

Spring 2012

## Fiction Fix 11

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# FICTION FIX 11

July 11th

Don't believe me. I am a lie.

I am counterfeit. I am fake. I am artificial. I am not real. I am false. I am fabricated. I am a fraud. I am a trick. I am spurious. I am an illusion. I am not genuine. I deceive. I am a concoction. I am conjured. I am phony. I am a mirage. I am a facsimile. I am bogus. I am a pretender. I am invented. I am feigned. I am simulated. I am an artifact. I am a ruse. I am a sham. I am ersatz. I am a forgery. I am a hoax. I am facts in mother's makeup, I am dressed in a disguise. I am smoke and I am mirrors. I am shuck and I am jive. I am the mask in the nightmare. I only look like I'm alive. I am a shadow from a magic lantern dancing on the wall.

Call me Legerdemain. I have infiltrated this plot. I am fiction.



## Fiction Fix 11, Spring 2012

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With Graphic Literature edited by  
**Russell Turney**

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Cover Art. Photograph by Masha Sardari (page 70)  
Postcard by David and Petra Press (page 33)

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## NOTE TO READERS

In August 2000, I was sitting in a room at The University of North Florida for my first faculty meeting. New to the school and to Florida, I looked like the newcomer I was. In weather better suited for Equatorial Guinea, I was still walking around sweating my brains out in jeans, oxford, and Doc Martens. On the other hand, Brad Simkulet, the teacher who sat next to me that first day, screamed Florida: sandals, shorts, t-shirt, sun-blonded hair. He was also funny, snide and subversive, and went out of his way to make me feel like I belonged there. Safe to say, I liked him immediately. I certainly remember Brad fondly for his generosity, even though he left for the West Coast and bigger and better things at the end of that year. However, I recall Brad specifically here because he first introduced me to graphic literature.

I don't remember the context for the conversation, but Brad suggested I read this book *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman. A comic? About the Holocaust? And Nazis are cats and Jews are mice?...Now, I had just completed ten years of higher education in literature. And in all that time, I had never seen a comic or graphic novel on a syllabus, never read a scholarly article that referenced them, and cannot even recall them coming up in any of those innumerable, interminable college conversations about books. Heck, even as a kid, I had read only the occasional comic book. So it's safe to say that I bought *Maus*, not because of scholarly interest or because I thought such a book could possibly be successful (I mean, a beast-fable comic about the Holocaust?), but instead I bought it because Brad said I should. Raise a glass to peer pressure...

Motivation aside, by the time I finished *Maus*, I was hooked. It was an amazing, brave and captivating book, unlike any I'd read before. In the ensuing months, I went about following a 'trail' of such texts: from *Maus* to Moore's *Watchmen* to Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* to Satrapi's *Persepolis* to Eisner's *Contract with God* to Clowes' *Ghost World* to Thompson's *Blankets*, and so on and so on. It's a trail that, as a reader, I'm still following today. But I distinctly remember thinking, before I'd even finished *Maus*, "This would be really cool to teach." So, for the first literature course of my second year, I inserted *Maus* as the last text we'd read. I confess that I pitched it to students as a "treat": a fun (easy?) carrot to dangle in front of students, if they worked hard on all those dense poems, Shakespearean dramas, and literary short stories we'd read during the semester.

Instead, what both the students and I discovered was that *Maus* enabled them to learn more about literature, what constitutes the literary, the art of reading, and the processes of critical thinking than any other text we'd read. It wasn't that *Maus* was "fun" or "easier," or that it was forbidden fruit. For students, as for me, this text tapped into something deeper.

Having taught courses on graphic literature for ten years now, I'm convinced that part of this 'something deeper' is our rich graphic lineage. Our earliest preserved stories, like the cave paintings at Lascaux, are graphic. Our Western alphabet—based on the Phoenician alphabet—is originally pictorial (and economic): A's represented (and counted) oxen or cows; B's women or households; C's camels, and so on. The most popular language on Earth today (and one of the oldest) is Chinese, a pictographic language. Philosophically, for centuries Platonic thinkers have postulated our world as a world of images and representations, just as Jung countered Freud by postulating archetypes as our foundational psychology. More recently, cogni-



tive scientists have delved into graphic processes central to all our minds, what Steven Pinker calls our “shared understanding of the truth”: the way our “thoughts are anchored to things and situations in the world.”

But it’s that world in which we live today that provides another attractive exigency. Unless you live under rocks, you are bombarded with visuals 24/7/365. Symbols, logos, ads: graphics, both subtle and explicit. Whether savvy political commercials saturating the media to seek our votes, product commercials that seek our money, or news media that seek our trust and belief, a distinctly graphic discourse runs through our culture. We construct ourselves graphically in this new media too. Whether we did it through MySpace or Second Life, or do it now through Facebook or Match.com or Instagram or Pinterest, evolving social media encourage us to (re) present “who we are” in a significantly graphic way. So thinking critically about graphic texts, learning how to read them, and even working to produce them ourselves are (not to sell it too hard) perhaps survival skills for the 21st century.

My students and I are not alone in our compulsion for reading, studying and enjoying graphic texts. Comics and graphic novels have never been more culturally popular. Despite drooping sales in the publishing

industry as a whole, graphic novels and comics sales continue to rise each year. Specific publishing trends suggest that this is not a passing fad. Within

graphic novels and comics publishing, for instance, the children’s graphic novel is the single fastest growing sales demographic. Additionally, digital comics sales/downloads have doubled just since 2010. This spring, webcomics server ComiXology announced that it has downloaded more than 50 million comics since launch, with 10% of that coming in December 2011 alone. And in the theatres, graphic novels and comics provide the substance for hit films and franchises. From *Spider-man* to *The Dark Knight*, *Shrek* to *The Avengers*, comics and graphic novels provided the source for about one out of six top grossing films of the 2000s.

Academic and scholarly circles are investing as well. In the U.S., there are no less than five museums dedicated to the preservation and study of comics and graphic novels. Research libraries at Yale and Columbia host significant special collections of such texts, as does the Library of Congress. Graphic novels and comics have been the focus of numerous Modern Language Association panels and publications during the last decade. It’s hard to find a college that is not teaching a course on these texts in one or more of its departments. Several respected colleges, including Cal-Berkeley, Savannah College of Art and Design and Emerson College, now even offer entire degree programs in studying and/or producing these texts. And again, other specific trends suggest that this development will continue. Since 2000, at least 55,000 dissertations and theses on graphic literature have been written and accepted in American colleges and universities. This certainly indicates a future in which scholars increasingly embrace, study, teach and publish on graphic texts.

All of this is not to denigrate the written word, whose power and beauty has rightfully been a focus of work, enjoyment and study...not least of which, in the pages of *Fiction Fix*. However, the current *Fiction Fix* issue par-

ticipates in this growing and important graphic discourse: one that recognizes that word and image are correlated; and one that recognizes that a genre that marries word and image on the page is a genre worthy of attention and appreciation. And in this issue, there are several and sundry examples from this genre that are particularly worthy.

“Postcards from the Hecatombs” offers an epistolary pastiche, while “The Clown Genocide” offers a series of woodcuts that channel Albrecht Durer via John Wayne Gacy (or vice versa). “In Need of a Hand” is a travelogue, murder mystery, romance, and a story of self-awareness; it is also, ultimately, none of these things. (Read it. You’ll see.) And “My Life in Gadgets” interrogates those ways in which we construct ourselves graphically and technologically, and then proceeds to participate in just such a construction.

Each of the texts in this issue possesses the power and talent to get a new graphic reader started down a trail that *Maus* started for me over a decade ago. I hope they do. And if you come to this issue an experienced and committed reader of graphic literature, then I hope the texts in this issue intrigue and impress you, giving you evidence that the future of this genre is bright and diverse. Thanks to all the contributors to this issue for sharing your work with me, just as I’d like to thank all the (new and old) readers of *Fiction Fix* for supporting the enterprise. Thanks to the editors of *Fiction Fix* for trusting me to work alongside them for this issue (a decision they must surely regret). They do an incredible job, and they do it passionately. And lastly, to Brad...wherever you are and whatever you are doing, man: thanks.

— **Russell Turney**



# A Transcript of Several Recordings

by *William Northrup*

So anyway, your mother wants me to make these tapes for you so you can get to know me. She saw a movie about a guy who did this. I told her this wasn't necessary, but you know how she gets. She kept bringing it up, telling me that the guys at the group kept telling her they were glad they'd done it, that the survivors all found these kinds of things very useful and stuff. By the way, I hate that term. I mean, seriously, it makes it seem like living with me was an ordeal or something. The guy who runs that group is taking therapy advice from a movie? I don't go to the meetings. I went to one. They're a bunch of people feeling sorry. Plus, I don't want to see some of those guys and all their tubes and bags and whatnot. Really, it's gross. Those guys are falling apart.

I don't know what I'm supposed to be telling you. Your mother told me to say whatever it is I think you'd want to know about me. She and I haven't really agreed on some important facts about these tapes. You see, I want you to know about the existence of the tapes but not be able to watch them until you're older. I feel like it'll be something to look forward to, and that this envelope will create mystery, but she thinks it's kind of cruel and that we should really just give these tapes to you when you're old enough, without any kind of suspense or build up. How old you're going to be is also up for debate. It's kind of hard talking to you when I don't know whether you're ten, or fifteen, or tonight's your graduation. One thing she did promise me was that these tapes are just between the two of us. You can, of course, decide to share them. I won't be there to stop you. Still, give it some thought. I mean maybe some of it won't be bad to show your mother, but I have no idea what'll be going on with her then and how much she'll be interested in what I have to say. Still, maybe she couldn't resist, and she's watching this now. Okay, just in case she didn't watch this, don't share the first tape with her. This one's just for us. Agreed? And Sarah, if you did watch this, you'll know that our boy withheld the first tape. I can't say I blame you; I'd watch your tape, too. Of course, I don't know you, and maybe you and

your mother are both watching this tape. I suppose it doesn't much matter.

I don't know what your reality is. What's your name? Your mother and I haven't figured that out yet. We weren't even going to know your gender, but then this whole thing came up. By the way, if you're ever interested in a real low effort job, ultrasound technician. Seriously, they rub some goop on a girl. That's all they do. I don't know where you're living. Are you in this house? You might even be in here. Maybe this room has been remodeled and looks nothing like this.

I have so many concerns about this tape. I'm desperately trying to avoid any kind of slang that'll date it, and I chose clothes that don't really scream any kind of era. So I'm trying to guess what it is you'd like to know about me that your mother couldn't just go ahead and tell you. I mean, she knows me, knows my family, knows where I went to school. I bet she can still give you a sense of my personality. Also, I don't want to use these things as some kind of confessional. We might have met. A lot of people go years longer than they're supposed to. I don't know.

Really, a lot of your life you're going to think that someone is screwing with you. They are. Really. People screw with you all the time. It doesn't matter where you are, what you're doing, or whom you're with. Someone there is screwing with you. They will do stuff just to make your life a little worse. Like for instance, there's this intersection nearby. If you still live here, I'm sure you'll know it very well. It's Methuen Street. Cars pull up to the end of our street wanting to turn onto Methuen, and the damned drivers, instead of coming to a stop, will cut the wheel. They need to get a head start on the turn, right? So these guys make your left turn onto Humphrey Street nearly impossible, and they're doing it on purpose; they're making you stop so you'll have to let them out, because they're really important and have some really god damned monumental stuff they need to get to. Son, every time you can, drive around them. Don't let them out. Make those pricks wait like they're supposed to. You know what the worst part of it is? This guy today had the nerve to flip me off, like I'd done something wrong by not letting him go. It's my right of way. Mine. So what I'm getting at here is: you can't let people screw with you.

My doctor has his way. Oh, he's a smooth guy, but even he's just like every one else. So, on one hand, this guy says there's nothing that can be done, right? And then, he starts talking about therapies and treatment options and clinical trials. But, there's nothing that can be done, but he'd really like to start treating me soon. The doctor doesn't push, ever. He'll

never insist. This guy makes it perfectly clear with his med school trained blank face and reassuring head tilt, that he thinks you really should go ahead and give every fucking thing a shot. I'm sorry. I just can't hold this in. You are not to talk like me ever. Now, I asked him what he'd do if he were in my situation. And do you know what this guy said to me, his first reaction? "I'm not in your situation, and each person has to make up their mind." It was then I knew he was a dipshit, one of those P.C. fucks using a plural possessive for a singular antecedent. Sorry, now I sound like a prick, but this doctor was screwing with me. He and his buddies are going to make me swallow all kinds of stuff that's not going to work so they can bill my insurance.

And you want to know what the worst part of this is? You and I are also people who will screw with other people. That's the saddest thing. Sometimes, you won't even know you're doing it. Other times, you'll think you're entitled. Like calling in sick when you're not sick. You'll maybe call it a mental health day, but you'll tell your boss something different, and that guy might wind up getting stuck doing his job *and* yours, if he can't find anyone to cover for you. I mean, what's the big deal? Everyone does it, right? It's wrong, but if you're like I was back in the day, you'll do this kind of thing at least once every couple of months. Most of the people you screw with, however, will be those poor people you think are beneath you. Most of the time it'll be unconscious, but there'll be some times when you'll be a real dick. Like let's say you and your buddies go on some kind of road trip, there's drinking involved, and you've had too much. So you signal for the driver to pull over. He spots a gas station up ahead and pulls you and your buddies into one of the spaces. You make it to the curb of the little sidewalk between you and the bathroom door, reach out your hand for the handle, and projectile vomit all kinds of booze and stomach contents onto said door. What are you going to do? I bet you'll hop right into your buddy's car and tell him to "step on it." The right thing to do, the ethically pure thing, would've been to ask the station employee for some cleaning supplies, or a hose at least, and you know it, but you'll decide, on some level, that this is what that employee gets for not going to college. He has earned cleaning up frat boy puke. Listen, I'm supposed to give you advice, so here it is. Don't be a dick.

I went to one of those meetings. I've mentioned them before. I've been avoiding them for weeks. Your mother took me. I'm driving less. You know, I thought I might get something out of it, because your mother had been talking them up and she's usually a good judge of things, but it was a big time waste. I found out I'm angry. Gary told me that. Gary told me it

was okay to be angry. I kept my mouth shut. Your mother was there to give me the eye if I was rude. I'm sure you know the eye. So Gary went on about how someone in my situation needs to release the anger, that these tapes I'm making aren't for that, and that I should only be calm with you. He thought I should take the opportunity to yell at God, if I believed in him, or to curse fate if I didn't. To tell you the truth, I couldn't see much point in either.

Gary had us all sit in a circle. None of us were too bad. Some of the guys were in wheelchairs already. I've always been proud of my legs, how strong they are. I used to swim. I had a great kick. I could streamline well past the flags and always pulled out first. Sorry, I hope you don't get why that's funny. I like a show, and I've been watching the DVDs. You see, this show makes it seem like work is just a real drudgery, that it's a soul crusher, and that being either ridiculous or insane is the only way to survive. Innuendo as defense mechanism. But, if you really wanted to show someone being bored to death, have that person be an invalid who doesn't have enough energy to read, because that's an active form of entertainment, who consequently has to watch television all day. Seriously, son, books knock me out. I know; I'm digressing again, but you have no idea how awful it is when your mother goes to work. I cry. I really do. Every time. But she has to go, obviously. It's only okay when she's home or I'm making one of these stupid tapes. I really can't do anything. A lot of people dream of that, not having any responsibility, and I get it. The fantasy always involves money and health. Gary had all of us, the dying and the not so much so, go around the circle and introduce ourselves. I felt like I was in some kind of twelve-step program. That's exactly what these things are, by the way. What Gary is saying is that all of us have to get over our life addiction. I really hate this guy. At least the guy running an AA meeting is a drunk, but this guy Gary isn't dying any time soon. Do me a favor. Look him up and kick him in the nuts. I mean pulverize them. You see, I figure the only equivalent feeling to slow death would be to be tied up against your will and to see someone slowly go to work mutilating your junk. It's about helplessness and parts of your body no longer having a function. The doctor doesn't think my legs have much more than a couple of weeks. He recommended I get one of the powered chairs. Gary needs to know what that's like.

So I'm using these tapes for the wrong thing, but I think, in a longwinded kind of way, I'm giving you the best kind of advice I can give. What you need is a release. Before all this, I used to go to the gym, and that was a release. But when you can't do anything but talk, talk's what you have to do, and I can't talk to your mother. She's a real trooper. You should see

how hard she works to be composed, like she's on top of this. She has it all covered. Being in charge, she needs to be a never resting hospice shark. She's

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**Be nice. Be polite. Hold the door for the guy behind you. Life really will be more pleasant for you if you are more pleasant to others. It's really true.**

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in her own kind of denial, and only a real jerk would try to snap her out of it. We all have to deal. The worst part is how much it's fucking up Sarah's life. You're going to be pretty old when you see this, so this might be too late, but stop giving her shit. Do what she says and keep your

mouth shut. What you're going to need is a release, and teenagers usually release in one of two ways: yelling at parents and partying. I've already covered the first part, but I want to say a few things about the second. Don't be stupid. First of all, this is tied into the whole don't-give-your-mother-shit rule. She's going to worry. She should. You're going to hate it when she asks you all kinds of questions like, 'Where are you going?' because your addled mind is going to see some kind of invasion of privacy. Try, whenever you think your mother is being a dictator, to remember that she's seen more death than someone her age should and that can make a mother overprotective. And, also remember you are heading out to do something you know is wrong. You are. Don't roll your eyes; it is wrong, that's why you're so vague and say shit like, 'Out' when your mother asks you the question. The truth will only validate her mistrust, and you know it. I guess what I need you to do is figure out a way to release without being a dick to your mom. There's a hoop out front. It came with the house. Shoot forty free throws before every conversation you have with your mother that might be unpleasant. Free throws saved my dad a lot of grief.

I hate that I'm saying this, because I know you've heard it before. It's a cliché. In fact, it might be the king of the clichés ruling over all its subjects. You can catch more flies with honey. Be nice. Be polite. Hold the door for the guy behind you. Life really will be more pleasant for you if you are more pleasant to others. It's really true.

I've been a lot more positive these past couple of days, and I feel better. Seriously. Not really physically, but I'm not sitting around, in front of the TV, hating everything I see. I've been motoring myself over to the big, sliding door in the kitchen and looking out on what's happening in the back yard. I never had the kind of patience it took to do this, but now it's all I want to do. Our dog stares out these doors with me. I never got it. There

never seemed to be anything worth looking at, and I'd watch him looking out the doors. I always took it as a sign of Man's superiority—that such boring things didn't interest us. But, all that was delusional thinking. It all has to do with focus. What fascinates our dog should be fascinating to all of us. Really, it's weakness that makes an onscreen car explosion more interesting to us than the ways leaves fall. Jasper and I saw the way the breeze would shift direction and how the bottoms of the leaves are a lighter shade of green than the tops. He and I both knew that the wind makes it so that the leaves show us their undersides. This let Jasper and I know the rains were coming. Mind you, there wasn't a cloud anywhere. Not one. But, I patted Jasper on the head and told Sarah she'd better rollup the van's windows. Your mom thought I was nuts.

What's going on is I've made the days longer. You can slow down time. It's relative. There's this quote I've always liked. Now, I haven't been in my classroom for months, so my memory might be fuzzy. This quote was on a poster in my room. You know, hold on, let me look it up on this thing. Sorry, it's a good quote. I just have to find it. Hold on...one more second... Yeah, here it is. It was Kafka who said, "It is not necessary that you leave the house. Remain at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait, be wholly still and alone. The world will present itself to you for its unmasking, it can do no other, in ecstasy it will writhe at your feet." I always liked it because I thought the kids might read it and not be in such a hurry all the time. Or, even better, they might do some thinking instead of their usual doodling and texting. What I hadn't realized was that even the slower pace I moved at was still way too fast. You really are going to have to find some time when you can just stop doing anything. It's amazing. I could stare out that window all day. Your mother's the only reason I turn around, really, but when she's at work I'm at the window with Jasper.

So listen, things are looking good now. Your mom's due date's only a month away. I'll probably get to meet you. I think if I continue slowing things down, I can hold on until then. I'm having a hard time doing this. Seriously, cynicism's a hard thing to let go of, but I've even started trying to pray. I just really want to make it. Your mother walks over to my chair, sometimes. She'll just grab my wrists and place my hands on her stomach. You move around so much. You never stop. I think you're getting frustrated. You must be out of room. There just can't be any space left. I've never paid this much attention to a pregnant girl before. I guess I thought the kicks were kicks, but they're not. Sometimes we can see a big bump in her side move half way around her stomach. It's weird. It reminds me of this time, when

I was like nine or ten, and a mouse got behind the cover my parents had draped over their couch. I remember watching this little bump move across the length of the couch back. I was freaked out because I obviously knew what was underneath there. Our cat, Titus Andronicus, didn't let the mouse go much farther. I left the room. I just couldn't watch what happened.

Really, if there's a bright side to any of this it's that I'll never have to do what my dad had to do. Dads are in charge of dead animals. Every mouse carcass Titus Andronicus left for us my dad had to get rid of. I was so repulsed by this I was afraid to go near my dad, or touch his hands, or feel anything he had touched. I didn't think there was enough soap in the world to wash off that grossness. I mean a live mouse is pretty gross, but a dead one? My dad had to bring Titus Andronicus to the vet that last time. He cried, my dad. I saw him afterward. He sat in the dark in his office and cried. When your mom and I got Jasper, I thought of my dad. I thought there'd be a day when I had to bring Jasper to the vet. I'm supposed to be in charge of dead animals. Jasper's still young. He still has years to go. You and he will probably be great friends. His breed's supposed to be great with kids. I mean this is all pretty silly. I'm sure by the time you're watching this Jasper will be long gone, and now I'm making you remember your childhood pet. Don't cry. I'm sorry I brought this up. It's just, there are rites of passage is what I'm getting at, and I'm not going to get to go through them. Some, like the killing Jasper one, I'm happy about. Though I feel bad that your mother's going to have to take the lead on that one. Others I'm sad about missing, but what can you do?

Gary stopped by today. Sarah asked him to. She thought I was spending too much window time; that I don't talk anymore. You know, I get it. It's just I can't say anything to her without that feeling. There's a moment right before crying when your teeth hurt. I don't know why, but I'd never figured out that's because you clench your jaw before you cry. At least I do. I've always fought it. I've never enjoyed crying. You probably don't, but there are some people out there who "enjoy a good cry." Avoid these people. And, you become way more aware of your sinuses at that moment. You feel the air in them because you breathe more deeply, but it also feels like they're wet. That's mucous. I thought it might be tears, misdirected tears, but it's mucous.

I'm on oxygen now, as I'm sure you've noticed. I'm not breathing well. I'm really shutting down. Sorry. I'm not trying to bum you out. I asked Gary whether these tapes were kind of cruel. When I'm at the window I've

been giving these a lot of thought. Sure, you're learning about your father. I'm sure you're happy about that, but you also have to watch me die. If you don't watch these, you'll never have to see a guy lose a hundred pounds. You'll never see sores. You'll never see lesions. My skin is gray. I already look dead. Sorry. Gary told me he thinks this is still good for you. I fucking hate Gary. I really fucking hate Gary. He thinks I'm depressed. Well, no shit. It's a good thing my insurance is paying for this.

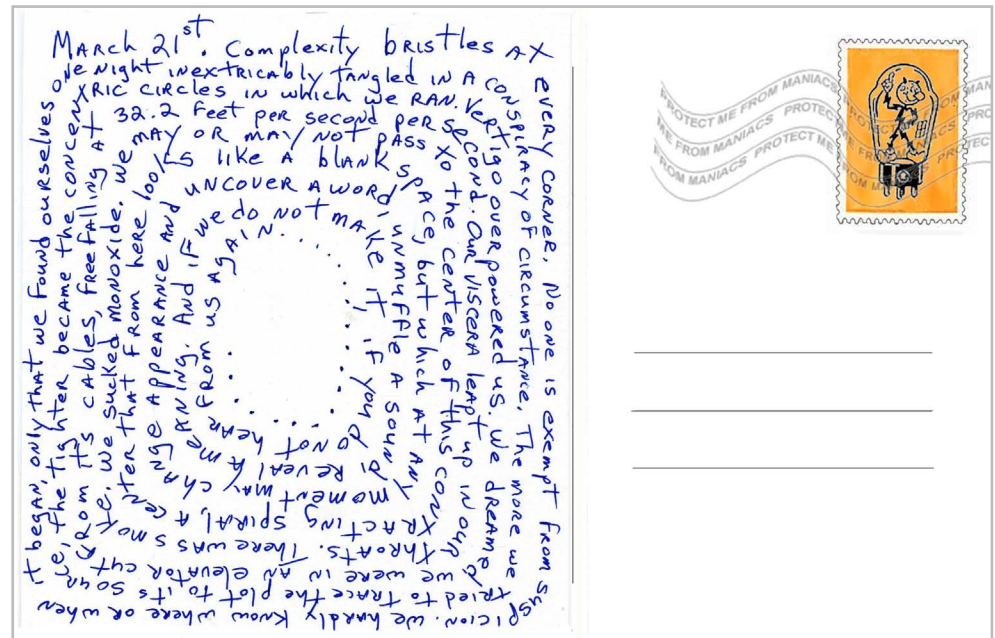
It's not going to be today or tomorrow. I feel worse, but I know it won't be in the next couple of days. This will be the last tape. It's clear: the doctors, Gary, and your mother all think I won't make it to your birth. I'm supposed to say goodbye. I've already talked to your mother. This is not to be sad. It's how it is, and it's pointless to fight.

I'm working on being okay with what's about to happen. I don't think it'll hurt, but that's almost more unsettling. I could at least hope the pain would knock me out. I don't know if there'll be a spasm when it happens. Will I be sleeping? What will I say? Will I see your mother? I'm afraid she'll be out of the room. Hell, she could be in another room. There's so much pain associated with the entrance, but I won't even notice the exit. I could be asleep. I always thought that'd be the way. Now, I'm horrified of it. I don't want to be alone. I don't want Sarah to be at a vending machine. What if I'm dreaming, and the dream never ends? How long do you think I'll go before I figure out that I'm dead? The only cool part of this is that I'm about to know. If there's something else, I'm about to see it. If not, I won't notice. Excuse me.

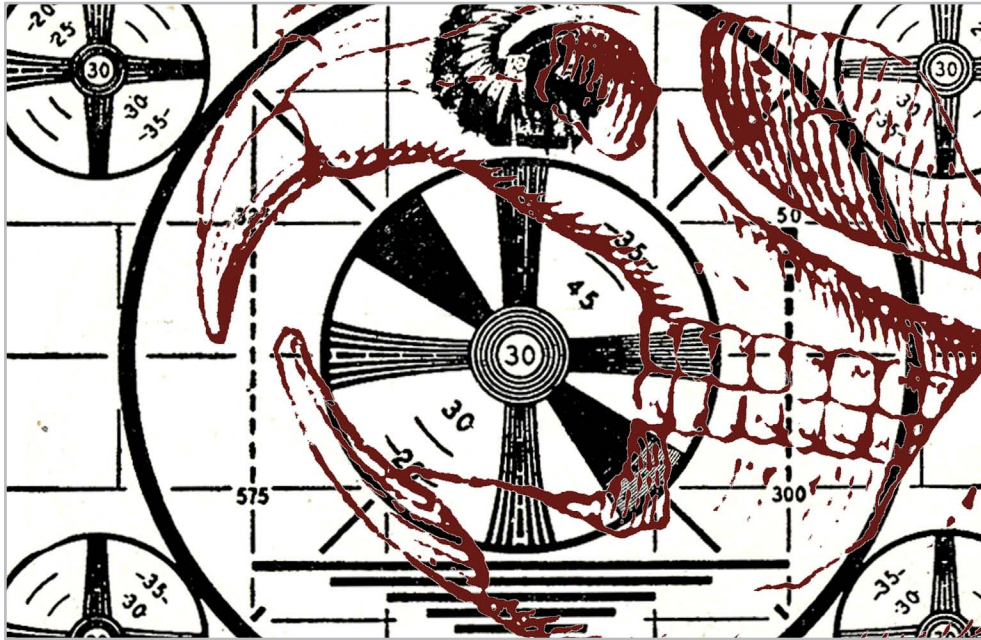
Listen, I've been ignoring some truths up until this point. I know that when you watch this, your mother will have remarried. She's too young now to be alone. You know, I told her as much. Whoever this guy is, it'll be okay. There will be another guy. He'll be your father. He'll have done all the bike assembling, turkey carving, hand holding and street crossing, first day at school dropping off, and Jasper killing in my place. I'm going to be a curiosity to you. And you know what? That's fine. It makes sense, really. It's okay. I want you to feel however you feel. There's a lot of pressure on people to feel the right things at the right moments. Gary thought I was too nonchalant about death, and then I was too angry. Do me a favor: don't forget to kick Gary in the nuts. But don't think you have to miss me, or that watching these tapes is anything but weird. It's really weird.

# Postcards from the Hecatomb

by David and Petra Press







April 30th

Glues exist; patterns are perceived; meanings emerge. The national ink shortage is a conspiracy. Swear off Bic pens.

For three consecutive nights I heard tapping at my window: "di-dah di-dah-dit dah di-dah-di-dit di-dah di-di-dit dah di-di-dit di-dah-di-dit di-dit di-di-dah-dit dit dah-di-dit dah-dah-dah dah-dit dah."

For three consecutive mornings a note has been stuck to my door with an ice pick, each time the same message: "There will be consequences."

Consequences. I am ready for consequences, but there are my communal obligations too. For every plot, a counterplot, and with this national ink shortage we've been counterplotting in blood. But now our members turn up in alleys, drained of blood, livid gray, without a teller to tell their tale. To avoid a similar fate, I have volunteered as a double agent. When we are introduced, dont let on that you know me. I'll be the one handing out free Bic pens.

Listen to the clicks.



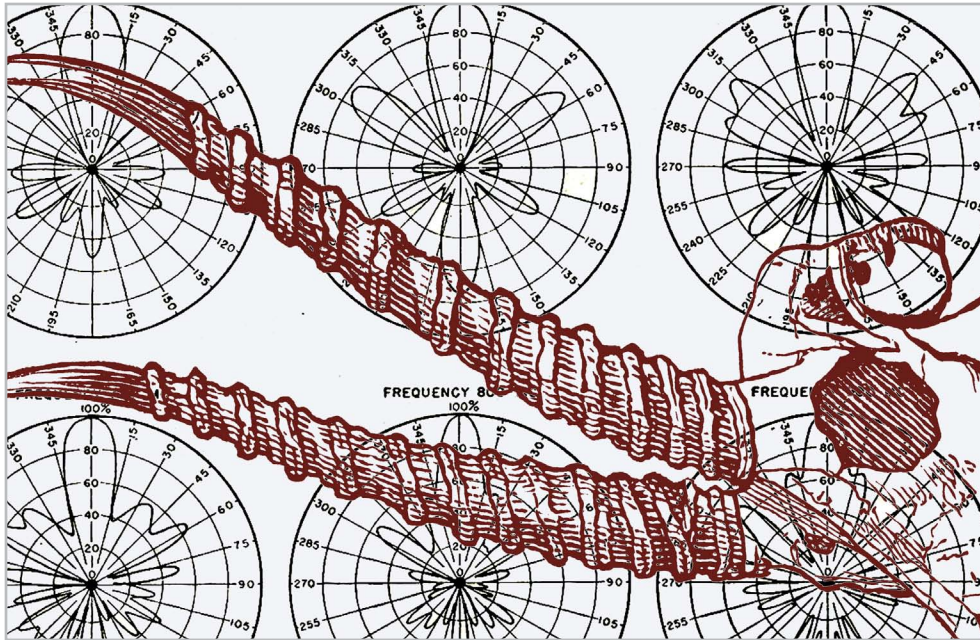

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May 8th

Only one thing is certain: appearance is apparitional. This makes it difficult to operate with any reasonable amount of certainty. Even the taste of words as they roll off your tongue may be tampered with. Sweet adverbs can taste like bitter proper nouns. The seeming chemists appear to hold what is perceived as the upper hand.

Last night Susan and I decided to sleep together. After weeks of light touching, brushing strands of hair from her face, the back of a fingernail against the cheek. Her fingers on my temples. My planchette hands seeking answers on her Ouija skin. Somehow I knew even before she removed her pants. Words tattooed to her inside thigh. Politics inside the secret crotch. False entries. No exits.

Only one thing is certain, and that makes it difficult to operate. But what is our alternative?

We kissed.




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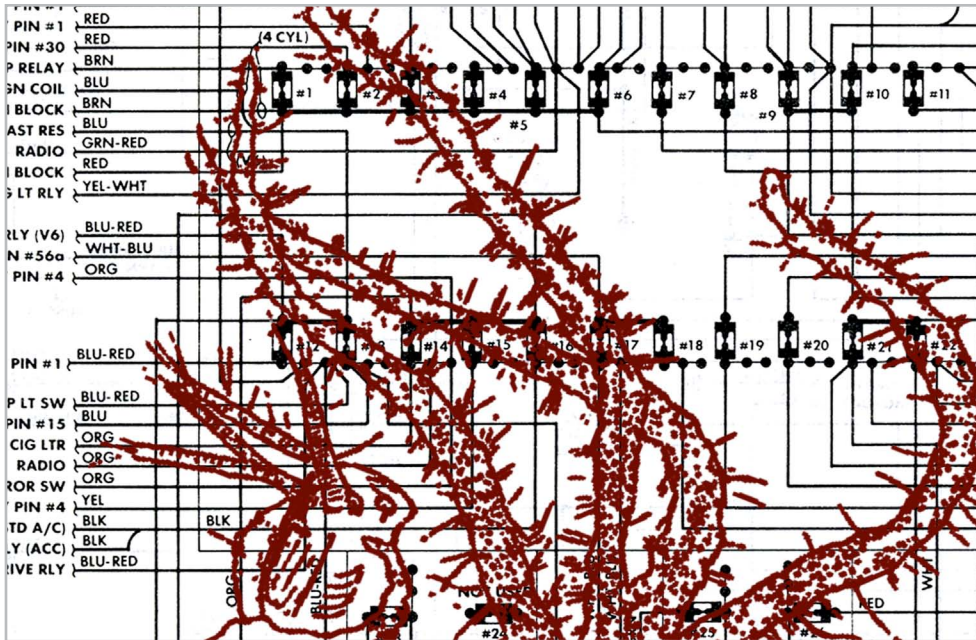


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June 4th. As I approach the center of this plot, there ARE lapses in my memory. The details remain extra sharp. But the gaps. There ARE these creepy gaps of blank nothing. I take these blanks and my cold skin as signs I am near the center. The plot itself has morphed into something that feels like the head of Medusa. Evidence writhes, characters split into multiple personalities. The plot proliferates into a matrix of possibilities. Maybe this confusion will subside. Maybe I will know when I pass through the center. Maybe I can negotiate a terrible nothing and live to tell the story. A terrible nothing. Since we separated, I am the A thiest in the Faxhole. If I should die before I wake, how does this story end?



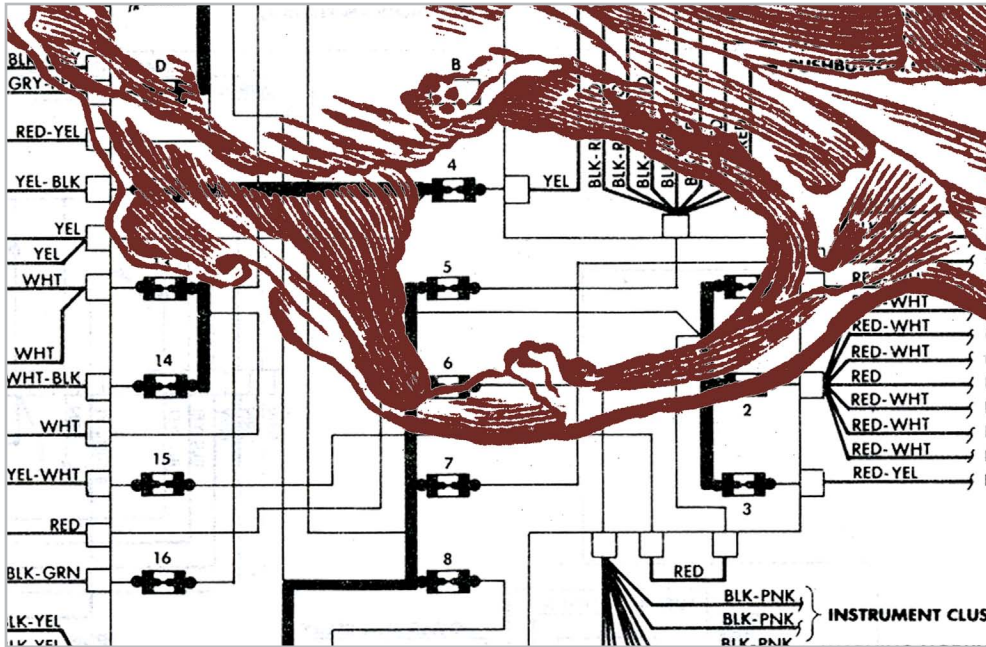

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June 8th

Well, what'dya know? I made it. Passed smack through the center and can't say I'm any better off for it. Talk about anti-climactic. At one point though, I could have sworn I heard a far off sax popping and bebopping, screaming and moaning. Moaning what? A secret? A code? My memory is suspect, and music too is registered. You must have a license to whistle. What alarms me most is that the plot, apparently, is all there is. It encompasses counterplots, coddles dissent, embraces revolution; heroism and heroin, passion and poison, sex and suicide, the night, the light, the knife, the life. It's all part of the narrative sprawl. Nothing is edited. Nothing is not edited.

And me? Turns out I'm just a minor character. A walk-on. For a moment, approaching the center, I was a protagonist. I was Hamlet, Sam Spade, Moll Flanders, Captain Ahab, Bugs Bunny, Hansel in the woods of death. Then the sax went silent, and suddenly I became a cameo appearance in a four part made-for-tv movie. I vanished into the clutter of incident, the catastrophe of event.



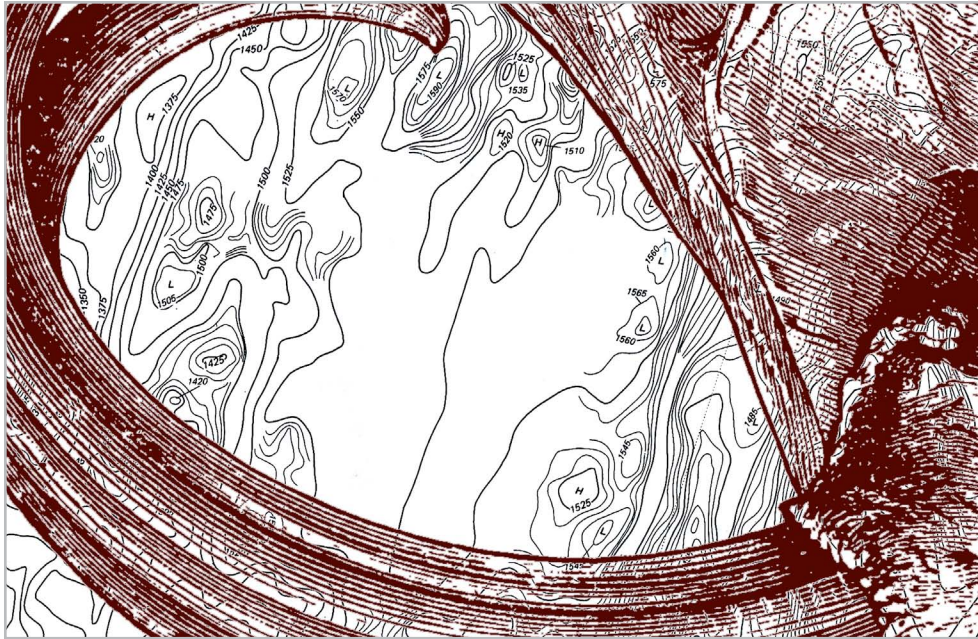

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July 11th

Don't believe me. I am a lie.

I am counterfeit. I am fake. I am artificial. I am not real. I am false. I am fabricated. I am a fraud. I am a trick. I am spurious. I am an illusion. I am not genuine. I deceive. I am a concoction. I am conjured. I am phony. I am a mirage. I am a facsimile. I am bogus. I am a pretender. I am invented. I am feigned. I am simulated. I am an artifact. I am a ruse. I am a sham. I am ersatz. I am a forgery. I am a hoax. I am facts in mother's makeup, I am dressed in a disguise. I am smoke and I am mirrors. I am shuck and I am jive. I am the mask in the nightmare. I only look like I'm alive. I am a shadow from a magic lantern dancing on the wall.

Call me Legerdemain. I have infiltrated this plot. I am fiction.




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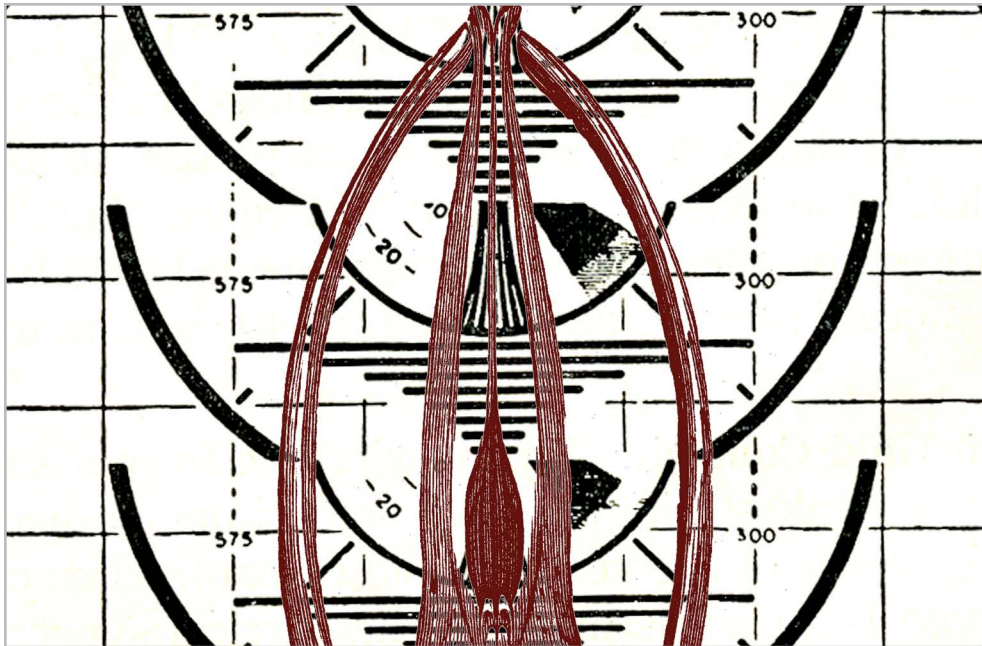


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August 30<sup>th</sup>. I have had a nervous breakdown. I am blind. I grew tired of the plot and tried to block it from my mind. I took a job as a prison guard at Webster's Penitentiary. I tossed mattresses for contraband, comma splices and pillows for home made grammatical errors. I volunteered for midnight busts. I worked on Christmas Eve. I stood in the guard tower with my MP5A3 ready to shoot down those who tried to escape from their assigned meanings. They tried. I shot. I was promoted. I got a raise. I woke up one morning and remembered the plot in a haze. When I realized what I had done, I poked my eyes out.

Please excuse the remnants





September 21st

I have made up my mind. I am leaving this conspiratorial surface and I am going underground. To the Hecatomb. Now, you may call this escapism, surrender, hiding my head in the sand. If it were only that simple. But the Hecatomb, I'm afraid, is as complex, apparitional, and labyrinthine as the plot of my postcards. And there's no light down there. I will have to memorize dead ends, chart my steps, make it up as I go along, and riff with an unseen order that may be hostile, chaotic, corrupt. I'm bringing my sax.

By the way, my only mode of transit from here to there is total silence. So there will be no more correspondence. Besides, postcards are easy to steal. I swiped these myself from a rack on the sidewalk outside City Hall. And stamps are cheap. Buy the ones with the secret messages.

Turn up your collar. Glance over your shoulder. Write small.




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# Baby Wants

by Scott David

“The baby wants s’mores.”

“Now? You want s’mores now? At eleven at night?”

“The baby,” Kelly repeats, touching her belly. “The baby wants s’mores.”

“The baby,” he says neutrally.

“The baby.”

Aidan meets her gaze.

I’m going to count to three, Kelly thinks. The baby’s childhood is going to be a long one if Aidan’s apparent prenatal reluctance to do his duty by the baby is any indicator of what’s to come. S’mores is not, after all, so much to ask. What about college tuition? What about unconditional love?

Aidan vaults out of bed. Kelly’s relieved. The baby doesn’t want a lot of eye rolling and sighing. The baby doesn’t want to hear that it’s pouring rain and Aidan has a big client breakfast meeting tomorrow. The baby wants prompt obedience and good cheer and a certain snap-to-it-tivity. If that’s a word. Many times, Kelly finds they haven’t even invented words for what the baby wants.

Aidan pulls on jeans and a t-shirt. He checks for his wallet, finds the boots he kicked off without putting them away properly. He has a dramatic jaw, a deep voice. He’s rumpled and handsome, but his features are slightly out of alignment, a little less than true, so the baby wants to inherit its mother’s features, especially if the baby is a girl.

“Anything else?” Aidan asks.

Kelly shakes her head.

“But take your phone,” she says. “You never know what else the baby might want.”

Aidan displays his phone like Vanna White to show her he has not forgotten. Kelly wonders whether Vanna-Aidan is being a smart ass. The baby does not want a smart ass for a father.

While Kelly waits for the baby’s s’mores, she concentrates on motherhood. She constructs a dozen lives in her mind, all of them good, all of them exemplary. She gives birth to Nobel Prize winners. She sires heads of state and brilliant writers and MacArthur grantees and even an OB-GYN

with a less chilly bedside manner than her own Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri. (It’s fine to dream of miracles.) Kelly will not for a second spoil the evening by allowing herself to indulge thoughts of the baby’s possible mediocrity. She will not let her baby prove to be a guy in a raincoat with no pants, or an insufferable boob like her former boss who insists on pronouncing foreign capitals as the locals would, or Ann Coulter. These lesser destinies are not her baby’s.

Aidan’s been gone less than ten minutes when Kelly suddenly realizes she can’t remember what on earth the baby wanted that caused Aidan to abandon her. Which is to say, Kelly remembers the object of the want (s’mores), but she no longer knows the want itself. She cannot conceive of ever having wanted s’mores. At any time in her life. Even as a little girl at the campfire. Indeed, s’mores hardly seem to be the type of thing a person could want. Saying, I want – the baby wants – s’mores would be like saying the baby wants cancer, the baby wants a terrorist attack, the baby wants World War III, the baby wants an advanced case of golfball-sized hemorrhoids and swollen feet (a subject with which Kelly has become infinitely familiar). The very thought of a single s’more makes Kelly gag.

What the baby really wants, she discovers, is fried wantons. Smothered in soy.

Kelly calls Aidan, but he doesn’t answer, which fills her with remorse. She has sent Aidan on this fruitless errand in bad weather for a repellant object that no one could possibly desire under any conceivable set of circumstances, and now she’s terrified that Aidan has been killed in a car crash, or during a stick-up at the convenience store. She’s terrified that she has set in motion events that she’s now powerless to change. She’s terrified she has deprived the baby of a father.

“Pick up the damn phone,” she yells into her phone. It goes to voice mail. She hears the voice of her baby’s father—now deceased, for all Kelly knows. It’s a calm, unpregnant voice, that has no sense of urgency or care, that is heedless of the baby’s needs, that is off on a frolic, celebrating his freedom and essential solitary primordial maleness, nothing more than a swinging dick in an uncomplicated world where the mortal wants and needs of his own child and the woman to whom he pledged “I do” are just vague and colorless distractions.

Kelly suddenly regrets ever having sex with Aidan. Regrets ever playing without a safety net. Regrets laughing when Aidan said, “I wants you wit’ ma baby, Kizzy,” which is apparently a quote from *Roots*, a TV series she has never seen since it aired when Kelly was two years old. Aidan, however, has seen it. Aidan hails from good Democratic liberal stock, civil rights



lawyers and safe schools advocates whose shelves of old videocassettes reflected a firm belief in the value of diversity, and Aidan enacts – she is told – a mean bar-table Kunta Kinte and intends (over Kelly’s dead body) to offer up baby to the heavens after its birth to bestow its name.

No, Kelly now wishes she had married Arnold Goldbaum, the dweeby runt with whom she experienced her first kiss, who offered to give her the contents of his Bar Mitzvah envelope full of cash from his relatives if she would just show him her “pussy.” Kelly now wishes she had shown Arnie her pussy. She wishes she had been a swinger. She wishes she had become a nun. Kelly imagines herself cloistered, serene, without the slightest clue as to what it was like to have a man enter her body, to have a baby occupy her belly like an invasive parasitological species causing these myriad untoward changes and thickenings and appetites and urges that were so entirely alien to her otherwise well-adjusted and rational self, the self that runs a \$15 million account in a public advertising agency and puts the fear of God into junior copywriters.

Then the baby kicks, and the cloister dissolves into the cramped bedroom where this very same baby was conceived thirty-four weeks ago during a drunken, tequila-fueled marathon session of unbridled lust following her cousin’s wedding reception from which it took Kelly’s chafed nipples three days to recover and of which neither she nor Aidan could specifically remember the details in the morning, though there had certainly been shrieking, spanking, heads knocking on headboard, nasty language, and repetition of the phrase “Drill, baby, drill” (it was during Palin’s run for office)—all things the baby doesn’t want, but Kelly wouldn’t mind experiencing again once her body returns to something approaching normal (if it ever does).

Aidan’s a good man in a lot of ways. He opens doors for women. He winces at harsh language in front



of girls. But he's also a brawler, a drinker, a talker. He has many friends. Too many. They drift into town and call him in the dead of night to go out for a beer, and Aidan always wants to go – feels compelled to go – but ever since the baby was conceived, he does not go, because – Kelly assumes – the baby doesn't want its father coming home at dawn hungover and piss-eyed.

It's been eons since she and Aidan had good sex. Centuries. Which makes Kelly suspect what's making it so difficult for Aidan to answer his goddamn phone is that Aidan is instead flirting with some trappy teenage checkout girl with a nose ring and pert tits and boyhips and not the slightest sign of constipation and back pain. She imagines the checkout girl seductively applying shiny chapstick while Aidan waits to pay, tilting back her head and opening her mouth, her shirt parting from the waist of her low-rise jeans and those glistening lips smacking together with a sound like wet leaves. She imagines the quick exchange of glances and a sloppy blowjob out of range of the security cameras in the walk-in refrigerator among the Schlitz cases and blocks of Cabot cheese.

Kelly hauls herself up from the bed. She paces back and forth. The baby is restless. The baby wants motion. The baby wants the teenage check-out girl dead.

Yes, it's true: the baby wants to hold a public execution. The baby wants to see pain and blood and jewelry liberated from pierced parts with extreme prejudice. This is a Biblical baby. This baby has no mercy for pert-titted teenage checkout girls. This baby has no time for Daddies who get off with a complete stranger. The baby's chief and overriding concern is that it be carried by a mother with two good legs for running, in case the wild wildebeest charges, so that Kelly is able to flee and take refuge in the nearest baobab tree and hurl spears she whittled from baobab tree branches.

Kelly crosses from the bedroom into the hall and into the tiny living room, which she roams like it's the ancient savanna. She feels fierce. She could leapfrog the sofa longways if it meant she could protect her baby. God help her husband and Pert-tits if they come home now. If they get within range, she'll skewer them with baobab spears. The baby would want it so.

Aidan calls her back.

"I was driving," he explains. "We don't talk and drive. It's dangerous. We wouldn't want our baby to talk and drive, when our baby is old enough."

His voice is laced with solemn, unconscionable righteousness. She wants to throttle him. The baby needs Kelly to be able to talk to him at a moment's notice. The baby needs its father. Doesn't he understand that? Is it such a complicated concept to grasp?

"The baby doesn't want s'mores any more," she says.

"No?"

"No, the baby wants fried wontons."

"Fried wontons. Check."

"And soy. Not the low sodium stuff. The baby also wants beer nuts. And blueberry kefir. And breathmints. And maybe some Mandarin fizzy water."

Kelly could go on and on. The baby wants smart outfits to set it apart from its peers. The baby wants window sills without lead paint. The baby wants the rain to stop. The baby wants to be a skilled musician. The baby's need is endless.

Above all, of course, the baby wants to get born now. Not three weeks from now when due, but now, when baby's Mommy doesn't think she can stand another single day of being pregnant. When Mommy is terminally done with exhaustion and heartburn and dizziness and the complete demolition of anything resembling healthy skin tone. And that doesn't even address Mommy's bladder control issues. Which reminds Kelly. She closes herself in the bathroom and carefully lowers herself to the seat.

"What did you say?" Aidan asks, when he knows damn well that Kelly didn't say anything, that what she did was emit an unladylike grunt – or was it a moan? – that a true gentleman would have gracefully ignored or, better yet, taken full responsibility for.

"Did you get all that?" she asks.

"Got it," he says cheerfully.

"Repeat it back to me."

He does so. Flawlessly.

Kelly's pleased she has married a man with a knack for memorization. The baby wants good genes. The baby wants a big brain. The baby wants to go to MIT. Kelly hangs up and prides herself that she has graciously omitted mention of the pert-titted check out girl. She'll forgive Aidan this time. The baby wants her to forgive.

Rising from the toilet, trying to wrestle her elastic pants back into place, Kelly is suddenly entranced by the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. Over the past nine months, in direct proportion to the baby's growth, the apartment has gotten smaller, and the number of mirrors has proliferated. There seem to be thousands of mirrors now, specializing in catching her at odd and obscene and completely unflattering poses. Normally she avoids them like the plague.

Today, however, Kelly turns left and right, stands taller, angles her

chin (“chins,” she has begun saying to Aidan). She pulls back her oddly thin and perennially greasy hair (the baby does not like the chemicals in shampoo), and flashes a movie star smile.

Improbably, she looks good. Really good. Even her butt looks good. She knows this because she removes her drawstring pants and draws off her shirt and stands in her socks and is wearing no bra. This moment doesn’t happen very often. This moment is a miracle. She feels titanic, oceanic, swollen, fluid. That’s just what the baby would want. No skin-and-bones, rags-and-goth-eyeshadow checkout bitch can hold a candle to her.

“Carrying it like a beachball,” her mother had said just last week. “Sign of a boy. Women carry girls on the hips.”

“We’ve agreed not to find out the sex. We’ve agreed to wait,” Kelly had replied.

“You’ve told me a dozen times already, Kelly. It makes it very difficult to shop, you know. It’s very thoughtless of you.”

Think blue, Kelly had wanted to say. She still wants to say it. She wants her mother to intuit the child’s sex, to understand the mystery. She wants her mother, thirty years after the fact, to turn out to be a good mother. She wants this 180-degree, wholesale transformation from Wicked Witch of the West to Glenda the Good Witch, not because it would help Kelly achieve some belated psychic wholeness or get her mother past the pearly gates when her mother’s time came due, but rather because the baby wants a grandmother—a real one, with gray hair and candies and patchwork quilts and a country house on Thanksgiving to which the baby will travel on a sleigh.

Of course, Kelly also wants to say think blue because – though she and Aidan had indeed agreed not to learn the sex of the baby – Kelly has cheated. She has gone back on her own to the OB-GYN, and sworn Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri to secrecy, and explained her need to know. Kelly desperately wanted to revert to her standard explanation for everything that had happened in the past nine months; she wanted to say, the baby wants to know its own sex.

But Kelly suspected Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri wouldn’t much appreciate this terminology. Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri would have thought Kelly was nuts. Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri would have called social services and taken the baby away from her and put it up for adoption, and the baby would live out the rest of its years in Peoria with an abusive family who couldn’t possibly give baby as much love as Kelly would.

So Kelly instead said, “Aidan and I have changed our mind.”

Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri looked smug. For a moment she hadn’t answered Kelly’s question. Worrying over some papers on Kelly’s chart, the good doctor had obviously begun to think—what with her Harvard degree, and her fashionable skinniness and her expensive eyeglasses and her stethoscope that she wore as proudly as a string of goddamn pearls, and her extravagantly long hyphenated name—that Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri would herself likely produce a better baby than the baby, and Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri would never deceive her husband or lie or cheat or steal or take the magazines from the waiting room, which Kelly has been doing for months now, despite the fact that she has a truckload of parenting magazines at home. (She has a sneaking suspicion that the ones at home aren’t the right magazines, that their advice is dated, all Skinner box and Doctor Spock, and the baby is a modern baby and needs the latest technological advances in babydom.)

And then, abruptly, Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri elected not to hold Kelly or her baby to the higher – nay, celestial – ethical standard by which Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri herself no doubt lived, and revealed the baby’s sex, which Kelly now carried around like a guilty secret.

The baby does not want this awkward, deceptive arrangement. Kelly has experienced regular urges to spill the beans to Aidan or her mom, but she senses it would make her look fickle and a little crazy and she is therefore gearing up to express ersatz wonder and surprise and awe when the baby is finally born and spanked and its sex proudly declared and it is held up to the night sky like Roots and given a boy’s name.

Kelly sits on the edge of the bed and flips through one of those magazines that has Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri’s address label on the front cover. Each page fills the baby with want. The baby wants new-mom notecards in five cheery colors and a Tummy Time play mat and a Halo sleepsack and a Boppy breastfeeding aide. The baby wants a stylish studio diaper bag and an ultrasound sonogram frame and matching set of sonogram photo magnets and a silver Mommy-to-be necklace with a dangling baby-shoe pendant.

The baby wants a mother as pretty as the model in the photograph: the flawless mother who doesn’t look as if she has earned her pregnancy, who has perfect skin, and no swelling, no cramping, and hardly any incontinence, bleeding gums, joint pain, or high blood pressure. A mother who will give birth to little flawless model children who will stroll out the delivery room like they were on the goddamn catwalk.

The baby also wants a father like the father in the photo: the loving look, the non-receding hair, the father who does not burp or fart or stay

late at work, the father with a higher paying job (or, better yet, independent wealth) who nevertheless never opens his mouth to express inane child-rearing philosophies he has developed with his buddies down at the bar.

The baby also wants – no, the baby must have – a bedroom the size of an airplane hanger like the one on the open page, a bedroom decorated by a professional celebrity nursery designer and furnished with a Posh-Tots armoire and a pewter crib and a genuine zebra-skin stain-resistant rug harvested from naturally deceased zebras that were humanely raised on PETA-endorsed zebra farms.

There's nothing wrong with the baby's many wants, Kelly reasons. There's nothing wrong with wanting a world fit for its occupation, a world without toxins or flat tires or immensely superior OB-GYNs. Not that the baby wants to be completely catered to, because the baby doesn't want to grow up to be a spoiled brat. But fertile soil for growth is ok. A shield from some of the worst hardships – hunger, cold, abuse, mullets, Sarah Palin, cleft pallets, childhood diabetes, urban blight, bad art, conniving coworkers, Arnie Goldbaum's bribery – isn't too much to ask.

And the baby doesn't always get what the baby wants. For example, the baby might want the six thousand dollar stroller advertised on page fifty-seven, or the twelve hundred infant foreign language learning software on page sixty-eight, but there's no way in hell the baby's going to get either, Kelly decides. The baby's no materialist. The baby will damn well use its imagination. The baby will make do with a block of rough wood and a teddy bear made of rags. Kelly thinks: Babies can't be choosers.

The rain becomes heavier. The wind blows. The baby kicks. A car passes. An hour passes. Kelly hugs herself. She shivers. She checks her watch. She's lucky. She knows that. Other people lose babies (or husbands). Other people's babies are born with defects. Kelly has a strong baby. Her baby wants barbecued ribs. Her baby wants access to orthodontics. Her baby wants and wants, and these wants are a good sign: this is a baby with ambition. This is a baby that will go far. This is the best specimen of babyhood conceived in this part of the country in a decade or more. That's what Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri will say when the baby is born.

In fact, the more she considers the baby's greatness, the more Kelly suspects she is not good enough for this world-class baby. She will damage it. She will stunt its growth and limit its potential. One day she won't know what the baby wants. The baby will kick and cry and toss and turn, and Kelly

will not be able to figure it out. This is her recurring nightmare. She has a desperate fear of not knowing what to do. A fear that she will be a bad mother. A fear that motherhood won't come naturally to her the way it comes to other women. She feels guilty for feeling guilty, afraid that she feels afraid. The baby will be made nervous by her nervousness and it will grow to be an irritable, selfish, frail child, full of tics and allergies and crankiness. The baby will be entirely unlovable.

Instantly, the baby wants an apology from Kelly. The baby wants an apology for these uncharitable, miserable, unnatural, unmotherly thoughts.

"Mommy didn't mean to," Kelly coos at her belly. She senses she is going to be saying this more than once over the next eighteen years. The prospect fills her with dread. Kelly doesn't want to be the mother her mother was. She wants – the baby wants – her to be a better mother than that, the first best greatest mother there ever was, besting the Virgin Mary, surpassing the queen mother, exceeding Marion Cunningham and Clair Huxtable, lauded above Mother Nature, and Gaia, and even Dumbo's mom, who never gave a hoot about his big ears.

The baby wants what Kelly's mother was never able to give her: affection. Also, humor. And security. And a dad who did not abandon them. A prom dress that was not secondhand. A private school education. A sense of decorum. (The baby also wants the brothers and sisters Kelly never had, but Kelly cannot bring herself to contemplate that prospect just now.)

The baby wants pickles with its fried wontons. The baby wants dark chocolate. The baby wants genius. The baby wants to live in Boca Raton. The baby wants to care more about truth than it does about itself. The baby wants to be a noble savage. The baby wants to be a real man.

Somehow the litany of what the baby wants calms Kelly. It's an incantation. A preparation. Make the universe ready. Prep the mold. Brighten the skies. The baby wants a keen sense of right and wrong, a solid moral compass, a bit of luck, and a handful of good friends. The baby wants an intact family. The baby wants love that is intentional, not haphazard, love that is an act of will. (And yet Kelly's love for this baby is unspeakable, and not willed, perhaps not even wanted. She is terrified of it.)

The baby wants most of all a shot of tequila. Unpasteurized cheese.

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**She feels guilty for feeling guilty, afraid that she feels afraid. The baby will be made nervous by her nervousness and it will grow to be an irritable, selfish, frail child, full of tics and allergies and crankiness. The baby will be entirely unlovable.**

---

Sushi. Everything that is forbidden. Sometimes baby wants two opposite things at once.

Aidan does not die. This is the good news. He has also not been seduced. Or if seduced, it's been done quickly, which is much the same thing. Pert-tits put no effort into it.

The bad news is, he's full of good cheer. Even bonhomie. He is telling Kelly about the wild winds and the full moon and the Chinese food place open past midnight on Congress Street and the fourth-and-goal on Thursday Night Football that was so damn exciting he had to pull over at the side of the road until it was over.

Aidan stops short when he sees her clothes in a pile on the bedroom floor. He sees the robe she has wrapped around herself. He puts two and two together. Kelly sees the math take place in his brain. She can smell it, for God's sake. On account of the baby, she has developed a keen sense of smell. Better than a dog. And the smell of math is acrid, irritating. Especially when it adds up to an accusation.

"What have you been doing?" he asks. "Did you check the windows, lower the blinds?"

Kelly ignores him. She finds a warm box of wontons, a Costco-sized bottle of soy sauce in the bags Aidan has brought home.

"Perverts everywhere," he says. "Did you know there's a whole section of the internet devoted to pregnant pornography?"

He blushes.

"Not that I was looking," he says. "Not that I'm into it."

Kelly stops rooting around in the bags. She squares off and faces him and lets her robe fall open.

"Why? Don't you think I'm sexy?"

"Of course I do."

"You think I'm hideous," she says. "You think I'm never going to get thin again. I disgust you."

"No," he insists.

"I'll put a bag over my head. I'll get a burka. I don't want you to have to set eyes on me. I'm only the mother of your child."

"No," he says. "I mean yes. You are. You are the mother of my child. You're the most beautiful girl in the world."

"The baby wants a mother who's pretty."

"You're pretty," he says. He slips behind her and put his huge warm



hands up under her robe, on her hips, on her belly. He is actively willing himself to be the man he wants to be. Manhandling his own boyish desires. Trying so hard that Kelly smells sweat, a mixture of hot and cold, effort and fear. It's maybe a little disturbing that he has to try so hard.

"Because the baby's no fool," she says belligerently. "The baby understands evolution. The baby wants a mother who is pretty. Pretty is how you retain a mate. Pretty is how you get a new husband when the old one runs off with teenage checkout girls."

"Checkout girls?"

She twists away from him. "Don't think I don't know."

Aidan is confused. Aidan is hesitant. Aidan's mouth hangs open. Kelly's not sure the baby likes this. His fear is somewhat gratifying, she supposes. The baby wants a fierce mother with her baobab spears. But the baby also wants, well, more backbone than baobab when it comes down to it. The baby doesn't want a spineless father who's incapable of delivering discipline. Nor does the baby want a domineering mother so tired of getting her way that she aches for someone to tell her what to do, and runs off and joins a harem, and subjects herself to a strong-willed man who regularly sentences

her to lashes for talking back to him. The baby does not want this to transpire; the baby would not thrive.

Kelly retreats to the bed. Aidan trails after her and offers her a fried wanton. She rolls away from him, and shows him her back

“The baby doesn’t want a fried wanton,” she says.

“But I just went out ...” he starts to say, but he knows enough not to argue with the baby, so he adds in a softer voice, “I brought you Ben & Jerry’s.”

Her nose twitches. The baby kicks.

“Remember,” he says, “you’re eating for two.”

She rolls over and studies him. He holds up a spoon. He sees he has done something right, and this pleases him. Like he’s a genius. Like it was rocket science, she thinks. But Kelly doesn’t feel the least bit bitter. She, too, is pleased. And surprised. And, well, kind of grateful.

“Baby wants a napkin,” she says.

Kelly eats and they watch HGTV – the nursery edition – and every once in a while Kelly feeds Aidan, and his lips become a mess of chocolate and look very kissable. Kelly sets aside the Ben & Jerry’s and strokes her belly, and discovers she is horny.

“Baby wants sex,” she says.

“Don’t say that.”

“Baby wants Mommy to have sex,” she corrects. She fumbles at Aidan’s belt buckle. Aidan is abashed. He pulls away her hands. He doesn’t like the words baby and sex in the same sentence.

“How do you think baby was made?” she says, exasperated, laughing. What a prude, she thinks. But she’s pleased Aidan wouldn’t ever let his baby (if it were a girl) grow up to be a slut. If the baby were a girl, Aidan would intimidate all the horny high school boys – not yet born – who try to take the imaginary baby Kelly is not actually having out on dates. Aidan would drive off all the Arnie Goldbaums. Aidan is nothing if not responsible. His mother raised him right. He’s not capable of irresponsibility. This is what it means to be Aidan. If he were not responsible, he would cease to exist.

She feels waves – no, oceans – of gratitude toward him. She feels for the first time since they saw the sonogram that they are carrying this baby together, that Aidan is helping share the burden as best as he is able, that he would gladly have carried the whole thing for her, if he could, if she would let him.

The baby wants a man like this, she thinks. A provider.

“Baby loves her Daddy,” she says.

Aidan’s eyes fill with tears. He strokes her face. Now, gradually, he’s in the mood.

Kelly thinks, Baby would never have believed Daddy needed so much foreplay.

They kiss, and Aidan is gentle and hard at the same time, and just a little hesitant when his hands stray beneath her collarbones.

Kelly says, “You can touch my tits, you know. They won’t break.”

“But aren’t they for the baby?” he croaks.

Kelly feels a perverse sort of ... curiosity. Yes, that’s what it is. Scientific, dispassionate curiosity. She looks at him and then at her tits. He is staring at them. He is maybe embarrassed by what he wants, and Kelly feels roomy and expansive and generous, infinitely capable, like a Jewish grandmother. She says quietly, “The baby doesn’t want these. Not right now. For now, these are for you.”

Aidan looks grateful that she hasn’t embarrassed or ridiculed him. Obviously his greatest fear – and something in his Irish Catholic upbringing – tells him he should be embarrassed and ridiculed, that he deserves it, that such treatment would be good for a dirtybird like him. Aidan’s not often held back by religion. At worst, he’ll pay the piper later, maybe sneak off to church without telling Kelly and spill the sins to the very priest that will end up baptizing their baby because Aidan’s mother insists that the baby be church-ed. But for now, Aidan gets after Kelly’s breasts, and she enjoys the attention and his gratitude, his worship. Aidan is delighted. What Aidan wants is not complicated at all.

In the morning, Kelly rises early. She hardly sleeps now. She is beyond exhaustion, and the baby wants a ghost of a sip of caffeine, not enough to do damage.

Aidan pours a quarter cup.

“Maybe a little more,” Kelly says. She fills the cup to the brim. He starts to protest, but Kelly shoos him out the door.

“Bring home the bacon,” she says. “Impress the clients. The baby wants a college fund.”

This is only Kelly’s second day not working at the agency. She went back and forth on the question: take maternity leave now or only after the baby is born? She hates to have to go back to work even a day earlier than necessary and risk missing the baby’s first step and or it calling the day care workers “Momma.” She fears leaving the baby with unqualified sitters and

unmet needs, so that the baby develops a Gibraltar-size chip on its shoulder that will reveal itself when the baby is fifteen and has a serious heroin habit and a bunch of good friends dressed in black who sacrifice cats.

What does the baby want? She had asked over and over. To work until labor or not to work? She'd asked herself and she'd asked the baby and she'd asked her mother and she'd even asked Aidan, who was smart enough not to provide an answer. Aidan had nodded and listened and hadn't dared to venture an opinion on what the baby might want, because Aidan was not the one, after all, who was lugging around this soul-sucking mass of humanity and thirty pounds of excess blubber for nine months, so what possible right could he have to offer the slightest surmise on what the baby wants? Once he has gotten pregnant and barfed and leaked and bulged and swollen, then, maybe, Aidan will have the right to do something other than zip his lip.

The caffeine, Kelly notices, makes her irritable.

She turns to the morning paper, which features an article about a mother dying of cancer. She is creating videos for her four- and six-year-old children to remember her by. Kelly wants to shut the page, to blot out the image, but she can't help reading to the end. She can't help finding a link to the videos on the paper's website. She can't help hoping the mother magically survived.

The mother tells the camera she loves it when her little boy runs into the room and makes his mommy laugh and she sings *Que Sera Sera* and she calls the camera her children's names. Someone has made-up the mother's wan and cratered face. Someone has fitted a wig over her skull. The last line of the article notes the mother's passing.

Kelly tears the entire newspaper to shreds and cancels her subscription. She vows never to be this mother. Never to abandon her child. She

vows to be long-lived, to watch her diet and exercise, and under no circumstance whatsoever to predecease the baby.

The ringing door-buzzer interrupts her vows, and she is immediately annoyed that Aidan has gone to work and abandoned her. The baby does not want to walk down four flights of stairs to let in the UPS man. In fact, the baby

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**Aidan was not the one, after all, who was lugging around this soul-sucking mass of humanity and thirty pounds of excess blubber for nine months, so what possible right could he have to offer the slightest surmise on what the baby wants?**

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would prefer not to have climbed the four flights in the first place. The baby wants instead an elevator building at a better address, but what the baby

gets is this godforsaken top-floor unit in the once-uber-hip, up-and-coming "Seaport District," which was supposed to have been the next new target for bohemian gentrification that didn't quite make it before the stock market crash and now sits in developmental limbo. "We barely have mail service and telephones," Kelly jokes to her friends, but it's true: you have to get in a car to get so much as a pack of Marlboro Lights, which she has of course quit smoking, at least as far as anyone else that matters is concerned. Maybe a puff on the roof when Aidan's working late. Which Kelly will no longer do, since she has made a vow not to predecease the baby.

The buzzer rings again.

"Christakes, I'm coming!" she yells. She waddles to the speaker for the intercom and yells again. "Don't leave, whatever you do, don't leave."

The UPS man is waiting at door. He is a real Marlboro man: gruff and silver-haired, with crows' feet and kind eyes that widen when he sees her.

"I would have come up," he says. "You should have just let me in, I would have come up to you. Are you alright?"

"Where do I sign?" she asks.

"Want me to carry the package up?"

"I'm pregnant, not disabled," she snaps.

"Sorry."

They stare at one another. The UPS man seems a little affronted by her brusqueness. Kelly thinks maybe she should not have been so gruff. She has been getting gruffer as she feels more vulnerable. She has been getting gruffer since she drank the whole cup of coffee. She says quietly, "I'd be grateful if you'd carry it up."

He does.

She follows.

He is kind enough not to outpace her.

She offers him a tip.

He pretends he does not see.

"Your husband," he says, "is a lucky man."

And then the UPS man is gone. She hears his heavy steps down the apartment stairs, the front door slam, the sound of his truck moving into gear; a rough, masculine sound. She stands in the doorway and wonders what it would be like to kiss him. She wonders whether the baby would want her to flirt with the UPS man. And yet the next time the buzzer rings, near lunchtime, she has false hope it's him again.

It's not. It's the polar opposite of the UPS man.



It's Kelly's mother. Who says she has stopped by to "check in," knowing it is Kelly's first day off work, making sure Kelly isn't going out of her mind with boredom.

"Not yet," Kelly says. "Not yet. But I've only just started talking to you, so there's still plenty

of time. And by the way, it's my second day of no-work."

Her mother ignores her tone. She mentions that she has a date tonight.

"Can I crash in your spare bedroom so I don't have to drive back out to the suburbs?" her mother asks.

"You're a grandmother," Kelly scolds. "The baby doesn't want a grandmother who 'crashes'."

"I'm not a grandmother yet," her mother says brightly.

"You'd dare deny my child?"

Her mother looks at her from a great distance, a distance at which the baby prefers not to be looked at.

"Was I as neurotic as you when I was pregnant?" she asks.

It's not a question that is meant to be answered. It is not a question worthy of answer. Kelly has a thousand answers. You never cared as much as I do, she wants to say.

But these are hard words, and Kelly bites her tongue. For all her mother's faults, it's still clear the baby wants a grandmother. Even this one, who has no gray hair, or sleigh, or country house.

"You can crash here," Kelly says.

Her mother kisses her and hauls in a large suitcase from her car.

"You bring your steamer trunk and hat boxes too?" Kelly asks.

"Thank you," her mother says, dashing out. "And don't wait up."

The baby wants a world where things aren't upside-down, but the baby's evidently not going to get it.

Later that night, Aidan sleeps, and Kelly waits up. She's thinking

she wants to do something extraordinary for this child. Something dramatic. The baby wants to be saved from a burning building. The baby wants to have a Volkswagen lifted off its left leg. The baby wants a parent who will love the baby enough to say no. The baby wants a hero, a mother who invented fire, a father who will always be there.

Kelly's in a sudden hurry to have this baby, in a hurry for it to get born, to be held, to be walked to the first day of school, to be accompanied down the aisle. She knows she should not feel so urgent. She knows she should have patience. She knows she should slow her breathing, count to ten, temper her own desire. Kelly sits forward, legs spread wide, head slumped over her own tummy, a hand on each side of her belly, just holding and listening, and for a moment there's no sense of time passing, no sense of the slightest want or need.

# Attractive Nuisances & Known Hazards

by David Livingstone Fore

Los Angeles, CA (56:43:21 AM/PM, Many Several Years On)

Sometimes it rains  
& sometimes it don't

I only know it rains  
& then it stops

Where are the gray days that can scour my soul?

I am an unbeliever left w/  
will  
& not much else making only a poet's progress of  
halting certainty  
& its doubtful opposite number (#)

Not fair! The sign @  
the door said we could redeem our longings on  
the way out

I stick the broad hook of  
my nose out  
the window to draw down  
the tired air of  
another half (1/2) -gone day

as I d  
o  
z  
e  
e  
r  
g  
o  
n  
o  
m  
i c  
l y  
l  
a

in  
my position as chief entomologist<sup>∅</sup> @  
the Dead Insect Office of  
the Los Angeles Department of  
Drought  
& Imperial Relief (guided as we are by  
our mission to irrigate the thirst of  
Commerce  
& Christianity  
& Civilization  
& Camaros of  
the Greater Metropolitan Region...<sup>⊗</sup>)

It is there I apply my hyperopic insight in  
creating documents that bear on  
ever present dangers 2  
the signal situation of  
the alkali fly lifecycle resulting from  
diversion of  
rivers which once fed ...M.. on.o .La k..e .. to feed our desire for  
too much of  
everything<sup>≡</sup>

So thoroughly thoroughly thoroughly have I squandered by  
the hour each hour sighing bored blasts of  
breath  
as I starve... starve... starve for  
sumfin...

sumfin...

sumfin...

---

<sup>∅</sup> Dutch for "ant fucker"

<sup>⊗</sup> Ibid, op. cit., et al

<sup>≡</sup> c.f., the small print: "Cut the chit chat Pat"

"Why is that Kat?"

"We're done w/  
all that Pat b/  
c Nature bats last  
& that's that!"



Fiction Fix

Sumfin is bearing down on  
us

No break in  
this dreadful pleasant weather is forecast

The spiteful sun sings yellowed harmonies that dissolve in/  
2 the white noise of  
another needless nice day

But our thirst is slaked by  
rain only!

One (1) drop of  
that stuff could fill reservoirs w/  
forgiveness

Now where did I put that thing?

I rifle my desk for  
sumfin

sumfin...

sumfin...

sumfin...

O yes!

I wuz starving for  
sumfin w/  
the taste of  
sky in  
it

But where did I put it?

Find the end of sumfin  
& there you'll have it

Out  
the window of  
my mind's eye cotton clouds like headstones gather  
as the temperature

*d*

*i*

*v*

*e*

*s*

*o*

*the*

*wind*

*justle lose  
a few*

*d*

*r*

*o*

*p*

*s*

*2*

*earth*

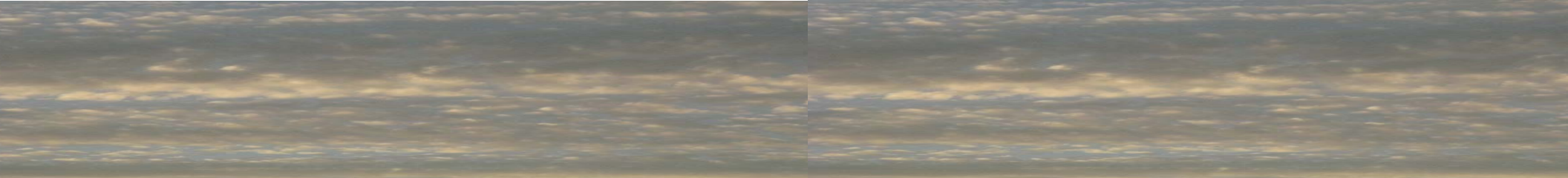
Puddles turn puddles in/  
2 lakes

Lakes in/  
2 creeks

Creeks in/  
2 rivers

Rivers rise toward  
Cemetery Hill past a pair of  
vengeful gravediggers on  
break leaning against  
their shovels beneath

the weight of  
the water of  
the world





Self Portrait



**Masha Sardari**  
*Photographs*



Models: Left, Bethany Rand; Above, Joseph Kerins & Bethany Rand



Model: Stephanie Perez

Self Portrait



Model: Marlene Senko

# The Desecration of the Sabbath

by Marianne Langner Zeitlin

Lest the Jewish Sabbath be desecrated, the electrocutions were advanced to occur before sundown. Sarah snapped off the radio. The night before, the executions had been postponed to avoid the anniversary of the condemned couple; now judicial propriety decreed they be hurried up. Nor was the careful non committal tone of the announcer any different from the one used earlier in the month when the coronation of Queen Elizabeth had been the mainstay of the broadcasts. News was news.

Ever since the old socialist dreams had given way to the realities of Soviet purges and counter purges, right and left, Sarah had little interest in politics. Still, that the executions of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg had been advanced to before sundown so as not to desecrate the Sabbath was a new twist. Sarah sat down carefully, loosening the cords of her maternity skirt, and inhaled deeply. Any sudden jolt and the delicate balance by which she controlled her ever present nausea would be disturbed.

From the radio in the next apartment, a repetition of the news bulletin could be clearly heard through the thin walls. *If they would only have confessed*, President Eisenhower explained, *I would have granted them clemency. At least to Ethel Rosenberg. She is a mother, after all.*

To shut out the sound, Sarah turned on the water in the bathtub full force and pulled off her clothes. Diamonds of light quivered from the sparkling water and a vaporous warmth enveloped the bathroom.

If only she didn't have to go to Mrs. Contini's for dinner. Not that the thought of being alone was that enticing. Still, Mrs. Contini was the last person she'd choose to be with on a night when electrocutions had been rushed – and by a Jewish judge at that – so as not to desecrate the Sabbath. How many Sabbaths upon Sabbaths had she wanted to desecrate when after a huge quarrel, family members had been forced to dine together, silent recriminations imposing a fugue against the familiar prayers and songs?

Once she had tested God by lighting a match on the Sabbath and David, her little brother, had appeared from nowhere to run and tell Mama.

In her orthodox home, creating fire on the Sabbath was a sin. *Testing God? You're testing God?* And the blows had rained down on her head so that even David had shrunk into a corner, frightened and remorseful.

Sarah stepped out of her underwear and stuffed it into the hamper, wishing Shlomo were back already. Outside, the tiny courtyard was resplendent in bright June foliage, a sharp contrast to the rainy day when they said goodbye nearly two months earlier, when he was on his way to play at the Prades Music Festival. Gray was everywhere then: sky, sea, peeling paint on the S.S. *Constantin*, faded hand me down tent maternity coat. And so gray was Shlomo's cell in the ship's womb that despite her resolve, her eyes had puddled.

After adjusting the bath water to the right temperature, Sarah eased herself down, enjoying the movements inside her strained and mottled body. It was like having company and she loved the feeling. Earlier, while walking to the grocery, her resident trapeze artist had swung around so vigorously that a trickle had been forced from her dislocated bladder. Seeing her stop and bend involuntarily, a group of teenagers had laughingly shouted, "Hey, lady, can we take you to the hospital?" Now another pain shot through her and she sat up straight. False labor pains. Her doctor had said that it would be three more weeks. She stretched out and let the water run until it covered her enormous throbbing belly.

Sarah rang the doorbell to Mrs. Contini's penthouse reluctantly and listened to the muted chime. Usually, leaving her two room apartment – with its bedside box of *Uneda* crackers and refrigerator stocked with cottage cheese – to be fussed over by this adopted mother and her aging butler Thomas and served *cordon bleu* dinners, was a treat. Mrs. Contini had encouraged Shlomo ever since he came to the United States as a wunderkind of eleven. At their betrothal party, she had given Sarah a packet of all his letters which she had preserved through the years.

But tonight she was in no mood for the older woman's dogged cheerfulness, a kind of rose-colored view which could only be maintained by the blinkers of privilege. As Thomas took her shawl, Sarah surveyed the inlaid console and matching chairs in the foyer – their shining patina testimony to two centuries of loving care – with something like distaste. Where was the feeling of borrowed peace which usually enveloped her upon entering this hallowed domain?

No such gloom disturbed Mrs. Contini. Still hale and smooth-

skinned at eighty, she came bounding out of the living room to embrace Sarah and within five minutes had brought her up to date with the latest activities of her eight grand-children: this one had graduated full honors at Smith, that one was going on a deep-sea treasure hunt in the Caribbean, the other was interning at Columbia Presbyterian.

As they sat down on matching down pillowed sofas, Mrs. Contini reached for the crystal decanter on the coffee table, poured some sherry into wineglasses, and handed one to Sarah. “Cheers,” she said, lifting her own glass in a toast and drinking a mouthful. “Now, my dear, you must give me the latest news of Shlomo.”

“He’s on his way to Le Havre this minute. *The Liberte* sails tomorrow.” She patted her belly and crossed her fingers. “Three more weeks. So he should be here in good time.”

“I hope so.” Mrs. Contini laughed. “It almost looks as though the baby’s dropped already. It’s probably just my imagination. Anyway, now that the festival’s behind him, what do you think were his main impressions?”

Sarah set down the wineglass and opened and closed her fists against the eggshell silk upholstery. The furniture of the room was mainly Louis XVI, with gilded chairs and gleaming mirrors. French Impressionist paintings adorned the walls; across from her the colors of two Renoirs were radiant with the reflection of the fast setting sun. All over New York, schools and offices were closed and highways were clogged with people trying to escape for the weekend. On the lower East Side and in Bensonhurst, candles were being placed in candelabras as Jews prepared to greet the Sabbath bride.

The windows of the skyscraper apartment fronted on Fifth Avenue and, far off in the distance, on the other side of Manhattan, Sarah watched a boat going up the Hudson River. Soon it would be under the George Washington Bridge, the Tappan Zee Bridge, Dobbs Ferry and then Ossining where the prison fortress of Sing Sing was located and where the Rosenbergs were probably being strapped into their chairs at that very moment.

“His main impressions?” Sarah asked with a start after Mrs. Contini prodded her. “You’ll have to ask him. Playing for Casals, I’d imagine. Seventy seven and still going strong...fantastic—”

“My dear, seventy-seven is nothing nowadays,” Mrs. Contini said as she rose. “And I’ll prove it. No, don’t get up, just stay where you are and relax.”

From the large armoire which housed her music collection, she extracted a score and placed it on the music stand. Taking the cello resting on a chair in front of the pianos, she carefully inserted its steel tip into a

holder to protect the Kerman rug. After fidgeting until she sat in the correct position, she placed the instrument between her bony knees and lifted the bow to play, her parchment-skinned hand grasping it firmly.

At the sound of the opening chord, Sarah spilled a couple of drops of wine on her black tunic. It was Bruch’s *Kol Nidre*. Taking a long breath, she tried to concentrate on not being sick. *For all vows that will be made to Him and that will not be kept—forgiveness, please.*

Why did she have to play that—tonight of all nights? Could Mrs. Contini possibly know how appropriate *Kol Nidre*, the Yom Kippur prayer that originated during the Spanish Inquisition, was? Unable to practice their religion openly, the Jews assembled in cellars to pray, at the risk of being burned at the stake. For three hundred years the funeral pyres blazed with those who had been discovered, although amnesty was offered to any who would confess and convert.

Was she playing this deliberately? It wasn’t possible. Although Mrs. Contini’s family had once been Jewish, for at least two generations its members were Quakers and Unitarians. She must have chosen to play that work just to show off the progress she’d made on the cello.

Indeed it was remarkable. Having had to give up playing the violin because of arthritis, she had taken up the cello at age seventy; and made up in feeling what she lacked in technique, die-hard resolution behind every arpeggio.

As the last sliver of sunset vanished over the horizon, heralding the Sabbath, the notes became faint, then fainter and fainter. A new intense pain shot through Sarah, making her catch her breath. The ormolu clock on the mantle began to chime jarringly just as the rich full sound of the cello repeated the opening *Kol Nidre* theme. Cortisoned fingers quivering on the strings, eyes twitching, Mrs. Contini brought the long wail to a close.

In a blur, Sarah, placed the glass on the table and watched the bent white head of Mrs. Contini as she adjusted a string.

For a moment the silence was absolute.

“Well,” Sarah said finally, rising to hug the older woman, “it may not exactly be Dubrowinsky, but it’ll do, it’ll do.”

Mrs. Contini shook her head. “Don’t speak to me about Dubrowin-

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Could Mrs. Contini possibly know how appropriate *Kol Nidre*, the Yom Kippur prayer that originated during the Spanish Inquisition, was? Unable to practice their religion openly, the Jews assembled in cellars to pray, at the risk of being burned at the stake.

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sky. I'm very angry with him. Imagine, he's talking about retiring already. At sixty six. He ought to be ashamed of himself."

Sarah nodded her head in agreement. "Shlomo played chamber music with him a couple of nights before he went to Europe. He told us he couldn't take it anymore. 'Ven I go out on stage,'" Sarah imitated the strong Russian accent, "'and stand at the vings to collect mineself, the chair out there, standing alone in middle of big stage, always look like electric chair to me...'" Sarah's voice broke and she turned her face away.

"Time to eat," said Mrs. Contini, taking Sarah's arm firmly to lead her to the dining room.

Sitting over the gleaming tablecloth and facing Mrs. Contini, Sarah was reminded of the Sabbath dinner rituals of her childhood. Rote, however inspired, was rote. Neither of them was hungry; Mrs. Contini heaped food on her plate and countered Sarah's protest with, "Don't forget, you're feeding two, my dear." Cutting a piece of beef and watching the dark blood form into little eddies on the plate, Sarah thought of the first time she ate unkosher meat many years earlier and nearly gagged. Now, after spearing a few peas with her fork she gave up, grateful her plate was removed without comment.

When Mrs. Contini struck the match that Thomas handed her to light the brandied *Cherries Jubilee*, Sarah felt a surge of fear. The blue flame hissed as it flared up and Sarah smiled. No David here to report that Mrs. Contini was desecrating the Sabbath. She spooned the hot liquid over the ice cream and Thomas placed a plate in front of Sarah. Not wanting to disappoint, she tasted it, but it was sickeningly sweet and she could barely get it down.

By mutual agreement, the evening came to an early end. The two women walked to the hall arm in arm. Thomas brought out Sarah's knitted shawl and draped it around her shoulders. As she mumbled her thanks, Mrs. Contini opened the door and stepped into the private elevator foyer to push the button.

"I'm glad we were together tonight, Sarah. It kept me from thinking about the Rosenbergs."

Not quite sure she'd heard correctly, Sarah looked at Mrs. Contini questioningly.

"Their little boys" – she shook her head vehemently – "orphans now. She was a mother, Sarah...a MOTHER...after all."

"So you did play the *Kol Nidre* deliberately—"

"The *Kol Nidre*?" Mrs. Contini frowned. "What's that got to do with—"

A piercing pain threw Sarah off balance and Mrs. Contini grabbed her by the arm. "What is it?"

"It's just another of these false labor pains," she whispered. "It's okay. They come and go. They've been happening all day."

The elevator door opened and the two women embraced. "Are you sure you'll be all right? Perhaps you should stay..."

"Not to worry, honest. I'm fine," she said, hastily stepping into the elevator.

The operator shut the door as Mrs. Contini waved.

*A mother...a MOTHER.* Sarah caught her lower lip between her teeth. Of course. Just like Eisenhower. Not only did she not play the *Kol Nidre* deliberately, she didn't even know its significance.

The elevator stopped on the fifteenth floor and a man and a woman entered, dressed in formal evening attire. Backing into a corner, Sarah tripped over a pile of copies of *Daily News' Extras*.

"Well, that's over," the man said to his wife, pointing down at the picture of the Rosenbergs strapped in electric chairs. "Good riddance to bad rubbish. Electric chairs! They should have been torn limb from limb."

The elevator operator slammed the door shut and started down with a lurch. Each lurch brought a corresponding lurch in Sarah's stomach. She was sure she'd never make it to the street. Pursing her lips tightly together, pressing the rail so hard the edge made welts in her palms, she squeezed her eyes shut.

When the door opened, she ran outside to the curb as her whole body wrenched in spasm. Out it all came, a sliver of beef, peas, cherries. From the corner of her eye, she saw the couple from the elevator look at her with distaste before driving off in a chauffeured limousine.

Fifth Avenue was curiously deserted and a stillness seemed to have enveloped the city. Springtime smells wafted across from Central Park. Everything was lush and green under the lamplights and the soft park paths beckoned, but she stayed on the safe side, passing the tall buildings guarded by officious-looking doormen. At 96th Street she waited at a red light. So

quiet was the street, she could hear the tick tock of the mechanism that changed the lights.

When it turned green she began to cross. A violent contraction ripped through her body immobilizing her midway, until cars honked at her angrily and she struggled to the other side. Blinded by pain, and not quite knowing why, she kept walking, fast and faster through the dark night until, a street later, she was jolted sharply again, doubling up as pain pierced through her like serrated knives. Suddenly a big gush of water burst out and covered her legs and shoes. *Ob God, not here. Not now.* “Taxi, taxi,” she cried, barely able to lift her arm, but they were all full or had their OFF DUTY signs lit as they whizzed by.

The whole city was deserted, transformed into a Southern town after a lynching. Should she return to Mrs. Contini’s? Life within her kicked in protest. In the distance everything had a surrealist quality; a canopy fluttered as the wind rustled the trees. At her wedding, so many rabbinical relatives were present that four of them had been honored with a pole of the canopy to hold. This canopy, however, was standing unaided. There was something significant about it, but what could it be? Up above a few faint stars were visible in the sky, a rarity in New York City.

Taking her shawl, she stuffed it between her legs, trying to absorb the still oozing amniotic fluids. Knees jammed together, she crept slowly along, even as she once walked down the aisle keeping time to the beat of the wedding march. Each square of cement was a whole city block. Slow and slower she inched her way forward, feeling her mother and father supporting each arm and her sister and brothers and their smiling faces at the end of the aisle. And Shlomo’s face—solemn and expectant under the canopy. Shooting pains in her legs further delayed her progress. After twenty one cement squares, she stopped short.

There in front of her was the blue and white canopy of her hospital. Mt. Sinai, she’d reached Mt. Sinai.

The lobby was empty; strewn magazines and candy wrappers on chairs and couches testified to the life there shortly before. Now a big silent void faced Sarah again, broken only by the ticking of a large clock. The receptionist—who a sign identified as Miss Nichols—was busy inserting a cord at the switchboard, and did not see Sarah cross the lobby to stand panting uncertainly at the counter. “Na, the big rush’s over,” she said into her mouth-piece, “the place is deader’n a doornail—”

As a strangled groan escaped from Sarah, the receptionist swiveled around to stare at her through thick-lensed glasses. “Where’s your suitcase? Didn’t the doctor tell you to have a suitcase ready?”

Sarah stared at her uncomprehendingly.

“You speak English—*Habla ingles?*”

“Yes,” Sarah replied, finding her voice, “but I was walking—”

Miss Nichols lifted an eyebrow. “For Chrissake, you walked to the hospital?”

“We-ell, I didn’t expect to, but—”

“Where’s your husband?”

“He’s in Europe.”

Up went the eyebrow again. “Didn’t you let him know?”

Sarah’s lips trembled. “We-ell he’s in France...he’s traveling right now.”

“How about your parents?”

“There’s only my mother, and she lives in Canada.”

“Don’t you want to phone her?”

“I can’t phone her because she doesn’t answer the phone on the Sabbath.”

“Not even when you’re having a baby?”

“Look, Miss Nichols,” Sarah cried, water trickling down her legs, “how would she know if the phone rang what it was for? She’d think it was a wrong number and wouldn’t answer. One mustn’t desecrate...” A stabbing pain in her vitals. “Look—”

“Now SEE HERE,” Miss Nichols cried, as a burst of green viscous fluid burst from Sarah’s mouth to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, “I just can’t—”

“Take it easy, for Chrissakes. I’ll have to get the maintenance people and they won’t like it a bit.” She rang the button repeatedly but there was no answer. “Damn, they’re never where they’re supposed to be.” She inserted another cord and received an immediate response. “Dr. Bader, please come to the lobby.” She listened to the doctor’s protests as a light began to flash on the board. “Look, somebody has to come—” She quickly unplugged and replugged a cord over the flashing light. “Hello...yes, I know Mike, but I had Dr. Bader on the other wire. I’ve got a big mess up here. For Chrissakes, get up here on the double.”

While the clock loudly ticked and then chimed eleven times, Sarah resignedly stood rooted in the same spot. She was almost surprised when a bespectacled intern placed her on a wheelchair, helped her fill out the hospi-



tal admission form, called her doctor, and carted her away.

From across the room came the sound of steady moaning like a distant Greek chorus. Sarah tried not to listen. She lay down carefully on her side, happy at the thought that she would soon be able to change from this one position. And happy to say goodbye permanently to those soaking clothes and cutting brassiere.

The shot of Demerol was just what she had needed. God was in his heaven; all was right with her world. School was out. *No more teachers, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks.* She was lying on a beach enjoying the first hot sun of summer.

The wall clock tensed up and then struck two. She could hear two nurses conversing, words floating by. *Yes, it's over...they're gone now...finito...imagine a Jewish judge—and a rabbi is comforting him...court Jews...Uncle Hymies, you mean, both of them.*

From the distance, a black wave approached Sarah. At first it didn't even seem the wave was meant for her but, as it came closer, she saw, too late, it was heading directly her way and she went under. Her belly tensed and hardened. Engulfed in blackness, she somersaulted twice over in the violent convulsion. Down went sunglasses and sunhat.

"Breathe," one of the nurses said, patting her shoulder.

*Breathe? Underwater?*

Then the wave receded, leaving her awash on shore, taking long gulps of air and grateful to roll over back to her interrupted reverie.

Shlomo was looking at her over his eyeglasses in that professorial way she loved, and all around, as far as the eye could see, mountains stood guard. She stretched her arms overhead and lay sideways, letting her legs drag in the cool blue waters of Brant Lake, straining her face to

the sun like a plant.

A hawk flew over suddenly and created a shadow across the sun. The bird kept circling directly in the sun's path and, with a shiver, Sarah tried to row the boat away. The hawk anticipated her every movement and she turned to Shlomo for help, but he was no longer there.

A crack of thunder exploded right on top of her; waves tossed the boat high, capsizing it. Unable to hold on any longer, she went into the pain.

A voice in her ear said, "Breathe as you were taught to do. Breathe as you were taught."

Although she tried the short breaths through the mouth trick, her lungs would not obey, and she screamed as two plastic-gloved fingers plunged into her nether regions.

"Hold on there, hold on there," the nurse whispered. "It isn't time yet."

Time? What did that mean? The Sabbath wasn't over?

As the first rays of morning sun glinted through the pitcher of water on the bedside table, she synchronized her breathing with the heart of the clock.

Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. She was skipping double-dutch. *Two hundred, two hundred and two, two hundred and four...* And she wasn't even out of breath. She could skip longer than anyone, floating high above in slow motion. Like a reverse telescope she watched her friends get small and smaller. The smoke curled out of chimney stacks from the tops of houses below and dissolved in

**Why was she pointing that big finger at her? A manicured finger with a certain stiffness in the joints which suggested that while the hand could still claw, it could no longer caress.**

air. Nobody could get near her now. Higher and higher she soared, leaving earthly contamination behind her.

From afar she saw her best friend Anne offering her some chocolate fudge cake and she joined her. Scooping a large piece, she ate slowly, savoring every morsel, leaving the icing for last. Grain by grain, she played with the icing on her tongue and let it slowly melt in her mouth. Total deliciousness. Another piece? She knew she shouldn't, but what the hell, why not?

Because it wasn't the same, that's why not. It was bitter. The vibrations in the room had changed too. Anne had changed. She was dragging her by the sleeve to the front parlor and hitting her. Why? What had she done? Anne, Anne...

But it wasn't Anne. It was Mrs. Contini with a long switchboard cord in her hand. Her brother David was cowering guiltily in the corner and on the floor the ormolu clock was smashed into pieces and ticking spasmodically. Why was she pointing that big finger at her? A manicured finger with a certain stiffness in the joints which suggested that while the hand could still claw, it could no longer caress.

"I didn't do it, I didn't do it," she screamed. Down came the cord with a stinging blow on her back. "I didn't do it," she sobbed, wishing she had so she could confess and have done with it.

Mrs. Contini came toward her again, but now she was her old self again. Instead of a cord, she held a towel and mopped the sweat from her forehead. "I didn't do it," she cried. "I swear I didn't..."

"There, there now," she whispered near her ear. The nurse was big and friendly and when she smiled, Sarah saw the flesh inside her mouth was rosy and dewy. She reminded her of her mother as she stroked her cheek. Sarah rubbed her face against the soft down of her arm. "It's hard work, child. That's why it's called being in labor. You have to push, push, push hard. Let the baby go free. You have to give it all you've got." With her rubber gloved hand she again probed into Sarah's body. "Y'gotta work hard, Sarah. As hard as you've ever done in your life."

A bolt of fear shot through her. "But it's the Sabbath—I can't work on the Sabbath. Don't make me. It's a sin...a—"

"Nonsense, my child. It's not a sin. On the contrary, it's a *mitzvab*."

She was in true labor now. But apparently this kind of labor was permitted. This was an act of God. Strange world where you can't get insurance for acts of God yet could for acts of Man. Yes, it was a *mitzvab*—a credit in His holy ledger in which all our deeds were recorded. But you could never know for sure. Even when you were positive, along came a different rabbi with a differing interpretation. As soon as you were sure of something, the rule always changed. All those exceptions in Hebrew. The feminine became masculine and masculine became feminine and when it came to the plural, forget it. No logic applied as to which did what to whom or why.

She was sitting in the torture chamber known as Hebrew School. How she hated not being able to be out playing like the other kids, especially now that the days were getting shorter and soon it would be winter. But no, they were studying Genesis again. God had created the earth and heaven in six days and the seventh day was to be a day of rest. Mr. Shkop kept look-



ing at her for some reason. A day of rest. “Right, Sarah?” She nodded her head but a familiar pain had knotted her stomach. Now he was talking about Cain and Abel. The mark of Cain is really not a bad thing. It was misinterpreted. In fact, whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. Mr. Shkop raised a fist. Seven-fold...do you understand? Cain was a penitent sinner. A

prodigal son, you might say.

Sarah’s hand shot up. They like when you ask questions. “Mr. Shkop,” she paused, her heart jumping as all eyes turned toward her in the now silent room. “If God likes a penitent so much, why should people be good all their lives?”

Silence greeted her. She smiled tentatively at Rosie and Dinah and Anne, but they turned stony backs to her. She had gone too far. She hadn’t meant it the way it sounded. It reminded her of the way David could always twist the meaning of her words and get her into trouble.

Mr. Shkop’s dark eyes enlarged. Sarah knew that look when his neck and face turned beet purple. Banging on his desk violently, he shoved his chair back with a jagged scraping sound. “Sarah, come here.”

Afraid to look at him, she squinted her eyes. Mr. Shkop was in a courtroom dressed in black judicial robes and waved a ruler at her. She didn’t want him to hit her over her hands with it as he once had done. The other time her hand shook with fright but he caught it and held it firmly. The ruler had come down full force over her knuckles and the tingling pain in her burning hand had remained for days. She could feel it now.

But it wasn’t a ruler he held—it was a gavel, and would hurt even more. She tried to put her hands behind her back, but two guards were lift-

ing her on a bed with wheels and pushing her down a corridor.

She wanted to scream *Ob God...my God...Help me*, but the pain was too intense and she had no will power. Suddenly she was lifted under a searing white eyeball. Her feet were strapped into stirrups as the two guards stretched her apart.

They’re going to tear me apart—limb from limb. Crack me open clear down the middle. Mr. Shkop had once broken an apple in two just like that. His teeth had dug into the juicy pulp and then he spat out the seeds. A scream rent the air, as though every particle of flesh had joined in the effort, but Sarah did not realize it came from her. A ticking tocking machine had forced her back to primeval times and she babbled uncontrollably, the pain so fierce it was no longer pain but persistent electric shock waves administered somewhere in the center of that knotted mound.

She pushed so hard a roar went up, hurting her throat and chest and nose and ears until it was all out. All out, all blessedly out as blackness came to meet her and she was tumbling down a mountainside, down, down, down through green shoots and fields of clover and tumbling daisies and clusters of grapes and sounds of cooing birds and running waterfalls and dappled sunlight. The last rays of the Sabbath sun spread over the forest as she landed on soft downy earth.

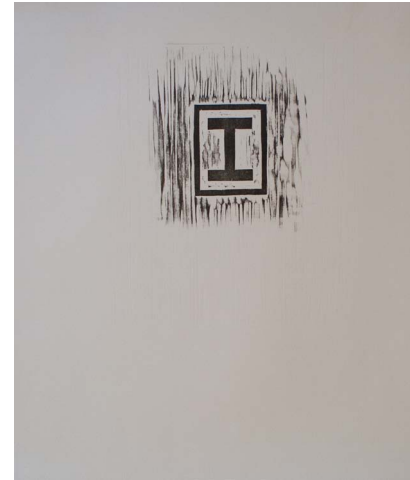
Somebody was trying to tell her something. Sarah could feel tugging on her arm but she didn’t want to wake just yet. “Can you hear? Can you hear me, Mother? Look at your lovely boy.”

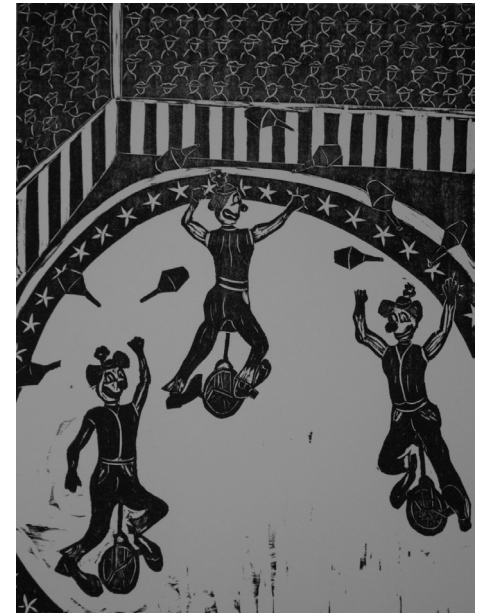
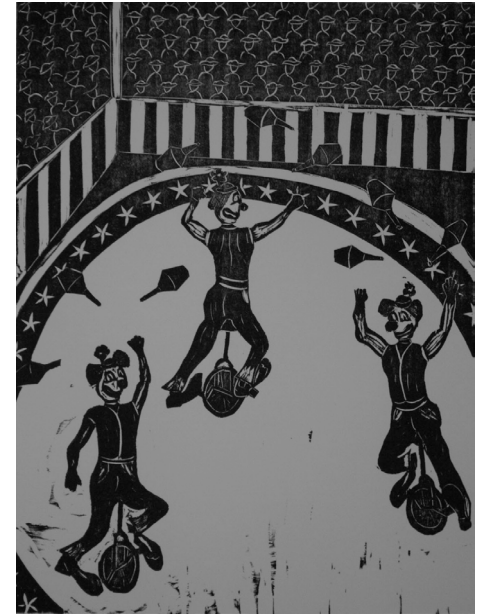
*Mother?* Mother wasn’t here. Tears scalded her eyes as with a burst she realized who this mother was. She could hear them very well but could not get up the strength to reply. Instead, she made a circle of okay with her thumb and forefinger. From somewhere a long way off, she could hear the cry of a baby and felt the warm weight of her *mitzvah* in the crook of her arm.

# The Clown Genocide: a novel in woodcuts



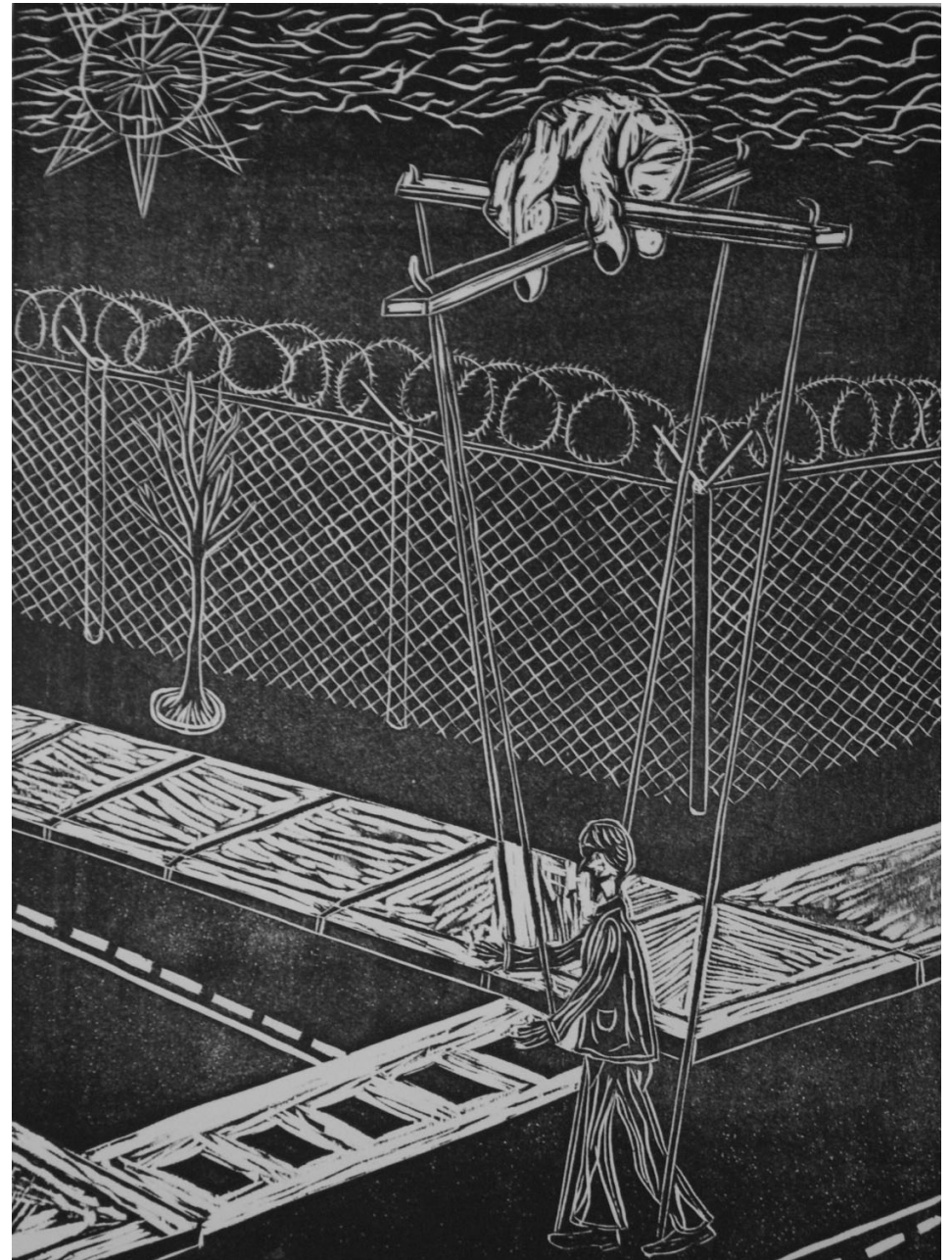
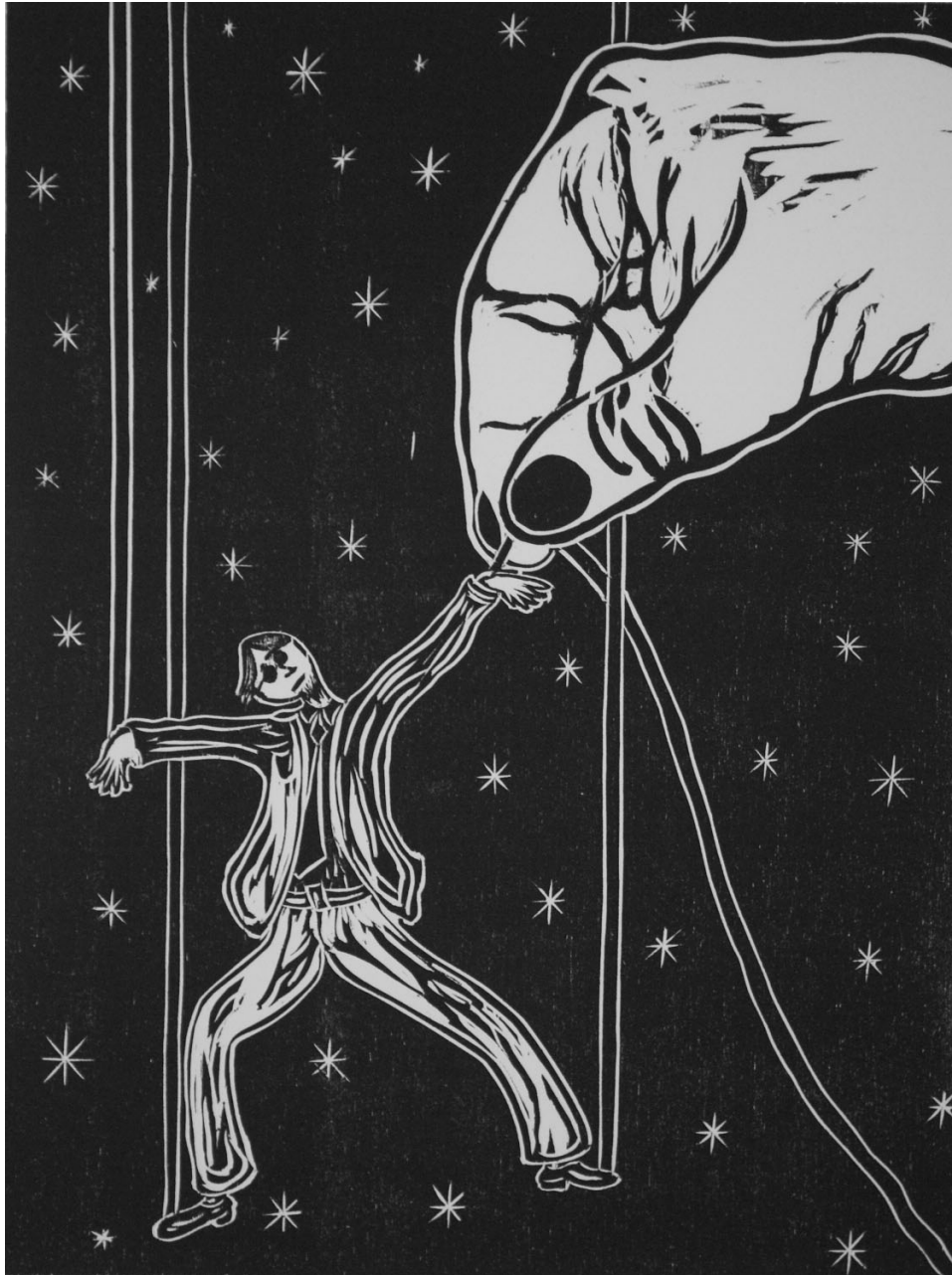
Billy Simms

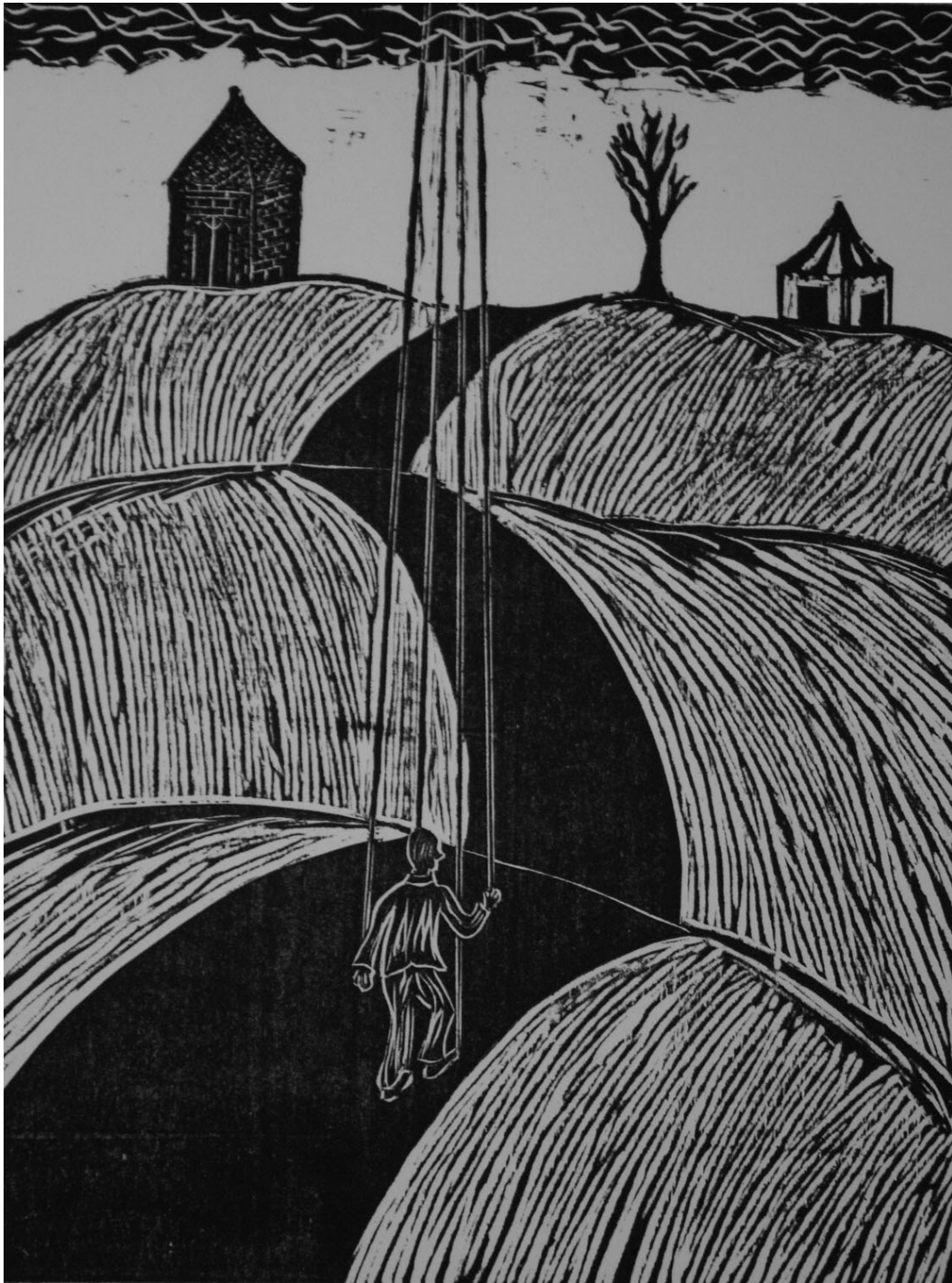


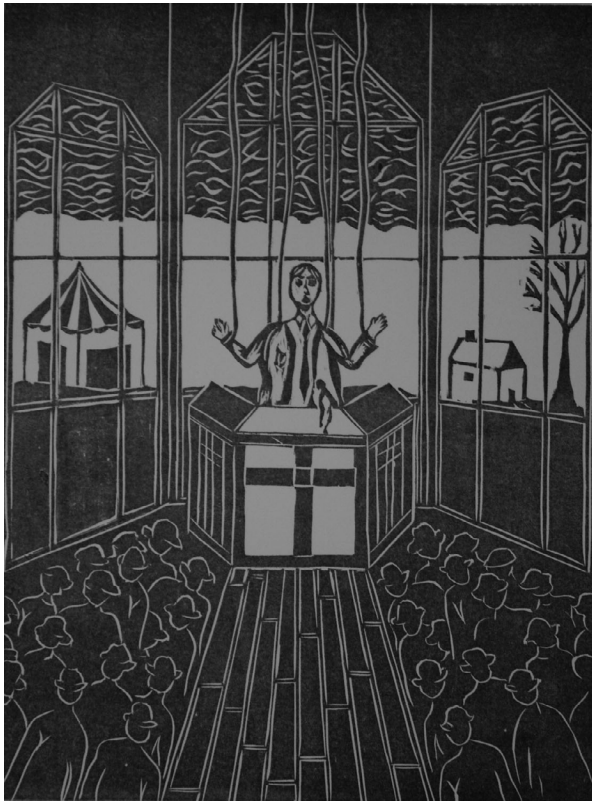


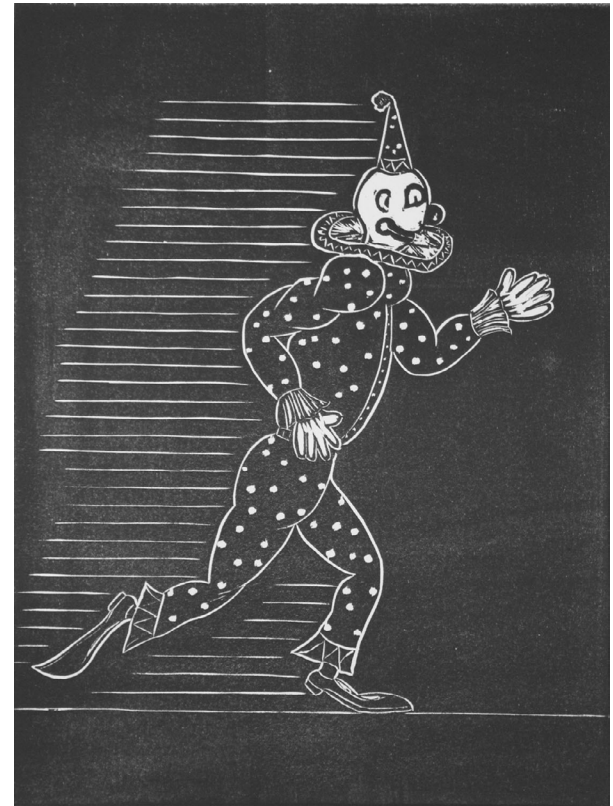
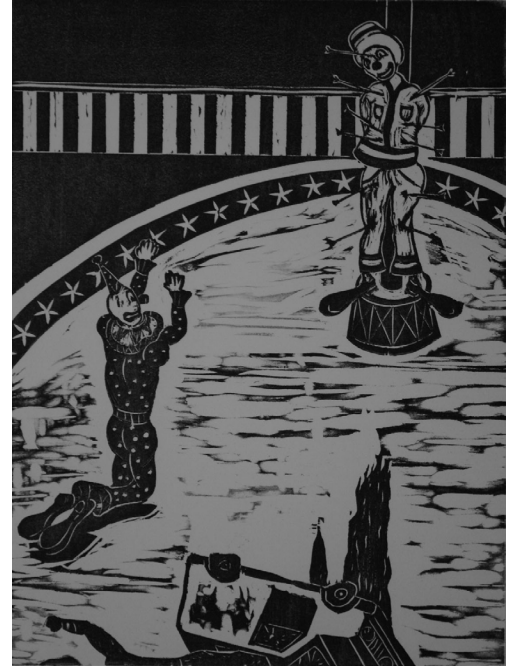
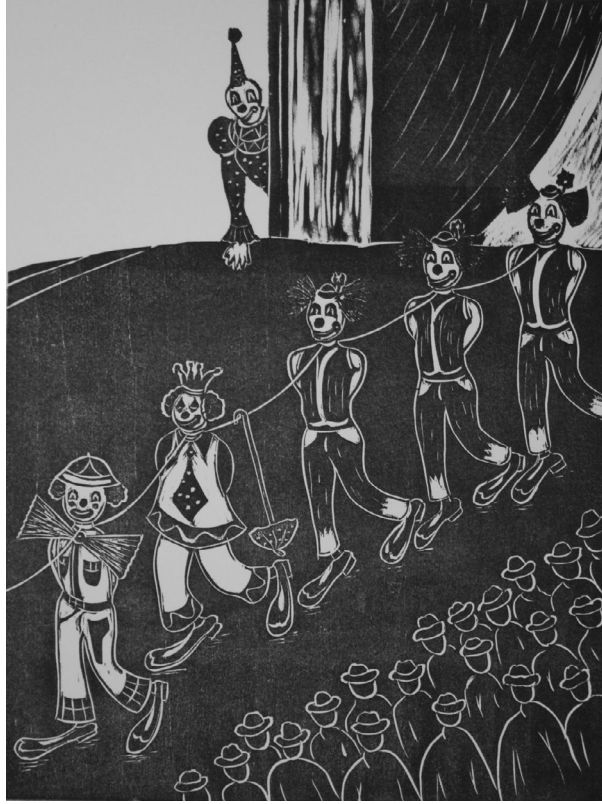


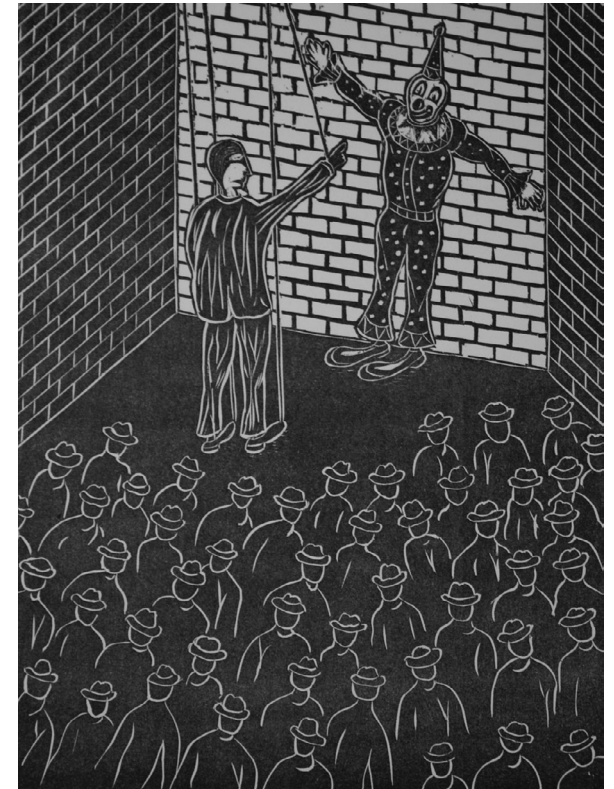
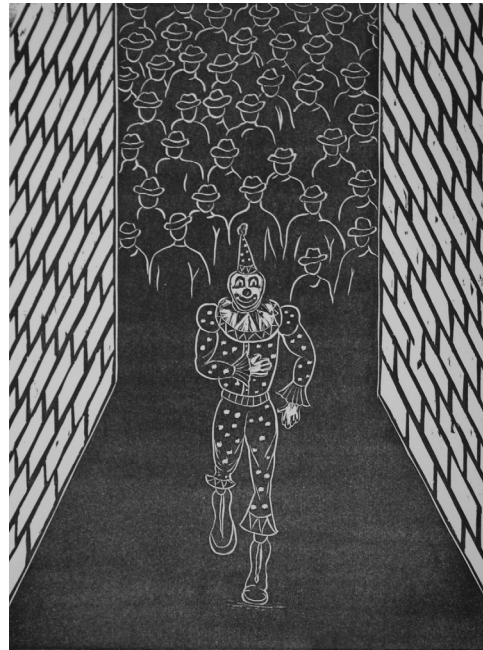
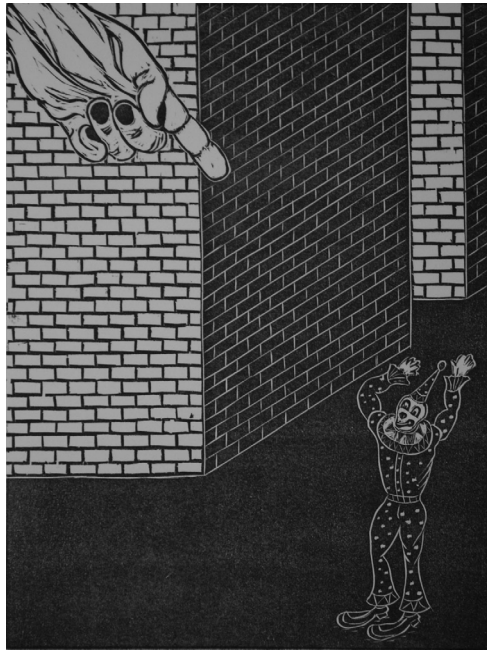
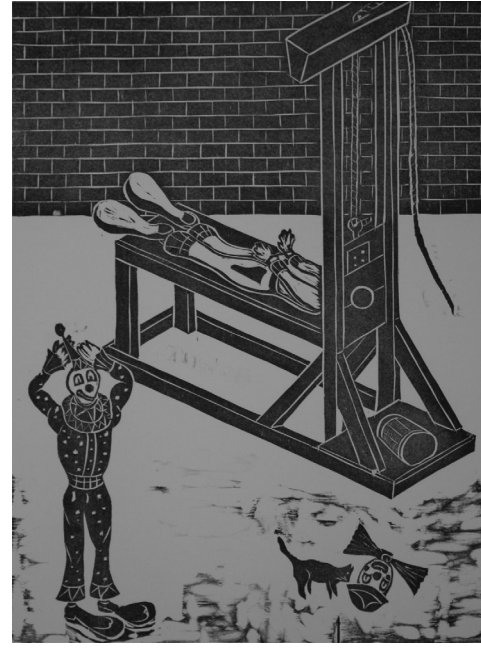
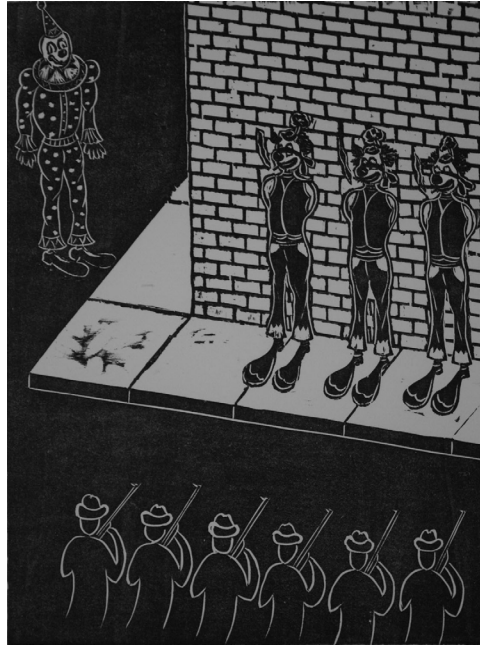
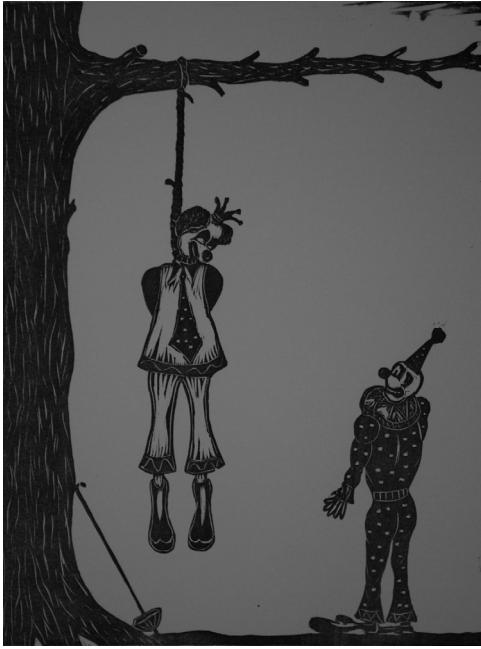


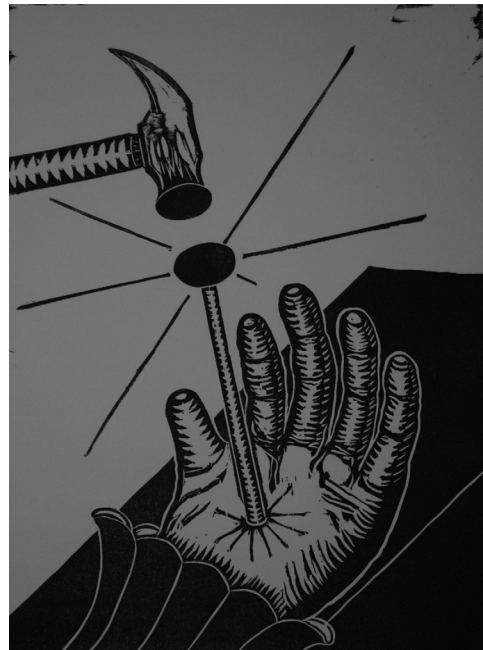
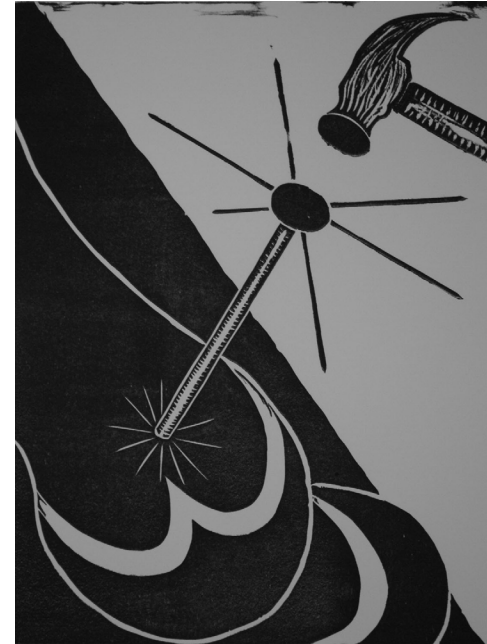


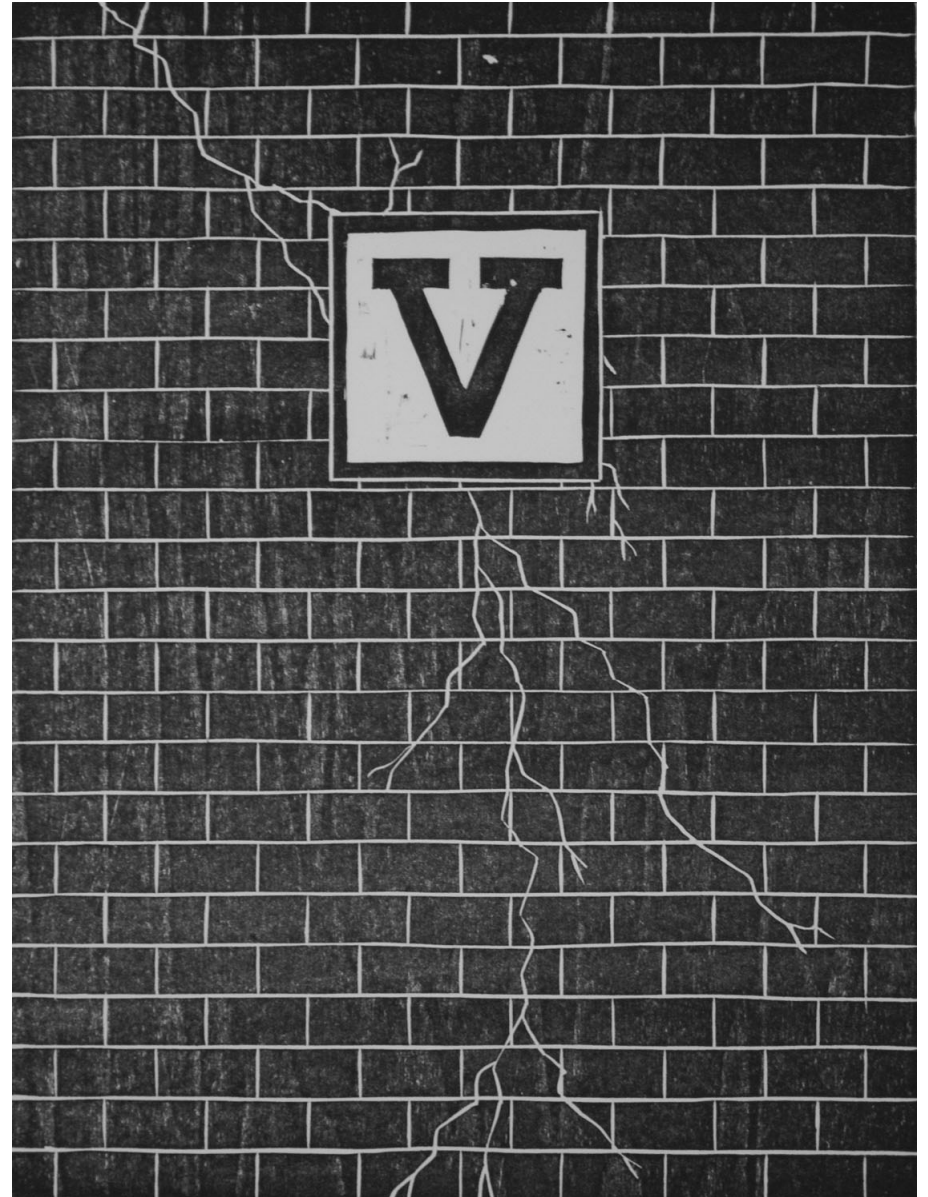


















# The Retention Device

by *Emily Zasada*

1.

It was winter in Minneapolis; a warm gust of tropical air came pouring across the park behind me. I waited at the crosswalk for the light to change. My head hurt again, but that was nothing unusual. I used to optimistically say that my headache was coming or going, but lately I'd come to the conclusion that I needed to face the truth: this was just one long, endless headache.

All I could think about was the ratty pharmaceutical coupon at the bottom of my purse. I'd won it on eBay, paid too much for it in the heat of an irrational bidding war, my fingers trembling on my touchpad as I typed in one set of numbers, deleted them, typed in another set, the value of them no longer making any sense.

And then I won, but the actual price of it – the price I was paying – settled in as I completed the auction. I typed in my government-issued pharmaceutical ID and wondered what I was thinking, bidding so much. Then again, I had other motivations as well. The person I was bidding against, damn them, lived in Maryland, and I wouldn't let them have this too!

I lived in Maryland once. All of that was gone now, along with quite a chunk of the East Coast.

Now, weeks after I won it and after it arrived in the decrepit mail, delivered by someone who looked like a heroin addict and who asked me if I had any diet soda (I said no), it no longer mattered what it cost. The way I was feeling at the moment, I would have gladly signed over my next paycheck to buy one if I hadn't had this one already.

I'd left my pills at home. My headache started when I was driving down the freeway. I could feel it moving in with increasing force as if it were pressing towards me through the windshield. As strange as it sounds, I appreciated the pain. It was so complete that it blocked out everything else, like how I felt about this job, or Joe, or our future together, or the future of everything, really.

As I was thinking and waiting for the light, I watched the construction project across the street next to the skyscraper where I worked. A few large, silver bolts fell from the scaffolding and crashed through the fronds of

a palm tree. The silver bolts weren't there long. Two of the giant squirrels, the new kind, materialized from the shadows behind a parked bulldozer. They were chattering away to one another in that raspy manner these new squirrels had, like three-pack-a-day smokers. They raced out, grabbed the bolts in their paws, and sat there for a moment in the warm sun, spinning them around and sniffing them. A mother walking with a stroller stopped when she saw them, and carefully turned the stroller around. I didn't blame her. I'd seen the stories on the news about the squirrels too. They were as big as cats; some were even bigger.

2.

Somehow, in spite of my headache, and in spite of the tremendous crashing and pounding that reverberated from the construction site next door, I managed to write two reports that morning. They were both analyses on the market position of two different divisions of the Company. In both cases the competition was fierce, margins low, and prospects dim. I had no recommendations at this point other than to cut costs.

Working for a corporation was certainly nothing like I thought it would be. I expected working light bulbs, carpets that didn't smell like mold, and to have my desk's drawers close correctly. I had none of these things. I did have a paycheck.

When I'd started working there, everything seemed strange, apathetic; it was an innocuous chaos: from the flickering bulbs and the forms to the sad stacks of outdated technology in the dark basement. But a mere three months later, it was becoming normal. Just that morning I didn't even stop to think before I rattled the door to the office supplies closet so the rats knew I was coming.

They say they are all like this now. You would never know these were separate companies once. They all contracted one another's goals and vision statements now, like communicable colds back and forth. They all use the same ads, but just swap out the words—it's futile anyway. Trust me; no one pays attention to advertising anymore, its allure tarnished by outdated ubiquitous banality.

I'd only been working there for three months, and while I knew there was a pharmacy somewhere inside the skyscraper because Miles had told me so, I had no idea where it was. I tried to ping Miles three times but never got an answer. No matter how much I kept swiping back to my instant messaging app and staring at that screen, all I saw was my cursor blinking at me softly.

I really didn't want to ask anyone else. I didn't want any uncomfortable questions. My headaches are my own dark secret. Offices these days like to perform collective diagnoses. We all knew none of us were paid enough to see real doctors. That would be all I needed, to catch vague murmurings about brain tumors from behind me in the kitchen when all I wanted to do was microwave my lunch.

So I was on my own. I was pretty sure he said it was only open during lunch. But at what time? Noon? One?

In the lobby there are no maps, no guides, and no list of offices. The Company cannot afford security and discourages wandering. They have cameras up near the ceiling to show that they're serious. I don't blame

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This is something else I've learned about working for a corporation. You'll sign your name until it doesn't look familiar anymore. Until it looks like a scrawled scribble detached from meaning, like the graffiti on a long freight train.

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them; if their competitors could see how decrepit many of these offices have become, the shabbiness of its divisions, they would all be collectively grinning and moving in for the kill. All of these giant companies are fraying at the edges; it's just the way it is these days.

I took a guess and headed for the thirty-eighth floor. The elevator creaked and gasped up the worn cables

and track. The Company had its own healthcare coupon division on this floor, but it was doing terribly. I knew this because I'd written up an analysis just last week.

The floor looked even worse than the one my office was on; the carpets were a dingy orange, and the walls were the flattest, dullest white I'd ever seen, as if the walls sat there all day eating light. There was a faint smell of mildew everywhere, and the sound – faint, but unmistakable – of dripping from behind one of the walls.

But I was in luck; the pharmacy was there. My coupon only covered the tiniest fraction of the cost. Normally I would have done mail-order, which is what the coupon was really meant for, but orders disappeared that way sometimes.

I held onto the counter and agreed to everything I was supposed to agree to: the exorbitant costs, the disclaimers. "I'll sign anything I need to

sign," I said.

There is something else I've learned about working for a corporation. You'll sign your name until it doesn't look familiar anymore, until it looks like a scrawled scribble detached from meaning, like the graffiti on a long freight train

I loved these pills because they worked immediately. I could feel the pain lifting even before I pushed the elevator button.

I thought I heard a curious whirring somewhere up near the ceiling. Like a bee, maybe, or a fly. They were bigger these days too. I instinctively ducked, but didn't see anything as I looked around—only the cameras, which seemed to be pointed at a different angle than before.

Then, behind me, one of the six elevator doors opened. The light above it wasn't working as if it had burned out. No surprise there.

Almost as soon as I got on the elevator, I realized I hadn't been on it before. I knew because it had an extravagant red carpet, the plush kind; it was squishing pleasantly under my shoes.

My hand was hovering in the place where the button to third floor should have been when I realized that it wasn't there. In its place was a smooth metal panel. There was nothing on that elevator wall except for the obligatory notice about the maximum number of occupants.

Worry started to zap through me. How was it possible that I was in an elevator without buttons?

I turned around and took a deep breath. There were buttons there, small ones, in a recessed panel. One read "42R" and the other simply read "G." I looked at my watch, hesitated, and looked at the button for 42R.

Oh, why not, I thought. As if I had a choice!

But I pretended that I did, and pressed the button.

3.

The first thing I noticed was the sunlight. It was flowing, unfettered, in long diagonal streams.

The second thing I noticed was the sense that I was floating. Without thinking about it, I took a step back and felt like I was about to fall.

Once I was able to focus, I saw what appeared to be a catwalk just outside the elevator. I stepped out on it, and that was when I saw people

suspended from the ceiling: bodies lifelessly hanging, rotating slowly in a long wide oval far above the ground.

There had to be forty, maybe fifty. At first, I felt cold all over. I thought they might be dead. But no, almost right away I saw a couple of them shifting a little, saw their chests subtly rise and fall as they coasted close by. Sleeping, then—not dead.

They were strapped into what looked like a leather harness that attached to the ceiling by two long metal chains like a swing. They were all suspended by some kind of metal track; the ceiling at the very top of the skyscraper was too far away to see exactly what was there. The very tops of the chains disappeared into shadows. The noise was cacophonous: a constant squealing and grinding from the machinery as it moved around, echoing off the concrete walls.

There was nothing but those concrete walls and empty space. This giant open area was, I realized, probably a full quarter of the entire skyscraper. Who knew that this was here?

Then I realized, just to my left, a line of people standing on the catwalk. No one was talking. They were all watching, entranced as the sleeping people swayed by one after another; limp bodies suspended from their chains, the machinery rattling and emitting squeals hard and bright.

I watched them too. They were several feet above where I was standing. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I began to make out their faces.

I didn't recognize most of them; thousands of people work for the Company, but I did recognize one or two. They looked different with their suits and dresses wrinkled; their eyes closed and their heads gently tilted to the side.

I heard footsteps just as I saw a person swinging gently in front

of me, sound asleep and rotating along with the others. It was Miles. His head leaned forward on his chest, and he had a small smile on his face as he passed through one of the long warm beams of light that pierced through the empty gloom. His feet and legs were so close that I almost could have touched him. I was on the verge of saying his name despite feeling that I wasn't supposed to. I felt I wasn't supposed to say anything at all. But I couldn't help it and nearly called to him when I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder.



I'd seen her around before, the woman who touched my shoulder. She motioned to follow her over to a table. I didn't know which office she worked in, but I'd passed her in the hall many times.

I followed her, conscious the entire time of Miles drifting past the line of people on the catwalk, back towards a shadowy corner where the sun probably never reached.

There was a folding table there, the cheap kind with fake wood veneer that you can get at any of the big box discount stores. I noticed that the ends of its wobbly legs sat on neat little blocks of wood that had been placed on top of the catwalk. The woman was sifting through a stack of papers in front of her and handed one to me. There was nothing else on the table except a touchpad and an official-looking radio, the kind you talk into. It was hissing intermittently, gently, as if it were breathing.

The form had an alarming number of pages, too many to count. The machinery screamed behind me as I stood and tried to make sense of the words in tiny print. The word "Non-Disclosure" was on the top of every page in bold print, and I saw my name strewn throughout the document. "Liability" was another word mentioned over and over.

The woman wore glasses that were reflecting white rectangles of the windows across from us, so I couldn't see her eyes. I could tell from the way she leaned across the table, watching me, that she wasn't very patient. Finally, she grabbed the form from me, flipped to the last page, and tapped the very bottom where the signature line was.

"What is this all about?" I whispered.

Immediately, she put a finger up to her lips, and then she pointed forcefully at the signature line.

I looked behind me. There was Miles, rotating back. He was budging slightly, shifting, his eyes still closed. I looked closely and noticed that other people were moving minutely too. Legs were swinging gently; heads were tilting forward or back, bodies adjusting to an external force. Clothes rustled softly like sleepless sheets at night.

The woman was writing something on a piece of scrap paper, scribbling with a small pencil that looked gnawed. Then she turned it around, slid it across the table to face me: YOU CAN REVIEW IT LATER. IN YOUR PERSONAL PORTAL. SIGN NOW.

I've thought about this a lot since—why I signed. I think it had to do with that sentence. It gave all of this a comforting official aura. Whatever this was, the Company was behind it.

It was strange here – and I couldn't say I liked any of it – yet I felt that I belonged. When I walked outside those days, nothing was familiar. I never knew what to expect with the weather; the sky always looked strange.

But at work, I started to feel I understood the flow of my days; it was safe and predictable. Sometimes it was boring and other times just terrible, but already I felt like I belonged here more than my own home.

Then Miles slowly rotated past on his hollow axis once again. He was so familiar yet not all at the same time. Whatever this was, I remember thinking, if Miles is a part of it, then it must be okay.

So I signed.

She reached into a cardboard box under the table, pulled out an unlabeled bottle of pills, and handed them to me. She did this slowly so that they wouldn't rattle.

Even the pills, I thought, are supposed to be quiet. After I signed, she pointed to the line of people, and I went to the back of it obediently just

like everyone else, holding the pills still in my hand.

As I stood there, I studied how all of this worked. I discovered that the catwalk branched off to a tall metal staircase that ended at an open platform. Gradually, one by one, the people in the swings were waking up. Stirring, they picked up their heads as their eyes crept open. They blinked and rubbed them a little. Upon waking, they held up one finger as if they were signaling for a cab.

I moved up in the line enough so that I was able to see what happened next. Each subsequent person at the top of the steps grabbed a long metal hook hanging on a pole. Then they reached out, put the hook around the leather harness, and were pulled in by an invisible impetus. Each person unstrapped themselves from the harness when they awoke and handed it to the next person. Immediately, that person would take a pill out of the little plastic bottle they were carrying, strap themselves into the harness, and swing back out and start moving in the long wide oval. They would sway back and forth for a while until the swing was settled by gravitational force. It seemed they had only enough time to tuck the little pill bottle into a small pocket in the side of the harness, then they fell asleep immediately.

I noticed that the movement of the swings and the harnesses automatically slowed down just as someone got off and someone else got on. But still, I worried: what if I wasn't fast enough?

Why was I agreeing to do this at all?

Miles was now all the way across from me in this giant space, far away. As I watched, he floated through a wide pale swath of sun before melding into shadow.

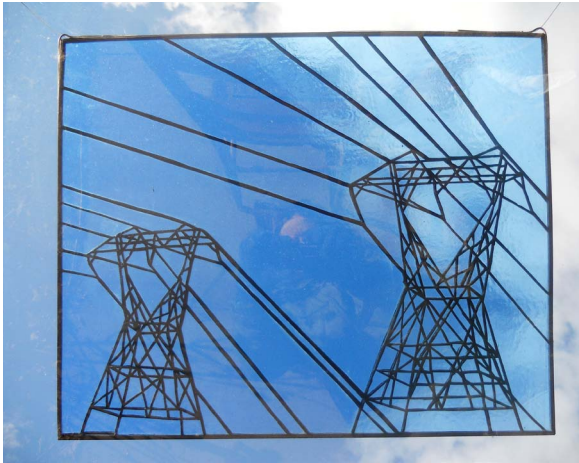
"I'll help you," a voice behind me whispered.

I turned around. I recognized her. I knew she was an executive of some kind. I'd even talked to her during my first week of orientation, seen her around with a tall man with droopy eyes who always wore a suit. I thought they might be a couple. Probably not married; people hardly got married anymore. Once health insurance vanished, marriage vanished too.

Maybe those things still exist somewhere else in another dimension. A land populated by things like veils, tuxedos and free pills for all.

She was one of the few people who seemed curious about me, but I was unsure why. She was wearing a rose-colored suit and held a pair of matching heels in her hand to avoid getting stuck in the metal gridded floor.

I nodded but was uncertain. Did I want help? Why was I here?



I looked around and saw that the few people I did recognize were all senior management. Everyone seemed to treat this as something normal that they would be doing, as if this were no different than waiting in line at the subway, or waiting at a bus stop. They looked indifferent and bored.

I remember thinking there was something hypnotic about that: the boredom. Whenever a thing acquires the lusterless film of the everyday: how strange can it be? She showed me how to use the hook when a middle-aged man signaled to us while yawning and stretching his legs. It was easier than I thought. The harness fell apart when you twisted a knob that looked like a deadbolt on a door. It only took a few seconds.

"Don't forget the pill." the woman in the rose-colored suit whispered to me, just as I swung off the platform. I wasn't going to forget. Those few seconds when I swung away were horrifying. The ground was much farther away than I would have ever thought. All I could see below me were bright empty sunbeams. Beneath that—darkness. Outside the window, the sun was brilliant. Clouds floated by fast, with that new look they had these days, like they might grow even brighter and explode.

I took the pill.

I dreamt every time that I did this. Much like regular dreams, I couldn't recall exactly what happened or in what order. However, these weren't entirely like regular dreams. For one, I was still partially aware of my surroundings; when I passed through the sun, I could feel it, warm and pleasant, but distant; as if I were watching someone else, imagining what it felt like to be that person at that particular moment. I was aware, but remotely, of the squealing, groaning machinery far above me and other sounds too: maybe footsteps or the faint thud of a shoe falling to the floor below. Then

there was always the cacophony from the construction site outside; off-beat, energetic crashes and thumps.

Nothing seemed completely real, like it was happening to someone else completely removed from my life.

The dreams felt real. I can't remember all of them exactly afterwards, but during they were vivid and sharp. More vivid than reality.

I do remember a lot about that first dream. I dreamt that I was on the Eastern Shore just the way it used to be before the oceans rose and everything along the coast sunk and was gone for good. I dreamt I was on the very top of a tall hotel, one with a skating rink on top of the roof. I knew that I could fly, so I did. I pushed off lightly with my feet and was floating over the ocean. I learned how to turn my body so that I could sink down at angles and then go up again. The sun was in my hair and eyes as I went towards the sky, and then I discovered how to descend, fast, so I was able to skim over the ground, inches from the sand. I could even smell the salt air and hear the waves as they crashed just below me.

It was the most perfect dream I'd ever had.

When I woke up, I didn't know how long I'd been asleep. It could have been years, or days, any time at all.

Later I learned that it was just about twenty minutes, and was always about twenty minutes. That was how long the drug lasted. It ticked inside all of us like an efficient little clock.

The dream hung around me for a while, as if I were walking in the middle of some bright, lovely cloud. I got off the platform and made my way down the other side of the steps, the hard shine of the metal gradually coming more into focus along with the rest of it. The line, the sleeping people, the rows of windows extending up as high as I could see—I remembered that Miles had been here, just like me.

On my way back to the elevator, I searched each face I could see. But Miles was already gone.

4.

Long ago, I went to college with Miles. He was my best friend. At the time, he had another girlfriend, and I had another boyfriend, and I think that we both liked it that way. We were glad that our relationship wasn't complicated by any romantic drama.

Around the time the lawns withered and the suburbs stopped re-

sembling the destination that was planted in many of our heads as the place we were “supposed to go,” all those conventional romantic ideas people had about relationships just seemed to die along with the grass. We began to long for the practical, rather than the unreachable. Love turned into the equivalent of pulling into fast food restaurants and ordering the first thing on the menu

I noticed because I did it too. For me, that was Joe. I guess for Miles, that was Lisa. I don't know Lisa very well, though now that we live in Minneapolis, I see her every night on the news. She always looks perfect and hopeful. Joe's mother loves her, because she's in the market for that kind of hope. If you want to know the truth, the fact that Joe's mother likes her makes me dislike her, but there's no one on the planet I could say this to, so I don't. And, anyway, she could be all Miles ever wanted.

5.

When I got back to my desk, I didn't feel like I'd been sleeping. That same glittery clarity that had been in my dream while I was flying, hung around for several hours. I looked around me and wondered if everyone knew, if everyone at this company had done the same thing that I had. I wanted to ask someone, but I remembered the silence up on the catwalk, and the form that repeatedly mentioned nondisclosure and liability. Some forms could be taken seriously, and others less so. Since I didn't know what kind of form I signed, it would be better not to ask anyone, for now.

Except for Miles, I thought. I could trust Miles. Who else did I have to trust?

Besides, now that I was back at my desk, it all had an aura of illusion. Maybe the whole thing was some kind of side effect brought on by the headache I'd had earlier, some after-the-fact hallucination. Maybe, I thought, if that's really the case, I shouldn't ask Miles after all. In case none of it was real.

But I didn't feel as if it were related to my headache. In fact, I hadn't felt so great in as long as I can remember—certainly not since I'd moved to Minnesota. I was perfectly focused on everything that I was doing and managed to get five reports done before the end of the day. I was so focused, in fact, that I didn't notice how late it was until I eventually looked up and saw that the sky outside the windows was just starting to darken; purses and travel mugs had disappeared from the desks all around me, just as if someone had snuck in with an eraser and rubbed them all away. Even the banging from the construction project next door had finally stopped.

I uploaded the reports I'd completed to my personal portal, and saw that I had new messages. Some were about upcoming assignments, but one simply had today's date.

I opened it and there it was: the agreement that I'd signed earlier that day up on the catwalk. Evidence that it actually happened, that it wasn't a hallucination after all.

I scrolled through, reading it. As I did, all those pleasant feelings of focus and clarity flew away, off into the stale recycled air. The agreement was specific: I was not to talk about this with anyone. If I did, it would result in termination.

There were other consequences as well. As I read the next section, I began to feel completely cold. The font was different in this section and was a slightly different color. It dangled awkwardly in the middle of the page as if it had maybe been copied and pasted from somewhere else. I realized, it was prepared especially for me, for my situation. It stated that if I ever discussed what they referred to as the “retention device,” that the Company would submit an order to the national healthcare coupon system to have my government-issued pharmaceutical ID blocked. In other words, I would lose the right to buy healthcare coupons from any source, ever again. If that were the case, I would have headache after headache but never be able to do a thing about the pain.

6.

At home, Joe's mother, Eloise, had closed all the windows, but I opened them during dinner. After all, it was seventy-five degrees out, with a warm breeze, and closing the window was going to accomplish nothing. I wanted to tell her that you can't pretend winters into existence, but I haven't said anything like that to her yet. She was angry with me, but she was trying to be polite and hide it, like she always did.

Joe took her side, of course. He always does. If I'd known that before we'd moved here, I don't think I would have come.

It made me sad as I thought of home. I could have cried, thinking about what I'd lost. But what would that have helped? All it would bring me was another headache.

I'd made a stir fry dinner with tempeh and frozen vegetables, and Eloise looked pointedly at both of us as she moved the tempeh over to the side of the plate and ate only the vegetables. The kitchen felt like a closed cardboard box, and the parakeets were chirping in the fading light. I could feel Joe shooting me glances, but I ignored him. I liked tempeh, damn it. If I

was going to be the one who was expected to do the cooking, I was going to make what I liked.

I could feel the beginnings of another headache creeping in, but it was early. Usually the pills lasted a full twenty-four hours. For once, though, I was actually grateful to get one of my headaches. It gave me an excuse to go upstairs and close the door and throw open all of the windows, and let all the strange air pour in.

I fell asleep early, but before I did, I checked my tablet. Still no response from Miles, and now it had been more than ten hours since I'd pinged him.

There was, however, an email from Lisa, his girlfriend. She wanted to follow up on what she'd promised me and Joe that she would do ever since we moved to Minneapolis: invite us to dinner on Sunday.

The next morning a time floated up in my portal, in my reminder box. There was no event attached to it, but I knew what it meant.

I told myself all morning I wasn't going back, yet I found myself back in that elevator again. And when I was on the catwalk, I realized that I couldn't wait for the line to move faster. When I finally strapped myself into the harness and took the pill and swung into that wide, empty space and fell asleep, I dreamt once more that I was flying. I loved every second of it.

While I was up there, a huge storm raged outside. Even while I was dreaming, I was aware of the rain pouring against the windows in grey sheets, and the crashing and pounding of that construction project below. Occasionally, I could feel a drop on my head, or on my arm, even while I was flying.

When I got back to my desk, I noticed that I left an orange smear on some papers I had touched. At first, I couldn't figure it out.

It was a long time later when I remembered how the raindrops fell on me in the middle of my dream. And I realized it was rust.

In the car that weekend on our way to Miles' and Lisa's house, Joe turned the radio on. I immediately turned it off. All the music is awful here. Actually, I suppose it's awful everywhere. But here the awfulness seems more profound.

After a long silence, Joe said: "I don't know what to expect. Besides, I haven't been keeping up too much with the news."

I glanced at him. He was neatly put together, as if someone had unfolded him and taken him out of a box.

"Lisa just reads the news, you know. It isn't as if you need to impress her; she's hardly a real journalist."

"Now we'll have to have them over for dinner," he said, twisting his hands on the steering wheel. The sun was sinking behind the city to our west. The sky was pink and puffy; it looked infected.

"We used to do that kind of thing all the time back in Maryland." I pointed out.

"I know. There's my mother now. You know she isn't always feeling well. It's just hard to plan something like that."

"I know." I looked out the window.

This is the kind of conversation we're having these days.

7.

Lisa and Miles' house was beautiful and seemed new. The deck was glassed in, the way all the new ones were, because of the squirrels. I suppose the bugs, too, although I don't like to think about those. Everything was shiny—the glasses, the polished wood floors, and even Lisa. Miles, however, looked like himself, which was comforting.

I kept glancing at him the whole evening, but he rarely looked back at me.

At dinner, the fish we were having was one of the new kinds, made practically from scratch. I'd read that the scientists had left the fins on when they designed them—more for show than anything else. These kinds of fish really didn't need to swim, or do anything, except grow.

"It was raised on French cheese," Lisa said proudly, as if she'd handed the fish herself. "That's what the package said. This way, you can get the taste of Brie, and your Omega 3's at the same time. The broccoli was from an underground farm in Uruguay."

"It's wonderful," Joe said.

I tried to think of something to say, but I couldn't.

Miles was sitting right next to me, carefully slicing up his fish.

"I forget that these don't really have bones anymore," he said.

"Well, there are a few," Lisa said. "Something has to keep them



together.”

After dinner, Lisa asked Miles to bring up a couple more bottles of wine from the basement. She said that maybe he should bring us with him, that we might like to see it.

“The basement is so interesting,” she explained, “because that's the original part of the house. All of this was rebuilt after a tornado came through, took down half of the houses around the lake. We bought it right

Model: Bethany Rand



after that. What a deal!”

She lowered her voice, glanced behind her, out the window.

“A shame, what happened to the owners, that's the only thing.”

“What happened to them?” Joe asked.

We were in their living room and Lisa was, disconcertingly, also on the TV that was the size of a large window, her head at least ten sizes larger than her real life head. She was replaying a recorded news story she'd been telling us about, about a fire in a skyscraper across town, but what she actually wanted to show us was the size of the new building next to it, a giant hothouse for engineered vegetables. When the TV version of Lisa smiled, I guessed that my entire hand was the size of one of her teeth.

“Oh” Lisa started, and then frowned, “nothing good. You know, it's really a coincidence; I covered that story. Well, sort of a coincidence; I mean, after that, I knew in the back of my mind that the house, what was left of it, was up for sale...”

She trailed off, staring straight at her own giant face, paused and floating there on the screen, smiling brilliantly.

“They died, of course. They didn't find them for weeks; no one expected them to be so far away. They crashed right through the roofs of some of those old abandoned buildings downtown. No one knows what to do about those. They're such a problem!”

She hit the play button again.

“Oh, look,” she said, taking the remote and pausing and zooming in on the building. “See that big thing right there, next to the window? That's a tomato!” I looked around while Lisa and Joe were staring at the TV. Miles had already left the room.

This is my chance, I thought. I got up and followed him.

It took a few minutes, but I finally found Miles in an unfinished room in the basement.

“Hey there,” he said. I tried to read his expression when he saw me, but I got the impression that he was making his expression deliberately unreadable.

“White or red?” he asked.

We were standing below a bare bulb, one of the ultra-efficient kinds. It gave off the thinnest yellow glow you could imagine, as if it were casting off a watered down layer of paint. Whenever either of us moved, giant shadows rippled like monsters across the cinderblock walls.

Even though I was trying to focus on the things I wanted to ask Miles, I couldn't help but think about the dead owners of the house. How not that long ago they used to come down there too, to pull out something to defrost or out of storage. All the normal boring things that people go down to their basements to do, the kind of normal boring things we all do when we don't know the future. They would never have pictured that they and the entire top level of their house – all the familiar things like the windows they looked out of every day and the couches they sat on at night and even the dishes in their cabinets would just get blown away – and that they would wind up dead in an abandoned department store downtown.

They could have never pictured someone like me or Miles standing in their place.

That feeling I've had, of not really belonging anywhere anymore. It was the strongest there that it had ever been. It was so strong that I felt as if I were made out of nothing more than sparks and dust, and that I would blow away at any second too.

Suddenly, I was really upset. I hadn't expected to feel this way, now that it was just me and Miles, but I did.

I asked him if he had been avoiding me.

Miles blinked at me, holding the bottles of wine against his shirt. In this dim light I could see the little creases by his eyes more clearly than ever. They reminded me of time, and made me sad.

"There have just been a lot of things going on," he said. "A lot of things that I'm not supposed to talk about."

I laughed, stared up at the ceiling.

"Yeah, I just signed one of those agreements for those things that I'm not supposed to talk about too. I'm starting to learn *all about* those things that I'm not supposed to talk about. You do realize that I know, right? About—"

I hesitated. I didn't even know how to refer to it: the catwalk, the flying.

Miles looked down. His eyelashes caught the light and looked, for a moment, like tiny golden spider legs.

"I know that you know," he said.

He glanced behind me, towards the stairs.

He said he didn't want to talk about it there. The way he looked at me, and then back at the stairs, I realized he meant that he didn't want to take the chance that Lisa would overhear.

I thought I understood a little better then. Although, looking back, did I? I was probably just relieved that Miles had said anything to me at all. But at the time, I remember thinking that, really, what did I know, about any of this? I didn't know a thing. I may as well have been trying to guess the mysteries of life.

Then Miles reached out and lightly brushed my arm with his hand.

"But, you know, I'm the one who got you this job. I guess I have been avoiding you, and it isn't fair."

He asked me to meet him in the park the next day, when I got off work around four.

I hadn't known that he knew when I got off work. It wasn't much, I guess, but I didn't know until then that I was waiting for any acknowledgement from Miles at all, something to make me feel like I still mattered to him in some way.

That was all it took.

And maybe, looking back, he had calculated that.

8.

I was in meetings all the next morning and into the afternoon, but when I got back to my desk, I started keeping an eye on the time. There's a regular clock there, an old one, which someone put on a pole in the middle of the room. Most of the day all you could hear was the noise coming from the construction site outside, but on the few occasions when they paused,



Model: Bethany Rand

you could hear the soft lurching click of the hands as they moved around the dial.

When I could hear it, it was all I was aware of. All I wanted was for the end of the day to get there and to see Miles walking towards me from across the park.

Whatever they were working on outside was going up so fast now that there was barely any light left in the office at all. It had gotten like this gradually; at a meeting a few days ago I realized that we were all squinting at one another through the gloom. At one point, I dropped a pen and it was too dark under the table to find it.

It must have been about two o'clock when I realized that if it weren't for the light from my touchpad, I'd barely be able to see anything on my desk. Someone volunteered to go down to the office supplies area in the basement and find some lamps. When that person came back we realized there weren't enough plugs, so a coworker that I'd never talked to before, Annabelle, volunteered to go down to find some extension cords.

I was in the middle of instant messaging with yet another person about that report I'd written when Annabelle brought an extension cord over to my desk. I thanked her, only half aware of her standing there, when I took the extension cord.

That was when I looked down and noticed she didn't have any shoes. She was just wearing a thin pair of black socks, covered in dust. From the basement, I thought, remembering what it was like. I'd only been down there once and it was hard to see, but it looked as if the Company had been tossing random things down there for years.

She saw me looking and our eyes met.

And then she asked, in a whisper: "Do you fly, too?"

I don't know what I would have done if we hadn't heard the crash that came next. Would I have said anything?

I think that, maybe, I would have said that I did fly. But I'll never know.

I don't think I had a second of doubt about what it was. And from the look on her face I don't think that Annabelle did either. It was through the walls and somewhat muffled, but I could tell that we both knew what direction it was coming from.

I thought of how the chains attaching the harnesses had been shaking that morning, how loud the machinery had sounded.

I thought of Miles. And maybe it sounds crazy, but I just knew. Maybe it was the same way that we used to have conversations and guess at one another's thoughts before we said them, back when we were really friends, back before we had this sad adult relationship that was suspended within the shell of something that looked like friendship on the surface, but wasn't. Maybe it had something to do with that.

While Annabelle and I were looking at one another, just looking, trying not to have our expressions change, everyone had rushed over to the window, but of course, what could you see? There was a wall there now, covered in tinted windows, shiny and dark. Everyone seemed to think that there was an accident at the construction site. Everyone seemed to think that was what was wrong.

Within a few minutes there was shouting behind my desk in the hall, followed by even more shouting. Some people sounded excited, as they'd just seen a parade go by.

The tall man with the droopy eyes – the one who I thought was in a relationship with the executive who had helped me that first day on the catwalk – appeared behind me. He was looking at a watch on his wrist when he walked in, and then he glanced over at Annabelle and me.

He straightened the sleeves of his suit.

"Fire," he said mildly.

"I'm sorry?"

"There's a fire in the building." He said this in a way that implied he didn't quite believe it. He kept glancing behind him, at the people pouring into the elevators and stairwells down the hall.

"I don't smell smoke," I said. I didn't believe a thing he was saying. But that was when I looked at him closer, and I saw tears in his eyes.

"I know," he said smiling gently, "but you all have to leave anyway. I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you."

He hesitated and said: "But the loudspeaker system hasn't worked in years."

9.

I knew that Miles wasn't going to show up, but I waited in the park

anyway. I waited as the sun sunk lower in the sky and the shadows from the magnolias grew longer.

After some time, I gave up and went home.

10.

Since then, I occasionally dream of flying, but it's always the same dream.

In it, I'm inside the skyscraper, in the secret part that you would never know is there. Everyone is strapped into their harnesses, sleeping, slowly spinning.

That is, everyone but me. I'm hovering, hummingbird-like, through the long slanted rays of sun, the sun – so far – that hasn't changed because humans haven't figured out yet how to ruin that too. The sun is warm on my face as I glide through the air and hover there, directly in front of Miles. He is sound asleep but I love just being near him, looking at his familiar face.

I keep pace with him as he moves slowly around the oval. I know the people on the catwalk are watching me, but I don't care. Because I know what is about to happen, to all of these people, and that's why I'm here. They look so beautiful, so vulnerable when they're sleeping. They seem to look more similar, somehow. You don't have the sparkle of their expressions to catch your eye. I remain in front of Miles but I look at all of them, one after another, the ones that are near, and the ones that are far away. I'm filled with such feelings of tenderness for them.

Just before it happens, I wrap my arms around Miles and feel his warmth, and sense that he's vaguely aware of me too, deep within his dream. I know that if I hold him, I will fall, just like everyone else, but I'm prepared for that. In my dream, I understand—there is really no other way for this to end.

# Living in Dark Houses

by Joe Ponepinto

Michael Gale was fifteen when he went down to the basement, took a rifle from the rack and brought it upstairs. He loaded a .30-06 caliber shell and took careful aim at his father, who rose from the easy chair in which he was sitting, pointed a drunken finger and ordered him to drop the gun. It was the middle of a humid Long Island summer. Michael Gale betrayed no rage. He said nothing, offered no explanation as he shot his father in the heart. When he saw his father was dead, he went out to the front steps, sat on the cool concrete and waited for someone to notice. Two hours later, when the police came, he was still sitting there with the gun beside him and a spot of blood on his finger where he had touched the wound. When the cops asked him if he'd done it, he said yes, and when they asked him why, he said because it had to be done.

The meticulousness of the act, the cold-bloodedness, despite the fact it appeared unplanned, perplexed the doctors, but as they studied him they learned the abuse to which Michael Gale and his mother had been subjected, the years of beatings and deprivations under the constant threat of worse punishments should they try to leave or seek help.

I knew Michael before the shooting – that is, I knew of him – and I knew him after, when he was returned to school after two years away. The rumors – the source of almost all information in high school is rumor – said that he'd been in a federal prison, occupying a cell with a Mafia hit man who was so impressed by Michael's detachment that he shared his professional secrets and gave him a contact for his capo for when he got out. What, then, was he doing back among us, shuffling through Ronkonkoma High's hallways like a specter on his way to social studies?

The other kids avoided him, even the jocks, their bravado about being able to take him notwithstanding, but I was drawn to him, to that aura of recalcitrance, his lack of regret. At lunch break he did not eat, but stood outside on the kickball asphalt looking at the sky as though pondering the clouds, or considering other worlds. There was always a teacher watching him. I'd seen him in the hallways when I was a freshman, but we never spoke. I put my sandwich down and walked past the rows of long tables. Everyone noticed when Michael Gale went by; no one looked up when I did. But I

would speak with him.

The bar on the cafeteria door was cold and resistant, and made a penitentiary sound when I pushed and it recoiled. Outside I saw Michael leaning against the bricks of the gym, with the heel of one foot propped on the wall, hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking very Brando, annoyed but too cool to say so. His hair was short and chopped, almost like he had cut it himself, which made him more menacing. It was fall and unseasonably cold, and the air was the kind of dry that made one's skin hurt. I could feel my lips chapping in the wind, but I didn't lick them because it would look girlish. Best not to get too close. I stopped about ten feet away, so I was sure he would know I was talking to him.

"Want this?" I turned my back to Mr. Abernathy and held out a joint I'd rolled in the boys' bathroom between periods.

Michael brought his gaze down from the sky and stared, reticent, maybe unsure of what he was seeing and hearing. "Can't do that here," he said at last.

"For later."

He put his hand out. Moving towards him felt like walking on ice, and I began to be nervous about what I looked like and who else besides the teacher might be watching. I dropped the weed into his palm. Michael slipped it into his shirt pocket and said nothing. I watched Abernathy watching us, but as long as we didn't get careless and light up there was nothing he could have seen. But once the exchange had been made I was flummoxed. What was I supposed to say now; ask him about the weather? I stared at him and he stared at something in the distance. It wasn't that he wouldn't make eye contact, he just didn't. I wasn't any more important to him than I was to the hordes in the cafeteria. I backed away, and after a minute turned and went inside, but I doubt if he noticed.

After school I waited by the gates. Michael lived on my street and could have taken the bus, but he preferred to walk, and today, so would I. I was already halfway down to a roach when he came by. He had no books on him, no supplies, and he wasn't going for the gift I'd laid on him earlier. The other walkers gave him a wide berth like fish around a shark. He was going slowly, and I caught up and then matched his pace.

"Hit?" I said.

He ignored me for a while. At a corner he stopped. "Don't walk with me," he said.

It would have been stupid to ask why, so I didn't, but I shadowed him, giving him another chance to rebuke me, which he did not take.

Instead he walked on as though I wasn't there. Michael moved without destination or purpose, like a zombie forced to roam the earth, or at least as much of it as he could before he finally had to go home for the day. I wondered what was waiting there for him. The rumors – more rumors – were that his mother never got out of bed anymore, and that a grandmother or aunt had come to run the house. Whoever was living with him was never seen outside, so any of it could have been true. He was out of place among the other kids, without an overweight book bag slung over his shoulders, without that hunched posture my classmates joked about of Egyptian slaves pulling another stone for the pyramid of learning. On top of chores and the trouble at home, I had my own studies pressing down on me, inflicting more punishment on my already painful back: a physics book, one for trig, two for English and another for history, all with reading and assignments due within a day or two, which would keep me and everyone else occupied at night, and off these streets, which I guessed was how the parents and administration wanted it.

All that and my father's anger, too, making it so much harder to focus on my studies. Mom begged me to stay with it—keep to the books as my way out. She said if I kept my grades where they were, I could at least get into the community college, where most of the kids I knew would wind up. Stay there and I had a future, she said. I had no choice anyway—if I left, my mother and sister would inherit my share of Dad's wrath.

More years of books and then a job. It didn't seem worth it. Was that the purpose of all this knowledge? I never saw this pyramid we were supposed to be building, only the unimaginative sprawl of our one-story school, surrounded by parking lots and fences, next to a dirt-scarred field that was trod year-round by the football, soccer and lacrosse teams, never left long enough to recover. All that learning supposedly going on, but no monument of knowledge I could see rising from this foundation. The Ronk hadn't changed in the three years I attended. It hadn't changed in thirty years of existence, and I knew it wasn't going to change. They'd brought Michael back to prove it.

We went on like that, the two of us walking but not really together, in silence, until we reached our street. I was ready to turn and go home, make sure my mother and sister were okay, get started on a paper, and if Dad allowed it, maybe catch a sitcom later. I stopped, but Michael kept on walking, past our turnoff, into a section of the neighborhood I hadn't ventured into since I was elementary age. I watched him for a hundred yards or so. He seemed not to diminish as he got farther away, becoming larger somehow, to

compensate for distance. I had to follow.

I tried to see it through his eyes, how he'd raised the rifle against his disbelieving father and lined up the bead on the middle of his chest. His father would be shitfaced probably – some dads always were at that time of day – but would still have the presence to know what was happening and summon the rage we were used to hearing six doors down. It was an anger that took everything personally, from a ball landing on his lawn, to a customer at work changing his mind, to a son's mistakes, and because that was how he saw it, any punishment he decided on was fitting. I remember that summer was particularly loud, and we hadn't seen Michael's mother for a long time. I heard the neighborhood moms whispering she deserved what she got, and had it coming to her for a long time. What she might have done was beyond me, but I knew from experience it didn't have to be much. You get on the wrong side of some people and every act becomes an affront, a challenge to what they see as their authority. It could be we were so used to the noise from the Gale's house that on the day of the shooting we didn't think there was anything unusual.

Did his hands shake? Did he hesitate? The newspaper story made it sound like he aimed the gun with the same indifference as if he were shooting at a tin can. The act of a severely disturbed young man, the police psychologist was quoted as saying. Detached from reality and the consequences of his actions. But just being near Michael, I knew that was all bull. I could feel the heat that flooded his brain as he debated the decision to squeeze the trigger, the heat that was still trapped inside him, no matter how cold he looked to others. He'd have been anything but detached, I was sure of that, and I sensed he was still trying to decide if he deserved the purgatory he'd cast himself into, or if, like the experts finally announced, he was not to blame but was only reacting on a subconscious, survival level, one that demanded he rescue himself and his mother from the monster that was his father.

Everything we're taught about our parents, from our first smack by the obstetrician, is that they're good and dedicated to caring for us, and that it's a sin to disobey, or not to love them back with all our hearts, because whatever they do is done from love and sacrifice. It takes a lot, an adolescence full of disappointment, before we begin to see it otherwise, to see the egos at play, the selfishness, to feel the hurt of neglect and punishment, before we understand that parents are as capable of hurting as a stranger. Maybe more so. And that's when we're able to accept the responsibility, the stigma of hating a parent. Those thoughts must have confronted Michael as

he peered down the barrel of the rifle. He wasn't just firing a bullet into his father's heart, he was taking aim at a whole system, one that gave his father, his abuser, the power of life and death over him, and from which the only way out was to revolt, reverse the violence and seize that power. But by doing so he could never be part of the system again. He usurped and abdicated all at once.

I watched Michael as he walked, and knew he was still working it over, even though there was no way now to make anything different. He went past rows of houses, every one as lifeless as the school, as though inside the families were living through the same drama as his—the exquisite threat of an icy, angry, regretful father, who saw enemies in every encounter, and who had become a conduit for, instead of a shelter from the cruelty of the world. In a back room huddled the rest of the family, petrified they might set him off. I knew it couldn't be so. There *were* happy families. I'd seen them. They came out on weekends to play. Their houses lit up in the evenings and looked warm inside. But I hadn't known them the way I knew clans like Michael's. The houses I knew were dark, a stillness punctuated by explosions of temper that echoed through the rooms and hallways. Being in one was like being a front line soldier during a war—violence was inevitable, unscheduled, unpredictable, and its possibility permeated every minute, every thought.

At the boundary to the town's commercial district, Michael stepped into Zeke's Pizza. When I caught up and looked through the window he was already sitting at a table. A waitress was delivering a couple of slices, like they'd known he was coming and knew what he wanted before he got there. He looked up at me through the glass as he took his first bite. This time he didn't seem as unfriendly as he'd been on the street. It was more like he was sad about something. I went in and signaled to Zeke for two of my own, and pointed to Michael's table. Then I went and stood across from him.

"Go ahead," he said.

I pulled out a chair and sat. It was like a movie. I was sitting down with the don, asking for a favor, wondering what I could do to gain his trust. We'd lived a few houses apart for so long, never talking before. Neither one of us was much for playing stickball or touch football in the street with the other kids, or just getting outside in general, and add in the difference in our ages and the distance was galactic.

"You been following me all the way from school," he said.

"Why do you still go?"

"I have to," he said. "If I don't they put me back in the nuthouse."

"You mean, an asylum?"

"Yeah," he said. "Don't you know I'm a crazy fuck?"

"At least you don't take no shit from the teachers. Man, I wish I could be like that." I felt stupid as soon as I said it. My whole idea had been to be Michael's pal, his equal, almost, but I sounded like a loser kissing up.

"I don't do it to be tough," he said.

I didn't get that. His ignoring the teachers was maybe the coolest thing I'd seen in my days at the Ronk. "Then why?"

"Don't care anymore."

I stared at him. I probably looked like someone's little brother, desperate for attention, but somehow it encouraged him to go on.

"I'm already fucked, so why bother?" he said. "Whatever I do don't make any difference."

"You're not fucked."

"I'm not?" he said. "I killed my old man."

"But he would have killed you, probably."

"And my mother. So what?"

"So you're alive. And she's alive. You had to do it."

Michael ignored my logic and dove into his pizza. This wasn't going where I'd wanted it to. I'd wanted to hang with him, to be his henchman in whatever scheme or adventure was next. But I realized there was no scheme. Whatever desires and plans Michael once had, they were blown away when he pulled that trigger. Maybe if I could get him to talk about it, he'd loosen up. He might dump the guilt out of his system. I looked down at the table. "How bad was it?" I said.

He finished his slices and took a gulp of Coke. Instead of using the napkins he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Don't ask me about that," he said.

I stared at him again. It seemed to be my best approach.

"They asked me about it every day for two fucking years." He said it matter-of-factly, without raising his voice.

"Did he hit you with his hands, or did he use a belt?" I asked. "The sting from leather lasts longer, if you ask me. Probably has something to do with the leverage, the length of the swing. Generates more speed."

Michael narrowed his eyes at me. He sat there for a good thirty seconds, looking at me the way a doctor examines a patient, debating whether to answer. "Everything," he said, finally. "A belt, a baseball bat, the hammer from his work bench. Everything he could think of."

I was a different person at home. There were expectations, and we

– my mother, sister and I – all tried to live up to them. It created a kind of teamwork among us, each taking a part to get something done, like cooking dinner and cleaning the dishes. This was completely different from being at school, where everything was competition. The smart kids competed with each other for the attention of the teachers. The jocks competed with each other for mating rights. Cliques held grudges against other groups, and within them each member fought every other for position in the hierarchy, like chimpanzees. Friendships seemed temporary and conditional. The only constant was the politics. We had none of that here.

At home there were procedures, and there were, of course, penalties for failure or deviation. My father liked things a certain way, and as long as we adhered we could approximate the happiness of the other families on the block, at least for a few nights out of the week. For example, he did not like to have his thoughts disturbed. If we were watching TV while he was reading the newspaper in his den, and there was a loud scene in the middle of the show, he might have been able to hear it. One of my jobs was to anticipate when these scenes might happen – and they do happen in almost every show – and turn down the volume so the interruption was inaudible. I usually kept my hand on the control, just to be safe, so it was easier to prepare myself for the offending segments. But it took something away from our enjoyment of the program. They say you can't miss what you never had, but I did, and still miss the feeling of family. Wanting that life never went away.

Not every disturbance was avoidable. My father had a list he kept tacked up to the side of the kitchen cabinets, on which were the names of the people who kept him from the success he expected, and believed he deserved. It was neat and official-looking, the names written deliberately, denying the impulse that was behind it. There were several dozen entries, and next to each was a note to remind him of what the person did. There were days when he added another name, and he told us how he would exact revenge, even if it took the rest of his life. Those were the days it was best not to watch TV at all. I really didn't think he needed the list. He would have remembered all those people and their crimes regardless.

I wondered sometimes why my name, and my mother's and sister's were not on his list, since we had offended him more than anyone. Maybe he had another list stashed away just for us. I would have liked to see it, to see if it included our offenses. I'd have liked to know just what, exactly, he had against us.

At home we didn't talk among ourselves about the punishments that were doled out, although I think I would have liked to. I was bigger

in high school, and was much more able to endure them than my sister and mother. But there was nothing I could do to ease their pain. Sometimes, in my room, I heard their whimpers when he became angry. I should have done something, but I didn't. I let them take it because I was still afraid of what he might do to me.

I couldn't help but think it was like this for Michael and his mother. That's the real reason I hounded him. I wanted to know how he got the courage. I wanted to know what would happen to him after school was over, and beyond.

The next day I cut the last class and was waiting for Michael at Zeke's. I paid for his food in advance as an excuse to sit with him again. When he arrived and saw me, he stopped at the door. I pointed to the pizza and pushed it closer to his side of the table, and he came over. But when he sat down he said, "Listen, I don't come here to talk. You want to sit here, I don't care. But don't ask me any more questions."

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**Because we are not always allowed to speak, we learn to say things in other ways.**

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We sat for a few minutes, eating, wiping the grease from Zeke's pies off our mouths. Michael squirmed. I had taken the seat that looks out the window, so that he had to sit facing the rear wall, with his back to the door, and it made him uncomfortable, as though he was afraid someone would jump him from behind. I suppose I had taken my seat to avoid the same feeling. But in a minute the silence made me edgy too, the way I felt in the minutes before my father was due home from work. I couldn't just sit there much longer.

"I need your help," I said.

"No, you don't."

"My mother needs your help. My sister."

He looked right at me and I knew he understood. But he said, "Shut up, man. Just shut up about it. What do you think I can do?"

"Tell me how."

He was an inch away from taking a bite, but he put the slice down on the plate, got up and walked out into the darkening afternoon.

There is a private language among the abused. It's not something that can be understood by those who haven't experienced the shame of their torture, how they live with it, allow it to happen—how they are, ultimately,



both the cause and the result. It is comprised of glances, postures, subtle gestures, and what isn't said communicates as much as what is. Because we are not always allowed to speak, we learn to say things in other ways. Michael and I were doing it then. He stopped a few yards outside Zeke's and reached for a smoke. From the way he was handling it I knew it was the joint. I knew then he would tell me what I was desperate to know.

I sat on a weight bench in the basement of Michael's house. There had been no one home when we entered, so I wasn't able to put the lie to any of the rumors about how he lived. He'd led me straight downstairs, not stopping to let me see the rooms upstairs, not even turning on the lights. At the bottom of the steps he pulled the strings to a couple of bare bulbs hanging from the joists, creating circles of light like those used for interrogations in the back room of a police station. Something hissed and I jumped, but it was only a leaky hot water heater. I watched as the trickle from the rusted barrel made its way into a crack in the cement floor. The gun rack was still on the wall, but it was empty, probably had been since the incident when the cops confiscated anything dangerous.

I thought he would tell me his version of the story at last, but instead he said, "Take off your shirt." Before I could ask why he had his unbuttoned, and he turned around to show me a scar that ran from his left shoulder halfway down and across his back, a rift in the topography of his flesh. He lifted his arm, and there was another line, pink and raised, a smaller ridge of mountains. He had the sinewy look of a wrestler, and maybe would have been on the squad if he'd avoided the injuries his father inflicted. Still, I could see why the jocks were afraid of him.

He moved closer while I dragged my sweatshirt over my head. My shoulder looked moldy in the yellow light, more like a fungus than a bruise. I turned a little to show him my back. The welts from my last beating were fading, but were still visible and painful. He sat down behind me on the bench and touched his fingers to the circular marks that accompanied them, as though he were reading intricate tattoos. "Sometimes he uses a cigarette," I said.

I thought he only wanted to see the evidence, to make sure my story and my motives were true, but while he was still behind me, Michael rested his head between my shoulder blades, and I could feel the soft stubble of his beard against a still sore area of skin. I let him keep it there. The pressure didn't hurt, and I began to think he had some power to cure me.

"Why is there no one else home?" I asked.

"There's no one else to be home."

"Your mother?"

He lifted his head from my back. "She left after I came home and the semester started. I don't even know where she went."

"She wouldn't forgive you."

"Would you?"

It didn't make sense. "He beat her as much as he did you," I said.

"More. He put her in the hospital. She was only back for a few days when he went after her again."

"And that's when you did it."

Michael remained quiet, and I didn't push for an answer. The details didn't really matter at this point. He moved away to the other side of the basement, as if waiting for me to follow him back upstairs. He shed no tears, displayed no anguish over the departure of his mother. He did not seem, even, to be trying to figure this aspect of his tragedy out, but had accepted the fact she was gone. I wanted to tell him to call the police, have them track her down for child abandonment, but I realized then he had been abandoned long before. This was where I might have insisted he come to my house. He could have dinner with my family, watch a little TV, stay in the spare bedroom overnight, or for a few days if he wanted. But of course that wasn't possible either.

"Do you want me to stay here?" I asked. "We could hang out, maybe talk. You wouldn't have to be here by yourself."

"What is there to talk about?" he said.

"Then we don't have to talk."

A clock chimed upstairs. I didn't have to count the bells to know it was five and getting dark, and that I hadn't begun clearing the yard of leaves. It had to be done before he got home. "If I see a leaf on that lawn, it's your ass," he'd said.

"Mom," I said aloud. I had to tell her to take Susan and get out of there. I had to run home and bring them to Michael's house where we could all be safe. But he would come. Or he would stop them before they could leave. I had to get back, right away. I wasn't going to make them take my punishment.

"I know you have to go, Tim," Michael said as I gathered my bag. He understood what was going down. His look said he would have done the same thing.

"Wait for me at Zeke's tomorrow," I said. I bolted up the stairs and

ran the six-house distance, flinging my gear into the garage and grabbing the rake. I attacked those leaves as though they were alive, like they were an army advancing on my mother and sister. But there was a breeze. A gentle thing that for someone else might invoke calm or beauty. I tried my best, but it did no good. Leaves littered the yard and were still coming in from the neighbor's. I worked until it became so dark I couldn't see, and laid the last bag at the side of the garage. He watched me finish and came at me as soon as I was done.

The gun was easy enough to obtain. The discontent at our school ran deep, and there was always someone willing to flout the law for profit, or sometimes just for fun. That made weapons and drugs common knowledge, available with the right contact and the proper amount of cash. Even the nerds would be able to get a gun, if they ever wanted to. I stashed it in my backpack, inconspicuous among the books, just another lump of learning breaking my back.

"One shot," I told Michael. "Just like you."

"And what good will it do?" he asked. "They'll hate you. You think they'll thank you for it, but they won't. You'll be like me."

Neither one of us was eating today. The four slices of pizza sat on the plates, as frigid as the weather outside.

"That was my mistake," he said. "Thinking that she cared."

"He's alone at the house," I said. "My mother and Susan are out grocery shopping. I'm going to do it." I started to get up from the booth.

"You really want to fuck up your life that much?"

"It's like you said, Michael. I'm already fucked. I guess the question is what kind of fucked do I want to be?"

"Just get away," he said. "Steal the car and drive someplace and stay there. Not this."

"I'm not doing this just for me," I said.

"Sure. That's what I thought."

So they would put me away for a while. But no one could touch me wherever it was, and Mom and Susan would be safe, even if they didn't thank me—even if they said they hated me. I could live with that more than the idea of them being hurt. And I would get used to being alone. I would be better at it than Michael. I would prefer it.

He had shown me, in his way, what I needed to know. I paid the tab over his protest, and slipped my backpack onto my shoulder, which caused

me to wince a little from my last beating. I was glad for the pain, for the encouragement it offered.

"I don't know if I'll see you again," I said, which was true but far too dramatic, and I regretted it. This wasn't the end of a movie, where the two buddies embrace each other, knowing that one of them isn't going to make it. In this scene, we didn't even shake hands.

The cold air slapped my face when I opened Zeke's door and stepped outside. This was going to be one of those unrelenting winters,



Model: Bethany Rand

where the snow and the ice started right around Thanksgiving and kept the world frozen until April. I thought about who might shovel the driveway in the coming months, and how much worse the weather would be upstate if it was going to be that bad here. I passed the houses of the neighborhood, unconcerned the families would know there was a gun in my pack, even wanting to stop and tell them about it. I wanted to say, “I’m doing this for you, too.”

My father would be my motivator, I had assumed, but all that simply drained from me as I walked. Everything became calm. There was a certain amount of pride, too—that I’d finally come to a point where I could act, that I could make things right, and that the consequences were not as important. There was no heat in my mind, like there had been in Michael’s. The debate had been put to rest, and I knew it wouldn’t haunt me in the future the way it did him.

When I got to my house I slipped around to the side door and into the garage. I started to close the door behind me, but something was blocking it. Michael pushed it open—so hard that it threw me back and I let go of the backpack. He came in and picked it up before I could, undid the zipper and pulled out the gun. “How?” I said. I hadn’t seen him following me.

He scrutinized the gun as though it were a toy, perhaps not up to the job. He flipped open the cylinder to inspect the rounds. I’d lied. I hadn’t been sure if I could do the job with one shot, like Michael, and I’d loaded all six chambers. He took out four of the bullets and threw them to the garage floor. “This is all that’s needed,” he said. Then he snapped the cylinder shut and spun it. He pointed it at me.

“Michael, you have to let me,” I said. “I have to end this.”

“It is ended,” he said.

He moved to the door that led into the house and jiggled the knob. “Open it,” he said.

I unlocked it, and he took my key. As he stepped inside he asked me where he would find my father, and I told him. Then he closed the door and locked it again. I heard him pad down the hallway to the living room, where my father was surely sitting, reading the paper and swilling a beer. Michael’s footsteps diminished and I listened harder, anticipating father’s raised voice, the rage and indignation, and dreading the eternity between the first shot and the second.

# MY LIFE IN GADGETS

# 125, 126, 127:  
MySpace, Blogger,  
and Facebook



By Nathan Holic

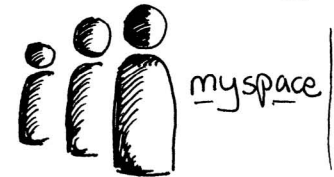
This was a few years ago now...One afternoon, I came home from work and realized that I hadn't sent or received a MySpace message or comment in ten months, and I deleted my account.



It shouldn't have been a big deal, and it wasn't, really. Just a click and it was over.



But that day, I couldn't help remembering, as I scrolled through my page one last time before its ultimate deletion...MySpace was supposed to have been permanent, a profile that I would create that would survive me, photos and comments and friend lists that would serve to forever document that I had been here...Nathan Holic...this is who I am...



No one would ever erase it. No one would ever erase me.

It sounds ridiculous now, but back then, I had high hopes for the site, fostered--no doubt--by its blazing popularity, its newness, its seemingly unrivaled utility...

For the first time ever, I could upload a photo to let all of my friends know exactly what I'd done over the weekend. And it was neither as annoying as an email forward, nor as geeky as a personal web page.



I even wrote a "blog" for the first time, something I'd sworn I would never do.

"Blog," I remember writing... "It sounds like some sort of pre-historic creature, something Godzilla would fight! Why would I ever want to be a blogger?"



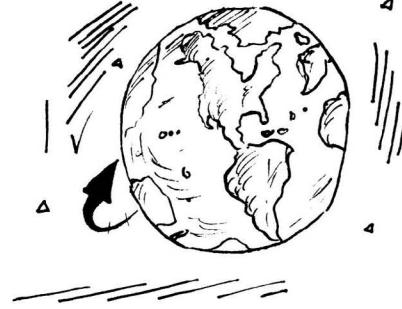
But sure enough, I was. They were simple blog entries on my MySpace page, at first. I wrote about "sarcasm as a second language" for my generation. I wrote about my friend Brandon's habit of consistently embarrassing himself...

It seemed revolutionary at the time, that I could write so much stupid crap, and all of my friends would see it, and there was my picture next to the blog, for context, and there were more pictures, and a comment board, and... *we were changing communication!*



And so, inevitably, I began to use this new power--social networking, MySpacing, blogging--to write about my lifelong Diet Coke addiction. The Diet Coke Chronicles were born.

Yes, yes. Here was the power to change the world, to unite the globe...



And I was using it--and the world--as my digital therapist, examining a Diet Coke addiction that stretched back more than a decade...



How frivolous, right? How small-minded... How Millennial.

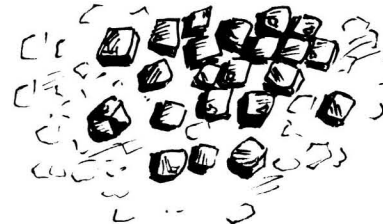
Other generations had *The Diary of Anne Frank* or *All Quiet on the Western Front*, books of consequence, books that still shape the way we view the world...



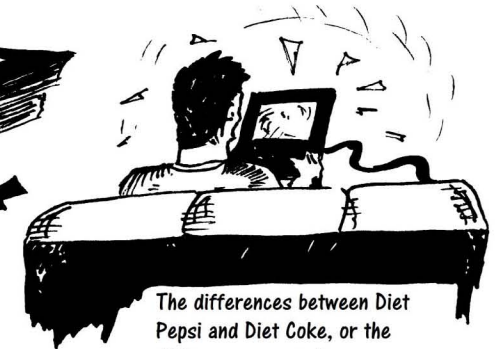
I was writing about the preferred straw size for fountain drinks--



The perfect ice-to-cola ratio--



But with the power to sit down in the evenings, type on my laptop, click a few buttons on my MySpace account, I was writing about soda--



The differences between Diet Pepsi and Diet Coke, or the differences--sometimes subtle--between plastic cups and styrofoam, between cans and bottles...



I was writing about how many ounces of Diet Coke I drank each day...



Back in 2000, Dave Eggers was publishing *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, a nonfiction/ fiction hybrid narrative that would change the direction and voice of Generation X culture.



An hour here, thirty minutes there, often while I took breaks from grading student essays, or from revising and submitting my still-unpublished novel...



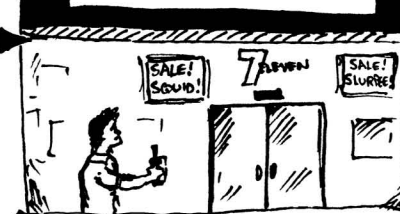
Where I went for free refills...



The strange relationships I forged with clerks and eatery employees...



And I was reporting the differences between 7-Elevens in Hawaii (while on my honeymoon) and 7-Elevens back in Florida.



Typing.



Posting.

POST

A bulletin to MySpace friends: "New Diet Coke Chronicles Blog!"

Published for the world, as easy as the click of a button.

Kurt Vonnegut defined an era of tumult, sexual revolution, disillusionment with authority and with traditional concepts of good and evil, in his sixties' era novels *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*.



John Irving defined the entire Baby Boomer Generation--the hope, the crushing failure--in *A Prayer For Owen Meany*.



Quickly, I had dozens of personal essays about Diet Coke. Hundreds of pages! Online! My frivolousness, my pointless musings, a part of my "permanent profile." This was my contribution to the world?

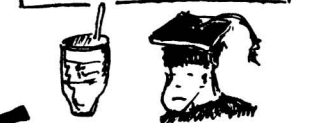
When confronted with the immensity of our silly leisure pursuits (time spent watching *Simpsons* reruns, or playing video games, or reading trashy airport novels), folks in academia tend to "academicize" those pursuits. We deep-fry our hobbies in intellectualism, in theory, in scholarship.

We justify time wasted by approving "wasting time" as an academic pursuit.

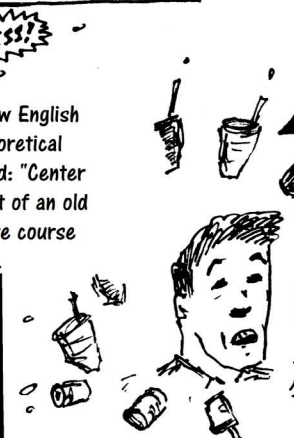


In conversation with a fellow English instructor, some highly theoretical literary words came to mind: "Center of Selfhood." Just a snippet of an old essay I'd read in a literature course dedicated to autobiography.

So I wondered...were the Diet Coke Chronicles academic?



Yes! Yes! This was my online autobiography, the story of my entire life...centered around Diet Coke.



And how perfectly appropriate for my generation, a group--an army--of young people whose very lives revolved around the comfort and stability of corporations!

In our childhoods, we develop strangely fierce loyalties to professional sports teams, irrational hatred for other cities, states, and schools...



We make choices, based upon the sparing money our parents allow us for lunch. We stand at vending machines and contemplate which snack pack will best satisfy us. We choose Cheez-Its, we cling to Frito's, we tell our friends that we can't stand regular Lay's potato chips. Allegiance to Oreo's! Enemies of Arnold's Pretzels!



There are no other choices for our generation. Who wanted to be the kid with a homemade peanut butter & jelly sandwich?

No. You wanted to buy a slice of...



Domino's Pizza!



With a can of Country Time Lemonade!



And hell, even if you had a PB&J, your mother likely declared herself a "Skippy" supporter, a "Smucker's" woman!

Nope. No getting around it. Brand names have been our battlegrounds from Day One.



Then: high school, and Gap t-shirts. Then: college, and Express pants.



Ford vs. Chevy.

Miller vs. Bud.

Nike vs. Reebok.

Mac vs. PC.

Sony vs. Samsung.

And listen, I know that there's nothing more tired than another "Evils of Corporate America" sermon.



But I'm just giving you the reality of our lives: no escape from the major brands and manufacturers, especially in food products--

So really, it's only natural that we form these loyalties--



That we attach ourselves to the Chicago Cubs--



Or Chili's--



Or Google--



That a major brand might become your "center of selfhood," that Diet Coke might become so intertwined with my daily life that it's just as important as the more necessary elements of my existence...What I have for lunch or dinner, for instance.



So, if I'd become associated with Diet Coke...if friends had grown accustomed to seeing me with a fountain drink in hand...



Why not write a blog about it?



Why not declare for future generations that I had no scarring experiences....?

I never went to war, as Oliver Stone or Tim O'Brien had. I'd never direct Platoon or write *The Things They Carried*.



I never survived genocide. I never endured slavery, or outlasted plague, or conquered an international "Depression."



Yes, you could criticize my generation for our silly corporate loyalties...

You could criticize us for riding the MySpace wave, wasting our time writing and commenting about nothing.



But what other choice did we have? This is the world that was gifted to us. MySpace! Diet Coke!

but then, a new and unforeseen brand warfare...FACEBOOK emerged.

Suddenly, my friends were taking sides. MySpace or Facebook?



Did you want an audio player, embedded videos, top friend lists? Slick new skins, movie trailers, celebrity friends?



Or did you want the simple, minimalist, seemingly anti-corporate yearbook design of facebook?



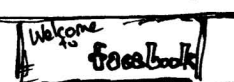
Take a side, take a side.



As with all else in my generation's short history, we declared loyalties: either you were a MySpacer, or a Facebooker.

Yes, it was the absolute height of frivolousness, an online war with no stakes. This was not a social revolution: the revolution had occurred years prior, when the average man and woman had received easy access to the internet, an easy medium to voice their minds.

This was my generation's first great battle. What would we choose? Who would we rally behind?



Slowly, carefully, I moved all of my Diet Coke blogs from MySpace to an account on Blogger.com. Neutral...like moving my government to Switzerland during war-time.



I watched as the vibrant community on MySpace dimmed. My blog views slowed. Friends disappeared.

The majority of my daily bulletins now came from major-label bands, from 20th-Century Fox, from the FX Network.



My subscribers dwindled.

I found myself typing the Diet Coke Chronicles on my Blogger page, then--out of habit, perhaps--copying and pasting it into my MySpace blog. But... there in MySpace... it didn't look right.

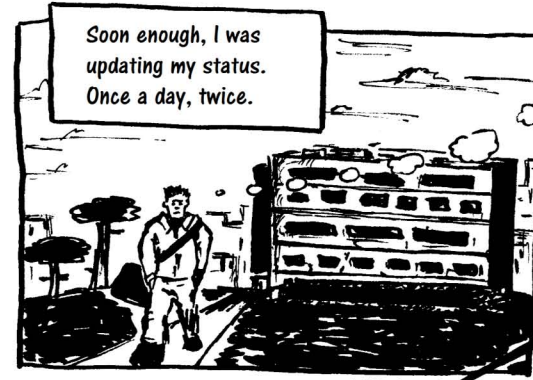
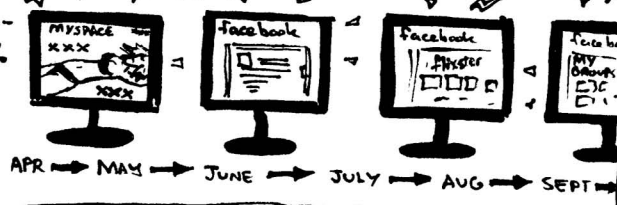
I stopped logging into MySpace for days, weeks. When I did, I found friend requests from dozens of porn sites, from as-seen-on-TV products, from former students (one of whom had the screen name, "I'm the Girl Who Givez Ur Man Wet Dreams!!!")



Meanwhile, I checked Facebook daily.

I felt clean.

Everyday, Facebook offered new features, none of which felt corporate or forced.



Soon enough, I was updating my status. Once a day, twice.



Nathan is... excited for the weekend! Nathan is... updating his status!



Nathan is...headed to Chick-Fil-A to grab a Diet Coke refill!

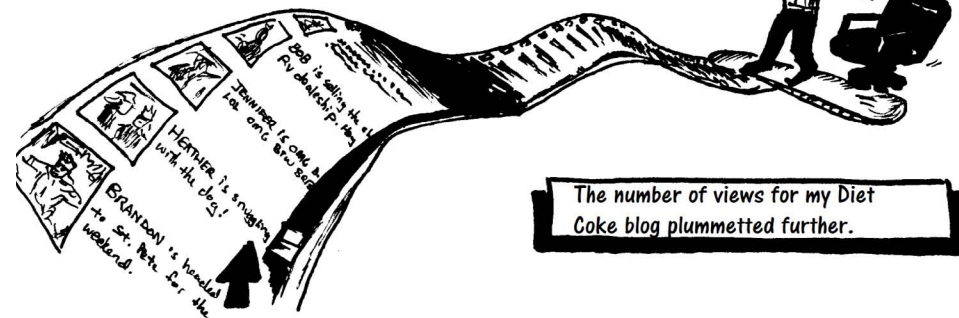
In twenty or thirty words, Facebook had allowed me to say all that was important.

- News
- Orlando
- VCF
- Photos
- Links
- Notes
- Groups

What's on your mind?

POST

MySpace bulletins were now irrelevant, replaced. Why would I click on a link to read some lengthy note when I could simply load my facebook home page and see a long list of status updates? Forty words, fifty: this was all I needed to know about the lives of the 500 people I called "friends." And fifty words: this was all they cared to know about me.



The number of views for my Diet Coke blog plummeted further.



# Search

by Michael Cocchiarale

Froggie's was a rather grim place to end a campus interview, but it was the only place outside of the cafeteria that served food, or what passed for it. I held the door for Ms. Dunbar, and we stepped inside, shoes squishing beer soaked carpet. Overhead was a poker match on TV, a row of hearts bunched up in the corner of the screen. It would be an hour until the students stumbled in, licking their lips for Hump Day specials.

The interview was officially over, and Ms. Dunbar, our applicant, had an early evening flight back to Ohio. Dennis, our considerate chair, suggested I take her out for something—the academic equivalent of a game show's "lovely parting gifts."

"Or," I said, thinking of my own obligations for the evening, "I could just drop you at the airport. Give you some time for yourself."

"No, no," Ms. Dunbar said, eyes fearless for the first time all visit. "I could really use a drink."

I laughed, and she smiled, hoping, I suppose, that this human moment might be taken into account when our department met to deliberate.

We scanned sticky plastic menus. Except for the side salad, everything was fried. "Anything you like?" I asked.

"The chicken fingers look good."

Had the interview been a success, she would have been laughing uproariously with the entire department at some upscale microbrewery in a nice part of town. She had to have known this. To her credit, Ms. Dunbar was a good sport. She was well into her thirties, and her brave face fit her like a glove.

A boy with vaguely familiar sideburns shuffled to our table. I ordered the basket of fingers and two gin and tonics.

"Were you one of my students?" I asked. He looked to me like the whimsical personification of an F.

"Maybe," the boy said, scratching an armpit. "Oceanography? I remember the Bluntnose Shiner."

"I specialize in Renaissance literature."

He laughed. "Right. That's what I was thinking of."

The boy left, and I watched Ms. Dunbar study the hanging jerseys,

the framed NASCAR posters, the infamous scrawl wall upon which students poured out their hearts, as long as they kept it clean. I was not good at small talk, especially after the morning coffee wore off.

"Your students asked such thoughtful questions," she said.

"I'm glad you thought so."

Ms. Dunbar's teaching demonstration had been a disappointment. Her curriculum vitae boasted a wealth of teaching experience: large and small schools, private and public, rural and urban. She had strong recommendations as well. Eyer, our surly Postmodernist, had "grave concerns" about her research. "Longfellow!" he cried more than once during our fall deliberations. "Longfellow!"—each time the author's name shot from his mouth with the surprise of a sneeze. The others had their reservations as well, but in a narrow vote, it was agreed that she should be one of the three to bring to campus.

At the beginning of her demonstration, Ms. Dunbar rubbed hands excitedly and said, "Today, I'm going to talk to you about a poem called *Paul Revere's Ride*. Next to me, Eyer dug a pen cap into his palms. Michael, our Norris scholar, fumed like Marcus at McTeague. Oblivious, Ms. Dunbar paced the room reading the poem, one stanza per row until she finished. To make matters worse, she just talked and talked.

"Such a good husband," she said of the poet. "Such a good man."

Then, awkward silence. Ms. Dunbar stood in front of us, anthology like a dead gull in her hands, mouth moving fruitlessly, until Jillian Wycoff, one of our best, asked if she would like a cup of water. In Ms. Dunbar's mind, Jillian must have stood for all those "thoughtful" students.

The boy with the sideburns brought our drinks, and we spent the next few minutes sighing and taking sips. I asked her about Ohio, and she said the town where she lived was small and more than a bit desperate around the edges. As a city girl, she could never get used to how dark the night became. "You look up," she said, "and if the stars aren't there it's like you've ceased to exist." I suspected she was alone—and that she was one of the many her age who thought there was a criminal for this crime.

My cell phone rang, which I thought was a mercy until I saw that it was my wife.

"I don't care, really," I said, trying to keep my voice level. That evening, we had a dinner engagement in Center City—old acquaintances from graduate school who were breezing through to see their youngest son, an Ancient History major at Penn. Sandy, the once-skittish guy I'd nursed through his dissertation, was retired already. His wife had come into serious money,

and he had been annoyingly wise with his own. In short, I wasn't keen on seeing them. My wife, however, seemed to think this was the opportunity of a lifetime and had been calling every hour with a new idea for a restaurant: White Dog, Queen of Sheba. Alma de Cuba.

"Pick and be done with it," I said.

Our food arrived in a thatched plastic basket. The fingers – five of them – were dark, gnarled, and hard. We both blinked at the food in silent dismay. Finally, I took a healthy bite of one to prove that they were edible. Ms. Dunbar nibbled another and wiped her fingers on a cocktail napkin.

We ate in silence for awhile. I thought to ask if she needed ketchup. She said she was fine. More silence. She made a comment about the poker on the TV screen, and, to say something, I said, "You gotta know when to fold them," instantly regretting it because she was sure to understand it as some cryptic comment about her professional fate. I switched to the subject of Ohio, forgetting I'd asked about it only minutes before.

"Oh, it's become a kind of home," she said. There were the small pleasures: the sprawling farmer's market, the artsy shops on Court Street, a misty morning jog along the Hocking River.

"I used to run," I said.

"Really? Why did you stop?"

I put hand to heart and made an ugly face. To my surprise, Ms. Dunbar dropped her head. My eyes were left to wander a white scar-like path of scalp. After a few moments, I asked, "Do you need—?"

"I'm sorry," she said, eyes shimmering. "I, it's just that, it's been a really long day."

I glanced at my watch. It *had* been a long day—seemed like years ago already since Ms. Dunbar finished her demonstration, years since she had been escorted by Jillian to the art gallery for the last stop on her itinerary and I dared to think there might be time for a brief nap before my dinner engagement. Eyler, though, his eyes blazing, hustled everyone into the nearest empty classroom, slammed shut the door, and declared, "No god-damn way in hell!"

"There's no reason for swearing," Donna said, rattling her bangles.

"She's someone I could see myself working with," Dennis said.

Eyler stared at him. He gave the applicant's CV a squeeze.

Julia said, "Was one lousy drink going to hurt her?" At dinner the night before, Ms. Dunbar had ordered a Diet Coke. Scowling, Julia ordered a third martini just to make a point.

"Look," Michael said. "From the beginning, I didn't like those two

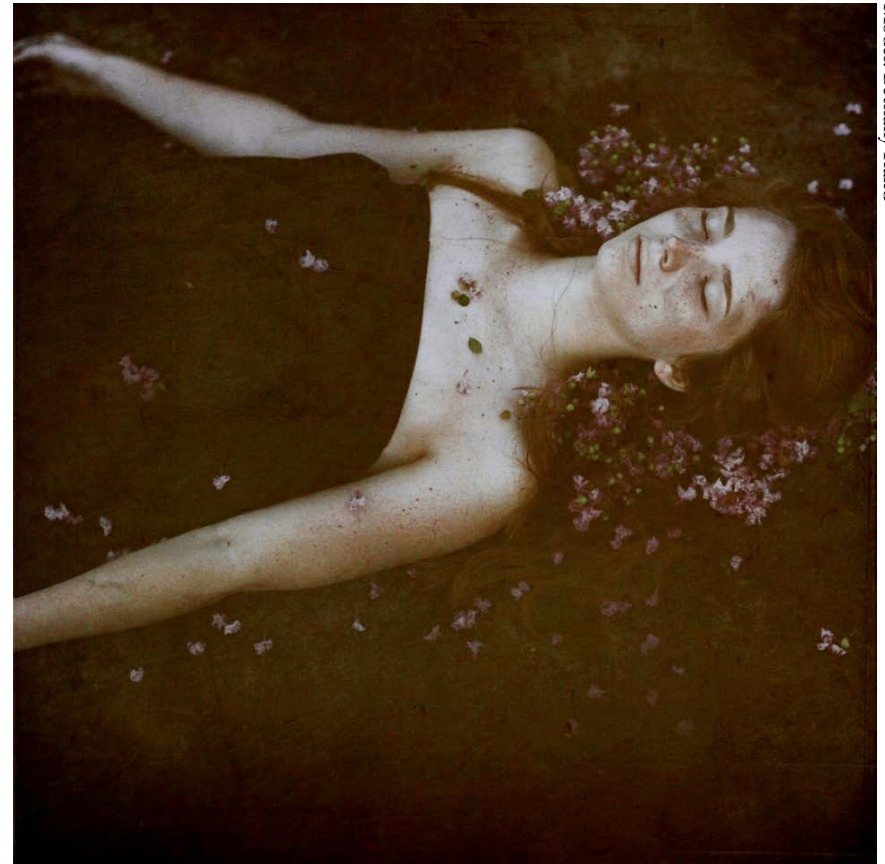
blank years—out of the loop for 'personal reasons.' Did anyone press her on this?"

"I hate personal reasons," Eyler said.

Michael smiled. He started check marking the document in front of him. "And after that, one year appointments here and there. Some of you call this experience. I call it desperation. Longfellow or not, she's stale bread and it shows."

Eyler crossed his arms and grinned at Donna. "A-the hell-men," he said.

On the way to the airport, I became loquacious. Maybe it was the gin or maybe it was just my natural passion for the subject, but when Ms.



Model: Bethany Rand

Dunbar asked about my research, I told her all about Walter Raleigh: the failure at Roanoke, those years in the Tower of London, the vain quest for El Dorado. As we pulled up to her gate, I thought it fitting to end the lecture with a little of his verse.

“Stab at thee he that will,” I declared in my most emotionally affecting voice, “No stab thy soul can kill.” I glanced over to gauge the effect of these comforting words. Ms. Durbin was staring through the windshield, eyes shiny with tears.

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When we got out of the car, things became more awkward still. Ms. Dunbar dragged her suitcase from the trunk and tugged at the handle, which refused to budge. “This happens sometimes,” she said before kicking the bag savagely to the ground. She picked it up and yanked again; this time, the handle shot out with such force that the leather purse on her shoulder slipped down to the crotch of her arm. An electronic device clattered to the pavement.

When she gathered herself, I stuck out my hand and said, “Ms. Dunbar, it’s been a real pleasure.”

“Maybe I should have lectured on ‘The Cross of Snow.’”

I nodded, as if I understood.

“Thing is, I know I wouldn’t have made it past line two.”

“You’ll hear from us in a week,” I said, smiling with all the teeth I could manage. “If not sooner.”

Later that night, I sat in my home office, door locked, staring into the fireplace glow of the computer screen. To my surprise, dinner had not gone badly. Sandy held forth, of course, and my wife, as she’d done for thirty-two years, took up the conversational slack. I drank glass after glass of wine so that, come dessert, I could angrily wonder aloud: “Isn’t retirement a bore? How can you stand to sit around the house all day?”

“It’s paradise,” Sandy said with a hearty laugh. “What comes next is the goddamn problem!”

“Stop it,” his wife said. “He had one of those scares...”

“They saw something on the MRI.” He took a bite of his Death by Chocolate. “A shadow.”

“Oh,” his wife said, slapping him lightly on the arm, “turns out it was just his big fat ego!”

We all laughed; Sandy, a successful career tucked like a child into bed, laughed the loudest of us all. Without warning, he sought his wife’s hand and took it to his heart.

“What would she do without me?” he said, blinking away tears. Embarrassed, I studied the wine spots on the tablecloth.

On the keyboard lay Ms. Dunbar’s curriculum vitae, which I’d forgotten to bring with me this morning. Such nice, substantial paper. Such a clean, no-nonsense font. Such concise descriptions of every move of her professional life. I’d been over it several times in the last three months, and there was not a single word or piece of punctuation out of place.

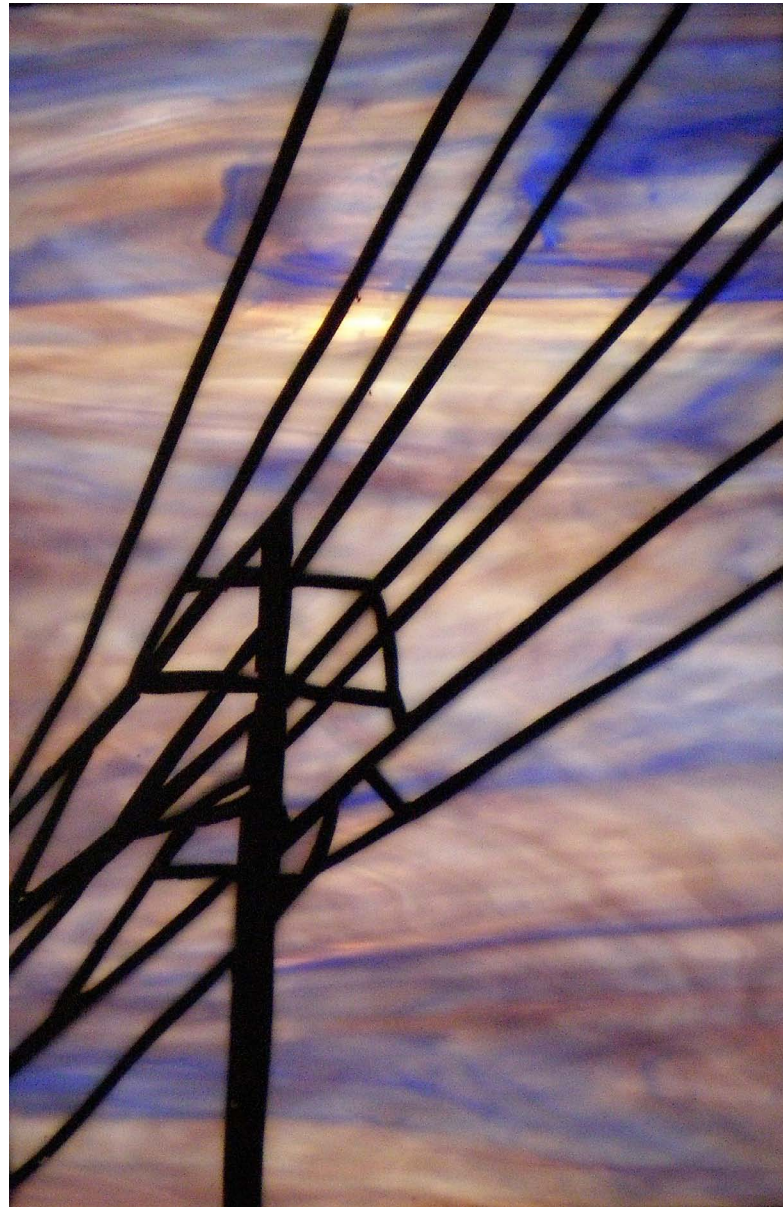
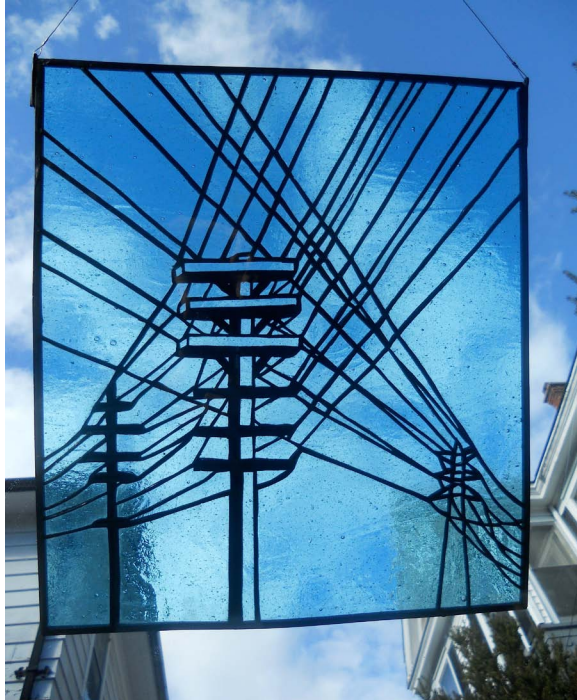
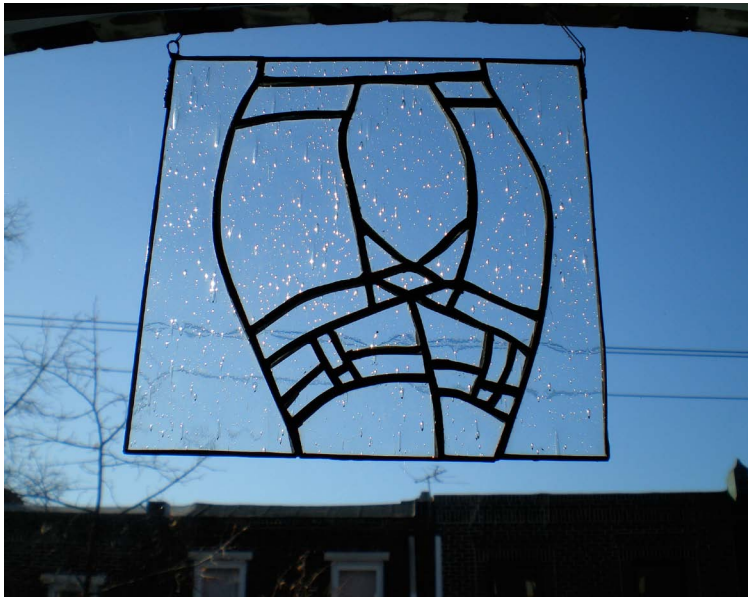
It was 10:15. She’d be getting back to Ohio just about now, and I imagined her pushing open a warped door to cramped, roach-happy rooms. A tabby cat would run against her leg. There’d be a coffee table – plywood over books – and an unmade futon in the bedroom, where she’d sit night after night to wring her hands and wait for our call.

After a quick search, I found Ms. Dunbar’s Facebook page. Her last post, a giddy “Cannot believe my luck!!!” from two weeks ago, had yielded just a single response: “I will never fail you or forsake you”—this from a woman I assumed was her mother.

I heard my wife in the bathroom—water from the tap, the thunk of toothbrush against sink. The toilet flushed. I couldn’t hire Ms. Dunbar, but I could send a message—a show of empathy to make up for the awkwardness of that afternoon. The cursor blinked patiently in the subject box while I tried to think of the best way to begin.

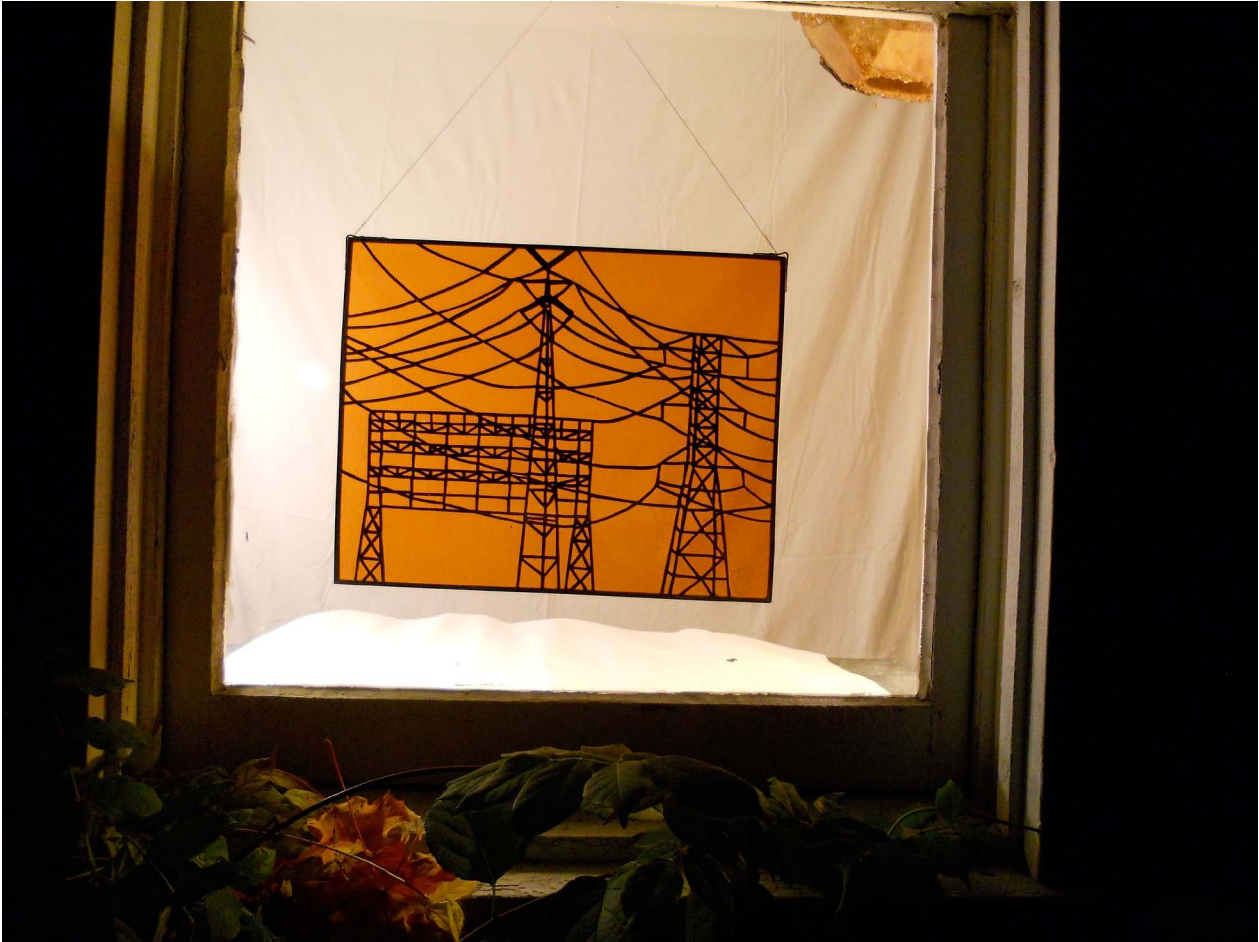
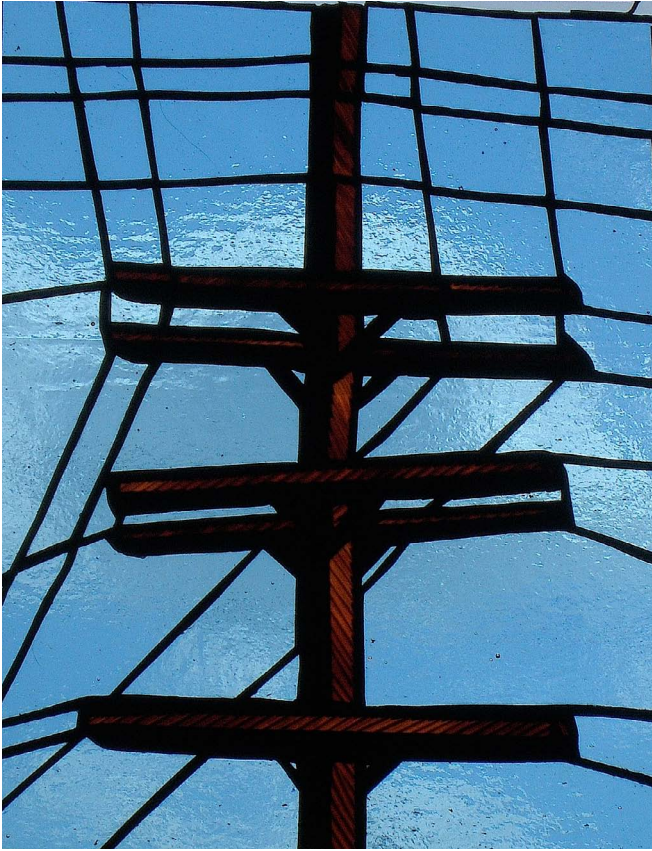
At last, I typed out “Ms. Dunbar,” then fixed it to “Gwen.” “I decided to finish my lecture on Raleigh, focus on his demise. August, 1618, the Palace of Westminster. An old, ailing man, long out of favor with the king, the poet pledged allegiance to James for half an hour before the crowd that had come to see him die. Then, in one deft stroke, the head came off and was sent to be embalmed. Often, I typed more earnestly now, I’m moved close to tears by the thought of those sealed lids, the sewn up mouth, the cleansed face radiant with repose. Gwen, you may well find it a comfort to know the story of what happened then: the next morning bright, London pungent with life, Elizabeth arrived at court to claim her husband’s head and, true love knowing no bounds, kept it close in a sack for the rest of her earth bound days.

Fiction Fix



Mimi Lipson  
*Stained Glass*

Fiction Fix



# From an Empty Place

by Suzanne Ushie

It would have been quite melodramatic of me to have created a scene, as you sat across from my parents in our living room with the beige carpet, and told them you were going to marry Elohor. After all, people didn't protest over their cousin's marriage just because they wanted to. Your fingers were entwined with hers. I remember staring at her nails, at the natural greyness of them, and thinking she was very unlike Idide, your ex-girlfriend, whose nails were always painted one unsettling colour or the other. The day before, as I picked out stones from grains of rice on an enamel tray, Mama told my sister Umoligie, her lower lip stuck out in disapproval, that you had broken up with Idide because of Elohor.

I was home on holiday. They were usually boring, seeing there was really nowhere to go apart from church or the video club on the next street. When you and Auntie Felicia moved to Lagos, her visits back to Calabar were few. But yours were frequent. Perhaps you needed to hold on to what was real. It was this sense of truth that made your visits seem less fleeting.

When Auntie Felicia called to say you were bringing a nice girl to meet us, the preparations it caused were rather amusing. The white china set that Papa gave Mama on her fortieth birthday was taken out of the cupboard where it lived for years. Cups of rice were measured from the sack we opened only when Papa's lecturer friends came to visit. The artificial flowers on the dining table were replaced by another garish bunch. I chose what I thought was the most presentable from the stack of table linen, one in the cutest shade of blue, but Mama scolded me for being showy and replaced it with a chequered fabric that stank of camphor. Amidst the cooking and cleaning, the telephone rang. Umoligie ran to answer it. She must have thought it was that boy she fancied.

'It's Idide,' she announced when she came back. Mama left the kitchen, leaving the door ajar in her haste. Umoligie pulled it towards the jamb, leaving a few inches of space for us to spy into the corridor where the telephone sat on a table with curved legs. We went quiet, rather unnecessarily because she didn't lower her voice.

'Take it easy,' she said in the soothing tone reserved for the affronted. One hand was balanced on the thick address book and the black

telephone wire was curled loosely around her wrist.

'You know how men are,' she listened for a while.

'How do you know that he's serious about her?' She moved the receiver to the other ear and nodded as if Idide could see her.

I imagined her at the other end, her pretty face disfigured with pain, her fair skin flush with the sting of heartache, her brown eyes reddened by tears, and felt no pity for her. It was then, after she hung up, that Mama said you had dumped her for Elohor.

On the day you were coming, I shuffled through my appallingly few clothes, wearing and removing tops and t-shirts until I was too tired to pull off a sleeveless top with tight seams that bit my skin. It had a hole, caused by a candle during a power failure one night, on its sleeve. I hoped you wouldn't notice. I stood sideways in front of the mirror and sucked in my stomach, willing the fat on it to manifest on my chest instead. I pinched my cheeks like *Oyinbo* women did in movies, but my coffee coloured skin remained the same. I burst a ripe pimple, peeled off a strand of hair plastered to my glossy lips, lined my eyes with Umoligie's black liquid eyeliner. That didn't turn out right. I tried to wipe the greasy streaks off but worsened things instead. By the time I spotted the pack of Cussons baby wipes beside an open jar of Vaseline, Umoligie was in the room, asking why I was still getting dressed when you were already here.

You hadn't changed. Or so I thought when I walked in and saw you sitting there. Your woman-like lashes were still there, your skin still as dark as the wood panelling on the walls, your laugh still hoarse. But when you embraced me, I noticed that your midriff was firmer and your hair was thicker. Believe me, it was hard, but I tried not to stare at Elohor. The dreadlocks were a surprise. They were like her, slender and brown, framing her heart shaped face, falling against her shoulder blades. She wore a halter neck dress the colour of butter. It was the kind of dress that Mama would call indecent, but she wore it with carefree ease. I stood there with my smudged eyes, thankful that I didn't turn red like *Oyinbo* women in movies, as you introduced me to her.

Mama's questions were direct at lunch. What did Elohor do for a living? Who were her parents? What church did she attend? Elohor replied in clear, unaccented English that made it difficult to tell which part of the country she was from. She spoke of the scholarship that paid for her MBA in the UK offhandedly. Her folks were well off. Her father, a medical doctor based in Saudi Arabia. Her mother, whose name I recognised from gossip magazines, a well known socialite in Lagos. She was raised Presbyterian but



now went to Chapel of Restored Grace Ministry.

‘When Pastor Femi preaches, you just feel like, you know, he’s talking to you,’ she laughed.

When Umoligie asked if she liked Calabar, she smiled at you and the light inside me dimmed. You smiled back and whispered something to her. She told Umoligie of her shock at seeing people wait for the traffic light to turn green before they moved, about the white Egyptian cotton sheets on their bed at the Anchorage Hotel.

Papa, always content to listen while others did the talking, didn’t say much until you said that Elohor liked tennis. They started to talk then, Elohor’s hands moving almost as fast as her lips, about some tennis player with some unpronounceable name that ended with ‘vic.’ I bent over my plate of *jollof* rice and followed her hands, saw them tap on a pencilled-in eyebrow, grip a glass, ball up under her chin, dance in the air. With her seemingly makeup-free face, she could have passed for a sixteen year old like me. When you spoke to me, it wasn’t to say that I had lost weight, but to ask if I was still flunking maths in school. I should have told you that I got a P in my last maths exam, instead I sat there mute.

‘I hated Maths in school too,’ Elohor said. ‘Only God knows how I ended up with an MBA.’

I didn’t like her assumption that I hated Maths. Did that too-wide smile mask pity? The thought of bearing any likeness to her silenced my spirit. In the living room, she lifted the thin silver chain around her neck and showed off a diamond ring, the first I had ever seen, swaying daintily on it.

‘We haven’t yet told her parents so it’s still under wraps for now,’ you said.

That night as Mama and Papa got ready for bed, I heard Mama say that Elohor was an *ajebutter*, a spoiled rich girl oblivious to hardship.

‘I don’t know what is wrong with Martin. It’s like the money he’s earning in that bank has turned his head.’

‘Well she seems like a nice person.’ Papa’s voice was pitchy with conviction, just like it was when he vouched for other people, including our former houseboy who stole his gold cufflinks.

Mama went on as if he hadn’t spoken. ‘Why can’t he just marry Idide, *eh?* At least we know her family!’

‘Let it go,’ Papa said.

But Mama did not. We endured her familiar tread in the days that followed, one footstep heavier than the former, as she went about receiving calls from a hysterical Idide, startling Aunty Felicia with talk of probing into

Elohor’s past. She told Papa that Aunty Felicia was soft, that if your father, Uncle Paul were alive he would have handled the situation properly.

‘There is no situation,’ he replied in the same peremptory tone he used to deliver history lectures.

‘*Kaa!* If only my sister will do something for once. Martin is only twenty-seven. He’s just a boy.’ She shook her head in that exaggerated way of showing sadness.

‘Martin is only twenty-seven’ became a catch phrase – not when Mama was around of course – for me and Umoligie. I’d ask a random question that began with why and she’d go: ‘because Martin is only twenty-seven.’ We would giggle afterwards, only she didn’t know that the sounds I made weren’t giggles. They were nameless sounds from an empty place inside me.

Most times our house was quiet. Umoligie was often away, either studying for the university entrance exam in the library or hanging out with her friends under the pretext of studying. With the days stretched before me, there was time to imagine you and Elohor together. Those big hands caressing her gently, your hot breath teasing the hair on her skin. I wanted to feel the firmness of your grip. I wanted my hair, those coarse strands that refused to be tamed by relaxer, to be smoothed by your touch.

I’d had a crush before – there was that bucktoothed boy in primary school – but it was borne out of proximity not authenticity. Nothing like this unfettered feeling that hurt and pleased me at once. I cannot say when it began. Perhaps it was shortly after Uncle Paul died. I was in your house, in the room we called the ‘small parlour.’ I sat on the cool linoleum floor, a pile of insect-bitten phonograph records spread before me, plastic bowls embossed with ‘in memoriam’ stickers piled in a corner. I went in there to escape from the wild wailing, the sad faces, the saucers with alligator pepper that made me sneeze. You walked in and I was silent with the awkwardness that comes in the aftermath of death. But you were still caught up in teenage angst, the rebellious years where you thought that the whole world was against you so you didn’t expect any niceties. We sat there together, reading the old labels together, laughing at the afro hairdos that took up half the cover jackets. I could tell that it meant nothing to you. But to me, it was everything.

In school, I passed a picture where you looked bored around to my dorm mates. They looked at me, then you, and pouted with disbelief, then went ‘aha’ when I said you were my cousin. ‘I wonder why a man should get all the good genes in a family. It’s not fair,’ one of them said.

I wondered too, about what made you fall for Idide, and then Elo-

hor. The former's affectation was something Umoligie and I mocked. Her 'cuppa' for 'tea,' the poorly timed swear words. It didn't take long for me to be sick of hearing her call Mama 'Mummy.' Her superficial allure made your attraction to Elohor's quiet elegance more puzzling.

'I don't think that girl is a good influence on him,' Mama said to Papa when we were watching 7pm news one night. He bit a large chunk off a mango and laughed at something the newscaster said, his fingers dripping with the gooey orange flesh. I didn't care for their conversation. Titanic was in the VCR and I was eager to get back to it. I sat on the sofa and wished they would hurry up and leave. Then Mama said that Elohor would force you to join "that funny church." When Papa did not let out the grunt he used to show assent, she said 'Are you listening to me or not?' I didn't wait to hear his reply. I rubbed my eyes in feigned drowsiness and walked out of the parlour.

Another time Umoligie and I were sitting on the veranda, by the mosquito net with a tear in it, when she told me that she saw you and Elohor at the Mirage nightclub.

'It was really dark so I'm sure that they didn't see me. Elohor looked hot *sha*.' She said that bit grudgingly, as if by the admission she was giving her approval.

I said something vaguely nonchalant, even though as I looked out at the landscape of jumbled electric wires, with the warmth of the falling dusk stroking my skin, I longed to know more. When the telephone rang the next day, I picked it up in the absurd hope that it was you. It was that languid moment between midday and evening, and no one else was home. There was a spark of static when I first pressed the receiver to my ear. It cleared and ushered in Idide's breathy hello. I fiddled with the Swallow padlock encircling the dial buttons, delighting in the rising panic my silence caused, then hung up.

Umoligie called me, her voice faint as though she were far away. I opened my eyes and saw her bent over me, one hand poised to shake me. I remember that her breath was stale. I remember that I wasn't happy to be awakened.

'There was a fire in Anchorage. The whole hotel didn't get burnt *sha*,' she said. I was clear eyed in an instant. I grabbed the faded *Ankara* fabric that was both my duvet and dressing gown, wrapped it around my waist and knotted it. Together we walked towards the voices in the living room. I

heard yours first, subdued yet firm, and became conscious of the browned lace of my cotton nightgown.

Papa was philosophical. 'It could have been worse.'

Mama was grateful. 'We thank God.'

Elohor sat on a side stool, one with a rusty headed nail that left holes in sensitive places. She looked embarrassed to be causing such a fuss.



Model: Bethany Rand

'Aunty I'm fine, really. It was Martin's idea to come here.' She turned to you, 'You should have checked both of us into that room instead of bringing me here.'

'And like I said, that's not a good idea because I don't want anything to happen to you. We've had enough drama for one night,' you gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Papa and Mama agreed. You would stay back in the hotel while she would stay with us.

When Umoligie and I asked you what happened as if we didn't know already, irritation tightened your mouth because you were tired of retelling the story. Nonetheless you did, and we listened. To be honest I didn't believe that Elohor was as unfazed about the fire as you made it seem. After we chorused 'thank God nothing happened,' we took Elohor to our room. She took in the bleakness of the white walls and the dark hole in the carpet from an iron burn absentmindedly. Things that were familiar to me but must have appeared shabby to a stranger. My tangled heap of cheap jewellery stood out on the dresser, making me wish it was tucked away in a drawer, the same way my feelings for you were tucked away. Mama made some perfunctory comments before going away. Make yourself at home. Hook the curved nail across the bathroom door to keep it shut. Flush the toilet twice after you pee. Her tantrums were quieted by the knowledge of what might have happened.

There was a tentative knock on the door and when we said come in, you did. You had Elohor's luggage with you. A Louis Vuitton suitcase. Even in the dim yellow light I could make out the detailed finishing that told of its genuineness. You told her not to miss you too much and she scoffed. Umoligie laughed. You laughed. I laughed too and felt normal, until your lips sought hers, met hers. I bent down and straightened the bed. Umoligie watched with her mouth open. When you left, Elohor said she needed to shower.

'I can still smell the smoke in my tentacles,' she tugged at a woollen dreadlock.

I pointed at the en-suite bathroom and lay on the bed. I should have told her that we didn't take showers. We took baths out of buckets, and more times than not, our bodies were still slippery when the last drop of water crawled into the drain.

'So what really happened?' Umoligie asked again.

'We were in our room when we heard a scream. We ran out and saw smoke everywhere. They said that someone forgot to put out a cigarette. As

usual.' Elohor rolled her eyes and untied her wrap dress. With an unselfconscious snap of her flesh toned bra, her cone shaped breasts swung free. They were a lighter brown than the rest of her body. Her nakedness made me uncomfortable, so I faced the wall.

'Did anyone die?' Umoligie looked more excited than frightened.

'Nope. But the Igbo woman in the room beside ours fainted. Shock I guess.'

Umoligie made a commiserating sound. 'At least you guys are safe *sha*.'

Elohor shrugged in a blasé manner that suggested she hadn't given much thought to her safety. She wrapped an olive green towel around her chest, knotted it under her left arm and flattened her breasts. At the bathroom door, she stopped and unhooked the silver chain around her neck. There was a tinkle of metal as it landed on the dresser. A lone sparkle in a sea of darkness. Soon water began to splash inside the bathroom. In the morning it would bear signs of her presence. The blue g-string pegged on the underwear dryer, the sparkling sponge shaped like a glove.

Umoligie rolled over on the bed. 'I hope she doesn't sleep with the light on *ob!*'

Elohor's footprints were a dark, wet trail on the carpet as she entered the room. She shook her hair free of a shower cap and drops of water bounced off the grainy mirror, landing on my face. I noticed the pale stretch marks zigzagged across her buttocks like streaks of lightning. Sleep did not come until she turned off the light.

We always had beans on Wednesday afternoon. It was a family tradition I couldn't change, like the matching clothes we wore to church on Christmas Day. I was slow with the preparations, prompting irritated glances from Mama. I lingered in the kitchen, even when the fat pot was finally hissing and gurgling on the kerosene stove. I was about to invent another creative task when Mama told me to go and stay with Elohor. I was expected to entertain and please her. It was another thing I couldn't change.

I followed the sound of two voices, hers and Umoligie's, into the bedroom. The air was heavy with the acidic smell of nail polish. Elohor perched on the floor, back propped against the bed, as she applied a colourless coat on a fingernail. Legs that hadn't known the misfortune of scarring were folded under her, making me more aware of my black knees and my spots that looked like pawpaw seeds, mementos of tree climbing adventures

in the setting sun.

'I won't say he's very hot, but he's hot *sha*. He has brooding eyes,' Umoligie flipped through an old edition of *Essence*.

'He sounds like a character in one of those awful romance novels,' Elohor said.

'I don't read those things. I outgrew that phase long ago.' Umoligie snapped her fingers, as if the piles of Mills and Boons novels on the top shelf of our closet belonged to me, not her.

I opened a drawer and played with random things I did not need. The diary I had abandoned in fear Umoligie would read it, mass bulletins with year old dates, an old list of provisions for school in my cautious handwriting: *Bournvita, Peak, Sure, Close Up, Vaseline, Omo*. There was an angry slash of ink where Mama replaced Peak with Nido. The dresser was devoid of the cosmetics I expected to see. Jars of expensive moisturisers that promised ageless skin. An arty bottle that housed her spicy scent. In their place a book called *Love in the Time of Cholera* sat beside a pair of pearl stud earrings. The pages were strewn apart, like they had been opened too often. The title fascinated me; it reminded me of the books in Papa's study. Sombre looking books that I never read, their grand titles memorised in an illusion of cleverness.

'So what do you like to do?' Elohor asked. It took me a while to realise that she was talking to me. She repeated the question and the words seeped out of my brain, clotted into a lump in my throat.

'That one, she's an introvert,' Umoligie said.

'Oh,' Elohor said slowly.

'Have you heard from Martin today?'

'He's coming here in the evening.'

Umoligie's smile was wide and coaxing. 'Ah ah. See how your eyes are shining because of my cousin.'

'The way your eyes are shining because of your brooding eyed man *abi*? The slang sounded awkward, forced even, on Elohor.

Umoligie giggled. She giggled again when Elohor said that the beans porridge was delicious. Mama waved off the compliment even though her lips loosened into a one-sided smile that wiped away her preference for Idide. Surely Elohor was just being polite because the sourness of the palm oil was obvious. I stirred my beans and the palm oil swirled inside my plate like a ripple in a stream. It was a diluted red, not the vibrant red of the ixora flowers beside the garage. "Your mother's pet project," Papa would call them with an indulgent laugh.

The sharp after taste hung onto my tongue when you came. I didn't look away when you kissed Elohor, not this time. I wanted to see if you would wince, wanted to know if she tasted like bad food too. I watched you and told myself that the kiss was clumsy because my presence made you uneasy.

'I can see that you're enjoying yourself. Maybe I'll leave you here and go back to Lagos alone on Friday,' you teased.

'Like you can get on that plane without me,' she teased back.

She helped Mama with the dishes when you left. They stood side by side, arms not quite touching. In the unforgiving fluorescent light their differences in size and age were clearer. Her body was compact, devoid of the ridges of fat on Mama's waist. There was a defiance in her back that time had taken from Mama's. Or perhaps it only seemed that way because I was accustomed to Mama's peculiar softness, to the odd way she scolded and praised us in the same sentence. Mama spoke gently, asking about her plans, her dreams. There was no arched eyebrow when Elohor said she planned to start a Youth-focused NGO, no admonishment to use smaller amounts of Morning Fresh. But when she turned her back, Mama discreetly re-rinsed all the glasses she had washed.

She slept in a faded grey t-shirt that smelled like you at night. When her arm grazed my elbow, I leaned closer and inhaled a fragrance I later learned was Old Spice, and the strange drum beating between my thighs increased its tempo. I couldn't sleep, not when my mind was pelted with different thoughts, some lucid, others not, all as wide and as endless as the speckled sky.



Self Portrait

On Thursday you took her to the museum. She wore a black dress that made her look slimmer. She smacked her lips until the near nude gloss shimmered. She told you that she would meet you at the gate.

‘Never allow a man to think that you’re helpless,’ she told Umoligie in an assertive tone.

Umoligie looked alarmed but she agreed.

I knew the car that drove into our compound wasn’t Papa’s. I knew this because the engine sounded new, not rusty like that of Papa’s silver 505. So when I looked out of the living room window and saw the blue Toyota with a rental sticker beside the ixora hedge I wasn’t surprised. I stood there, uncertain if you were coming in or not. You pulled Elohor back when she

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**As you slammed the boot shut, I stared at the curly film of hair on your arm and wondered what you would do if I stroked it.**

---

opened the door; she pushed you away then came out of the car. You touched the side mirror and I imagined that it was anger that made you pull it back. I feared you would see me so I walked away and left the curtains fluttering in

the evening air.

‘I’m ashamed to admit that I heard of most of those places for the first time today,’ Elohor said to Papa when he came home.

He went into his study and came back into the living room with two hard cover books. Elohor ran her fingers over one with embossed gold lettering before flipping it open. The title page had tiny brown stains that resembled age spots. She scanned the pages from left to right with the intensity of an academic. Papa gave her names and dates and facts, thankful that someone under his roof was showing more than a passing interest in history. I picked up the raffia fan on the centre table and waved it in my face until my arm ached.

Elohor made what she called vegetable sauce in the evening. I flinched when she sautéed an onion in butter. Umoligie’s face was straight with the indifference that disguises shock. ‘Don’t rub your eyes,’ Elohor said when the onions made us blink our burning eyes. She stepped back from the hot oil leaping out of the pan, and told us that their cook had taught her over and over until the sauce was near perfect. I could just see her flinging moist onion rings into a bin. No one ever threw food away in our house; not unless the person wanted to hear Mama’s legendary sermon about how much luckier we were than our relatives in the village.

I lied that I wasn’t hungry. When they left the dining room, I dished food out of an ugly brown Pyrex. The rice was too salty, too mushy. The *ugwu*

suddenly looked so alien, tasted so exotic. I peered at Elohor over the flowers on the dining table when she took your phone call in the corridor. She scraped at a dried patch of candle wax on the table and repeated the time of your flight after you. 10:45 a.m. Back then I had been on a plane just once, on a trip to Lagos. All I remembered was the see-through panty hose on the air hostesses’ legs and the brittle scone that tasted like air.

In the room, she folded a dress into a cube and squeezed it into her suitcase, tossed a bottle of Poison by Dior at Umoligie.

‘Makes my chest burn,’ she said.

I drew the curtains together and shut out the fading daylight. I didn’t want her to think I was hovering around for a hand-me-down.

‘You guys are coming to Lagos for the wedding, right?’ she asked.

‘I guess so,’ Umoligie sounded distracted. She spurted Poison on one wrist then rubbed both wrists together with glee. ‘Thanks.’

Elohor had the same modest look Mama had when our church members thanked her for giving them our old clothes. She lifted her silver chain and fiddled with her engagement ring until it let out a prism of translucent light.

The farewell was subdued. We were that kind of family. When Papa dropped me off at boarding school, he always said ‘see you’ as though I’d be at home when he got back there. Papa and Mama shrugged off Elohor’s thanks. ‘Don’t mention,’ they said. You stood in the living room with your hands in your pockets, your feet in palm slippers that were too big. You thanked them for taking care of Elohor. You laughed when they told you to beware of robbers in Lagos. They always did, right before they said ‘take care’ and ‘greet Felicia for us.’ The muscles in your arm tensed when you placed Elohor’s suitcase into the boot of the yellow taxi where an engine oil stain was spread out like a map. As you slammed the boot shut, I stared at the curly film of hair on your arm and wondered what you would do if I stroked it. I did not feel the chest tightening that came in anticipation of distance. What I felt was something akin to *déjà vu*. The certainty that you would be back. You turned to me and my heart did its happy beat. You were going to heal me, make me whole, right there under the clouds floating above like a cluster of white marquees. The driver pressed the horn twice and stuck his head out of the window. His face was marred by a frown. You turned and eyed him then got into the taxi. I stood there, burning, like the engine that was screeching to life. The tyres munched on the gravel, and the figures on the number plate faded out, slid through the gate.

# IN NEED OF A HAND

~OR~

## So... I went to L.A.

by

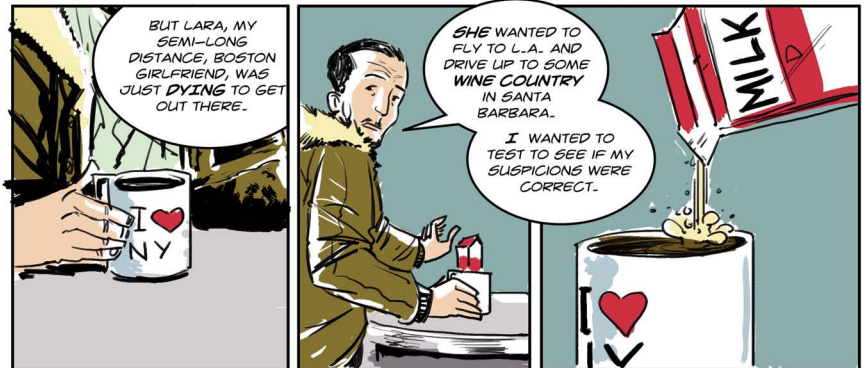
Jonathan Baylis and Thomas Boatwright



SO...

BEING THE NATIVE NEW YORKER THAT I AM, I **SWORE** I'D NEVER GO TO L.A. ALL O' THAT GLITZ AND GLITTER.

WHO NEEDS IT.



BUT LARA, MY SEMI-LONG DISTANCE, BOSTON GIRLFRIEND, WAS JUST DYING TO GET OUT THERE.

SHE WANTED TO FLY TO L.A. AND DRIVE UP TO SOME WINE COUNTRY IN SANTA BARBARA.

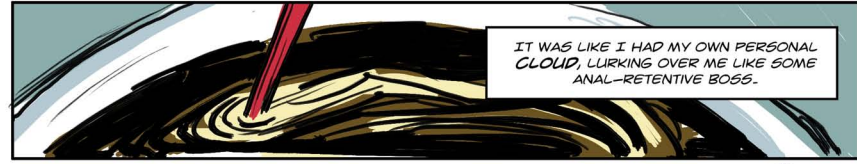
I WANTED TO TEST TO SEE IF MY SUSPICIONS WERE CORRECT.



THAT WE WERE HOPELESSLY DRIFTING APART.

IT WAS RAINING WHEN I LEFT NEW YORK AND UPON LANDING IN L.A. THOUGH IT'S KNOWN FOR ITS DRY CLIMATE...

...IT WAS AS WET AS A MUSTACHIOED KISS FROM MY AUNT CALLIE.

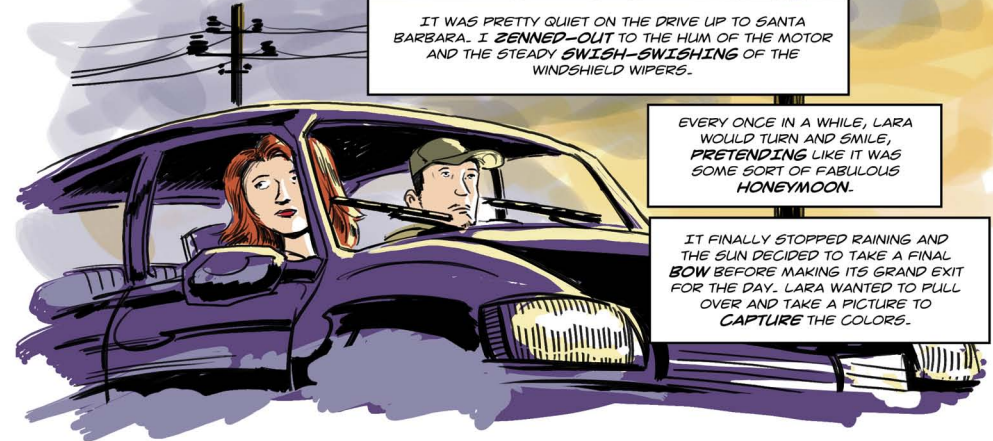


IT WAS LIKE I HAD MY OWN PERSONAL CLOUD, LURKING OVER ME LIKE SOME ANAL-RETENTIVE BOSS.



I BEGAN TO WONDER IF IT WAS SOME KIND OF...OMEN.

MAYBE I SHOULD'VE NEVER LEFT NEW YORK.



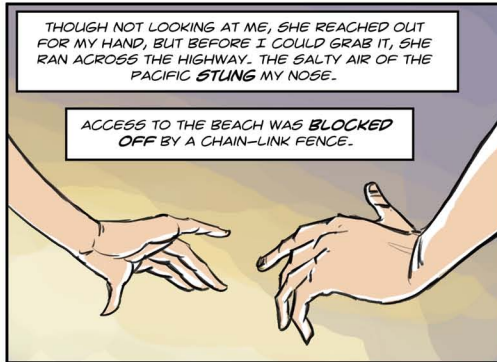
IT WAS PRETTY QUIET ON THE DRIVE UP TO SANTA BARBARA. I ZENNED-OUT TO THE HUM OF THE MOTOR AND THE STEADY SWISH-SWISHING OF THE WINDSHIELD WIPERS.

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, LARA WOULD TURN AND SMILE, PRETENDING LIKE IT WAS SOME SORT OF FABULOUS HONEYMOON.

IT FINALLY STOPPED RAINING AND THE SUN DECIDED TO TAKE A FINAL BOW BEFORE MAKING ITS GRAND EXIT FOR THE DAY. LARA WANTED TO PULL OVER AND TAKE A PICTURE TO CAPTURE THE COLORS.

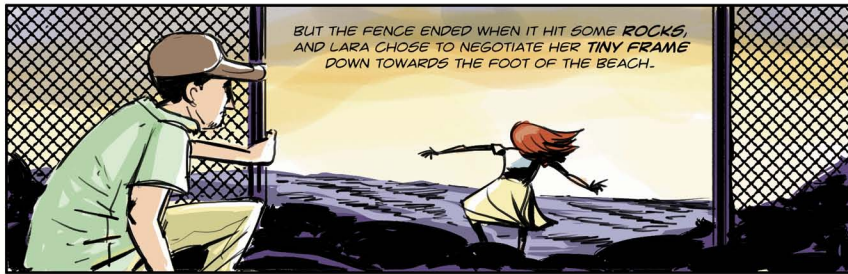


HOW ABOUT OVER THERE BY THE BEACH?



THOUGH NOT LOOKING AT ME, SHE REACHED OUT FOR MY HAND, BUT BEFORE I COULD GRAB IT, SHE RAN ACROSS THE HIGHWAY. THE SALTY AIR OF THE PACIFIC STUNG MY NOSE.

ACCESS TO THE BEACH WAS **BLOCKED OFF** BY A CHAIN-LINK FENCE.



BUT THE FENCE ENDED WHEN IT HIT SOME **ROCKS**, AND LARA CHOSE TO NEGOTIATE HER **TINY FRAME** DOWN TOWARDS THE FOOT OF THE BEACH.



THE **ROCKS** WERE STILL **SLICK** FROM THE RAIN AS I **AWKWARDLY** FOLLOWED HER PATH.



SHE DIDN'T LOOK BACK. IT WAS ALMOST LIKE SHE **FORGOT** I WAS THERE.

AND THEN ALL OF A **SUDDEN**, HER LIMBS GREW **TAUT**.



I HAD NEVER **SEEN** LARA ENVELOPED IN SUCH **ODD** BODY LANGUAGE.

CHOKÉ!

I **GULPED** IN ONE DEEP BREATH AND HELD IT AS I **FEARED** WHAT COULD MAKE HER **BODY WRACKED** WITH PARALYSIS.



MY TEETH WERE **CLENCHED** INTO MY LIPS. MY MIND WAS **RACING** WITH **DREADFUL** THOUGHTS AND I **WHISPERED** UNDER MY BREATH.

WHAT COULD IT BE?



I DIDN'T THINK SHE **HEARD** ME, BUT SHE TURNED AROUND **SLOWLY** AND I SAW THAT HER COUNTENANCE TOOK ON A TREMOR OF **WORRY**. HER VOICE STILL **SILENT**, YET HER EYES FELT **ACCUSING**.



I STEPPED **CLOSER** AND COULDN'T QUITE SEE WHAT SHE WAS POINTING AT. IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE **CRASHING** WAVES BELOW, WE WOULD'VE HEARD THE **TICK-TICKING** OF OUR BEATING HEARTS IN **WILD** JUNGLE RHYTHM!



A **HAND** STICKING OUT FROM UNDER THE **ROCKS**? OH MY **GOD!** IT'S A...

**DEAD BODY!**

MY MIND WAS **REELING**. UNCERTAIN OF WHAT TO DO. FEELING **DISBELIEF**.



WAS THE **HAND** POINTING AT **ME**? **ACCUSINGLY**? WAS IT POINTING **EAST**? WHERE AM I? GO BACK TO **NEW YORK**?

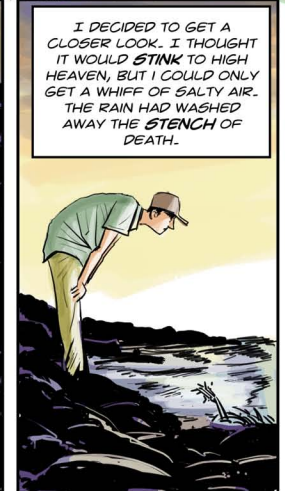
MY **INSIDES** **CHURNED** AND I **CHOKED** BACK THE **NAUSEA**. I IMAGINED THE **PULVERIZED** BONE, THE **ROTTED**, **YELLOWING** FLESH UNDER THE **ROCKS**.

WAS LARA LOOKING AT ME, **REPULED**?



LARA **RAN** BACK AND I **STEADIED** MYSELF. I **CLENCHED** MY JAW, MY TONGUE BRUSHING THE **BACKS** OF MY TEETH FROM **SIDE** TO **SIDE**.

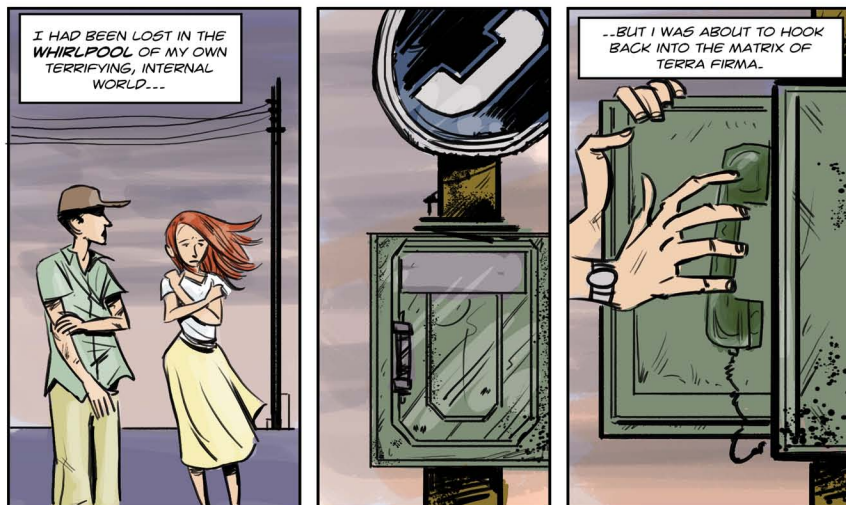
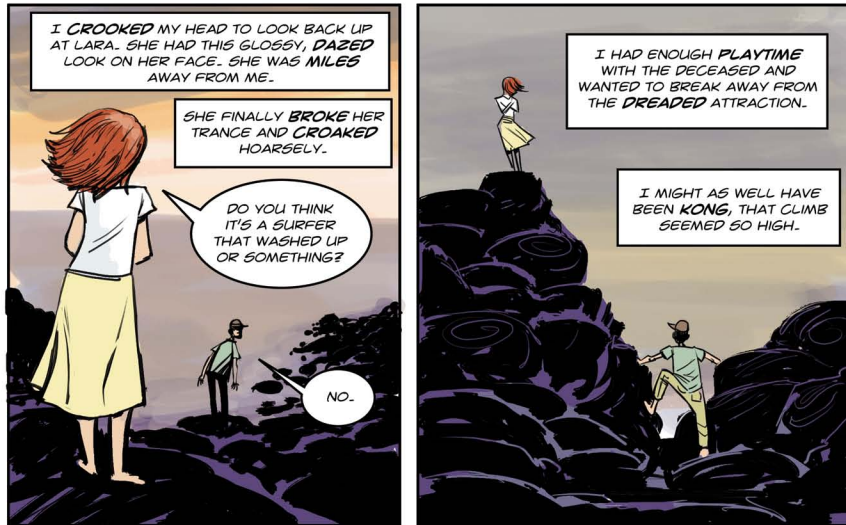
I **BEGAN** TO SWEAT, BUT THE **OCEAN BREEZE** **TEMPERED** MY HEAT.



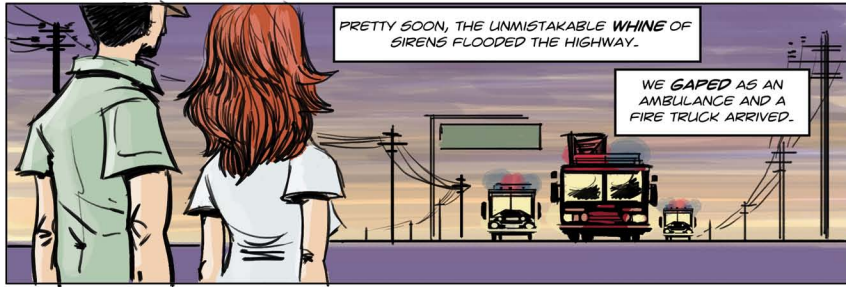
I **DECIDED** TO GET A **CLOSER** LOOK. I THOUGHT IT WOULD **STINK** TO HIGH HEAVEN, BUT I **COULD** ONLY GET A **WHIFF** OF **SALTY** AIR. THE RAIN HAD WASHED AWAY THE **STENCH** OF **DEATH**.



THE **HAND** LOOKED TO BE THE **SAME** SIZE AS MY OWN.





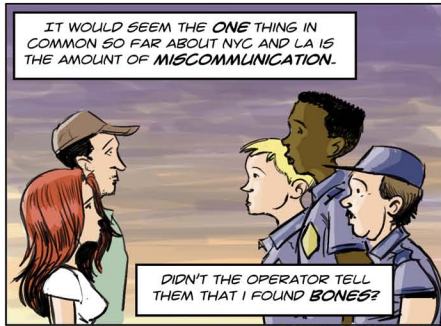


PRETTY SOON, THE UNMISTAKABLE WHINE OF SIRENS FLOODED THE HIGHWAY.

WE GAPED AS AN AMBULANCE AND A FIRE TRUCK ARRIVED.



ARE THEY STILL BREATHING?

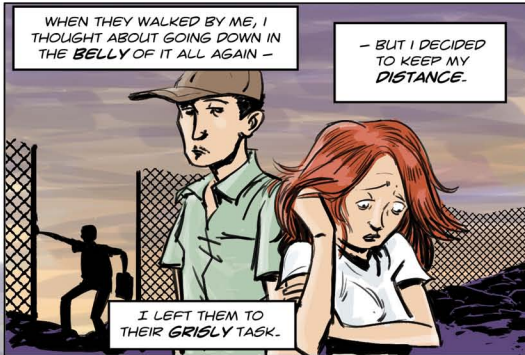


IT WOULD SEEM THE ONE THING IN COMMON SO FAR ABOUT NYC AND LA IS THE AMOUNT OF MISCOMMUNICATION.

DIDN'T THE OPERATOR TELL THEM THAT I FOUND BONES?



THE SURFER'S DEAD!



WHEN THEY WALKED BY ME, I THOUGHT ABOUT GOING DOWN IN THE BELLY OF IT ALL AGAIN -

- BUT I DECIDED TO KEEP MY DISTANCE.

I LEFT THEM TO THEIR GRISLY TASK.



AS I WATCHED THEM CLIMB DOWN THE ROCKS, I LISTENED TO THE DRIFTING WAVES AND LOOKED AT LARA.

I THOUGHT IT WAS FUNNY.

IT WAS IN THAT MOMENT THAT IT WAS CRYSTAL CLEAR TO ME HOW FAR APART WE'D DRIFTED.

WE WERE NOW INCHES APART, IN THIS TOGETHER, BUT HOPELESSLY SEPARATED.



HOW HAD I NOT SEEN IT BEFORE?

I GUESS LOVE WAS NOT ENOUGH.



I FELT SO DUMB.



AND THEN THE MEDIC GRINNED AND LOOKED AT ME LIKE HE WAS THE SMARTEST PERSON IN THE WORLD.

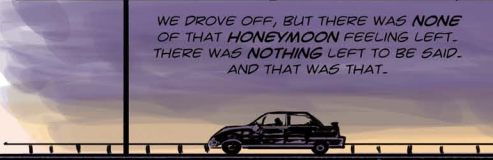
IT'S A SEAL.



THEY EXPLAINED THAT A SEAL'S FIN WHEN ROTTED AWAY, LOOKS JUST LIKE A HUMAN HAND.

PART OF ME WANTED TO SLAM HIS GRINNING TEETH DOWN HIS THROAT, BUT LARA WAS ALREADY HALFWAY TO THE CAR.

I FOLLOWED.



WE DROVE OFF, BUT THERE WAS NONE OF THAT HONEYMOON FEELING LEFT. THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT TO BE SAID. AND THAT WAS THAT.

IT DIDN'T LAST MUCH LONGER. OUR LOVE WAS AS DEAD AS THAT CORPSE. I LEARNED A LOT ABOUT LARA, BUT I DIDN'T LEARN MUCH ABOUT LA.



THOUGH AT LEAST WHEN I FIND A DEAD BODY IN NEW YORK, I KNOW IT'S NOT A SEAL.



I LOVE NY MORE THAN EVER.

END.

# Biographies



Before **Jonathan Baylis** wrote auto-bio comics, he interned at Marvel Comics, Valiant/Acclaim Comics, and was an Associate Editor at Topps Comics. His comics have been published locally in New York City and in literary anthologies like *The Florida Review*, *Backwards City Review*, and *Wild River Review*. His first fiction story was published by *Arcana Press* in *Dark Horrors 2*. Jonathan had a couple of two-pagers published in "I Saw You... Missed Connections" and "Side B: The Music Lovers Anthology." He has since collected most of his stories into the self-published, "So Buttons" series, of which there

are four issues and a holiday special in print. More stories can be found at [www.sobuttons.com](http://www.sobuttons.com)

**Thomas Boatwright** is the co-creator and artist of



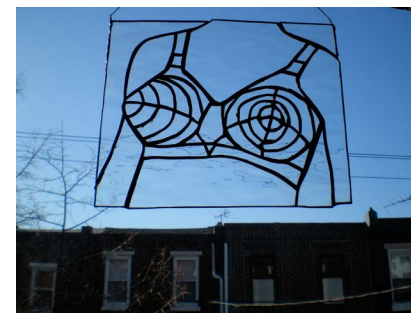
"Cemetery Blues" and "Zeke Deadwood: Zombie Lawman." He enjoys old junk and is discovering new technology to despise everyday. He plays five string banjo in a skiffle band.

**Michael Cocchiarale** lives and works in Chester, PA. Some of his other stories have appeared in *REAL*, *Stickman Review*, *SN Review*, *Relief*, *The Dirty Napkin*, and *Flashquake*. *Still Time*, his collection of short and shorter stories, is forthcoming from Fomite Press.

**Scott David** is a writer in Boston. He has published novels, short fiction, and a variety of nonfiction under various names.

**David Livingstone Fore** is a writer and designer living in Oakland, California. This poem is from *Weight of the Water of the World*, a hand-made book of visual onomatopoeia. He has published poems and stories all over the place and is haunted and taunted by two novels that sleep restlessly in a desk drawer.

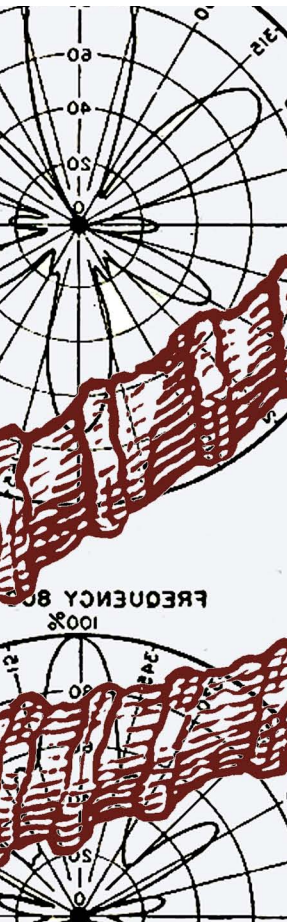
**Nathan Holic** teaches writing courses at the University of Central Florida and serves as the Graphic Narrative Editor at *The Florida Review*. He also works with Orlando-based *Burrow Press* as the editor and curator of the ongoing anthology series, "15 Views of Orlando," a literary portrait of the city featuring short fiction from fifteen Orlando authors young and old, local and far-removed, established and aspiring. His fiction has appeared in *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, *The Portland Review*, and *The Roanoke Review*, and his serialized graphic narrative "Clutter" (a story structured as a home décor catalogue) appears at the online magazine *Smalldoggies*.



**Mimi Lipson** is a writer and artist who lives in Kingston, NY. Her chapbook, *FOOD & BEVERAGE*, is available from All-Seeing Eye Press. She will receive an MFA in creative writing from Boston University in September, 2012.

**William Northrup** is an MFA student at Emerson College. His work has appeared in the anthology *Young Angel Midnight*. Will was born in Lowell, Massachusetts and currently lives in Boston with his wife and son.

**Joe Ponepinto** is the Book Review Editor for the *Los Angeles Review*. He is the winner of the 2011 Springfed Arts Writing Contest (Michigan) in fiction. His work is published or upcoming in a variety of journals, including *Apalachee Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Valparaiso Fiction Review*, *Vestal Review*, *Stymie*, and *The Chaffin Journal*. He lives in Michigan with his wife, Dona, and Henry, the coffee drinking dog. He blogs at <http://joeponepinto.com>.



Scarred for life as a pre-teen when he watched the 1933 version of King Kong 13 times in a single week, **David Press** now lives in Milwaukee where he has taught, run an educational publishing company, sold battery-operated Santa Clauses, and authored six young-adult nonfiction books (including biographies of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglas, and histories of American music and American sports). As far back as the 1970s and 80s, David was an active impresario and writer in the Oklahoma and then the Milwaukee spoken arts communities. Bad stuff happened. Mysteriously, the imagination is now reanimated. He is happily baffled.

Press now writes and performs fictions of overlapping, contradictory, and non-linear micro-episodes. Pshew! He has also written several one-act plays that have been produced in Milwaukee. He lives with his wife, Petra, a printmaker and book artist whose works are exhibited nationally. They sometimes collaborate on unique word/fiber projects. <http://language liberation front.blogspot.com/>

**Petra Press** ("Miss Petra!!" to her students) is a Milwaukee print, fiber and mixed media artist whose work takes on tactile memories, intimate fears, madmen, maniacs, pre-Columbian archetype, and talismanic protection. Strongly influenced by Surrealism, outsider art, literature and travel to Mexico, Barcelona, Mexico, Prague, Mexico, Amsterdam, Mexico, China, Mexico, Krakow, Mexico,

Nicaragua, Mexico, Buenos Aires, Mexico, Panama (where she saw the red frog), and Mexico, Ms. Press' book art and other work may be seen regularly in regional exhibits and in permanent collections all over the country.

**Masha Sardari** was born in a little country called Moldova in Eastern Europe. She moved to the U.S. when she was twelve years old and a few years later discovered art. Her favourite medium is photography and she has been photographing since 2010. She attends school in Ponte Vedra Beach and goes on photo shoots almost every weekend hoping to create something mysterious and meaningful.



**Billy Simms** is an artist and educator who lives in Hamilton, OH with his wife and two cats.

**Suzanne Ushie** has been published in *Overtime*, *Open Wide Magazine*, *African Writer*, *Sentinel Nigeria* and *Saraba*. When she isn't writing she is pretending to write, reading, tweeting, watching a movie or daydreaming. She lives in Lagos, Nigeria.

**Emily Zasada** lives in Northern Virginia with her husband, son, and dog. Since graduating from college in the early 90's with an English degree and vague plans to become a writer, she has (among other careers/activities) owned a streaming video business, developed a deep affection for Photoshop, spent several years painting and selling realistic still lifes, and worked in web marketing for a startup software company. And while all of these things have been highly enjoyable, she decided about a year and a half ago to get back to the original writing plan. Since that time, she has written over thirty short stories. Currently, her living room is filled with stacks of short stories by her favorite authors; they can be found on top of and under tables, in stacks around her computer, and behind couch cushions. She can be reached at [ezasada@me.com](mailto:ezasada@me.com).

**Marianne Langner Zeitlin** is the author of three novels, *Mira's Passage* (Dell), *Next of Kin* (Zephyr Press), which won a City of Toronto Book Award, and *Motherless Child* (forthcoming, June 2012, Zephyr Press). Recent stories have appeared in *Passager*, *Aethlon*, *Scribblers on the Roof* and *Jewishfiction.net*. Through her long professional career, she has worked as a journalist, book critic, public relations director, and manager of an orchestra. She lives in Rochester, New York.

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