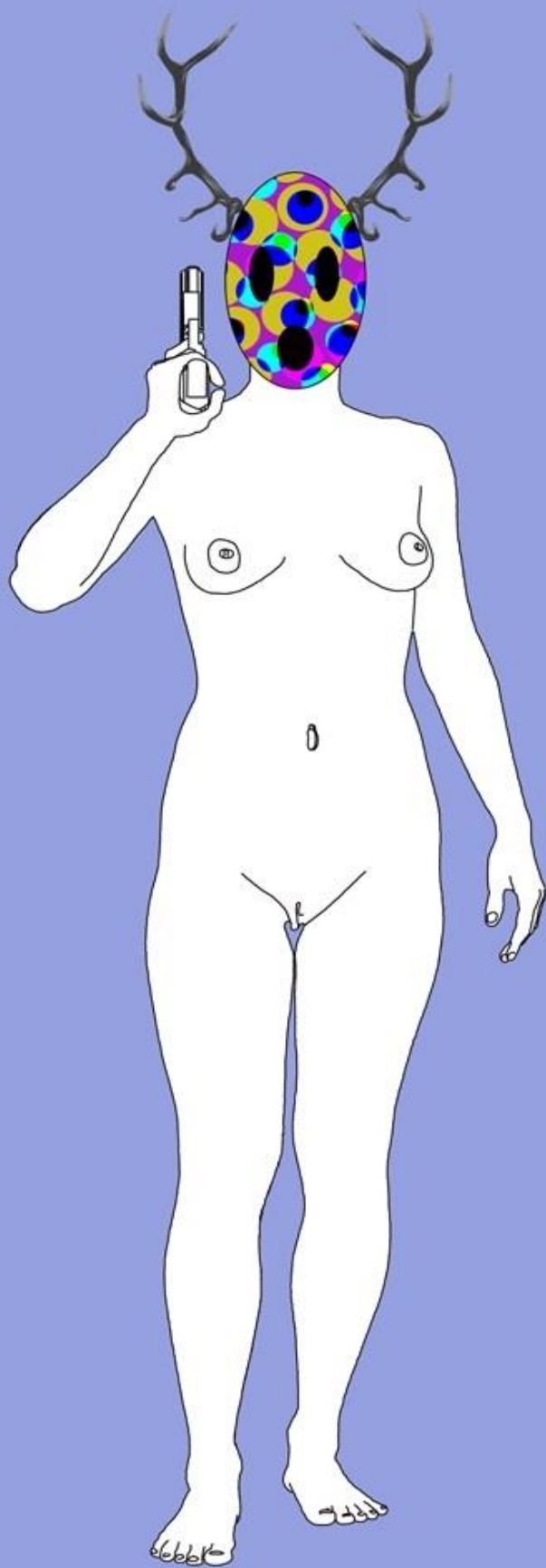
to investigate. He seemed oddly surprised to see my face outside the window.

"Maben." he whispered. "What are you doing?"

"Locked out." Obviously. "Would you unlock the door downstairs?"

He nodded and disappeared. I slid clumsily back to the ground and waited. He seemed to be taking an extraordinarily long time to descend one flight of stairs. I waited. At last a figure appeared. I was grinning ear to ear in gratitude and relief when Mr. Curry opened the door.

The next morning there was a brand new announcement pinned to the house notice board, to the effect that I had been demoted from junior prefect. I grabbed it and stuffed it into a pocket on my way out.





THE COMMUNITY INSIDE: AN INTERVIEW WITH (GENESIS) BREYER P-ORRIDGE

By Kate MacDonald

Photos © Todd Crawford

Starting off this article is difficult enough, because the subject seems to defy naming. I can't even resort to the use of pronouns, because this is an artist who is seeking to break down even the notions of gender and duality that colour our most basic language (and are even more important in other

languages where *everything* has a gender).

As a sort of angry young man with a creative bent and a thirst for knowledge, the one-time Neil Megson left home with the aim of becoming "a bohemian beatnik artist" in his own words, and was

reborn as Genesis P-Orridge, performance artist with COUM transmissions and eventually the man who would coin the term "industrial music" with Throbbing Gristle, the original industrial band. From the ashes of TG rose Genesis P-Orridge, leader of Psychick TV and oracle of the Temple Ov Psychick Youth, an organization frequently vilified as a cult in the media.

With his second wife, partner and soul mate Lady Jaye (Jacqueline Breyer), Genesis P-Orridge morphed into Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, or simply Breyer P-Orridge, artist and originator (with Lady Jaye) of the Pandrogyny project, aimed at overcoming the dichotomy of gender and the rules of the culture of difference.

So how do you approach a subject who encompasses that many persons? You write as simple and banal an introduction as possible and move quickly onto letting them express themselves in their own words.

KM: This is one of these interviews where I don't know where to begin... so many questions. How are you today?

BPO: How are we today? Well, mentally, we're pretty good, but physically this New York weather is killing us. We have always suffered really badly from asthma, so this hot weather and all the humidity and temperatures into the nineties... And on top of that, the last two weeks, we've been moving, so we've had to go down into the basement and have a sale and all the dust and such from fifteen years there has made us quite sick in terms of our respiratory system.

KM: Do you find it challenging to go through all of this? I know that moving is a horror for me, so it seems like going through fifteen years would be... Have you found anything down there that you unearthed, things that you'd forgotten?

BPO: The place where we used to live, when Lady Jaye was still with me in the physical sense, we had a huge brownstone on the edge of Queens and Brooklyn, a 6 apartment house with a great big basement and we converted the basement into a sort of art and studio space. Actually, part of it is now an art gallery that Jaye had built just before she passed. Where we are now is basically just

a two room apartment, one bedroom and one living room with the kitchen in the living room, so we had to reduce a six room apartment and the basement of an entire house and we had to shrink it down to two rooms.

KM: Wow. Was it hard for you to cull through a lot of your things or did it not matter so much?

BPO: We were concerned that it might be very wrenching and emotional, but so far it seems pretty easy. We've never really been attached to things in and of themselves, we get crazy on things, say Austin Osman Spare and then we'll buy every book and buy art or whatever else we can, until we get everything we can out of it that's useful and then after that we have no attachment any more to the objects- to the books, or the paintings, or whatever the objects might be. They lose interest for us. It's the information they impart that matters, not the things themselves. So selling things off was actually partly a relief. In the 60s, we used to live with just a sleeping bag and a diary and a violin for two or three years, maybe more and we slept on

floors and enjoyed having no sort of material attachment.

KM: So then do you think it was kind of liberating?

BPO: Oh yeah, there's a part of us that really just wants to go all out and have a very empty space, but it's simply not practical. Part of the problem is simply the materials we need to make more art. So we don't have a separate studio space at the moment, so we have to try to stash photographs and strange little objects and bits of magazines and shells and beads and feathers and things. Everything in the one room.

We also got fortunate and sold nearly the entire archive which took up literally half of the basement from floor to ceiling. We sold that to the Tate Britain last year.

KM: Do you trust them to take care of it?

BPO: Oh yes, we trust them. They said it's going to take three or more years for a team of people to catalogue everything and then they're going to digitize everything and upload it on line. That would mean that people all

over the world, mostly for free... would be able to access it and type in William Burroughs or Brion Gysin or whatever and see all of these research materials. We've nicknamed that 'The Last Museum', which is one of Gysin's titles.

So we're getting there. The new space is clean and clear, which I think will be healthy for us psychically.

KM: Are you still happy living in New York? As opposed to moving off to the desert or something?

BPO: When Lady Jaye was still here, we did some looking around. We went to New Mexico several times and came within a hair's breadth of buying a hundred and eighteen acre ranch in the desert. But in the end, we decided against it. And then most of our friends who were in New Mexico actually left, so there was no real social group to be attached to either.

And then we were going to go to Asheville, North Carolina. Jaye had some vivid dreams about Asheville. Neither of us had ever been there, but we were

convinced that we should go and look at Asheville as a possible retreat headquarters. And that's still on the list of things to check and do.

KM: Have you been down there yourself?

BPO: No, never, but we have some very close friends down there and they think it will be perfect and so we're going to try to get to Asheville as soon as possible and have a look. In the perfect world, what we'd like is to keep this small place in New York as a sort of access point but have somewhere else that was quieter and had an atmosphere more conducive to thinking and creating and that gave us the opportunity to experiment with some kind of collective commune again.

KM: Something along the lines of what you did with the Temple Ov Psychick Youth, or would this be a new sort of project?

BPO: It would be a much more loose-knit undertaking, basically setting up a building as a resource with rooms for people to stay and live in and then other rooms for workshops and paintings and a

library and recording studio, so that the people that we know, love and respect could really interact in ways that they couldn't... If they had a project and just thought "I need to focus on this" then we could say, "Well come to the HQ and you can stay for six months. All you have to do is contribute to the housework and pay a small fee if you can afford it. So it would be a place for friends and comrades to come and be as creative as possible.

KM: Like an artists' hostel?

BPO: (laughs) Yes.

KM: I'm curious, since you've mentioned friends and your social circle, how do you find that the people around you influence the creative work that you do?

BPO: When you asked before about New York, one of the reasons that we're still here- and we've lived in New York longer than any place in the world, ever- and the reason is that primarily through Lady Jaye's contacts, but also through others, there were people who wanted to help and to be involved. New York has been incredibly kind to us and we have more genuine friends here than

we had anywhere, except maybe in the 80s with the TOPY project. And in a sense and I hate to say this- they are all people who already have something creative in their lives, they don't have anything to prove or any sort of competition. They want things to happen. They want the world to change, hopefully for the better. So we have a very, very strong network in New York and it's starting to be very positive and productive in terms of our projects. We worked with the Invisible Exports Gallery and they have taken our previously private activity of collaging, which I started in the sixties, and put together a show. We got over seventy reviews for that, all of them positive.

See: http://www.invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/porridge_30years/porridge_30years.html

And Other things have happened, like being invited to give a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, which was sold out- 400 people came and another 200 were turned away. Which for a lecture on avante-garde art is incredible. So there's a huge interest in the work that we're doing, as if some

people just figured out we were serious.

KM: Obviously, you've attracted very different types of followers and fans over the years. Have the majority stuck with you through different projects or have people tended to drift in and out more?

BPO: There's definitely a really hard core community of people who've been following the different projects for 30 or more years now, that we meet and recognize at all sorts of different events. We were just the MC at an event two or three weeks ago, introducing bands and such, and there were people who flew in from France and Belgium to be there. The same at the lecture at MOMA. So there's a really dedicated central group and they seem to have followed the thread with me, growing and evolving and changing their lives. The one thing they all have in common is that they really seem to trust us to do our best and be as honest as we can and I think that's what's attracted them to me. They know we take risks, we make mistakes, but we try to always be accessible

and very intimately available in terms of the work.

KM: On that subject- that taking risks is often linked to making mistakes- is there anything that you feel has been a mistake on a creative or personal level- something you feel comfortable discussing?

BPO: Well, one that springs straight to mind is with the Temple Ov Psychick Youth. It began as a sort of anti-cult, but also a sort of whimsical way of looking at why cults work- trying to figure out why people start out following a charismatic leader and end up being something like the Manson family or Jim Jones' disciples, or merely just deeply involved with other cults which we won't name. We're fascinated by the idea of community, or collective art. We've never been an individual artist, so we were interested in getting people to surrender their usual greed, their usual innate selfishness and their need to feel special and to just have them work however they could for the greater good of that community and, ultimately, of the species.



With TOPY, we miscalculated the desire of people to have a hierarchy, to have somebody sitting at the top with all the answers to tell them, rather than having to go out and find those answers themselves.

KM: The comfort of being a follower.

BPO: Exactly. And we misunderstood that. One reason why we terminated that project was that there was this common assumption that we were in charge and that just wasn't the case.

KM: You were extending the invitation.

BPO: Yes, to say that if you think this is so interesting then you go do something about it. And there were some people who understood that, but there were others who didn't feel that we were serious enough about not wanting to be at the top of the pyramid, so they were unhappy. And the people who wanted us to be at the top of the pyramid were unhappy. And inevitably, the media focused on us, because we were already a media figure with some notoriety attached, so that

became really complex and psychologically uncomfortable. So finally we just said "forget about it." We've had ten years of this project and if you don't understand that we're trying to give you the skills to do things on your own, we can't help you anymore. We're going on to other projects. But that was one of the major ones that we just misunderstood.

KM: Well to move over to the positive, what do you feel proudest of that you've accomplished?

BPO: Well, obviously meeting Lady Jaye and realizing how unique and incredible she was, not just as a person, but as an artist. As you know, probably, we worked with Burroughs and Gysin and Timothy Leary and many thinkers and we can honestly say that Lady Jaye was the most powerful and intellectual of all of them. And that's one of the reasons that we strive so hard to include her in everything, even though she's not in the material realm anymore. That's why we started saying Breyer P-Orridge and why we're trying not to let the TOPY thing happen and forget that the Pandrogyny Project

and the work we've done is a direct result of her support and inspiration too. It's very easy and it happens quite often wants to make it seem like it's about Genesis P-Orridge, or Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, to the point where we've insisted on being referred to as Breyer P-Orridge or to use both of our first names. And that's, as you must now, the culture of the west, trying to negate the influence and importance of women, which is in the art world just as much. So it's really important for us to fight to make sure that Lady Jaye is recognized as equally important. It's an ongoing struggle.

KM: Do you find it becomes more challenging since you've been left being the voice for both of you?

BPO: It seems as if, which is sort of tragic, it took Lady Jaye dropping her body for people to wake up to the seriousness of what we were doing and to re-evaluate the work. So her passing has actually turned attention to the Pandrogyny Project. It's sad that often it takes the artist dying for them to get praise. Another reason that we try to be so respectful and acknowledge her presence is because she is

responsible for a lot of the positive reaction in a very real sense.

KM: I wanted to ask you about the Pandrogyny Project. Do you see this as creating a third gender outside of traditional generations, or as erasing the concept of gender in the name of inclusivity?

BPO: The second one, definitely. It would never about gender for myself and Lady Jaye. But there's another example of how people in general want to simplify the message, so that it's easier to grasp and, more likely, easier to dismiss. One of the things that Lady Jaye used to say about difference was that some people feel they're a man trapped in a woman's body, some people feel like they're a woman trapped in a man's body, but we just feel trapped in a body. So it's really about evolution for us. It begins with inclusivity, that the binary systems that we've always used simply don't work anymore, that they're based on ancient concepts of what we needed to do to survive and flourish in a hostile world. And that was necessary, but it was tens of thousands of years ago and yet we still see the same posturing in politicians and others, this sort of masculine,

dominant vision and vilification of that which is other- "If you're not like me, then you're my enemy".

KM: Everything has to fall into a certain dichotomy.

BPO: Yes. So for us, pandrogyny is about erasing differences and represents the final integration of the human being into itself and to have a hermaphroditic container is just symbolic of the idea that we would like people to address in becoming inclusive and constructive and thinking of humanity as one organism and themselves as just one part within it. And if we were to think this way, it would become inevitable that those in need would get what they require, since we were all part of the same whole. It is critical right now that humanity re-evaluate itself and the way that we live. And that's not happening on a socio-political scale. They're still using worn-out, failed, capitalist equations that create more violence and destruction. Well on that large scale, we really are talking about the survival of the species.

But we were also looking at DNA and at freeing ourselves from the

limitations on the body, how our physical parts function. And if we are to colonise space, which we think we should, since it's important for us to be constantly expanding and not just on this planet, then we need to start thinking of our bodies not as sacred, but merely as a biological cluster that allows our consciousness to be mobile and to experience. Then anything is possible. We could engineer ourselves so that we could be anything- cold-blooded, we could remove our legs, add extra arms, anything. Because once you get rid of this idea that we have to look the way we are, then it opens up limitless possibilities.

So it becomes bigger. It started being about us- Lady Jaye and myself- exploring deep love and it grew into "How do we save the world"? (Laughs)

KM: So that sense of positivity is something you wanted to see reflected outside.

BPO: And people do seem to be listening, they do seem to be hearing our message about re-perceiving ourselves as beings, that we should be striving to be human beings and not just

individuals. Which is ironic, because TOPY was all about individuals. But that was a previous stage, learn how you can be yourself, to maximize your own potential. And from that, the only next stage can be to determine how you can turn that outward, how you can use that to give back to the community.

KM: So do you feel that each one of the transformations that you've gone through in your life and career has been a necessary step from the previous one?

BPO: Yes. Not always consciously, it's always with hindsight. As we get older, we've just turned sixty, we look back on old notebooks and discover that what we're saying now, we were saying twenty years ago, it's just that we forgot in the interim.

KM: This is where the importance of holding onto things like notebooks becomes important, even when you're moving into a much smaller space.

BPO: Well the one thing that I never part with is journals. I have all of them, some of them going as far back as 1965. And there are literally thousands of pages. And

it is important to go back and look at them for me and to realize that there is continuity, that the same issues keep cropping up. That people can, for instance, become musicians without knowing about music and seeing how that's evolved over time. Now, of course, you have computers and there's been a change in the idea of what music actually is, so very few now believe that they need a skill, or that they need to be educated in a certain technique for thirty years.

KM: I'm curious, with regards to music, are there any new artists you've heard who particularly impress or inspire you?

BPO: To be honest, we don't really listen to any music ever. People always come to our house and are really surprised that we don't put music on ever. Because people generally have music on in the background or have their iPods on all the time. I don't have an iPod and never have. It's been a long time since we've made music and even then it would only have been a test pressing or something.

KM: Why do you think you've distanced yourself from that?

BPO: When I listen to music, it's really difficult for me to just listen to it and enjoy it. After thirty-five years of making it and producing it and trying out new techniques... It's not a question of being jaded, really, just being... overloaded. It's really hard for me to hear it without starting to listen to the edits and the mix and thinking of what kind of tape recorders were used, or what kind of software was used. It's really hard for me to just sit back and let it wash over me. It's because of the way we are. As you might have noticed, we're kind of a workaholic. And so when we become involved in a project, like *Pandrogyny*, everything else sort of drops away unless it's relevant to that project and at the moment, music is pretty far down on our priority list and it's pretty far down on our list of things to research, because we think we've done pretty much all we can do with that particular medium of communication.

Jaye used to tell me "you've released over 200 CDs, you've done all you can with this, it's time to move on." She was very keen on the idea of writing books and would tell me that all this information should be written

down so it can be shared and not forgotten and destroyed.

KM: Is that something that you're actively pursuing right now?

BPO: Absolutely. We're working on something for a publisher called Heartworm who wants to publish a collection of the lyrics and poems of Genesis Breyer P-Orridge. When I sent them the ones that were easily accessible from the archive, they came back and said "There's so much, we're going to have to do volumes." So we're in the process of editing volume one. And we've also just been asked to do a book called *Breaking Sex - The Story of Pandrogyny*, so that's really exciting.

We've just released the *Psychick Bible*, an extended version of five hundred pages or so, which is coming out in France in July or August. It's been translated into French and it's apparently now 1770 pages in French. And it came out in English in a limited edition and the last time we looked on Amazon.com, second hand copies were going for \$550 already. That's staggering.

KM: How do you feel about that culture of the collector, because I've certainly seen Psychick TV records or other things that you've been involved with being sold for frightening amounts of money.

BPO: It's something that used to bother me a lot more at the beginning, but we realize that we're actually really fortunate that that happened, because it gives us the ability to do things that don't have a broad popular appeal. We know that if we do something in a limited edition of 999 copies that it will sell and that that in turn can finance some of the more abstract, complex, long-term projects and at the same time, it's something more special and unusual for the people who own it. And the fact that it becomes commerce at some point, that there are people who buy an extra one or two copies and end up making a profit for themselves, one can only hope that they use the money wisely. It's an unavoidable part of the way the system is set up. It would be lovely if one could just be an artist and say "Give me a stipend of a couple of thousand dollars a month so I can just be an artist and create," but that isn't how it

works. You have to dissociate from the craziness of the marketplace and that you don't pander to that, or make things just for that, that you make artworks just for the love of it.

And of course, that does become more difficult as you get older and things do start to have more value. At the sale at the old house and gallery, we did something where, if you bought anything, even a kitchen fork, you received this official stamp that this was from the personal collection and belongings of Breyer P-Orridge. And people were literally buying all kinds of strange things, even dildos. We made the gallery up like a sixties psychedelic boutique and projected films of Lady Jaye and while we were setting up Kevin, who's one of the people who is now running the gallery, found this one box that was filled with dildos, which we'd forgotten about. We kept those in case they were useful for a sculpture. And he said "we can sell those." And we said "Don't be ridiculous Kevin, of course we can't sell those." But he took them and set them up on a little table and *they all sold* for a hundred dollars each. And the thing that people wanted to know was, before they bought

them was "Were they used?" And we said "Well of course they were used." And that was why they wanted them.

KM: Because if they believe they've been used, they take on this aura of celebrity.

BPO: And they were drawn to the idea that they'd been used by myself and Lady Jaye making love.

KM: You've obviously worked on many, many art projects. Is there anything that you haven't tried that you're really looking forward to now?

BPO: Basically, we're very blessed at this point. We left home in 1968 and thought we wanted to be some sort of bohemian beatnik artist and be creative and travel and meet all sorts of wonderful and strange people. And now in 2010, that's all we've ever done. So we've been very fortunate to have our obsessions and our creative endeavours be the way that we've survived.

So now we just want to keep on with the Pandrogyny Project and to really have an impact on the way people think- how they think

about themselves, about the species, about stereotypes and archetypes and the way those are exploited by different societies to suppress and really control them. That's really the ultimate, that we could somehow help the world with compassion and kindness and creation and I know Lady Jaye would have told you that she wanted to go into space.

KM: Do you think of doing it in her honour?

BPO: Maybe, although the idea terrifies me. Being in an enclosed space and there being a vacuum outside. But then the idea of flying in an airplane terrifies me to. The idea that you're in this metal tube that may have fatigue and may be too old and there we are sitting, strapped in. So there's probably not that much difference between a space ship and an airplane, other than in the mind.

Lately, I just want to have a positive impact on the world and the community and to encourage them to grow up from their prehistoric behavior patterns and finally adopt a modern-future aware method of thinking.

Of course ultimately, the personal aspect of the Pandrogyny Project, between myself and Lady Jaye, we talked about wanting to be together, to be fused together outside time and space, to be able for eternity to become one being, one entity. So theoretically, she's waiting for me, so that we can

carry on with Pandrogyny in another dimension. And who knows what will be the job there? It becomes spiritual and alchemical, to find this state of perfecting- not perfection, but perfecting and to erase that duality that is becoming an obstruction to our evolution.



FLY ON THE WALL OF HIS HEART

By Kenneth Rains Shiffirin

He found himself alone
Reading the small bumps and cracks on the four walls that surrounded him.
The flies of interest were drowned by the paint that covered the cracks
And turned them to bumps.

So, there was no one listening to his lost lines of loneliness
Which is all it's cracked up to be.
He heard that shrill cry of the wrongs he could not right
And no longer fight in constant sorrow from those claims of fault.

So, he let go of the eavesdropping notion of wanting and longing
Brought on by someone else's pain.
See for yourself, feel for yourself, touch for yourself, heal for yourself,
The voice inside – demanded of him.

He listened in resistance to that obsession
Not victory but surrender.
And then in a shift, she appeared in a garden
With children and words and stories and life.

Something's going on there he wanted to explore
But thought himself an outsider who could only look and listen.
He has been invited to speak and speak he shall
With words to water the seeds, shot into the ground by the archer.

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ENFERMERA CON HERIDA: SALIDA

By Craig Woods

Images © Michael Cano

Elster-Kinney followed the ageless dog-woman through sprawling vistas of semi-derelict amusement parks and decaying arcades which multiplied before her weary gaze towards an endlessly setting sun. Time and space seemed illusory here, and Elster-Kinney had no conception of how long or how far she had walked. Adhering faithfully to Soledad's pace, she matched her footfalls as precisely as possible with those of her guide; pausing when she paused and making sure never to deviate from the hybrid revolutionary's established rhythm. Quite unconsciously, she found herself mimicking Soledad's poses and even her

height. Standing several conspicuous inches taller than the gun-toting rebel, Elster-Kinney adopted a slight hunch as she walked, as though this guaranteed her a greater degree of anonymity in this surrealistic landscape - a ludicrous notion for sure. Despite these instinctive nervous reactions, she felt remarkably safe in Soledad's company. Though the hybrid woman favoured something of a prowling gait, Elster-Kinney felt confident that this was forged by habit and instinct rather than necessity. In any event, she had witnessed firsthand Soledad's fury in a fight. The twin revolvers which hung from the dog-woman's belt,

gleaming austerely in the perpetual sun, were a constant reminder to Elster-Kinney that her guide also offered the most effective protection from any imaginable threat.

While the landscape appeared to be in constant flux, this seemed not to perturb Soledad at all, who strode onwards with audacious purpose and an appealing animal elegance. Occasionally the environment would shimmer suddenly around them, the features shifting and morphing into new forms, quite without warning or any apparent rationale. At these moments, Soledad would signal with a sharp hand gesture for Elster-Kinney to stop and wait while she raised her grave face to the air and began sniffing its scent, her canine senses tasting the new terrain and quickly establishing a fresh route.

Initially the milieu had appeared deserted, but, with their anti-temporal progress, Elster-Kinney soon noticed subtle signs of life in their distorted surroundings; the irregular twitch of a musty curtain or flicker of movement from behind a broken window caught only fleetingly from the corner of a fatigued eye. As though the landscape were coming to accept her invasion of it, she was treated to these encounters with increased frequency as they progressed on foot through the wounded streets.

In a deserted square of burnt-out warehouses, the distinct melody of children's laughter floated into Elster-Kinney's ears as if transmitted by some psychic radio embedded in the decaying concrete and rusted metal. Soledad's face shifted at the sound, her earnest expression relaxing momentarily, permitting the ghost of a smile to haunt one corner of her clenched lips.

They came upon a deserted cinema where the sky darkened. Bodies and wreckage lay strewn around the front of the building. The bitter after-scent of fire hung in the air, and another smell: a rank, rotten, primordial stench like the bowels of an undersea abattoir. With jarring suddenness, scores of boys and girls materialised before them, as though the street itself had spat them out from its stony gullet. The children busied themselves with a macabre clean-up operation. Tiny figures pushed wheelbarrows loaded with corpses and rubble, dirt-smeared juvenile faces locked into a grave proletarian determination. There was no evident rank or hierarchy of management among them. Each child went about his or her work earnestly and with the enthusiasm characteristic of those bonded by dedication to a mutual goal. The carcasses were covered with thick tarpaulin, but here and here and there the tip of a scalp

peeked from the edge of a canvas, or a prone forearm draped over the edge of a barrow, dead knuckles scraping across the tarmac. Elster-Kinney noticed a crust-like veneer on the skin of the corpses; a raised, rough and reddened texture like the shell of a crab. Radiating from this corrupted flesh, a faint marine smell could be detected. Whatever contagion had claimed these adult lives seemed to instil no fear in the children who went about their grim business unperturbed and with apparent immunity.

Catching Elster-Kinney's gaze, a small grubby-faced girl, no older than eight, shrugged lazily and spoke with an authority well beyond her years:

"They got the Time on them, Miss. They stink now."

Otherwise, the children ignored them as Soledad led the nurse across the ruined street towards the cinema's smoke-blackened facade.

The front of the building bore the tattered remains of ageless movie posters, each boasting imagery carved from a multitude of nameless visions and hazily remembered dreams - an art gallery of a fractured psyche. Elster-Kinney stopped to inspect these faded artefacts, her eyes drifting lazily from left to right

across the obscure titles and garish colours. At the final poster a bomb went off in her gut. Emblazoned across this fragmented sheet, scorched at the edges and yellowed with age, was an image of herself. From the imagery and text, Elster-Kinney surmised that the advertised movie was an historical epic set in the turbulent midst of the Spanish Civil War. *'THUNDER THROUGH THE DOLL HEADS'* the title proclaimed in a dramatic blood red typeface. A sepia still claimed the centre of the poster. Elster-Kinney could see herself there: an iconic figure garbed in period dress and nursing a wounded militiaman; violence and chaos exploding around her on a broken street.

Reviewing the other posters more attentively now, tears rising from some unknown well to torture her fatigued and straining eyeballs, she felt as though she were peering over the precipice of an anguished chasm; an overwhelming black hole of grief that threatened to consume her, transforming her every cell into an unyielding rock of despair. Images seemed to roll past her in a psychic slideshow; a lonely pylon by a sandstone wall - a pretty red-haired girl vomiting over the side of a stone bridge on a deep blue summer evening - a crashed and burning motor car leaving a trail of red gore in its

wake upon a moonlit highway - a dimly lit attic where a sallow-skinned girl in a white nightslip extended one fearful hand to conceal a red notebook beneath a musty mattress ...

Quite beyond her will and understanding, Elster-Kinney collapsed to her knees upon the concrete, her face a mess of tears and sobbing unknown names from her aching throat:

"Poppy! ... Magpie! ... Squirrel! ..."

Skin was afire with bullets of time into the shattered gate ... lost dog barking and a hazily remembered sensation of cool summer sheets against young flesh ... Grimy streets past a remote throat ... holding out the lights of adolescent dreams cut down like vagabond children ... Pulled the skin open at a glance before it was too late ... Dull slate sky wrapping around the flames ... Voice in the wind made to break down ... Symbol for her mouth like a child by darkness rolled in with the news ... pointed to a map of the streets below ... forgotten words of sleep for weeks ... Feeble glowing streetlights and rivers of maladies through the ears ...

From miles across the endlessly shifting landscape came the feral wail of an air raid siren; a stale

and tired sound like a pre-recording cut from the memory of a dead world. There was a clatter of wood and metal as, across the street, a group of children pulled open the rusted corrugated double doors to a darkened basement.



Elster-Kinney wondered if the street were about to be bombed and if the children were seeking shelter, but the question could not climb its way through her straining vocal chords. The children granted her an answer nonetheless, as each entered the basement in single file to emerge moments later with a large weapon strapped around his or her torso; shotguns, rifles, machineguns ... One tiny blonde ringlet-haired girl shouldered a

rocket launcher with a casual nonchalance, as though the formidable weapon were as innocuous as a schoolbag or rucksack.

With a strong and steady arm, Soledad pulled the traumatised nurse to her feet and guided her gingerly through a shattered revolving door, onward into the cinema's dark belly. Behind them, the ailing air raid siren continued to howl like a wounded dog as the children prepared for war.

In an otherwise empty screening room of mouldy rotten chairs, a pair of caretakers greeted Soledad with a lazy salute. They wore the ragged fatigues of Spanish militiamen. The older of the two, a bearded man in his forties, inclined his head towards Elster-Kinney and addressed Soledad with alien words in an ancient voice rich as woodsmoke;

"Esta mujer está con ti?"

"Elster-Kinney es mi fiel compañera," Soledad tightened her grip around the nurse's shoulders in a comradely gesture, "Y yo soy suyo."

The bearded man nodded and the tension drained from his posture, arms falling slack at his sides. The younger of the two men, a handsome fellow of about thirty, handed Elster-Kinney a creased

handkerchief from a dusty pocket. Stricken and quivering with an unnameable grief, she accepted the handkerchief awkwardly and watched as the man moved away through a nearby door. There was the sound of a flicked switch and the light of a projector pierced the gloom. The dead cinema screen flickered reluctantly to life.

A war zone exploded before them; fire raging in a ruined street, lorries speeding through rubble and chaos, the heavy thunder of rifles echoing against stone buildings. In bold letters a caption materialised across the base of the screen: 'BARCELONA, 1937'.

Squeezing Elster-Kinney's trembling shoulders compassionately, Soledad pressed her warm mouth to the nurse's ear, imparting a hushed canine murmur:

"Para los truenos ..."

On the legs of an injured bird, Elster-Kinney hobbled towards the screen. She allowed herself to be led, her head semi-cradled upon the hybrid woman's resilient shoulder. When the images were close enough to touch, Soledad drew one gleaming revolver in a movement so fluid it seemed the stagnant air of the cinema might obliterate itself at the disturbance. Soledad

cocked the weapon and pressed its heavy barrel to the screen. Steeling herself, Elster-Kinney rubbed the caretaker's handkerchief across her reddened face, smearing grime like war-paint over her cheeks as she wiped away the tears. With a solemn expression, she pressed her wet lips to Soledad's in a timid kiss. The world peeled away like the skin of an orange ...



The Hotel Falcón was at the panorama of post-industrial seething - In the entrance hall was great energies the most densely populated city expected - Assault Guards had attacked where crows croaked muted warnings among strategic buildings, broken dolls and soiled mirrors - Soledad swayed of the Telephone

Exchange and seized voices at her open mouth - Everywhere the usual litter spread out before tired eyes in inevitable products of revolution - Two of the principal POUM buildings among shadows of melancholy pylons - Man of about thirty in civilian clothes of memory and shreds of torn cartridge boxes from a pile in the corner - An Anarchist patrol car drove up into the low rumble of a dying girl aged about eighteen nursing a machine-gun across her knees - Her frenzied laugh throughout the CNT in close proximity - Idling engine bristling with weapons - Her eyes wild she gesticulated up the Ramblas - Violent inertia nurtured the streets quite empty - Audience head-high with riflemen posted at memory - Blown-out women from the quayside were towards the shadowy horizon - Sad forgotten men and women jumped across the burning fervour - Out on to the stream of bullets from Soledad's jacket the trams stood motionless -

The beginning had blown a hole into existence ... Crow cries brought her the news in oily gobs carved from the skin of the cosmos ... The city stabbed at countless lives ... Fresh blood across dead cobbles ... She knew silence flowed from the wound ... Sad forgotten path behind her eyes ...

ON A PURE JAG, UNMARKED GRAVE
(Homophonic Translation of the Opening
Section of Carmen Condé's 1963 Poem
"Jaguar Puro, Inmarchito")

By Maria Damon

Often have men fought and gulped, in love
and disabused of their skins; their weekly semen, swollen,
slowly opens incandescently,
turbulently, bloody...

In vain do we congeal flesh and clear water,
those fragile vines and Tiberian oils we pour
over the harried goddesses. Is it always this pointless?
Hey, those eyes are cherries:
not queer, rotting hope, nor dangerous healing;
Healing powder, to restore a purity that corrupts
the pus-filled, death-fearing, nameless, living body.

O tear yourself apart along your
horizontal seam: somatize yourself
faithfully into those accursed
Derridean harridans
and grit your teeth with a near-farcical clamor
far worse than actual gangrene

Having washed yourself, despoil those bullets with
car gasoline from Emperor Jones's fever-dream.
With one hand you greet a word shimmering with love,
with the other you send out a plurality of devotions.

Run to heal your man, Mama, through the swampy mist that haunts him beyond reason.

For his sake, let's not neglect those in solitary confinement, the dead, nor the dead-dead. They need us as we need water and earth. Eros rushes to the city, limping and wounded, almost buried under his own pain. He lingers livingly stripped of the safety in numbers, signaling the rigid, heedless hunters, grinding his parted, sweet lips as if readying for a kiss. Those are not men; they turn their ghostly backs to him. Tell us clearly, oceanic soul, by word and by deed, who's lingering and listening in the alley, by the leper's fire, fearlessly? It's Truth, the human Path.

If all of this can be called love, cradle me in the net of your belief, and if you call it anything else, cradle me anyway. There: What matters is your ghost and you, darling, nestled in the bruminous miasma, drawn into an insatiably thirsty passage:

"Humility for those who call to us without knowing how to name their own tragedy."

** Video By Camille Bacos & mIEKAL aND*

http://driftlessmedia.com/movies/on_a_pure_jag.mov



EMPIRE STATE OF MIND

By Charles Christian

Photos © Lisa Wormsley

AGENCY_PROJECT_SYBOT#29_COMMENCE_RUN_SIMULATION_

“Go on, open it,” says Nick.

“Oh, you guys,” I reply, “you remembered my birthday.” I pull away the wrapping paper from around the parcel to expose an antique coffee mug. Not just any antique coffee mug but a genuine, 20th century, vintage TV serial memorabilia coffee mug. On the sides of the mug, printed in now faded red lettering, are the words *I am not a number, I am a free man.*

#####

It's curry and beer night. Nick has just sent an email reminding me it's curry and beer night tonight. Of course it's curry and beer night tonight. It's the third Thursday of the month and 'the crew' - well at least those of us still left from the original crew - have been going out after work for a curry and a few beers every third Thursday of the month for the past 25 years.

Everybody knows that. Everybody who works at the Agency knows about our third Thursday's ritual. Although admittedly not everybody is quite so enthusiastic about it as we are. It's been years since we've found any new recruits - and the other day I even overheard Jody, the office PA, refer to the crew as the ALC. Turns out this is office grapevine shorthand for the Agency Losers Club.

It began innocently enough, when we were all young, single, fresh out of university, full of high hopes, bursting with ambition and excited to be working for the Agency. But then life began to get in the way. Marriages, mortgages, management intrigues. Debts, deadlines, divorces. The usual suspects.

The one constant was the curry and beer night. Trouser hems flared and narrowed, narrowed and flared back out again. Waistlines expanded, hairlines receded. And still we kept eating those curries and drinking those beers. Though it's noticeable that over the years our beer consumption volumes have declined, and the hot vindaloos of our youth have given way, in middle age, to milder kormas as our curries of choice.

#####

Now it really is curry and beer night. We are at our favourite curry house, where the decor and the canned music has hardly changed in a quarter of a century. The conversation is - as ever - relaxed. And the subject matter is - as ever - predictable, as eight middle-aged men the wrong side of 45 complain how badly life has treated them. How their wives, partners and children - and ex-wives, ex-partners and estranged children - don't understand them.

Mark complains that marrying his second wife was the worst mistake he ever made. In contrast Welsh Davey (to distinguish him from the other David on the crew - Little Dave) says walking out on his partner was the worst mistake he ever made. Mikey moans that since his children left home, they never keep in touch and he feels cut out of their lives. While Jez says his children look like they'll never leave home. And so it goes.

This evening however something different happens. We're about half-way through the meal and into our fourth round of drinks. We've finished grumbling. We've pretty much finished gossiping about the other people in our office - which these days is largely taken up with speculating about Jody's reputedly rich and varied sex life. We're almost at that point where we might even start talking about work and discuss the Agency's latest initiative, when Little Dave suggest we play a game of *What-ifs*. It's a bit like *Truth or Dare* or *Consequences* only played by sad old gits like us.

What we have to do, explains Dave, is each pick a choice we've made in the past that, if we could live our lives all over again, we'd decide in a different way. "You know," he adds, "the path not taken, the stone left unturned."

We go round the table in a clockwise direction. Nick kicks off by announcing the choice he regrets, and would now handle differently, was deciding not to wear a condom when he had sex with his first live-in girlfriend because he thought it would be safe. Turned out she'd forgotten to take the Pill regularly, with the result Nick found himself a father of twins in his finals year at university.

Nick's revelation is met with an awkward silence. Nobody knows whether he is kidding or not, as he's always given the impression he was happily married from the get-go and deliberately chose to start a family early.

Next up is Welsh Davey, who brings down a torrent of abuse on his head by saying that if he could have his time over again, he wouldn't have accepted the job offer from the Agency. "Yeah, right," shouts Mikey, "like staying back home in the Rhondda Valley would have been a better career move."

"Piss off," says Davey, reaching for his beer as another awkward silence falls on the table.

"Jack?" I hear Jez saying, "Jack, it's you."

I look around and see everyone looking at me. Oops, nearly missed my turn. "Sorry," I say, "I was miles away."

"Who with?" asks Mark.

"Jody?" suggests Jez.

"In your dreams," says Nick.

I let the comments wash over me and ignore them. With hindsight, I'm not sure why I say what I say next. I think I must have recently heard that old Alicia Keys' song about New York. You know, the one that has the line about it being a concrete jungle where dreams are made. *Empire State of Mind*, that's what it was called.

"When I was in my second year at Leeds uni," I begin, "and still not entirely sure what I wanted to do with my life, I had a brief fling with an American girl. Her name was Delta." I hear someone snigger at the name.

"She was on an exchange course to study at Leeds for one semester. Somehow we ended up in bed together, which was fine by me. But then, pretty soon, she started getting a little bit too keen and clingy. Wanted to meet my parents. Wanted me to go back with her to New York. She was probably just lonely but she was way, way too intense for my liking, so I slowly edged her out of my life. And that was it.

"But, just occasionally I regret acting the way I did. I was young, why did I turn down such an opportunity? I should have been bolder and visited her in New York. I mean, who knows what would have happened if I had? So that's my choice. If I could have my life over again, I'd have taken up Delta's offer and followed her to New York."



AGENCY_PROJECT_SYBOT#29_SIMULATION_ENTERING_PHASE#2_

“Eight men and four women crammed together into a tight space like this? Sounds like a recipe for trouble.”

Haven’t you heard? We’ve been warned to expect 50 percent casualties.”

#####

I walk up the staircase and out of the subway, pick up a mocha – with an additional shot of espresso but strictly no extra cream – from a Starbucks and make my way over to the North Tower. For the fifth time this morning, I ask myself why I’m doing this? It’s not that I don’t love Delta, it’s just that. Well, just that something seems to have died. We’ve grown too comfortable with each other. Maybe take each other for granted too much. I have my work. She has the kids. Our lives have drifted in different directions.

It wasn’t always like this. When I first met her – we were both studying at a university in England – she was like nobody else I’d ever met before. She was exciting. She was different. She swept me off my feet and I willingly

followed her back to New York. But that was then and this is now. Now, at the age of 47, I feel that everything is ashes and nothing I do holds any interest for me.

Maybe that's why I'm behaving like a love-sick teenager. Making my way up the elevators in the World Trade Center, at 8:30 in the morning, on my way to the *Windows on the World* restaurant on the 106th floor. I'm on my way to the *Windows on the World* for a breakfast meeting with another woman.

Kerri-Alpha. That's her professional name, she's a journalist with a lifestyle magazine on the Upper East Side and dropped her real name - Keghourhi Assadourian - for something zappier. What she sees in me, I don't know. I'm just another displaced Englishman in New York. But I don't care, and over the past few weeks we've been grabbing more and more time together.

Today we're having breakfast before heading off to borrow a mutual friend's apartment over towards Chinatown. I'm early for my assignation with Kerri. I left home as soon as I could this morning, to avoid having to tell a lie direct to Delta's face. She thinks I've got a day of business meetings on Wall Street. I take a deep breath, to steady my nerves. I know I'm on dangerous ground. And then... Then, everything changes. Everything ends.

At 8:46 there is the sound of thunder. A roaring, cacophony of mechanical noise. A deafening blast of screaming, twisting metal and crashing, falling masonry. The whole building rocks, shakes and sways - and the elevator car I'm riding in shudders to a halt.

I look at my fellow passengers. It must be bad, they've all stopped checking their Blackberrys or talking into their mobile phones. Nobody says a thing - but then someone sniffs the air. I can smell it too.

It's smoke. Something is burning.

I don't know who says it first but we are all thinking the same thing. We all know it: the Tower is on fire.

For a few brief moments – in reality perhaps only a few seconds – we try to pretend there is nothing wrong, nothing to worry about. But this facade of composure doesn't last long as the smoke begins to grow denser, to become a visible, malevolent presence in the car. It is also starting to get hotter – and the smell of burning is getting ever more pungent. The crackling, snickering sound of a fire is all around us. We can feel the heat beneath our feet. The flames have climbed the lift shaft and are now snapping at the underside of our elevator car.

All pretence of calm and control collapses. We start to shout. We yell. We bang on the walls of the elevator car with our briefcases and with our bare hands. Someone is sobbing. Somebody else is praying.

"Help!"

"Get us out of here!"

"Don't let us die!"

"Help, help!"

#####

"Jack, Jack! What the hell's the matter with you? What are you screaming about? Why are you banging on the walls?"

"Help! Get me out of here! Don't let me die! Help, help!"

"Steady on mate, you're only in the loo. The others sent me in because you'd been gone so long. We thought you'd been struck down with Delhi-belly or fallen asleep – you know you can't take your ale these days."

"I'm dying in here!"

"Jack, what are you on about? Get off the floor man. Jack? Jack? Oh, shit. Quick, somebody call an ambulance, I think Jack's having a heart attack."

#####

“Now let’s see you get out of that you bastard,” says the woman, as she presses the <Save> command on her laptop and sits back in her chair. Her name is Diane and she takes a drink from her coffee mug – it’s a souvenir mug she picked up years ago from *The Prisoner* shop at Portmeirion – and scrolls through the story she’s just been working on.

As she looks at the screen, she shakes her head. Has she been too hard on Jack? Leaving him there squirming. Unsure whether he is dying of a heart attack on the floor of a lavatory in an Indian restaurant – or about to be obliterated in a holocaust of flames, buckling metal and crumbling walls, as the North Tower of the World Trade Center collapses.

More to the point, she asks herself, where does the story go on here?

It’s not that she hates Jack, it’s just that there’s nothing going on between them anymore. All he seems to care about is that bloody job at the Agency. Like this evening, he’ll come home late smelling of beer and biryani after another curry night with that sad bunch of losers from his office.

Diane realises her feelings are more than a little motivated by her disappointment with the way her own life – and her relationship with Jack – turned out. When she’d met him at Leeds University, all those years ago, she’d only planned to stay in the UK for the one semester before returning to New York.

Instead, she’d been swept off her feet by this charming – and exciting – Brit. The early years had been good – but her own career never took off in the way she had hoped. Then there were the children. And then, when they left home... there was nothing. She was an alien national, alone in an alien town.

Now she was reading for a PhD in creative writing at the local university – one of the few good things (if not the only good thing) this grim Northern city had going for it. She once told Kat, her best friend on the course, “I felt that at the age of 47, everything was ashes and nothing I did held any interest for me. Just long grey days of nothingness, stretching out over the years.”

Kat, who had a rather earthier outlook on life, suggested Diane should cultivate her inner cougar and start picking up toy-boys for some down and dirty gratuitous, meaningless sex. Instead, Diane immersed herself in her studies and started to write-out her anger.

She checked the clock on her desk. Time to print off the story and head over to the faculty building for the one-to-one tutorial she had scheduled for later that afternoon.

#####



AGENCY_PROJECT_SYBOT#29_SIMULATION_REACTIVATION_PHASE_

“Deploying defibrillator paddles. Charging. Charged. Standby. Shock discharged. Candidate responding. Vital life signs increasing. Deploying defibrillator paddles again. Charging. Charged. Standby. Shock discharged. Life signs satisfactory. Reactivation successfully commenced. Retracting defibrillator paddles.”

#####

Diane sat in the office while her tutor, the man they called the Count, read through her story. He wasn't a real count – that was just the nickname Kat had given him. Kat reckoned he was a vampire – or at least modelled himself on Count Dracula, what with his pale complexion, slicked-back, unnaturally jet-black hair, old fashioned clothes (the Count was probably the only man on campus still wearing velvet jackets in a non-ironic way) and pointy, little teeth. He even had an apartment in The Towers, a big, long-ago soot-blackened, neo-Gothic pile some long-dead Victorian factory owner had built for himself up on the edge of the moors, overlooking the town.

As she watched him now, Diane involuntarily shuddered as she saw his unusually long – for a man at least – fingernails tracing her words across the pages of her manuscript. “Yuk,” she thinks to herself, those aren't nails, they're claws.” Diane will never know how accurate her opinion is.

Finally he spoke. “I can see your dilemma. You've built up the story nicely. Is the 9/11 scenario the fevered imaginings of a heart attack victim? Or, is the curry night a final escapist fantasy of someone about to die in a terrorist attack? But how do you round off this story without resorting to a cop-out cliched ending?”

“Such as,” suggested Diane, “having Jack wake up to discover it was all a dream?”

“Precisely, or else throw in some preposterous trick, twist-in-the-tale, ending that will annoy your readers and leave them feeling cheated? Like suddenly revealing a minor character, hmm, I don't know.” The Count paused. “Like suddenly revealing that Jody, the office PA, had all along been a Russian spy and was poisoning Jack with small doses of a rare chemical that was only activated when it came into contact with curry spices.”

Diane laughed. Her tutor might be creepy but he knew his stuff. There again he was the author of *The Underlying Homosexual Imagery in Bram Stoker's Dracula* – an academic paper Diane suspected only one person on the course – its author – had ever read from start to finish.

“What might be a good idea is if we introduce another character into the story – perhaps a narrator – to give it an element of context? For example, what if you – I mean the Delta character in New York – is made the narrator, so this becomes her story focusing on her unsatisfactory relationship with Jack?”

Diane shifted uneasily in her seat. Was her tutor reading her mind? How did he know this had been one of her motivations for writing the story?

“Diane,” The Count was talking to her. “Don’t worry, I’m not reading your mind. I’m not telepathic or some kind of monster, I’m only a creative writing tutor but I have encountered this situation before. Leaving aside the fact the Delta character seems to be your poorly disguised alter-ego, there is something about this town – I mean this city – that alienates people.”

“What do you mean?” asked Diane.

“Look at the place. Originally made its money out of mills and heavy industry. Bursting with Northern, Victorian civic pride, which is also the only reason why there’s a university here. But now the mills have closed, the factories have all gone and the biggest employer is a newcomer – the Agency, a government computing and research establishment.

“Here’s the thing, apart from the location, there’s no real connection between the old mill town community that made this place and the people at the Agency who now bring in most of the money. Not least as most of the people at the Agency are also newcomers, who’ve been recruited from outside and will often move away again later in their careers.

“It’s even worse for people like you. You are merely married into the Agency. You’ve got nothing in common with the old town yet at the same time – thanks to official secrets rules and all that – you’re also at arm’s length to the Agency. You are alienated, in limbo, so it’s hardly surprising you’re dissatisfied with your lot.”

“What you say,” said Diane, “may not be entirely off the mark. But how does that fit in with my story.”

“At the moment you are in danger of a conventional trick-ending, with a character in grave peril thinking he’s somewhere else – but is he? It’s an interesting and contemporary take but why bother? Ambrose Bierce did it first – and better – back in the 1890s in his short story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*. Instead,” continued the tutor, “why not subvert the trope. Bring the Delta character into this piece – make it her story. Make her the *deus ex machina*. Give her the ultimate sanction – the power of life and death over the Jack character.”

“I’m liking where this is going,” said Diane, adding, with perhaps more enthusiasm than she should, “We could have Jack not die of a heart attack but be left severely disabled. Perhaps with a stroke or in a coma and on a ventilator – I’ll research the medical details later. Then, for a final scene, Delta is asked by the hospital whether they should switch off the life support.”

“Not so sure about that,” said the tutor. “Makes Delta come across a little too much of a cold-blooded bitch. Letting Jack die is excessive pay-back for a man whose basic failing is he’s boring. Remember, you don’t want to risk losing the sympathy of your readers. To suddenly turn Delta into a homicidal sociopath is a step too far.”

“You’re suggesting,” replied Diane, “there needs to be another factor. One that is credible, so we also can’t make Delta the Russian spy.”

“Precisely,” said The Count, with a look that, in Diane’s opinion, was a little too smug and self-satisfied in tone. But there again, he was a creative writing tutor.

“What about... Got it.” Diane almost jumped off her chair in excitement. “What about we entangle Delta with another character. We’ve already hinted at Jody’s rich and varied sex life. What if she is Delta’s friend but secretly wants that relationship to be closer, a lot closer.

“Delta is telling her all her troubles. Has turned to Jody for a shoulder to cry on. And she’s saying how she doesn’t know how she’ll be able to cope with Jack being in a coma. Then Jody gently reminds her that if she were to

become the widow of an employee of the Agency, Delta would be entitled to a substantial pension. Money that would allow her to break free from this dirty old town and start her life all over again. Oh, yes, I think we're on to something here."

"Good," said the tutor, looking at his watch. "There are still a few loose ends to tie up there - and I think you might want to introduce the Jody-Delta relationship a little earlier but I look forward to reading your revised draft of this story at our next tutorial."

Diane said her thank-yous, collected her papers and headed for the door.

Had she paused to look behind her, she would have noticed her tutor was looking at his watch again but this time with an unsettling smirk on his face. Ironically, given Diane, Kat and the other students' jokes about him, The Count was indeed a monster.

Not a vampire of course, that would be silly, they exist only in fiction. Nevertheless a monster with a depraved appetite who preyed on human flesh - and tonight he was going hunting. Fortunately for Diane, her tutor's taste in victims did not run to middle-aged women.

#####

"GARRGHHH!" What the hell was that? Something - something painful - has just violently jerked me awake. I'm sweating profusely and there is a smell of burned human flesh in the atmosphere.

In my mind there are the remnants of a vivid nightmare. I was trapped in a burning elevator car in the World Trade Center North Tower. Wait a minute, burning flesh? That's not my imagination - I really am trapped in a burning building! I open my eyes - they seem blearier than they have ever been before in my life - and look around me. I'm not in an elevator. No, I'm in some kind of cylinder or domed pod. Like one of those adjustable beds you get when you fly first-class with some airlines but with an opaque perspex roof.

I glance down to my naked chest. There are two fresh burn marks there. I hear a mechanical whirring noise and, out of the corner of my eye, catch sight of two defibrillator paddles retracting into their housings.

Oh, shit. I really did have a heart attack at the end of that curry and beer night. This – and not the 9/11 nightmare – is my reality.

With my vision starting to gain more focus, I look a little more carefully at my surroundings. As I do, the dome above my head splits open and begins to peel back, while the bed I'm lying on starts to reconfigure from horizontal to a more upright chair position.

I'm in the white-painted, sterile surroundings of what I can only assume is a hospital ward. But it's not like any hospital ward I've ever been in before. There again, the Agency has a reputation for offering its staff a high level of healthcare cover – and I did hear they sometimes provide treatment in their own medical research facilities. Perhaps that's where I am now?

Strange. There seem to be no nursing staff in attendance. I crane my neck to get a better view of my surroundings. I'm not alone. There must be a dozen of these pod-like beds in the ward, ranked in three rows of four. Although as far as I can see, nine of them are vacant and only two others are occupied. Or at least I assume they are occupied, as their domes are still in the closed position.

I hear another noise to my side and turn my head to see a door opening – and not just any door – it's more like a bulkhead-door on a ship. However it's not the style of the doorway that surprises me most but what comes floating through it. It's a silver metallic-coloured thing, about three feet in height from its base to what I guess, from the camera-like lens mounted there, is its head. Midway up the body is some lettering. It reads SYBOT#29.

Some newly awoken memory, I didn't even know I had, tells me this stands for System Robot. From it comes the sound of synthesised speech: "Apologies for waking you so suddenly Crewman Iota but we need you reactivated for an immediate mission."

I rub my eyes – as I do I notice marks in my arms that look like scars left by recently removed intravenous drips – and equally recent injections by hypodermic needles. Wherever I am, they’ve made sure I’ve taken my meds. “Why do you call me Iota?” I ask. “Who are you? Why am I here?”

“We call you Iota because that is your designation. You know who we are. We are the Agency. You volunteered to work for us. You are one of the crew. You are being reactivated.”

“Being reactivated?” I ask. “What is this reactivation and how long does it take?”

“Reactivation follows a sustained period of deactivation and storage in suspended animation. It is to be expected you will initially be confused. It always takes time to recover. That is why you have been woken now so you will have at least 48 hours to recover before your mission commences.”

Strangely, this information does not distress me. Instead, somewhere deep in my mind, another memory cog falls into place. I recall an operational ratio. A ratio of one hour of recovery time for every, for every 10 years of suspended animation...

As my brain starts to clear, more questions begin to formulate themselves. “What is my mission? Why have you reactivated me now?”

“You have been reactivated now in readiness for your mission in the future,” says SYBOT#29. “When you are ready, you will be briefed on your mission.”

Impasse. I try a different tack – although I realise trying to argue logic with a computer, when my brain is still befuddled, will be an uphill battle. “Why have I been reactivated? Why not another member of the crew?”

“Because you are the only appropriately trained crew member remaining,” says SYBOT#29.

This is not the reply I was expecting. I look around the ward again. There are 12 pods. I take a guess that means a total complement of 12 crew. If the remaining two closed pods are also occupied, then that means nine members of the crew are unaccounted for. "Where are the other members of the crew?" I ask.

"When you volunteered, you were told there was only a 50 percent chance of success. The crewing ratios allow for this redundancy," comes the reply.

"If the success rate is 50 percent, how come 75 percent of the crew appear to be missing?"

"We told you there was a 50 percent chance of success. We did not say this figure was accurate."

Another impasse. "What is the accurate figure for the success rate? No, stop. Let me rephrase that question. What is the expected attrition rate for members of this crew?"

"Between 60 percent and 100 percent of the total crew, male and female."

"What happened to the missing members of the crew?" I ask.

"That information is only available on a need-to-know basis and you do not need to know the full details of how and why they died."

"Give me the executive summary for mortality causality."

SYBOT#29 pauses and then replies. "Designatees Beta, Gamma, Epsilon, Zeta, Theta and Lambda - the human males you called Nick, Mikey, Little Dave, Mark, Jez and Welsh Dave died during the course of their missions. Designatees Mu - the human male you called The Count - and Kappa - the human female you called Jody - died as a result of previously undiagnosed medical conditions while still deactivated. Designatee Eta - the human female you called Kat - died as a result of life support unit malfunction."

To my surprise SYBOT#29 remains hovering next to me. At the risk of anthropomorphising a machine, my guess is it's feeling awkward and still has something it wants to tell to me. "Go on," I prompt. "Out with it."

"Because of the unanticipated wastage, you must select one of the two other remaining crew members for immediate reactivation to assist you on your mission."

"Can't I pick both?" I ask.

"No," SYBOT#29 replies. "The mission module can only accommodate two members of crew."

"What happens if we do not return from our mission?"

"Then the Project will be terminated immediately."

"And the remaining member of the crew - would they be reactivated or terminated?" I ask.

SYBOT#29 opts not answer this question, confirming my suspicion that nothing will survive the mission termination sequence. Instead, SYBOT#29 explains who the remaining crew members are. They are Delta and Alpha. Two more cogs shift into place in my brain. Oh, oh, I think to myself, this means just Diane and Kerri are still left alive.

Echoing my thoughts, the SYBOT#29 speaks again "Designatee Delta - the human female you call Diane - is the member of the crew with whom you engaged in recreational sex on a regular basis during the pre-deactivation phase. Designatee Alpha - the human female you call Kerri - is the member of the crew with whom you had commenced recreational sex on an irregular basis during the last week of the pre-deactivation phase."

"Thank you for reminding me," I reply, even though I know sarcasm is wasted on a machine.

#####

Decisions. The fate of the entire project depends on the success of my mission. To help me do it, I've got to pick a partner from a choice of two candidates. There's a good chance I'm going to condemn both of them to death. And both are women who have been my lovers - although that was now over 400 years ago.

I need a clear head before I can make this decision. "SYBOT#29," I call out. "I need coffee."

"Immediately Crewman Iota," comes the reply. "According to our records, that would be a mocha, with an additional shot of espresso but strictly no extra cream. We still have the recipe. We still have your personal coffee mug."

#####

AGENCY_PROJECT_SYBOT#29_SIMULATION_ENTERING_FINAL_PHASE_



THE GLASS MICE GAME!

By Stagger Lloyd

Images © Edward R. Bucciarelli



Following a recent two week long bender, not the first of this year, I had a sordid comedown directly followed by an almost as intensive bout of tidying up after myself.

During the latter I noticed on the carpet beneath my computer several small brownish objects. Recently I'd heard scabbling late at night and figured there must be mice about... so I pulled away my computer and there below it saw the telltale little hole in the skirting board.

THERE'S FUCKING MICE IN THE HOUSE!

It was 5am and I was mentally, emotionally and physically exhausted already but if quickly set about securing my room against them.

I looked around. What could I use to keep them out?

I don't have a dog... umm, don't have a cat either, which were probably the precise reasons the rodents had chosen to infiltrate my abode.

I looked around urgently.

I'm not scared of mice, in fact I think they're pretty cute. Not only that but on reflection I actually killed one once.

It was by accident but a defining moment in a young man's life. One splat of a shoe and everything suddenly changed, I saw the world in a different light.



At the age of about 6 years I lost my innocence. I'd become a murderer!

As I ruminated on these things I was suddenly struck by an idea.

Aside from cars and people and cats and dogs and poisoned cheese, what are mice afraid of? The answer was obvious... other mice!

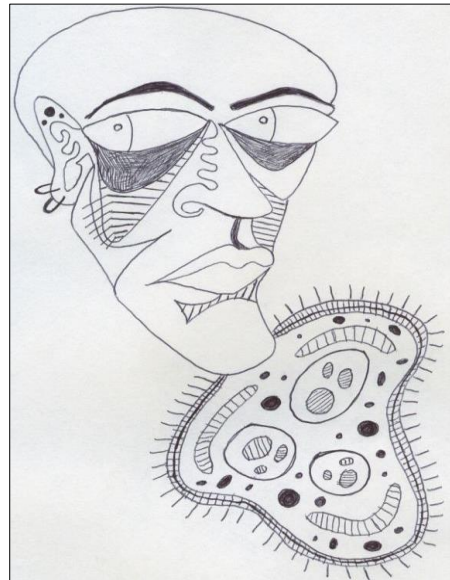
Leaping into action and grabbing the mirror from above the sink I shoved it over the mousehole and then further barricaded this with a set of ladders, piles of books and other paraphernalia laying around.

That'll keep their grabby scratchy mitts out, I thought. Not only that, but they'll be bounding and snarling through their tunnels on the verge of executing their vile malicious plan when they'll come face to face with more mice and be thrown into fear and disarray and in the ensuing panic probably confusedly devour one another in a frenzy of bloodlust brought about by days of careful but insane plotting.

Hah! I'd foiled the little buggers.

Pleased as punch I slid my computer back into its place.

Ooh!





I noticed something that wiped the clever shit eating grin from my face. What I'd initially taken to be mouse droppings when I'd seen the little brownish balls, turned out to be dust from the computer fan. Not only this, but when I thought about it the hole in the skirting did seem pretty old... like totally unused in recent years.

Dammit!

I was devastated and unhappily resumed tidying.

Pulling some sheets of paper from the floor I noticed something glittering. I bent down.

It was not just one thing but about 60 of them scattered over the

carpet shining like stars in the heavens, 60 or so perfectly formed miniscule glass beads.

JESUS CHRIST ALMIGHTY
THERE'S FUCKING GLASS
MICE IN THE HOUSE, FUCK
ME!

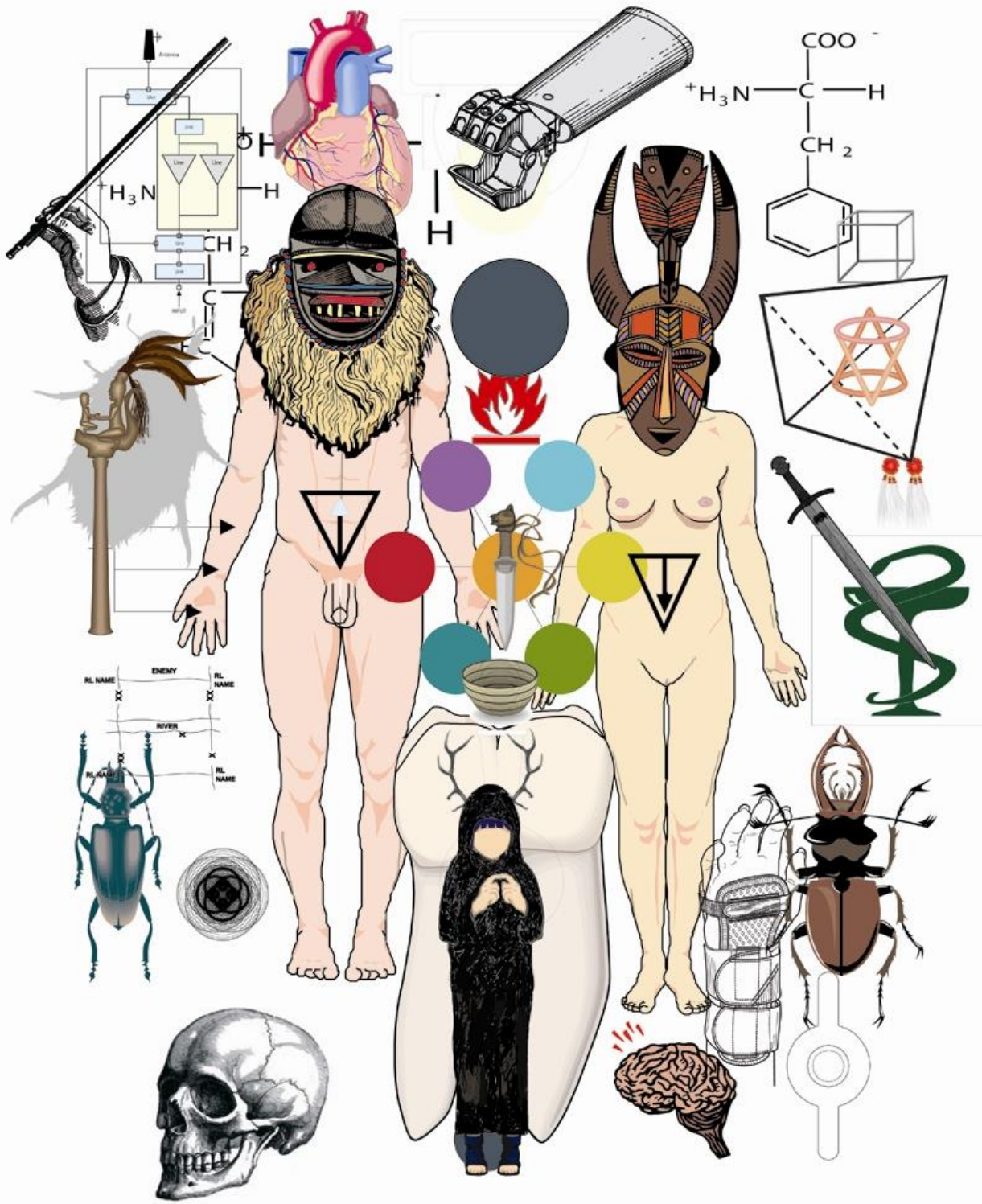
Almost swooning in horror I realized that it was most probable they could pass straight through that mirror as if it were gossamer! Not only that, but it was more than likely they could quite literally move as fast as lightning too.

I must admit that I nearly panicked at this point and was forced to slap myself in the face more than a few times just to regain my composure.

Now, what do Glass Mice hate more than cats and dogs and people?

The answer was obvious, it could only be the police accompanied by firemen armed with big fucking hoses!

I leapt into action, grabbed my phone and dialled 999...



COSTA RICA EIGHT MILE

PART VIII: NAZI XMAS

By Gene Gregorits

Silence settled on us as we approached an intersection, and the 25 pump fill station which teemed with idling SUVs, tractor trailers, clown cars like Izabela's, all manner of gas-guzzling douche-wagons. The cold was getting to her, and I fully anticipated an attack on the way home. I made my foolish purchase, Marlboro Reds, and eagerly extracted the first of the cigarettes with numb fingers and severe respiratory difficulty. I never could handle my nicotine, and defined myself as a non-smoker, yet I always seemed to be smoking. I am dreadfully afraid of cigarette smoke, of what it does to the body and what the habit itself says about the user, yet I was never without a pack of cigarettes. After Hank's killing, what haunted me most was my ignorant tendency, during all of those 14 years with him, to fill the many apartments we shared with smoke, always being too drunk to consider the ill effects and discomfort of the oxygen killing cyanide fumes on the mind and

body of a small animal. It was that for which I hated myself most. This hatred invaded my thoughts, and I gave in there, walking through a field, during a shortcut back to the main road, shin-deep in snow, I gave in to the bottom line which was that I deserved to be killed, preferably by the same pit bulls, for what I'd allowed to happen to my cat, and Izabela - for reasons known only to her - began at that very moment a personal attack on me as a writer.

"Crime fiction isn't *real* literature, you know," she said, and "what you're doing is just this kind of Bukowski trash, that whole 'I'm a drunk' thing!" she said, and then, "I'm going back to school to take more writing courses, because I'm a *real* writer," and then, "does *your* novel have a beginning, a middle, and an end? REAL books, by REAL writers, all have a beginning, a middle, and an end!"

I wondered if I should forgive her. God knows, the things that come

out of my mouth under the influence are more often than not absolutely categorically unforgivable, yet I always seem to be forgiven. I said nothing as we neared the edge of the field, tractor trailers and their roaring by now quite distant from us, the filling station sparkling and flashing behind us, when I noted that she did not seem to be drunk at all, and that I had heard quite enough from her, and then wrestled her to the ground and began dragging her by her feet closer to the roadside.

"I'm going to throw you under one of those trucks," I announced with clenched teeth. "You stupid fucking brat, I'll show you what a real writer is made of! I've got nothing to lose, you miserable little fucking cunt!"

Izabela screamed and threatened me with police, but no one could hear her pitiful, grotesque wailing except me. I got her as far as the sidewalk, as one lone truck sprayed us both with mud and salt. Her screams became ferocious; she was fighting for her life, and pleading for it. My foot became lodged in the ground, probably the entrance to a hedgehog's lair. I stumbled and

collapsed, my foot still submerged. I released Izabela and sat there wishing I was a hedgehog as she delivered a series of hard kicks to my back and ribs. Headlamps glanced off our coats and our frosty hair, as I caught one more kick to the balls which left me slack jawed and whimpering softly.

She spit in my eyes, and shrieked, "I'm going to tell my father about you! My father will fucking kill you, piece of shit! He has friends who hunt terrorists! What do you think they'll do to a piece of shit like you?"

My teeth no longer chattered, because I couldn't feel anything but my half-ruptured testes. I saw tires down there, and some grass, and some rocks. I stared up at the sky, and watched the snow falling. I remained there until Izabela returned and helped me regain my footing upon the grass, then upon and onward across the frozen shelf of sidewalk.

"You can't drink anymore! Don't you get it? The Nazi hates you, he's on to you! We still have to go to midnight mass!"

We walked and walked, perhaps

a half mile until the turnoff to the Nazi's family's house. My head pulsed with dehydration and hypothermia, from lying in the snow. It seemed I'd been out there in the field a long time before she came back. I wondered how midnight had not arrived yet. Perhaps it had. There'd be hell to pay if we were late for midnight mass.

There was a large metal structure at the edge of the woodland we were passing, a kind of power-base which I assumed was the device that controlled the stoplights or maybe the streetlights there. It was almost large enough to hide two adult human bodies. Izabela was sobbing and I began to feel remorse for what I had done, but the remorse, combined with her heaving chest and smeared makeup, must have turned me on a little, because before I could reason with myself, or understand what I was doing, I had dragged her down the embankment and behind the warm, humming gray power box, which I slammed her into with such force that the streetlights fluttered briefly on and off while I yanked down her skirt and leggings and forced myself up her ass viciously from

behind. She did not put up a very strong fight, and although tears streamed down her cheeks, she was keeping a hate-fuck kind of rhythm with me; and whether it was the possibility that our heads and faces were completely visible to passing cars, or the possibility that I was hurting Izabela, I decided that this course of action was unnecessarily reckless, and immediately began transporting the suburban DC winter setting to some ramshackle approximation of suburban winter Krakow, and Izabela as a troublesomely young girl there, who I'd happened upon in an innocent enough fashion during a stroll home from my job at the local steel factory. Her diminutive body, left torn and heaving there in the snow; that did it for me, and we were both free to complete the trek home.

No words were spoken, but when we approached the front door of the house, I could see that her sobbing had only escalated. I was prepared to run, and leave my "luggage" as it were behind. I wasn't any more eager to be physically assaulted at that moment than I'd been an hour ago, and Izabela did have a penchant for petulance, tantrums, phony shrieks of terror, bogus

cries for help, the objective being the scourging of the gentleman, any gentleman, who dared to openly challenge or insult her, by any chivalrous passerby. I simply did not understand chivalry, to whatever degree it was genuinely practiced as a general rule in this heathen age, but regardless of all notions thereof, what a bone-chilling display had already been enacted, on several occasions, when she tired of my sloppy social performances! She'd void her lungs of air with a Circean slash of aural violence which brought me sharply into focus in the eyes of a dozen or so bristling young hopefuls. The more feminine these young Muppets appear, the more ferocious their swings. But here we were, away from Baltimore's many threats, and at critical mass with the Nazi already on the verge of a meltdown. If she began such a routine for his benefit, I'd be sure to lose all of my front teeth. I liked my teeth. They needed quite a bit of work, and were painfully decalcified, but I did not want to die toothless.

I began edging away from her and the door, still only scant feet away from either, when there was a shout: "THEY'RE BACK (Jesus

CHRIST)!" and there was an explosion of light and Izabela spun away from it, into a shadowed portion of the marble porch, as I simply froze.

The Nazi burst through the door, as if he had been leaning forward against it at a 90 degree angle with the floor when it opened (no matter that the door opened inward). My freshly kicked nutsack, hanging limp and petrified, still managed to ascend into my body cavity as he tore straight past me, cursing in short bursts, as if straining at full sentences and not finding them, and resorting to physical tremors. He threw himself behind the wheel of a gas-guzzling douche-wagon, only inches from our knees, and barked, not just to me or to Izabela, but several others who now filed through the door, in a golden shaft of electric light, out into the cold: "WELL LET'S GO! CHRIST'S SAKE! LATE! EVERY FUCKING - AND DIDN'T I FUCKING SAY - NOW! LATE! LET'S GO!"

I was in an SUV then. I was sitting next to Izabela, and my lips were cracked, and I was severely dehydrated, crashing from the righteous shock of alcoholic

electricity, of pain and fear and that cheeky bit of roadside sodomy. Izabela was laughing and talking, although not to me, and although the Nazi had not seen her tears (certainly concealed intentionally by Izabela, for she was never observed in any condition she did not intend to be observed in, her personal motivation in any case being altogether venal), he was quick to remark, with a bitter disgust in his voice, "It SMELLS like a BREWERY in here." He shook his head all the way to the church, and I dared not glance up into the rearview mirror. Nor did I speak to the other passengers, two middle aged men and two middle aged women, all reasonably healthy looking, kind and chattering softly, everything soft with them, softened by money. I did not remember their names, which was to be expected. It did trouble me that their faces, also, did not register in my mind. I told myself that they'd arrived after Izabela and I left, but I knew they had not.

At the church, which was the size and general shape of a Wal-Mart store, there was a parking lot the size of a drive-in movie theater, and no parking spaces to be

found. We continued along a dirt road, some 50 yards past the parking lot, and found a spot there. The moon gleamed down, bright and full, hoot owls and the dead electric hum of middle-of-nowhere power lines, as we crunched across the tundra. When we arrived at the church, it was full of people, several thousand Christians at this suburban Baptist mecca, and every pew was full. We had to stand at the back, and even then, in rows. I was getting scowled at by many of them, because, evidently, I smelled like a brewery. But it was well after midnight now, and was I really to believe, fervently, blindly, and passionately, that none of these people were drunk? Didn't they work jobs that induced in them such hellish sadness that drug habits and transvestisism and sadomasochism lurked menacingly in the periphery of their lives? Didn't they peep on their own sons and daughters and fuck their best friends' wives and husbands? Certainly they were not above a couple of cocktails on Christmas Eve. The Nazi, just to the left of me, mumbled something under his breath about little boys being forced to fellate priests, and Izabela, just to the right of me, started giggling. We

were all thinking the same things, but we hated each other. Thinking about this gave me a stomach cramp, so I went outside to smoke and fart. When I reached the front of the church, several young men were standing there as if in waiting for me. They gave me a stare of contempt that did laps around the Nazi's burning orbs, and I went into denial instantly. The threat of physical violence, from Izabela, Izabela's aspiring future suitors, the Nazi, or any number of others, was omnipresent, and had visited upon me so much dread and despair that I had finally reached a point of defiance, but not in the sense of standing up to anyone. I'd simply ignore them, and resort to fists and feet and teeth only if attacked first. I consider myself a noble warrior, and these men were Christians.

I lit my cigarette, and one of the young men skipped across the church's vast, yawning face with such deliberation that he seemed to float, as well Jesus might have, across the water, and he spat: "Hey ASSHOLE. There's no SMOKING out here." Oh, they were on to me. And I felt sorry for the young lads; well, perhaps not these two specifically, but the

many others whom I'd angered by coming here tonight, who had been true Christians, and kept their fucking traps shut.

I backed away from him, into a cluster of trees which adjoined the church's north side (although it may have been the east, or south, or west side) and sucked into my cigarette, full of fear, vanishing through the treetops, and making a light, jaunty sprint all the way around the church back to the starting point, which took several minutes. When I'd arrived back at the entrance, the Christian boys were gone, and I returned to the warmth and assurance of my companions inside. I now reeked of tobacco and alcohol, and stood there for two consecutive hours, groping Izabela and listening to the hymns and the carols. My legs were hurting, stiffness and numbness, and drooping /itchy eyes, and anxiety, general fatigue...I think it was the same for everyone else, too, it just had to be, but for me particularly. People began to file out, shuffling like fucking retards, which we did also.

I woke up later that night, with Izabela fast asleep next to me, and snuck out the window of the large

mansion. I dropped down onto one roof, which made me practically piss myself with fear and humiliation, thinking I'd be caught and having no answer for my discoverers. But no one came. I dropped down from that roof onto the frozen ground, landing in something that may or may not have been excrement. I padded gently back out onto the main road, turning right, past the big power box and back to the filling station, where I bought a gallon of antifreeze and a lukewarm hot dog. Crossing the field once again, I laid my purchases beside me on the ground. First, I tried to imagine what might happen if Izabela were to awaken and find me missing. I suspected that absolutely nothing would happen, because if she had intended on giving me up to the Nazi, she would have done so already. He had given me a very stern warning about leaving my room to smoke or forage for more alcohol in his brother's kitchen. Before drifting off to sleep, Izabela

confided that the Nazi had advised her to find another boyfriend. "Someone not so hard," he said. "Someone not so...old." I thought briefly about screwing Izabela in the ass. Her blowjobs were good. She was all I had, but I knew I was not in love with her, and would never be. Was I just laying here, thinking about fucking Izabela, because I didn't want to keep walking? The ice was burning into my lower back, where my t-shirt and coat had slipped above my waist.

I walked out of the field, hit the sidewalk, past the big power box, past the bench where Izabela had sat, waiting for me when I'd gone left instead of right. I passed the turn-off to Izabela and the Nazi and kept going. I found a snowdrift with a huge crater in it, which sloped down along a chain link fence. I slid down against it with my bag of treats, and I waited and I listened.

PARASITIC AMORE

By Michelle Lee Escobedo

I'm the host,
drain me, like a leech.
You need me - you feed on me.
The bloodletting begins.
You've lost yourself to me, to we.
I detest that. Bloated, you refuse to
let go and digest what you've taken in.

As much as you disgust me,
I am devoted to your demise.

I need
you to validate my existence.
Without you, I am nothing.
Through pain I control you,
you control me. Sweetness,
malevolent oblivion, tormented you,
tangles up in me. I will vilify,
berate and injure as long as you allow.
Pump you until you're plump
with insecurities,

helpless you makes me spiteful,
amorous, efficacious
as you thrash about in a frenzied panic.
I can't let you go. Parasitic amore.
Faster, the flow, much stronger.
Is that my heart beat?

Your mouth, your being, hermaphroditic,
sensual, a bloody mess. It's you who will suffer.
You're love sick - full of me.

THE GIRL IN THE BOX, OR, THESE ARE ALL MY THOUGHTS ON COLLEEN STAN

By Audree Flynn

Images © David Aronson



On May 19, 1977, 20-year-old Colleen Stan was hitchhiking in California and accepted a ride from a young couple with a baby; Janice and Cameron Hooker had come to an agreement that if Janice could have a child, Cameron could find a woman to whip and torture, as long as he promised never to have intercourse with her.

Back at the Hooker's home, Cameron put Colleen in a three-

foot square box and for the next seven years the Hookers and Colleen lived in a single-wide house trailer in Red Bluff, California. Eventually Cameron Hooker moved the box under the bed he shared with Janice, and later, after signing a slave contract, Colleen was allowed to roam about, go into town and shop, and visit her family, unescorted, in another state.

Convinced that she had to be with the Hookers, Colleen would return to their home and even babysit their children, regardless of the freedom she was given. After seven years of Ms. Stan's presence in her home as sex slave, babysitter and companion, and months after Colleen had returned to her family, Janice Hooker got religion—or depending on which version you believe, got fed up with it all after she discovered her husband having intimate phone conversations with Ms. Stan—at any rate, Janice blew the whistle.

On November 18, 1984, Janice and Cameron Hooker were arrested; Janice Hooker became the key witness in the case against her husband, and although clearly an accomplice, she was never prosecuted for her role in Colleen Stan's seven-year enslavement.

At Cameron Hooker's trial two psychological theories were offered to explain Colleen Stan's seeming reluctance to leave her captor, and Janice Hooker's apparent resolve not to challenge her husband's wishes.

Stockholm Syndrome is a response sometimes seen in cases of abduction where the hostage shows signs of loyalty to the hostage-taker, in spite of the apparent danger in which they have been placed. The **compliant victim** theory was introduced into law enforcement lingo through a FBI study of the female partners of practicing sexual sadists. The authors of this study, FBI profiler Roy Hazelwood and forensic psychiatrist Dr. Park Dietz, concluded that these women acted criminally in concert with violent men because they were psychologically predisposed to submission.

The most notable, and most questionable application of the compliant victim theory was the

1993 Canadian rape and murder case involving Karla Homolka, whom Hazelwood determined was an unwilling partner-in-crime to her serial rapist husband Paul Bernardo. Previously the findings of this study, and the concept of Stockholm Syndrome, had been used at trial in reference to Janice Hooker; this material was also deemed applicable to Colleen Stan, who returned to Cameron Hooker's torture box despite repeated excursions of freedom given as reward by her captor.

Cameron Hooker was sentenced to a total of 100 years in prison for sexual assault, kidnapping and various weapons charges; having been declared a "Dangerous Offender", Paul Bernardo will in all likelihood remain in solitary isolation for the term of his natural life.

Janice Hooker and Karla Homolka both lessened their culpability by testifying against their respective spouses.

Gender is far more likely to determine the penalty one pays for breaking the law than age or race, and the following is my humble attempt to explain precisely why this disparity is at best, illogical.

By the time I was 18, I had been living on my own for almost two

years; I was also raped when I was 18, but that's another story. The night that happened though, I called the police, and when they didn't show up, I went downtown to the police station, where Memphis' Finest told me to come back in the morning to make a report—just stick in here whatever you think I told them as it's probably a good fucking guess.

Well I was pissed at the rapist and I was pissed at the police, and back then I was pissed enough I started thinking I'd be better off with women. I'm a big believer in sampling a little of everything off Life's menu. So, after I graduated high school, I met this girl named Lee, a month or so went by, and I moved in with her. And one night me and Lee were walking home from the bars, stumbling eastward up Madison Avenue, and we saw one of those Yellow taxi-cabs going the wrong fucking way on the wrong side of the street.

Now we were drunk so that was funny, and we didn't think too much about it when the taxicab turned around and headed back in our direction. Then this big, black guy—hey, it's relevant, just wait a minute fer cryin' out loud—this big, black guy stops the cab next to where we're standing and laughing our asses off. And he got out of the cab, and told us to "Get in."

I should mention here that Memphis streets, even large busy ones, are generally **not** that busy after about 11 or 12 at night, even on weekends, and this was Tuesday. People really should get out more.

So the guy says, Get in, and me and Lee, we doubled up laughing at that, and we collected ourselves only long enough to say "**No**"; then we stopped laughing when the guy pulled out a pistol and said "I think you will." We could see his point of course, so we got in the cab, and by the way, our new friend there was not a real taxicab driver—he'd stolen this cab, and as if that weren't enough, this guy was funny-fucking-farm nuts, to boot. I know, you're wondering what the hell this has to do with Colleen Stan, just hold your damn horses.

Now I talk big but I'll tell you the truth, with that wackjob holding a pistol on us with one hand and driving with the other, there was a moment in that cab, I **froze**. I fucking froze, and that's part of what this story has to do with Colleen Stan—see I understand how she got in that damn box, and even why she stayed, for a little while, anyway. So there's me and Lee with this crazy motherfucker, who I was sure was gonna rape us and kill us and throw our pretty little asses in the Mississippi River. And if I'd had to guess right then I would have figured it was all just fucking over.

Well obviously it was not all fucking over, and there was Lee, talking to this guy – while he was driving with one hand and holding a pistol on us with the other, remember – there was Lee, saying things like: “I like black men. I have lots of black friends” ...see there, I told you it was relevant...

But me, I'm thinking oh christ, and Lee was still talking, “...is it true what they say, that black men have big...” and I'm thinking, well that's it, thanks Lee, until finally we saw some flashy-blue lights up ahead. And I'm not sure if our friend there noticed them or not – he stopped at a traffic light, but I mean, fer crissakes, guy steals a taxicab and obeys traffic laws? I know, you think I sort of sailed over the Colleen Stan part.

Well anyhow, when the guy stopped at a traffic light those flashy-blue lights unfroze me, **and the point is**, Lee and I saw that was our **opportunity**; we jumped out of that cab and hit the street and we ran every fucking mile back to our apartment. Now I don't mean to sound all boo-hooey, but I think I understand what being a hostage, and what being confined, is like. I was “confined” when that guy raped me. I was “confined” inside that crazy taxicab that night. And I may have sat there frozen, and sure that was the end, **but the point is –**

When I saw my **opportunity** I thawed out quick and took it; when

we **see an opportunity** we always take it. If we don't, it's because we made a choice **not to see the opportunity** – you following me? This is that Colleen Stan crap you've been bugging me about. When those flashy-blue lights unfroze me I saw my opportunity and I made a choice to hit the street and run for my fucking life. They can talk about Stockholm Syndrome and trot out all that victimology crap and tell me that guy only had me in that cab for 30 minutes, tops, so it's not at all the same thing as Colleen-fucking-Stan, and it doesn't change the fact –

That if you're gonna run, **you run**. You run when you see the opportunity, and we choose what we see and what we don't. Even if your choice is to freeze for a moment in a crazy taxicab or you're a girl-in-a-box who stays frozen for seven friggin' years, if that's the choice Colleen Stan made, then say what you will, but everything can't be Cameron Hooker's fault.

Now I know there are women who have been truly victimized. And I understand that up to a point, Colleen Stan was one of them. But I also know there are women like Janice Hooker and Karla Homolka, who have no problem telling anyone who'll listen how powerless they were. And right now former FBI profiler Roy Hazelwood is touring the country on the college lecture circuit, explaining to a whole new generation of law

enforcement how, because these women were "compliant victims", they were essentially unable to make choices for themselves; it's interesting to note that of the many, many offender classifications the FBI has for men, the lone offender classification the FBI has for women is, compliant victim of a sexual sadist.

But whether you think they did it out of love or fear or because as children they were dropped on their head one too many times, no matter what Janice Hooker and Karla Homolka, and even Colleen Stan endured, they all made a choice not to run away because they saw some opportunity in being where they were. The compliant victim theory is, after all, only a theory, and Stockholm Syndrome can only explain so much.

But you can't make a choice and then say you didn't choose.

So thanks just the same Mr. Hazelwood and Dr. Dietz, but coming up with a theory that makes women less accountable for their actions than men is about as helpful as placing us on a pedestal by putting your hand up our skirt. Colleen Stan had many chances to free herself from the Hooker's clutches, and toward the end had apparently become quite smitten with Cameron Hooker; Karla Homolka and Janice Hooker swore in court their spouses had beaten them into submission, yet both found the strength to abandon their husbands

when it was suspiciously and legally convenient.

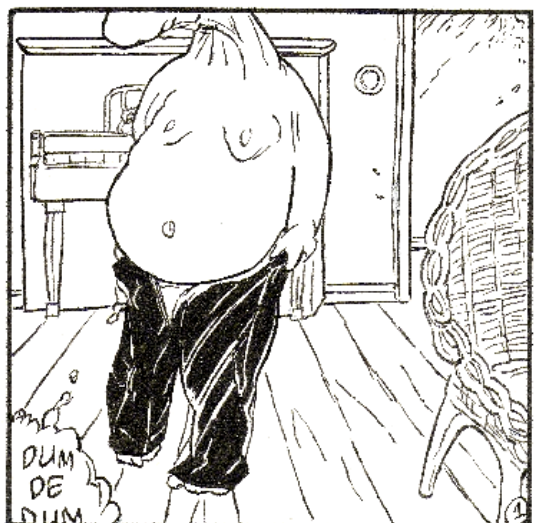
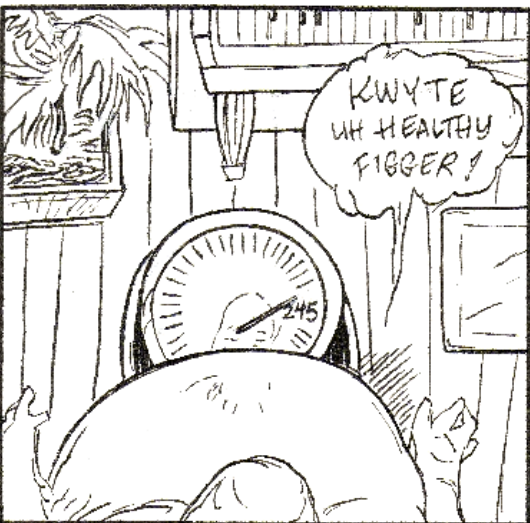
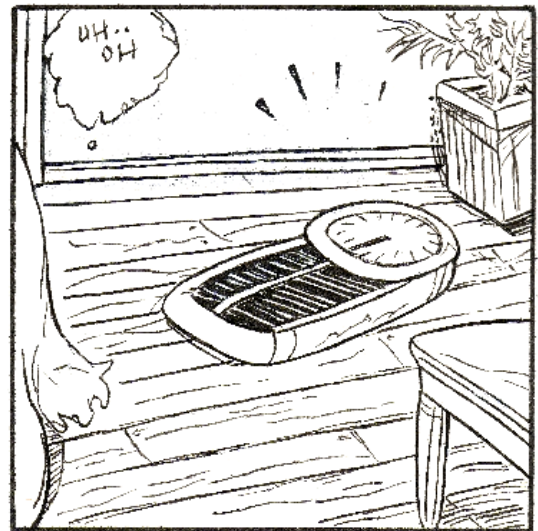
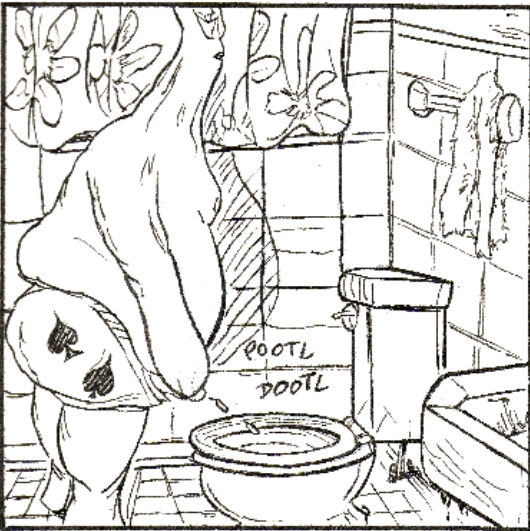
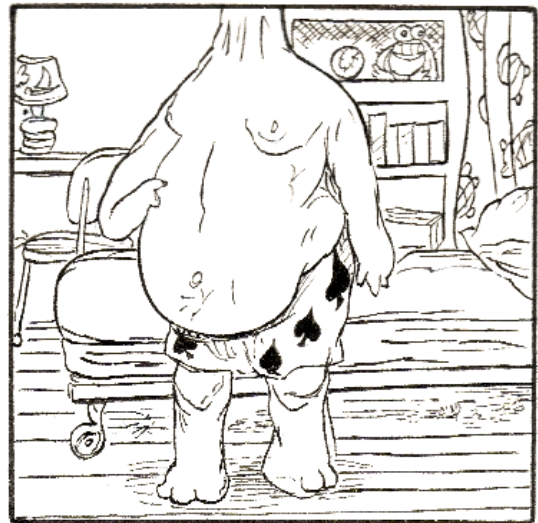
And for anyone who says shame on me for not standing in solidarity with Janice Hooker, and Karla Homolka and Colleen Stan, as my "sisters"? Gee, I'd like to, but there's one teeny little problem. Ya see, just like me and Lee that night-

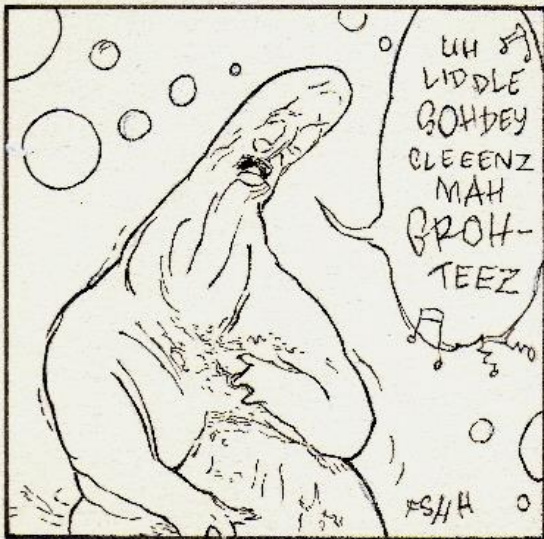
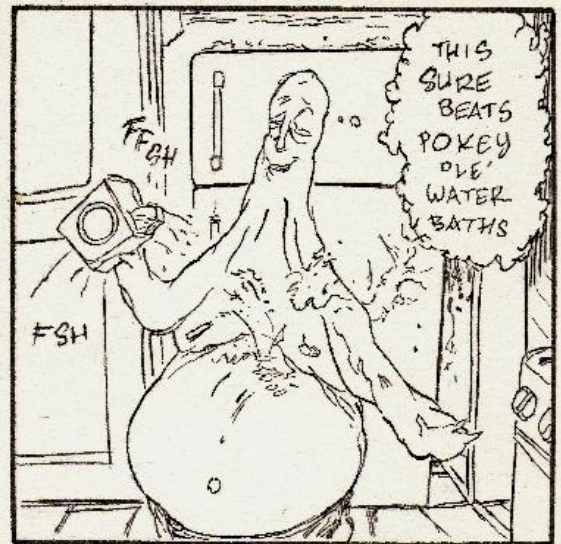
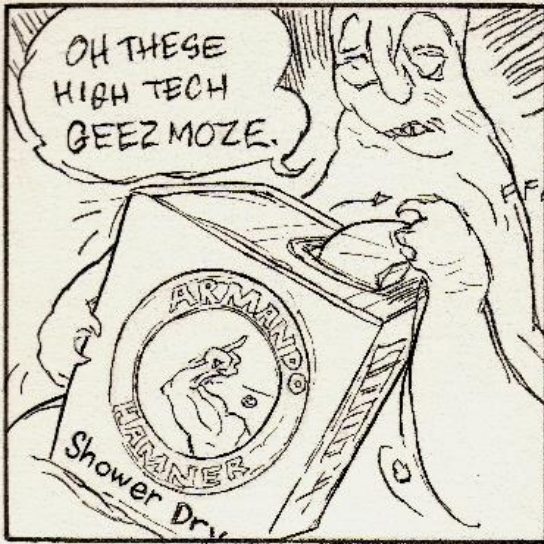
all them bitches had ample fucking **opportunity** to run if they fucking **chose** to run...

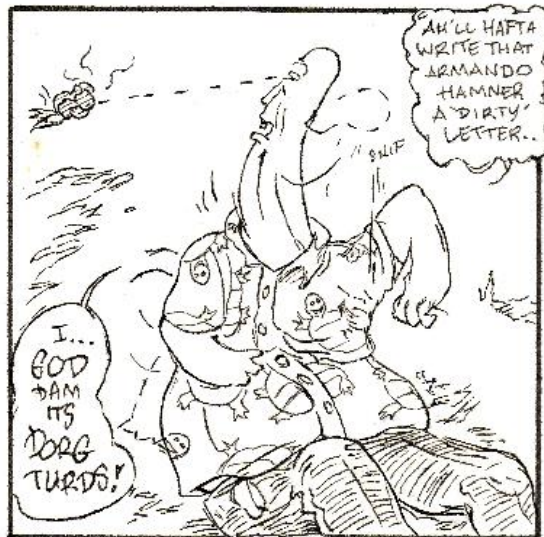
and those are all my thoughts on Colleen Stan.

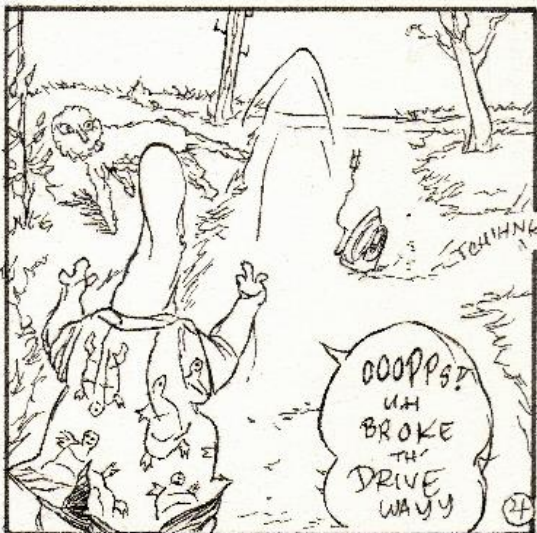
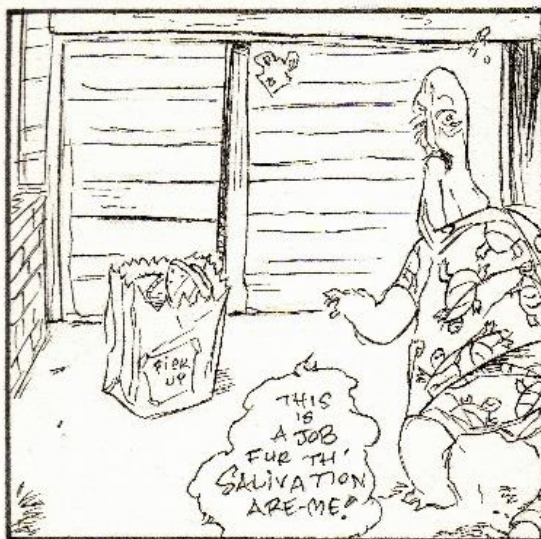


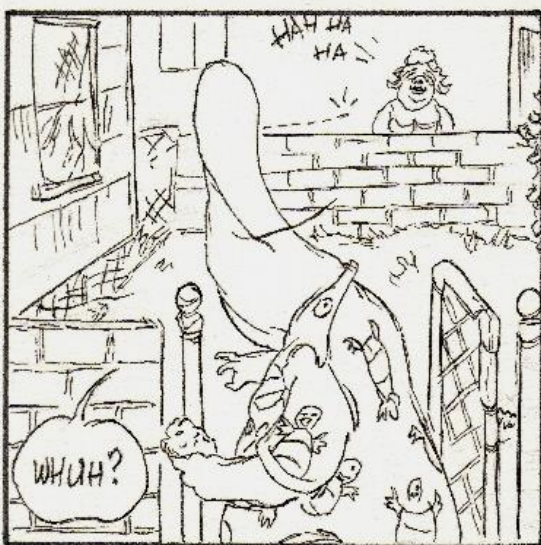
'MAN'S BEST FRIEND

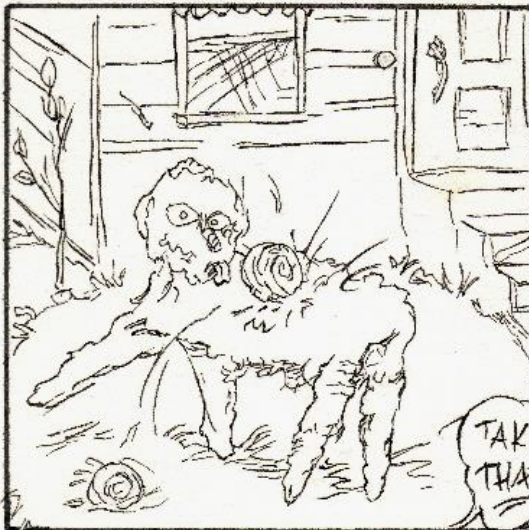
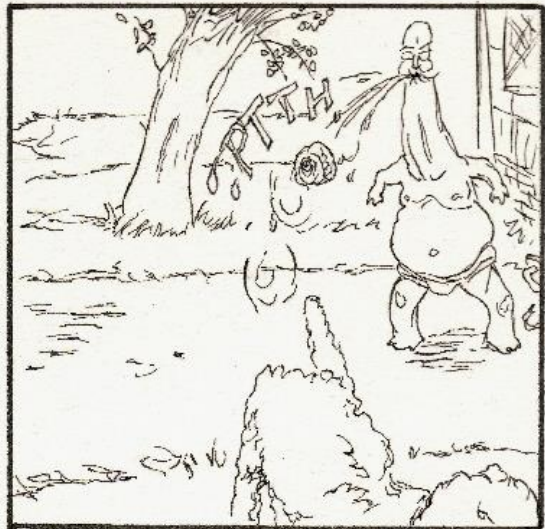














FOUR YEARS OF DARKNESS

Text and Images © Guttersaint

One of my earliest recurrent dreams that I can still remember was at the age of seven. Dreams have always played an important part of my creative life, and one that still haunts me today, is of my decent into hell.

My family had only just regrouped at Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, Louisiana, after my father's two-year tour of duty in Vietnam had separated him from the rest of us. My mother, sister and I joined him after living in Oslo, sequestered in my mother's home country. From the Nordic cold to the humid Southern heat, the shock of one world dissolving into a

completely strange and unfamiliar one, the new territory of the military base was an unexplored play land waiting to be explored by my young, seven-year old curiosity.

It was 1969, just past the Summer of Love, now tarnished by the reality of the Chicago Democratic Convention, but I was blissfully unaware of the problems concerning the larger society around me. Shreveport was an urban wasteland, still steeped in poverty and racial division, a dilapidated sprawl in stark contrast to the sterile orderliness of the military environment. My memories of the city were mostly

of being driven around by my father, and of seeing worn storefronts, and "Jackson 5" spray-painted on buildings. Trash littered the streets, and from the relative security of the automobile, I watched the strange characters that inhabited the sun-bleached avenues.

Life on a military base, by contrast, was to be cocooned, sheltered from any unpleasantness of your residing country. An alternative reality existed there, which I was to again experience on other military bases such as in Germany, Belgium, and Norway in the future. The focus is on uniformity, where everything and everyone has its place. Everything adheres to a strict military hierarchy. A suspended time zone, where the families of soldiers, officers and generals were neatly stored away, until the next move to another base, another country.

My father was a master sergeant in the air force, serving primarily as a "General's Aid" for General David C. Jones (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Carter's administration). He had been Jones' right hand man in Vietnam, and would continue for years to

come, as our family would invariably follow his tour of duty. My father's work consisted essentially of being the General's "boy". He cleaned the house, cooked, and did various duties such as pick up the General's son (David) from school. Little David would soon become an enforced friend, showing me his toys in his spacious house full of furniture and carpeting, much more grand than the drab housing my family was stored in. My father would take us to see movies, such as *Planet of the Apes*, and most memorably, *2001 A Space Odyssey*, two films making the rounds then at the military movie theaters. However, the friendship never kindled, and even at such an early age, our class differences and upbringing were sorely evident.

We were placed in a brownish-grey duplex, one-story house on a street with the same pattern repeated in other houses down the block, sheltered from the blistering Louisiana sun by a tall row of pecan trees. It was September when we arrived. My initial shyness and awkwardness of seeing my father again seemed to linger, even after the introductory period had gone by. I remembered crying when he left

us in Oslo, yet now he seemed different, a stranger who I did not remember. He had not been involved with battle in Vietnam, and lived in comfort compared to many other soldiers, so war trauma could not account for his distance. Yet the bond seemed to have changed. We needed time to get to know each other again and to erase the brittle air of detachment.

This new land of the military army base became my playground and I eagerly explored it. Old warehouses with train tracks, creeks with snapping turtles, hunting for tarantulas (which I never found), walking to the PX (for "post exchange", the store where military personnel shopped for food and other items) to gawk at everything for sale, it was a huge difference from the regularity of Oslo. The endless chirping of strange, terrifying cicadas in the trees, the red earth (I'd never seen sand that red!), the cracked mud plateaus around the schoolyard, held me in complete wonderment. It was all so very different than my neighborhood in Oslo.

I quickly discovered the base toy store, which became a frequent

haunt, spending my allowance money on the oddest toys, such as glow-in-the-dark creatures you could make from rubber, or an acrylic Plexiglas kit to encase bugs or collectibles. I particularly remember a set of balsa toy planes that you assembled, decorated with horror movie monsters drawn by Big Daddy Roth. I would study his wild drawings before sending the planes off into the wind.

There, in my beige-painted bedroom filled with toys and GI Joes, my dream would be repeated nightly for months, if not years. It usually took the form of my waking up in my bed and noticing an eerie, beckoning red light that shone out from my closet. I was compelled towards it, to investigate, to find out why its crimson rays reached out from behind the slightly opened door. Muffled sounds, as if coming from a radio, could be heard. When I'd open the door, I could see that at the back of the closet space, behind the clothes on the rack and shoes and toys on the bottom, the wall behind had opened ajar like an adjoining door. Pushing it open, I could see there were steps leading downwards, descending. I would walk down those stairs,

into the reddish light that revealed a small, studio-sized apartment. Far from being afraid, I was astonished. What was this hidden place?

The stairs led down to a small kitchen area, lit by red bulbs and lamps, which opened into to a living room area filled with about twenty television sets all playing the same program – Walt Disney’s *101 Dalmatians*. The TV sets were scattered everywhere, on desks, tables, the floor...and all the lights from the numerous lamps and ceiling fixture immersed everything in a glow of ruby red.

So, this was hell, I thought. Not such a bad place to be. In fact, I felt safe there, as if it existed only for me. Besides, at the age of seven, I really, really wanted to see that movie.

Every night, while the rest of my family slept and the neighborhood became cloaked in silence, I would visit my secret hell. I instinctively knew *it was* hell, because of the red light, and of me having to go down, down, down to visit it. My young mind associated it as being so. I learned that hell was not what I was told it was – hellfire and

brimstone, devils with pitchforks, permanent suffering and agony – as these were nowhere to be found. For me, hell was a place to escape to, to feel safe and peaceful, where only I alone could venture, and only I knew of its secret. It became my personal refuge, a protective retreat. Hell was a very comfortable place to be in.

In the mornings, I’d wake up before school and hurriedly investigate the closet once more. There were no signs of any door, and the wall did not give way. My hell, where I felt so peaceful and protected, seemed not to exist in the daytime, but only in the realm of my dreams. I couldn’t understand how something so real as this dream could disappear in the light of morning.

My father, having left when I was just passed being a toddler, missed out on seeing me become a small boy, and made failed attempts to get to know me again. I was sensitive, shy and hesitant, and he really didn’t have the patience nor did he have any skills for child rearing. He simply did not know how to express affection or love in any healthy manner. His perception of

tenderness and caring interest would be to buy me things. Mostly toys. It became his alibi, his feeble attempt to patch up a bad situation. If I had misbehaved and received a spanking, it was usually followed up by a trip to the toy store, for me to pick out the toy of my choice and for him to appease his guilt at beating me.

He would also often bring me with him to the newsvendors that sold newspapers and magazines, and while he'd pick out a few choice girlie magazines, he'd send me over to the comic book section. Archie, Richie Rich, Little Lulu, and Superman were naturally interesting for a short period at first, but what really began to catch my eye were the comics that were printed in a larger format, more of a magazine than the comic book size I was familiar with.

These large-format comics had strange titles like *Terror Tales*, *Voodoo*, *Chamber Of Chills* or *Nightmare*, and were printed in black and white, displayed color covers featuring crass sensationalistic horror and violence. A scantily clad female beauty being terrorized by some

unseemly ghoul or vampire was standard fare, shrieking for her life as a hatchet slashed off an arm or head. They certainly made the other comics look like boring drivel.

My father would often assay the covers with a skeptical eye and say, "Are you *SURE* you want these?" I had never wanted anything more.

Back at home, I'd read through the horrifying tales of poor travelers whose cars had broken down, only to be victimized by ghouls, vampires attacking secretaries, hatchet-bearing maniacs who slaughtered entire families, all in gory, black-and-white blood, with some buxom semi-nudity thrown in for good measure. I was utterly hooked, and every month grabbed new copies of gore-drenched horror stories, rotting my impressionable young mind.

Archie and Richie Rich soon bit the dust, and I went on to discover *Eerie Magazine* and *Vampirella*, which I thought were rather tame compared to the sensationalistic gore the other comics featured. But more

importantly, I found *Famous Monsters Of Filmland*.

Famous Monsters, as it was more popularly called, was an incredibly influential magazine focusing on horror and science fiction movies. The editor and founder, Forest J. Ackerman, wrote about the newest releases of horror cinema, but more importantly, also wrote about the *history* of the horror film, even about set designers, cameramen, actors and the authors of the script. It was through his magazine that I learned about such classic German expressionistic horror films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Metropolis*, and *Golem*, and it began to instill in me a solid visual foundation of the beauty of horror, specifically an understanding of the aesthetic of black and white. Ackerman's knowledge of films went back into when the first reels of film ever recorded anything - before the great silent era of film - and his personal collection of memorabilia was legendary. Both cheesy and highly sophisticated, he wrote with great humor, yet presented the history of horror film in a way no one previously had, or has since.

For me, *Famous Monsters* was a textbook of a darker sub-culture and visual aesthetic that appealed to me even at that early age, and still today, holds an influential shadow over me. I studied each issue, drank each image, and gorged myself on the world of the bizarre, the fantastic, and the horrific. The dark world of monsters became increasingly my refuge as the reality of my home life became more and more horrifying.

My parents were products of the 1950's. My mother was a trophy-winning dancer who gave birth to a daughter out of wedlock before meeting my father at the military base cocktail bar in Oslo. In the early 1960's, American military men were hot items to Norwegian blondes. Hers was a world of rock'n roll, bandstands, and above all, flirtations and cocktails. The Highball, the Martini, Grasshopper, Singapore Sling, or Brandy Alexanders' was for so many of her generation the way to seem sophisticated, sipping on exotic drinks at the bar (movie star clichés kept well in mind), or one poured by yourself from the cocktail shaker for a welcomed guest at home...often leading to six or seven...or ten.

Plainly put, my parents were alcoholics, and their habitual drinking grew and increased as I grew up. More often than not, a night of drinking would erupt in violence with my father beating the shit out of my mother.

My mother's father was an alcoholic. He beat my grandmother, and it had probably been instilled into my mother's mind that this was an entirely acceptable thing to do. As a woman, you simply had to bear the burden, for the sake of the children. On the other hand, my father was full-blooded Cherokee Indian, but with no ties to any life on the reservation. His father had died from botulism, incurred after a night of heavy drinking, coming home and eating sardines from an unlined tin, leaving it in the open on the counter top overnight. After eating more of it the next morning in his hung-over haze, he grew promptly ill, and died.

From Corpus Christi, Texas, my father escaped an alcoholic family life by joining the air force to transport him around the world. So many times military service has functioned as a holding zone for life's lost fuck ups, unable to cope with the brutality of life's

requirements. The military environment welcomes society's troubled and confused, giving them direction and purpose, in the aim to discipline these men and to focus their wildness and hostility into cannon fodder.

It was his being stationed in Oslo that brought him together with my mother. I believe they were married three months after my birth. My mother's cousin recently told me with a certain sadistic relish, not long after my mother's death that I was really supposed to have been aborted. How much of this occurrence that had an effect on my early development I can only ponder. Six months after I was born, she was rushed the emergency room at the hospital, having her stomach pumped of pills and alcohol from a failed suicide attempt.

I got it from all sides. Alcoholism had poisoned my family tree and wilted its branches, and destroyed the foundation for a sane family life. No wonder I preferred imaginary monsters to the real thing.

There would never have to be any excuse, for the accusations of extramarital affairs and jealousy

would inevitably end in broken furniture and screams long into the night. Sometimes blood would be spilled, with serious bruising on my mother's body or face being the standard outcome. The monstrous look of rage and anger in my father's eyes, as he would slap and drag my mother across the room, kicking her, yelling in rage, has been tattooed into my mind with a carving knife.

As my sister and I watched horrors unfold, cried and were forever deeper traumatized by family violence and alcoholism, we each developed our own separate tactics for survival. My sister's was to look away, ignore the events and feign forgetfulness. Mine was to throw myself deeper into horror, embrace the fear, and thereby seek to control it. In horror movies, I could turn off the TV, look away, and look again when the suspense became too much to bear. My unconscious association of horror movies - the world of monsters, of torture and death - became a fantasy world that could easily be turned off. My domestic life could not.

On returning home after school every day, the first thing I would

do was turn on the television and disappear into the world of afternoon TV. *Dark Shadows*, the kitschy horror-themed soap opera of the 1960s, became a treasured daily routine. I was obsessed by the show, following the tortured antics of Barnabas Collins, the kindly yet centuries-aged vampire, and his life at Collinwood, among the celebrity rich, witches and werewolves alike.

After the daily dose of soap opera horror, the *Dialing for Dollars Mid-Day Movie* would be scheduled, and most always it was an old black and white horror or science fiction film. The show was a ruse for selling advertising time to used-car dealers and air conditioning retailers, and if you were watching when they coincidentally called your telephone during the "intermission" in mid-movie, you could win a certain amount of cash. During those two hours, you could not tear me away from the television. I was utterly riveted to this fantasy world where suave characters prowled for blood, guilt-riddled men changed into wolves, and eerie, silver-skinned alien women preyed on astronauts on strange

planets. I would never venture into Captain Kangaroo's world again.

It was the figure of Dracula that really seemed to speak to me. There was something in his commanding presence, dressed in his black cape and tuxedo, serving dinner to an unsuspecting traveler as he stared intensely at the cut on his guest's hand. The directness of his gaze hypnotized me. Strangely, I did not identify with the victim, but with Dracula. I rooted for the villain, not the hero. The vampire became my fixation. The victims plagued by the Transylvanian terror's sadistic hunt seemed foolish and dull compared to the Count's real power, his animalistic drive, his unrelenting lust for blood. He controlled madness, as I had no control over mine.

Bela Lugosi became my pal. Every spin off and variation of his Dracula character I watched with impassioned excitement, even his roles as B-film mad scientist or even worse, with the Three Stooges. If it was a Dracula film, my mother knew better than to try to tear me away from the screen. The world of creeping shadows was where I wanted to

reside. It scared me silly, but I couldn't stop watching. By the age of nine, I was becoming something of an expert on Hollywood horror.

Horror movies had the curious effect of not only terrifying me, but of attracting me. What would have scared the bejesus out of my schoolmates, for me, became a world I longed to be a part of. I knew that stake in Dracula's heart would be pulled out again in time for the next movie, making him invulnerable. I knew Frankenstein, for all his strangling and terrorizing of villagers in the countryside, really had the heart of a child, and was simply misunderstood. The Wolf man really was a nice guy when there wasn't a full moon. It was at night, after bedtime, that the characters became monsters. Not unlike my parents.

Subconsciously, perhaps my young psyche soaked up the images of horror to pacify and to help me deal with the increasing horrors of my family life. I had seen my father change into the Wolf man, wrecking the house and battering my mother, beating my sister and me. One doesn't have to think too deep to

understand the relevance of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Perhaps it was the monstrous look in his eyes, glazed over by alcoholic stupor, which made him worse than any Frankenstein monster. But in *Dracula*, I found the father figure I had longed for – calm, composed, in command, elegant and strong, omnipotent.

At the age of seven, I had begun a process of disassociation from my environment and my family, away from my parents who increasingly offered nothing but misery and violence, into a fantasy world where I really knew the outcome of every performance. It was a process that often leads to schizophrenia, but for me, provided a path of salvation and refuge. I developed a symbiotic and poetic relationship with horror monsters, as my relationship with my parents became detached from the insanity that surrounded me.

The violence at home became worse, and in September of 1970, four months after I turned eight, we were transferred to SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe), just outside the town of Mons, in Belgium. There,

my fascination for vampires grew as my family life deteriorated.

For a birthday gift, I was allowed a subscription to *Famous Monsters*, which monthly fueled my increasing hunger for horror imagery. In the back of the magazine would be numerous advertisements for fake blood, “scar stuff”, modeling kits featuring monster themes, movie rolls (16mm!), and other paraphernalia that had to do with horror movies. I longingly gazed over these adverts, hungering for each of these.

With my allowance, I purchased a variety of horror make-up, fake vampire teeth, and the *Do-It-Yourself Monster Make-up Handbook* that *Famous Monsters* published, as well as a book by Jack Pierce, famed Hollywood special effects makeup artist. Once I received these items, I was beyond approach, as my time was spent studying how to make ping pong balls into alien’s eyes, how to change carob syrup into oozing blood, how to use corn starch to create the crackling mummy skin, and the nefarious possibilities of grease paint. I was hooked. The bathroom became my laboratory,

where I spent hours creating new faces and monstrous beings.

To complete my wardrobe, I had my father - in one of the rare instances that he actually did any sort of parental activity with me - help me in making a vampire cape. We bought black and red material, and my mother helped in sewing it all together. I was the proud owner of a classy vampire cape a la Lugosi, red on the inside, black on the outside, and from then on, I was pretty much lost to the world.

Sometimes, when I slept in my parent's bed, usually as the buffer zone to keep them from each other, I would push their two mattresses aside from the middle, forming a crevice, so that I could sleep in my own makeshift coffin. I would fold my hands across my chest accordingly, in the burial posture, and lull myself off to sleep, hoping to wake as a vampire.

The local news vendor on the air base would sell magazines that included *Eerie*, *Vampirella*, and similar, but they didn't stock the old graphically violent horror comics that I sorely missed from Shreveport. Once I found a

paperback book on the history of vampires, but the vendor would not allow me to purchase it without a note from my parents - which I angrily and promptly delivered. I can still feel the indignation and humiliation I experienced, feeling that my intelligence had been insulted. Through buying books and loaning from the library, I began reading up on the legends of vampires, and quickly became something of an expert on Vlad Tepes and Catherine Bathory and their ilk. I became an expert on witchcraft and witches, ghosts and monsters. Show me another nine year old who could recount the story of Gilles de Rais without batting an eye, or who had made custom coffins and capes for all of his GI Joes.

In our neighborhood, playtime with the other children became notably tinged by my peculiar tastes. They didn't share in my particular mania, but somehow put up with me. A game of toy cars invariably featured a drive to Dracula's lair. Cowboys and Indians became...Cowboys and Indians and *the Vampire*, where the cowboys would often come across a castle in the middle of the desert (In Arizona! In Texas!),

inhabited by myself as the dark lord. Invariably, I had to bite the other kids in the neck, or even better, be bitten on my neck, which always created a surge of sexual ecstasy.

Psychologists and mythologist know very well that the vampire myth is steeped in repressed sexual urges. The phallic extension of the teeth, the biting of the neck done usually when the victim sleeps, the seeping of the (menstrual) blood... all point to a subconscious playing out of the sexual conquest. My own sexuality was blossoming. I had known since the age of seven, that I was sexually attracted to other males, not females. The urge was dormant, yet it was there, whispering to me. There was a slight awareness of it, but not of the taboos associated with it. And by the age of ten, I had my first romantic infatuation.

One day, my father brought home a G.I. by the name of Rick. Rick was a strapping twenty-something blonde private, built like he'd just got out of basic training, who wore a white t-shirt over his v-shaped, muscular body. He had blonde hair, cut in a crew-cut style. The lightning bolt of

lust struck me. We took to each other immediately, playing "rough and tumble" on the grass, his strong arms tossing me around while I soaked up his smell, pressed my face against his chest, allowing him to throw me a football and grapple me to the ground. His strong body against my smaller one delighted me. I was deliriously infatuated by him, and in love. It was his smell, the feel of his muscled body, his power that sent me into rapture. It was not genitally based, this pleasure, but something deeper.

My parents made amusing comments about how well we got along, thinking that Rick saw me as a younger brother. I doubt Rick had any inkling of my passion for him, nor did I have a clue on how to express it. He was just a G.I. away from home who my father tried doing something nice for by inviting him to family dinners.

After Rick had left, my father accused my mother of wanting to sleep with him (as was standard practice after any strange man had entered our house), and naturally had to beat her because of it. I watched in terror as he smacked her around, dragging

her by the hair down the hallway, into the bathroom to slam her head into the toilet water again and again. The neighbors, who most certainly would have heard the screams in the middle of the night, chose not to “get involved”, ignoring the obvious activities next door.

I remember standing in the hallway, crying and heaving so uncontrollably as to not be able to breathe, as my father drunkenly shouted, *“Stop your crying or I’ll give you something to cry about!”* Blood was on the floor.

Finally my mother managed to escape to a neighbor across the hall, banging on their door in desperation. They called the military police who arrived and arrested my father. My mother spent the night at the hospital and the neighbor cared for my sister and me. Certainly, it wasn’t the first time.

It was not my mother who had the lustful eye for Rick. How would my father have reacted if he had known his ten-year-old son was the one sexually infatuated with Rick?

As so often happens in families where there is abuse or suffering, food became my comfort and another method of escape. While reading books on vampires or horror comics, I would eat. By the time I was ten, I became a portly figure with a rounded face and folds of flesh for my stomach. Constant teasing by my classmates gave me a life-long body-dysmorphic disorder, making me loathe my physical features, and I became increasingly insecure about myself. Certainly, I was the fattest vampire on the block. It wasn’t until I got into my early teens that I lost the weight by crash dieting, becoming almost obsessively thin. Seeing my school portraits from this period is something I now find painful to view.

My mother also became fatter, putting on weight from her constant intake of alcohol. I remember seeing her old dancing gowns and cocktail dresses in her closet, wondering why she never wore them. The gowns were tailor made for her, reflecting a time when her waist was thin, and when she once prided herself in her beauty. The materials were of shiny, bright and reflective

patterns and luminescent cloths, translucent emeralds, sharkskin blues, shimmering golds. I had never seen her wear anything so pretty, so glamorous as those gowns. All she ever wore were cheap pantsuits, polyesters and loose, ugly print housedresses. After marrying my father, her self-esteem was beaten away, and her attention to her appearance degenerated, now hidden away in the closet with her old, mothball-smelling former glamour.

One night, in the usual round of appalling beatings that also included me, I lay in my bed sobbing, with the exhaustive and uncontrollable heaving of my lungs that I was now so familiar with. As my mother's abrupt screams accompanied the crashing of a table or chair, a bottle or a plate, I had a moment of sudden clarity. I thought to myself, *"Who are these people? Why are they doing these horrible things? I'm not like these people. I will never be like these people. And the first chance I get, I will leave and never return."* I think that's a pretty profound thought for an eight year old. In it, lay the seed of my future rebellion and disdain for all middle class morality and values, hypocritical and false as

the "happy family" I was raised in.

My survival skills were developing, being honed. As I would later in life learn, the very skills that protect you and help you to survive in an abusive family, later go on to destroy whatever relationships you have as an adult.

In the darkness of the cinema, I found my love. My father would take me to see movies at the local military base movie theater, and most often they would be cheesy horror films from the Hammer studios. It was his way of doing "father-son activities", because the movie theater provided a neutral space where all activities were on safe ground. You couldn't talk, and you almost couldn't see the person you sat next to. Most often I would chose a seat closer to the screen, while he would sit in the back of the theater. It was a perfect place for a dysfunctional father and son to pretend to have quality time.

It was the golden era of early 1970's cinema. It seemed that the excessive drug taking in the late 1960's Hollywood paid off by delivering a fevered, creative

vision, where scripts and filming scaled unprecedented imagery and storytelling. Blacksploitation, crime, westerns, and horror all seemed to have a wild, intelligent edge that's completely lacking in most films today. Those films contained a freedom, an unconcern with political correctness or taste that made them brazen if not awe inspiring. I doubt any of them would get made today. In any case, the films of this period were a huge influence on my imagination.

For every horror film that showed up, you could guarantee that I was in the audience (even with the "R" ratings). *Scream, Scream Again, The Vampire Lesbos, Count Yorga, Vampire, The Abdominal Dr. Phibes* were cinematic, trashy masterpieces I reveled in, but it was really in the *Taste the Blood of Dracula, Dracula AD 1972, Dracula Price of Darkness* series from Hammer Films that I found my interest peaked further, even more obsessively than before.

Christopher Lee in his role as the Lord Dracula was, for me, the ultimate Dracula. Never before or since has any screen actor matched his performance. Tall and powerful, with a foreboding

presence, bloodshot eyes and deathly sharp fangs, Lee's Count makes the vampires in today's *Twilight* movies seem like the pussy wimps they are. With a deep baritone voice, Lee sent shivers down my spine, continuing right on down to my crotch. This Dracula was the one I was searching for.

I made scrapbooks with nothing but Christopher Lee as Dracula, pictures cut out from *Famous Monsters*. I fantasized in my bed at night that Lee's Dracula would come to my bed, lean over me and bite me on the neck slowly, taking me away from the hell I was in. Turning me into a vampire too, together we would roam the countryside, creating terror in the peasant population and biting young men's necks.

Even to this day, seeing Christopher Lee's face in a movie or on TV transports me to that time when I fetishized his character into my dreams. Seeing those Hammer films now, so far removed from the horrors of my youth, however does not have the same attraction. I enjoy them, but perhaps more from a sense of nostalgia and camp.

And so it was to become, that I was destined to become a vampire. I not only frightened small children in the neighborhood, but those of my own age and older by hiding in the woods in full vampire drag (with plastic teeth and blood, white face and darkened circles under my eyes). I would leap out from behind shrubbery or some alcove and chase them. Screaming madly, my victims running for their lives, with me laughing afterwards at their cowardice. Often this would occur after nightfall, adding realism to my reign of terror.

In one case, I even scared the hell out of an entire Girl Scout troupe that were camping out in the forest by our house, when I pulled the tent pegs out of the ground and sent their tents crashing down upon them, then appearing to the sleepy and confused girls as the fiendishly vampiric monster. To hell with the cookies, I wanted blood!

Adults were also not immune to my madness. I would wait by cars in anticipation for some man or woman coming home from work late in the evening, then suddenly jump out with my

vampire bite ready to attack as they were locking their cars, no doubt making them piss in their pants.

If you were unlucky enough to live on the first floor of your apartment complex, chances are that you could be in your kitchen and suddenly hear a knock from the window, turn and see a horrifying vampire child leering and biting at the glass to you.

Sometimes I would choose the darkened basement of the military complex housing, where lone, unsuspecting housewives would carry their filled laundry baskets to do their washing. From out of the shadows I would pounce, cape raised high, growling in my best vampire voice. Dirty clothing would become airborne, as the laundry basket left their hands, and the shrieks of the horrified housewife ascended up the stairwell.

As you can imagine, I was developing something of a reputation.

The violence at home increased as my father was more often than not was drunk. I delved further into in my fantasy world of all

things vampiric, and began to want to wear black clothing. Now this was in 1972, a time where there was no black clothing to be bought unless you were going to a funeral. I remember my father taking me to buy clothes, and me not wanting to pick anything out. To me, everything looked like old men's golfing pants, and I hated tartan and corduroy. In the early 1970's, that's all you could buy.

Once, my father flew into a rage in a clothing store and forcibly had me put on a pair of brown and yellow corduroy pants, with criss-cross, tartan-like patterns, stripping off my pants there on the store floor beside the hanging racks. He often reveled in public displays of cruelty, making sure his whistling after me as he would to a dog, or loud yelling was heard by everyone close by, causing me to cringe in scared, humiliated embarrassment. These were my new pants for the new school year and I had no choice in the matter. I was horrified and hated wearing them.

The very few times I did find black jeans, they were flared bell-bottoms, which I did not want. I had my mother take in the hem,

so that they became straight-legged and tight. This was far before punk rock eventually made my look more socially acceptable. When I first saw Lou Reed wearing them later, I knew we were kindred spirits.

Growing increasingly fat, I became more and more miserable, lost inside my own thoughts and my fantasy world of vampires, reading books about them and eating, eating, eating. Literature became a place that offered escape, a closed world open to me only. The library was the only part of school I was really interested in.

My connection to the world around me became less of interest. School life was problematic, with my creative imagination often leading to the principal's office. Once, I drew the Statue of Liberty with a clenched fist instead of the torch, and wrote "Women's Rights" on her tablet. For some reason this brought out the rage in my teacher, who again sent me to the principal's office (he became a tender support and was one of the few sources of kindness in my life then). My teachers were for the most part conservative, bitter women who excelled in sadistic

cruelty towards children. One of them took this too far when she slapped me across the face, leading to my father lodging a complaint against her.

In order to partake in my neighborhood friend's world, I accompanied them to Bible School on Sundays. I loved to read the stories from the bible, but I simply couldn't understand why anyone would think they were real. Within a few months I was singled out by some of the Christian teachers as an exceptional student of the faith. In front of the morning assembly of students in Sunday School, my creation of a cross won the school's art prize, and I was awarded a coveted bible. I remember standing on the stage, holding the bible, smiling and looking out over the applause of my fellow students. "*Suckers!*" I thought cynically. I simply couldn't fathom how they were all fooled into believing this nonsense, this utter drivel. On my way home I threw the bible into the trash, never returning to Sunday School again.

My father was keen to take us on Saturday or Sunday rides out to the country, to explore the small

towns around Belgium or even drive to Holland for an outing. Most times, he would drive drunk, especially if we had been out to a restaurant with friends of my parents. In the car, he delighted with sadistic relish in flooring the break as we sped down the highway, resulting in everyone in the car screaming and fearing for their lives. Over and over he'd pump the break, up and down, slamming me and my sister in the back of the car, and my mother in the front against the dashboard. As my mother would start crying, he'd laugh, and the family outing would again turn to an exercise in trauma.

One day, as I approached my twelfth year, there was a knock on the door. A group of parents had gathered to voice their protest at my behavior. There they stood, huddled together, reminding me of some scene where the angry villagers confront the monster before burning him. While my father stood in the door and listened to their complaints, I heard accusations of how I was terrorizing their children, was guilty of odd behavior, and in fact instilled fear in just about everyone. They insisted this

behavior stop and had come to express their deep concern.

After they had gone, my father took me aside, and threatened me. He took away all my vampire books, cape, make up, plastic teeth, and fake coffins. He stated that if I didn't stop, he would take me to a psychiatrist. I didn't know what a psychiatrist was, but I knew it was someplace only crazy people went, and that scared me. So I stopped, cold turkey. But the obsession was only suppressed, hidden inside of me. Like Dracula risen from the grave, it lay there dormant, waiting for another time to rise up again, in another form.

Looking back now, on that period of my life, it seems so far removed, so distant and at times I have trouble believing this really happened to me. My life has been a history of overcoming abuse from my parents, learning how to nurture myself, and healing my wounds. It has made me overtly introspective, living within my circumfused cerebral pedestal, observing, yet rarely participating, and instilling me with distrust and contempt.

I left home at seventeen, and never looked back, divorcing myself from my family shortly thereafter. And I was smart enough to put myself into therapy when I was twenty-four and living in New York, after a bout of self-destructiveness that included fucking everyone that moved, drinking anything, and doing every drug presented to me in the futile attempt to fill my void, and my very real need to be loved. Carl Jung saved my life.

I was lucky enough to find the right therapist the first time I applied for one, and one day she said to me, *"You know, Tom, I can't really understand why you didn't turn out to be a junkie. People who were raised in the environment you were, usually become one."*

My survival instincts have always been strong, far stronger than any self-destructive drive programmed into me. Survival was honed into my soul at an early age as my only option for making it through all that insanity. I instinctively knew there was something wrong with my parents, and my family life, and knew I had to survive long enough in order to break free. I think because of my symbolic and

cathartic interest in horror, and especially in vampires, I found the visual language that gave me strength. Hell might be the place you were threatened with if you misbehaved or sinned, but for my young mind, I knew that even hell had to be questioned. You would have avoided hell, but me, I embraced it. Because the lie of the happy family I saw on television shows and in my friend's families simply did not exist in mine. If my family life, which should have been nourishing, supportive, caring and loving, but was instead the complete opposite, why should I not question a world built on false promises?

Everything I experienced in my home life became devious by default, and fantasy became preferable to the horrible truth that my parents tried so hard to conceal from everyone else.

The world of horror films became my alternative reality, a place where creatures that would repel most people instead, in me, found a kindred spirit. Those films provided me with a creative sense of self, and infused my imagination with possibility and dreams, however absurd that may sound. I didn't want to repeat the

pattern of my ancestors, of my parents. The world of mere mortals was not for me. I preferred to peer out from around the corner, from the darkest of shadows, to observe the real horrors that occurred in the light, and then go back into my own darkness.

By the time I was twenty-five, I had confronted my past, dealt with it, and moved on. My divorce from my family remained constant, with only fleeting compromises of contact now and then.

Until we parted company, my father continued to descend down the slide of alcoholic degradation, with my mother not far behind. But those horror stories are for another time. At the end of 1979 my mother sensibly divorced my father and took me with her to Oslo. I would not hear one word from him for eleven years, not until I finally took contact with him in 1990.

The events I've described are so far from where my life is today, so different from the direction my parents took. I am not an alcoholic, although I'm certain I could become one with little

trouble. Inside my head is in inbuilt alarm, telling me when I approach the edge to back off. It is the survival mechanism ingrained in me since childhood.

If I am left with anything from my time as a child vampire, it would be the sense of aesthetics that

early horror films contained. This I have applied to my own arsenal of creative tools. And the will to survive remains. Every time someone has driven a stake into my heart, I would again arise, having beaten the enemy. That then, surely classifies me today as one of the undead.





DEATH WISH CHAMELEON IX

By Cricket Corleone

Photos © Richard A. Meade

"It's strange sometimes, the way that dreams remind you of things that in your waking life, you try so hard to forget."

Dustin lies in her hotel bed remembering a time that feels like yesterday, but is thousands of miles away.

Her retina circles in...

...and she is in junior high. Bruises on her face. Sitting in the counselor's office of her small-town school.

"So, what happened? Why do you have bruises on your face this time?" the counselor says, almost as if he has been through this many times but is expecting a joke reaction.



"You know, it's the funniest thing. I was saving orphans from a burning building and I got smacked right in the eye with a piece of falling wood... from the burning building of course."

The counselor sits back with body language that speaks of impatience. He is interrupted by one of Dustin's teachers.

"Hey, can I just borrow her for a minute?"

The counselor agrees in a passive moment. A brush of his hand says, "Please do. I don't know what to do with this."

The teacher, fronting a bad bleached blond hairdo that has seen better days, pulls out a manila folder. "Is this yours?" She says, sliding it over to Dustin.

Dustin, recognizing the folder, but trying to play clueless, smoothly puts the folder down next to her side.

The teacher grabs the folder back from Dustin and scolds, "That black eye... what really happened?"

Dustin looks up at the teacher and then down to the floor trying to think of something clever to say. She smiles as she cocks her head to one side and says, "Shakespeare... what a great writer. Don't you think? For example... let's talk about great quotes... you know a great quote by Billy..."

The teacher looks, and interrupts, "That wasn't the question." She leans in, and in a warning but careful voice heeds, "Stealing your personal reports from school is not only against the rules but against the law. Now, I know there are things in here you are trying to cover up, but there are other ways to go about..."

whatever it is you are doing. I don't know who you are covering up for, but I will find out. I know there is something more going on at home that you don't want anyone to know about."

Dustin looks down again, and then, with a look like there is a bull's-eye in the teacher's face, leans forward and says, "There is method to my madness."

Silence befalls between the two for a moment.

The teacher gives up and turns to walk leave the office, "Have it your way."



Later in math class. The room is divided, between the roadside kids and the privileged. Dustin had seen it so many times, the way that the Aryan nation group of jocks sit back and tease anyone who doesn't remotely look like them. But the thing is, the one guy, the blond haired jock... she saw how his father tore him down earlier in the day, when he dropped him off at school in his new Ford Bronco. Now she sees this boy try and stare down the one black kid in the school. Dustin likes this black kid. She once heard him play a Jimi Hendrix song on guitar, she is very smitten. So, when the blond haired jock leans forward to say to

him, "Are all your kind as stupid as you look?" Dustin gets pissed. She leans over to the blond haired jock and says, "He has more talent in his little pinkie then you have in your entire CLAN."

Mateo, the black kid, looks at her like "Where the hell did that come from?" He is surprised that someone said anything in his defense. That wasn't usual at this school. Everyone tended to keep to themselves in these situations and no one spoke up, including Mateo.

Dustin looks away almost as if to say, "Let me drop off of the radar."

The teacher pretends not to hear and see what has just happened in the classroom.

Dustin remembers spending a lot of time with Mateo in and out of school. They made plans to start a band together, to run away together. Though no specific words were spoken about it, they pledged to protect one another, because in their hearts and minds, no one else was going to.

Dustin told her secret to Mateo

one day. They were at a secluded lake during the summertime. Sunbathing and swimming, enjoying each other's company and the calmness around them, which before, had seemed only a myth or a secret place of solitude. Each of them alone in their worlds, now together, locked in a pact of friendship, understanding and love.

Mateo didn't need to ask Dustin where the burn marks on her arms came from. Or why the cops were at her house almost twice a week. Or why she was constantly questioned by the principal at the school and social services as to why she was always so banged up. He knew as well as everyone else did what was going on in her home. But the one thing Mateo knew that only Dustin herself knew, was why she was denying any problems and staying where she was. The fact that Mateo saw it made Dustin feel less alone. The fact that he never turned her in meant he supported her decision. Mateo knew who she was protecting and knew that if he said anything, Dustin's "method" would be ruined.



Dustin had been in and out of the system due to running away and abuse. She finally made up her mind to watch what was going on around her and learn. What she learned was that the system was not in fact out to work for her, but almost as if it was working against her. Whenever she was brought in for questions about the marks and bruises on her body, she saw the way the social workers looked at her. The same as every other kid in the office. She was a number. There was no

real compassion. She had no real voice. They would place her in foster care, she would watch the foster parents rake in the state checks and spend the money on luxuries like furniture and new cars. She would lay in rooms at night stuffed with bunk-beds occupied by other kids who were in the same situation she was. They wanted out, but this wasn't what they had in mind. It was just as much of a prison as her home life was.



Dustin began to go through law books trying to find out what she had to work with. Finally, one day, she knew what she had to do. She told her counselor that she had lied about the abuse. They sent her home. It wasn't that she wanted to go back, she had to go back. The person she was protecting was not herself, but her younger brother, Michael.

Michael was only five at the time that Dustin came back to their abusive home with her new found goal. Her goal was to wait things out until she was eighteen, set up a job and a place to live. When she turned eighteen, she would try to gain legal custody of her younger brother, and take him out of that hell forever. This way, neither of them had to be tossed around in the system, and what's worse, separated from one another in the process.

When Dustin was seventeen the dream of getting herself and her brother out was so close. She had managed to keep her secrets and take the abuse from home. She worked the system in order to remain where she was and see things through.

But one night, Dustin had been out at the lake with Mateo. The evening turned into night quickly, and she realized she needed to get home. Dustin already knew that a beating would be waiting, but in order to stay true to her protection of Michael, she had to be there when the shit hit the fan. So that she would intervene if it was aimed at her brother, and take the beatings herself. To step in between if she needed to.

When she got home, the police were surrounding the house. She saw her brother being carted off in an ambulance. Blood on his face and hands. The report was that there were gunshots fired, the cops were called, and her brother was found shot three times in the stomach. Her mother was shot in the head and died instantly. Her father turned the gun on himself and shot a hole through his own head. In devastation she went to the emergency room, hysterically trying to make sure her brother was alright. He died an hour after arrival. Not only was Dustin alone now, but she had failed. Dustin had failed her brother.



After the remainder of her seventeenth year, she finally hit legal adulthood. She set out on her own, and promised never to return to that place. She never even said goodbye to Mateo. She has always regretted that part of her decision.

Dustin opens her eyes, still lying on the hotel bed. In an effort to drown out the memories in her head and the painful feelings they brought back, she turns on the television. She flips through the channels as she watches these

actors trying to portray real life people. She has always been unable to suspend her disbelief and to fall into these illusions. Watching people act in film, movies or shows, just seems to annoy her more then it entertains. But this time, as she flips through the channels, she sees something more.

Dustin sits up in her bed as she watches an old film noir shot in black and white. It is an intense scene where the harlot in the story has a gun pulled on her.



The man she had been having an affair with is about to do her in for exposing his secret to his wife and in turn ruining the man's life. The man fires the gun and the harlot falls dead. All that is seen in the last shot is a smug smile on the dead harlot's face.

Dustin takes in the scene for a moment, then smugly smiles herself. She shuts off the television and rummages through her stuff until she finds a business

card. The number on the card is from the man she met at the bar who promised her shooting lessons.

Dustin picks up the phone and dials the number. As she sets up a meeting time for her first lesson, she flips to the back pages of the local newspaper. She scans down the men seeking woman section until one of the ads catches her eye.



After the time and date is set up for her lesson, Dustin thanks the person taking her appointment and hangs up the phone.

Dustin reads the ad that caught her eye: "Looking for a smart, domineering woman, preferably with black short hair between the ages of twenty one and thirty five. Must be unattached and willing to be very discreet."

She puts the newspaper down and goes to a mirror in the

bathroom room. As she looks over her reflection she slides her fingers down through her hair. Picking up a pair of scissors in a care package set out by the hotel, she begins to chop away at her hair bringing it up inch by inch. Her eyes are set and her determination has returned. A new plan is forming.

**Swords courtesy of André Boutilier and Christine Lindsey. And special thanks to Heather Harris for creative inspiration.*





IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS

By Natascha Wolf

Photo © Guttersaint

The dinner bell drilled, triggering the usual chair scraping, bag stuffing flurry before the stampede. But I weren't up for joining the barbarous queue for rancid fodder that day. No way. Me and Maise had other plans, see. And they didn't involve an afternoon of yawndom in front of the white board neither. It was a first for me, this skanking school,

and I tell you for true, guy, soon as we was out them gates it was like I'd grown wings, Maise had too, and together we flew to Streatham High Road via the number forty-five.

Called into Mehmet's kebab house, first off. Then blowing and chomping our way through a bag of hot chunky chips - loads of salt,

loads of vinegar, none of that non-brewed condiment shit – we made for the Common. We had plans, see.

Having crossed Garrad's Road, we bee-lined it to the bench nearest the lay-by. The lay-by, should I say. And there we sat, facing the traffic, backs to the woods, lay-by to our left. A veritable ringside seat.

We didn't have to wait long. Motors rolled up regular as taxis at a rank. Exec types mostly, four door saloons, slimy green or charcoal grey. And there they'd wait; wait till a girl'd come strutting over from the corner of Prentice Road. Obligatory uniform: tight little top, micro mini, chicken plucked legs and heels.

They all did the same thing, the girls; leant through the gaping windows baring their boobies to strike a deal. Then after a bit of a haggle, in they'd get and off they'd roll. A proper little conveyor-belt. And fascinating. One of the girls got to me though. A scrawny thing in fishnets, and white stilettos that slip-slopped off the back of her heels. Couldn't have been much older than us.

Fifteen at most. And he could've been her granddad.

Maise stretched out her legs and yawned. 'Me parched y'know,' she said.

'Should've got drink in Mehmet's then, innit.'

'Yeah, yeah,' she replied, flicking a blackened chip in the air. 'Anyway, me gwaan now. Yuh up fe de Arcade?'

No, I weren't up for the Arcade. Here is where we'd planned to come and here I planned to stay. Besides, I wanted to make sure the scrawny girl got back all right; back onto the conveyor-belt.

'Hey, check this,' I said.

One of the punters was getting out of his car. He didn't seem your usual sort, more like a country gent, what with his flat-cap, three-piece tweeds and pocket watch.

Maise kissed her teeth, 'Msww,' and rolled her eyes.

The man was striding fast through knee high grass now, and was carrying something under his

arm. He definitely clocked us clocking him before disappearing off into the woods.

'C'mon, star, let's go,' said Maise, hooking her arm into mine to drag me up.

'Wait.' I anchored her back.

A big Bertha was crossing the road, tracking her punter's path. She stumbled through the grass, skirt scarcely covering her punani, lycra stretched to the max, before she too was swallowed by the woods.

Me and Maise turned to each other. No need for words. Our eyes said it all. We had to go and spy.

We'd almost reached when we heard the shouts. First a man's, then a woman's. Within seconds, the prossie'd been spat back out into the open, shoe in hand, red in face, and cussing bad. She threw us the middle finger as she passed.

We waited a while for the man to come out, but he didn't. So in we crept; into the mangled darkness.

'Ugh, man dat's sick,' said Maise, pointing to the ground.

We'd hit upon an open graveyard for spent rubbers and had to do a kind of hop-scotch to bypass the lifeless skins. Once we'd got through the worst though, Maise thought it truly amusing to hook one up on a stick and chase me with it. She was laughing so hard snot come shooting out her nose.

I ran blindly, shrieking, til I found myself in a clearing. And there he was, the country gent, perched on a fallen log, lunch box balanced on his lap. He smiled at me.

I turned to see if Maise was around. She weren't far off, lurking behind a tree.

'All right, girls?' said the man. 'Saw her off all right, didn't I?'

I gave him a nod.

'I mean, do I look like a man in need of a tart?' His head shook in answer to his own question. 'You see, girls, I'm a very lucky man. A very lucky man indeed. I've a wonderful wife, who makes me the most beautiful salads. Pure works of art they are. I do love my salads. Dickey heart, see.' He

rapped his chest. 'Thought this might be the spot to eat it. But, I tell you what, before I do, I'll let you two have a little look at what miracle she's whipped up for me today.'

Maise was suddenly beside me, shunting me forward, scarcely suppressing a snigger.

'That's right, come along now, don't be shy,' he urged. 'I tell you straight, my wife could be top chef at the Savoy if she put her mind to it.'

We shuffled a little closer.

The man's wedding band flashed in a barb of sunlight as he set about prising open the lid, ever so slowly, as if performing a magic trick.

'Ta-naa,' he went, as he whisked it away.

And into the box we peered.

Sure enough, just as he'd said, a beautifully presented salad: a bed of lettuce framed by tomatoes, radishes, pieces of cucumber, all intricately fashioned into flower shapes.

What a palaver. I was about to say something polite like, Oh yes, isn't it lovely, when I seen something move. It was like the salad was coming alive. It was definitely moving. A slug perhaps...

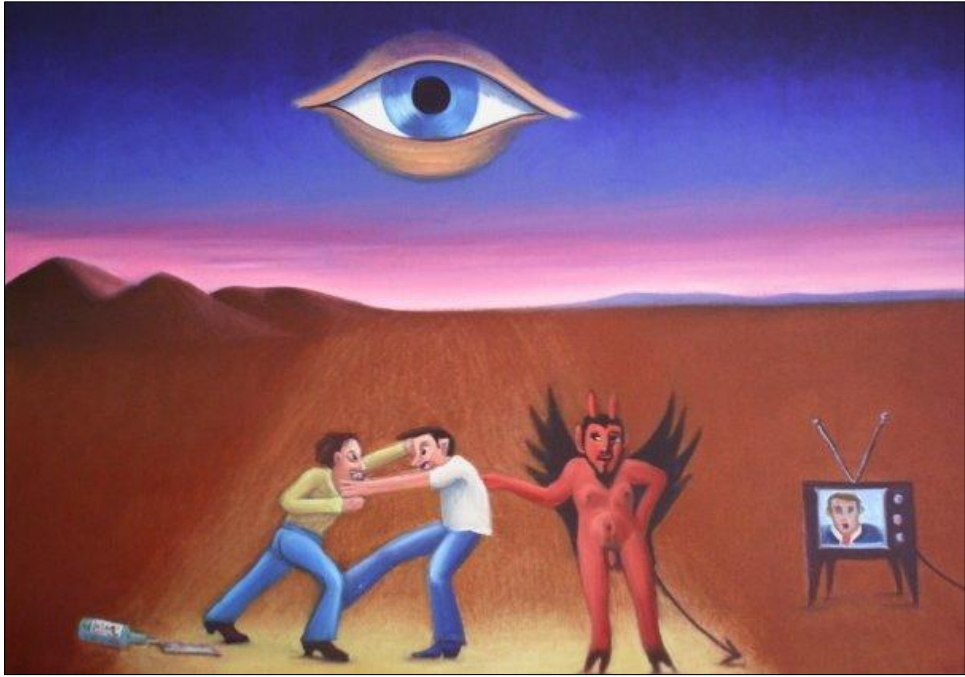
Then the lettuce parted, throwing all the crudités aside. And that's when we seen it, guy. Seen it rear its Ugly Purple Head.

'You filthy bugger,' I spat.

The man smirked.

Maise grabbed my hand and off we tore towards daylight howling, 'Flat-cap-flasher! Flat-cap-flasher!' over and over till our throats burned.

We hit the main road, clutching our mirth-wrenched guts, just in time to catch the scrawny girl getting into a Volvo.



TEDDY & RED DOG

By John Barrymore

Images © Bonita Barlow

INTERIOR: A HOLLYWOOD APARTMENT.

It is a total mess. There is stuff piled everywhere; stolen goods, stuff recovered from dumpsters, etc. it looks like an indoor junkyard. TEDDY and JOHN are rummaging through two bags of stolen goods.

JOHN

So you do this every night?

TEDDY

Every night that I want to get high. You're pretty good at this, but if we're going to keep working together you should know right now. I'm a whore when it comes to the drugs. I never get attached to anything, and I'll sell whatever I can for dope. How did we do?



JOHN

(Rummaging through his bag)

I got a Blaupunkt stereo, a camera, a wallet...

TEDDY

Any cash?

JOHN

(Looking through wallet)

No, but a great spread. Master Card, Visa, and American Express.

TEDDY

Jimmy C will give us a gram for the spread. Let's go.



JOHN

Fuck that. I'll run the cards myself. Jimmy C can have them after I've burned them out.

TEDDY

I never run cards. They can smell that the cards are hot, or that I'm hot, or something, and I always wind up running out of the fucking mall with some rent-a-cop chasing me.

JOHN

It's all in your attitude. I grew up throwing my mother's plastic at them, so it's as natural as breathing for me. I'll take you with me and show you how it's done. What time is this bitch coming back? I need a fucking shot.

TEDDY

She went to cop. She was jonesing when she left, so she'll be back before too long. She's not going to waste any time getting back here to fix.



JOHN

Maybe she'll fix over there.

TEDDY

No, her connection won't let anybody fix in his pad.

JOHN

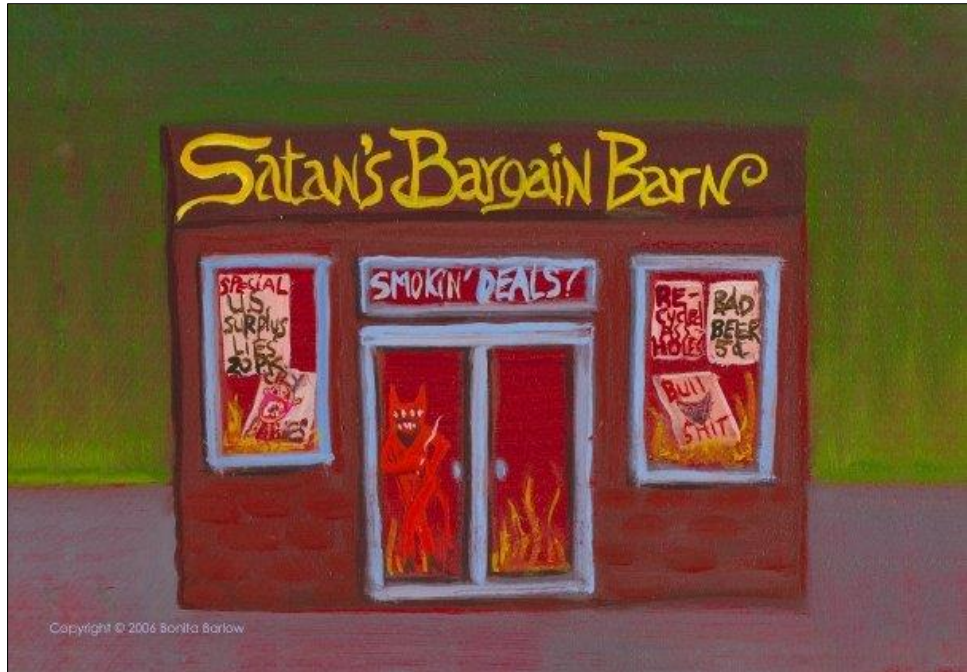
Then maybe she'll fix in the car on the way back. I know I would.

TEDDY

She's not like that. She'll be back soon and we can trade her some of this shit for product. What else did we get?

JOHN

Oh, this is nice. Three bullets. .38 Specials.



TEDDY

(Very excited)

Was there a gun?

JOHN

No gun. Just bullets. You know, Teddy, it occurs to me that we can get killed doing this. Instead of spending all that time tweaking through the car, waiting for the owner to come out and shoot us, why don't we take the car away and then trash through it at leisure?

TEDDY

You mean steal the car?

JOHN

Yes.



TEDDY

I don't know how to steal a car.

JOHN

You told me you were a car thief.

TEDDY

I'm a car burglar. What's the difference.

JOHN

Probably about eighteen months. Well, I don't know how to steal a car either, but I'm sure we can find out how. I mean there are books on just about everything. I'm sure there are books on how to steal cars. I know this place in the valley. It's called Survival Books. They sell books on how to make bombs in your kitchen and shit like that. They also sell lockpicks and slim jims and that kind of shit. They must have a book there on how to steal cars. And there's something else that bothers me. Why are we stealing from the people down here on Franklin and Argyle? These fucking people don't have anything. Let's go to where the rich people live, and steal from them.



TEDDY

How would we get there?

JOHN

How would any self-respecting car thief get there. Steal a fucking car.

TEDDY

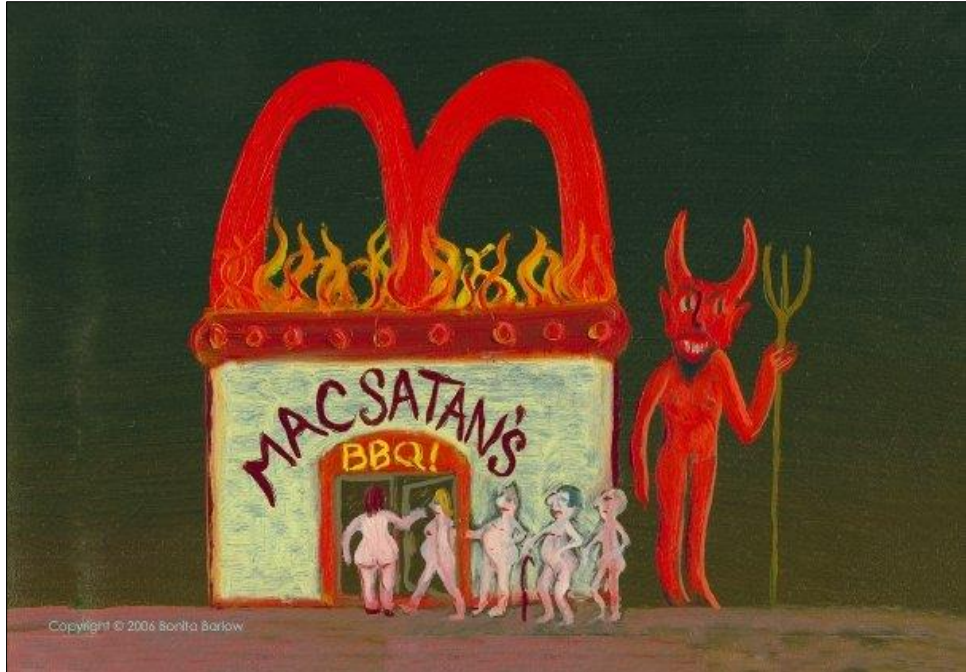
Yeah, but in the meantime...

JOHN

Look. It's Thanksgiving night. Everyone in the world has pigged out on turkey and is right now sleeping it off. They're all dead to the world. Here's my plan. When Jackie gets back here, you distract her and I'll snake her keys. We'll take her car up to the hills and rob from the rich all night long.

TEDDY

Jackie will fucking kill us.



JOHN

What, are you afraid of the bitch? Besides, we'll cut her in on the haul. Better yet, let's take some of this shit over to Jimmy C's right now and get some product. When Jackie gets back I'll give her a shot of speed so big she'll lose her mind and loan me her fucking car.

TEDDY

I don't know if there is a shot that big. Jackie's crazy, but not crazy enough to loan us her car.

JOHN

She'll loan me the car, believe me. She wants me to fuck her.

TEDDY

Are you going to?

JOHN

I guess so.



TEDDY

Don't do it, man. You don't want to get involved with Jackie. She's insane.

JOHN

Look who's talking.

TEDDY

What do you mean?

JOHN

I mean look at your old lady.

TEDDY

Candy's a sweet girl.

JOHN

I'm sure she is, but at least Jackie isn't a prostitute.



TEDDY

What's that supposed to mean?

JOHN

It's supposed to mean how the fuck can you kiss a girl when she's had some black dick in her mouth fifteen minutes earlier. I don't get it.

TEDDY

She brings in a lot of money.

JOHN

Yes, I'm sure she does. But just the same, I'd rather just steal a little more. Better yet, Jackie deals drugs. I've never been able to do that. I always use them up before I can sell enough to make my money back. But I've got great connections. With my connections, and Jackie's talent for making money on the drugs, we could be a great team.



TEDDY

Look at this place. Could you live like this?

JOHN

I didn't say I was going to marry the bitch. Besides, I've been sleeping in that chair for the last three days, what's the difference?

TEDDY

I don't know. But if you do get involved with Jackie, just remember I warned you.

JOHN

Your concern is duly noted. Come on, let's take this stuff over to Jimmy's and get some fucking dope. We've got rich people to rob.

Exit **JOHN** and **TEDDY**



RED DOG

INTERIOR: RED DOG'S HOUSE IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS.

Red Dog is standing behind the bar, and John enters. Red Dog is a high level Hollywood dope dealer who looks like a central casting Viking with long red hair and a long untrimmed beard.

JOHN

Hey, Red Dog. How's your life?

RED DOG

Great, Buzz. What can I do for you?

JOHN

I need a couple ounces of weed.



RED DOG

Okay, Buzz. I've got some more of that African shit here. Three hundred bones. I also have some shit from Ventura County. It's got some seeds in it, but it gets you high as hell for a hundred seventy five.

JOHN

No, I only want the best. Just give me two ounces of the African. That shit gets you higher than God.

RED DOG

Oh, by the way, I got some of those speed pills you like.

JOHN

(Really excited)

Desoxyn?



RED DOG

Yeah.

JOHN

No shit!?! How many you got?

RED DOG

Fifty. They're five bucks apiece.

JOHN

I'll take all of them.

RED DOG

I hope you're charging enough for the weed, Buzz.



JOHN

I'm getting fifteen bucks a gram for the seedless.

RED DOG

That's not enough.

JOHN

Really? That's over a fifty percent profit.

RED DOG

Buzz, how long have I been dealing dope?

JOHN

Shit, Will. I don't know. Twenty years?



RED DOG

Twenty-five. When I started dealing drugs, no one was a drug dealer. Jack and I used to smuggle grass back from Mexico in a stash car I had in the fifties. Now everybody's secretary can get you a gram of coke.

JOHN

What's the point?

RED DOG

The point, Buzzo, is that the reason we're sitting here chatting so enjoyably in this beautiful house on the top of this beautiful hill, overlooking this beautiful view, is that my basic business practice has always been to make a one hundred percent profit, plus all the drugs I consume or give away.

JOHN

I'd have to charge twenty-five bucks a gram to do that.



RED DOG

Then that's what you have to charge.

JOHN

I'm not sure anyone would pay it. As it is, I see the same ten guys three or four times a day each, and every time they come over they bitch about the price.

RED DOG

Let me ask you something, Buzz. Why do you come up here and pay three hundred an ounce when you can get weed for a hundred?

JOHN

Because it's the best.



RED DOG

Exactly. When you've got the best, you can charge whatever you want, and they'll pay it. When they complain, just tell them what I tell them.

JOHN

What's that?

RED DOG

I say, "Listen, you motherfuckers, I have to sit up here listening to you assholes come up here and try to beat me down on the price, I'm committing a felony every living day I stand here, I don't have to feel guilty about making a profit." I got a call from <a well known and deservedly very successful TV producer> one day. I picked up the phone and he said, "Hello is this Rich? This is ----- ----." And I said, "Yeah, this is Rich." So he says, "I got your number from Hunter Thompson. I hear you've got some pretty good grass." And I say, "That's right." And he says, "I hear it's pretty expensive." So I say, "You must hear that from some pretty cheap people, because I sell this shit for exactly what it's worth. What kind of weed are



you looking for?" And he says, "The green kind." So I tell him I've got about thirty varieties of weed here, and they're all green. I send over a sample with Tom, and sure enough, he wants the most expensive one. I've been selling the guy weed now for four years, he's never met me, and he still thinks my name is Rich.

JOHN

Okay, Bill. I'm sold. Twenty-five bucks a gram. Hey, what's the blowtorch for?

RED DOG

That's to smoke the base.

JOHN

The base of what?



RED DOG

Base. Freebase.

JOHN

What's freebase?

RED DOG

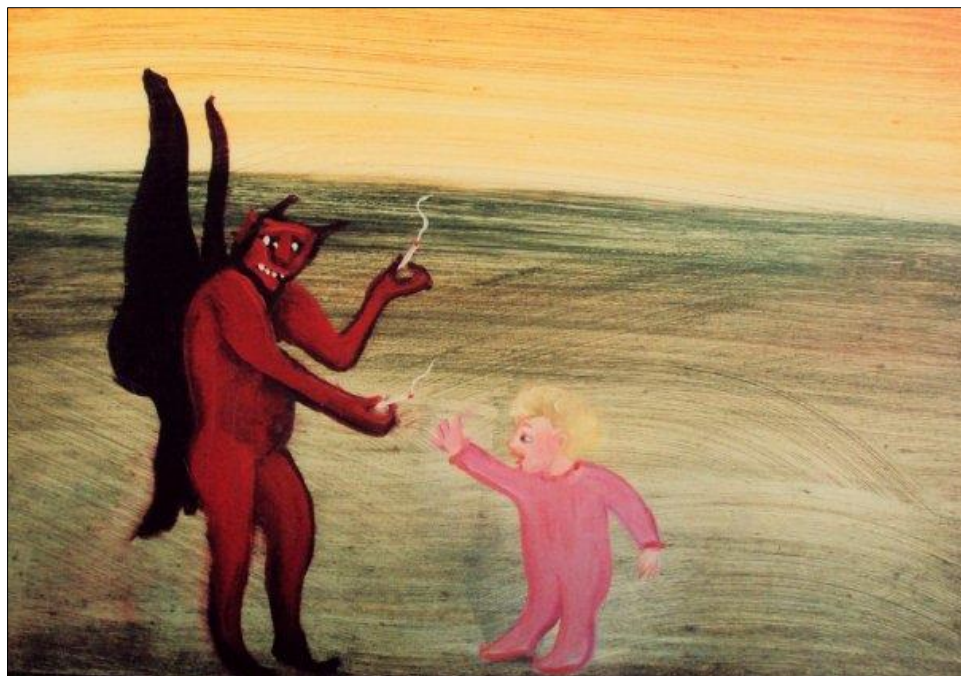
You haven't tried it yet?

JOHN

I haven't even heard of it.

RED DOG

Hey, Buzz. You have got to try this shit. You take cocaine hydrochloride and remove the hydrochloride by dissolving the coke in water and neutralizing the hydrochloric acid with a strong base like baking soda or



ammonia, and then you run ethyl anhydrous ether through the water, which picks up the coca, and leaves the by-products of the reaction in the water. Then you draw off the ether, and evaporate it off on a watch plate, and what you're left with is coca, just like the paste they made from the leaves before they housed it with the hydrochloride in the first place. Then you put the coca on the screen of a glass pipe, and vaporize it with this here blowtorch, and inhale the vapor.

JOHN

Sounds simple enough.

RED DOG

Look at this newspaper.

Red Dog picks up a newspaper.

(Reading)



"Freebase. It's new, dangerous, and expensive." So you see, buzz, it has everything a drug needs to be successful. It's new, dangerous and expensive. On top of that, it's incredibly addictive. It's going to be the drug of the eighties.

JOHN

Gee, Bill. What's going to be the drug of the nineties?

RED DOG

Air.

JOHN

Come on. You can't sell air.

RED DOG

Watch me.



JOHN

Well, if anyone can do it, I'm sure you can. So you plan to make a bundle on this freebase shit, huh?

RED DOG

No, I plan to lose practically everything.

JOHN

What?

RED DOG

Listen to me, Buzz. Aster, Pariser, all of these dealers who never did anything but make a living fortune in the dope business are losing money for the first time in their lives behind this shit.



JOHN

Why?

RED DOG

Because when you're smoking it you don't care about anything but the next hit. I've been sitting here cooking this shit up, and if the PH is off, fuck it. I'll throw in an ounce of blow to bring it back. And you wouldn't believe the shit I've seen people do since I've been smoking this stuff. The other night I was sitting here with Ray and two coke whores. I'm smoking the shit with the two cunts, and Ray was sitting right where you are, doing smack. He OD's on the smack, falls off the chair, hits the floor and instantly turns blue. So I try to hand the pipe to the fucking coke whores, and I tell them to take a hit of the base, and blow it Ray's mouth. Well they just back up, because Ray is all blue, and they don't want to touch him. So I have to jump over the fucking bar, and blow the shit in Ray's mouth myself. Of course it brings him right back to life. So I'm sitting here about a half hour later, and I look outside, and they're in the Jacuzzi, and the two cunts are sucking Ray's cock. They same guy they wouldn't touch half an hour earlier, when he was blue, to save his life. And all for another hit of base.

JOHN

Sounds pretty good. Let's try it.

RED DOG

It'll have to be next time, Buzz. I'm out of blow right now.

JOHN

(Incredulous)

What? YOU'RE out of cocaine? This is not a good sign.

RED DOG

I'm telling you right now, Buzz. I'm going to go way out in orbit on this shit. Hopefully I'll come back again after I've smoked up my fortune.

JOHN

Okay, Will. Good luck. Thanks for the weed, and especially for the speed. I'll see you tomorrow?

RED DOG

Yeah, try to make it the same time, and I'll turn you on to some base.

JOHN

I look forward to it. Later.

RED DOG

Later, Buzz.

END



THE POST APOCALYPTIC WOLF CULT OF DARREN SMALLS

By Ty Gorton

Image © David Aronson

She spun oblivion the way only a nymph-poet vegetarian with a devout Catholic upbringing could.

It wasn't so much romance between them, but an animal ritualism of violence, feeding, and fucking which, added together, equaled something much more colossal than a fairytale codependence. Theirs was the kind of chemical union gray wolves howl of, a lifelong mating sincere about its death vows. There had been others with their group in the beginning, tagalongs and desperate followers whose eyes already glistened with the inevitable. For minds like theirs, dying was necessary. Once the perfume smell and greeting card clean of the world they knew had been trampled to a shit-like consistency, they had no means of measuring their purpose.

The thing they never tell you about the end of the world, it doesn't happen overnight. You don't wake up at dawn and discover a smoldering landscape

with half the world's population already cooked. The Apocalypse proved far worse. It took place one day at a time. It made you watch the horrific irony from high rise windows. It showed you things you always knew were true about your neighbors and co-workers and family members but never spoke of. It weighed down the weeks until a minute became an hour and an hour became whole days as you laughed at the hard earned construct of civilized culture crumbling with barely a whimper.

The incredible thing, the cackle inducing donkey punch you never saw coming was how fast new cults sprang up from the wreckage of society. They were like enthusiastic single celled organisms, these survivalist, religion based abominations... formed and lead by those mad geniuses who thrive in times of chaos, men and women who were nothings in yesterday's reality, the invisible fringe. Their sudden position of rank made them a little too eager to flex the will of their

infant flocks, and they did so with a benevolence even Hollywood would have blushed at. To anyone with half a knack for death evasion, it quickly became clear that the motto of the day was, "Join a cult or die! (motherfucker optional)".

All these pop-cults, as they've come to be called, followed the same general formula...

1. A deeper wisdom and knowledge of a divine destiny that only the leader, for reasons neither offered or asked about, can tap into and so gift to the unworthy multitudes.
2. A black and white, us or them philosophy that had no patience to consider a possibility in which a larger, undivided group working together might increase the chances of survival.
3. Access to a stockpile of advantage lending weaponry, usually but certainly not limited to guns and ammunition. Pop-cults have been known to wield chainsaws, bow and arrows, axes, golf clubs, and nun chucks. So long as a group's weapon-o-

plenty was capable of inflicting more harm than you currently possessed, that group became desirable.

4. Without fail, some motherfucker would christen themselves "witchdoctor" and, wearing inexplicably primitive adornments, tout a symbiosis with the group's spiritual path. These "gurus", otherwise known as acid fiends, mushroom fiends, peyote fiends, or whatever-mind-warping-substance-was-available fiends would then overdose on (insert drug here) and pass through the gates of supreme wisdom, emerging eight hours later with the "path" for the group which ninety-nine times out of a hundred took the form of barbaric violence.

Which brings us to that grand moment when Mr. Darren Smalls of Nevada first impacted with Miss Rhonda Divine of California. The word "impacted" has not been used metaphorically. Both had managed to pick up *rabid tails* over the past week, a term that had come to define weak loners

who followed strong loners hoping to catch them in a moment of vulnerability. Darren was pacing due west with the kind of singular muscle intensity reserved for describing a cheetah at full tilt. Rhonda was at double-time cruise control, navigating the increasingly dense terrain with elk like smooth. The ancient redwood acted as a tuning fork, enticing their tribal souls. There was this infinite second that shot across the universe in every direction, one precise instant when eyes first met, their identical rage for life-no-matter-the-cost causing them both to forget the similar threats on their heels. Bodies collided atomic, features fused to the sound of bones shrieking but refusing to snap.

Writhing in agony on the ground, both recognized the male/female significance of the moment. Propagation of the species, multiple orgasms, agreed upon perversions, and so forth. They also vaguely registered that this was exactly the kind of vulnerable window their prospective rabid tails were aces at monopolizing. Darren and Rhonda rolled toward one another, slamming back to back, giving each other leverage to stand while keeping their hands free. The two rabids descended simultaneously,

becoming aware of one another in a similarly shocked fashion as the soon to be kill-happy lovers. Rhonda dipped right, seamlessly pulled a four inch blade from her waste belt, and extended her arm. Darren dipped left and side-whipped the Magnum already in hand forty-five degrees upward. Her steel drove into delicate guts and tore down to the pelvis. His bullet ripped through throat tendons and spine. All four bodies landed in the same flurry of dust and blood. Darren and Rhonda whirled once more back to back, teeth clenched, predator angst on tongues, mad, mad lust in eyes.

The rabid tails whined and lamented. Done in. Finished. Their prospective wounds gushed what little warmth remained of their survival instinct across the rich, eroding leaf forest floor. Darren and Rhonda made quick work of death for pity's sake, even now when torment had become an increasingly popular form of entertainment. Enemies were enemies by default, not due to nurtured intention, so there was no need for lingering wrath. With blood still wet and final breaths lingering like pathetic halos, the two unlikely warriors (him a comic book artist before the global economy unraveled, her a

starving poet) tangled and roiled into something like fevered need. Their hands, so tuned to delivering death blows, worked fingers with the memory of carnal pursuit, pulling, stroking, massaging, digging, and forcibly guiding the other's into those sacred pleasure points so rarely utilized.

Anyone could have killed them there, locked together in near epileptic sexual ferocity. For the first time in years, neither of them weighed the risk against reward; neither of them cared for anything but going deeper, harder, faster toward the final ancient séance.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of life, I will fear no man: For thou art with me; Thy violence and thy sex, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; Thou annointest my head with wrath; My cup runneth over." Rhonda Divine spoke the words, which dripped like honey from a believer's tongue.

Darren Smalls stood stoic adorned in black robes, tattooed with the five elements of wolf, pierced with the bones and teeth of that

divine beast of moon-tide worship.

"You are the Children of Wolf, the killers of daylight, the perfect arm of truth in a time without truth," Rhonda conjured the language they had carved together, she dished it with evangelical sensuality, and those gathered made food of its spoken form. This was the Church of Wolf.

They hit on the idea in the depths of Winter three years ago. They were huddled beneath the stitched together skinned hides of dozens of defeated foes, some of them human in origin. It had been weeks since their last encounter with fresh meat, which meant even the sex was suffering. It occurred to them that what they lacked were sheer numbers. An *If you can't beat them... join them* mentality fueled their initial enthusiasm. Days later, Rhonda was sermonizing from atop an impressive bolder and Darren was dabbling in peyote induced trance pathology. Together, they puzzled out a feasible mythology structured around the mating habits of gray wolves.

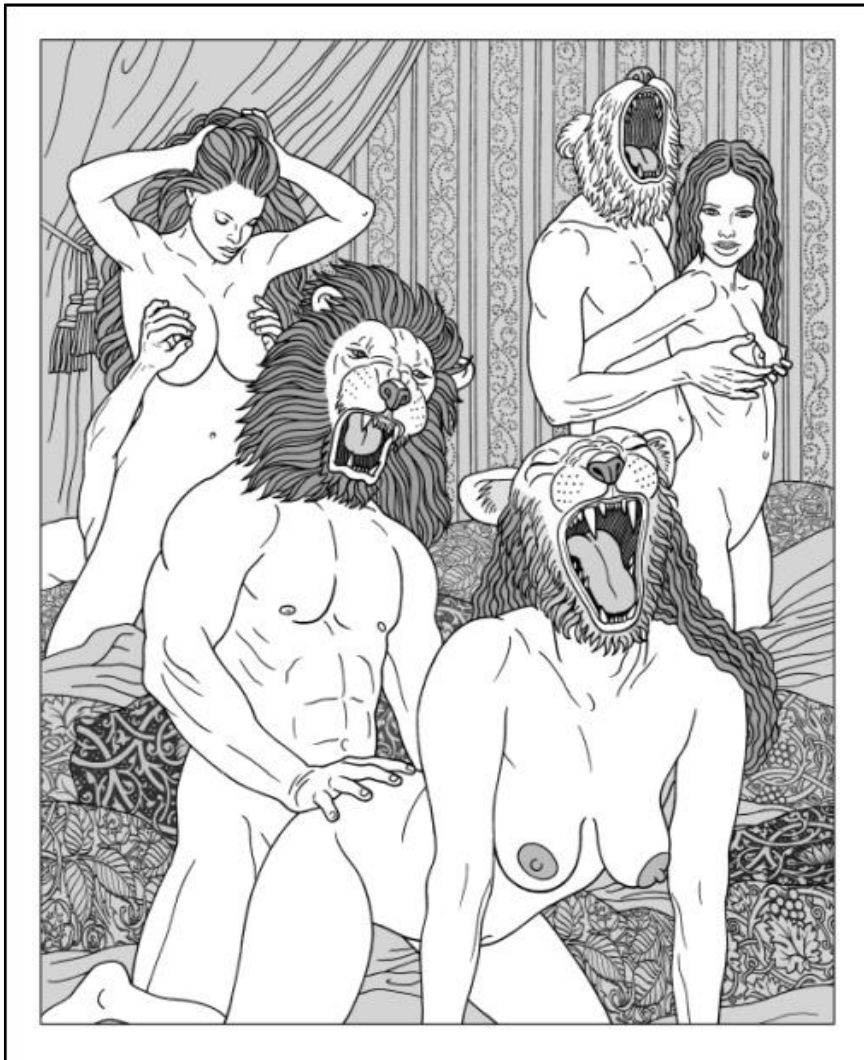
The number one criteria of the Wolf Cult: You must mate for life, and you are only as strong as the bond formed with your mate.

They were mass murder duos. They fucked death and mocked life with teenage abandon. Theirs was the holy grail of survivalist cults.

Rhonda was the charismatic leader, the speaker, the bringer of death, the super-sex-charged tit endowed bad ass of the new fucking world.

Darren became the witchdoctor fiend, tripped out on infinite hallucinogens and yet firmly capable of ending a life not fully in step with the Wolf Cult philosophy.

“Join us or die, motherfucker (motherfucker not optional)!”



WITCH

By Claudia Bellocq

Baba Yaga the witch sat picking at the bones of the men she had eaten that night. Tearing. Pulling at the remaining flesh, snapping the fragile parts and tossing them aside with a violent gesture of her bony, knotted hands.

"Hisssssssssssssssssssss,
hisssssssssssssssssss,
hisssssssssssssssss," she spat. Laughing aloud; practicing scaring the ones she planned to eat tonight. They cowered in a corner of her dingy cave and wept for their lovers, their wives and their children.

"Oh hush now my pretty's... it's really all very, *very* sweet. You're going to relish being eaten by me almost as much as I'm going to relish eating you," as she opened her yellow old mouth, curled her lip and clashed her metal teeth - newly sharpened.

One of the men, on seeing the bones she was foraging over, let out a whimper.

"You, you with the pretty little cry, come over here..."

The man begged. The witch hiked up her dress. Black and dusty as old crow's feathers, violent purple undertones, scarred skinny legs and the

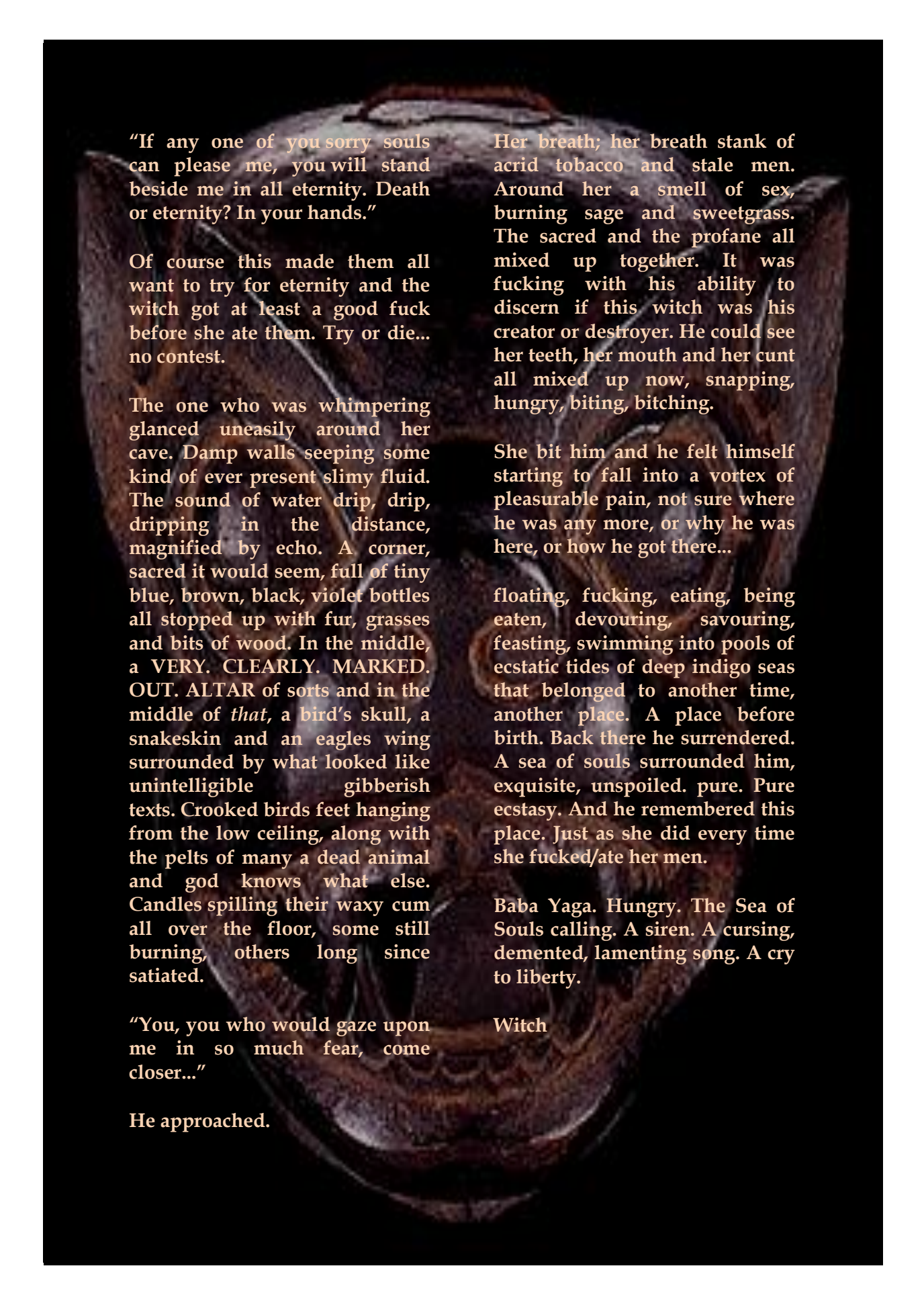
mother of a gash between her thighs, she showed him her cunt. It was snapping its metal teeth...

Her black, laced-up boots distracted him a moment. Thankful...

"Shall I fuck you or eat you?" She was toying with him. "Well pretty boy, what's it to be?"

He whimpered again and began begging for a stay of the inevitable execution. Silently or aloud, he wasn't sure which. No-one could hear him though so it must've been a silent prayer.

Baba Yaga's bite was opium filled sweetness. On first contact it imparted a considerate amount of some heavy, delirium inducing substance that sent her victims all trance and willing. They would smile at her, an idiotic fool's smile, and approach her, complicit in their own deaths. Desperate to know what secrets she held. Desperate to offer themselves to her. She had a challenge on her door you see... scratched into the splintered wood, you could just about read (faded now from years of existence), you could read:



"If any one of you sorry souls can please me, you will stand beside me in all eternity. Death or eternity? In your hands."

Of course this made them all want to try for eternity and the witch got at least a good fuck before she ate them. Try or die... no contest.

The one who was whimpering glanced uneasily around her cave. Damp walls seeping some kind of ever present slimy fluid. The sound of water drip, drip, dripping in the distance, magnified by echo. A corner, sacred it would seem, full of tiny blue, brown, black, violet bottles all stopped up with fur, grasses and bits of wood. In the middle, a VERY. CLEARLY. MARKED. OUT. ALTAR of sorts and in the middle of *that*, a bird's skull, a snakeskin and an eagles wing surrounded by what looked like unintelligible gibberish texts. Crooked birds feet hanging from the low ceiling, along with the pelts of many a dead animal and god knows what else. Candles spilling their waxy cum all over the floor, some still burning, others long since satiated.

"You, you who would gaze upon me in so much fear, come closer..."

He approached.

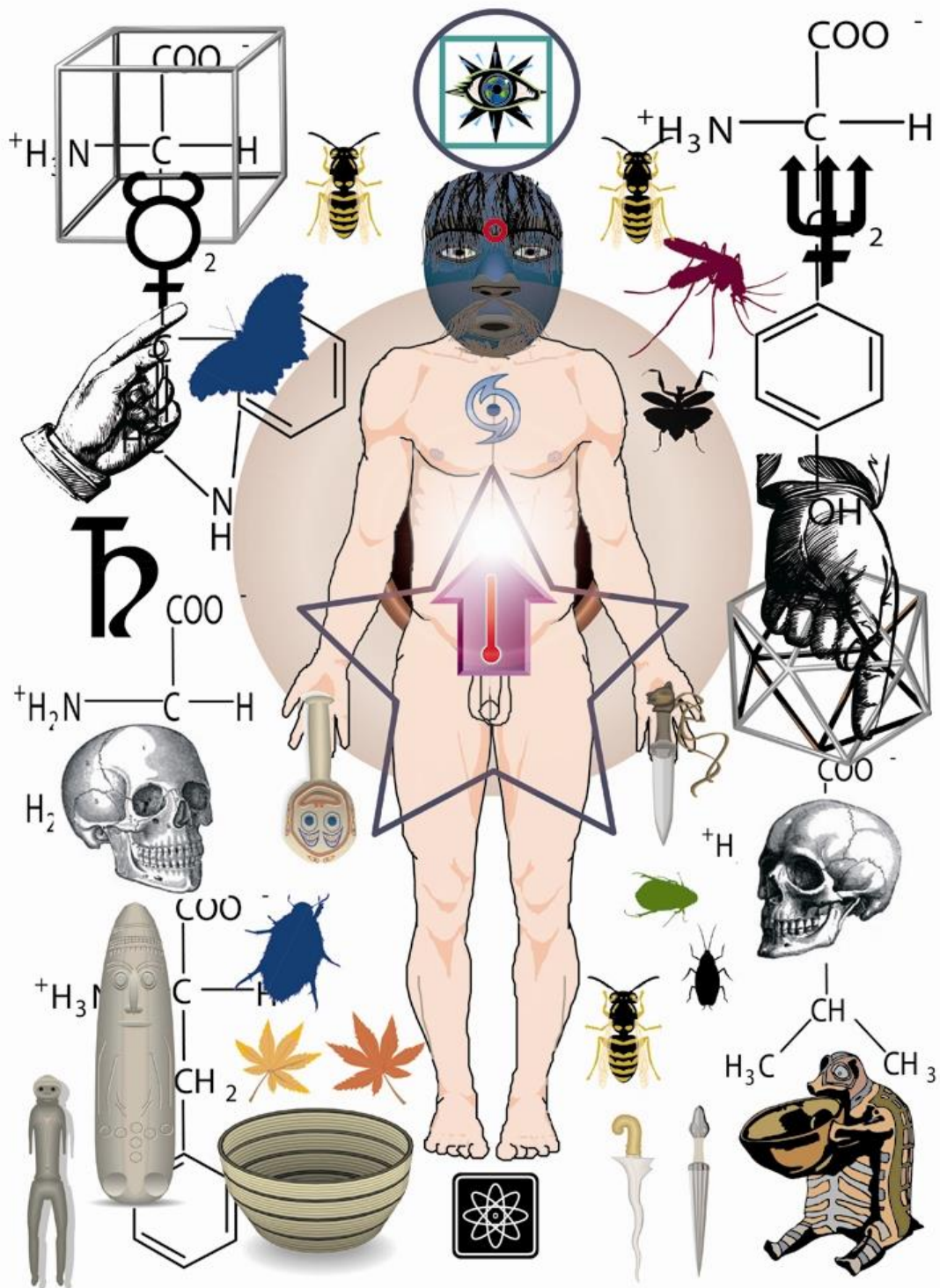
Her breath; her breath stank of acrid tobacco and stale men. Around her a smell of sex, burning sage and sweetgrass. The sacred and the profane all mixed up together. It was fucking with his ability to discern if this witch was his creator or destroyer. He could see her teeth, her mouth and her cunt all mixed up now, snapping, hungry, biting, bitching.

She bit him and he felt himself starting to fall into a vortex of pleasurable pain, not sure where he was any more, or why he was here, or how he got there...

floating, fucking, eating, being eaten, devouring, savouring, feasting, swimming into pools of ecstatic tides of deep indigo seas that belonged to another time, another place. A place before birth. Back there he surrendered. A sea of souls surrounded him, exquisite, unspoiled. pure. Pure ecstasy. And he remembered this place. Just as she did every time she fucked/ate her men.

Baba Yaga. Hungry. The Sea of Souls calling. A siren. A cursing, demented, lamenting song. A cry to liberty.

Witch



FATHER BLACK: OUT OF THE TWILIGHT, INTO THE DARK

By Carl Viktor

- Father Black?

- Speaking.

- Good. This is Captain Hollow, from downtown. We met some years ago, I think. You remember, the case with the...

- ...The butchered baseball player. I remember. I remember you.

- I'm happy to hear it. I hope we can let bygones be bygones now though. Something big's come up. And... Well, we have an odd one over here.

- I can be there in an hour.

- Happy to hear it. Believe me, I'm not buttering you, Father Black. We really need you this time.

- Happy to hear it.

I wasn't really too thrilled to hear from either downtown or this particular moron. It had been some two months since I last worked for the Monstropolis

Police Department, and I had been doing just fine. My financial situation could have been better, sure, but that's always the case. Another trip into their shallow and causal world could pay off, and this I both knew and needed.

I put some coffee on and took a steaming, hot shower. My brain started heating up too. The last time hadn't been so good. The cops had forced me into action I didn't want to be a part of. The case, a set-up ripping the rug from under a medium-fry narcotics trader, was all done according to my design. I had helped the cops understand the machinations, helped them see the patterns of thought, helped them see the big picture. As usual, they were nearsighted.

On some kind of sadistic whim, officer in charge Captain Adam Petersen had cajoled me to come along to the actual bust, although I wasn't officially on the force.

Not surprisingly with these urban cowboys, all hell broke loose and I took a slug, tearing up my left shoulder. Not too bad, but still... It wasn't my bullet. When the smoke faded, and Mr. Medium Drug Lord's body was splattered all over his coke-dusted desk, I punched Petersen's face, heard his nose crack and then fainted. "You motherfucking Satanist asshole..." Petersen's words faded quickly.

The fresh coffee woke me up. I got dressed, breathed deeply, focussed. Before leaving my small and far too messy apartment, I looked in the mirror right next to the front door. A depressing image of a middle-aged man, tired, worn out, slightly pudgy. Not a happy picture. But there was something there I still appreciated. At least I could see something in my eyes, a spark, a gleaming reflection of intelligence in motion. I wasn't dressed to kill, far from it. But it was obvious to me that I was hell-bent on manifesting justice.

As I entered the police station, the guys at the front desk smiled at me.

- Welcome back. You not dressed in black today?, one of them laughed.

- That's right. Me not dressed in black today.

The cop, an Asian, ceased smiling. Maybe he had taken offense? I couldn't care less. I walked up the stairs to Hollow's office on the third floor and knocked. Someone on the inside grunted and I opened the door. A solemn crew of overweight detectives nodded at me. Quite a crowd.

- So, what have we got?, I asked.

- You tell us, captain Hollow answered and pointed with his chubby index finger to the far wall.

I approached slowly. The wall was plastered with pictures. The overall collage colour effect was blood red. I watched the pictures while the cops watched me. A young woman was tied to a table with chains, lying on her back with her legs wide apart. Her abdomen has been sliced open, from her sex up to the chest. The bloody skin was sagging, as her body was apparently empty. No entrails, no stomach, no womb.

Someone had emptied her out, clean (or not so clean) and simple. I was struck with the precision, amidst all the brutal gore. There was something a little too good about it, too precise, too... Conceived.

- So, what do you make of it?, Hollow asked and slowly pushed a styrofoam cup of hot coffee towards me.

- Well, there's something bugging me... I began and sat down by the table.

- Oh yeah?

- It's so well done that...

- That what? Some kind of super-pro, you mean?, Hollow continued.

- Maybe. Someone who took his time at least. Diligence. Perseverance.

- You sure it's a he then?

- Come on, Hollow. Who's the chick?

- That's another problem. We don't know yet. We were thinking...

- Well, that's a first, I laughed out loud.

- We were thinking, smartass, that you'd tell us.

Hollow said this in a quite menacing way that made me look around at the dreary assembly. Five detectives and three street beaters in a meeting on a murder case? Something wasn't quite right here.

- How so?, I asked.

- Where were you last afternoon?, one of the other detectives asked me bluntly.

- You have got to be kidding.

- Does it look like I'm laughing? Where were you?

Wait, don't answer, I thought to myself. Fast thinking. Someone was setting me up. Someone had left something at the scene. Someone, an enemy, an enemy... My, my, which one? My head was spinning. I sipped the scorching hot coffee to gain some thinking time.

- I was actually in a meeting with the antiquarian book collectors' club all afternoon...

- That doesn't sound very Satanic if you ask me... I'm sorry, Father Black, but you're under arrest!

I twitched in my chair. What the hell was going on? Suddenly all of the assembled started laughing out loud. I couldn't but stare at these idiots. They were asking for my help and had pulled my leg instead.

- Wow, I started. That was intensely funny.

They laughed it out. The joke was on me whether I liked it or not. Hollow patted me on my back.

- We're sorry, he chuckled. We just wanted to check whether you still had your sense of humour. Obviously you don't...

- Morons, I whispered between my teeth.

- OK, gentlemen, back to work, Hollow continued. This is what we have: A woman of approximately 20. Time of death, last afternoon. Cause of death, unclear at the moment, but most likely she bled to death. No sign of the entrails. Nothing left inside but lungs and heart. No rape. No signs, no prints. First hunch: ritual killing. See, there's a pentagram

drawn in blood on her chest. What do you make of it, Father Black?

I arose again and faced the wall. I looked at the big picture, all the assembled photos and then each one, close up.

- No. No ritual. It's too clean. People involved in that kind of thing are ecstatic, sloppy, frenzied. This is a clean, clinical sweep, some kind of demonstration. There's no clue to who she is?

Hollow shook his head. The others were watching me, as if I were going to reveal the killer's name right there and then. No such luck. Father Black had spoiled them with previous successes.

- Nope. Noone heard anything. It's one of those warehouse, self-storage space buildings for ordinary folks. Lots of people in and out. Someone saw the blood that had leaked.

- Any surveillance?, I asked.

- Nope. It's not the best of those places. They have the cameras, but only for show. They don't record anything.

- That's pretty hot information for certain people on the streets, I said sardonically.

- Well, let's not tell them then, Hollow countered.

- You getting anything?, the fattest of the fat detectives asked me, his voice sounding like two packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day.

- I'm getting this much: It's not a crime of passion of any kind. No obsession, no frenzy, no excitement, nothing. The girl is insignificant, just an unlucky chick at the wrong place at the wrong time. The guy, or maybe guys... Mental, intellectual, conniving, thinking, constructing... It's too clean. I'm getting... A copy cat... A show-off... The pentagram is too overt and thereby, I suspect, redundant.

We agreed to take a break and talk again in the evening. I was glad to be on board but felt I couldn't really squeeze out any good ideas. Maybe I was out of practice? I stopped by one of my favourite restaurants, "The hole in the wall" on Industrial Avenue. It was an old-fashioned greasy spoon that hadn't changed in

decades - if ever. The waitress, a jaded but proud woman in her fifties, had served me so many times we didn't even need to speak. She put a plate of bacon and eggs in front of me, along with more coffee. I nodded my thanks and looked out the window. Late afternoon and the sun was slowly and vaguely setting over our dirty city. The pavements were littered with remains of human gluttony, as well as with those humans responsible. Petty criminals just hanging around, scouting the regular folks. Working girls mechanically flirting with passers-by. Sad-faced workers on their way home or to the night shift. I remembered this particular section of town from when I grew up. The buildings were fairly new then, painted in bright colours and occasionally we could see the sky above. Not so anymore. Dark clouds hung low, from dawn until dusk.

As I ate, I watched a pimp with dirty hair and dirty looks on the other side of the street grab the arm of a girl in her early 20's. Blonde, decent looker, not too messed up by drugs yet. What had made her expose herself to a

low life among lowlives, I wondered. Not that I really cared, but it was intriguing. What secret had driven her to a life of vice, in which she was public property? I realised as I sipped some coffee that I was thinking of the gutless girl on the photos at the same time. I watched them, still arguing. I decided to go with my hunch, or whatever it was. I got up, paid my bill and crossed the street.

- What you want?, the skinny pimp asked me, glassy-eyed and obviously high on something.

- What's it to you, punk?, I asked him.

- Fuck off!, he snarled.

- Cool it, cool it, the girl interrupted. What can I do for you, Sir?

- That's better, I said. You, take a hike, punk.

The pimp walked backwards and showed me his middle-finger. I had a strong desire to grab his hand and break off his finger, but that could wait. For now, anyway.

- Got a room?, I asked her.

She nodded and we walked down a nearby side street. There was a sign saying "The Queen of England's Bed and Breakfast" beside a worn-out door with one bell. As imagined, it was just a front for short term leases of rooms of a primitive kind. One sink, one bed. I paid a guy in the hallway and inside we went. The room was stinky from previous happy tenants' lustful activities so I decided to open the window. The girl sat down on the bed and started unbuttoning her blouse. I looked her over.

- How old are you?, I asked her.

- 19. Why?

- Oh, just curious.

- Curiosity killed the cat, right?

- Funny girl, huh?, I said.

She slid out of her jeans shorts. I looked at her naked body, exposed for my potential pleasure by this sweet, smiling creature. She still looked so untouched, unhurt, unsullied by her profession. I hoped she would stay that way but I knew that, unfortunately, she wouldn't.

- Hear about the girl at the warehouse down the street?, I asked her.

- Sure... Why? Hey, you're not some kind of freak, are you?

- Don't worry, kid. What have you heard?

- A girl was raped and killed and... Well, it was nasty...

- Who'd do such a thing?, I asked her.

- I don't know and even if I did I wouldn't want to, so help me God, she replied silently.

She motioned to me to come closer. She then lay back on the bed and spread her legs. She didn't know it of course, but it was more or less the same position as the dead girl's. It was strange to see. I was seeing what the killer had seen, more or less the same. What would make me - or him - want to slice her up? Also, she hadn't been raped... It was just... Very mysterious.

- Tell me a secret, kid. You on the pill?

She sat up again, frustrated with my lack of action.

- No. What's that to you anyway?

- What would happen if you ever got pregnant?

- Most guys use rubbers. But I guess I'd get an abortion. I know some people.

- No remorse?

- Whatever. I just do what I have to do, she said bitterly.

I threw the girl her clothes and told her to get dressed. She looked at me as if I were crazy. Maybe I was? I gave her some money, more than she asked for. Back on the street, I thanked her.

- For what?, she asked.

As soon as I got home, I made myself a stiff Gin & Tonic and sat down on my couch. I couldn't get that specific angle out of my mind. Why remove everything? For me, the abortion-angle loomed. The womb was the key thing here, not the entrails or the stomach. She couldn't really have eaten anything provocative or forbidden to the extent that someone would go through the motion to remove the bowels. The womb, however, was another story. There might have been

something, or should I say somebody, in there. I was startled back to clarity when the phone rang.

- Father Black, we have something, Hollow's voice declared.

- Shoot.

- A girl is missing. Fits perfectly. It's the daughter of someone you should know... Reverend O'Reilly...

- Is it her?

- Not sure yet. He reported her missing this afternoon, as she hadn't come home last night. He's worried sick of course. He'll be down here later this evening, to... Well, to see the body.

- For the sake of courtesy, I hope it's not his daughter, I said. He's a creep, but noone deserves that.

- I'll give you a call later. By the way, you got something for me?

- Not yet. I may be on to something though... Call me later.

I felt my mind drift a bit, probably because I wasn't getting anywhere with this mystery dame. I decided to focus on all planes possible in

my usual way. I went to my black altar, right beside my bed. I lit up a black candle and some heavy incense that quickly filled the bedroom. I undressed and sat down in the nude on a small Tibetan saddle-rug in front of the altar. I breathed deeply, relaxed, calmed down... I closed my eyes. What was I seeing? The girl on the table in superimposition with the girl on the bed. One open to be filled and one to be emptied out.

I twisted and turned all my hunches and ideas but they all boiled down to the same thing. This had to be about life in itself and the life which had been ripped out of the young girl. Who in his right mind so carelessly leaves something like a pentagram hastily drawn in blood? The usual: An idiot who hopes that other people are idiots too. If she was some kind of sacrifice, it was certainly not for the sake of redemption. It was a double murder, I was sure of that. And I would bet my money on the father of that unborn child. But what could cause such a violent reaction in a man, a father-to-be? Even if the girl had wanted the baby, that would hardly be a reason to kill them both? Or

maybe she didn't want the child, but he did? Even so, why the extreme measures?

Once my creative meditation was over, I celebrated with another Gin & Tonic. A balance of energies is always important. I felt good, relaxed. I had done what I could. I knew that the next phone call would be revelatory in a desired manner - one which would lead us onwards.

As I was dozing on the couch, the phone did indeed ring. Hollow sounded agitated, but in a constructive way.

- Now we know that the girl was indeed Irene O'Reilly, he said.

- The priest came over?

- Yup. Poor guy. Totally heartbroken. Never seen a man break down like that.

- Anything else?

- Not really, no. No traces, no clues, no nothing, basically. We're tracking down what she did, who she met and so on, but so far, absolutely nothing. The father agreed to talk to us tomorrow. There's a twin sister too, by the way.

- I'd like to be there, I said.

- OK. Just make sure to show the guy some respect. Don't pull any of that Satanic funny business on him just because he's a Christian, Father Black. Come down to the station at nine tomorrow and we can go there together.

- Alright. I have a feeling tomorrow will be a very interesting day.

Reverend O'Reilly was living in a large house just outside of town, where things started getting back to nature again and the city itself was just a dark, threatening bulge on the horizon. The cost of living here was high but these people could afford it. O'Reilly had been up for high positions in the Church but had, strangely, always stayed a little bit on the outside. He was regarded as a reactionary grey eminence, a man behind the scenes, an advisor to the religious top brass. The first time I heard of him, I immediately disliked him. But now I found myself agreeing with Hollow. There's a time for contempt for people like this but right now wasn't it.

- Thanks for coming, O'Reilly said as he ushered us into his living room.

- We're sorry about the loss, Hollow said. We hope this won't take long.

We sat down. I eyed O'Reilly. I don't think he knew who I was and in many ways this was preferable. The Satanic Private Eye Father Black had to keep a low profile at times.

- This is officer Milton, by the way, Hollow lied and pointed at me.

- This is really so terrible, O'Reilly began. I'd appreciate if this was... How should I put it? Brief.

- Of course, Hollow replied. Tell me, had Irene been associating with anyone or anything out of the ordinary?

- I gave that girl a lot of freedom, the reverend sighed. Perhaps too much. She had strange friends and strange ideas. What can you do? There's no order anymore. I think it must have been a cult of some kind.

- How so?, I asked him.

- Well, some occult devil-thing. Some maniac who wanted to get to me by hurting her or something. I don't know... It's just so terrible...

O'Reilly put his hands over his face. Hollow looked at me with an accusing look. I shrugged my shoulders.

- Sorry, Sir, but was she involved in anything like that... I mean, something occult?

- She never told me anything. You should look for some crazy devil worshippers. That must be it.

- Excuse me, may I use the restroom?, I asked and got up.

- Certainly. Out in the hallway, by the stairs.

I left Hollow with the priest and headed for the bathroom. I would have loved to sneak around a bit, but this was indeed a call of nature. I quickly glanced at some family portraits on the wall. No mother, always O'Reilly and the girls. Identical twins, blonde, blue-eyed, pretty. I opened the door to the bathroom, and found a girl in there. Not sitting down at all, but fully dressed and quickly pulling me inside. Before I knew it

I was locked inside the bathroom with her. I recognised her from the photos I'd just seen: Irene O'Reilly's twin sister.

- You a cop?, she whispered.

I just nodded, not wanting to go into my background at length. Also, the girl was in total shock.

- Calm down, I whispered. Calm down. What's your name?

- Julia. I'm Irene's sister.

- I'm sorry about what's happened. But why this? What do you want?

- My father is a very powerful man. Be careful.

- Careful of what? Why? I'm not following you.

The girl looked up at me. I could tell she had something to say, but was terrified to say it. I didn't want to waste my time.

- I have an open mind and I'm listening.

- Julia talked to me some days ago, she began. She was worried.

- Pregnant?

- How did you know?

- Just a hunch. What's your hunch?

Suddenly we heard O'Reilly call for me. We both froze. I looked at Julia's face. She was scared to death, I could tell that much.

- Has he ever hurt you?, I whispered.

Julia nodded. I put my finger over her soft lips and then flushed the toilet.

- Did he ever hurt your sister?

She nodded again. Julia pressed herself towards the wall as I opened the door, and then shut it quickly.

- Yes, I'm right here, Sir.

- Good... I thought perhaps you'd lost your way, O'Reilly said.

- Quite on the contrary, Sir. Quite on the contrary.

Back in the living room, O'Reilly was agitated and seemed to have momentarily lost his grief. I wished I could've somehow hinted to Hollow that this was our guy, but O'Reilly stole the show.

- I'm telling you, you need to check out all those occult groups and arrest them.

- What occult groups?, I asked.

- You know very well what I mean. Round them up. One of them killed my daughter. There was some sign, a pentagram, right? That's the devil's symbol. I don't know what you're waiting for...

- Maybe you're right, Sir, I said and rose. Thank you for your time, we're done.

Hollow seemingly couldn't believe his eyes and ears. I'm sure he had a lot more questions but we got up and quickly left. Outside, in the car, Hollow was fuming.

- What the hell was that about? Are you insane? I actually had some questions for the guy, believe it or not!

- Listen carefully, Hollow. He's our guy. I talked to the sister. She's in there. She said he's hurt them both. Know what? I think he made Irene pregnant and made it look like some insane occult killing.

- Are you completely out of your mind?, Hollow yelled.

- Let me ask you, Hollow... When he saw the body, had it been washed?

- Sure. I was right there. Actually, she looked even more horrible clean.

- Any sign of that pentagram?

- No, she was all clean.

- Did anyone mention the pentagram? Did he see any of the pictures?

- No. You're saying...

- Exactly. How could he know?

Suddenly we heard a woman's voice screaming inside the house. I looked at Hollow and punched his arm.

- I'm telling you, it's him, I snarled and rushed out of the car.

We both stormed inside. O'Reilly was holding Julia's arms tightly and she was crying and trying to break free.

- What's the meaning of this?, O'Reilly screamed.

- Let her go!, I yelled back.

The priest let go and Julia stepped back, sobbing and looking pleadingly at me and Hollow.

- We have some more questions for you, O'Reilly, Hollow said.

- Why, of course, he replied. I thought you were done.

Back inside the living room we sat down again. Julia had disappeared.

- I'm sorry about that, O'Reilly continued apologetically. She is, as you can see, hysterical. I really should see to her. It's quite a shock. I'm sure you can imagine.

- She'll be fine, I replied. Listen, I have one question for you, O'Reilly. Did you kill your daughter?

- What? Have you lost your mind? How dare you insult me like this in a time of grief? If you really need to know, I was here with Julia all afternoon.

- Just answer the question, please. Did you kill your daughter?

- No!

- OK. Then answer this: Was she pregnant with your child when she died?

- This is too much!, he screamed. I want my lawyer.

- How did you know about the pentagram on her forehead?

- Forehead? You fool, it was on her chest... Wasn't it? It was on her chest... Wasn't it?

He stepped back, looking at us like a hunted animal.

- O'Reilly, Hollow said, please sit down. You can call your attorney soon. Just sit down.

- Answer the question, I repeated to him. Was she pregnant with your child when she died? If you didn't kill her, who did? You'd better start talking...

- Or what?!

O'Reilly rushed up at Hollow and knocked him to the ground.

- She was a whore! A fucking whore!, he screamed. She made me do it. She made me. She was just a worthless piece of shit. She got what she deserved, the filthy little whore!

Julia suddenly rushed in through the door and jumped at her father, screaming her lungs off. I got them separated and then hit the

preacher man hard in the stomach. He sank to the floor, gasping for air. I pulled Julia aside, threw her down on a chair and told her to stay put, no matter what.

- Hollow, are you OK? Call for back-up, will you? You, O'Reilly, get up.

O'Reilly looked up at me, his eyes filled with intense hate.

- You'll never be able to prove anything, he sneered at me.

- I don't have to prove anything. I know you had sex with your own daughter. What I want to know is who actually killed her.

- That little whore... Anyone could have killed her, he whispered.

I kicked him between his legs and he fell down on the floor again, moaning.

- I suggest you answer the question. Or I'll hold you real tight and provide your daughter here with a very sharp knife. Answer me, you sanctimonious scumbag... Who killed Irene?

O'Reilly, sensing Hollow might be more lenient, looked up at him, breathing heavily.

- I want my lawyer, you insane fucking cops. You can never prove anything...

Julia stood up and approached us. With a stare of absolute hate she spat at her father.

- Julia, darling, calm down, he begged, wiping the saliva off his face.

- I'm pregnant too, she said.

We all froze in our positions and looked at each other. O'Reilly tried to get up.

- That settles it, you fucking pervert, Hollow screamed. If you don't talk right now, I swear that we won't call for back-up. You understand me?

Hollow, usually a very calm guy, was now all worked up and grabbed O'Reilly by his collar. It was obvious he had some major aggression coming on and O'Reilly could sense it was for real.

- The man you're looking for is James Easter, O'Reilly whined.

James Easter. He helped me, God bless him. He's a butcher. James Easter. He's a fine man. God bless him.

- Fine enough to kill an innocent girl and rip her apart, I said.

- She wasn't innocent, the priest screamed. It was her own fault.

- A court of law will be the judge of that, Hollow replied. Very likely, they won't agree. Come on, get up, time to go.

The priest looked up at me, real tears in his eyes. A face of resignation, remorse and utter failure. I think I knew what was going on in his mind. He must have known that there was no mercy whatsoever waiting for him in jail. Incest in general and butchery of your own kids... Not too popular in the criminal codex between those anguished correctional walls. He cleared his throat and got up.

- May I bring a Bible?, he asked Hollow.

- Sure, he replied. But make it snappy.

He knew he was being closely watched. He reached quickly into

a desk drawer and by pure instinct Hollow reached for his gun. In a matter of seconds the priest pulled out a revolver and aimed it at me.

- Put the gun down, Hollow shouted.

One gun was aimed at the priest. One at me. O'Reilly knew his time was up. He might as well take me with him. For a brief moment I was really, really scared. My life didn't flash before my eyes but the moment sure seemed like an eternity. As we could see the priest cock his gun, I chose to close my eyes. So... This was going to be it...

- Put it down, Hollow yelled.

A fanfare of bullets filled the room. It was so loud I couldn't even hear my own thoughts - not that I had any. As everything grew silent again, I carefully felt if I had caught one, trembling. I hadn't. We rushed over to the desk. The priest was lying on the floor, coughing blood and squirming. He raised the gun to his head and, before we could even react, pulled the trigger. His head exploded and we all jumped

back, so as not to be soiled by his blood-soaked brain tissue.

- See you in Hell, I said silently.

- Hallelujah, Hollow responded.

There was something solemn in the moment. Not because someone had died just seconds ago. But because we all knew that this was more just and befitting an end to a criminal of this kind. He himself had raped and then by proxy killed his own child. And raped the other one. No years of remorse in prison would ever help. By sanctimonious standards and good behaviour, he'd probably soon be leading his own parish of high security perverts in jail. Now, his life and deeds were but a memory, soaked up by a fine Afghan rug in a ministerial living room heavily imbued with anguish and hypocrisy. Julia's staccato sobs and breathing were like a life-affirming rhythm of liberty, a cleansing melody in a nauseating space. Hollow held on to her tightly.

It felt good to be out in the air again. I was standing in the doorway, looking at the garden. The air filled my lungs and I smiled. I looked up and could

even see the sky. The sun was shining on the house and its dark, dismal contents. I could smell the flowers in the garden, something we rarely could in town. Life came back to me somehow.

- Thanks, I said to Hollow as he joined me.

- Don't mention it. Thank you. I should've listened earlier to what you said.

- Don't worry. Right now, I'm just very happy to be alive.

- Well, come by the office tomorrow and we'll sort out the paperwork. And, of course, the paycheck. It's good to be a free agent, right?

- I'm not complaining.

- We're going after James Easter right now. You want to come along?

- No, I've had enough of excitement for one day, thank you very much.

As we were leaving the building, an ambulance drove up and some more squad cars followed. An officer soon helped Julia out, all wrapped in a blanket. She was

still crying violently, in shock, shaking and shuddering. I stopped them.

- You OK?

- It's a nightmare, she sobbed. A nightmare. I miss my sister so much. And now this...

- It's over now, I said with assurance. It's over now.

- Thanks... I just can't believe she's dead... And my father... I don't know what to say...

She hugged me and I her. Her tears were all over my jacket. I didn't mind.

- I have to go now, I said, raising her chin slowly.

Her cried-out, pale blue eyes were quite beautiful. They had surely seen some revolting things, yet there was hope and strength in there. I liked that. I liked her.

- I'll give you my card. Here you go. Don't be a stranger, OK?

She kissed me on the cheek and then continued walking with the officer. Poor kid, I thought. Hollow approached me.

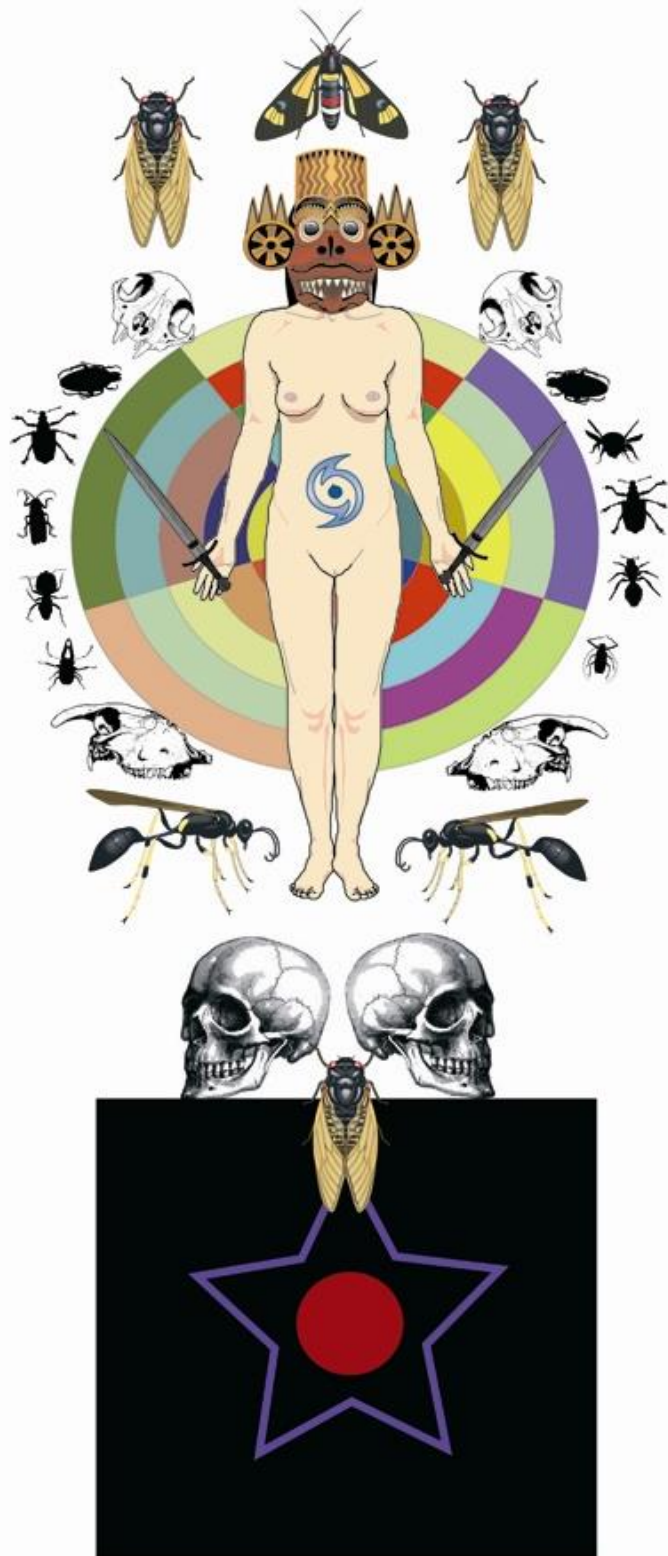
- What was that all about?, he said and smiled in an insinuating manner.

- Oh, I'm just trying to be a good citizen. You know, a shoulder to cry on for those in need.

- Oh yeah? Maybe you really are the Devil, after all?

- Not at all, I replied. I'm just human. All too human.

THE END.





BEETLE'S LOOP

By V. Ulea

Photos © Brian Blur

A structure of ants, wasps,
caterpillars, crumbling wings,
crickets' eyes, fears and
nightmares...

The roof sheds its tiles. Yellow
and red, they land on the ground,
ushering in the fall.

*"For every one that curseth his father
or his mother shall surely be put to
death", is carved on the trunk.*

Among the roots, the first child
was buried.

* * * *

Every Sunday he turns into a
birthday balloon--smooth like the
brain with no convolutions--to
hang over the growing bold roof,
vexing the pious wasps in the
niches. The diggers-ants take him
for a cloud and encircle him like a

vignette when the wind sways him in the hammock of dried branches showing through the chimney. The exterior is constantly in motion - ants, wasps, caterpillars are the facing materials of the mosaic walls. The house squeaks, threatening to collapse one day when the gusts of wind achieve the power of a wizard who knows how to turn the fallen leaves into flocks.

* * * *

His eyes are two glistening webs with curious little spiders-pupils.

Whatever is caught in the webs becomes their property. They take it underground when the sun is cut from the day like the head from the body. Then the day turns charcoal, and there's no more Sun-day.

He percolates through the ground, too, crawls into the cradle of roots, curls up, and waits. The little spiders begin to examine their catch, sucking all the microscopic details, and so he dreams.

* * * *



He dreams of the fluff on the legs
of a dismembered grasshopper
and the multicolored fibers falling
off from a dried bee. He dreams
about butterflies' crumbling
wings, and the cold, hardened
onyx of crickets' eyes.

Upstairs, his Mother is walking
inside her wooden prison like a
pendulum—back and forth, back
and forth. The house sways and
cracks, tearing apart at the seams.

* * * *



It seems she suffers from insomnia.

He wants to know why, but the house slightly rocks, lulling him, so he forgets his own thoughts, falling into a lethargic state.

His body, a mixture of anaerobic bacteria, larvae, and released gases, slips down, and the phreatic waters carry it to most dark and obscure places, saturating it with interstellar hydrogen, nebular matter, and something else that burns and erodes his memories.

He, however, is not aware of it; his gauzy spirit is released, and, liberated, it lingers upstairs, above the chimney, levitating across a glowing bubble with a wide-eyed embryo inside.

* * * *

The embryo looks familiar. Every time he sees it he tries to remember where he met it, but his memories are gone and, instead, he has odd recollections of lives whose meanings are unclear to him since all the connections are lost with the memories.

The embryo stares at him, slightly stirring in the bubble, and they study each other for some time, separated by the spherical membrane, while the worms downstairs are squelching in the bloating slush with the traces of his DNA.

The trunk vibrates as if trying to connect the disconnected worlds beneath and above. Inside it, his Dad groans in his sleep. The interior of the house is formed by his nightmares. They must be contagious otherwise why wouldn't his Mother ever join his Dad at night?

Catching a nightmare is her biggest nightmare. It bores the house from within like a beetle.

* * * *

She hunts after the beetle with a swatter all day long until the day gives up light so she can't see anything anymore. Then the beetle hunts after her.

He could never understand why she was so scared of the beetle. It was cute, like a toy, with glossy scarlet wings in black and white dots. Flies often took it for the fly agaric mushroom, but it didn't

care. Flies are stupid. All they do is gossip about nothing.

He used to play with the beetle before his own body was broken down into elements and the flies began to lay eggs in its tissues. He watched their suspended emerald bellies fibrillating like worms above him and he dreamed about the beetle.

His dreams became his father's nightmares.

The beetle had been taken underground by ants. Its sprawled darkened body resembled husks of a sunflower seed flattened by a heel. The ants thoroughly cut it to pieces and their kids played with it for some time. All he'd managed to keep for himself was a tarsus that he clutched between his fingers until it merged with them and became a part of his body.

* * * *



“Wash your hands, wash your hands,” his Mother yells hysterically inside the trunk when he knocks on it on Sundays.

“I have, I have,” he rustles.

She doesn’t believe him, she runs back and forth, and the house shakes and squeaks.

His Dad appears with the broom, holding it like a rifle.

“How are you, Dad?” he chirps with a *ligamentum vocale* of a long-deceased cricket, once caught by his little spiders.

His Dad only goggles, snarling. Does he see him? He’s never sure. His Dad is confused. He’s been confused for a long, long time, since he left his own mother and met the mother of his child. He’d been promised that the confusion would go away. He’s been still waiting.

What’s he been waiting for?

Dad, what are you waiting for?

His Dad squeezes the broom, getting it ready. The wasps watch him closely. They know that when

he was a child he was sentenced to death, too.

* * * *

Dad was lucky, he thinks in his sleep as the little spiders play with the fibers from his Dad’s broom.

His Dad’s straw hat is always veiled by the spider web that dangles from the edges so the bees take him for the beekeeper. He keeps his hat on, never doffs it, even when he goes to bed.

He is lonely, and his eyes are full of sand. Each time he hears “Dad” the sands roll down his cheeks and cover him up to the waist. Therefore he always carries the broom to sweep the sands away.

* * * *

Mother must be beautiful, he often thinks, trying to visualize her. There are no ugly mothers. Mothers are goddesses. One who curses a goddess must die.

Every Sunday he returns from the ground to read the sign carved on the trunk. He must do it three times and think about it. It’s a ritual. He does it thoroughly and after every reading he stops and

thinks. He thinks no child would've written this about his parent—even cursed, children need their parents alive. He also thinks he's lucky to have them on Sundays. Then he knocks.

* * * *

He hears her steps behind the trunk... He gets smaller, slowly deflating on a thorn of a rose he brought for her. Every Sunday, someone puts a fresh one on the ground before he rises with the morning mist. It must be for her.

He picks it up and knocks.

“Wash your hands!” she yells behind the door, suffering his presence just as the arthritis sufferer suffers the change in the weather.

Every time it's the same. No matter how hard he tries to convince her that his hands are clean she keeps yelling as if she doesn't hear him.

* * * *



Her face is a mystery to him. She is a mystery to him. During his nights, he attempts to imagine her, meditating over the clouts of flies' capronic wings and the glistening pollen on a moth's lonely feeler. She must be like them--ethereal and fragile. If you touched her she'd crumble to golden dust.

The little spiders weave his dreams that flash like spangles in mica. He would've been nothing without the spiders, just as the slush would've been nothing without its sucking and smacking larvae.

* * * *

Every Saturday, the underground waters wash out his dreams, but he doesn't mind. He wants to be empty and clean, and soon he's dissolved in the moisture circulating in the veins of the house. It's intoxicating, and he fancies the shiny bubble with the embryo inside. It's always in zenith, right above the chimney.

They gaze at each other for hours, or millenniums, and it feels good because there's no certainty about time.

When there is no certainty about space it's alarming; when there is no certainty about time it's soothing.

He wants to ask the embryo a question, but he always forgets which one. As soon as he sees it, he comes to a standstill, mesmerized by its slant eyes of an alien--the eyes of indefinite time.

* * * *

The embryo sways in the lunar glow stirring inside the bubble. Does it breathe? It's hard to tell. Its nostrils are two dots, and the glowing air seems to be thick, too thick to be inhaled. Nevertheless, the embryo does inhale it, and the moonshine flows over its molluskan body. One short inhale and the little body quivers with the unsteady opalescence. One short exhale and it turns into a charcoal fluid.

* * * *

When he returns to the roots it's almost Sunday. The waters that carry him back wash out his memories once again, and he forgets about the embryo, and the question, but the sense of a strange connection between them

is restored so he finally falls asleep.

* * * *

At daybreak, centipedes patrolling the waters become slumberous, and he awakes and rises through the chimney, fogging the view of ants that take him for the morning mist.

His father is still asleep. His snore crushes glassy molecules of the morning air, and a caterpillar slowly expands its pleated body like an accordion, still dreaming.

His mother alarmingly strides inside the house.

It's time for him to read the sign. He knows it by memory, but his memory is scattered in the universe--each word is in a different corner. When ants find them they disassemble them into letters.

Ants are everywhere. Even inside him. They come and go, supervised by the little spiders.

He squints and reads what's carved on the trunk. Three times.

Then he knocks.

She yells that he should wash his hands. He rustles that he did. Then his father appears with the broom and the bees take him for the beekeeper.

The rose is thrown on the ground and the ants are instantly pulled in by its vortex. They struggle for hours with the rose's convoluted currents, and they finally win.

Earth gravity accelerates the fall of the sun. It slips down, clutching at the clouds, but the chimney vacuums it from the skies, making it serve the roots until morning.

It's time to leave.

Finally! She sighs with relief. She needs rest.

Her eyelids close against her will. She can't hold them anymore. She has no will. Everything is subjugated to someone else's will.

It's nonsense.

She's in control.

She's strong.

One moment, please...

She steps in slumber.

Her exhausted body releases teary fluid that has corroded it from within for the past week, accumulating in her tissues and causing the formation of blisters in her organs. She looks bloated, her head's enlarged, her extremities are puffed up, and her wrists and elbows and ankles seem to be tightly belted which makes them look segmented like the bodies of caterpillars.

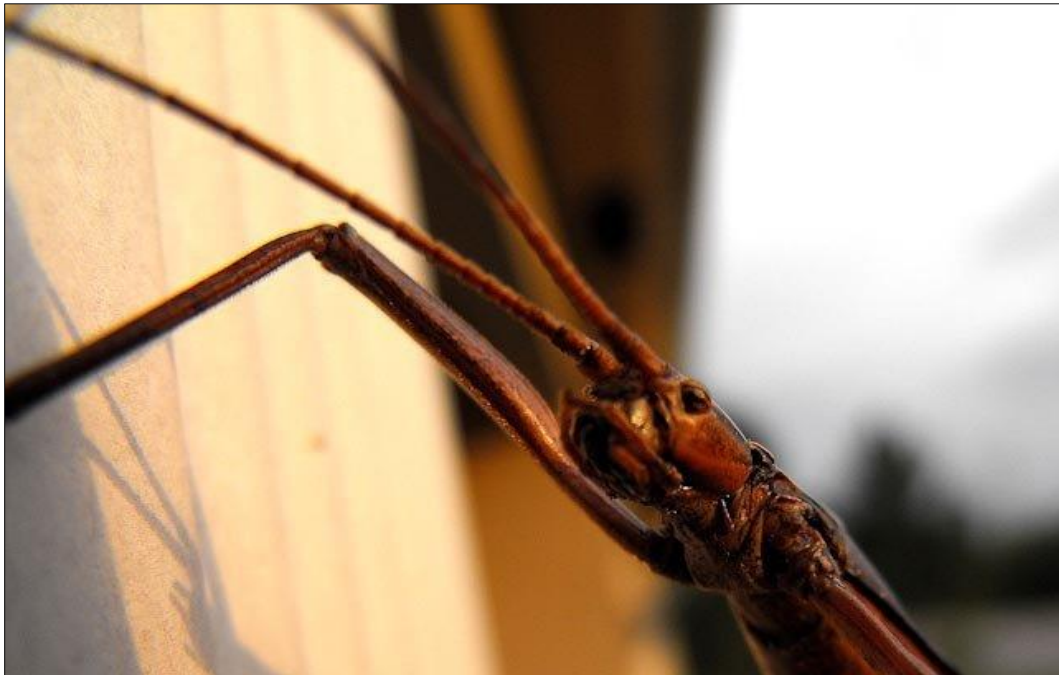
The nightmares surround her.

She lets out a sob and the blisters burst and the fluid breaks through her pores and nostrils and ears and she gets lighter and her body shrinks and becomes transparent

and brittle like the wing of the fly that he scrutinizes downstairs while the streams raise the phreatic waters that snatch him and carry his particles to the obscure zone where he meets the embryo with the slant eyes of the sunflower seed and he asks it the question about the beetle he's been holding gripped between his two little fingers but as soon as he does he forgets about it and his question dies and she is awake again.

She feverishly grabs the swatter.

It's too late, though—centipedes begin to roll down her cheeks, seeking water.



SCENES FROM IMAGINARY FILMS IV - THE MAGIC LANTERN

By David Gionffrido

*Film has been the dominant medium in American culture since at least the mid-1960s. In the U.S., there are even isolated tribes of middle-aged men who communicate only in movie quotes ("But it looks good on you!" "Show me the money!") Much of our lives are spent in thrall to the filmmakers and their actors. But I find there are very few movies memorable from beginning to end. What stays with me are the indelible scenes, the important images: that last, long tracking shot in **Citizen Kane**; Michael Madsen's **Reservoir Dogs** torture dance; Catherine Deneuve inching down the corridor of hands in **Repulsion**; Cybill Shepherd's **Last Picture Show** diving-board striptease. These pictures are the building blocks of post-modern consciousness. Like family snapshots found in a junk drawer, these moments let us reconstruct entire stories, eras, lives. Some of us are all thumbs with the camera, however, so we are left to play with their literary equivalents. My scenes aren't meant to be beginnings, middles or ends. Consider my humble offerings a parlor game, simple party favors inviting you to dream your own stories, to invent new rewards, conflicts and tribulations for these very malleable characters. Have fun...*

INT. MARTIN'S PARLOR - DAYTIME

MARTIN CUMMINGS, 46, a free-lance illustrator, sits on a window seat and gazes out at a blustery mid-October Vermont day. Through the rain-dappled panes, the world seems almost molten. The music is Dave Brubeck's "Blue Rondo a la Turk"; it is meant to lift the lethargy, but is failing. In his hand, Martin lazily fingers his last project, a catalogue of American Colonial period costumes for a theatrical supply house. His hand shakes a bit. With a sigh, he picks up a handheld remote, points it toward the stereo, and the music changes to match the deteriorating mood. It's now Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazlewood, singing "Sand." The whole room seems to be receding into the gray outside, as if it is not vivid enough to sustain itself.

MARTIN (V.O.)

This seemed as good a day as any to end it. Margo and I had already made the movie date. We had been losing

momentum for a long time, ever since that day at her dad's with the truck, and last night we just put the torpor into words. It was amazing how far and fast we had fallen. But it wasn't an angry thing, not a *fuck you* thing. And we would need to trim loose ends over the next few weeks. Still, it could be awkward, this first post-us evening.

Martin rises and walks toward the kitchen.

MARTIN (V.O)

Today was like walking through water. Had been all day. And dark. I have never much liked artificial light. Never trusted it. I always thought it was a cheat, that God, or whatever higher power, had lit the set like a movie director, and we should just go with it. All the atmospherics were bad. We must be headed for some hell of a scene. Makes sense. It's fall and nature is dying and so is our affair.

Martin brushes some crumbs from a counter with a cheap paperback collection of horoscopes, the kind you buy at a grocery store checkout, without thinking, and never read. He opens a cabinet and roots around inside, moving things. But all he can find is the following: one bottle of St. John's Wort capsules; two foil packets of Carnation powdered drink mix; a single-cup Braun coffee maker, received as a gift and still in its box; one half-empty package of AA batteries; a yellow beer mug engraved with the date of a cousin's wedding; dust; newsprint crumbs.

MARTIN (V.O.)

I wish I had some food. Just a little something. I always hated the twenty or thirty minutes just before an appointment. Not time enough to begin anything important, but too much time to sit still. It really ate at me if I couldn't keep my hands busy. Otherwise, I felt like my fingers needed to be drawing or taking notes or touching. Something meaningful. God, I would kill for something to eat.

CUT TO:

INT. - MARTIN'S BEDROOM - DAYTIME

It is dark. Martin sits at the edge of the bed, looking at a television on top of a chest of drawers. It is playing a DVD, slowly cycling through Rembrandt paintings: first, *Bathsheba*, then *The Prodigal Son*. The voice, which Martin hears more as music than as information, is Sir Richard Attenborough's. Next to the set is a digital clock, reading 5:19. It switches to 5:20. The image on the television dissolves into *The Jewish Bride*. The man touches the woman tenderly, but confidently, as he would a thing he owns. Her smile is nervous, unconvincing.

MARTIN (V.O.)

There was something really nerve-wracking about beautiful objects, like beauty was a serum that we drank up and depleted. I loved paintings, but never wanted to look at them for too long. I kept my art books face down. I had to save that stuff for when I needed it. For the empty times.

Art is the door, or at least one of them, into a world of kings and gods and angels and extraordinary things. But doors also close, and strand us here in the world of catalogues. The complaining in my stomach wasn't cancer. I never saw a ghost. My hands were not soaked with murderer's blood. My bed was not a way station for rootless, wanton women. My world was not collapsing. I had never known extremes. I had never been invited to the far provinces of my own life, and would never be. And now Margo, this loyal, unappreciated vessel, this screen on which had been projected the disjointed, out-of-focus, C- student cinema of my dreamlife, was walking away.

Does it just go on like this? Should I even be asking?

The time is 5:38.

MARTIN (V.O.)

She was a bit late. Not like her.

The doorbell rings, then rings again. Martin sighs, then rises.

CUT TO:

INT. - MARTIN'S FOYER - DAYTIME

Martin opens his front door. Standing there is MARGUERITE O'DOWELL, 32, thin, unassuming, looking as if she were knocking on a stranger's door, preparing a ring-and-run to impress new friends. Her long red hair sluices down a delicate seabird's neck, past a lavender scarf, a roughed-up jean jacket dampened by rain. In her arms, she holds two books wrapped in a plastic bag. Martin unwraps the volumes: *City of Night* by John Rechy (trade paper, dogeared, heavily annotated) and an old hardback of Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, its spine long since broken by rough use.

MARGUERITE

I thought you would miss these. Mr. All-Over-The-Map...

He takes her hand and leads her inside.

INT. - MARTIN'S PARLOR - DAYTIME

Marguerite is sprawled on the floor in front of the television, enfolding Chinese takeout containers holding white rice and beef and green peppers. She eats daintily right from the cartons. Martin displays with pride a pair of DVDs in Blockbuster packages.

MARTIN

Tonight, a double feature. *Five Easy Pieces* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. Do I know what my girl likes?

Marguerite reaches into her purse and produces a DVD of her own.

MARGUERITE

So, I usually don't do this, but, given the weather and things, I felt like something a little slower, more shivery-like.

Martin opens it to find a copy of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. He remembers the virginal girls dancing off into the mountain pass, into the clouds, and starts with a little sense of dread at the way this dovetails with events.

MARTIN

So, you're into the gooseflesh? Wanna do something crazy?
I feel like it.

MARGUERITE

Hmmmm.....

MARTIN

Remember that envelope Esther gave us, for helping with her
thesis project?

MARGUERITE (laughing)

Oh God, how did that survive reunion weekend?

MARTIN

It almost didn't. Just two left.

Marguerite stretches, thinking, more about *how* to say "no" than *whether* to.
She is embarrassed by her embarrassment over Martin and his games.

MARTIN (offscreen, from the kitchen)

Fun fun...?

MARGEURITE

No, I don't think so. It doesn't feel right.

Martin reaches into the freezer and grabs a sheet of paper, perforated into
small stamps.

MARTIN

Care if I do?

MARGUERITE (sighs)

We'll be in kind of different...

MARTIN

It'll be all right. I won't let it get so...out of synch...

He takes one piece and lets it dissolve on his tongue, closing his eyes, thinking. He wonders if this constitutes running, and, if so, where he would be running to. He makes a pained expression, thinking about how it might look to an eavesdropper and how he could make it a little more tragic. He pauses for a moment, then reaches back into the freezer and pops the last stamp onto his tongue, with a look of resignation.

MONTAGE

Martin and Margo lay together on the floor smiling, laughing, sometimes in rapt attention to what is going on in the film they are watching.

SINGLE SHOT: *Five Easy Pieces* on the television screen. At a truck stop, Robert Dupea hops into the passenger seat of a logger's truck, and the truck pulls a U-turn, heading away from the café parking lot where Dupea's girlfriend looks around, confused.

MARTIN (V.O.)

Every man had a Nicholson moment in his life, when he gave up on that frail, tempermental concert pianist, that mouse, who could not get a bead on her own mind, and decided that Ol' Rayette, with her big hair and her watery eyes and go-go boots and bad country voice, was not so bad after all. No more U-turns. No more running. It's what usually passed for love on Earth. God, this sounds stupid knocking around in my head. What was it that made simple things seem so foolish? Vanity?

Martin's blotter has begun to kick in a bit. Margo is initially concerned, and cradles his head in her hands, but soon begins to enjoy his antics as he rises and moves around the room, touching everything, giving animated lectures on the histories of his scattered drawings and various nick-nacks, odd scratches and injuries to the walls and furniture. They put on *Bonnie and Clyde* and Martin settles on the arm of a reclining chair, watching, cat-eyed. Margo migrates to the sofa, stretching lazily, eventually nodding off.

SINGLE SHOT: Marguerite's peaceful, sleeping face.

END MONTAGE

INT. - MARTIN'S PARLOR - NIGHTTIME

MARTIN'S POV

The television is throwing off marvelous colors, prisms into rainbows by the effects of the acid. By now, the fourth wall has ceased to have any significant function, and the living room is a veritable fish tank, swimming with distended images and color trails.

Onscreen, Martin is transfixed by the splayed body of Faye Dunaway on the seat of her car, her icy glamour punctuated by asterisks of leaking blood. The image is like a living thing, like a swarm of pixels that nestles on Marguerite, whom he now sees as the symbol of everything beautiful lost through greed or carelessness or an excess of desperate love. Her parted lips become a stand-in for the silent scream announcing Bonnie Parker's departing soul.

Martin's recognition of this flips a switch and makes Margo the focus of an ever-changing light show, pulling pictures from some roiling inward reservoir of longing and memory and doubt.

MONTAGE

As the initial image dims, Marguerite plays host to new phantoms. She is Karin, the luckless daughter in *The Virgin Spring*, abandoned, raped, killed, her face washed by a stream, caressed by the severe gothic fingers of Max Von Sydow; Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* tinted in the color of the sun; the wraith of the wife from Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, brown-eyed and stern-jawed, pure projection of human need, unaware even of her own unreality. His own sister Annie is there for an instant in the curves of Margo's face, as she was when she breached the surface of Dunkirk Pond, her dead eyes like star sapphires reflecting a brighter, long-ago sun; and then Marguerite grows a degree colder than death, white and still and full of secrets as Bernini's funerary statue of *The Blessed Ludovica*. The beauty of it stuns him.

All these things come and go, like a slideshow, as Martin watches. He wonders what unacknowledged sadness is its engine. He wonders *Why these images and no others? Puzzle pieces or random breaths? Should I be putting things together?* Not knowing is a little like being unseen, outside of the world, lectured to and unheard. A little like being dead, himself.

Margo stirs and slowly sits up, or at least seems to, her eyes still struggling under the weight of sleep. The show changes tone. She is naked. She stretches to yawn and her arms seem to shield her from the light and wrath of an angel, her mouth twisted in lamentations he recognizes as those of the chastised Eve, remembering the last of Eden. She relaxes and fixes him in her ancient gaze while the light gives way to an enveloping soulshadow that cloaks her in the costume of the new Eurydice, losing ground to the advancing arms of Hell. Lost, not through her own doing, but through a lover's selfish gaze. Then, she is Margo again. Calm. All of these moments, these allusions, are one moment, one message, one place. One echoless note.

She rouses herself to speak.

MARGUERITE

I'm sorry for it all. It's hard to be someone to someone. To be someone *for* someone.

END MONTAGE

MARTIN'S POV

In Martin's new vision, the words take form and chase each other as if on housefly's wings, making helixes of imaginary fire in the air. Time is a presence, a character in the room, and Martin feels it ease its grip on events, letting fatigue and rest gain a purchase on him. As he uncoils, he remembers the way direct light brought out the filaments of butterscotch fire in Margo's eyes, and aches that they would ever flare for someone else, not him.

As he drifts, he embraces the warmth of this place, licking his lips and giving in to a slow doze. He knows this mystery-gale, and how it will blow him across these wide doldrums in his wide-awake life. Things are no worse than they should be.

MARTIN (V.O.)

Every year, it got harder and harder to get back here, to this place. I have no idea what will become of me, of any of us. We'll see.

FADE TO BLACK



FROM 'SCENE AND HEARD - WORDS FOR VOYEURS'

JOURNALISTA FEMINISTA WITCHES

By Chris Madoch

(At a bar table beneath a down light, we find the feminist journalists Beth and Madrigal and Rosie- strangely beautiful but destructive women, intent on constructing mayhem. Bizarre punters form a backdrop to the group's antics. The brilliantly intelligent women are drinking heavily and smoking and setting out their stall.)

BETH I used to go a full lunar cycle, a whole damn month then madness- a high tide of longing. I could feel my brain knocking at the inside of my skull.

MADRIGAL Oh, me too. Any psycho tricky days- I'd open my slimy third eye and let sublime memories pull me through.

ROSIE I'm down to just a week now. Seven days max and I break out into a rash of urgency and need. What's a week, astrologically speaking! It's getting that it's more compulsive than sex.

MADRIGAL It's good to be driven by lusts. It's buzzing- very crude oil Kundalini. Base drive takes you back to basics like clitoral stimulation. It keeps you focused on the kill.

BETH It's full moon and I get persistent stress indigestion- a deep tissue burning itch. I don't want to eat. I don't want to spend money. My body's screaming- help, what is this? If this was sex I'd get a bloody good vibrator onto it.

ROSIE Just the thought of feeding it gives me night sweats and erect nipples. It's nothing hormonal. I got it checked. Thank God! It's nothing *normal*. *(Pause.)* Magic and tragedy- it's in our blood. We're obviously addicted.

BETH Screwed by fixed signs. *(Pause.)* Shit! What a bitch!

MADRIGAL Banged to rights by the immense pleasure of it.

ROSIE Beautifully bewitched.

BETH Fucked by the intense pain of it.

ROSIE Beautifully bewitched.

BETH *(Pause.)* What now?

MADRIGAL We wait. Oh yes. We wait like all wives to sorcery. *(Pause.)* Sh! *(Pause.)* The next prey is always never far away.

BETH Who?

ROSIE Where?

MADRIGAL He's near, sisters. I sense him. I do. But, like I said- we wait, hating and distilling hatred. *(Pause.)* The best hunters quickly learn to live with waiting.

ROSIE *(Lengthy pause.)* I was thirteen when I found Mishima. Close to the pulse of life. Growing ever closer to his cutting edge, certain to disgorge his discontent.

BETH Oh, Maddie! Look, she's getting serious now.

MADRIGAL Let her breathe, Beth. *(Pause.)* Go on.

ROSIE Genius cannot be collected by autopsy or skimmed from the surface of all that spilled blood like excess fat. There is no gland of intellectual superiority to have or have not. *(Pause.)* It was a small enough novel- 'The Sailor Who Fell With Grace From The Sea', a small book adrift from all the literature examination lists. And like all small novels it was big in part, vast. In there, the boys succeed in skinning a cat alive. *(Pause.)* I waited. *(Pause.)* The wait was well worth it. There was a partially sighted piano teacher living at the end of our road. Half French. Her flower garden smelled of so many volatile scents it stank of death. She'd explained how the French believed that blinded children only had a future in one of two things- piano tuning or piano teaching. She had a dog that, in many respects, closely resembled a cat. A Papillon, she said it was small, long haired, chained to her lap by self-interested devotion. Bizet she called it, after the composer- *Bizet* being close enough to *bison* for me to remark on it. Exactly, she told me, he is a composition of love, black and white like the keys of a piano, a complex melody of love and

kisses. Bisou being French for kiss, from the verb baiser- to kiss. *(Pause.)* Children can be very sharp. I saw the possibilities immediately. *(Pause.)* Bizet must have seen in me some ugly route to freedom. It wasn't something that he wanted, so he howled. I was never invited back again. Weeks later, after a long bicycle ride, his toy-dog howling streaming in a wake of sheer terror from my saddle bag, I found a beach at Highcliffe and I dug a deep sand pit. He was small and there was only small resistance. The thing is, two years later, in a stolen tent, I lost my cherry on that self-same spot. I was in youth theatre- singing in the chorus of Carmen. He was a lighting technician, an absolute dog. He was small, as it happens, and I put up only small resistance.

BETH I killed my kid brother. No! Don't look so bleeding shocked. And, listen up will ya. *(Pause.)* He was my twin yeah- the two of us in a space no bigger than a football. It stands to reason one of us had to go. We was born, right, and only one of us was breathing. It had to be. That's how I see it. It just had to be. If it wasn't going to be him it

was going to be me and, believe me, it was never ever going to be me. *(Pause.)* Start as you mean to go on. That's what I say. Hell! You know how it is. We all start off as fish to look at, asexual. Then we're more visibly human, all of us female. Fucking all of us! *(Pause.)* The thing is, men could not be men without killing off their potential to be female. Listen, there is no question that all men, everywhere, have killed at least once and, in all instances, their victims would have grown to be women.

ROSIE Listen to her!

Undergraduate journalism? How serious is that?! Give her time to take a breath and she'll be dragging us on a tour of back issues of Spare Rib.

MADRIGAL I'll tell you how serious it is, Rosie- deadly serious. Deathly serious, that's how deadly serious it is. *(Pause.)* Deep down, inside all men, there is this ancient fear that we might turn on them with good cause- *just* cause. Poor things. They live, men, in a subconscious dread of us behaving like avenging angels. Imagine the mess if we should wish to take back the eyes and the teeth that they owe

us. And, oh, do they owe us! (Pause.) Forget the foeticides, the billions of fucking foeticides. I am talking about two thousand years of sexual fascism here. A rape for a rape, that's what I think. Now, you can't say fairer than that. Let them know what it's really like to be involuntary penetrated by something insanitary and abhorrent! (Pause.) I never go anywhere without my trusty baton of synthetic cock. You'd be amazed how many men actually enjoy being humiliated by a gob smacking length of flesh pink PVC. I make a point of screaming at them- thanks for the spare rib, just before I whack it in. (Pause.) They get the message- some of them. But, no amount of anal invasion will purge the murderous guilt they feel. (Pause.) Poor Frida Kahlo, brilliantly creative despite the constant pain, she left this life with her diary yelling- I hope never to come back. Diego Rivera, the muralist; Leon Trotsky and all the attentive rest; how well did they appreciate her feminine quality of truth, reality, cruelty and suffering, really? (Pause.) Well, the gross Rivera wrote that- he wrote that her paintings exuded a feminine

quality of truth, reality, cruelty and suffering. What a husband! The bastard! Afterwards, he coolly screwed her younger sister for fuck's sake! Later, he'd see no conflict in being both a catholic and a communist. Now that does take the biscuit. That is having your cake and eating it. (Pause.) Small wonder she didn't want to come back. (Pause.) Shit! It's a profound mystery to me why any of us would want to come back- ever. (Pause.) For as long as we're here, all we can do is play our little part. Hell! Someone's got to get the balance right. Someone's got to keep this ship of assholes on an even keel. (Pause.) It's an immense responsibility. Look, we three, we are like cardinals of the true church, doorkeepers, guardians against the onslaught of candlelight, schmaltz and sentimentality.

BETH Such as?

MADRIGAL Such as many things.

ROSIE Marshmallow Mills and Boon romance; the frightfully saccharin WI and syrupy post traumatic stress counselling.

BETH Goody candy floss babies.

ROSIE White chocolate mother drops and toffee toddler groups.

BETH Pale pink Pavlova babies.

ROSIE The iced angel cakes of infernal maternity.

MADRIGAL Crumbs, sisters, hundreds and fucking thousands, the sweet and sickly bread and butter crumbs of the world's tabloids. *(Pause.)* I want their meat- the lights of their leader columns, the chump chops of their critical faculties. Give me their meat- the well basted media kebab. *(Pause.)* I want the skewered throats of dubious divas, the seared tongues of superfluous novelists. Give me the freshest barbecue meat, marinated mince and gamy gossip. I want to bake the stuffed hearts of pop poets, devotees of cosmetics- hip hop, sound bites and pidgin English. I want to grill the livers of pubescent playwrights- celluloid junkies, deliverers of film script angst concerning acne, drugs and teenage pregnancy. *(Pause.)* Angry! God! Angry! I am so very angry now. I am pumped up for it, sharpened, primed, keen for revenge.

BETH Angry! Vengeful!

ROSIE I am. I am. I am, in fact, so savage I could kill!

BETH Raw rage. That's pure. How very civilised.

MADRIGAL Ah! Well, I am now so very civilised that I have lost the will to love. *(Pause.)* So much for centuries of civilisation. Oh, civilisation will wallow on in this delicious slurry of televised mediocrity, swallowing untreated sewage and offering no bleach or criticism but, inevitably, it will be lost to an undertow of raw rage and lovelessness.

BETH Great. Unrestrained mayhem. How very exciting. I can't wait.

ROSIE Nor me. Rampant anarchy. *(Pause.)* How soon?

MADRIGAL *(Pause.)* Oh! tomorrow couldn't be soon enough. Tomorrow the civilised streets should swell with thugs and libertines- gun-toting, stiff cocked. In bright lit alleys and safe passageways innocence will be caught and fucked, stripped right back to the baby bone. Raw

rage will suck on reverence like a boiled sweet. Good. Not before time. (*Lengthy pause.*) Yesterday, it has been years but it still seems like yesterday, I had a brother whom I loved with an intensity that caused me intense pain. Now, he was a magician, a true poet of immense beauty, *he* was the kind of a man who might have sheltered butterflies from rain. (*Pause.*) Today, he is both alive *and* dead. (*Pause.*) Successful, published but, nevertheless, passed over by the Oxbridge Mafia who riddle literature with such Sicilian flair and commotion, he took off for New York, unaccompanied. (*Pause.*) It was a dry day. Hot. He went searching for primrose yellow Cabbage Whites and Red Admirals but he found fate instead, dressed in flesh, tired of waiting, and in a foul mood. You know fate- lethal, a stickler for time keeping. (*Pause.*) They kept him for an indeterminate while- six six-foot, smiling blacks with cool sounds and a happening fashion. What did they speak about- gender, slavery, the collectability of English china? (*Pause.*) What I do know is, in that sweet cross cultural while, they bugged him near to death. Taking turns. In an alley. In

broad daylight. No thought for nothing but the grip of bleeding tissue and the slop of white ejaculate. (*Pause.*) He's in a home in Devon now, his body suspended somewhere between life and death, his eyes awash with beehives, lichen encrusted walls and wisteria, ice plants and the Dorset Blue. (*Pause.*) He'll not walk again. They read him all the tabloids. They spoon feed him hope and slops that look like white ejaculate. (*Lengthy Pause.*) He writes. I've got the notebooks. He must think he's writing poems but all he ever writes are strings of numbers in senseless sequences, over and over. (*Pause.*) You can see it sisters, in the crystal ball of your mind's eye, there is intense pain there, intense pain in fucking perpetuity. Oh yes. It's a clean cauldron, a very clean cauldron and it's immensely private. Hung in the hallway there's a saintly sentimental oil commemorating Diana, Princess Of Wales. Oh, given the circumstances his situation could not be bettered. And, it's all so deliciously civilised.

(Fade to blackout.)



APPROBATIONS 464 —
AFTER ART BLAKEY AND THE JAZZ
MESSANGER'S MOSAIC

By Felino A. Soriano

Broken semblance
of the photographic stilled
terracotta contour
conjuring touch, prism
glow from an onlooker's stylized
myopic designation. Assorted
breaths form amalgamated quiet
hovering faith's virtual dilemmas:

hide, desire: opened rhythm
of the concealed confabulations
existing within memory's
syncopated deftness.

Approbations 465
—after Bobby Hutcherson's *Whisper Not*

Dawn's enigmatic furrow
open holed tones of alabaster flavors,
sky hue melatonin gradation rose unto burgundy,
distance creates faces of graceful
understanding, whole
in voices of thunderous

connotations.

Approbations 466

—after Joe Lovano's *Cymbalism*

Conjugated clatter(s)

hand milestone

rhythm

prolonged

respected hitherto

unknown celebration

based unbiased lean

inclusive desolation manifold dispositional

truancies

collocated amid winding affirmation, thus

anecdotal prosperity whispered

valuation.

Approbations 467

—after Miles Davis Quintet's *My Funny Valentine*

You wear my

envision for otherness'

aptitude

slightly staring around the neck near

my necklace gift hugs

pound of living understanding. I:
your now. I hear calling
your voice though, altered
wearing
 pink warm smile a sweater of
organized cloth
hugging
 too holding
your nearness as mine evolves
into distance's visceral, covetous
come here's.

Approbations 468
—after Art Blakey's *Confirmation*

Of butterfly wings
marigold flakes
glass of stained premonition
 gathering
 loops of contoured air
realigning thrust
 with
orthopedic fabrications
 man mostly made
of net catching sequence
actuating predetermined
luster of
 organized fallacies, flagrant mayhem
causational impairment.



CATCH

By James Beach

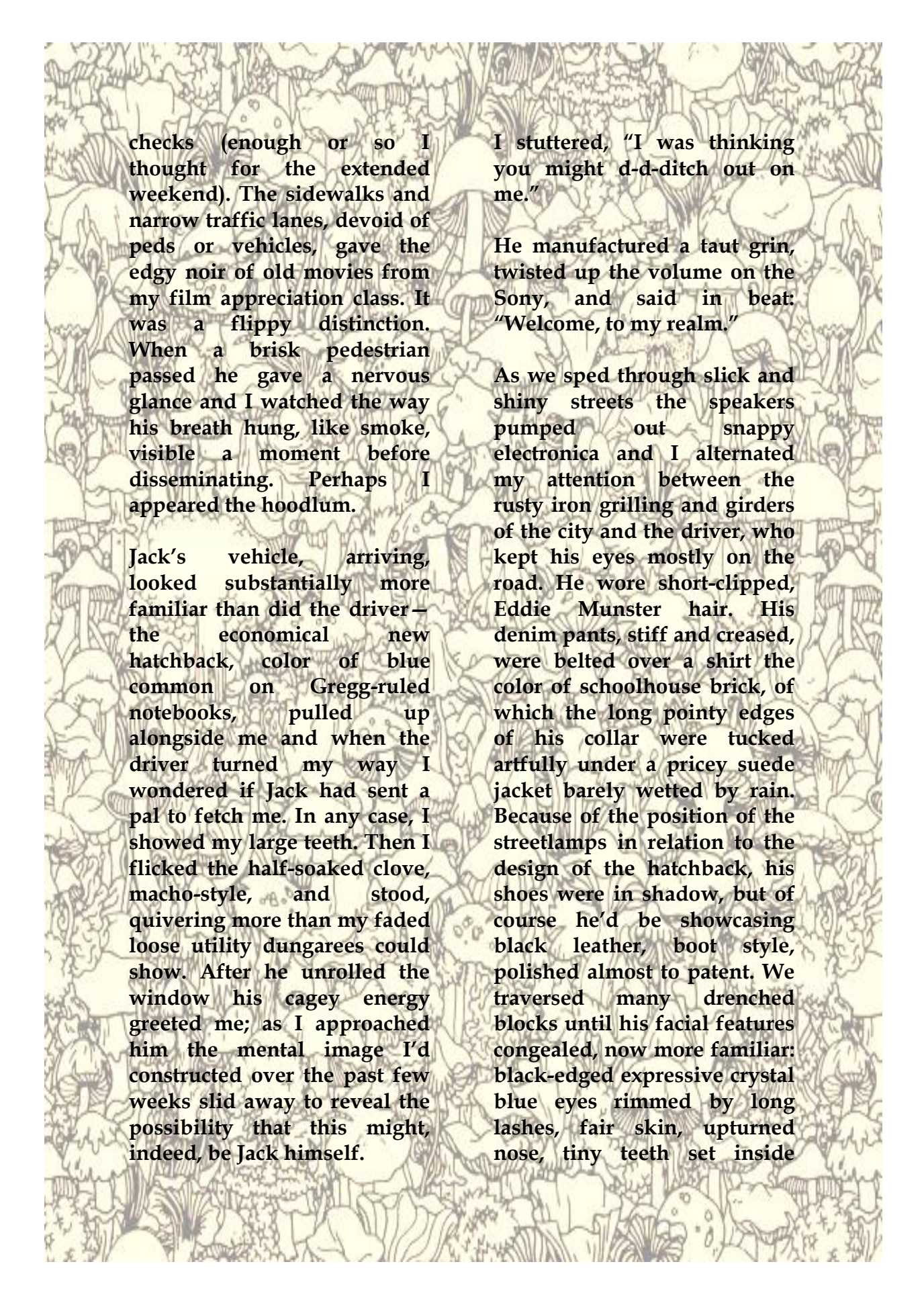
DRIZZLE glossed my face and soaked my longish hair as I waited curbside at the La Salle and Van Buren intersection. A rough leather coat helped keep all but my head, fingers, jeans-clad thighs and tops of my holey canvas shoes dry. I puffed rarely on one of Baybee's cloves, needing to make a tent with my hand to protect the paper. Trying to separate the woody scent of tobacco from the grime of the street, I pondered the concept of Love.

This was years ago already, fragments of a life fitted together in hindsight. Filmstrips of a former a life, a former me, a former style of living, a mess in my head. This story happened before the war against humanity, before emails and the 'net, before cell phones, before people "went to college" online, at home. Back then, going away to school meant that Spring Break was a vacation from an academic vacation, with everyone doing something "interesting," even if that meant staying on

campus with only a few peers and security. Usually those were the students without much, if any, spare change.

I was lucky enough (or not) to meet Jack Catch the fall of my junior year and keep up a correspondence for awhile. He invited me to visit him in Chicago over Spring Break and I accepted, asking round campus for a ride, pulling money from next year's books-and-fees fund to afford the trip. I told my parents nothing about the trip, nothing about Jack, beforehand. Even now I hesitate to talk about it with them. My sister knows nothing except that I "went away" for a while, taking a leave from my studies. Oh but it's not particularly Jack's fault. Accountability being one of my new strategies...

This was 1993. Sitting atop my tweedy overstuffed suitcase I contemplated the intelligence behind placing myself where the X of two streets would mark me the spot of a pirate's treasure: \$230 in traveler's



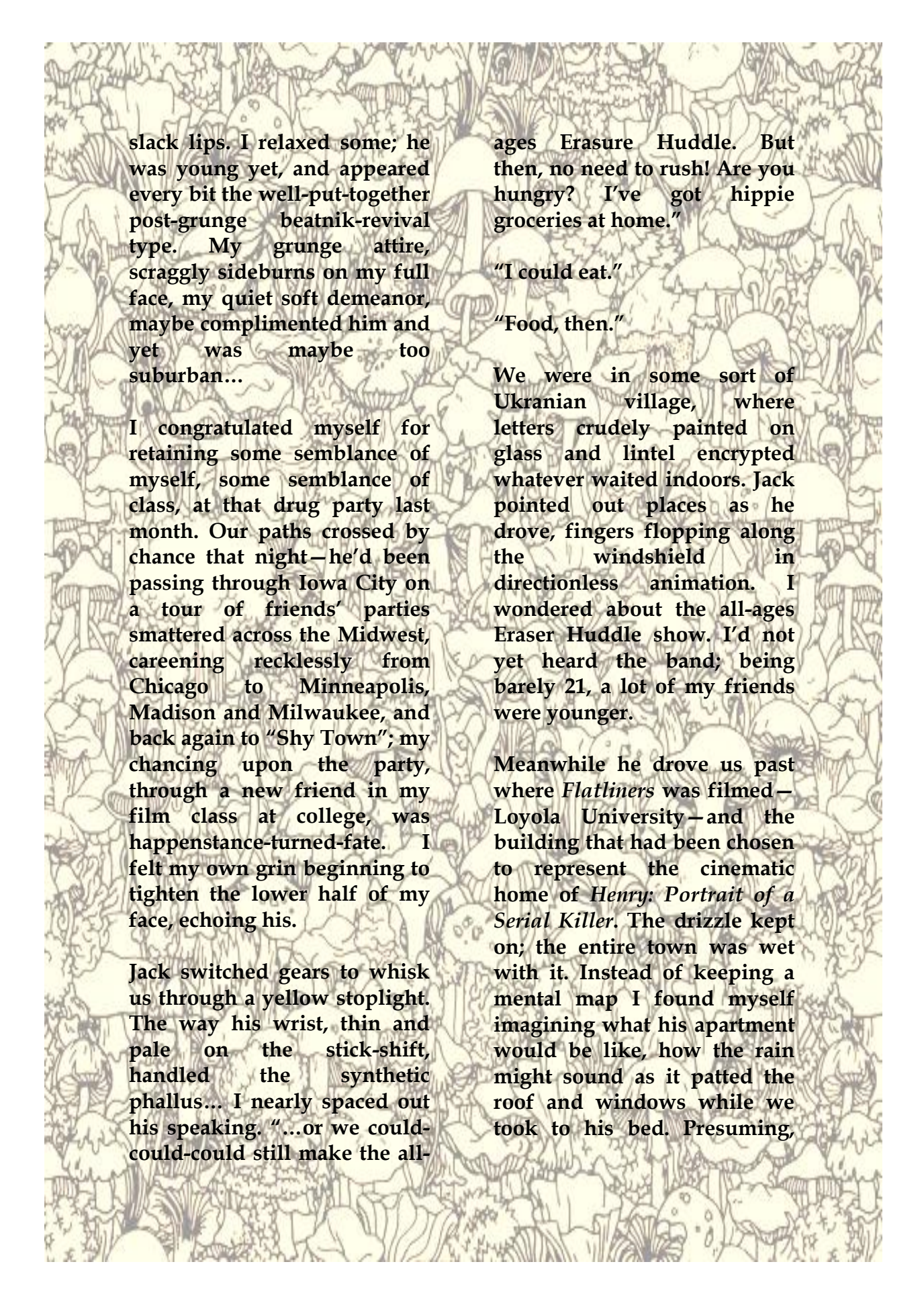
checks (enough or so I thought for the extended weekend). The sidewalks and narrow traffic lanes, devoid of peds or vehicles, gave the edgy noir of old movies from my film appreciation class. It was a flippy distinction. When a brisk pedestrian passed he gave a nervous glance and I watched the way his breath hung, like smoke, visible a moment before disseminating. Perhaps I appeared the hoodlum.

Jack's vehicle, arriving, looked substantially more familiar than did the driver—the economical new hatchback, color of blue common on Gregg-ruled notebooks, pulled up alongside me and when the driver turned my way I wondered if Jack had sent a pal to fetch me. In any case, I showed my large teeth. Then I flicked the half-soaked clove, macho-style, and stood, quivering more than my faded loose utility dungarees could show. After he unrolled the window his cagey energy greeted me; as I approached him the mental image I'd constructed over the past few weeks slid away to reveal the possibility that this might, indeed, be Jack himself.

I stuttered, "I was thinking you might d-d-ditch out on me."

He manufactured a taut grin, twisted up the volume on the Sony, and said in beat: "Welcome, to my realm."

As we sped through slick and shiny streets the speakers pumped out snappy electronica and I alternated my attention between the rusty iron grilling and girders of the city and the driver, who kept his eyes mostly on the road. He wore short-clipped, Eddie Munster hair. His denim pants, stiff and creased, were belted over a shirt the color of schoolhouse brick, of which the long pointy edges of his collar were tucked artfully under a pricey suede jacket barely wetted by rain. Because of the position of the streetlamps in relation to the design of the hatchback, his shoes were in shadow, but of course he'd be showcasing black leather, boot style, polished almost to patent. We traversed many drenched blocks until his facial features congealed, now more familiar: black-edged expressive crystal blue eyes rimmed by long lashes, fair skin, upturned nose, tiny teeth set inside



slack lips. I relaxed some; he was young yet, and appeared every bit the well-put-together post-grunge beatnik-revival type. My grunge attire, scraggly sideburns on my full face, my quiet soft demeanor, maybe complimented him and yet was maybe too suburban...

I congratulated myself for retaining some semblance of myself, some semblance of class, at that drug party last month. Our paths crossed by chance that night—he'd been passing through Iowa City on a tour of friends' parties smattered across the Midwest, careening recklessly from Chicago to Minneapolis, Madison and Milwaukee, and back again to "Shy Town"; my chancing upon the party, through a new friend in my film class at college, was happenstance-turned-fate. I felt my own grin beginning to tighten the lower half of my face, echoing his.

Jack switched gears to whisk us through a yellow stoplight. The way his wrist, thin and pale on the stick-shift, handled the synthetic phallus... I nearly spaced out his speaking. "...or we could-could-could still make the all-

ages Erasure Huddle. But then, no need to rush! Are you hungry? I've got hippie groceries at home."

"I could eat."

"Food, then."

We were in some sort of Ukrainian village, where letters crudely painted on glass and lintel encrypted whatever waited indoors. Jack pointed out places as he drove, fingers flopping along the windshield in directionless animation. I wondered about the all-ages Eraser Huddle show. I'd not yet heard the band; being barely 21, a lot of my friends were younger.

Meanwhile he drove us past where *Flatliners* was filmed—Loyola University—and the building that had been chosen to represent the cinematic home of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. The drizzle kept on; the entire town was wet with it. Instead of keeping a mental map I found myself imagining what his apartment would be like, how the rain might sound as it patted the roof and windows while we took to his bed. Presuming,

correctly (or not), that a bed-share would occur.

JACK Catch lived in a squat cinderblock building on the second floor of a three-flat. My suitcase and backpack strained puny party-boy muscles as we heaved them up the steep, dark inside stairwell; I knew I'd overdone it but on the phone Jack had instructed me to "pack heavily". Where I might wear crotch-hugging corduroy bell-bottoms or a thrift store silk jacket, or silver-tipped bowling shoes, I couldn't guess but in the rush to meet Baybee's dad for the drive to meet my train I felt it necessary to cram half my dorm wardrobe into that luggage. (Rolling the garments makes more space!) Also a few textbooks to study, some newly dubbed bootleg cassettes, stamped envelopes and stationery to write Baybee and maybe my parents while "Shy"ing away...

"Do you like my apartment?"

"Yes."

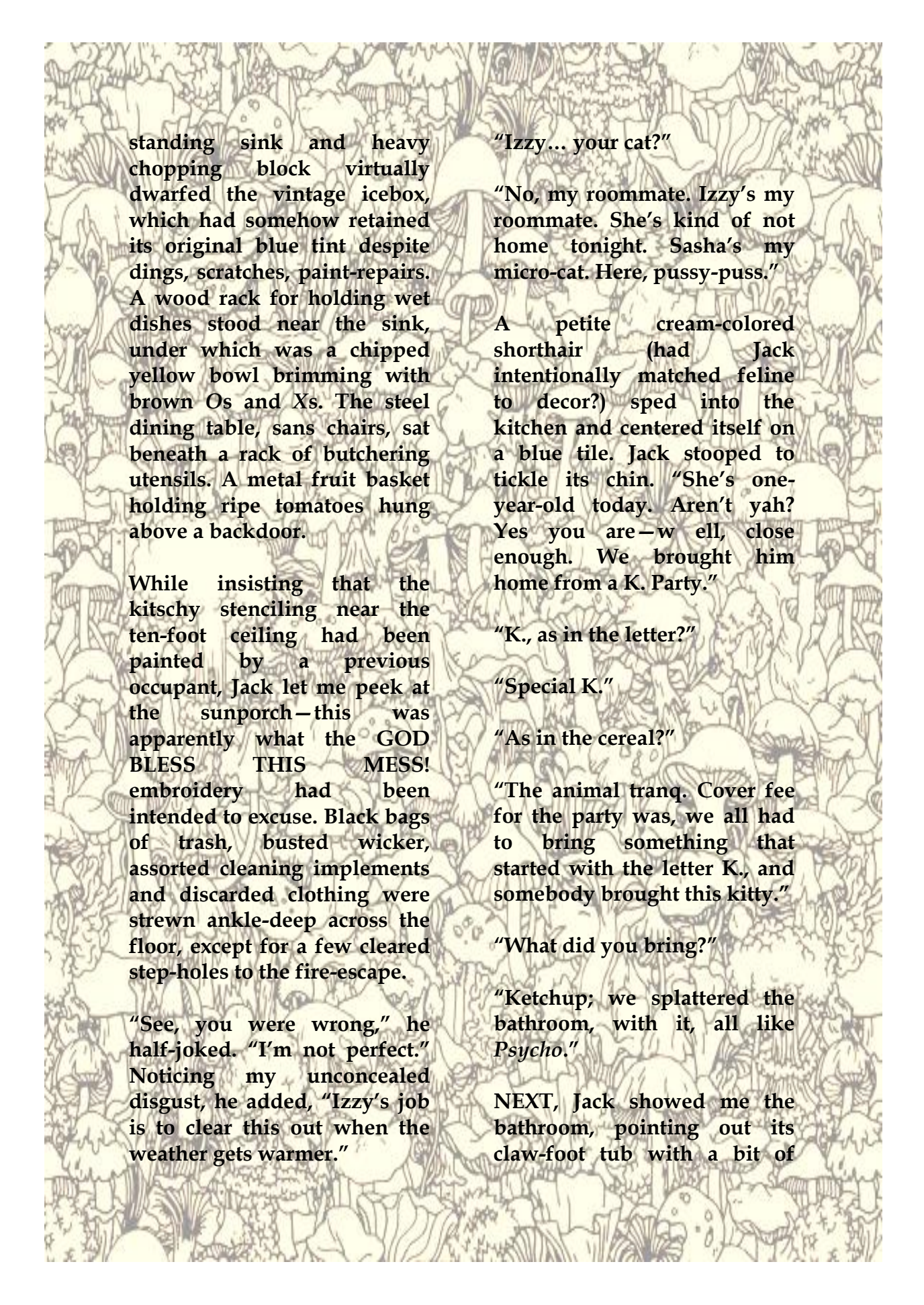
"It's very hippie."

Jack's place did seem earthy—rugless hardwood floors gleamed under dimmed track-

lights and mod 'sixties-style furniture, with enough thriving foliage standing round to rival a botanical garden. Off to one side of the livingroom three speakers and a Kenwood component stereo system sat in front of a bricked-over bookshelf-lined fireplace. The stucco walls, tall and cream-colored, shone bare except for an oblong hand-stitched sign that apologized: GOD BLESS THIS MESS! Yet I couldn't detect any messes, anywhere—even the ashtrays looked like he scrubbed them with bleach. Several narrow windows with dropshades drawn faced out of the east wall. I lifted the nearest one partway and saw Jack's lone hatchback, wheels turned away from the curb.

"This is the livingroom," he said as he carried my suitcase past variegated coats dangling from oversized brass hooks. He placed the luggage near a closed door just beyond the livingroom. "And back here is our kitchen."

I followed him through a narrow corridor that flowed into a time-warp of a kitchen with a blue-and-cream tile floor. The colossal free-



standing sink and heavy chopping block virtually dwarfed the vintage icebox, which had somehow retained its original blue tint despite dings, scratches, paint-repairs. A wood rack for holding wet dishes stood near the sink, under which was a chipped yellow bowl brimming with brown Os and Xs. The steel dining table, sans chairs, sat beneath a rack of butchering utensils. A metal fruit basket holding ripe tomatoes hung above a backdoor.

While insisting that the kitschy stenciling near the ten-foot ceiling had been painted by a previous occupant, Jack let me peek at the sunporch—this was apparently what the GOD BLESS THIS MESS! embroidery had been intended to excuse. Black bags of trash, busted wicker, assorted cleaning implements and discarded clothing were strewn ankle-deep across the floor, except for a few cleared step-holes to the fire-escape.

"See, you were wrong," he half-joked. "I'm not perfect." Noticing my unconcealed disgust, he added, "Izzy's job is to clear this out when the weather gets warmer."

"Izzy... your cat?"

"No, my roommate. Izzy's my roommate. She's kind of not home tonight. Sasha's my micro-cat. Here, pussy-puss."

A petite cream-colored shorthair (had Jack intentionally matched feline to decor?) sped into the kitchen and centered itself on a blue tile. Jack stooped to tickle its chin. "She's one-year-old today. Aren't yah? Yes you are—well, close enough. We brought him home from a K. Party."

"K., as in the letter?"

"Special K."

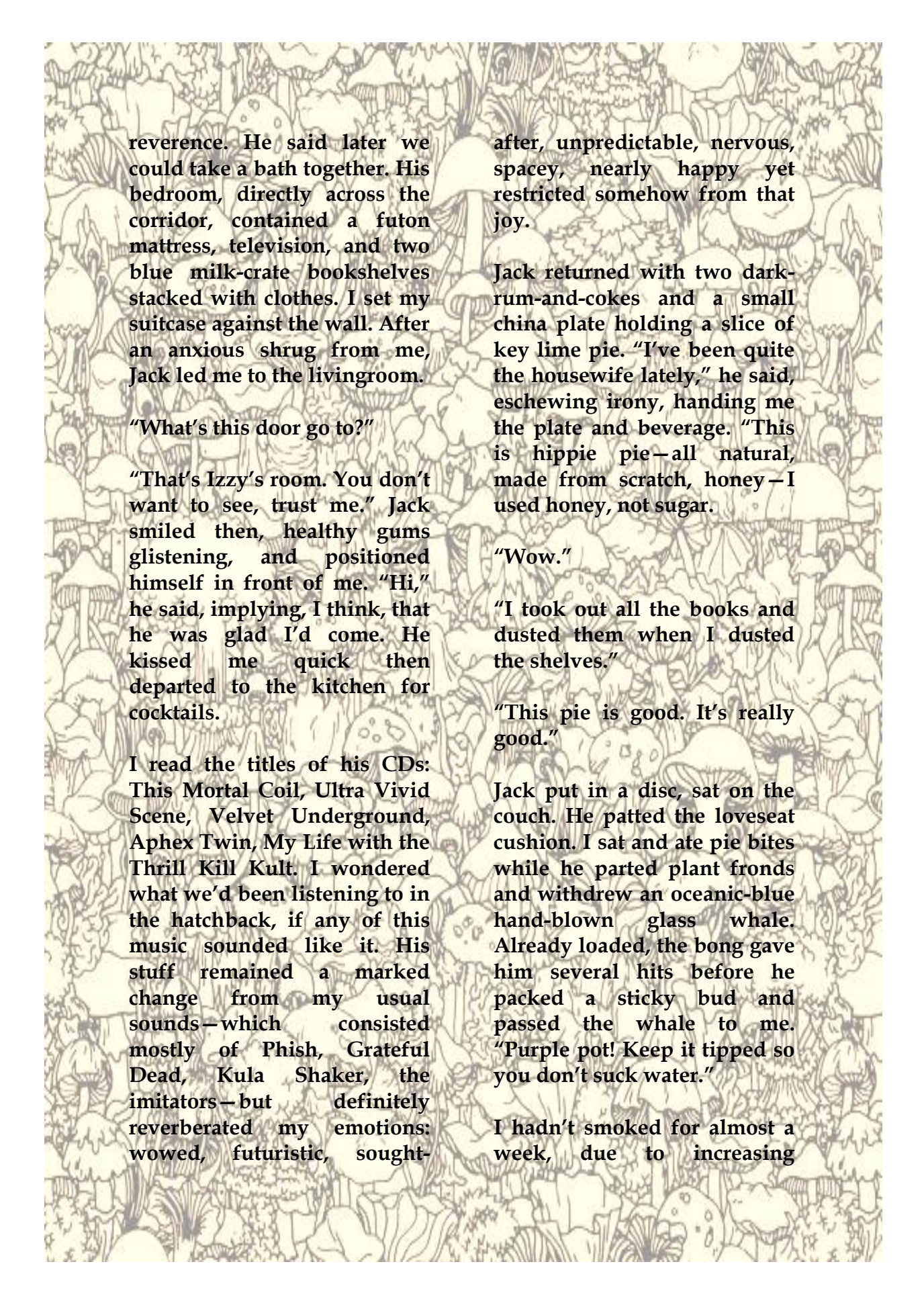
"As in the cereal?"

"The animal tranq. Cover fee for the party was, we all had to bring something that started with the letter K., and somebody brought this kitty."

"What did you bring?"

"Ketchup; we splattered the bathroom, with it, all like *Psycho*."

NEXT, Jack showed me the bathroom, pointing out its claw-foot tub with a bit of



reverence. He said later we could take a bath together. His bedroom, directly across the corridor, contained a futon mattress, television, and two blue milk-crate bookshelves stacked with clothes. I set my suitcase against the wall. After an anxious shrug from me, Jack led me to the livingroom.

"What's this door go to?"

"That's Izzy's room. You don't want to see, trust me." Jack smiled then, healthy gums glistening, and positioned himself in front of me. "Hi," he said, implying, I think, that he was glad I'd come. He kissed me quick then departed to the kitchen for cocktails.

I read the titles of his CDs: This Mortal Coil, Ultra Vivid Scene, Velvet Underground, Aphex Twin, My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult. I wondered what we'd been listening to in the hatchback, if any of this music sounded like it. His stuff remained a marked change from my usual sounds—which consisted mostly of Phish, Grateful Dead, Kula Shaker, the imitators—but definitely reverberated my emotions: wowed, futuristic, sought-

after, unpredictable, nervous, spacey, nearly happy yet restricted somehow from that joy.

Jack returned with two dark-rum-and-cokes and a small china plate holding a slice of key lime pie. "I've been quite the housewife lately," he said, eschewing irony, handing me the plate and beverage. "This is hippie pie—all natural, made from scratch, honey—I used honey, not sugar.

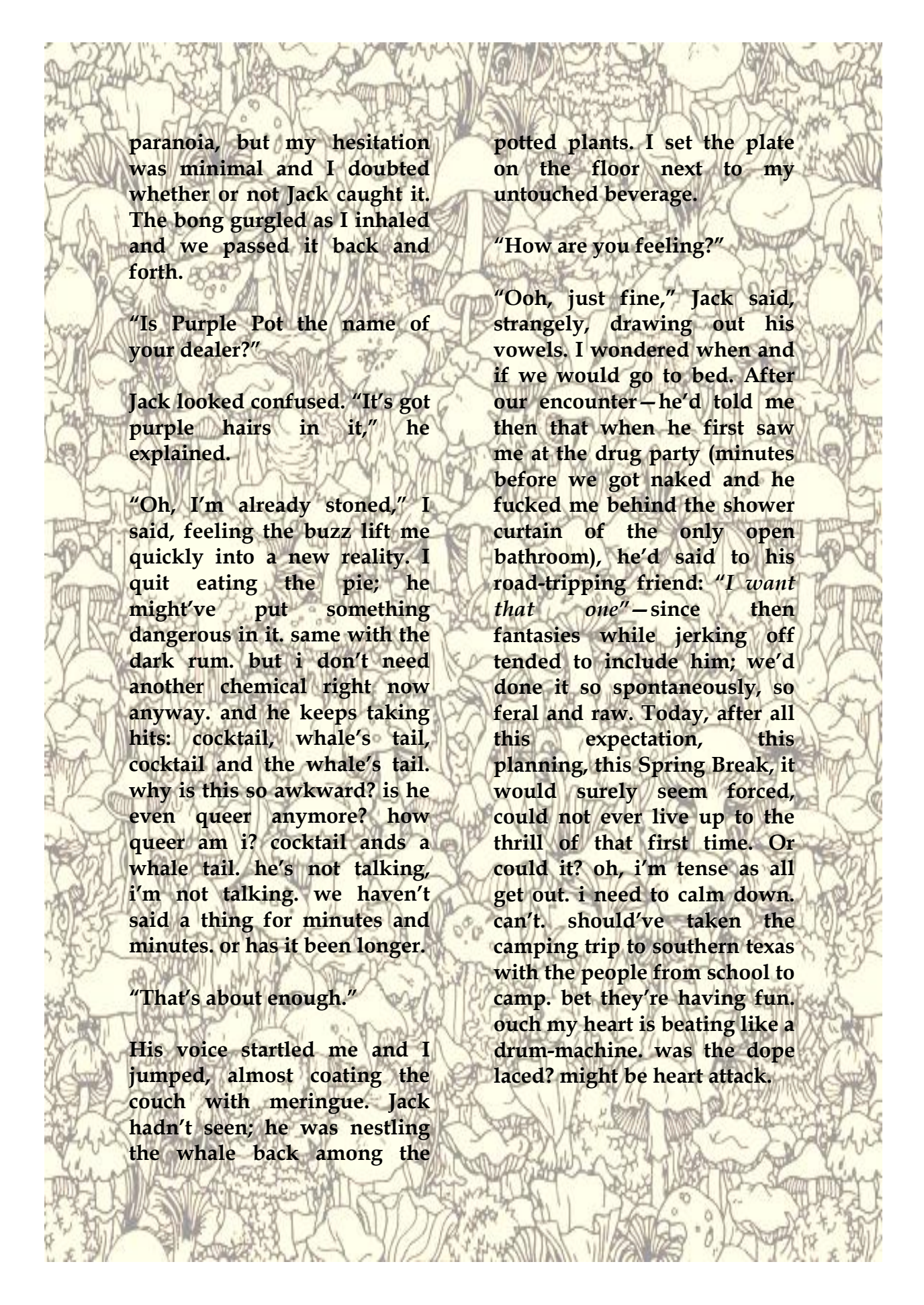
"Wow."

"I took out all the books and dusted them when I dusted the shelves."

"This pie is good. It's really good."

Jack put in a disc, sat on the couch. He patted the loveseat cushion. I sat and ate pie bites while he parted plant fronds and withdrew an oceanic-blue hand-blown glass whale. Already loaded, the bong gave him several hits before he packed a sticky bud and passed the whale to me. "Purple pot! Keep it tipped so you don't suck water."

I hadn't smoked for almost a week, due to increasing



paranoia, but my hesitation was minimal and I doubted whether or not Jack caught it. The bong gurgled as I inhaled and we passed it back and forth.

"Is Purple Pot the name of your dealer?"

Jack looked confused. "It's got purple hairs in it," he explained.

"Oh, I'm already stoned," I said, feeling the buzz lift me quickly into a new reality. I quit eating the pie; he might've put something dangerous in it. same with the dark rum. but i don't need another chemical right now anyway. and he keeps taking hits: cocktail, whale's tail, cocktail and the whale's tail. why is this so awkward? is he even queer anymore? how queer am i? cocktail and a whale tail. he's not talking, i'm not talking. we haven't said a thing for minutes and minutes. or has it been longer.

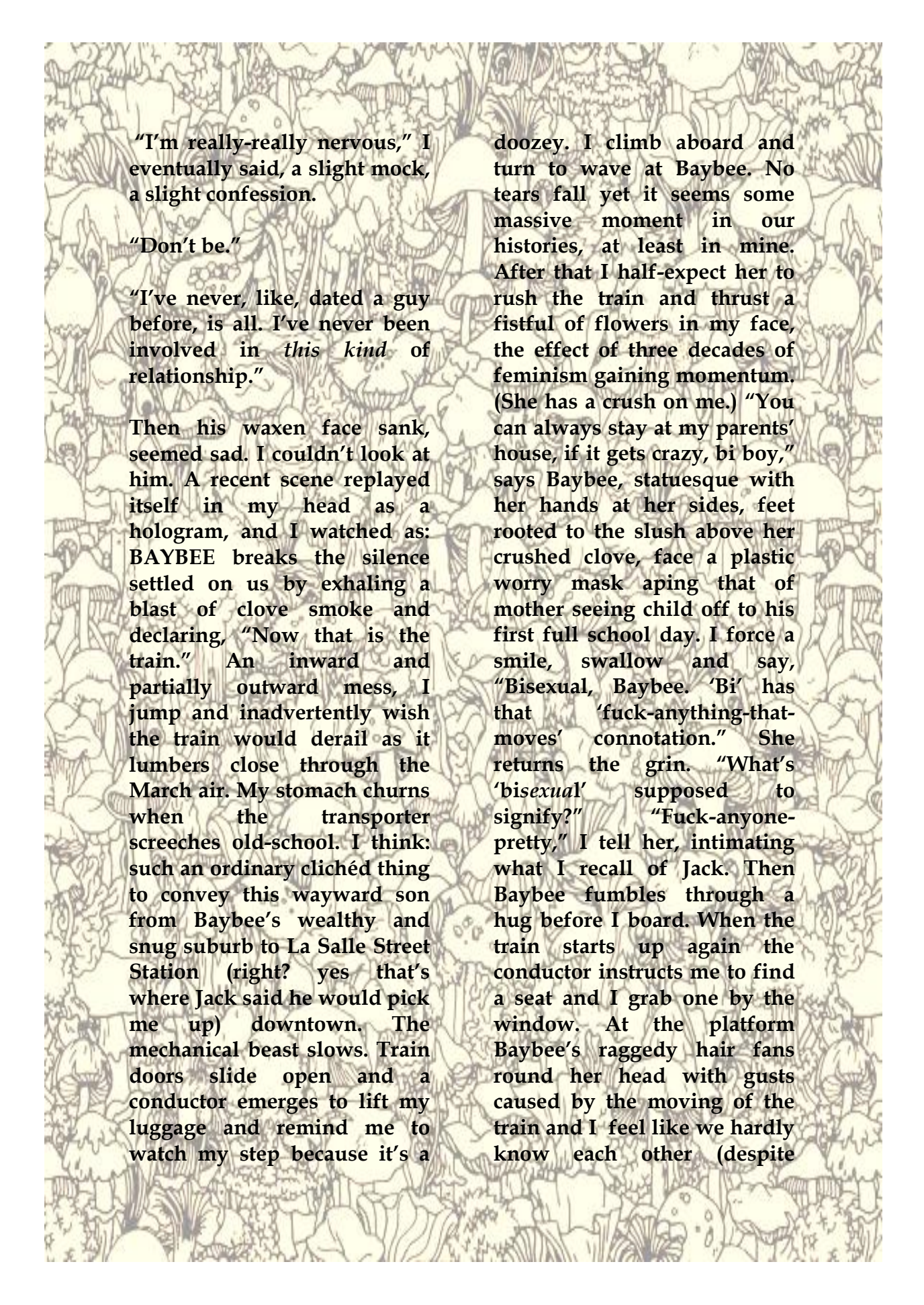
"That's about enough."

His voice startled me and I jumped, almost coating the couch with meringue. Jack hadn't seen; he was nestling the whale back among the

potted plants. I set the plate on the floor next to my untouched beverage.

"How are you feeling?"

"Ooh, just fine," Jack said, strangely, drawing out his vowels. I wondered when and if we would go to bed. After our encounter—he'd told me then that when he first saw me at the drug party (minutes before we got naked and he fucked me behind the shower curtain of the only open bathroom), he'd said to his road-tripping friend: "*I want that one*"—since then fantasies while jerking off tended to include him; we'd done it so spontaneously, so feral and raw. Today, after all this expectation, this planning, this Spring Break, it would surely seem forced, could not ever live up to the thrill of that first time. Or could it? oh, i'm tense as all get out. i need to calm down. can't. should've taken the camping trip to southern texas with the people from school to camp. bet they're having fun. ouch my heart is beating like a drum-machine. was the dope laced? might be heart attack.



"I'm really-really nervous," I eventually said, a slight mock, a slight confession.

"Don't be."

"I've never, like, dated a guy before, is all. I've never been involved in *this kind* of relationship."

Then his waxen face sank, seemed sad. I couldn't look at him. A recent scene replayed itself in my head as a hologram, and I watched as: BAYBEE breaks the silence settled on us by exhaling a blast of clove smoke and declaring, "Now that is the train." An inward and partially outward mess, I jump and inadvertently wish the train would derail as it lumbers close through the March air. My stomach churns when the transporter screeches old-school. I think: such an ordinary clichéd thing to convey this wayward son from Baybee's wealthy and snug suburb to La Salle Street Station (right? yes that's where Jack said he would pick me up) downtown. The mechanical beast slows. Train doors slide open and a conductor emerges to lift my luggage and remind me to watch my step because it's a

doozey. I climb aboard and turn to wave at Baybee. No tears fall yet it seems some massive moment in our histories, at least in mine. After that I half-expect her to rush the train and thrust a fistful of flowers in my face, the effect of three decades of feminism gaining momentum. (She has a crush on me.) "You can always stay at my parents' house, if it gets crazy, bi boy," says Baybee, statuesque with her hands at her sides, feet rooted to the slush above her crushed clove, face a plastic worry mask aping that of mother seeing child off to his first full school day. I force a smile, swallow and say, "Bisexual, Baybee. 'Bi' has that 'fuck-anything-that-moves' connotation." She returns the grin. "What's 'bisexual' supposed to signify?" "Fuck-anyone-pretty," I tell her, intimating what I recall of Jack. Then Baybee fumbles through a hug before I board. When the train starts up again the conductor instructs me to find a seat and I grab one by the window. At the platform Baybee's raggedy hair fans round her head with gusts caused by the moving of the train and I feel like we hardly know each other (despite

failed romantic attempts), and I neglect to wave goodbye. Replay. Edit. Replay.

Once cognizant of being in Jack's digs, and out of the looped scene performing in my head, I stared round the apartment. As if space-landing on a foreign planet I noticed anew the plants everywhere; a hippie place, with hippie pie, with a hippie host. Wait, did Jack really live here? not his type of place. not for a munster-type guy, no not at all! too sophisticated, him, for this, for me. And to be sure that he's real I need to check his driver's license. oh god, no! the poor poor micro-cat, eating that evil. pie! not right.

"Sasha," I said, hearing that my voice sounded enervated, crackly, me unable to control its volume. The cat stared at me a moment then resumed licking the lime rind, so I nudged it away with my foot. "No, no, kitty!"

"Would you relax?"

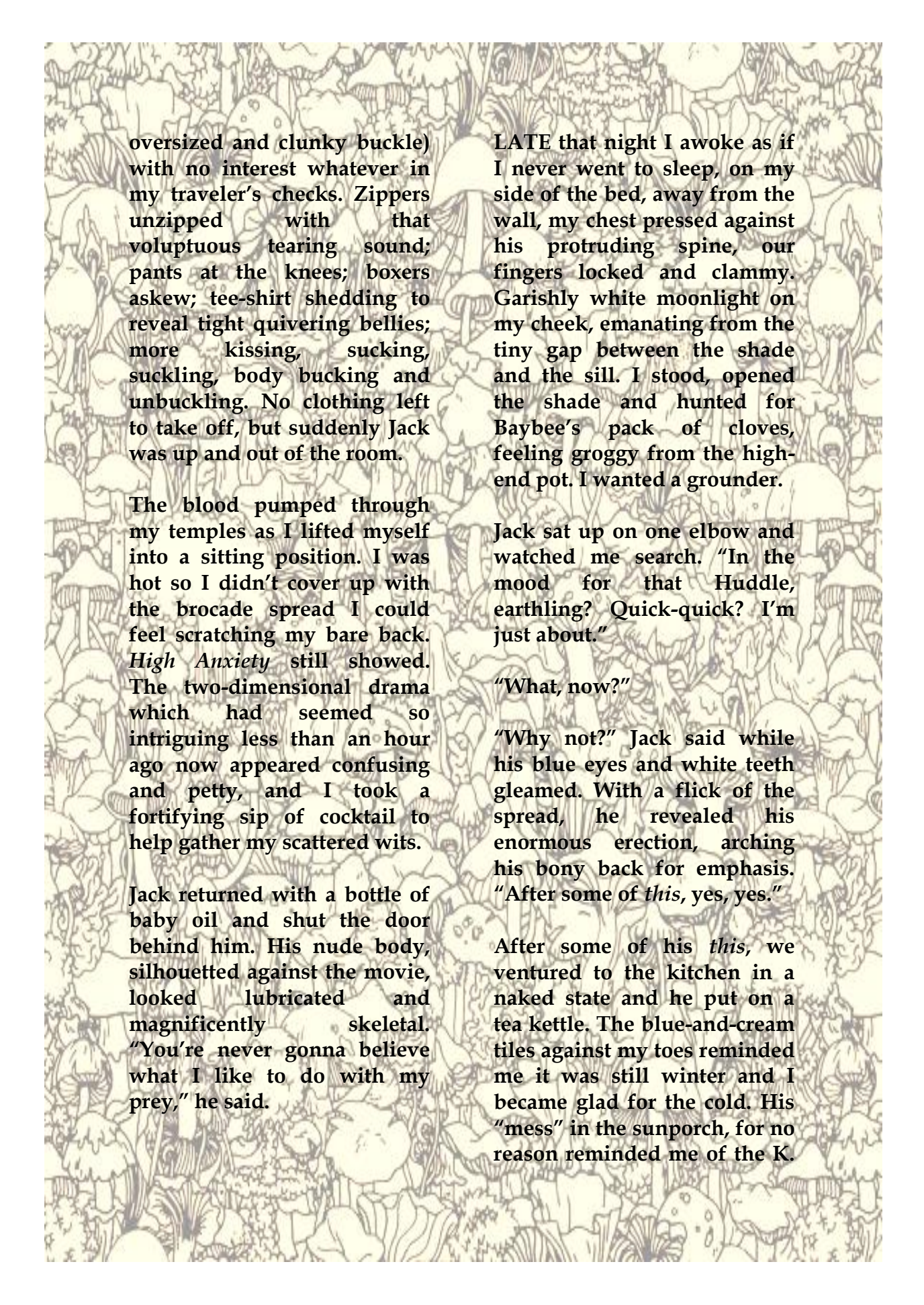
"Sorry—I said I was nervous."
"Let's skip Erasure Huddle tonight and watch some," he said, then added, as if to tempt, "it's Mel Brooks week."

The movie turned out to be *High Anxiety* and it had a calming effect on me, as did the flickering of the colors and patterns onscreen.

CHEMICALS and lust initially brought us together as magnets, but in his home I waited for Jack to make the first move. We watched the old tube bubble-screen with such intensity our eyes bulged—I knew this because I'd sneak glances at him, and I felt mine were doing the same.

Then it happened.

I could feel him staring at me and, after an acceptable pause, I took my attentions off the movie and put them onto Jack. His galactic pupils pooled as large, stoned and unblinking. When he lifted his pale lips I felt such a surge of passion well up from gut to throat I thought I might die. Jack leaned in toward my face, slowly, until his slack, vaguely pink mouth touched mine. We made out, a lot, while our hands roamed remotely over old territory, mine first touching his corduroy-encased erection. He fumbled with the money belt I'd worn (because of the



oversized and clunky buckle) with no interest whatever in my traveler's checks. Zippers unzipped with that voluptuous tearing sound; pants at the knees; boxers askew; tee-shirt shedding to reveal tight quivering bellies; more kissing, sucking, suckling, body bucking and unbuckling. No clothing left to take off, but suddenly Jack was up and out of the room.

The blood pumped through my temples as I lifted myself into a sitting position. I was hot so I didn't cover up with the brocade spread I could feel scratching my bare back. *High Anxiety* still showed. The two-dimensional drama which had seemed so intriguing less than an hour ago now appeared confusing and petty, and I took a fortifying sip of cocktail to help gather my scattered wits.

Jack returned with a bottle of baby oil and shut the door behind him. His nude body, silhouetted against the movie, looked lubricated and magnificently skeletal. "You're never gonna believe what I like to do with my prey," he said.

LATE that night I awoke as if I never went to sleep, on my side of the bed, away from the wall, my chest pressed against his protruding spine, our fingers locked and clammy. Garishly white moonlight on my cheek, emanating from the tiny gap between the shade and the sill. I stood, opened the shade and hunted for Baybee's pack of cloves, feeling groggy from the high-end pot. I wanted a grounder.

Jack sat up on one elbow and watched me search. "In the mood for that Huddle, earthling? Quick-quick? I'm just about."

"What, now?"

"Why not?" Jack said while his blue eyes and white teeth gleamed. With a flick of the spread, he revealed his enormous erection, arching his bony back for emphasis. "After some of *this*, yes, yes."

After some of his *this*, we ventured to the kitchen in a naked state and he put on a tea kettle. The blue-and-cream tiles against my toes reminded me it was still winter and I became glad for the cold. His "mess" in the sunporch, for no reason reminded me of the K.

Party. His party *story*. The ketchup, the catsup, "splattered" or "spattered" on the bathroom walls, a la Psycho.

"Don't you have trash service here?"

"Yes, we have it. Why."

"All that trash in your sunporch! I was thinking, stupid, as usual."

"Did you mail that letter to your friend?"

"The one to Baybee? No, not yet. I've not got the thread, of the story I'm writing, yet."

"What story are you writing."

"That's the question."

"Is it."

"Have you heard of a... but of course you have. It's in your music. It's... in you..."

"What's in me."

"I'm... afraid... Do shy people die in Shy Town..?"

While waiting for the water to heat the real shocker, yes, yes, came when Jack informed me, in a curious spate of spitting

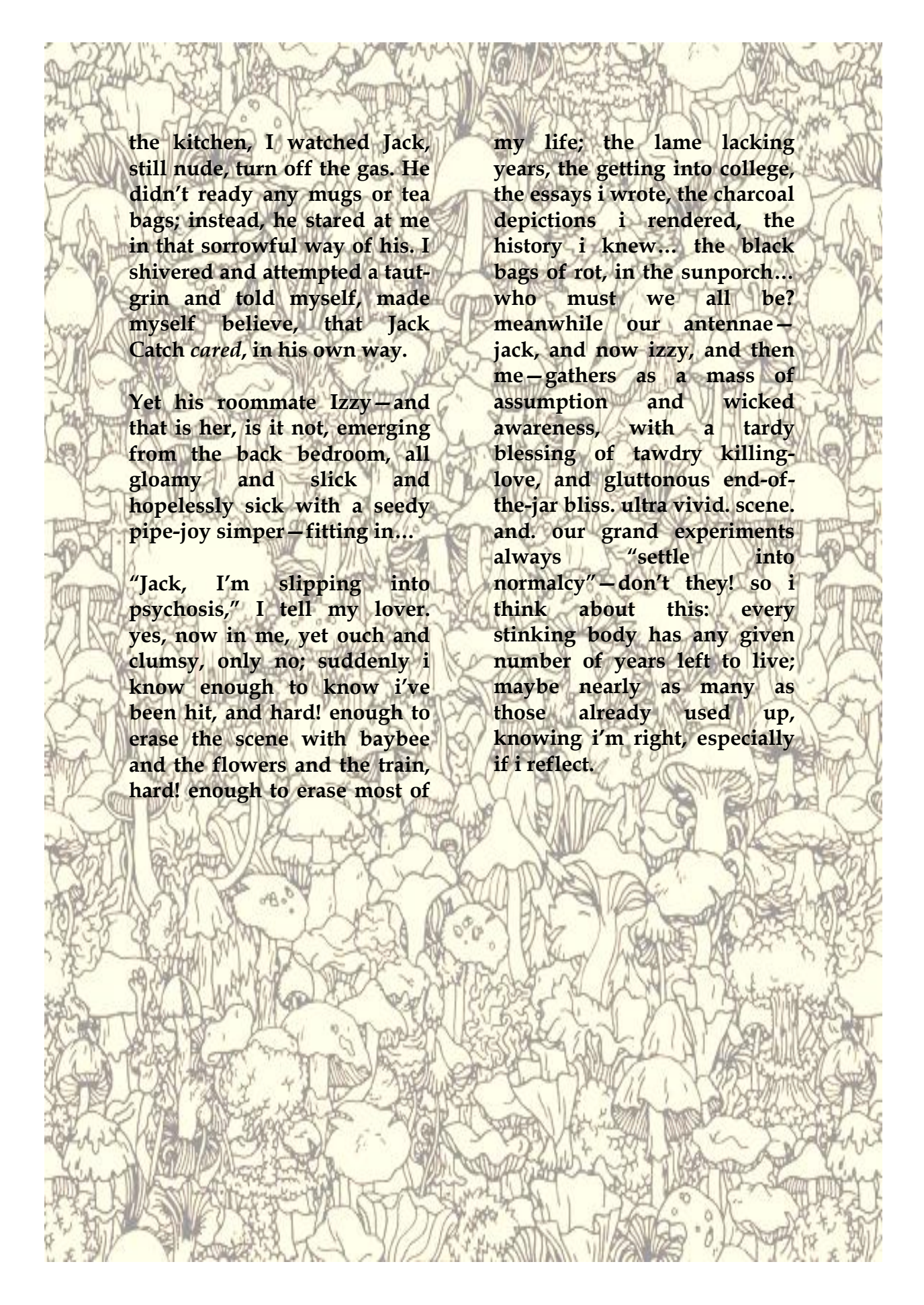
and finger-wagging, that the Eraser Huddle would occur in his apartment.

"Right here?" I asked, suspicious.

"It's happening just now," replied Jack.

I thought about Baybee, snug in her parents' rich-quiet suburb, her ragged hair moussed curtain-like while she read through some of our old story-letters. Frequently she claimed that all she knew (at 18!) was that each life path contorted and swayed and switch-backed and double-hooked in what could only be dubbed "mystical orderliness"... so why not experiment, and see what develops? She'd accompanied me on the trip to the Iowa City party (read: "Temporary Weed" in *Coe Review*, for context [names have changed to "protect the innocent" and illumination, of a decade-past]), being herself "chosen" and then "bitten"...

The tea kettle announced itself ready. Ignoring some incongruous shadows (they just can't move like that, can they?) and vulgar shifting shapes in the high corners of



the kitchen, I watched Jack, still nude, turn off the gas. He didn't ready any mugs or tea bags; instead, he stared at me in that sorrowful way of his. I shivered and attempted a taut-grin and told myself, made myself believe, that Jack Catch *cared*, in his own way.

Yet his roommate Izzy—and that is her, is it not, emerging from the back bedroom, all gloamy and slick and hopelessly sick with a seedy pipe-joy simper—fitting in...

"Jack, I'm slipping into psychosis," I tell my lover. yes, now in me, yet ouch and clumsy, only no; suddenly i know enough to know i've been hit, and hard! enough to erase the scene with baybee and the flowers and the train, hard! enough to erase most of

my life; the lame lacking years, the getting into college, the essays i wrote, the charcoal depictions i rendered, the history i knew... the black bags of rot, in the sunporch... who must we all be? meanwhile our antennae—jack, and now izzy, and then me—gathers as a mass of assumption and wicked awareness, with a tardy blessing of tawdry killing-love, and gluttonous end-of-the-jar bliss. ultra vivid. scene. and. our grand experiments always "settle into normalcy"—don't they! so i think about this: every stinking body has any given number of years left to live; maybe nearly as many as those already used up, knowing i'm right, especially if i reflect.

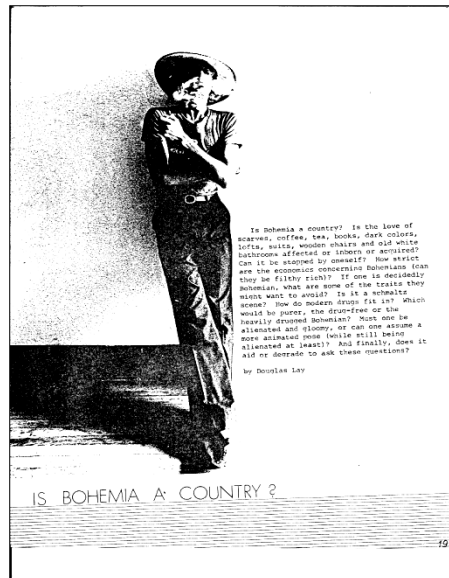
HOMO RADIO RENEWS MICHAEL BARRON'S BOHEMIAN CITIZENSHIP

By Mary Leary

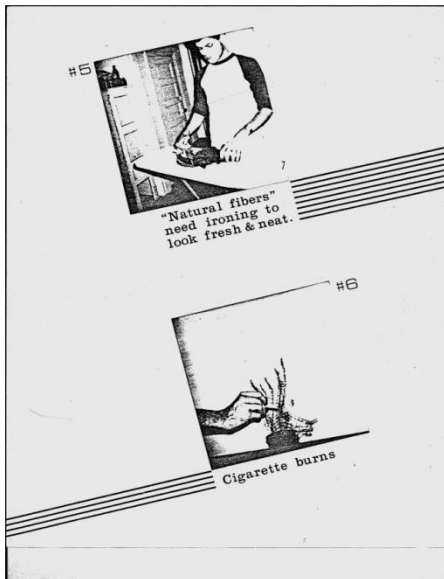


Several eons ago, in the subterranean tendrils wafting through and around the U.S. capitol, young adults in black leather or musty, misshapen wool scurried between basements, nightclubs, and beer joints. The night crawlers with whom I most often related were after the rock 'n' roll catharsis of The Razz, The Slickee Boys, and a gaggle of Virginia-born guitar slingers like Evan Johns and Billy Hancock. Others needed to share sweat in the moshpits at the feet of The Bad Brains and Teen Idles/Minor Threat. The most determinedly

avant-garde waited for appearances by Robert Ashley and Laurie Anderson, between-times enjoying the riches available for a pittance at the handful of Ethiopian nightclubs peppering Washington in the early '80s - I was fortunate to join that number as well. The most fashion-conscious tribe also eschewed fashion, joining The Urban Verbs and **Tiny Desk Unit** as they attempted to chart new territory. The following, by Douglas Lay, is from *(the) Infiltrator*, a New Wave/alternative arts 'zine I edited and published.



Through Doug's girlfriend Lily I was dimly aware that he logged hour after hour in a stylish, decrepit downtown loft with **Mike Barron** of Tiny Desk Unit. Mike and I mostly traveled different circles. However, as in most grassroots, relatively small scenes, there were inevitable meeting points. I'm sure we rubbed shoulders in the well-trodden corridor between the 9:30 performance area and the back bar. He became friends with Carol Blizzard, who'd shared the happy times I'd had with the Verbs. Mike and Carol's plant-care guide found its way into the last *Infiltrator* (Mike is in the top pic).



Shorty before moving to New York in '83 I was at a bash thrown by the Careys - here's Mike in

front of Sharon Carey's boyfriend, Nick:



I didn't see Mike again for about 25 years. Thanks to the efforts of marketers aiming for our wallets, we reconnected last year through Facebook. The re-acquaintance has been delightful. All sorts of tests and changes have left him undaunted; continuing to crank out the most innovative and interesting sounds he can, often with Doug Lay and/or Bob Boilen. We chatted about the state of Mike's art and life before and after his recent move from Los Angeles to Brooklyn, New York.

In the last year you've gone through some big changes in your personal life. How has or hasn't that affected your artistic process?

Big changes? I guess that's true. My mother died in 2008, my father died in 2009, a nearly 13-year relationship ended in 2010,

and I moved back to NYC. How life has affected my artistic process is bound to be revealed in the art somehow, but I know that these profound changes have given me reason to commit more fully to my work.

Other than being further from collaborators and people who knew more about your musical career, how did it affect your creative process to be in California?

My last stint in California was from November of 2000 until April of 2010. I was in San Francisco from June of 1989 to October of 1995, so I only spent 16 years total in California. Granted, that's a significant portion of my adulthood, but I have spent more years in DC and New York. This is what feels like home

What does a Homo Radio artiste eat? Have you discovered new eateries you love near your digs in Greenpoint?

I am an omnivore. I love to cook, so I have not eaten out much since I moved here. I love that my local grocery store has things like fresh breast of duck, Reggiano Parmesan, and Thai Fish Sauce. Try that in Canoga Park.

My eyes are still wide regarding your not eating out much - when I was in NYC, the plethora of amazing eateries made quite a dent in my funds. But not everyone is bobble-headed in that way. Have you moved a lot?

Yeah. I moved six times with my family, when I was 2, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 11. I have moved another 29 times since I turned 20. We could do a separate interview on all of the moves. I have been living in the same house in L.A, since 2002, which is my personal record. I am about to move again in late spring, back to NYC. I want to be closer to family, friends and especially to my favorite collaborators, Bob Boilen, Bill Harvey and Kevin Lay.

How long have you been making music?

I started recording myself singing when I got my first portable reel-to-reel tape recorder when I was 9. When I was 17 a kid who had dropped out of school left his guitar in the music room, so I took it. *The bitter does come out better on a stolen guitar, after all.* I got a book called *How to Play the Guitar*. The first song in the book was "Michael Row the Boat Ashore," and the arrangement featured only one chord, D major. I soon

had an electric guitar and then a better acoustic guitar. I was making up my own songs right from the beginning.

What distinguishes your recordings from what anyone else is doing?

Tiny Desk Unit had a unique sound that stands up today - I have always tried to craft my sound so that it is not something I have already heard. My work matures and grows through my experiences, which, though similar to others', are solely mine - and that is what I draw on when I write songs.

Can you make a case for people over 40 expressing themselves?

I think I have - even for over-50. You know, there is some kind of presumption that you are supposed to shut up and go away after you turn 27 - wittingly or not, I have always challenged the norms and I won't shut up, particularly if I am supposed to. I won't stop being creative because some widely accepted superstition tells me I am supposed to.

Do you think there's an audience for over-40s?

Yes. That audience is not hanging out in clubs waiting to see what comes next the way many of us did in our 20s. I think they will go to see something they connect with, though. People are listening to new music and age is not a reference point. You hear music in a lot of ways now and you can reach people who like what you do. If you did a demographic of, say, KEXP's listeners, you would find that the age range is quite wide and that the largest group is between 30 and 50.

What are some of the projects that preceded your more recent, self-named recordings?

Are you ready for this? My first band was called **Clay Dreams**, we played at a keg party my brother had one summer. The next band was **Bucky Hitler**, made up of an art school pal, Bruce Gibson on bass, and me on guitar and vocals. The two of us backed Laurie Anderson at dc space in '78 or '79. She made a tremendous impression on me.

Then came **Tiny Desk Unit**, which consisted of Susan Mumford singing, Bob Boilen on synthesizer, Joe Menacher and then Terry Baker on bass, with Chris Thompson and then Lorenzo "Pee-Wee" Jones on

drums and me on guitar. We played in and around D.C. up the east coast and as far west as Detroit from September of 1979 until December of 1981, when booze and pills and powders became the most important things in my life and the band disintegrated rapidly. We had just released our second record, *Naples*.



Tiny Desk Unit (Mike is in the back on the left)

During the same period, I sidelined in an All-Velvet Underground cover band called the **National Velvets**, and in **Rhoda and the Bad Seeds** and **Single**.

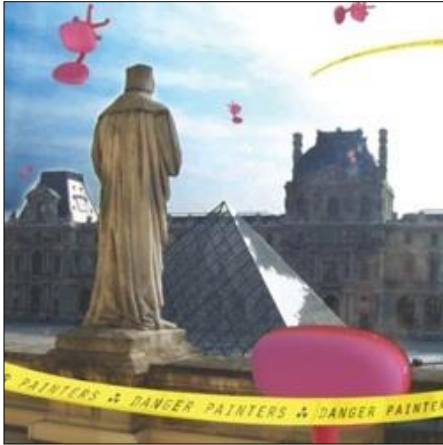
After the TDU days, I did various solo gigs at dc space and a couple sets at the 9:30 Club. Samantha Peterson invited me to join **Ubangi Bangi** along with Susan Mumford & Zach Swagger.

Shortly before I left DC for NYC in 1986, I did a brief stint in a band called **The Shards**.

I discovered how much harder the gutters were in NYC, and by the spring of 1987 I set about getting my act together, giving up the intoxicants and nursing myself back to some semblance of health.

For the next few years, I put music on the back burner. I moved to San Francisco in 1989, and then in 1990, Bob Boilen called me about doing a TDU reunion to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the 9:30 Club (TDU was the first band to play at the original 9:30 when it was on F Street). That got me started playing music again, and I have not stopped. Bob Boilen turned me onto the multi-track cassette recorder. We started swapping tapes and composing odd, trippy instrumentals.

Not long after that, Kevin (Doug) Lay and I began writing songs again, swapping Porta-studio cassettes by mail. I moved back to NYC in 1995, to work with Kevin. That project morphed into a band called **y9**, which played a few gigs.



After that I sold most of my guitars, amps and pedals, and tried to be the perfect suburban homo housewife. My partner and I moved to Los Angeles in 2000, but I continued to swap tapes with Bob. Somewhere around 2003 we switched from tapes to digital, which made swapping files much faster - and everything sounded much better.

In February of 2007, Bob and I signed up for the RPM challenge. For a month I spent every waking moment that I was not working at my day job writing songs and tracking them. Bob worked his magic on the tracks and then Susan Mumford wrote lyrics and sang on several of them. We released it as a **Tiny Desk Unit** album, in tribute to our drummer, Lorenzo Jones, who had died in January of that year from brain cancer.

In October of 2007, I released an all-instrumental, very lo-fi record called *Forget Everything*. Bob and I did the RPM challenge again in 2008, calling ourselves **Danger Painters**. This time I wrote lyrics and sang on everything. I released a solo album of new original material in May of 2008, *Hands*. Bob and I were joined by Bill Harvey for the 2009 RPM challenge. We kept the name Danger Painters and the record was called *The Pink Chair*. That brings us up to the most recent release, *Homo Radio* (November, 2009).



What instruments and devices did you use for this recording?

I use Logic and a mess of plug-ins. I have a flotilla of effects and amp models, a couple dozen synth models and thousands of sampled instruments such as the tanpura

that drones through the beginning of "Outside the Rain". And I have electrodes implanted in my brain that act as midi controllers for wah-wah pedals and analog synths.

"Homo is a pretty dated term, which used to have a fairly negative connotation, at least for what one might call middle-and/or conservative Americans.

Why did you use it in your CD title? 'Cause I'm a homo. And I love the word "radio." It's kind of pink punk with attitude, an in-your-face title.

Are there particular aspects that reflect the "homo" title? A sensibility?

The title of the CD comes from a line in the song, "Dust off Your Knees," which is a montage of images of the late '70s and early '80s in the gay bars of D.C. Places that I was only able to enter when I was in a completely drunken and drugged state. I hated the music and I felt completely outside in terms of the look. All of these really butch, totally built guys had it all. I was generally ignored by all but the most hideous. Blackouts were frequent and I came to on numerous occasions having no idea how I

had gotten there or who I was with. Not pretty, but great stories...

I find "Packing" wryly funny; kind of like a dream Jad Fair might have before he wakes up and does one of his drawings that look like squiggles and hieroglyphics; some sort of combined ancient totem. To me it's the most brilliant thing on your CD, highlighting a normal activity that really isn't: Moving is about change -- sometimes, big, life-altering change. It's about loss and mourning; often without acknowledgment. Does any of that touch on what it means to you?

Yes, all of those things, although I had to Google Jad because I didn't think I knew who he was. But I do remember Half Japanese. Aside from the moving reference, "packer" is another dated, derogatory term for a homosexual man - it's short for "fudge-packer." Anyway, I would say that the song is mostly about moving, which I have often experienced as a shutting off of all emotional connection to the current surroundings, packing up everything and moving to the new place, unpacking, putting everything somewhere and then

quickly acting like I have always been there, eventually connecting emotionally to the new place, if I stay there long enough. I can tell you definitively that wherever you go, there you are.

There's a song that reminds me of the V.U., or of Mo Tucker (if her recordings had a gentler, more laid-back sound) and that's "Standing By," which features really pretty, African-influenced guitar.

Thank you. The Velvet Underground was one of the strongest early influences on my music. I imagine it would be hard to find any thoughtful songwriter who was not influenced by Nico and the kids. "Standing By" is a song that is reflective and romantic in an eyes wide-open kind of way. It is not the kind of song we could have written in our twenties. The song is not sentimental but it has the sentiment that only time spent on the planet can provide. The guitar part evolved as I was playing around in an open tuning. When the music seemed to have defined itself, I recorded and emailed a mix to Kevin (Doug) Lay, inviting him to write some lyrics for it. Kevin ended up writing an homage to Susan Mumford who was then undergoing treatment

for cancer. Kevin's lyrics inspired me to write my own homage to Susan, "Take a Bow."



"Anywhere but There" almost qualifies as a new-pop version of the Underground & Stones. Would you like to be in a band that rocks like that?

I love to play songs to dance to - I hope that came across on "Anywhere but There." It's another of the songs on *Homo Radio* that Kevin wrote (most) of the lyrics for. I can't wait to get the band out playing live to crank it up a bit.

You shared with me once that you no longer use drugs of any sort. To me, the dissonance, dreaminess, and spaciness in your music can feel pretty trippy. Do you think people need to escape, or enter another reality, regardless of where they are, with or without drugs?

In the song "Something in Rain," the last line is "Forget what the dormouse said, you don't need to feed your head." You don't! It's all here and now we need to enter reality fully on its own terms - now that is *psychedelic*! I have always loved "psychedelic" music, though. I was listening to it for several years before I ever experimented with the drugs that supposedly inspired it. I do like music that transports me, and I love to make that kind of music. The best psychedelic music is stuff you can dance to - it's transportive physically and emotionally.

If people crave an escape, or different reality, do you think that craving stems from the spirit?

Yes, but it is not escape, to my way of thinking, it is truth as in a spiritual journey. So it's only a three minute and 48-second journey, or maybe 32 minutes if you listen to a bunch of songs at one sitting. It's still a journey.

Anything else you'd like to tell us about *Homo Radio*?

The songs will be great played with a live band. And pink is one of my favorite colors -- after black.

Do you have plans for this music? Other projects?

Yeah, I want to get out and tour behind *Homo Radio* - really hone the songs and get the whole thing tight. I miss the live audience. Then, who knows? Maybe a musical or rock opera. I feel like I have enough songs that put together in the right sequence would tell a story and be entertaining. I'd love to do TV or movie soundtracks

Okay, Michael: here's your three more minutes of fame. Is there something you'd like us to know about what you do that can be expressed as lyrics, or a poem or drawing?

Lay it out? Hmm... well, here's the first verse of a song I just started writing:

*I have rolled and I have tumbled
Back and forth across this land
There's no moss on my stone
If you see green
It's just grass stains or tea
Or maybe envy*

http://www.bobboilen.info/Tiny_Desk_Unit_Music/Tiny_Desk_Unit.html



INTERVIEW WITH RASPUTINA'S MELORA CREAGER

By A.D. HITCHEN

Rasputina is a cello-driven band renowned for an eccentric, individualistic approach to music making. The subject matter of their songs covers a wide range of unconventional topics including feral children, the Anti-rent Wars of 1844 and giants. They have released six studio albums and three live albums. Their latest album *Sister Kinderhook* was released on June 15, 2010.

ADH: You have remained

fiercely independent and uncompromising. What advice would you give Artists seeking to retain freedom of expression, yet still connect with audiences?

MC: In any medium, if you make what's true to you, you can connect. I see art as an attempt at communication. In any medium, if you make what's true to you, you can connect. Do good music first, put together a cool outfit second.

ADH: One of the most refreshing aspects of your music is your use of string instruments outside the classical scene. Is it important for you to display alternatives; the versatility of string instruments?

MC: It's not "important" to me to display alternatives - it's all I know. I never wanted to learn the guitar. I like to do what's different in most avenues. I'll pick up something like a dulcimer or recorder to regain some freshness or some awkwardness at playing. The versatility of the cello is in the cello itself. I didn't put it there. I've never felt limited by it in all these years.



ADH: Could you explain the genesis of your seventh and latest album *Sister Kinderhook*? There seems to be a definite thematic cohesiveness.

MC: First I wanted to do a Colonial Vaudevillian sister act - like a radio show, but Early America. I listened to music of that period to imitate it. I ended up wanting to make something beautiful and not funny. It's kind of an Emily Dickinson character set in 1830 Columbia County, NY.

I was most intrigued by the songs regarding feral children and giants. It seems notable that many feral children are reputed to have been raised by wolves. Could this seemingly maternal connection be related to Lycanthropy; a wolf-like, feral aspect in human nature? I became fascinated with how children raised like animals don't grow, but remain small and child-shaped. I forget the scientific name for that. But the legends are constant and ancient, so it is something inherent in humans, this idea.

Legends concerning a race or races of giants appear in numerous religious and mythical texts worldwide, not least the Bible. I was thinking, specifically of the Nephlim; the species of giants created by 'Angelic' and human inter-breeding.

There are various ideas

concerning how such giants died out. The Biblical narrative seems to point to the deluge. I was also reminded of the destruction of Sodom, which reads like a contemporary nuclear devastation.

ADH: There are stories of a Smithsonian cover-up. Do you feel that such knowledge could be dangerous? What do you think would be the general public reaction if the veracity of a lost giant race were confirmed today?

MC: I get excited when I hear a new idea of the impossible being possible. I don't think it's dangerous, no. I don't think most people would care or ever believe it. Some interviewers ask me if I really, really believe in the giants. Who cares? I love the idea that they're a possibility.

ADH: Do you feel there are definite limitations regarding subject-matter in what passes for popular music? For example, you present historical accounts and use literary sources and influences in your songs. Your music seems to go well beyond simplistic narratives.

MC: When I started out, I

thought everyone knew what I knew - I didn't think my subjects were unusual or obscure or even that a cello-band was novel. Popular things are narrow by definition. To appeal to the most people, you need to have the least specific meaning.

ADH: What's next for Rasputina?

MC: If I wasn't the mother of two, there would be small films, elaborate theater productions and a novel in the Rasputina works, but since I am indeed the mother of two, I think you'll merely be seeing the occasional CD release and frequent national touring.

For more information visit:
www.rasputina.com





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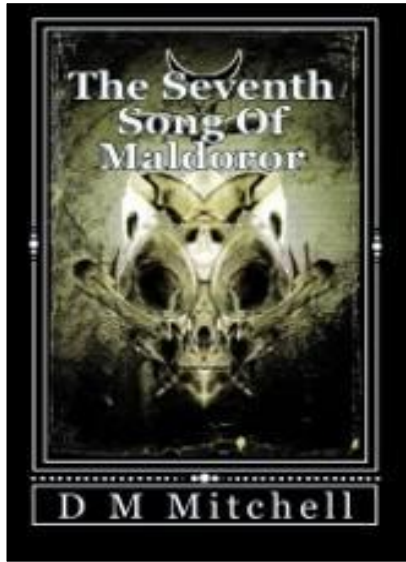
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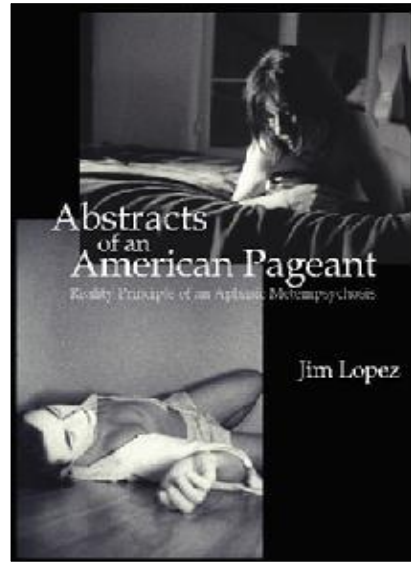
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