

Angel City Review



TALES FOR THE GENERATIONS THAT GOT SCREWED

30
MODERN
WRITERS

33 NEW
WORKS

"Startlingly fresh and eclectic anthology. It's everything!"

--- David LaChapelle, Artist

"Like Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* for the Internet Age. We need to read this."

--- Maxwell Williams, Technology Editor, *Good Magazine*

"Charles Bukowski would feel disturbingly at home in this darkly hilarious anthology!"

--- Sandra Tsing Loh, *The Madwoman in the Volvo*

GEN F



*An Anthology of Short Stories of Comic
Tragedies, Humiliations and Reversals of
Fortune for Those Displaced by Technology
and the Economy*

EDITED BY GORDY GRUNDY

Andrew Berardini, Ronee Blakley, Betty Ann Brown, Matty Byloos, Luca Celada, Paul Chavez, Shana Nys Dambrot, Michael Delgado, Harry Dunn, Gordy Grundy, Doug Harvey, James Hayward, Rich Henrich, Josh Herman, Sarah Hunter, Tulsa Kinney, Victoria Looseleaf, Christopher Michno, Diane Mooney, Martin Mundt, Holly Myers, Jill Paris, Dave Shulman, Hills Snyder, Kurt Thomas, John Tottenham, Matias Viegner, Buffy Visick, Dimitri Vorvolakos, Mary Woronov

Available in print and Kindle at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

FOR OUR CONTEMPORARY TIMES



POETS
WRITERS

·
INTERVIEWS
READINGS

·
LIVE FROM DTLA

·
TUNE IN
TUESDAYS
7PM

ANOTHER VOICE FROM THE CROWD

RADIOTITANS.COM

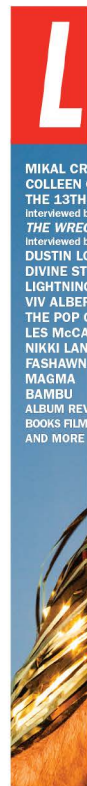
HOLLYWOOD

W E N D Y C. O R T I Z

NOTEBOOK



available now on amazon



L.A.'S ONLY MUSIC MAGAZINE **INTERVIEWS** ALBUM REVIEWS **LIVE PHOTOS** AND MORE
LOCAL AND INDEPENDENT SINCE 2005 FREE AT MORE THAN 300 LOCATIONS
READ **SUBSCRIBE** ORDER A COPY **AND CONTRIBUTE** AT LARECORD.COM
[INSTAGRAM/LARECORDMAGAZINE](https://www.instagram.com/LARECORDMAGAZINE) [TWITTER/LARECORD](https://twitter.com/LARECORD) [FACEBOOK/LARECORD](https://facebook.com/LARECORD)



Foreword

When initially starting this project, I questioned if there was really a need for another literary journal. There are tons of them out there already. In fact, you can walk in to most bookstores and find them on the shelves varying from \$7 to \$24 for the larger collections. The problem, though, is not everyone can afford to shell out even \$7 to experience new poetry and fiction. Also, many (but not all) of these journals are inaccessible to new and emerging writer making it difficult for new writers to be heard. With these two problems in mind *Angel City Review* was born. We are dedicated to providing cutting edge poetry and fiction for free on a twice-yearly basis in eBook format. Our goal is to be inclusive to writers of all backgrounds, whether they went to college, or never took a single creative writing class. There will also never be reader fees. Every issue will be anchored by a few more established names (with this issue being a little heavier on that end) but writers who you may not have even heard of yet will carry the brunt of it. This has been a long and arduous process and I hope you enjoy what you find inside. Los Angeles has a rich and diverse literary culture that is waiting to be tapped into and we plan to share that with you for many years to come.

Thank you for reading.

- Zachary Jensen

This Issue's featured artist
Photographer Dave Tada



Dave Tada is an LA-based photographer who specializes in fashion, editorial, and portraits. Born and raised in Salt Lake City, he picked up a camera at the age of 16. Mostly shooting bands, friends, and his pet Lhasa Apso, Goro...his love for photographing people and animals has remained with him. For more information about this artist you can visit <http://www.davetada.com/>

Angel City Review Issue 1 2015

Team:

Zachary Jensen: Founding Editor

Yair Ben-Zvi: Editor

Angie Rodriguez: Editor

Bennett Alon Cordon: Design

Additional Credits

Thank you to all the various part-time volunteer readers who came in to help over the numerous months. A big thank you to all the writers who donated their work to the journal. Without your work there would be nothing to fill these pages with. Thank you to Gloria Plaza for the logo design. And thanks to early donors who allowed us to not have to come out of pocket too much for initial costs: Anna Ishikian, Benjamin Harmon, Jeff Sadsad, Misty Green, Parthenia Grant, and Andrew Adams.

Table of Contents

Poetry

Dan Fante	<u>11</u>
Iris De Anda	<u>20</u>
F. Douglas Brown	<u>22</u>
	<u>24</u>
Ramón Garcia	<u>47</u>
	<u>48</u>
Christopher Mulrooney	<u>51</u>
	<u>52</u>
Alina Nguyen	<u>57</u>
	<u>58</u>
Kim Young	<u>75</u>
	<u>76</u>
D.M. Collins	<u>84</u>
Keith Niles	<u>87</u>
	<u>88</u>
Dorian Wood	<u>90</u>
Teresa Córdova	<u>93</u>
	<u>94</u>

Fiction

A. R. Castellanos	<u>14</u>
	<u>16</u>
Jess Mowry	<u>27</u>
Thea Manalang	<u>54</u>
Vincent Gutierrez	<u>61</u>
Cayla White	<u>71</u>
Jake Rarick	<u>78</u>
Erica Plouffe	<u>97</u>
Gordy Grundy	<u>110</u>





Lost in Ravenna | Dan Fante

If your lover is a dog – love dogs
If your heart is in the sea – love the sea
If your feet are on the sands of the desert – love the desert
But nothing is to be gained here on my broken TV set without life's gift of uncertainty
No peace
No enduring love
No self contained paradise
Can or will be mine until I appreciate my own lost-ness

Perhaps then, I am Dante - or Caligula
But who I am really
is not what I considered myself to be
I am a being within a being
a heart beating within a heart
a whisper contained within a scream

I am the tiles on your church floor and the shit on your streets
I am my greatest friend and my most hated enemy
I am a part of history and the hope of the future
I am the man next to you on the train - or your most feared executioner

I am my own best friend in a world of orchestrated chaos
In fact - I am a piece of eternity

I am who I say I am.

Strangely, my experience is that man is most perfect when he
believes himself to be lost

Dan Fante is the author of eleven books including *Chump Change*, *86'd*, *Mooch*, a memoir titled *Fante: A Family's Legacy of Writing, Drinking, and Surviving*, and the detective-mystery novel *Point Doom*. He teaches fiction writing courses at the UCLA extension program. He currently lives in Los Angeles with his family. <http://danfante.net/>



Night Beat
by A. R. Castellanos

I shopped for metal today. A hypothermic metal bed frame. An unblemished metal to carry my back. Metal. Burnished and dissonant to incarcerate my curv-I-linear mortality.

Late at night a heart talks to me. It speaks in jagged thumps and palpitations, a jazz ballad of history echoes throughout the night. The night beat.

En-ca-de-nada, I toss and turn. I am criminal, churlish, and duplicitous. Maldita and soft in too many places. Grinding and pyrrhic with an unfavorable calentura. I carry the quintessential makeup of what it is to not know how to die.

*

I excavate through the discarded chambers of the talking heart. It is malnourished and sleep deprived. It is my aunt's heart.

*

I remember a smattering of catholic candle wax, a drizzled tattoo, a gargantuan blotch in her sad dead ojos de hiero.

Tia, I whispered into her neck. Tears salted the hospital floor as my family looked on. Her skin glowed yellow, highlighting her carious teeth and bones. The white knitted blanket much too large for the hospital bed her bloated body lay atop of, hung down to the floor. Like a spider's web blowing in the wind, the woven pattern suspended unnatural and strong, fluttering to the slow tempo of the growing ocean of tears. A scrunched up tissue blotted red, lay on the side table, used and forgotten. I briefly wondered whose tears, whose blood, whose solid ache had stained the bright white tissue. I wanted to take it, to keep it in my pocket, to keep it close, to keep it safe. The fluorescent lighting casted a cold shimmer over every corner of the room leaving only the space above her head unconsumed, her hair a dirty chemical black wiry nest. She smelled of tears. Stone bathed in tears. I inhaled deeply, dormir, she whispered back to me.

I kissed her cheek. It rippled with life, as she lay there dead, drowning in sleep, too much sleep. Her body tired, having been dead for hours.

*

Now, I sleep in her bed. Five years and some coinage I've been sleeping in her bed. I sleep in her bed, awake in her diabetic hallucinations. I've slept in her bed, her heart talking to me.

When I exhumed her triangular heart I used my survivors pocketknife to extract it from my mahogany haunted headboard, her mahogany headboard, where it lay, aching for sleep. Hers. Not mine. Hers. I sleep, I breathe, I dream sawdust.

I speculate over oceanic crusts, will I die here tonight? I hope, I pray, I dangle with her heart packaged in my dirty splintered hair follicles, may I live for tomorrows metal bed frame.

I possess inconsequential shivers for the dead, for my dead, for my dead family, for the dead. I am the dead.

I shopped for metal today. What will she think of me?

Tonight I will sleep. The incandescent spheres of night will croon frantic and serpentine as they sweep away my aunt's gossamer heart. Sleep. We will finally sleep. Our hearts will sleep. If only I could afford a new mattress so I could be free of her bones rattling an infinite dance beneath my own. Night beat.

Medusa, Loving
by A. R. Castellanos

This phenomenon of getting older is really starting to freak me out. I'm not aging well. I feel like I'm not doing it right, as if my life has been stunted in the common sense department and my grip on reality is not a grip at all.

All I've got is dental floss. To hang on to. To worship. To breath my secrets through. Green floss, sometimes white. Crystalized floss, sometimes glossy. Vanilla mint, sometimes plain. It's worn and thin. I can hear a voice, it laughs every time I rip another strand off to lasso it into the ether.

I must be the butt of a cosmic joke. I like the sound of that. Cosmic Joke. It has to be cosmic. Anything less would be mortifying.

I can see a gnarled hand in my room. Creeping. The fingers are long and broken. Reaching. It dances in the air. There is no arm to guide it. Just a wrist and a hand. Threatening. Threatening me. Threatening to turn the light switch off. What's that light for anyway? I've got a lighter in my pocket. I stole it from that guy who smokes.

I think I'm a pervert, maybe even a riot starter. I often long to do inappropriate things to strangers. I want to pinch the finely sculpted ass of the hot girl in front of me when I stand in any line, and point to the maybe innocent guy standing next to me. I'll wear an appalled look on my face. I'll wait for her to slap him. Or. Kiss him.

Creator. I want to be a creator.

Maybe the hot girl with the finely sculpted ass and the presumably innocent guy need me. They need me to create a love story for them. Their wretched lives need me. Need some excitement. Need some love. Their bodies will mold together as they explore one another. Their love will be my creation. Their destinies will be my destiny. I can feel it. They'll love one another.

Listen to me. What has love done to me? I'm a pervert but I call it love. I am perverted. Pervert-esque. I long to fondle my boyfriend in public. I've recently realized that I stare at his crotch way too often. Private places, public places I'm staring. Wondering if his dick is thinking of me the way I think of it. Every two minutes I steal little glances. Flirting. Searching. I'm searching for love. I want him to love me the way I love him. I love to touch his face. I love running my hands through his longer hair, it's growing. He's growing it out for me. It grows.

A part of him is afraid of me. He's admitted it, shy smile, brown blush and curved eyes. Yet I can see the whisper of real fear that he hides beneath his fingernails. He fears me. I wish my eyes glowed yellow. A yellow so bright and menacing, a true measure of love. I'd hide in his closet and creak the door open late at night to watch him sleep. Creak. Creak. Creak. My eyes, a brilliant yellow, lightning in his room, bathing his face. My eyes. My eyes. My eyes. These almond eyes. I often. Wonder. That's all I do. Wonder. Does he see me? Wonder?

Next year I'll be 30. He promises to stay with me, to love me till all that's left is a rotting corpse. I need to make arrangements to be cremated. I can send everyone home from my funeral with a party favor. A small vial to wear around their necks or to swing on the rear view mirrors of their cars. Each filled. My ashes swirling. Whatever is left over, they can pour into an hourglass. I could spin time for them. I'll whisper for them to get a move on.

This phenomenon of getting older is really starting to freak me out. I'm not aging well. I feel like I'm not doing it right.

Perhaps this Sunday after I've loved my boyfriend carnal and all I'll give thanks. I'll want to rip his clavicle out. I'll want to wear it like a crown, my snaky hair curling around each end, holding it up. His muscle tissue, warm patches, fibers of his being, loving me. I'll want to be his queen, wear him, but I won't. Perhaps he should give thanks too.

I'm a creator. If I could just sit still long enough to create; time is wasting. The sun is setting and I can see the hand again. It's gnarled, broken and beautiful. Creeping.

A Los Angeles native, A. R. Castellanos writes poetry, fiction and memoir that draw upon her vibrant and tenacious ancestral heritage in Guatemala and California. Her conjured worlds encompass feral spirits, otherworldly legends, and the disconcerting realities of domestic workers in Hollywood celebrity homes. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Drunken Boat*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Chaparral*, *Duende*, and *Lunch Ticket* among others. Aside from writing, Castellanos loves watching movies over and over again with her dog Nola, a rare breed of wolf-bear. For more please visit arcastellanos.wordpress.com.



mercury in retrograde | Iris De Anda

Silly Girl
who do you think you are?
always blaming the stars
playing with fire
dancing at the edge
falling into dark corners
there is a guardian
roaming above your head
the reason you're not dead yet
always taunting
split second chances
runaway chases
take another sip
forget remembering
slip into night sky
don't care
play music loud
fast and louder
invoke wonder
thru muses
infuse this mess
you find yourself in
come up for air
come down from there
the ladder is waiting
the moon is lighting
the earth is calling you home

Iris De Anda is a writer, activist, and practitioner of the healing arts. A womyn of color of Mexican and Salvadorean descent. A native of Los Angeles she believes in the power of spoken word, poetry, storytelling, and dreams. She has been published in *Mujeres de Maiz Zine*, *Loudmouth Zine: Cal State LA*, *OCCUPY SF poems from the movement*, *Twenty: In Memoriam*, *Revolutionary Poets Brigade Los Angeles Anthology*, *Seeds of Resistance*, *In the Words of Women*, and online at *La Bloga*. She is an active contributor to *Poets Responding to SB 1070*. She performs at community venues and events throughout the Los Angeles area & Southern California. She hosts The Writers Underground Open Mic at the Eastside Cafe every third Thursday of the month. Author of *CODESWITCH: Fires From Mi Corazon* which can be found at www.irisdeanda.com

Ode to a Morning Paper | F. Douglas Brown

we've come up together hand in
hand my blood your ink

you've kept me
honest with the day

state taxes and sports ready
the given grind of events

this world would ruffle us both
could leave it as if it weren't

for my kin leave it the
way a paper boy tosses you thump

down jumpstart my morning
walk back to retirement's ease and pillow

and that's for me earned time to be
with you meanwhile your job is one bit

shock and awe grief and national
mourning *the king of pop is dead at 50*

is sharing my morning coffee
goddamn it I say

but you don't flinch never
budge the same resolve mama taught us

you bring me back to her
send me home to cook for my brothers

out of school to work with her
when she was sick like her you tell me

I'm a man every morning
you flip your white wings and the span

of my face unfolds
I swallow the facts march if need be

or bet on them horses wave
a fly away vote the idea

of a black president to life
and we sho' did, baby we sho' did

darlin' I frame your fringe and
frock to my wall at least the parts

telling me black folks can live
other than how we been living

Jacob Lawrence Ekphrasis: Frederick Douglass Series | F. Douglas Brown

Panel 7. olemarsterauldsaythisthegospeltruththatifyouteachthatniggertoread
therebenokeepinghim,andthaswhutmakemewoki'swoktowriteantoreadghazal

Ole Mr. Auld said, if you teach that nigger to read
there be no keeping him, so I became determined to read.

I saved biscuits and jam for the poor white boys, traded a piece of pork
for pencils and paper, or a lesson on cursive or a story read

aloud by someone who knew the correct pronunciation.
Sometimes I'd sing a bit, lull them to nap so I could read

an extra passage or poem. I could feel my stars alter their path,
a grand achievement evolving. To write is to fill my belly; To read,

is a pail of coal I can throw onto a fire deep inside me.
My heart burns through page after page. Read-

ing to the sunrise was not wise, but the risk was what I knew.
Like my mother, I only have a small torch to guide me. When I read,

I re-route her hideous twelve miles. By day, I hide books in holes,
brush the dirt off every night. Most of the time, I am alone, read-

ing to myself. Frederick Douglass, how spoiled you are to have a weapon
of this size. Freedom radiates from my face with each word I read.

F. Douglas Brown of Los Angeles is the author of *Zero to Three* (University of Georgia Press 2014), recipient of the 2013 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, and selected by Tracy K. Smith. Mr. Brown, an educator for twenty years, teaches English at Loyola High School, an all-boys Jesuit school. He holds a MA in Literature and Creative Writing from San Francisco State University, and is both a Cave Canem and Kundiman fellow, two organizations that cultivate the poetry of African-Americans and Asians respectively. His poems have appeared in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (VQR), *The Bat City Review*, *Toegood Poetry*, *The Sugar House Review*, *Cura Magazine*, *Muzzle Magazine*, *Transfer Magazine* and *Santa Clara Review*. Mr. Brown was featured in *Poets and Writers Magazine* as one of their Debut Poets of 2014 (Jan/Feb 2015). www.fdouglasbrown.com/



Double Acting (novel excerpt)

by Jess Mowry

"That's the last of it, dad," panted Mike, trudging out of the small shabby house.

It was only a little past noon, but the day was already hotter than hell and Mike was shirtless in jeans and sneakers, his muscular body shiny with sweat. He was only thirteen, but his chest was a pair of high-jutting bricks, his belly a perfectly sculpted six-pack, and his biceps bulged like baseballs even when relaxed. He was black as a panther at midnight, with a gently-rounded snub-nosed face and long-lashed ebony eyes, and wore his hair like a bushy cap.

His father was closing the doors of the boxy U-haul trailer. The man was almost as dark as his son, thirty-seven and strongly built though a little rolly around the waist -- he laughed at Mike's gentle urgings to jog -- and also wore only jeans and sneakers. "Welcome to Coyote Valley, son. We should have a beer to celebrate, but there's nothing but bottled water."

"And that's not even cold," puffed Mike, wiping sweat off his face. "When will they turn on the power?"

His father glanced at a sun-weathered pole out by the road that ran past the house. "They should have done it already. I sent an email a week ago, but people move slow out here."

"I can see why!" panted Mike, dog-shaking sweat from his hair. "I never knew it could get this hot, even with climate change!"

His father laughed. "It got this hot when I was your age and spent a summer here with my uncle."

"Wasn't that kinda boring?" asked Mike. "Since you were raised in Oakland?"

"It was at first," said his dad. "But it kept me out of city trouble... and at just the right time in my life. But wait until August if you think it's hot now. This is only the first of June. ...Think you can handle this, son?"

Mike puffed his chest, though it didn't need puffing. "I'm in shape so I can take it. Don't worry about me, just finish your book. It's gonna be a best-seller this time."

His father looked thoughtful. "Wish I could be that sure. Every black book is a first book no matter how many you've sold. ...And don't push yourself too hard with those weights. You're only thirteen once in this life, so just kick back and enjoy it sometimes. Don't always feel compelled to do something, or guilty for just day-dreaming. 'Getting active' includes your mind, and dreams are healthy, too. They get us in shape for our future. ...You might not understand that now... I didn't understand it then... but trust me you will when you're my age and remember what you didn't enjoy when you had the chance."

"Like, 'take time to smell the flowers?'" Mike glanced around. "If there were any flowers out here."

"There may not be any flowers, but the desert has its own kind of beauty. I enjoyed my summer here. Did a lot of reading and dreaming in the shade of that water tank out back."

Mike laughed. "Which might be why you became a writer. ...But weren't you worried about getting fat?"

"Kids didn't obsess about weight in those days, because they weren't brainwashed about it. Or a lot of other things we're told are 'healthy' now. But I did a lot of exploring, too." Mike's father pointed north-east. "There's a big copper mine ten miles up the road... though Uncle Joe wrote it closed last year, about six months before he passed. He also told me stories about a ghost town over those mountains. I always wanted to check it out, but that would have been a three day trip... a thirty mile hike up an old railroad track." He laughed. "And I didn't want to spend a night alone in an old ghost town."

“Cause of ghosts?” asked Mike.

“To be honest, yes. ...But now I wish I had.”

“Would you like to go back and be thirteen again? Do some of the stuff you didn’t do?”

“It’s the time to go exploring, physically and mentally. ...Some would also say spiritually, like Indian boys on vision quests.”

Mike laughed. “What if I got obese ‘cause I did too much mental exploring? And I don’t guess the spiritual kind burns any calories either.”

The man ruffled Mike’s hair, scattering jewels. “There would be more of you to love.” He poked one of Mike’s jutting pecs with a finger. “Lame as it probably sounds, it’s what’s inside a person that counts. And some of the so-called ‘healthiest’ bodies have the sickest minds.” He latched the trailer’s doors. “I have get this into town or they’ll charge for another day. Want to come along?”

Mike had already seen the “town,” appropriately named Coyote Flats, when they’d driven through on their way out here; a sun-baked huddle of ramshackle buildings, most with archaic square false fronts, that looked like an old western movie set. “Nah, that’s cool. I’ll start unpacking and set up my weights.”

“Going to set up your train?”

“...I don’t know,” said Mike. “Maybe I should have sold it to help us pay for gas.”

“We’re not that poor,” said his dad. “And you spent lots of time building that layout.”

“Not to mention money,” said Mike.

“Money is to use, Mike, not only for things you need, but also for things that make you happy. We had some then, and we’ll have some again. And it’s still my job to worry about it.”

“I was pretty out of shape just working on my train all the time.”

His father smiled. “You were always in perfect shape to me.” He got into the battered Land Rover, a 1963 Series Two. “Just take it easy at first. You’re not used to this Arizona heat. Drink lots of water, even if you’re not feeling thirsty.”

Mike patted his stony chest. “I wouldn’t wanna get dehydrated. You lose mass that way.”

“Okay, Mr. Teenage Universe.” His father glanced at a rusty windmill on a skeletal tower behind the house. The tower was maybe forty feet tall, and at its base on timber legs was a weathered wooden water tank. “Speaking of water... and if you want to ‘get active’... climb up there and unlock the vane. It’s chained so the fins can’t turn.”

“Why is it chained?” asked Mike.

“You chain it when the wind gets too strong, otherwise it could be damaged.”

“But there’s no wind,” said Mike.

“There’s strong winds here in spring and fall. Uncle Joe passed in February and someone, maybe a neighbor, chained the windmill down. But there’s usually an evening breeze, so it can start pumping tonight. The tank’s probably empty and the planks have shrunk, so it’s going to leak for a while. Best to get it started now if you want to take a shower next week.”

“Okay,” said Mike, eyeing the tower. “That’ll be good exercise... but I’m really gonna smell in a week.”

His father laughed. “Desert people tend to smell earthy. But I’ll buy a couple of water cans to get us through until the tank fills. ...And, speaking of mass, what do you want for dinner?”

“I saw a KFC in town... at least the sign on a shack.”

“Regular or grilled?”

“What’s the point of grilled if it’s supposed to be KFC? ...I’m not a freakin’ health-nazi, dad.”

His father laughed again. "Those people are really out of shape in all the ways that matter. ...I should be back in a couple of hours. Stay out of trouble, muscle-boy."

Mike gazed around at the desolate landscape of shimmering rust-colored desert. It reminded him of pictures of Mars. It was totally flat except for mountains, jagged and barren in the distance, that seemed to rise from rocky rubble. Otherwise there was nothing but sagebrush, and cactus bristling with savage spikes. "To get into trouble there's gotta be some, and I don't think there's any for a hundred miles."

His dad started the Rover's engine, which rattled a bit in the heat. "There's lots of rattlesnakes around here, and they can be trouble if you don't respect them."

Mike looked around again. "I haven't seen any."

"But I'm sure they've seen you. I left the snake-bite kit on the table. Check it out and read the instructions. Snakes won't bother you if you don't bother them, but be careful when you're walking around... look before you step over a rock to see what's on the other side. And don't reach into dark places."

Mike smiled. "Thanks for all the healthy advice."

Two

The road was only a twin-rutted trail, and the Rover raised a tail of dust as it rocked and rattled away, the empty trailer booming behind. The sound of its engine faded, leaving only sweltering silence. Mike watched from the shade of the house's front porch until the Rover reached the junction where the trail met a ribbon of two-lane highway, deserted except for a lone semi-truck that was only a speck in the distance. The junction was maybe a mile away, and there was a little general store that looked like an old trading-post in a movie, except for a pair of pumps in front, one for gas and one for diesel. They had stopped to buy Cokes coming in, Mike gratefully gulping a 16 ounce -- and trying not to feel guilty about it -- and the air-conditioning had felt like heaven after driving all night in the dry desert heat.

He scanned around again: there were only two other buildings in sight. To the south, about half-way to the store, was an ancient house of sun-weathered wood. Behind it was a big water tank like those in the days of steam locomotives. And there was a rusty windmill tower, the windmill hanging motionless. In the house's front yard was a yellow dump truck. Mike had been dozing when they'd driven past, but now he squinted at the truck. There was something wrong with the perspective; the truck looked almost as big as the house! Maybe it was closer and not really parked in front?

To the north, up the road, was a mobile home, a double-wide that looked fairly new, its white paint gleaming painfully. It was maybe a quarter mile away, and there was a swimming pool in front; one of those above-ground kind. Mike imagined how good it would feel to be in that sparkling water. He wondered if any kids lived there... hopefully around his own age. Then he went to the house's front porch and opened the squeaky screen door.

His new home was a tumbledown shack of sun-blasted boards with four little rooms and a rusty tin roof. There was some junky furniture in what passed for a living room... a sagging couch, an overstuffed chair that was no longer "over," a rickety wooden coffee table, and all of it furry with rust-colored dust. A kerosene lantern hung from a rafter beside a naked light bulb. The floor was bare boards, also covered with dust, and moving boxes were scattered around, though Mike and his dad hadn't brought very much because they didn't have very much... thanks to Mike's mother who'd won a big chunk of his dad's book earnings, still claiming -- despite her live-in boyfriend and a nice bungalow in Culver City -- she needed financial support.

There was a telephone on a wall, black like all phones used to be. Mike's grandmother -- his mother's mother -- had often sadly shaken her head and called Mike "black as a telephone." Mike's mother, much lighter than his dad, had never seemed to be sure of something, though Mike wasn't sure what she wasn't sure of until she had left a few years ago. He was also sure it wasn't true; his dad would surely have told him.

The phone had buttons instead of a dial but still looked a hundred years old. Mike lifted the dusty receiver but didn't hear a tone. He jiggled the hook but still got nothing. The swamp-cooler wouldn't work either until there was electricity, so it was hotter in here than outside.

On another wall hung a framed photograph, an ancient black-and-white faded to yellow, of a little steam train on a narrow-gauge track. Mike brushed some of the dust off the glass. His own model layout was steam, with a Rogers 4-6-0 locomotive... which looked like the one in this picture. The setting was in a desert, and he wondered if this was the train that had run to the ghost town over the mountains. Looking closer, he made out the words, COYOTE VALLEY & CODYVILLE RAILROAD on the locomotive's tender, which seemed to confirm that it was... or had been. The date in the corner of the photo was June 13, 1897.

Then he went to his own little room, which also contained a few moving boxes, including one full of books. Mike read a lot, though these days mostly in bed at night because it wasn't an active pastime. Another box held his H.O. train, though there hadn't been room in the trailer to bring the layout board. He'd have to build another layout... assuming he wanted to.

They hadn't brought any furniture, selling it all to pay for gas, and Mike's "new" bed was an iron skeleton with a starving mattress on sagging springs. There was a dynamite box beside it fronting as a night table, with a kerosene lantern on top, plus a shabby chest of drawers with a darkly de-silvering mirror. A bare bulb hung on frayed wires from a rafter. His weight bench stood half set up in a corner. He would have to find something to use as a desk to put his computer and games on. He was fairly good with tools, thanks to helping his dad with projects on their former home, so he could build a bookshelf.

The room was like a pizza oven. Mike's jeans were soaked with sweat from toting in the boxes, and his shorts felt like he'd gone swimming in them. He stripped buck-bare, then opened the one grimy window -- its frame, like all the wood in the house, shriveled by decades of desert heat -- which only seemed to increase the heat. He glanced at the other old house in the distance -- the truck couldn't be that big! -- then studied himself in the murky mirror. His body looked cool all shiny with sweat, like he'd oiled for a body-building show -- not that he'd ever been in one, except when posing for himself -- but damn it was hot! Maybe he should start unpacking and finish setting up his weights?

But it was too hot for that now. He thought about sweeping the dust from his room -- it was like an indoor desert -- but it was too hot to do anything! He padded into the tiny kitchen at the back of the house, which boasted a box-like wood-burning stove and a tin sink with only one faucet. The rusty refrigerator, a 1930s General Electric with motor and cooling coils on top, wasn't working, of course, but he drank a hot bottle of water, one of four left in a six-pack. That reminded him of the windmill.

He opened the back door and studied the tower. There was an iron ladder, so climbing would be no problem. Would he need tools? His dad's toolbox was in the Rover, but he had a small set of his own. He should take a couple of Crescent wrenches in case the chain was bolted.

The tower wasn't far away, maybe a hundred feet, and the ground was open except for sagebrush, and cactus with an attitude... nowhere, it seemed, for a snake to hide. He noticed a collapsing outhouse, which obviously hadn't been used since indoor plumbing had been installed... maybe fifty years ago. A snake might be lurking inside. Would it come after him?

He took the snake-bite kit off the rickety kitchen table. The instructions were in pictures, and he winced at the one that showed how to slice. ...But, what if he got bit on his butt? He felt around on his tight behind and decided he could manage. He took it into his room, donned a fresh pair of jeans commando -- it was too hot for boxers -- put on his sneaks without socks, and slipped the kit into a pocket. Then he got the wrenches and went out through the kitchen door.

Total silence ruled the desert. Total silence and hellish heat.

Staying away from the outhouse, he went to the base of the tower. Climbing was harder than he'd expected. Despite being in really good shape, the heat seemed to suck out his strength, and he was puffing and pouring sweat by the time he'd climbed the first twenty feet. His jeans were sodden and slipping low, and he paused at the top of the water tank to pull them up a little. The tank had a wooden cover, and there was a small trap door. He opened the door and peered in. Like his father had said, it was empty, and there were slits of sunlight where its planks had shrunk.

Closing the door, he continued his climb, and after a lot more sweating, finally reached the top of the tower, which gave him a bird's-eye view of the sun-shimmered valley floor. To the west was basically nothing until the mountains rose. To the north-east was a gigantic hole that looked like a meteor crater,

but was probably the copper mine. Maybe twenty miles to the south were the clustered buildings of Coyote Flats. To the east was also basically nothing...

Then he noticed a narrow line that might have been a railroad track. It was almost covered by tumbleweeds and camouflaged by sagebrush, but angled south-west from the copper mine to run past the big water tank behind the house down the road... which must have been a water stop for steam trains long ago.

Then he examined the windmill. The chain had been knotted, not bolted, and it only took a minute to untie the links and extend the vane. He figured out how to latch it in place -- steam-age technology -- then rotated the fins. The bearings should have been oiled, but the oil can was in the Rover, so he'd do that when his dad returned. Then he climbed wearily down. Reaching the ground and dripping more sweat, he looked back up the tower. It couldn't be more than forty feet tall, but he felt like he'd climbed four-hundred!

He thought of ice-cold drinks at the store. It was only a mile away.

Three

The afternoon air was even hotter as Mike came out on the porch, clad in fresh jeans and sneakers without socks. Sweat trickled down from under his arms, the scent of him strong in the blistering air but basically boyish and not really bad. ...Healthy sweat, he supposed.

His BMX leaned against the porch rail, but he paused to consider if it was smart to try to ride anywhere in this heat. A shadow swept over the ground as a real Hollywood movie vulture came to rest on the telephone pole and seemed to eye him in speculation. Would it follow him if he rode to the store?

Looking away uneasily, he scanned the heat-shimmered landscape. The sky was cloudless and brilliantly blue, and the line of telephone poles by the road dwindled into infinity like a drawing lesson in vanishing-points. He shaded his eyes from the glare of sunlight blazing on basically nothing. South was the highway, and there was the store. Closer stood the ancient house with its strangely huge truck in front... it couldn't be that big! Up the rutted road to the north was the mobile home with its swimming pool... which looked like an oasis.

He imagined a beautiful girl lived there. A girl of thirteen, of course. She would go swimming every day in nothing but a bikini. ...Maybe, since there was no one around, she would go swimming without the bikini! She probably wouldn't be black, but Mike wasn't prejudiced... assuming she wasn't. His dad had a pair of binoculars, so Mike could peep her on the sly... maybe from the windmill tower. Her breasts would be large and perfectly round, and she would have a Hollywood body with everything that promised. He pictured himself going swimming with her, and maybe doing... other things. Like hugging and kissing at least. She would be smart, but not too smart. ...At least no smarter than him.

Mike had imagined her so well that he forgot he was. How to make first contact? Why not ride his bike up the road? The girl would be getting ready to swim, putting on her bikini right now... or maybe putting on nothing. She would be lonely all by herself way out here in the desert. The timing would be perfect! She would come out as he rode by. And he would be all sweaty, so she would offer him something to drink. Maybe even an ice-cold beer.

He started to mount his bike despite the ominous vulture... but then someone did come out on the porch of the distant mobile home!

Mike felt a little shocked... like he'd wished for something and gotten it, but wasn't sure what to do with it. He'd always been shy around girls, but, by building up his body, he'd found them to be more attracted to him. ...Not that it had gotten him much: the ones who wanted to feel his muscles and always begged him to lose his shirt never had anything to say. At least not much he wanted to hear... he already knew he had a buff body. And they only read books when they had to for school. He shaded his eyes with a hand and frowned... it wasn't a girl, dammit!

It was hard to see in the distance through wavering ghosts of heat, but it seemed to be a young boy; a gawky but sloppily swag-bellied boy clad in nothing but short cutoff jeans. Maybe he was going swimming? The kid left the mobile home's front porch, but mounted a mini-bike, the kind with small wheels and a skeleton frame. He reached down and pulled the starter rope. There was a burst of blue-tinted smoke, and a moment later came the snarl of a bratty one-cylinder engine. The kid throttled up and burned away, skidding sideways into the road and roaring in Mike's direction while trailing a tail of dust. The vulture gave a croak and took off.

Was the kid on his way to the store, Mike wondered? Or was he coming to check his new neighbors? Mike decided to be cool: like his father said, you never got a second-chance to make a first-impression.

Pretending he hadn't noticed the kid, he leaned his bike against the porch rail and walked to the mail box out by the road as if just going to check it. He waited until the mini-bike had gotten close before turning to look, though only a deaf person wouldn't have heard it miles away in the silence. The boy locked the brake and slid to stop, spewing dust all over Mike.

He looked about twelve with a mop of blond hair that smothered his shoulders and almost covered big blue eyes, and had what Mike called a "gamer body," shapeless and soft as if made of pudding, with big bobby orbs for a chest... sort of how Mike had looked last year. But this kid had an appalling belly besides just being out of shape... a wobbly mass like a pillow of Jell-O that spilled onto the bike's gas tank, its flattened navel a smart-ass smirk. He was deeply tanned to an old-penny shade, which made his blue eyes even brighter and his shaggy hair look almost white. He had an open-mouthed impish face with a hint of a small second chin, and huge buck teeth that he didn't brush much. Low on his hips was a wide leather belt, and there was an old cowboy gun in a holster, so massive it looked like a cartoon cannon, its barrel almost dragging the ground. Most of the blueing was worn off its steel, leaving it dull silver-gray, and its brass parts were tarnished dark gold. Mike didn't know much about guns, but he'd seen hundreds in pawn shops when his father's royalty checks had dwindled, and this might have been an old Navy Colt.

"Wuttup, nigga?" asked the kid, over the chug of his idling engine.

Mike was shocked and then felt pissed. "What did you call me?"

"I said it with an A," said the kid, sounding innocent enough despite being heavily armed. "Don't you call yourselfs niggas?"

"Only retarded niggas."

The kid smirked. "Or maybe only retarded ones don't."

Mike decided to stay cool and pretended to check the rusty mail box, which had a huge spider inside. It was only a dumb little kid... even if he had a huge gun.

"It came already," said the kid, over-emphasizing "came." "It cuuums in the mornin'," he added, as if Mike hadn't gotten the clue. "Expectin' a Hustler?"

"No!" said Mike, slamming the box.

"I gots a subscription," announced the kid, which pretty much trashed his innocence. "What's your name? I'm Scooter."

"Mike," said Mike.

"You smoke, homeboy?"

"Hell no! It's the worst thing you can do to yourself... except for getting obese."

"Bullshit," said the kid. "I smoked since I was ten." He patted his loose sprawl of belly, which quivered to the throb of the engine as if it was its own life form. "An' I'm healthier than you are, homes."

"Like shit!" said Mike, puffing his chest. Except for his dramatic tan, the kid looked exactly like a gamer who sprawled on a couch or his bed all day, never ate anything but junk, or used any muscles except in his fingers.

"Yeah?" said Scooter. "I ain't the one all sweaty, an' pantin' like a dyin' dog."

Mike scowled for a moment. Scooter stank of tobacco smoke, and there was beer on his breath. And there was another suggestive scent that proved he wasn't innocent... at least not with himself. Mike decided the kid was drunk so maybe he should cut him some slack... and he had said it with an A. "I'm just not used to this heat."

Scooter blasted a burp, strongly scenting the air with beer. "Ain't it hot in Africa?"

"...Not so much in California."

"Cool! Hollywood?"

"Thousand Oaks."

"Is there?" asked Scooter.

"Is there what?"

Scooter snickered. "A thousand oaks, duh. Did you count 'em to make sure you wasn't cheated?"

"That's retarded, man."

"You're retarded, fool." Scooter checked Mike up and down. "How'd you get all them muscles?"

"I work out and eat healthy."

"That's gotta be a boring life. You drink beer at least?"

"Sometimes."

"Maybe there's hope for you yet, my man. Gots any?"

Mike was starting to get really pissed... but the kid had a swimming pool. "My dad will bring some back. He went to drop off the trailer in town."

"Does he smoke?"

"Hell no!"

"What's his game?"

"What do you mean?"

"You sure you're black? What's he do for green, duh?"

"He writes books."

"Dirty books?"

"No, goddammit! Ghost stories."

"That's kinda cool," Scooter admitted. "Are they full of blood an' guts, an' people gettin' their faces ripped off?"

"They're the classical kind. With ghosts and haunted houses... like, set in Victorian times."

"Like steam punk, only with ghosts?"

"...Guess you could say that," said Mike.

"I mostly watch movies," said Scooter. "Only read when they make me in school."

"Big surprise," said Mike.

"We gots a dish. Gets 200 channels. You gonna get one, bra?"

"...Maybe."

"Ya better, dawg. 'Cause otherwise there's only two channels an' both of 'em suck. ...Does your dad make lots of money?"

Mike shrugged. "Enough... most of the time. But writing's not a steady income." He thought of his mother demanding a chunk, but that was nobody's business... especially a drunk little kid's. "That's why we came here," he added. "My great-uncle left him this house. ...Did you know him?"

"He was pretty cool," said Scooter... which surprised Mike a little. "Told me lots of stories 'bout what this place was like in the ol' days." He pointed north-east. "Said when he first come here, like, maybe when he was your age, there was a train went over them mountains to a town called Codyville... 'cept it's a ghost town now. You can still see the tracks goin' up to the pass." Then he smirked again. "But now it's mostly losers who end up in Coyote Valley."

"You're in Coyote Valley," said Mike.

"I was born here, what's your excuse? My mom's a cocktail waitress at the Rattlesnake Saloon in town. That's a steady income, doc. She gets big tips an' buys me stuff."

"That's nice," said Mike. He wondered if he should blow the kid off... but he had a swimming pool.

"What kinda car you gots?" asked Scooter.

"A Land Rover."

"Like a Jeep?"

"Way better," said Mike.

"How much it cost?"

"It's an old one, a classic. Like in African movies."

"Figures," said Scooter.

"You always a smart-ass?" asked Mike.

"Better than bein' a dumb-ass. Jeeps are better, my mom gots a new one. One of her boyfriends bought it for her."

"One of her boyfriends?" asked Mike.

"Hell yeah, pimp, get down with what's up. An' another one bought us the mobile home, an' another one bought us the swimmin' pool."

"That's nice," said Mike again. The kid really pissed him off... but he had a swimming pool. "You have any brothers or sisters?"

"I murdered 'em all," said Scooter. "Popped a cap in their bitch ho asses. Then I cut off their heads with a chain saw an' drank their blood with fava beans an' a nice chianti. Then I chopped 'em into pieces, burned the bodies an' buried the evidence. Then I said a prayer to Satan."

"Didn't that piss off your mom?"

"I told her they ran away an' went to Hollywood. They changed their names an' became porn stars. Had sex-change operations in Sweden so she'd never recognize 'em."

"Guess you do get 200 channels."

"I'm gonna be a porn star," said Scooter. "An' have a bunch of rich boyfriends."

"Um?" asked Mike. "Are you gay?"

"Nah. But rich gay boys will buy me stuff."

"Why not rich girls?" asked Mike.

"Boys are more desperate. That's what mom says. ...Bet I could get you to buy me stuff."

"I'll never get that desperate," said Mike.

"Give it time. ...Gots any games?"

"A few," said Mike.

"X-rated ones?"

"No!" Mike was really getting pissed... but Scooter had a swimming pool.

Scooter revved his engine. "I'll cumm over later an' check 'em out. I ran outta smokes, an' since you don't... which is pretty retarded... I gotta go to the store. I usually drive my Hummer, but it's in the shop this week."

Mike frowned. "They sell you cigarettes?"

"They think they're for my mom. But they won't sell me beer, goddammit, an' I wanted to get real drunk today. Nothin' else to do in this suckhole."

"Not even with 200 channels?" asked Mike.

"I seen it all before."

"You could go swimming," suggested Mike.

"I dropped my iPod in the water this mornin' when I was jackin'-off. I lay on a air raft an' do it a lot." He reached obscenely under his belly. "I might let you watch if you pay me."

"That would be desperate," said Mike.

"I'll stop on the way back," said Scooter. "Maybe you'll change your mind."

"I doubt," said Mike.

"Gots a computer?"

"Yeah, a Mac."

"PCs are better. I gots a new one. You gots an iPod?"

"Yeah."

"Can I borrow it?"

"It's still packed."

"That sucks. Well, see ya later, pimp. When I cumm back to check out your games."

"What about swimming?" asked Mike.

"Could happen, homes... if you're nice to me. An' my crib's air-conditioned. Gots 220 refrigerated, freeze the balls off a polar bear."

"Okay," said Mike.

"See ya, mac-daddy."

"Um?" asked Mike, as Scooter throttled up his engine. "Anybody else live around here?"

"Just that rattlesnake by your foot."

"...SHIT!"

Scooter laughed. "Never jump, retard. Just stand still. ...See, you made it coil up an' rattle. Now it's pissed at you."

"...Aren't you going to shoot it?"

"Why? It ain't gonna bite me."

"...Um... what should I do?"

"Kiss your ass goodbye."

"That's not funny, asshole!"

"I thought it was... asshole. Just stand there an' it'll go away. It can't stay out in the sun very long. ...Hey, what if it bit my dick? Then you'd have to suck it."

"Oh shut up!" Mike forced himself to stand very still when every instinct screamed to run. Watching the rattling snake, he asked, "So, there's nobody else around here but you?"

"I'm all you need, but..." Scooter jerked his chin toward the weathered old house with the big yellow dump truck in front. "There's Little Coyote."

"Little Coyote?" asked Mike, wondering if something else might attack, but scared to look around. He kept his eyes on the coiled snake, which had stopped rattling but was still watching him.

"He's an Indian an' you won't like him."

The snake was uncoiling slowly, and Mike was staying very still. "Why wouldn't I like him?"

"Cause he's obese an' you hate obese people."

"I never said I hated them, I just don't want to be one."

"You gots all them muscles so you gotta hate 'em."

"...Why?"

"Cause you do shit you don't like to do, thinkin' you're addin' years to your life." Scooter thumbed his bobby chest. "But us fat dudes do what we like, an' that really pisses you off, 'cause we're addin' life to our years."

Mike had never considered that. Did he really like building his body as much as working on his train? It was hard to admit that a drunk little kid might have shaken his faith -- even for just a second -- like "health" was a religion and Scooter had pissed in his church. Lamely he said, "You're not really fat, just out of shape."

Scooter patted his belly. "I'm in perfect shape for me 'cause I like who I am."

Mike felt his heart begin to slow down as the snake finally slithered away. It seemed stupid to argue about getting active when just standing still had saved his ass. "How old is Little Coyote?" he asked.

“Bout your age,” said Scooter. “But he don’t gots a swimmin’ pool, air-conditioning an’ 200 channels.” Scooter blinked his big blue eyes. “An’ he ain’t as cute as me.” He scooted forward on the bike, baring more of its leather seat. “Wanna cuuum with me to the store? Maybe they’ll sell you beer ‘cause you’re black an’ might pop a cap if they don’t.”

“I doubt,” said Mike, wiping new sweat from his face as the snake glided over Scooter’s bare foot and disappeared across the road. “And I don’t have a gun.”

“Thought you thugs packed steel.”

“You watch way too much TV.”

“They gots a few games at the store, an’ a lotta good shit to eat. You can start buyin’ me stuff.”

Mike was tempted to go, thinking of air-conditioning and another 16 ounce soda... after this shit he deserved one! But, what if he got pissed at Scooter -- more than he already was -- and had to walk back in this heat? ...With vultures watching him. “Nah... but thanks. I gotta start unpacking. Set up my weights.”

“Weights are for retards who don’t like themselves, an’ muscles don’t make ‘em no smarter.”

“You basically said that already,” said Mike.

“But you don’t believe it yet. ...I gots a new Wi.”

“Let me guess,” said Mike. “One of your mom’s boyfriends bought it?”

“If they’re nice to me, mom’s nice to them, so I play ‘em a lot.” Scooter revved his engine again and burned away in a cloud of blue smoke, spewing more dust over Mike. “Stay chilly, homeboy!”

Mike watched him go with very mixed feelings. A few minutes ago this had been an adventure like Indiana Jones & Son, but now he was stuck in a desert suckhole with no one around but a smart-ass kid and some Indian dude named Little Coyote... who was allegedly obese and didn’t have a swimming pool.

He looked down the road at Scooter’s dust. Maybe he should ride to the store? Scooter was better than having no friends. ...And he had air-conditioning, plus a swimming pool. Maybe if he took it slow he could get there and not have a heat stroke. He searched the sky for vultures, but maybe Scooter had scared them off... he’d probably make an unhealthy meal, even for a vulture.

Mike walked back to the house, cautiously scanning for snakes on the way. ...Then he thought he saw a shadow dart away from the door. ...A dog? ...Or something else that might want to kill him? He froze, suddenly wishing he had a gun, but nothing was there. ...Probably just a heat ghost.

His jeans were soaked with sweat again -- after almost stepping on a snake he was lucky that’s all they were soaked with -- so he peeled them off in the living room. He drank another hot bottle of water to prime himself for the ride to the store, then donned his last pair of fresh jeans, left the house, mounted his bike, and pedaled slowly down the road. A horned-toad scuttled out of his way, and he saw several lizards and one brown snake... which fortunately didn’t rattle or he would have fled for home.

Four

Little Coyote's shabby house wasn't much bigger than Mike's, but looked a century older. Its sun-blasted boards had never known paint and were starkly eroded by wind and sand. But Mike was amazed by the dump truck... it really was almost as big as the house! Its dual rear tires were six feet tall, and even the smaller tires in front were twice the size of an 18-wheeler's. There were no side panels on its long hood, and the engine was also awesomely huge. The radiator was guarded by mesh that looked strong enough to head-butt a tank; but the vehicle also looked very old, like something from the 1930s. Its yellow paint was chalky and faded with patches of orange rust all over like some gigantic Tonka toy forgotten in a kid's sandbox... a kid from Gulliver's Travels in the land of giants.

Mike stopped to study the mammoth truck after checking the road for snakes. Like most boys who'd played with Tonka toys, it was like a dream come true... even if too late for him. Then he noticed someone underneath in the massive vehicle's puddle of shade who seemed to be pumping a grease gun like his father did on the Rover.

Mike squinted against the sun glare... if that was "Little" Coyote, the truck was a Matchbox toy! The truck's ground clearance was at least three feet, and the dude seemed to need every inch of that as he wiggled and wallowed around in the dirt applying the gun to various fittings. Mike couldn't see him very well... except that he was **FAT!**

He didn't seem to have noticed Mike, busy with his greasy work, and Mike was tempted to just ride on. He could be "nice" to Scooter -- up to a non-perverted point -- if it got him into that swimming pool and under refrigerated air, but what could he possibly have in common with any dude who was that obese?

He watched the mammoth boy at work beneath the mammoth truck. He really didn't hate fat kids; mostly he felt sorry for them because they got dissed and ridiculed. And, of course, they weren't healthy. But, maybe Scooter had been right and only losers ended up here?

Mike hesitated, one foot on a pedal. On the other hand, this huge fat dude was the only other boy in the 'hood. He probably wasn't very smart -- no one that obese could be -- but his mind was probably cleaner than Scooter's. And at least he was doing something instead of playing video games.

The sun blazed down on Mike's ebony skin, and he'd probably sweated two bottles of water and maybe more already. He glanced at the store, a half mile closer, and thought of air-conditioning and chugging a liter of icy Coke. His dad would be coming back in an hour and would probably stop for beer, so even if he got pissed at Scooter he wouldn't have to ride home on his bike.

Then a voice called, "Hi."

Almost feeling trapped somehow, Mike returned the greeting, his dry throat turning it into a croak. He walked his bike to the mammoth old truck while the mammoth young boy wallowed out from under, reminding Mike of a blubbery seal floundering across a beach.

The dude wore only jeans and sneaks, though he hardly "wore" the jeans at all, more than half baring a gigantic bottom like two copper moons colliding, and overhung by the rolls of his waist as he finally got to his feet. Mike had never seen so much fat... at least on one person, especially a kid! The dude's belly hung almost down to his knees, with a navel like a railroad tunnel, and he had to lean backward to balance its mass, which rippled like Jell-O with every move. His chest was a pair of water-balloons that looked about ready to pop, and he had more rolls than a bakery, even under his blubber-bulked arms. He wasn't any taller than Mike, though at least three times the diameter, and must have weighed almost five-hundred pounds.

...Which meant he was a hundred-pound boy carrying four-hundred pounds, a concept that awed Mike a little.

He was old-penny copper all over, though further darkened by rust-colored dirt, and his ragged jeans looked more like leather blackly soaked with oil. They barely managed to cling to vast hips; and only the toes of his battered sneaks showed beneath their ground-dragging cuffs. His hair was also black and oily, flowing over the orbs of his chest and halfway down his rolly back. His double-chinned face was as round as a moon, with cheeks that engulfed a small button nose, and his eyes were shiny obsidian, though all but hidden under his hair. His scent matched his size but was not really bad -- mostly very earthy boy -- though he wasn't sweating much, at least compared to Mike. Nor was he panting like Mike despite the effort of getting up... a process that took half a minute. His smile was open and friendly, which, at least where Mike came from, usually meant a short-bus kid; though Mike couldn't see enough of his eyes to confirm what he suspected.

But nobody cool would have gotten that fat!

The dude had already said hi, and Mike's reply didn't count. A slow kid would have babbled, eagerly offering all he had in hope of making a friend, but it seemed up to Mike to make the next move.

"Little Coyote?" said Mike.

"Yeah," said the dude, offering a greasy paw displaying dimples instead of knuckles, the grease gun still in the other. "I saw you meeting Scooter."

"Mike," said Mike. Little Coyote's enormous belly made it hard to get close enough for a shake; and then it wasn't really a shake, only a strong but very brief grip. Yet, he felt as if Little Coyote had gotten a lot of data somehow, while all Mike got was grease. Then the dude, though still looking friendly, didn't offer anything else... which, Mike had to admit, was cool.

Not knowing their relationship, it wouldn't be cool to dis Scooter. ...Or maybe not to dis him. "I just moved into the house up the road." That was uncool babble, but maybe cooler than nothing.

"I saw you," Little Coyote said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, the same as his previous statement.

Mike caught himself before saying "um" and raised his eyes past the mammoth boy to the gigantic truck. "That's cool," he said. "What is it?"

That might have deserved, "a truck," but Little Coyote went on smiling. "A Euclid."

"Never heard of those," said Mike.

"Don't feel bad, most people haven't. They were made for mines and quarries. This is a 1947 with a Cummins 220 engine."

"Cool," said Mike, and it kind of was. He walked around to the back of the truck, noting only one tail light, ruby glass and tiny. Up close he couldn't see into the bed because it was so high off the ground, but he'd seen from the road it was empty, and totally red with rust.

"Hauls twenty tons," said Little Coyote, laying his gun on the truck's running-board.

"Cool," said Mike, impressed. "So it runs?"

"Sure. Been working on it for a year. Cleaned the injectors and rebuilt the pump. Changed all the oil and filters, and put on new belts and hoses."

"Cool," said Mike again, understanding some of that from helping his dad on the Rover. "What do you use it for?"

"Cruising and going to the store."

Mike studied the dude but he looked on the real. He was wondering whether to ask what it cost when Little Coyote went on:

"Used to visit your great-uncle. He told me about you and your dad."

"I never met him," said Mike.

"He hoped you'd come out here someday."

"Makes me kinda sad," said Mike. Then, despite himself, he added, "...Um... did he...?"

"Die in the house?"

"...Yeah," said Mike.

Little Coyote nodded. "Peacefully in his sleep. He was a hundred and seven, so it probably didn't surprise him."

"We didn't know how old he was." Mike turned back to the truck, and Little Coyote said:

"They were gonna scrap it when they shut down the copper mine."

"That was retarded," said Mike.

"Go figure," said Little Coyote. "But I used to help in the shop up there, washing parts and stuff, and the foreman said if I could get it home he'd forget about it."

"Cool," said Mike, admiring the tires, eight inches taller than he was, though obviously ancient and heavily scarred.

"I needed something to get around, and I'm way too fat for a mini-bike."

Mike glanced at Little Coyote again, but he only seemed to be stating a fact, not dissing himself before someone else did like a lot of fat kids had learned to do. "It fits you, man."

Little Coyote patted his belly, making it ripple in waves. "Figured you'd notice sooner or later."

"...Um, guess it don't bother you?"

Little Coyote grinned. "What?"

Mike laughed and turned to the truck again. "It's kinda like a huge model."

"You build models?" asked Little Coyote.

"Had an H.O. train layout, but then I got my weights."

"It shows."

"Figured you'd notice sooner or later."

"Building a model of Mike?"

"...Kinda, I guess," said Mike, though he'd never thought about it that way.

"I build ships, wanna see 'em?"

"Sure."

Little Coyote waddled to the house, every inch of him in motion. He tortured a sagging wooden step, inflicted pain on a protesting porch, and opened a screechy screen door.

"Your parents home?" asked Mike, then wondered if that was cool, considering he didn't have plural parents, along with a lot of other kids.

"Just got my big sister," said Little Coyote. "Rents in the Happy Hunting Ground."

"...Oh, sorry," said Mike.

"It was a long time ago. Crashed their car but saved a coyote."

"Still sorry," said Mike.

"It's not all bad, the coyotes owe me."

"...Oh," said Mike, supposing it was an Indian thing.

"My sister's at work," Little Coyote added. "She cooks at the Coyote Cafe in town." He pointed to the distant highway. "Truckers get off the Interstate and take this old valley road... come fifty miles out of their way just to eat her cooking."

"Guess she rules the range," said Mike.

"Hey, that's good."

"What tribe are you?"

"Apache. And you?"

"...Orphan African, I guess."

"We're a little luckier, the palefaces just stole our land."

The house was built to an ancient style, with tongue-and-groove walls and lofty ceilings, the latter plated with patterned tin. The tube-and-post wiring had probably been added in the 1920s. There didn't seem to be air-conditioning, but the house, though hot, was cooler than Mike's, and curtains tamed the savage sun, making it shadowy inside. The living room was surprisingly neat -- though Mike wondered why that surprised him -- and simply furnished in what he supposed was desert Native-American. Indian blankets -- naturally -- covered most of the walls, along with a couch and a chair, both of which showed sagging signs of Little Coyote's size. There was a small TV, and a 1970s stereo with a stack of eight-track tapes -- Stones, The Doors, Pavlov's Dog, REO Speedwagon, and Bad Company -- along with a pair of kerosene lamps that were obviously more than decorations. There were lots of beads and feathers, and a colorful -- Navajo? -- rug on the floor. Several bone-white animal skulls, maybe dogs' -- or coyotes' -- seemed to watch Mike with long-vanished eyes. The skulls made him think of something.

"Um... when my great-uncle died...?"

"The coyotes told me," said Little Coyote. "He didn't decompose in the house."

"...Oh," said Mike.

"I called the sheriff. Then me and my sister went over and stayed till Doctor Pritchard came... he's the coroner, too." Little Coyote smiled. "Your great-uncle isn't haunting the place."

"How did you know I...?"

"Logical progression of thought."

"Did you lock the windmill?"

"You're kidding, right? I sent Scooter up to do it."

"Oh. Thanks."

"Guess you unlocked it?"

"Yeah, but the tank's all shrunk."

"It'll probably leak for a while. Come over for water anytime."

"Thanks. ...Did this used to be water stop?"

"Yeah. For the Coyote Valley and Codyville railroad. The tracks are still out there. They run north-east past the copper mine, then switch-back up the mountains."

"I saw 'em from the windmill," said Mike.

There were many shelves of books taking up almost a wall by themselves, which also surprised Mike a little. He paused to scan the titles: lots of old-time stories for boys from the early 1900s when boys had adventures and invented things -- The Rover Boys, The Hardy Boys, The Steam Boys, and many others -- plus Dickens, Poe, and Hemingway, Steinbeck, Flannery O'Connor, H.P. Lovecraft, Lewis Carroll, Ralph Ellison, and Thorne Smith. There were also many sea stories; Moby Dick, all the Hornblower books, Typhoon by Joseph Conrad, We Didn't Mean To Go To Sea...

A shadow moved at the edge of Mike's vision. "You have a dog?" he asked.

Little Coyote gave him a curious look. "Did you see one?"

"Guess not," said Mike.

Little Coyote went down a short hall that was barely wide enough for his bulk, the floorboards creaking loudly. Mike followed his copper colliding moons. A doorway showed a tiny bathroom similar to the one in Mike's house, with a high-tank toilet and tin shower stall. Little Coyote couldn't have fit in the stall, which seemed to explain his earthy-boy scent.

They passed another doorway, and Mike saw a kitchen with a wood-burning range, though there was also a microwave. And the fridge looked like a commercial model of gleaming stainless-steel. Brightly polished copper pots and blackened iron frying pans hung from hooks on doorless cupboards stacked with plates, bowls and cups with colorful designs. Dried red peppers hung from a nail, and there was a shelf of Mason jars containing herbs and spices. None of the jars were labeled; but who would need a label if they knew what they were doing? Little Coyote's sister obviously loved to cook... the progression of thought was obvious.

"Want a Coke?" asked Little Coyote.

"Yeah, thanks," said Mike, who felt like he could slam a whole sixer no matter how unhealthy that was.

The house's interior doorways were narrow, built before any codes, and Little Coyote squeezed his rolls through to open one of the fridge's doors.

LARD!

Came bellowing out at Mike like someone yelling FUCK in a church. There was a gallon can of the stuff, and it wasn't ashamed of its label! Mike stared in shocked fascination as if actually meeting the fabled Satan the god of health had warned him about.

It was hard to see around Little Coyote -- there was a lot to see around -- but the fridge had a lot of unhealthy food, though Mike himself drank real milk and not the milk-flavored water crap they made kids drink at school. ...And the sixers of San Miguel beer were cool. ...And there were fruits and vegetables; apples, oranges, limes and lettuce, onions, tomatoes and avocados. And a lot of cheese. Coke was only naughty to Mike... a very minor apprentice imp compared to Satan LARD!

But, Gansitos were DEVIL'S FOOD that made you fat just looking at them and thinking -- in Mike's case remembering -- how goddamn good they tasted.

The sour-cream was enticingly evil, making him think of big juicy tacos -- something else he'd given up -- and so was badass butter, reminding him of his dad's pancakes... of which he partook only sparingly now. But his eyes were always drawn to LARD, like a porno site that didn't pretend to be anything but what it was.

"Ground control to Major Mike." Little Coyote offered a bottle of Coke.

"...Oh, thanks."

"Looked like you were having a vision."

"...I'm kinda tired," said Mike, yanking his eyes away from LARD. "We drove all night. And I'm not used to this heat."

"Yeah, you should take it slow at first." Little Coyote got a Coke for himself. "Mad dogs and Englishmen..."

"I've heard that," said Mike, and wiped sweat from his face. "But now I know what it means." He laughed and popped the cap on his Coke. "Least you didn't say, 'ain't it hot in Africa.'"

"Sounds like Scooter." Little Coyote indicated a platter covered with aluminum foil. "You had lunch? My sister made beef and cheese burritos. I already ate, but there's two left. I can nuke 'em if you want."

"...I... don't normally eat lunch," said Mike.

Little Coyote raised an eyebrow, though only half seen beneath his hair. "What's normal about that?"

"...We had breakfast at a truck stop... about four o'clock this morning."

"The Buddhists say, 'when hungry eat, when tired sleep.'"

"...Guess I could eat one," said Mike.

Little Coyote took out the platter and unwrapped the foil, revealing a pair of enormous burritos, golden-brown and tempting as hell... even if they'd been made with LARD. "Only one?"

"...Yeah."

"Want sour cream?"

"...Um... sure."

Little Coyote slipped the platter into the microwave. "I'll join you, it's a long time till supper."

Little Coyote's den was also well supplied with books, their titles very eclectic, from *Wind In The Willows* to *Portnoy's Complaint*. It smelled like Little Coyote -- a lot -- but there was lots of him, and the bed was braced with railroad ties. There weren't any sheets, just an Indian blanket. Judging from the dude's ragged jeans, it wasn't surprising there weren't many clothes -- they wouldn't be cheap in his size -- and there wasn't a dresser. The only garments in evidence were a clean pair of jeans on a dynamite box and a blanket poncho draped on a hook. Maybe, being an Indian, he didn't wear shirts or socks? And, it was already obvious that shorts weren't part of his wardrobe.

There was a dog -- or coyote -- skull adorned with feathers on a wall, and a kerosene lamp on a box by the bed... another dynamite box. For sound there was only a small radio; for the Web an elderly Imac. A Winchester carbine, an old Yellow Boy, rested on pegs on another wall. It looked well-oiled and ready to shoot. Also not surprising, thanks to western movies, were the hawk feathers tied to its barrel.

"Great-grandfather fought for his freedom with that," said Little Coyote, tracking Mike's eyes.

"Unfortunately..."

"Yeah I know," said Mike.

The models were crazy awesome! All over the room were model ships filling homemade shelves, all beautifully built and perfectly painted. There was everything from clipper ships to various freighters and ocean liners, including a huge Titanic.

"These are cool!" exclaimed Mike, a burrito half-eaten in one hand, a half-empty Coke in the other; though it was somehow hard to believe this huge fat boy could have built them, those chubby paws had painted them, or could have done such delicate work. ...Or maybe it was hard to believe that under all that tangled hair and inside all that roly fat was someone who could do it. Sure, he could fix a big brutal truck, but rig a tiny sailing ship with lines as fine as spiderweb? Mike walked around saying "cool!" a lot, but then asked, "Why ships in the desert?"

"I like the ocean."

"...Oh. Ever been there?"

"Nah, but maybe someday."

Mike felt sad for a moment, imagining Little Coyote on a California beach and all the health-nazi hate he would get from assholes who only saw his size.

Another ship was being built, a steam freighter on a table at the single window. Mike leaned close to study it, but Little Coyote tapped his shoulder.

"There's a telephone truck in front of your house."

Mike squinted against the sun glare. "Guess I better go before it gets away."

"Wanna come over later?"

"Yeah," said Mike, realizing he did... even without a swimming pool, air-conditioning and 200 channels.

Jess Mowry was born on March 27, 1960 to an African-American father and a Caucasian mother, near Starkville, Mississippi. He has written fifteen books and many short stories for and about black children and teens in a variety of genres, ranging from inner-city settings to the forests of Haiti. Many of the novels are set in Oakland, California (USA), and deal with contemporary themes such as crack cocaine, drug dealers, teenage sexuality, school dropouts, and street slang.

In 1990, Mowry's first collection of stories, *Rats in the Trees*, won a PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award and was also published in the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan. In 1991, Mowry's first novel, *Children of the Night*, was published by Holloway House in Los Angeles. In 1992, his second novel, *Way Past Cool*, was published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux of New York. *Way Past Cool* was also published in the United Kingdom, Italy, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Japan. It was optioned for a film, for which Mowry co-wrote the screenplay. The film under the same title was produced by Redeemable Features in 2000 with director Adam Davidson and executive producers Norman Lear and Milos Forman. Jess Mowry currently lives in Oakland, California. www.jessmowry.com



5th and Spring Street | Ramón García

The words of Central American and Korean
street preachers
hurled upon the noisy rabble of day crowds.

Words of damnation
beyond individual hysteria
“Repent! Jesus is Coming!”
Prophecies absorbed by the city’s brutal ignorant hunger,
they enter the body where sin slumbers.

Rooftop Party | Ramón García

Ten miles in the night distance
the San Gabriel mountains were burning.

A sublime image of flames climbing
the graded darkness of mountains, flames that in the day
melded into sunlight and bellowing smoke.

Flaring winds blazed the hours, pacing and
Consuming them.

Someone, predictably, commented “Rome...”
And passed the empanadas.
“I drove my car up there,” Patssi said,
“I had to see it up close.”

Ramón García is the author of two books of poetry: *Other Countries* (What Books Press, 2010) and *The Chronicles* (Red Hen Press, 2015). He is a professor at California State University, Northridge, and lives in downtown Los Angeles.



protocol | Christopher Mulrooney

the bender she was on Thursday and Friday
lifted like storm clouds on the sabbath
that was when the coffee seemed a good idea
and roses not too many for the headache
but two aspirin and a glass of fizzy water cured her

a parlous situation | Christopher Mulrooney

you can't help it any way you can is the rule
and you'd like to know can what any way
not that it matters it doesn't matter at all
six of one half dozen of the other and what's that got to do
with the price of eggs these days anyway

Christopher Mulrooney is the author of *toy balloons* (Another New Calligraphy), *alarm* (Shirt Pocket Press), *Rimbaud* (Finishing Line Press), and *supergrooviness* (Lost Angelene). His work has recently appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *San Francisco Salvo*, *riverbabble*, *San Diego Poetry Annual*, *London Grip*, *The Merida Review*, *Coup d'Etat*, *Hot Tub Astronaut*, and *Sidereal Journal*. He currently resides in Los Angeles, CA.

The Lighter
by Thea Manalang

Earlier this evening, Natalie set a pen on fire. Well, she didn't really, but she tried; she held the lighter to the tip of the pen, and for a second, it looked like a skinny, transparent candle, black fumes rising from the bright orange flame. We told her to stop. She pouted, but she did remove the flame from the candle-pen, eventually. The blackened tip glinted dully under the cool fluorescent light of the kitchen. She does this a lot. Come to think of it, she has always been fascinated by fire. When she was younger, she would cry - insistently, relentlessly - during cold nights, and the only way to placate her was to start up the fireplace. Gareth never liked the idea, but sometimes, I would let her fall asleep in front of the fireplace, but only if she lay far away enough for her blankets, pillow, and long hair to avoid the flames.

I thought you got rid of all her damn lighters, Gareth is saying.

I thought so too, I reply, thoughtfully. At least she handed this one over. (It was warm when she placed it in the palm of my hand.)

She's gonna set the damn house on fire one day. Gareth leaves it at that, and he turns his attention back to the paper. He is wearing his favorite sleet blue dress shirt, the one he wears when he has an important meeting and important people to impress. Behind the wall of crinkled grey paper (it is held up only by his tightly curled fingers), his shoulders are tense. I can tell it's a bad idea to ask how his day went, and I already know what is going to happen later. Later, Gareth will undress me. His fingers will curl tightly around the strap of my nightgown, and he will tug down until I am naked before him. He will place his palms on my knees to spread my legs, and it will feel like nothing because his skin feels the same as mine. Smooth, cold. And then he will pump away, perfunctory pumps, until he is done. This is what he does after he has had a bad day. (Occasionally, I look forward to it, but only when my day has been particularly stagnant.)

Two hours have passed. He has already tugged down on the strap of my nightgown. He is already done, and it was alright. The entire time, I thought of the black fumes, the bright orange flame, the warmth of the lighter in the palm of my hand. When Gareth is still and unmoving, I remove myself from the covers and go to the drawer where I keep all of Natalie's lighters. My fingers tap on the one I took from her earlier, and I pick it up, weighing it in my hand. And then I light it.

The flame is small, but it is bright, and the orange glow feels strange upon my skin. It is a welcome strangeness, and as I stare unseeingly into the flame, I slowly begin to understand why Natalie has always been so fascinated with fire.

Thea Manalang grew up in the island of Cyprus. She received her BA in Creative Writing and philosophy from Cal State University Northridge where she is currently working on her MA in Creative Writing. This is her first publication. She lives in Los Angeles, California.



Casualty | Alina Nguyen

I am a victim of monocles pressed against muscles.

Voices are images of war in my head.

It hurts, and I vaguely know why.

I'm tired from banging my multiplied head.

Attainable Madness | Alina Nguyen

I don't even know how to introduce myself
anymore, the *Hello my name is*
is blank. The sticky side will never face
the scratches on my sweater.

Identity is textured with rings from
fingers smeared with ink, so where did mine go?
To you; I'm your trifle and that couch is your
sidekick. It won't leave you:
you've exhausted all your money.
I'm tired of sitting in this murky rental.
I've stared too much at this candle, and

the greasy black grains on the wick are coating the
corners of my mentality.

Alina Nguyen is a poet based in Los Angeles, CA. She holds a BA in Literature and Asian American Studies at Cal State Northridge and is currently pursuing an MA in creative writing at Cal State Long Beach. She has previously been published in the *Northridge Review* and is part of the Verse Collective that puts on poetry events in Los Angeles.



Third Wheel By Vincent Gutierrez

When Andy and I pull up behind Katie's car, I can hardly believe this is the place she spends her nights. Through the moonlight, I can make it out as a beige, stuccoed house, with an olive green roof and shutters. It was probably built in the '70s, just like many of the houses in this part of the Valley. Both of her neighbors have wrought iron gates fencing off the chickens and goats that send clucks and bays echoing down the block. Across the street, there's a chain link fence with weatherworn slats, partially hiding a German Shepherd who takes notice of Andy's unfamiliar car. Compared to these places, Katie's house is a relic from a time when her unhealthily pale skin wasn't the lightest on the block.

Andy and I hang back in his muggy Corolla to watch Katie get off her car. The warm streetlight exaggerates the size of her chest. She walks into the house, with her back upright and the calm sophistication of someone who knows they're being watched. Her shirt adheres to the shape of her hips, which have recently become more flattering. Probably because of the Mediterranean food bar she gets to eat from on her lunch break.

I take off my seatbelt.

Andy presses on my chest, his nails dig through my cotton button-up, and he says, "You're gonna play it cool tonight, right?"

I push his hand from my chest, offer an irritated and compulsory, "Yeah. Of course."

He looks in the rearview, combs his patchy beard with his fingers and straightens his collar. He looks like an unemployed lumberjack who dropped out of college.

"I don't know how late we're gonna be here," he says, "so don't rush anything. Let it all play out--naturally."

"Okay."

"And put away your phone. Just..." he flips open a panel under the radio, "leave it in here."

"Why?"

"You start Googling shit when you get bored. I don't want her to think she's boring. Plus, it's rude."

"You were texting people in the middle of dinner earlier. That's just as rude."

"You know what I mean. It's not personal-- I'm trying to make an impression here."

He seems to expect big things tonight. Katie isn't some girl from sociology class he wants to eat out in the back of his car after a Tapes 'n Tapes concert. No, he claims he's been done with that since the unexpected dry spell that was sparked by Elise; the dry spell he's hoping Katie will cure.

I turn off my phone and tuck it into the compartment that Andy has so graciously presented. "Let's do this."

Rusted patio furniture loafs on the porch, in the light of a bug zapper hanging from the eaves. Three dishes are set at the foot of one of the chairs. The door's peephole is covered with electrical tape. Wiring loosely dangles from the doorbell, but doesn't stop me from pressing it. It doesn't work. Andy, who's always said that knocking is an unnecessary nicety, opens the door, wonders aloud, "Where are you, Katie?"

Katie's ponytail sways in the entrance to the kitchen. It sounds like she's quickly gathering something to offer us, like she didn't expect we'd agree to help her tonight. She often jokes about inviting us over to do things for her (shampoo her carpets or hang some shelving), but we've never actually come over. She must have been surprised that I insisted we help her put a new slipcover on her shredded couch.

Andy ditches me at the entryway, with my runny nose, to slip behind her and grip the belt

loops at her hips. They start talking, but their voices turn to whispers that get lost in the carpet. I can't really tell what color it is. Maybe it's burnt orange, but it's hard to tell with the thick sheath of multicolored cat hair laid over it. Bottomless footprints disappear down the hall to the left.

Some of the wallpaper is folding in on itself, revealing aged glue that's browned and scratched. The chandelier over the dinner table casts warped shadows onto everything and gives a preview of the backyard through the glass sliding door.

The house is nearly empty. There are no chairs to compliment the table. There's a boxy cabinet and a milk crate in one corner, a modest TV in the other, and a couch with a stubby coffee table along the front wall.

Her sofa reminds me of *The Golden Girls*; a dated floral print in a mismatched gold, orange and white color scheme. The cushions have mysterious brown stains on them, the frills are frayed, and there are springs ready to bound from the padded backing.

I hear coy giggles and a clatter come from the kitchen, followed by what are surely hushed euphemisms from Andy. My eyes start watering.

I interrupt, "How many cats do you have?"

Katie's voice comes burrowing from the kitchen, "Uh, six." There's a laugh, a playful, "Stop it." She clears her throat. "My aunt has six cats."

I cough to soothe the sudden itch in my throat. "Do you have any Benadryl?"

"Oh no. Are you allergic?" She comes out of the kitchen to meet me.

Andy let's out a hiss.

"Yeah," I answer.

"You should've said something," she coos in a motherly way. "I would've given you one before we left the restaurant." She goes back into the kitchen and I follow.

Andy glowers at me, and shakes his head. He mouths, *Play it cool*.

She digs through her purse and finds me an individually wrapped pink pill. I ignore the label's warnings and swallow the capsule without a glass of water.

"I didn't know you had so many cats," I explain. "I'm okay around one or two, but any more than that, and my eyes swell shut and boogers flood my throat."

Katie chortles, caps it off with a snort.

Andy pounces. "What was that?!"

She blushes, covers her mouth.

"What are you?" Andy asks. "A pig?"

Her usually pasty face now looks swollen, blood red.

"Don't be embarrassed," I say. "It's cuter than the hackling that comes outta me."

Snorts and whistles come buzzing from Andy's wet lips.

I tell him, "Dude, that's fucked up. What about you? You don't ever laugh because you sound like an asshole choking on a fart."

Katie lets out another snort, then turns her attention to the loaded tray on the counter. It looks like a pictorial from a *Martha Stewart* magazine: some kind of corded pitcher, a box of loose-leaf tea, and a can of biscotti.

She walks away, tray in hand. "Let's go to the living room."

Andy pulls me by the elbow, leans into my ear to say, "Don't fuck this up for me."

I pull my arm away, but he grips harder.

"I won't hesitate to leave you somewhere."

I instantly regret riding with him instead of bussing it with my bike.

Andy and I sit on either end of the sunken couch, and Katie sits on the carpet in front of the coffee table. I stopped listening to their babbling after Katie finished telling us about her Aunt Beth, who owns the house and all six of the cats we haven't seen yet.

Beth had a nervous breakdown, then moved to Simi Valley for "fresh coastal air" and scenery that doesn't include cars parked on lawns or mariachi music that never seems to stop. She didn't want to sell the house (something about it imprisoning her mom's ghost), so she left it in the care of Katie, rent-free, utilities paid. The cats were forced to stay because of a court order that ruled Beth inept to care for anything living. She stops in, every once in awhile, but hasn't in a few months. Katie said she thinks she's on vacation in Aruba.

I'm stirred by an uneventful sneeze and the gentle steaming of the electric tea infuser. Katie pours each of us a glass in mismatched mugs from different tourist spots. I get, Visit Scenic Doreville.

I inspect the cup closely, see there's an image of a forested river. "Where's Doreville?"

She blushes again, but before she can answer, Andy cuts her off, explaining, "It's in Georgia. By Atlanta. I did a report on Georgia for my Cultural Diversity class."

"Actually, it's not a real place," she says, before taking a sip of tea from her Vegas mug. "I had that made for a project in my city planning class. We had to create a marketing campaign for a fake place. My group decided it was in Connecticut."

"Well," I say, "it's impressive. Sounds real. Fooled this idiot."

Andy shakes his head. He sets down his Arizona mug so hard his tea sloshes around, splashes a bit on the table.

"Bet you got an 'A,'" I tell Katie.

"B minus," she says.

Andy slides his mug along the spilled tea. "Why don't we go outside for a smoke?"

Katie and I agree, as though he asked for our consent.

She lifts herself off the carpet. A wad of hair clings to her jeans, outlines the creases of her ass. Her underwear makes a brief appearance between the end of her shirt and the waist of her jeans. They're a lavender color that brings out the faint blonde hair of her lower back.

Andy elbows me, mouths, Fuck off.

The smell of clove cigarettes turns Katie on. I can see it in the way she leans her head into the smoke, letting it weave itself into the layers of her tightened hair. She's only smoked with us once, after Andy told her she'd like the taste. She inhaled half of a cigarette in five seconds, and had a husky cough until the next day. Now, she just absorbs the smoke. I like to watch it prowl up her waist, before twisting along her arm and tracing the silhouette of her bust.

The furniture in the backyard matches the stuff on the porch. It's rustier in some spots because the patio has a few leaks, but it's actually pretty comfy. The only light we have is whatever escapes through the sliding door. There's a pool, shallowly filled with darkness.

"You have a pool?" I ask, my voice noticeably congested. "We should go swimming."

"It's not clean. The pump broke when my aunt still lived here, and she never got around to fixing it. I tried to scrub it one weekend, but the algae just kept coming back."

I suggest a few home remedies my mom has used on our pool. Calcium and lime remover. Tire degreaser. Bleach mixed with vinyl tarp cleaner.

I ask her, "Does it have a light?"

"Yeah. Let me turn it on for you." She walks over to a fuse box, flips a switch.

Andy and I go over to inspect it. The grout line of the decorative tile border is covered

with a black fungus that protrudes from the wall. The lake at the bottom quarter of it is so green it almost looks black, and there are chunks of something floating along the top, covered in mosquitoes.

“Jesus,” Andy starts. “You should get a professional out here. That shit might be bad for you to breathe.” He inhales the last bit of his cigarette, tosses the butt into Katie’s swamp.

I finish my cigarette, put it out on the sole of my shoe, and hold onto it, so I can toss it in the garbage. “Why don’t we help you with your couch now?”

Katie’s in her bedroom, getting the slipcover. Andy pulls me in for another word, over the couch.

“What the hell is your problem, bro?”

“What?” I let out in a harsh sneeze that scrapes my nose.

“Knock off the bullshit, okay? First, you make me look like a prick because of her snorting. Then, you make me look stupid with that goddamn coffee cup.”

“You were being a prick about her laugh. And the coffee cup was all you.”

He latches onto my wrist, squeezes it until the veins in my hand quiver. “Remember what I fucking told you.”

His twitching amber eyes, engorged with an unexpected ferocity, remind me of the first time I met him. Elise, a girl from his Literary Theory class, had abandoned him in the crowded student center with a box of bonbons and a stuffed bear. I needed somewhere to sit and eat my pizza, and I preferred his solemn face over the patchouli scented guy sitting alone at another table. I thought I’d eat my lunch and leave him be, but we found ourselves bonding over our routine of listening to The Cure and watching The Princess Bride whenever we had suffered a heartbreak. It also turned out that we had Film and Literature together, but never noticed because of the auditorium seating and our lack of response to any of the professor’s questions. Over the summer, he showed me how he copes when an ex changes her phone number and deletes her Facebook account, and I willingly submitted to his loud, spit-laden, and self-indulgent monologues.

Katie walks in; her scent jars me.

Andy lets me pull my numb hand away.

“What’s up?” Katie questions, with an uneasy tone.

I step back from Andy. “Nothing. Just an inside joke.”

Andy tells us he can move the couch all by himself. I enjoy watching him strain his back, his stomach ready to unstring his buttons, before I decide to help him lift it. It weighs as much as a baby piano and creaks like a wooden ship. We can only move it forward a few feet from its original spot.

In between stamped feet marks are a half-eaten sandwich and a rolled piece of cloth, surprisingly free of any cat hair.

Andy kicks at the cloth with his scuffed Nikes. “Is that a sock?”

He begins to unfold it with his foot. Katie picks it up, stuffs it in her back pocket before we can make out what it is. She picks up the sandwich with a tissue, and then starts to vacuum the gaggles of hairballs that sit prettily in a row.

“Come on, you fucking thing.”

“I’ve almost got it.”

“Just a little more.”

We all struggle to fit the hand-stitched slipcover over the sofa. Katie made it out of old Looney Tunes sheets and some polyester curtains. I’m on the floor, trying to stretch part of it around a bottom corner, while Katie tries to adjust the middle, and Andy tugs along the top.

Each time either Andy or I start to get our side on, Katie's section shifts and her dangling breasts sway, sending ripples through her cleavage. I'm close enough to see the grayish stretch marks carved into them. I lose my grip. The corner snaps back to Katie's section. Andy's side bunches. I think she stitched it too snugly.

A deep breath whizzes out of Andy. "Is this the first time you've made one of these?"

"No," Katie says. "I made one for my friend, out of some old band shirts and fleece."

"Band shirts?" I ask. "Which bands?"

"He had a bunch of old punk band tees."

"You have guy friends?" asks Andy, right as I blurt out, "You like punk?"

Katie looks confused by who she should answer first. "Yes, I have guy friends. I like some punk music. He had a couple of NOFX shirts, Bad Religion. Dead Kennedys. I kind of like those bands, I guess. A few songs anyway."

"You know, it's funny that you mention Bad Religion," Andy begins. It's his story about how he met the group at the county fair. Or at least that's the way he spins it to everyone, like he had a detailed interview with them. He told me the real story once, how he screamed at the drummer, who yelled back at him, "Fuck off!"

Katie takes a seat on the couch. She seems entranced by his story, or by the way his lower teeth grate along his dry lip when he uses words with the letter "F." She looks her best when she's silent, when her face is resting.

We met Katie in British Literature. She was just as quiet as us. While the rest of the class floated from seat to seat each week, we three always planted ourselves in the first few seats of the second row; Katie always to my left, Andy always to my right. Andy had mentioned her once after class, saying, "I'd fuck the shit out of her." I asked her to join us for lunch after she caught me and Andy drawing penises along the margins of *The Faerie Queen*, which sent her into a giggling fit that our professor had to address. Four weeks of the three of us sharing homemade sandwiches after Brit Lit evolved into the three of us enjoying tapas at happy hour, earlier tonight. I never imagined where she lived. I never imagined I'd actually be here.

I twist my neck and crack my knuckles. It gains the attention of Katie, who shivers at the sound.

"Alright," I say. "Let's try this again."

We prepare for our eighth attempt.

All of us are sitting on the floor, in front of the coffee table, because we thought we might ruin the new couch cover. Andy pours a third round of victory shots. I say I don't want any. Tequila is my least favorite spirit, especially when it's this ten dollar drugstore crap.

"It's already poured," he says, sliding it to me. "You have to take it."

"You can have it for me." I slide it back before stretching my legs underneath the low table.

"It doesn't work that way," he explains. "And no lemon this time. That shit's for pussies."

We pound the shots. Even though my nose is so clogged that I have to breathe out of my mouth, it tastes like sea salt and rubbing alcohol. Katie gets to have lemon.

Andy gets up, asks where the "shitter" is at. Katie leads him there.

That shot did it. My chest starts to rattle. My intestines start fizzing, sweating, percolating the awful liquor. I chatter my teeth, check to see if I can still feel them. I can. It usually takes four shots before I can't.

Katie rejoins me at the table. She tries to sit down, Indian style. I hold out my hands, so she can use them to balance herself, but she pratfalls. Her squeal is so loud it ricochets off the wall, makes the

glass door reverberate. She breathes hard, trying to settle the laughter. I imagine her mouth smells like tequila and stale biscotti

She props herself up on her knees, rhythmically rubs the tops of her thighs. With a wave of her hand she draws me in. I slide along the carpet until my knee rests against hers. I suddenly feel lightheaded, and there's an incessant beating trapped in my throat. Her lips are close enough to touch the ridges of my ear. The way she holds her mouth open makes it obvious she's conflicted about telling me something. Her cool, paced huffs are something I wish I could bottle. They flow along my cheek and sting my eyes with an unyielding indifference.

"I need to tell you a secret," she finally says.

I wonder about Andy; how long he'll be, and how long I want him to stay gone.

"I didn't want Andy to see it. I didn't." Her voice starts to sway in and out of my ear. She reaches into her back pocket, pulls out a protective fist. She rests it on my thigh.

I can feel my stomach fizzing again. My eyes disobey my will, start to release a few tears. I realize my mouth is closed and I still can't breathe out of my nose. I put my hand in hers and collect the cloth she picked up earlier. I unfold it.

"I sell them online," she tells me. "They're very popular."

It's a crocheted onesie, with strawberry buttons along the edges. At first I think it would look good on my niece, but then I take notice of the misplaced arm holes. I write them off as a failure, something worth hiding. I lay it flat on my leg, and straighten it out.

She slaps my leg. "Turn it over."

I do. Three quarters down the bottom is a wide hole.

"I can't usually get them on the cats," she slurs, "but a couple of days ago, I got one on Dali."

"Dali?"

"He's an American shorthair. But, you can put it on any cat."

"These really sell?"

"Yeah." She sounds surprised by the question. "The Internet is the future. You have to..." She pauses for an unexcused, hearty burp, "...capitalize now."

My logical side blames this remark on the shitty tequila, but my slightly buzzed side knows it's something she'd back up if she were sober. The chandelier projects iridescent rings on her cheeks, highlights the hazel stare that's kept me company while Andy dominates the conversation. She notices the way I drift into it before she looks down at the carpet, caresses it steadily.

"Do you think Andy will make fun of me for this? Do you think, maybe, he'll stop talking to me?" I fold the outfit and place it in her lap. I want to hug her and tell her that he doesn't care about anything she does. "He won't mind."

She laughs so big I can see every smoothed edge of her front teeth.

I feel a swift shot to my ribs, like someone's stuck their fingers beneath the bones and tugged. It makes me yelp.

Andy walks in, asks, "What the fuck is this?"

I tell them, "I really don't feel good. That last shot did something."

Katie rests her hand on my head. "Are you okay? Do you wanna check my medicine cabinet for anything?"

"Leave him alone," Andy commands. "He always gets like this when we drink. He's an attention whore."

"I'm not drunk," I contest. "I'm barely even buzzed."

“Whatever,” Andy says. “Lightweight. Go ahead and tap out. We’ll keep drinking without you. Right, Katie?”

Katie tousles my hair. Her neatly trimmed nails glide along my scalp and send a soothing warmth down my spine.

“Sure,” she says. “You don’t mind watching us get drunk?” she asks me.

“No,” I tell her. She places her hand on my thigh to keep her balance as she stands.

Andy pours two more shots.

Andy stands over us, explaining his reasoning for why Captain Piccard was a better captain than Kirk. He uses all sorts of examples from both versions of Star Trek that I’m sure are wrong, but I can’t Google anything he’s saying to fact check him. Each harsh syllable of his makes my head feel much more swollen than it actually is. He sways even while he tries to stand still, bouncing his weight from his heels to his toes. Katie grips her knees, gazes upon the carpet, looks lost in some other thought. Certainly, she didn’t think her off-colored remark, about a YouTube clip of Captain Kirk fighting a lizard creature, would illicit a lecture from Andy.

Katie told us if we drank we could stay the night. We could share the floor, she said. She has plenty of blankets. She has a few extra pillows. I don’t know why I agreed that was a fine idea, to share this hairy floor with Andy. I couldn’t come up with an excuse for leaving, and it could have been anything, really. A paper I had to work on. A dentist appointment early in the morning. There was some reason I justified for staying. Something probably related to being close to her, sleeping where she sleeps, using the same air she breathes. I sneeze lightly.

Andy abruptly stops his tirade, clearly stifled by a gurgle in his throat. Katie and I look at him.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

He swats away her worry with a swift hand gesture. He clears his throat and tugs at the bottom of his shirt. He looks like he’s about to continue his speech when he lets out a curdled burp.

“What a lightweight,” I tell him.

He flips me off, and straightens his collar. “Like I was saying...” a sharp swilling sound thunders from his gut. He stumbles towards the hall, his hands slapping along the walls until they slam the bathroom door.

Katie laughs. “I know it’s mean, but I’m glad he stopped talking.” She blushes with an apparent shame.

“Don’t feel bad,” I tell her. “I’m always glad when he stops talking.”

She honks like a pig again, and I laugh hard. She comes close so our knees are rubbing again. She leans on her left arm so her head is near my shoulder. I can faintly smell her shampoo through my blocked nasal passages. She bobbles her head like she did when we were outside smoking. I lean in closer to discreetly get a better whiff, but I get lightheaded and lean in so much that my chin bops her on the head.

“Ow!” she lets out.

“Oh, shit!” I say. “I’m sorry.”

I rub her head where I bumped her, and she puts her hand over mine, as if both of us doing it at the same time will make it feel that much better. I get nervous and rub faster. She sets her hand down and leans into my shoulder.

“That feels nice,” she says.

I massage her scalp, and breathe in her aroma. I don’t know why, but my hand has started working its way to where her hairline meets her light forehead. I glide my finger along, soon following the shape

of her cheek. I circle around it before I move along to the edge of her lip. She smiles, and I trace her laugh line down to her chin, then slowly move up to feel the weight of her bottom lip resting on my fingertip.

She looks up at me, her eyes lazily half-open. Her eyelids have a slight discoloration that wasn't there earlier, a purple color that accents how long her lashes are. I expect her to look away, but she doesn't. She stares into my grubby brown eyes, swollen so much that they could be read like brail, with a comfortable intensity. She cranes her neck up at me and puckers her lips. Andy's moans bounce down the hall, exaggerated by the strain on his throat. I move in and kiss Katie.

I feel something delightfully soft glide along my cheek. I pat my face. The swelling has stopped. I try to open my eyes, but they still sting, even more from the sunlight that reflects off the glitter in the popcorn ceiling. I hear purring and feel the softness running through my hair. I push my head against the cat. I wish I could sleep until tomorrow.

I hear a string of curses from a woman with a husky voice. The unfamiliar sound forces me to open my eyes. Katie's lying next to me, wrapped in a cheetah print blanket, her hair tangled up in her bunched pillow. We are in her bedroom. I am shirtless, wearing nothing but my boxers and one sock.

Someone's pounding on the door, rattling the handle so much that it looks like it'll unscrew. Two voices mingle to create an unclear argument. I shake Katie, but she doesn't stir.

Andy starts yelling through the door, "You guys need to get up now! Party's over."

Katie twitches, then rolls over, further entangles herself in the blanket.

The handle jiggles fiercely, and then a woman's voice comes from the other side, "Goddammit Katie, I told you not to have anyone over! You're disgracing Nana Lydia! Get out here now!"

I shake Katie until she finally sits up.

"Who is that?" I ask her.

The woman's brash demands come through again, "Open this fucking door!"

"That's my Aunt Beth," says Katie. "Hurry! Get all of your stuff and go."

I hop out of bed and dig through the piles of clothes she has on the floor. Another cat jumps out of one of the mounds and lunges at me. It hisses and scratches my leg.

"No, Desdemona!" Katie tells the cat.

It hisses at me some more, and I kick it before it can strike again.

"What did you do? Why would you kick a poor cat?!" Katie scolds me.

"The fucking thing was coming at me," I retaliate.

Beth starts shouting about how she can hear us. Katie gets out of bed, wearing my shirt and her underwear, and walks over to the door. She starts trying to calm her aunt while I tear through her dirty jeggings and sports bras. I find my pants and struggle to turn them right side out, so I can put them on.

Katie opens the door and Beth pushes it in, knocking her to the floor. She's a slender woman in a velour jogging suit, wearing Katie's pointed nose and rounded chin. Her eyebrows look drawn on, bent with disapproval. She looks over at me and says, "Get out of my house."

I start to put my jeans back on, but I wear down Beth's patience. She grabs me by the ear and pulls me along to the front door, where Andy stands in his puke-stained flannel. Beth slams the door. We can hear her going off on Katie through the sound of the neighbors' animals.

Andy shakes his head at me and starts to walk to his car. The brisk morning air breaking along my bare chest hurries me to the passenger side. Andy takes his time, strides over to his door, unlocks it with his key. He gets in and starts the engine. I pull at the door handle. It's locked. Andy lowers the window enough to say, "Good looking out, bro." He drives away. His engine backfires, adding to the symphony of the street animals and Beth's howling.

Vincent Gutierrez is a graduate of Cal State Northridge with a BA in Creative Writing. He currently spends his days working at Disneyland where he contemplates his plans of slowly taking over the place. He currently resides in Los Angeles, CA. His work has previously been published in the *Cul-De-Sac review*.



Starving
By Cayla White

We've decided to be swingers. One of us is more into the idea than the other, but only slightly, like the difference between wanting a churro and really wanting a churro. Everybody likes churros. We never thought we would be those people. When we were young, we thought we would spend the rest of our lives only wanting each other's wondrous sex organs. When we were young, our sex was sweaty and sticky and shameless. When we were young, orgasms gushed through us like rivers, flowing through our veins and oozing out our pores and gaping mouths like jelly doughnuts—sticky and sweet, melting us together. Shameless. When we were young, we were stupid.

We're not old. We used to laugh at people our age. People more than a few years into a relationship who got bored and found themselves doing whatever it took to find the excitement again. We relished the fact that our love was too strong to need anything more than each other. When we were young, we were stupid.

We got bored like we said we never would. We tried to spice things up. One of us bought toys. One of us tried to imitate moves from a 2004 porno that was found unopened and stashed in the box in the garage labeled "college memories" with three exclamation points. One of us looked up a list of aphrodisiac foods and cooked a steaming meal of oysters and asparagus followed by a sticky desert of chocolate and banana flavored lube. One of us was appalled by the smell of raw fish on the other's breath and faked a magnificent orgasm so the night would end. One of us suggested a threesome. Surprisingly, the other wasn't opposed.

We hashed out details. After much deliberation, we agreed on a girl. One of us was slightly disappointed by this decision, but only slightly. We established ground rules. One of us was allowed free reign with this girl. One of us was not allowed to penetrate said girl—at least for the first time, the other of us said. One of us thought that was unfair. One of us was self-conscious. Neither of us expressed concern. One of us masturbated quietly and excitedly with one of the new toys after the other had fallen asleep, biting into the plum colored pillow at the peak of orgasm so as to not wake the other. One of us dreamed of a train endlessly rushing in and out of a hollowed out loaf of sourdough bread dripping with butter.

We discovered that actively seeking out a threesome is much harder than agreeing to it in theory. One of us had been propositioned for a threesome once in a McDonalds by a greasy looking couple with matching leather outfits and rusty, studded facial piercings. We did not want to be those people. We tried to be subtle. We went to our favorite bar. We ordered our usual drinks. The bartender asked how we had been and we replied, "Great, things are really great."

It dawned on one of us that the bartender was very attractive. One of us gave the other a look that said "Well go ahead, turn on the charm." One of us clumsily tried to flirt with her. One of us asked, "Can you give me two buttery nipples?" smiling coyly at the pun. We got progressively more tipsy and confident. One of us thought the bartender was definitely returning our flirtations. We both giggled to ourselves when she left to take care of the other patrons, proud of our boldness. One of us asked her personal questions every time she walked by. One of us was becoming very drunk and leaned over the bar and whispered seductively in her ear, "Would you like to do a blow job with me?" One of us watched—definitely turned on—as one of us and the bartender placed stretched out lips around the shot glasses and threw back the milky concoction. One of us fell off the barstool. And both of us were escorted out of the bar by the 6'4" doorman with a tattoo of a cartoon bulldog maliciously eating a hot dog on his forearm. One of us sloppily groped at his face and slurred, "But I didn't get to tell her that I wanted a wet pussy!"

We realized that maybe we were out of our league. One of us was very discouraged that the recently purchased lingerie, penis pump and handcuffs would not be put to use. One of us had already secretly used the penis pump, broken it, replaced it with another, and was now having reoccurring nightmares about an electric eel suckling itself to said penis and electrocuting it into a sushi roll. One of us stumbled across an internet ad of a girl in a lobster-red thong bikini that read, "Find hot, young swingers in your town!", clicked on it and was promptly delivered to a webpage demanding a \$69.99 monthly contribution to the swinging lifestyle. One of us scoffed, but one of us reminded the other that we had already spent much more money than that on toys and really, can you put a price on happiness? (One of us had found a "College Girl on Girls Gone Wild" porno in that box from the garage and was definitely not about to give up now).

One of us, thinking of the unused handcuffs, gave in slightly begrudgingly. We paid the membership fee and began to fill out our profile, dutifully making sure each answer would elicit the response from exactly the type of girl we were looking for. One of us searched for the sexiest picture of the two of us. One of us googled "What is soft swapping?"

We spent hours browsing profiles of severely kinky but mostly unattractive couples and shamelessly horny bimbos. One of us, who had a phobia of the word "moist" and was mortified at its overuse in said profiles, tried to stay calm for the sake of the oath of celibacy we had agreed on until we went through with this. To make it more special, one of us had said. The oath supposedly included masturbation, but what went on in the bathroom with the removable showerhead was between one of us and God.

We checked our profile hourly. We received messages. Some demanding, some nice, and some that used the words "cock," "pussy," and "fuck" more times than we'd ever uttered them in our lives. We eventually decided to meet with "ShellBell27," whose suggestive, but not too revealing pictures of her short and muscular gymnast's body had both of us burning in our nether regions. One of us took a long shower that night. One of us dreamt of purple grapes with cartoon faces drowning in a vat of maple syrup, which was a nice break from the electric eel nightmare.

We meticulously planned out our meeting, making sure that it would not coincide with one of our menstrual cycles and the other's annual outbreak of winter cold sores. One of us grew out body hair for three weeks and then spent 75 minutes in the shower removing it all. Along with the showerhead. One of us, after convincing the other that the "no penetration rule" was neither fair nor reasonable, bought a pocket-sized box of extra large condoms, emptied it, then stuffed it full of the slightly smaller than average WalMart brand.

We agreed on a hotel downtown that had a well-lit and well-populated bar, just to make sure that "ShellBell" Michelle was not a fat and lonely grandmother before we took her to bed. We dressed up. We sprinkled lavender and cinnamon scented baby powder down our underwear. We packed breath mints. We agreed not to eat any beans, garlic or spicy food all day. We checked in early, went up to the room and strategically placed cock rings, wrist restraints and finger vibrators in hidden but easy to access corners of the room. Just in case. One of us brought out the penis pump and gave the other a look that clearly said "Don't disappoint me." One of us set the small box of condoms on the nightstand with the bolded "XL" clearly visible from the bed.

We met Michelle at the bar. She wore a chocolate colored dress and ordered the most expensive martini on the menu. We looked down at our Jack and Cokes (one of them was diet) shamefully. While we talked, she kept swirling the olives around her drink with her pinky finger. One of us despised olives but suddenly wanted nothing more than to suck the sweet juice right off her finger. One of us had much dirtier and penetrable thoughts about the olives.

Once we had consumed the previously agreed upon number of drinks (three—just enough to feel confident but not enough to prohibit certain members of our group to stop working), we nervously went up to the room. As soon as the door shut, she was on one of us like a leech, sucking the breath out of our chests. She came up for air long enough to walk over to the bed, slide off her dress and perch there—naked and smiling at our wide eyes. One of us watched the other confidently stride over to Michelle, shove her on the bed and fall into her lap. One of our knees twitched at the sighs and squeals shooting out of Michelle’s mouth. One of us fell into the pile and frantically thought “dead puppies, dead puppies, dead puppies.” One of us had a subliminally sudden desire for pepperonis. Two of us heard trains rushing in our heads and opened our mouths to let their screeches collide. We looked at each other and remembered how much we loved jelly doughnuts.

Cayla White is a 24 year old CSULB graduate who has an immense phobia of awkward situations but somehow always manages to write about them. This is her first publication and she hopes that her parents will never get a hold of it.



What the Elephants Carry | Kim Young

A wooden cart the break beam and axle even the awkward wheels
the elephants can pull through this wide ravine.

One man, perched atop the elephant's broad forehead, slides slightly to the right,
 as if he might be a great man the elephants must carry forward.

The elephants carry. They move forward.

The white hard hats the men the leather straps the bag the burlap...

What I can say is that I don't know what to ask God.

What do the elephants carry?

I want to tell you something true about myself.

I see the girth of each leg. The long trunk.

What I see is a downturned look in the eyes. The man's leg
dangling there over the forehead.

The elephants aren't ashamed.

Cold maybe— not as in temperature but a coldness is what they carry.

A resignation. I love you, token elephants.

God, I want to know what is being carried forward.

Is it sugar rice the men's personal belongings longing?

Angels | Kim Young

When our two dead mothers
sidle out from heaven
they're wearing pink lipstick
and carrying new handbags.
Maybe they've exfoliated
or finally covered the skin
of their purple thighs.
They don't burn in some shine
we wish they might have warmed
us with at night--
instead of chain-smoking
and ripping open packages
of powdered doughnuts.
You're not my child!
they yell as we hacked at our own hair
and pretended the streetlights
could read our thoughts
pretended the horses would
break through the trellises--
the moms with their eyes
us, the little piggies
while secretly we dreamed
their hospital beds might one day
roll wildly down some dark hill
the insurance cards
the long electrical cords.
What terrible child
wouldn't spend a lifetime there
running alongside?

Kim Young is the author of *Night Radio*, winner of the 2011 Agha Shahid Ali Poetry Prize (The University of Utah Press) and finalist for the 2014 Kate Tufts Discovery Award, and the chapbook *Divided Highway* (Dancing Girl Press, 2008). She is the founding editor of *Chaparral*, an online journal featuring poetry from Southern California, and her poems and essays have appeared in *Los Angeles Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Western Humanities Review*, *MiPOesias*, *POOL* and elsewhere. She teaches creative writing at California State University Northridge and lives in LA with her husband and daughter.

Bucktoothed Oyester
by Jake Rarick

Once upon an uncanny tide, — aboard a retiring french steamship — transpired the unpublished headline: Naive Sailor Heads Home From Uneventful Assignment In East Asia. The following tale seeks to clarify such a headline.

Whitewall eyeball dripped a saline rain and overflowed a murky puddle in a trembling, metal teacup. The flavors of the orient climbed through the aching cabin wall, wafting through the ajar porthole with a smokey, bitter face. A flat, leafy pouch had spattered the floor with remnant black tea, after having been slung away when its ability to service was done, damned, and depleted.

No afternoon greeting announced the sly presence of an incidental voyeur, who caught the steaming scent of unprocessed, exotic tea. With a soft chin, prissily propped onto the porthole brim, she peered into the bleak cabin, only to find the disrobed, seated figure of a commanding officer as he sipped, sniv- eled, and shivered in twofold exile — which was forced upon him, once, by a desolate ocean surface and, twice, by the inflexible tin can that was his congested cabin.

As the leading deckhand in vertical incompetence, she found herself on tiptoe and stretching, so as to observe the officer of anatomical exposure and a surely coveted cup of liquid escape — filtered through a pipe dream, with the musty fragrance of an unhampered, asiatic timberline. She extended her tawny, scrawny neck, fully interested in the man behind the mug.

For this peeping tomboy — who lifted her head into the window by gripping an overhead pipe and pressing her ear to the rounded storm cover and her face to the screen — the afternoon aroma was enticingly elegant and profoundly pleasant. It was the taste of travel, reminiscent of the subtle appreciations that only dry land could provide; it was a vivid flavor of faraway forests, brimming in vapor that flew skyward and out.

With each whiff, the stained stench of saltwater was lifted, and the black tea asserted a brooding command. The deckhand girl stuck firmly to the porthole, but began to lose herself to the pregnant scent. She slammed shut her eyes, blinking into wistful thinking, until she could press an imagined mug to her lips and sift her tongue about a warm rinse of whistling teakettles and spoonfuls of packaged honey.

Her senses drew in the evaporable presence of tea, boiling it across her tongue and sharing itself for nearby, personal gratification. In vicarious luxury, she absorbed that full cup of boiled beverage — even without a single, true drop to slip from slimed lip, past an unburned, female gullet.

A sharp, raspy sound of discovery was called out by the teatime sailor, in muddled concern. But, before the deckhand girl — whose name was Oyster — could utter an excuse for her intrusion, she slipped and fell, knocking her chin against the windowsill and scratching her arms against the lower wall. When she could stand, she shamefully dusted off her arms, running back to her own cabin and clutching an aching jaw.

Lacking balance, but overflowing with curiosity, Oyster blamed only herself for the inevitable fall — aware that physical activity was not her forte. She was foolhardy to have sought the source of the scent, to have peeked into the porthole. She was an immature girl in unknown waters, backed only by a misguided thirst for intrigue and adventure .

For any parched inspector of patented ordinance, the scent did travel; though, to the officer with the grander tea and cataract eye, this was commonplace.

The clock ticked through the stiffness of solidarity, as Oyster silently rested under one sheet of linen, on a stiff cot — her blond hair free to spread out behind her like a bleached, pressed sunflower. She thought back to the wonderfall of tea as she rubbed her sore chin, a beige bandaid laid along it. Before swimming back toward reality, Oyster fantasized of ingesting something better than what those obnoxious men served in the mess hall.

Scraping through her mind as if she were cleaning a stiff pumpkin, she made an intolerable effort to discover for what it was, in this world, that she could possibly yearn and strive — aside from a good cup of tea, of course. As a fledgling sailor, Oyster basked in the open air and savored the shoeless strolls spent on foreign beaches. However, she despised the tedium of duty — trapped for hours under the synthetic lighting of the cargo hold. She longed to return home, as she kept thinking of that naked, elder man, who held her only visible desire at the end of five crooked digits, in the bottom of a dented cup.

Oyster looked back on her uneventful girlhood — which she had abandoned when she enlisted in the navy. She remembered the storybook legends of buried treasure and bearded cutthroats, as she weighed her past daydreams against her present reality — against the struggles and solitude of true seafaring. Without a doubt, her expectations had led her, astray.

Outside, the midnight waves clawed the hull, like a young boy running a stick along a wrought iron fence — which was a well received tune, but it surely did not allow Oyster to sleep, uninterrupted, for more than a couple of hours. Yet, in spite of such a melodic raking of waves, she managed to achieve a fair deal of unconsciousness — ignoring the discomfort of her skinned arms, and the throbbing grip on her jaw, which resonated into her oblong teeth.

Grayscale dreaming echoed her guarded soul into a realm of hypotensive relaxation, if only until those clotted waves in the wake of the keel reeled her back, unto the gloomy wake of the morning. In her dream, Oyster was seated at some island in some spotless kitchen, where teak shelves complimented the shivered, wooden floorboards, and the counters were smooth slabs of reflective granite. The ceiling was a painted, seamless blend of timber and stone, beaming down with unmatched lamplight. She was stationed in the musty condo of her presently passed grandfather. Nothing other than a memorial demitasse — filled with her dearest flavor of tea — was nearby.

The resurrected image of her grandfather flashed into existence, sitting beside her on another numbing bar stool. He was flesh, for the moment, and she could sense his warmth just as she could sense the crisp brewing of the tea against the crafted china. Fully suited in blazer and belt, her grandfather whistled against the steam and pacified the boiled water in his concave ceramic demitasse, so as to burn not his fragile cheek or tongue. She followed suit, and used her tiny, innocent breath against a fiery, peppermint tea.

Swiftly, the false memory faded — and, though she had never had the privilege of drinking tea with her ashy grandfather, she could always pretend so, through any deepness of dream state. The magics of her being were not in her buoyant head, but in her stubborn heart. Thus, while her reality troubled and exhausted her enthusiasm, she often fell from logic to the wistful wishing that is inexperienced imagination.

If Oyster harbored any specified intention for her life, the solution would be plain — but she knew only that a venture on the unparalleled ocean was not as fulfilling as the library tales had made it out to be; she was disappointed to have not encountered any dashing pirates or historic discoveries.

Dawnlight peeked in on Oyster, as she stripped out of her underclothes and dressed for less than delicate duty. She was up and out, with her hair in a tourniquet ponytail, long before the bleating trumpet sounded for sailors to take up their proper posts. With a tight uniform wound around her waist, a stiff posture, and a wobbling sailor hat, Oyster strolled to the cafeteria for a hurried breakfast, avoiding the rowdy clamor and commotion of the boisterous crowd that would arrive late.

The sensation of razorblades took hold in the desolate minds of those hungover sailors who had slept at the canteen, with empty bottles clutched in their calloused fists and their dazed heads rested on the tabletops; these wingless creatures were trapped on flypaper countertops and benches, unkempt and unbalanced. After scrambling around and stepping over drunken bodies, the timid Oyster fixed herself a plate of squid and rice, matched with a filtered glass of rainwater with lemon.

Oyster cleared off a table with a nearby rag, before sitting down to savor the fresh meal and the delightful crispness of an unsullied, refrigerated refreshment. As her chopsticks nearly landed on the ridge of her roseate lips, a fellow seaman, Blenny, plumped himself at the table, with his own decided meal — a folded napkin containing a single slice of unbuttered toast, a flask filled with a highly spirited liquor, and a strip of strawberry chewing gum, in lieu of after dinner mints.

Considering the scars and gear grease on his arms, it was predictable that Blenny was a seasoned sailor — probably a stoker to the boilers down below. He was not as brash as Oyster had expected from a man who must have slithered out from deep below deck, like a worm in the rain. Blenny neglected to introduce himself other than by nodding his head and displaying an unopened grin, and she neglected to give a facetious, melodramatic salute, as she often and otherwise did. This shared, trivial negligence was partly due to a shallow disinterest in formalities, but also due to a benign concentration. For Oyster, this was of a subtle preoccupation with discretely examining Blenny, as he pierced rye bread with faintly malformed teeth, swigged bitter alcohol while he chewed, and swept away the cowlicks of his greased and compact hair. This face could burn a match head, and match a nylon rope.

In a common occurrence of staleness and mundanity, the two shipmates sat in silence, save for the occasional gulp or itch, as they polished off their morning rations with quick gnawing and bite. Then, as Oyster began to tidy her plate and withdraw her petite legs from the bench to return to deck, Blenny impeded her retreat with a captivating inquiry — faintly implying that she had spied on a particular old salt, during his private, reclusive teatime: he notified Oyster that a wrinkled and thereby retiring lieutenant had reported that some witless or depraved ‘mademoiselle’ was snooping about his window, the previous night. Blenny smirked with frivolous condemnation as he awaited her humiliation — his invariable, rumbling tone passing, without hurry or obstacle, through a solemn and cavernous windpipe, where his words scraped against stiff lips and a pinched tongue.

Toward Blenny and his latent allegation, Oyster considered flagrantly denying any such act of folly or vulgarity, as a guilty handcart railed behind her crowded eyes. Yet, by the bass and thrum of his appeasing speech, Oyster inevitably felt the need to confess her sins to this intimidating individual. In abashed haste, she admitted her involvement with the rounded window, the naked old man, and the tempting cup of tonic tea. Thus, intent on complying with Blenny and knowing what he knew, Oyster returned to the table, setting her elbows to points and propping up a gaunt face like a dedicated schoolchild. In return for her honesty, she found it fit to be accorded more information about the teasop gentleman and the mysterious case of the featherbrained, prowler girl — a title, from which, she could procure some modicum of pride. With spongy eyes, that drifted high and low, Blenny noticed the weaving scrapes upon the gentle arms of Oyster, which inspired him to involve himself beyond petty interrogation:

he welcomed the conversation, and consented to divulging and delving deeply through the enigmatic life of Lieutenant Latridae.

Out from the stuffed innards of the ship, Blenny and Oyster leaned over a rusted railing and conversed by the fresh air of an ocean backdrop. Through the bottomless brine, seaweed rolled and danced, as the sun spat sparkles upon the tide. He reveled in this tide and its spray — speaking as if time were to be pitied, but not obeyed.

According to Blenny, the lieutenant under discussion was an officially retired, former career sailor who, by some means, pressed and lengthened his contract — lingering overseas, retaining a title, and managing to remain occupied with one task or another. Due to the compassion of commanders, Lieut. Latridae had been permitted to stay with the service vessels, as if he were an active navalman.

Appropriately, Oyster asked about the aforementioned empathy by ‘commandants’, and Blenny dropped his tone to a crawl, explaining that Latridae suffered the total dismantlement of his existence, when he suffered the loss of his dearly distant wife and child to a motorcar collision, only months before he was set to be discharged in his late thirties. He was demolished, without a mainland home to which he might have returned.

Poor Latridae, as Blenny described, was nothing more than a shellshocked shell of a man; he was a ghost in the flesh — alive for merely patriotic allegiance without any true passion or contentment. He cycled through duties and actions, drifting from port to port, never returning home or recovering from his understandable but overdue grieving. Blenny seemed to know much about him, having listened to years of boiler room gossip. Furthermore, Blenny spoke of the upcoming destination for the ship, and how Latridae would find it difficult to hitch a ride after this particular docking, which would set the ship as a sort of stagnant, public display. Where Oyster would be reassigned to a more modern ship, Latridae would be anchored until he could search out another naval force or fishing company that would be generous enough to give the old man legroom and a free lunch.

Having finished his abridged biography, Blenny smirked and turned to Oyster, who was wildly disappointed that this tale had ended in such dissolution and despair. She wanted not to hear such a tragic tale, so far removed from the romance of fantastical seafolk — about which she read as a child. But, regardless, as the trumpet sounded for duty to commence, Blenny shrugged and chuckled, “c’est la vie”.

Off the horizon, rang the excitement of bells and parades, as the bayside people prepared for the incoming ship and the subsequent offloading of homecoming sailors. Blenny had returned to toiling within the bowels of the machine, and Oyster was checking the designations for priority and hazardous cargo.

Raising and organizing the more manageable containers with her gloved hands, and the larger crates and cages with a winch, Oyster began to flounder about the recesses of her psyche to determine as to whether or not she was keen on seafaring. Finally, she was able to conclude, with utmost certainty, that she would not reenlist, in fear that she would end up like either Blenny or Latridae: grinding away until her body gave way, or drying out with nothing more to offer. She dreaded misuse as equally as she dreaded disuse.

All hands, and feet, were on deck as the ship put into port and the relieved, reveling faces of attendees were shimmering like moonbeams on black waves. Oyster was caught in the crowd, eager to disembark and race down those narrow stretches of stairs and steel. Suddenly, through the foggy

commotion, came the chapped eyes of Blenny, who displayed morbid alarm. With an outstretched, determined grip, he passed an antique cigar box to Oyster. Inside the worn, wooden box, was a collection of exotic pouches of tea, courtesy of the late Lieutenant Latridae, who had shot himself moments ago, spattering his cabin floor with chalky brain and blood, after having been slung away when his ability to service was done, damned, and depleted.

Blenny assured Oyster that the box belonged to her, figuring that it would have been thrown away if he had not taken it, after he heard gossip of the lieutenant corpse. The box was light in his hands, but heavy in hers. She peered inside at the assortment of tea leaves bound in hairline string and the incomparable stain that painted the underside of the lid, and she joyously detected the scent of her peppermint heaven, packed neatly in the far left of the container.

Without a single word passed between them, Blenny and Oyster mourned for the old man, and prayed for each other. Oyster had found the whole ordeal with Latridae to be dark but enlightening — an end to the monotony of her travels. She held her tea leaf, treasure chest against her breast and kissed Blenny on the cheek, before disembarking.

Oyster rushed herself down the ramp and began to push through the crowd, kicking off her shoes and leaping into the warm sands of the beach. The seashore felt like fresh bread; the sunshine fell down like cream. Oyster rolled around as if she had never before met dry land, realizing that this was where she belonged.

Jake Robert Rarick is a student at College of the Canyons . His father, Raymond S. Rarick, made his career in the film industry as a propmaker, which forged his fascination with cinema and storytelling as a whole. He is deeply inspired by works that are absurd or surreal. He currently resides in Santa Clarita, California. This is his first publication.

Line Noise | D.M. Collins

I love the greys,
The delicious in-betweens and meanderings,

The analog logistics, broken
Down into a delicious set of

Ones and
Zeros,

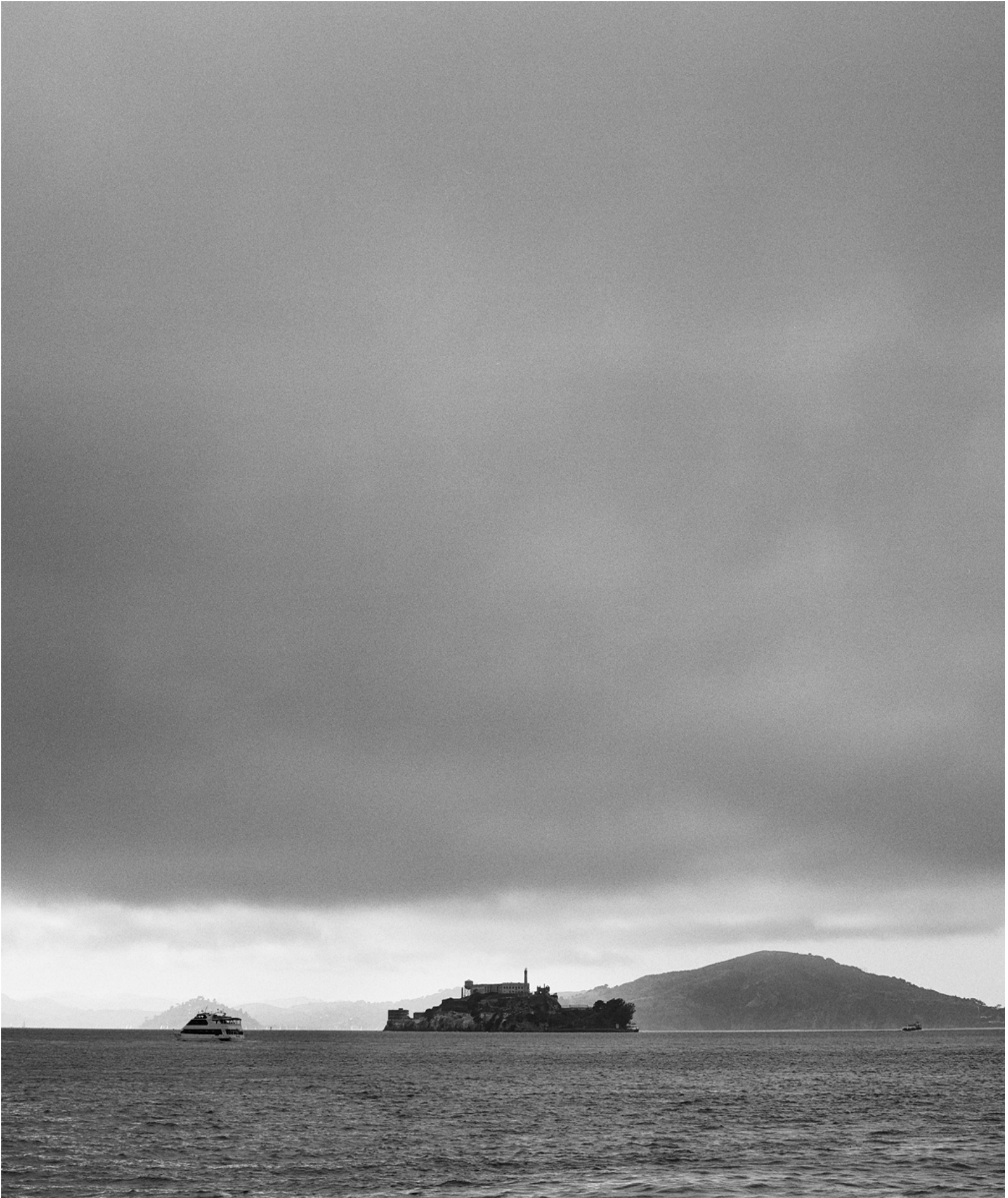
Calibrated and
Logical with a

Twist of acceptable
Parts per million. From

This came we. We are that
Parasite.

Someone forgot to carry the
Two.

D. M. Collins is an author, critic, poet, and performer who lives in Los Angeles. Whatever scant fame he has came largely due to his role as New Music Editor for L.A. RECORD, where since 2007 he's interviewed everyone from Chuck D to the Trashmen (and Trashwomen!) and gained a reputation for writing music reviews that could be critical even of the sounds they celebrated. But in recent years, he's turned a corner in his writing career, focusing less on music criticism (though he still hosts BRGRTV's YouTube channel on occasion) and more on poetry and literature, which he has helped promote each month at the A Rose in a Prose literary salon. He also plays with the band WORDS, loves his dog, Valerie Solanas, and thinks modern conceptions of love are a capitalist trap.



All The Crap You Keep Inside Grows Sunflowers | Keith Niles

All the crap you keep inside grows sunflowers and
bell peppers and opium poppies that brood in the
richest darkest loam for weeks and months in the
suppression of the sadness of your unfulfilled visions
before something gives way to the sun and the
heart blooms black and bursts forth with awful
truths. I'm afraid I may have a nervous breakdown
before long, the seeds are too strong and these
flowers are those no one wants to see, they bring
death to things and sadness to the land. I'm sad, I'm
sad, and I just really can't say right now, you know,
the garden needs all the quiet it can get, the
garden has a need, it needs to grow.

my weed count is low | Keith Niles

and i musta cleaned this house 100 times this fucking year dragging out empties and making beds and cleaning sheets and hiding corpses, sweeping and doing dishes and making nice for relatives and friends and roustabouts and girls and cats... and 89% of the time the fuckers come in and sniff around and go hmmm.. you just cleaned huh? wow, nice job...! but my weed count is low and i got trouble with the law and i've never voted and i've lived in la too long but i've come to love her and i can't complain i have friends and gigs and sex and love and a job that pays ok, hot running water and a view, i can't bitch but my weed count is low, and i got to stay clear of the brothers with the dope and i can't see out of one eye or hang out at the one place that knows me cuz i cant keep my cool... and i have a suspended license and a clubfoot and a diet soda problem and when i come home in the evening from the job and the bus and the walk and the lack of sleep, thru the smog and the snow and the shit.... she runs out to greet me... she meets me on the front lawn she's been waiting for me on the lawn she sees me coming she says daddy daddy where you been daddy i love you daddy she has her own language and so do i, i say yes baby i know i know darling girl i love you too little one and we go on in and i fill up her bowls and take off my pants and fall to the bed with some water and a book and my soul and she comes on in and lies with me and my weed count is low but i have the one thing that matters: i have it all.

Keith Niles is a widely published Los Angeles poet. He honed his craft during a potent stretch writing, performing and hosting shows in dive bars in East Hollywood. His most recent book, “The Thousand Poems (Vol. 1)” is a product of those wild years. A second volume is slated to be released in 2015. Most recently, Niles has recorded a full length album of genre-defying music with his band The Knownothings.

| Dorian Wood

and if the skin of my face should spiral away and forward
to the corner extreme and interrupt
the big NOTHING of you congratulating the actress
is correct

dw

Dorian Wood is a musician, playwright, and performance artist based in Los Angeles, California. His works in various forms have been performed at MOCA, REDCAT, LACE, LACMA, UCLA, Highways Performance Space (Santa Monica), Pacific Design Center (West Hollywood), The Stone (New York City), Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco), Mousonturm (Frankfurt), Botanique (Brussels) and the Stockholm Fringe Fest. He is currently working on a new studio album, out in 2016. <http://www.dorianwood.com/>



The Art of Opening Up | Teresa Córdova

We lay in bed holding each other
in a moon-shaped embrace
and talk about the good times,
ones about coming of age.
Bowl haircuts and the social suicide
of our neon colored nineties wear.
You recall the first time feeling loved—
and I my manufacture,
The chiseling of my being into glass
from head to toe in my gritty home
before being shipped off to
the brutal winds of life.

I want to perfect the art of opening
up, instead I close my eyes as
I experience the nirvana from your
whispers in my ear.
Please touch me...
Every half moaned syllable that
comes from your thin cherry lips more cunning than the next.
The laps of your tongue over my
body now a thick layer and succumb
what I am made of.
The planned soliloquy in my head
immersing itself between the sheets
and for a moment
you vindicate my mind
of fragility.

Whine or Whiskey Solution | Teresa Córdova

Walk out of the house,
old man.
Swallow your melancholy down
to the last drop of your whiskey ginger.

Unknown tomorrows
but you want to forget this moment—
hasta que la muerte ‘nos separe.

You come back
through the door
groggy eyed, scent of cigarette
from the bar in el ghetto.
With lipstick on your shirt
Inebriated. Thinking you forgot everyone
but your now ex-wife— well,
you tried.

So you wrap yourself in your bed sheets—
they’re black. You’ve morphed them into a coffin,
turned off the lights.

I can hear you from a distance.
The lonely cries, the whispers,
but they are fading.
Your low voice in tune
With your slow heartbeat—
The walls are really caving in now.

Teresa Córdova is from Los Angeles, CA. She has received her B.A. in Creative Writing with a minor in Business Law from Cal State Northridge and is currently pursuing her M.A. in Creative Writing, also at Cal State Northridge. She is currently working on completing her poetry manuscript "*In Memoriam: Darkness*," from which she aspires to encapsulate both the haunting, and the beautiful aspects of love, divorce, and the family dynamic. This is her first publication.



Shad Daze
by Erica Plouffe

Noah was nearly naked in an inner tube, telling Wendy about his family.

Ma's got round glasses, he said. Dark ringlets like his, cropped short.

Dad's a walking refrigerator. Cheeks made of ham.

"Sissy looks about the same as dad, but with tits," he said. "Can't miss her."

"You are so crude," Wendy said. She adjusted her bra strap. "Your poor sister."

"Wasn't always that way," he said. "That girl went from Shad Queen to Queen-sized in nearly a year."

They were floating down the Neuse River in their underwear, bottoms and bellies sunken into the liquid O centers of their giant rubber donuts, looking for Porter Bridge, where they'd parked their bicycles. Cinched with string to the tubes were the clothes they wore into town, waterproofed in triple-wrapped plastic bags.

"What happened to her?" Wendy asked.

"She found God."

"Found God? Or food?" Wendy said. She smirked, kicking water at Noah with her toe. Her inner tube pushed past a protruding rock, moving her closer to Noah. She leaned toward him for a kiss.

"God."

"So God makes you fat?"

"Church does. All that fellowshiping? The barbecue, the casseroles, the cake," he said. "Folks get together some two-three times a week, just to congratulate each other on how saved they are."

"Praying won't make you fat."

"All that congratulating comes with a whole lot of eating. Trust me."

"People need to eat."

"Yeah, but outdoing others is the design of the covered dish. And then someone thinks you're mad at them if you don't try their layer cake," he said. "Then you're rude if you don't ask for seconds."

"For an atheist you got the church drill down pretty well."

"We used to go when I was a kid," he said. "And I know one thing: God loves Atheists."

"Keeps him in business, right?" she said.

"Or her," he said. "If there is one at all."

The water was warm for an April afternoon in North Carolina. Noah arched his back to dip the crown of his head in the stream, making the world look upside down. He'd insisted they leave Philadelphia that morning at five, drive the seven hours to Franconia, and spend the afternoon doing just this before he introduced Wendy to the reality of his family: Granny supposedly on her deathbed; Sissy in a Christian fix; Ma and Dad docile and oblivious and abiding as always.

He shouldn't have been surprised that the river trip brought back memories of his best friend, Knox. It had been only two years since they took his ashes to Porter Bridge. This was the first time Noah had gone down the river without him. Knox would have liked that Noah had finally come home to do this. Finally, he'd say. You grew a pair and got out here without me. And he'd have loved for Knox to be with him and Wendy today, just to show her off. Knox would appreciate, as Noah did, how Wendy crossed her legs over the curve of the inner tube, how her long fingertips skimmed the surface of the Neuse, how her thin cotton bra showed, in its dampness, the precise scope and curve of her breasts.

"What you thinking about?" Wendy said. "Going back to church?"

"Something like that. Thinking about you. Thinking about the last time I was out here," he said.

“When was that?”

“Just before I left for school with this friend of mine, Knox. Man, that kid loved to smoke, right? Snuck them around everywhere we went, dying to light up. Loved them so much he’d bring ‘em to the river sealed in a Ziploc.”

“Kind of counter to the whole ‘being one with nature thing,’ no?” Wendy said.

“No doubt,” Noah said. “But I’ll never forget, we’re cruising along in the water, and he’s all excited telling this joke, about a pet whisperer, or something, when the tip of his cigarette burns a hole in the tube, and the thing just starts deflating. Nearly sunk with him still on it. He had to ride down the river on his belly, holding onto my tube. And the guy up at the gas station – same one we rented these tubes from today – charged him ten bucks for the repair. He never did that again.”

“So, where is Knox? Is he in town?”

He knew she’d ask. “No,” Noah said. “He’s not. Hey, there’s the bridge. We got to kick over to the shore.”

They slipped their legs and hips through the inner tubes’ holes and kicked crosscut of the current to the rocky lip of the river. They climbed barefoot up the steep slope to the roadway and found the bikes as they’d left them, chained to a utility pole. They dried off with the towels they’d strapped to their bicycles and found their clothes and flip-flops in the plastic bags, dressing on the gravel shoulder of the road.

Noah paused dressing for a moment to look at Wendy, whose underwear showed the line that divided the moon of her ass. Her legs were long, shoulders almost too narrow for the heft of her breasts, the girlish girth of her hips.

“Now that’s a nice, free show,” Noah said.

“It’s not a show if there’s no audience,” Wendy said, slipping a shirt over her still-wet bra, darkening her yellow tank top in triangular patches. She patted her dark hair with her towel, smiling at him. “I can see you, too.”

Usually, Noah said, they’d stow the tubes under the bridge and drive back to get them. “We can manage carrying the tubes back on the bikes, right?”

“We can try,” she said, slipping on her skirt.

“I wonder what my folks will say when they meet you,” he said. He reached for her hand, pulling her toward him. Her skin was cool, alive. Perfect. “They’ll be so surprised.”

She pulled back. “Why? You told them you were bringing me, right?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “No.”

She took the key she’d kept on a hair tie around her wrist and unchained the bicycles. “Noah,” she said. “What the hell?”

“What is it?” he asked.

“I don’t see why you keep all these secrets,” she said.

“There’s no secrets,” he said. “Just surprises. I don’t talk to my family a whole lot is all. You ready?”

Wendy’s bike wobbled as she struggled to guide the bike’s handlebars with one hand and hold the inner tube in the other. “So tell me about this Knox guy,” she said.

They were nearly two miles away from the gas station where Noah left his car, where they rented the inner tubes. Soon they’d be away from the river. Soon he could get in his car and go anywhere, tell Wendy everything, anything she wanted. But riding on that street, so close to the river, he felt too close to all of it.

“Knox was just... a friend,” Noah said. “But he’s not here anymore.”

When they drove up to Noah's house – an older brick ranch in a newish development – everything looked as Noah remembered it except for the driveway, which was empty.

"Wow," Noah said, as he found the spare key and let them into the house. "I was kind of expecting a big ole welcome. Ma's been wanting me home for months now."

Noah's "hello" echoed through the house, unanswered. The first floor was tidy as always but it held the smell of an unflushed toilet.

"Granny's got to be in there," Noah said, gesturing to the closed door off the dining room. "This here's her wheelchair."

"Shouldn't you check on her?" Wendy asked.

"I don't want to complicate things," he said. "She confuses easily."

In the kitchen was a plate of plastic-wrapped, fish-shaped cookies and a note: "Dear Noah, We are all down at the Shad Festival. Barbara Saunders is ill and I have to run the SHAD-O with your daddy and Sissy. Please come find us for supper at our usual spot. Granny should be resting. Sissy will come get her around five for dialysis. Love, Ma."

"Shad Festival," Noah said. "Of course. It's April. They're running right now."

"Shad. Is that like the Shad Daze shirt you brought to wear?" Wendy asked.

"One and the same," Noah said.

"So those things run?" Wendy said.

"They're like a salmon's distant cousin, only they're herring. Spend most of their lives in the ocean, until it's time to spawn," Noah said. "Then they swim upstream, back to the creeks where they were hatched. That's the run."

"Well, why were there none in the river today?" Wendy asked.

"April's kind of the end of the season," he said. "And they tend to swim deep, so we wouldn't have seen them anyway." Noah showed Wendy the screened-in back porch with the daybed where his folks would probably make him sleep. The den held a massive television, a shag rug, and a mantle full of mounted fish. On the wall of the stairwell to the second floor were a dozen or more milestone photos of Noah and Sissy. Wendy stopped to look at them.

"So this is her, huh?" Sissy in her knockout days was rail-thin and red-haired, her smile saucy and come-hither in the photo, even in her sparkling celery colored dress and tiara. This was taken just before Knox and Sissy had got together, for real, just after Sissy was named Shad Queen and before Noah left for school. Noah heard from his Ma that Knox and Sissy had been spending a lot of time together. He never had a problem with Knox dating Sissy; Noah had dated Knox's kid sister Colleen, off and on, although nothing really came of it. But Noah had always kind of hoped Sissy and Knox would have worked it out. If they got married, he liked to joke with Knox, he'd have his best friend for a brother-in-law. And then he'd heard Sissy had been getting in neck-deep with all the party kids up at the college during her senior year of high school, and she'd bring Knox along with her. He'd told Knox to watch out – and to watch Sissy, too – or she'd probably get them both in trouble. And then she did.

"Not anymore," Noah said. "She's a big girl now."

"You must miss her," she said.

"It's hard to know what I miss," he said. "But I do." Next to Sissy's Shad Queen shot was Noah and Knox at their high school graduation, Sissy wedged between them.

"It's just so sad," Wendy said.

"If you want to see something truly sad," Noah said, walking down the hall to his childhood

bedroom, “come see where you’ll sleep tonight.” It had been almost twenty years since his mother decorated him a room inspired by Batman – complete with a bat shaped headboard, a dozen bat mobiles, and hand-stenciled walls. It still made him cringe.

“All hand-made by my mother,” he said. “I must have been three or four.”

“Wow. Did you have a thing for Batman or what?” she asked.

Noah shrugged.

“Why hasn’t she changed it into a guest room?” Wendy asked.

“Maybe she’s waiting to be discovered by Better Homes or something,” He swatted at the mobile of bat-shaped silhouettes that hang from a Bat-shaped light fixture.

“Or for you to move home,” she said.

“That won’t happen,” he said.

Each bat was hand-stenciled in gold and metallic blue on navy walls. The mobile bats were cut and sanded smooth, painted the same shade as the walls. A flannel, hand-stitched golden bat silhouette sits in the center of the bedspread quilt.

“Why didn’t you ever ask her to redecorate it?” Wendy asked.

“I never had the heart to tell Ma all these bats kind of creep me out,” he said, as he felt around under the back of Wendy’s shirt for her bra clasp. They moved together onto the bed. “You see, all this? It’s not really Batman,” he said, pushing up her shirt. “It’s just bats. A thousand bats. I counted once.”

“Noah, your grandmother,” she breathed into his ear, moving in closer to his body, reaching for the fly of his shorts.

“She can’t hear a thing,” he said, sliding his hands under her skirt. “As deaf as they make ‘em. You’ll see when you meet her.”

“This whole Granny deathbed business, is it going to be okay with me here?” Wendy asked.

Noah said it should fine; Ma had called him a month ago with the same looming news, and she hadn’t died yet. “No one really likes Granny anyway,” he said. “I mean, we love her and all. But before she lost her mind, she was one of the meanest nurses you ever met.”

Even with all he’d told her about Sissy that afternoon, Noah was surprised that Wendy was still determined to befriend her, to try to tap into, as she said, “what made her real.” So it didn’t seem fair, then, that Sissy’s first view of Wendy that weekend was of her panting naked on the hand-sewn Batman bedspread, legs spread, with Noah kneeling on the floor between them.

There was no denying that Sissy had launched a stealth attack, climbing the stairs undetected, standing in the doorway, silent. At some point, Noah had felt Wendy stiffen, and then gasp loudly and not in a good way. He could only imagine that, past the dangling bat mobiles, Wendy was staring down a large, redheaded woman smirking in the hallway. Before Noah could react, Wendy shrieked, shielding her breasts with her arms. She kicked Noah in the eye with her heel before she folded herself into a ball on the bed. Noah clutched his eye, now throbbing.

“What the fuck, Sissy?” he said. No one said anything for a brief moment, and just as Noah opened his mouth to tell her off, Sissy said, “They got all the fish you want to eat, Noah, down at the festival.” Her footfalls on the stairwell were as quiet going down as they were coming up. “And may God in heaven forget to save your wretched, cussing, sinning souls.”

“Go to hell yourself, Sissy,” Noah yelled, helpless, naked, kneeling, as Wendy, shuddering, reached for her underwear. His eye was well on its way to bruising.

"Are you okay?" Wendy asked.

"Well, that was Sissy," Noah said. He stood, pressing his palm into his eye, wanting ice. He swatted at the bat mobile with his other hand. "I'll be fine. Still think you can tap into her?"

"It could have been worse, I guess," Wendy said, as Noah drove them to the Shad Festival. "It could have been your mom who found us."

"We'd have heard Ma long before she ever got up the stairs," he said.

"Do you think Sissy will say anything?"

"What's she gonna say?" Noah said. A man in a silver fish hat directed him to a parking spot behind Franconia Middle School. "How do you describe oral sex to your mother? How do you even acknowledge it exists? You don't."

"But she could say something like: 'That Wendy girl is trash.' Or, 'I caught them fooling around.' Just one little thing speaks volumes, you know?"

"Or she'll just hold it over our heads as long as she likes," Noah said. "It'll go on for years. Christian blackmail gets my vote."

"It's bad enough getting caught, but what gets me is that she didn't even look away," Wendy said. "Clear her throat. Something. She had to have seen your car in the yard. Who knows how long she'd been there, fingering that gold cross around her neck?"

"I don't know, man," Noah said.

"I mean, she was prowling around. We caught her catching us," she said. Her grip on Noah's knee tightened. "In my book? Voyeurism's the real sin here."

Every spring, Noah told Wendy, the entire town of Franconia shakes with river shad. It's boiled and shredded into fried cakes, grilled in small slabs, breaded with cornmeal and deep-fried whole like chicken, eyes and all, in hot grease. They are tossed, frozen, as sport. Caught in batches and mounted in taxidermy workshops. People in hand-made fish costumes shake fins with visitors. They hold pageants and compete for cash prizes, pose for photographs like Disney characters meandering through the festival.

"I wonder how the fish feels," Wendy said. "It's like, all these people are saying: we love you because we eat you. Or: we eat you because we love you."

"Hot night in the old town," Noah said. "Not much else here to do but get your fish freak-on."

"Maybe you can win me a stuffed fish, or something," she said.

"I guess," he said. "I already have one, you know." Noah's mounted fish that he kept in his dorm room was one of the first things Wendy noticed when he invited her over.

"But can't you just imagine, in, like, the dead of January, that we might find ourselves feeling lonesome for shad, and all we'd have to do to brighten up is look toward the mounted fishes on the mantle?" Wendy said.

"You've been watching too many Disney specials or something," he said.

"What I'm saying is, we need souvenirs. All we can get," Wendy said, pulling Noah closer to her.

"Our first Shad Fest together. I love it."

At the Shad Shirt booth, people slathered the fish in paint, then pressed them in custom patterns against T-shirts. Noah wore his classic "SHAD DAZED AND CONFUZED" T-shirt. The shirt was nearly a decade old now, from the early 1990s – the very one that got Wendy and Noah talking down at the Philly flea market the first day they met, about a year ago, sorting through a stack of dollar bin vinyl records. She told him later she'd noticed the imprints of the tiny scales across his shirt and finally got the courage to ask when was the last time he'd hugged a fish. And he'd wrapped his arms around himself and said, "I'm my own favorite Pisces, thank you." When she said she was a Pisces, too, he hugged her.

"Oh, I definitely need a fish T," Wendy said. "You know, to come full circle."

"You just don't want anyone to think you're a Shad Fest virgin."

"Well, I guess it's good to still be a virgin of something," she said. And they laughed, embarrassed, when a woman in a spun-white bouffant turned around and glared at them. "Let's just get these T-shirts underway, Fish girl," Noah said.

Wendy took a bottle of blue puffy paint and a fish patted dry with a paper towel, roller paint at the ready, for their T-shirts. On the front of her shirt, she wrote, "I ♥ a Guy who ♥'s to Eat Shad!" with a left-pointed arrow. On the back, she wrote "It's Shad-alingus!!" On Noah's T-shirt she wrote, "I'm the Guy who ♥'s to Eat Shad!" with an arrow pointing up.

"What are you doing?" Noah said, laughing. "Why taunt her?"

"C'mon," Wendy said. "Sissy needs to know we aren't afraid of her. We eat fish and we like it!"

"It's kind of a bad idea around here," he said, "to turn shad into a joke about oral sex." When the paint had dried, Wendy gave the woman at the checkout twenty dollars and the two shirts. The woman began to write down the T-shirt slogans on a long list with her chewed up ballpoint pen.

"We're always looking for the next shad slogan," she said. "Usually the best ones come from this booth right here."

She paused before she made an ellipsis after the "I ♥ a guy who..." Then she looked at Noah and said, "Well, ain't you Bif Garrison's boy? Noah?"

"Yes, ma'am," Noah said.

"Well, we haven't seen you at services for a while," she said.

"I been up north at school," he said. "Philadelphia."

"Good for you," the woman said. "Your hair got real long."

"Yes ma'am," he said

"What happened to your eye?"

"An accident, ma'am," he said. "This afternoon."

"You hear Colleen Toler is dancing tonight?"

Noah glanced at Wendy and said, "No. We just got here. Haven't even seen a program." The woman handed him a thick booklet with a pair of cartoon Shad wearing sunglasses and playing saxophones.

"Take mine," she said. "I have two. That girl's a real star, that Colleen. Shame about her brother."

"Yes, ma'am," Noah said. He flipped through the pages to the schedule. Colleen Toler, he learned, was not only performing that night, but as Shad Queen 2001, she was co-hosting the pageant for the next crop of satin-clad beauties, along with three other former Shad Queens. Colleen's photo was stunning. The slight bump on her nose made her wide-set eyes, her broad smile and shining dark hair all the more compelling. She looked like Knox, Noah realized, only female.

"Who is Colleen?" Wendy asked.

"No one," Noah said, feeling Wendy's prickle of jealousy. "Used to be friends with Sissy." He closed the booklet and said to the woman, "Thank you for this. We got to go find my folks." The woman cast a wary look at Wendy. "You take care of that eye, now."

Noah clutched the shirts in one hand and Wendy's hand in the other. They passed a long snake of a line of people all trying to get under a huge white tent with purple crosses painted on the roof. On stage, a lone man with a guitar sang a song about waterways.

"Where'd they get such a huge tent?" Wendy asked. "With such huge crosses?"

"It's on loan from the Revivalists," Noah said. "They have their big camp meeting the week before Shadfest, and to keep the permit people in town happy, they just leave it up for the Shad folks."

Seas of people were eating fish at red picnic tables aligned in long rows.

"How will we find your folks?" Wendy asked.

"They sit in the same section every year," he said. "Like panning for gold. You stake your claim once and no one crosses it."

They found Noah's dad in the center row, reading the newspaper, fulfilling his assignment of reserving the otherwise empty bench.

"Hope you like shad," Mr. Garrison said when Noah introduced him to Wendy. "That's all that's on the menu this weekend."

"Where's Ma?" Noah asked.

"She left to meet Sissy and take Granny to dialysis," Dad said. "They should be here soon."

"I'm getting hungry."

Dad looked over to the special needs transport area and nodded.

"Here they come now," he said. They followed the point of his finger to see Sissy pushing an elderly woman with bright pink hair.

"What the hell has Granny got on her head?" Noah asked.

"Sissy brought home one of them fuchsia bobs around Halloween. One of them ten dollar rat's nests you can get down Wilson? And damned if that's the one thing Mother will wear when she leaves house," Dad said. "She forgets her own name but won't be seen in public without that wig."

Ma didn't come over, but instead went straight to the pre-order express food line. Sissy found the family picnic table as though there were a painted red line leading her to it. She didn't say hello to anyone, and made a show of locking the wheels on Granny's chair, adjusting the woman's hair. She began to complain about the trouble she'd had with Granny's catheter, how long the dialysis line was today.

"I don't see why they don't have one line for all the junkies and alkie, and one for the normal people who just need to get their kidneys clean," she said.

"That's what we need in this world," Noah said. "Even more privileged health care, based on your moral past."

"They let such trash in that place," Dad said.

"Course you can find trash in your own home, too," Sissy said, staring at Wendy. "If your timing is right."

"Watch it, Sissy," said Noah. He leaned over toward his grandmother and said, loudly, "Well, hey, Granny. Isn't your hair the prettiest shade of pink!" And Granny patted Noah's hand and smiled.

"You like my hair?" she said. Noah nodded.

"Sis, you meet Wendy here?" Mr. Garrison said. "Noah's friend from school."

"Charmed," Sissy said, her gaze was tracked on the line where her mother was. "I'm a go help Ma now with dinner. Like I do everything else around here."

"Take your time," Noah called after her. "Nice to see you, too."

"Hey, Colleen is on the bill tonight," Mr. Garrison said. "That gal's a heck of a stepper." Noah turned to his father.

"How's Gram been?" he asked.

"She's about the same," he said. "Not much changes around here, you know that."

"And Sissy? Still rolling holy?"

"Can't you tell?" he said. "But we all manage, you know. She's talking about doing a health aide program at the college, but I don't know what'll come of it."

"I hear there's a need for nursing assistants," said Wendy. She stretched, still clutching the shirts in one of her hands. "Wasn't Mrs. Garrison a nurse?"

"Nurse!" Noah yelled at his grandmother. He pointed to her in a You-you-you gesture. She nodded. "It's a nurse some thirty years," she said.

Sissy and Ma returned from the shad line with plates of food for everyone: two trays filled with deep-fried baby shad fish, cartons of collards and beans, and rolls so slathered with brushed butter they shone.

"I been waiting on this all year," Dad said.

There was a brief moment of introduction for Wendy, between the shad delivery and Noah's explanation for the swelling of his left eye. No doubt Sissy had weighed in on Wendy, because Ma had pulled Noah to standing to give him a hug and then kept her arms wrapped around him as she gave Wendy the once-over.

"You didn't tell me you had a girlfriend," Ma said. "He doesn't tell us much, but usually he'll mention the important stuff. Like how he got a bruised eye. What happened here?"

"Nice to meet you," Wendy said. "We had a little accident this afternoon."

"I'm all right Ma," he said. "We were..."

"We were enjoying your town," Wendy said. "Down at the river."

"That's not all you been enjoying," Sissy said. Granny shifted in her chair and reached for one of the fried fish. Sissy slapped Granny on the wrist and shook her head. Granny dropped the fish like a thief, caught.

"Let her be, Sis," Noah said. "She's not a child."

"Don't tell me what to do," Sissy said. "We got to give a grace first." She bent low to Granny and yelled, "Grace!"

"I guess that's a sign it's time we eat," Dad said. Sissy took Granny's greasy hand, then her mother's, then dropped her head. Sissy prayed for the health of her family and friends, the tastiness of the shad of which they were about to eat, and that the souls of all sinners would seek to be saved so that they may find a place in the Kingdom of the Lord on Judgment Day. "And may those sinners, Lord, who fail to repent their ways, be forever scarred by your wrath, until they find it in their hearts to seek your forgiveness," Sissy said. "Amen."

Everyone but Wendy lifted their heads and immediately grabbed a fish. They held it at either end, like an ear of corn, and bit in. Granny picked up the fish and licked her lips, smiled at it as though it were an old friend. She pushed aside some hot pink strands of hair stuck to her lip, then downed it in three precise bites. Mr. Garrison brought his own seasoning – Mrs. Dash – on account of his high blood pressure. "Gotta cut back on the salt," he said. He eyed Sissy. "You should, too, sweetie."

"Keep that shaker away from my fish. You know I don't like spicy," she said. Her nose scrunched up, making her cheeks puff out, her mouth full of food. "The Lord will provide."

"Whatever that means," Noah said. Sissy was already on her third shad. "Looks like he's provided enough already. Or has God got into the weight-loss business, too?"

Sissy ignored him as she buttered her butter-brushed roll. Ma avoided talking about the things that matter: Granny's health, the presence of his girlfriend. She added to the din of the crowd as they ate, telling Noah news about who got married, who had a baby, who joined the Army, who sold his car,

who got a new one.

The table was quiet as the high school show choir waved aquatic-colored sashes for their “Under the Sea” routine. Noah had planned to tell his family how Wendy grew up in Connecticut, how she could add huge sums in her head. That she spent last summer building schools in Peru. How they might go back there together this summer. But he couldn’t shake Sissy’s sneery “fish eating” comment from that afternoon, how she crept up the stairs to spy on him and had since ruined Wendy’s chances with his folks. All of this had lodged into him and refused to leave the little place inside where he held grudges. He watched Sissy get grease and cornmeal stuck to her chin as she ate, and thought back to all the times he and Knox had come here, sitting at this very table, downing the ancestors of the same crunchy fish. One year Knox had switched out the Red Banks Free Will Baptist Church’s praise choir’s “He is the Source of Love” cassette with “Rebel Yell.” They were sitting right here when all the lace-collar control freak ladies started screeching at the sound man to “turn off that devil music.”

Noah found himself staring at Sissy as she ate, unable to look away from her seemingly opaque stay-at-home grown child’s eyes, unforgiving and cold. He wanted to ask Sissy if she’d counted how many fish she’d downed in the past ten minutes. How did it feel to be one of God’s charlatans? And who the hell did she think she was, making everyone in her midst miserable, bringing Knox down like she did?

But then Wendy sighed, and put down her fork.

“I can’t do this,” she said.

“What’s the matter?” Sissy asked. “Don’t like shad?”

Ma gnawed on a roll from the basket, her eyes fixed on the stage as though it were a television screen. “Oh, Noah, almost forgot. You know, Colleen is dancing tonight,” Ma said. “Prime time, before they crown the next Shad Queen.”

“Heard all about it, Ma,” Noah said.

“That trash,” Sissy said. “You figure the judges would be smart enough by now than to go pick her to run the show. When I was...”

“Sis, now wait, you were heaps trashier than Colleen could ever be,” Noah said. “And everyone knows it. Don’t get all high and mighty now that you think you’re playing on God’s team.”

“Don’t you take the lord’s name in vain to me,” Sissy said. “How dare you!”

Wendy reached for her napkin and blew her nose. She stared down at her uneaten food, shaking her head.

“Well, Sissy. Why do you suppose they didn’t ask you to co-host the competition this year with the other former Shad Queens?” he said.

“You need to mind your own,” Sissy said. “I wouldn’t have done it if they asked.”

Noah grabbed Wendy by the shoulder, leaned into her as though he was going to tell her a secret.

“I don’t think they ever will. Wendy, check it out. You want to know what trash is? I’ll tell you. It wasn’t ten minutes after they crowned her Shad Queen and took the photos for the paper and all that Sissy here changed into her skintight jeans and this halter top and proceeded to get soused down at the carnival,” Noah said.

Wendy shrunk away from his hand on her shoulder. “Noah, I don’t think...”

“And so there she was, our fair fish lady, in her roadhouse clothes and tiara and sash, with this gauzy cape wrap thing they put around your shoulders to make it look like you been blessed by a fish or something. And it took but an hour for miss Praise Be here to down a bottle of peachtree, and then toss it all up on the Spider Ride.”

Noah hardly heard his mother ask to keep his voice down. He focused on the pair of women on stage singing, “Let the River Run,” karaoke-style. Their hair was electric-socket big, over-permed

and tamed by Aqua Net.

"You shoulda seen it. The whole crowd was covered in Miss Shad Priss' peach tree-shad puke, and the operator didn't notice, cause he was talking to some gal, right? Even though people are, like, screaming at him to stop the ride," Noah said.

For a moment Noah believed that he was telling the story to the women on stage.

"And by the time she was done, Sis and her two friends were covered in fish vomit and they had to wrap a big plastic bag around her spider seat for the rest of the carnival."

"Shut up, will you?" Sissy said, standing up. Her face was contorted and red. "Just shut up."

"So what does Sissy do? Strips down to her skivvies right there on the railroad tracks, then tries to walk around in nothing but that cape and her undies and her sparkly purse. Oh and the Shad sash and tiara, too. Knox and me had to corral her like we was sheepdogs, just to get her home safe. And the next year, they had to get a new cape thing for all Sissy had done to it. Girl sure knows how to make her mark."

When the collards, rolls and whatever else was on the tray between Noah and his sister got tossed on him, even he knew he deserved it.

"You need to shut up now," Ma said, as Sissy ran off into the crowd of fish eaters. Ma followed her.

"What happened to you, huh?" Noah yelled after her. "What the hell happened? Miss fucking party girl. You're so one with God, why don't you bring Knox back?"

The crowd around them hushed for a quick moment, alarmed by Noah's outburst, his bruised eye. He imagined he must look like trouble. He sat down.

"You know better than to tip the scales with your sister," Dad said as Colleen took the stage, looking every bit a Tier One Class-A Irish-stepping Shad Queen. "And Wendy here, all upset. What's got into you?"

Wendy, Noah saw, was crying into her napkin.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "You feel like taking a walk?"

"I don't feel like much of anything," she said. "Leave me alone."

"Come on with me," he said. "You won't feel better here."

As they stood to leave, Dad said, "Oh, you'll miss Colleen if you leave now. They're just starting."

On stage, Colleen led a troupe of girls whose bodies moved like jumping puppets from the waist down, Riverdance style. Their upper bodies were still, their smiles of plaster, their bouncing fake hair and real breasts the only indicator that they were not carved from wood. Noah took Wendy weeping into her napkin away from the Revivalist tent, the high-energy fiddling music that reminded him of corralled sheep on speed.

Granny bit into the last of the shad, the one fish that didn't hadn't fallen to the floor.

"Sissy's the Shad Queen!" she said to no one.

"I want to go home," Wendy said. She'd folded her arms into her body, like a pair of wings nestled into themselves on the back steps of Franconia Middle School. "I can't stay here."

"Don't say that, Wendy, c'mon," Noah said.

"Your sister..."

"Poison, huh? Told you she was," Noah said.

"No. You're the poison," she said. "Why did you bring up her past like that? She's not this... Shad Queen whatever anymore."

"She'd have you believe she didn't have a past," he said.

"So what? Why make her feel bad about it?" she said. "Looks like she's got plenty problems of her own to deal with."

"The girl I described is the person she wants to forget," he said. "She thinks turning to God's gonna save her from it all."

"What do you care? Some people need religion to keep them on track," she said. "There's comfort in rules, in the idea of God."

"Sure, but that works only if it feels right," he said. "Let her be all one with God if it makes her happy. But you saw her. She's miserable."

"Oh, and you're Mr. Happy because you don't believe in God?" Wendy said. Noah looked out at the carnival and the Revivalist tent, breathing deep, unable to answer. Wendy took Noah's hands into her own, examining with her fingers the stiff hub of each fingernail, tracing the faint vein lines. "Noah. What happened?"

Noah closed his eyes, shutting out everything: The shad fish, the tent, the twilight sky. He wanted to say it right, so Wendy would know. So she would not miss anything.

"Okay. Knox? That friend of mine? Well, he died about two years back," he said. "In March. And Sissy, see, was with him when it happened."

"Oh," Wendy's grip on his hand tightened. She curled into him. "I'm sorry."

"We were best friends, grew up together, had this grand plan someday we'd take our River Run all the way down to the Atlantic. We'd joke sometimes that we'd marry each other's sisters, just so we could be brothers. It was silly, I guess. All these life plans. But college was never for him, and he always talked about moving up to Pennsylvania with me, just to hang out. Like he had nothing better to do down here but work at the grocery store. I'd call him every couple weeks, just to say hey, and that's all he'd talk about. And he was supposed to drive up to see me the weekend he died, but I had so much doing with schoolwork I called him and cancelled. He went out instead with Sissy. And when he died, the newspaper was so vague about it. My mom clipped me his obit and all it said was that he'd died," Noah said. "Unexpectedly. But Colleen called me at school a couple days later. Told me he'd been out with Sissy at a college party and overdosed. That they found some mix of valium and alcohol in his system, traces of cocaine."

It was after the wake in the pleather-hubbed booth of Duck's Tavern that some guy filled in Noah on what Colleen could not, and what Sissy would not. The guy had told him how Sissy wouldn't shut up that night, just kept going on with her brassy self about how she'd stuffed down her pants a bag of marshmallows from the Food Lion, thinking she was the shit, swigging from her Gallo. And the whole time Knox had passed out on Sissy's lap. The guy said he remembered being surprised that Knox could sleep through all of Sissy's jay-birding and squawking, making all the boys think dirty things about marshmallows.

"Then some girl got the idea to put makeup on Knox, like for a party joke? And they put eyeshadow and lipstick on his cheeks. Everything. All over his face," Noah said. "And, when Sissy couldn't wake him to go home, she got some guys to pile him into the backseat of her car. At some point she must have realized something was up. That he wasn't breathing, and he wasn't going to, because they ended up at the hospital. But it was too late. He'd stopped breathing somewhere between Sissy's lap and the backseat of her car. And pronounced dead, looking like a fucking clown."

Wendy brought Noah close to her, her arms around his waist. He could feel her fingertips on the ridges of his spine. "I'm so sorry," she said.

"I tried to talk to Sissy about what I'd heard, about the makeup and marshmallows and all. But she wouldn't get real with me. Just buffered me with blather about her recently saved soul. And then came the weight. Like Jesus himself masoned a big old wall around her."

“God. She must feel terrible,” she said. “Why do you blame her?”

“A lot of people in town blame her. And, I got to say, aside from the smokes, Knox never did any of that shit when I was around,” Noah said. “I feel like it’s my fault, too. Like if I hadn’t cancelled on him that weekend, maybe he’d still be here.”

Noah wiped his eyes on the shad shirts. “I’m so tired. Maybe we can just go to the house?” he said. They left the Shad Fest, silent, holding hands as Noah drove through the darkened streets of Franconia, back to his house. They changed into their new shad T-shirts and rested in his bed amid the bats, still holding hands, their bodies close, she murmuring into his ear as she fell asleep about the plans for Peru, about the babies she wanted to have with him, how she never did get a stuffed fish of her own.

It was nearly midnight when Noah returned to Porter Bridge on his bicycle. He hadn’t seen Sissy since she left the Revivalist tent. He’d checked her room every hour or so, just to make sure she hadn’t, yet again, stealth-climbed the stairs. What he did hear as Wendy fell asleep, was his parents coming in with Granny. They talked to her in loud voices about a glass of juice. A cookie. Bedtime. Eventually the television came on, and, even without leaving his bed, Noah could imagine his folks dozing in their twin easy chairs like they always had.

Now riding along the roads of his old neighborhood, he hardly needed the intermittent moonlight to guide him, but he was glad for it, because when the clouds passed and the moon shone it made everything ahead emerge in sharp, white-and-black images. Thus he saw the Porter Bridge long before it occurred to him that it was his destination. When he got there, he stopped on the curb where he and Wendy had towed off, and walked to the center of the bridge, taking in the shine of the water below, the plunk and rush over rocks. It made grooves in the shoreline. Standing here, watching the water just after it passed under the bridge, made him feel calm, like he had never left home.

When they were kids, he and Knox had a plan to make a full run of the Neuse River on their inner tubes. They’d talk about what landmarks lay past Porter Bridge; how they’d freak out the weekend yachters in New Bern, move through the inlets of the Inner Banks and finally reach the Atlantic Ocean. They’d have traveled in a caravan of inner tubes: one would hold a cooler; another would hold supplies and a pair of telescopic oars; one would be a spare in case Knox burned a hole through his tube again. They’d rope the whole thing together, crafting a long-distance, river-worthy black donut mass. Of course, they’d never gotten much past Porter Bridge, but the plan was there. They’d mapped out all the coordinates on the nautical chart; they’d made the supplies list; they knew the river’s shallow and deep parts; where the marinas were in case they had to call it off.

Noah had been thinking so much about Knox that when the smoke of a freshly lit cigarette hit him, he looked around, terrified, for its source. On the other side of the bridge, down along the banking, he caught sight of the cherry ember attached to the unmistakable silhouette of his sister, sitting alongside the riverbank. In the moonlight, surrounding Sissy, shone the opened wrappers of a dozen or so snack cakes. When Sissy was done with her cigarette she stood, brushing the crumbs from her body, and began to remove her clothes. The flesh above and below her navel bisected her torso, her down-sloping breasts atop it all reminded Noah of the liquid sand castles they’d made on these banks when they were kids. When she reached the lip of the river, she pressed together the palms of her hands as she waded in.

Noah wanted to call out to her. But he couldn’t yet find the words to let her know that, as she swam upstream in the slow current of the Neuse, naked and alone, that he was there, watching over her.

Erica Plouffe Lazure's flash fiction collection, *Heard Around Town*, won the 2014 Arcadia Fiction Chapbook Prize. Another chapbook, *Dry Dock*, was released in winter 2015 by Red Bird Press. Her fiction has appeared in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, the *Greensboro Review*, *Meridian*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Journal of Micro Literature*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Flash: the International Short-Short Story Magazine* (UK), and elsewhere. She lives and teaches in Exeter, NH and can be found online at ericaplouffelazure.com.

Back in the Muk Again
by Gordy Grundy

It was a decent crowd, a thorough cross-section of society. Fairly smart. Certainly opinionated. Cruddy, the group leader, pointed to me with a thick bent finger and said, "You next."

I stood. My handwritten manuscript was carefully organized on the grey plastic folding table before me. There were probably fifty loose sheets of notepaper and foolscap of many sizes, shapes and color, all neatly, if unevenly, layered in sequential order. Water and God know's what else stained many of them, blurring my penciled marks.

I cleared my throat and announced my work, "Back in the Muk Again, Chapter One. Missing in Action."

As a veteran of Toastmasters International, I looked around the room and gave everyone a direct look in the eye.

Then, I read, with a little flair.

*

Southern California was always golden outside of the Spanish Colonial Revival mansion in Los Feliz, the swank hilltop community that floats above Los Angeles. Legend and real estate listings have it that Cary Grant, the old school version of George Clooney, used to live here. The spread is called Silver Rio because the guy who built it in the Twenties had made his fortune in Colorado silver.

Muk McKaylee the artist and his studio crew have been squatting there for over nine months now. The period-furnished pad with pool and tennis court played out like the Alcalde's palace in a Zorro picture. McKaylee's galleon crew was becoming well acquainted with the luxury lifestyle, a pleasant change.

The kitchen was palatial and very modern. An industrial espresso maker was singing a morning song. Pedro Gin sat at the long Catalan table and was alternating his attention between the Asahi Shimbun, the LA Times and the flashing screen of his laptop.

Blu Wosakowski stood over the stove and blew a lock of hair out of her eyes. The slight seventeen year old liked to cook. Truthfully, she loved to cook in this TV, pro chef's kitchen with every gadget and chopper and skillet that imagination, money and ease could conjure. She was making Huevos Revolucion when the phone rang.

Blu answered the cell phone, "Studio!"

Blu. It's Vicki. I'm coming over right away," said the husky honey voice, "Business."

"We're here," said Blu, "Leadership is M.I.A."

"Got it. See you soon."

Blu snapped her phone closed and turned to Pedro, "Tricky is coming over."

Immediately, the doorbell rang, a chorus of deep, leisurely tones. The church bells had once pealed the attention of a small town near Monterrey Mexico in 1822.

"And that must be Tricky!" said Blu, clapping.

"Damn, she's fast," said Pedro to himself.

Blu was fascinated by Tricky and thought of her as an older sister. She studied every gesture and idea.

Somewhere deep in the household, a dog barked twice.

"I'll get the door," she untied her apron, "You watch the eggs."

Pedro stood to his six feet, four inches and sauntered over to the skillet on the stove. He had absolutely no idea what to do with the problem at hand. This guy could fix everything and make anything, but cooking food was a biotech mystery. He looked down at the skillet of tortillas, scrambled eggs, spicy red sauce and burping cheese. He was horrified. He really didn't know what to do and he didn't want to mess it up. He was hungry.

Pedro broke a sweat, a very uncommon occurrence. Logically, he was about to turn off the heat or shake the pan when Blu and Tricky Vicki Waters entered and rescued him.

"Where's the dogs?" asked Vicki, looking around, "It's so quiet."

"Don't do that to me again!" pleaded Pedro, wagging a finger at Blu.

"Look at you. *Baby!*" Blu grabbed the spatula and pretended to whack him with it.

Vicki smiled coyly at Pedro. "How's my Muscle Man? She tweaked his bicep.

Pedro smiled like a goof. He was built like a brickhouse but he was shy to her teasing.

They called Vicki *Tricky* because she was an attorney, a good one. She could be a better one, but her focus was split between re-starting a law career, raising two toddlers, paying the bills, entrepreneurialing a fast, mad scheme and wrapping her head around an unexpectedly nasty divorce.

Vicki was guessing, "I take it the Prince has yet to arise?"

"He drank his dinner last night," Blu answered.

"Ah! Trouble! That boy!" replied the attorney, looking around, "I can get him up. Are the dogs shut in with him?"

Blu laughed and nodded "Yes" in unison with Pedro.

Vicki crossed the room and leaned into the hallway. She cupped her hand and spoke clearly, not loudly, in the direction of the west wing. "*Nicky!? Nora!?*" Then she added some cotton candy to it. "*Bay-bees?! Bay-bees!*"

Far off down the hallway, behind thick closed doors, dogs began to howl. Each fast bark was a hard sharp report, like the crack of an automatic rifle. It sounded like there could be three or four feral dogs running amok in that distant bedroom.

"We'll see how long Muk can take it. What smells so good?!" said Vicki, "I came at the right time. I'm starved. I fed the kids but I forgot to feed me."

"Huevos Revolucion."

"How about Huevos Let's-Eat-First-Then-Riot-Later. I'm starving," added Pedro, "Who wants juice? Tricky, a Café Con Leche?"

The barking down the hallway grew louder and more frenzied. The door was banging in its frame.

"Nah, thanks." Vicki asked, "How you kids been?"

"Busy with the Freemani commission," said Blu, speaking up over the canine din.

"We install the sculpture day after tomorrow," offered Pedro.

"That's why I'm here. There's a kink in the link."

Blu and Pedro looked at each other with dread.

The Freemani commission was a much-needed gig at a really bad time. The Freemani Brothers of jewelry fame had recently purchased Muk's first sculpture. The installation of the two-ton bronze would be difficult and expensive.

"How big a kink?" asked Pedro warily.

"A hiccup. We have to do a favor job first. A little grease on the handshake." Tricky had a certain style. No-nonsense and breezy. So Cal preppie and proud of it. Happy with a hot tamale and a can of beer. Vicki Waters glanced in the direction of the howling and barking beyond. She smiled.

"No way." Pedro was worried. "We have rental equipment scheduled. Truck and a crane. I can't cancel now. I got guys coming."

Vicki said, "There is an emergency issue that may override the installation. We'll see," she said as she typed into her iPhone. "One of those crazy, silly, over-klept, nutty things. The Freemanis are freaked!" She paused and added, "It's kinda funny actually. There may be an adventure in it."

Far down the hallway, the barking stopped and something possibly human roared. Something heavy hit something hard, bounced and thudded. After a beat, the canine caterwaul immediately resumed and intensified.

"A small kink. A little quirky, murky," said Vicki, "Nothing that Muk can't fix."

"Nothing Muk can't fix," repeated Blu.

Vicki sighed deeply, "The Freeman Brothers are paying top ticket. We can't lose them. Muk needs this Second Act. Especially now in this economy." With a weary giggle, she said, "It's rough on the little guy when the rich stop getting richer..."

Down the hallway, a double door crashed open with the physical reverb of a 4.1 on the San Andreas. The hounds of hell, now unleashed, were howling at full volume and coming fast. An angry male voice roared, "*Curs! Flea bags! Pissers!*"

A dog stampede was coming.

Calmly, Vicki stood and moved her chair away from the table into the middle of the room. As she sat back down, two streaks of vapor, colored white, tan and black, hurrican'd into the room. Nick and Nora are two very fast moving, wire hair Fox Terriers. Both have a wild thing for Vicki. A cyclone of fur wrapped around her.

"Babies!" clapped Vicki.

Like a canine ballet at breakneck speed, Nick leapt onto Vicki's lap and got scratched behind his ears while Nora ran a circle around the chair. Then the dogs traded positions. This vaudeville dog-act love-fest kept repeating until Vicki was sufficiently mauled. The attorney stood up, disheveled. She cooed "Babies!" and barked "Enough!"

The dogs retreated. She adjusted her skirt, tucked in her blouse and tossed the hair out of her eyes.

The dogs dove at the water dish and were not polite about smacking their lips loudly.

Blu made art with her presentation of the plates. The tortillas were folded like origami. Cilantro and a chunky fresh salsa added color.

Pedro set the breakfast plates onto the table. As the dogs were now chasing each other, he grinned, "What's the difference between a terrier and a terrorist?"

"Nothing!" replied Blu and Vicki in unison; it was an old joke.

"Let's eat."

"Starved."

Pedro and Vicki made it perfectly clear that Blu had done a spectacular job with breakfast. In this life, there are few things better than a warm tortilla and a chunky fresh salsa.

The dogs began to squeal and stir excitedly.

"Victoria, I figured it had to be you." His voice was graveled and hoarse. Muk stood, bracing himself in the doorway. The dogs danced around him. He was wrapped in a Chinese silk comforter, heavily brocaded with colored silks and embroidered dragons. At quick glance, he looked like Ming the Merciless. Muk's long hair was tangled. His eyes were the color of the American flag. His shoulders were slack. "I shouldn't be standing."

I looked around the room once, at the familiar faces, and continued, "Chapter Two. *The Glow of Green*."

*

Standing in the doorway, Muk garbled, "Ya know, I was having the nicest dream. We were all dogging it in Tavarua and Lani and I walked outta the surf and fell into the sand and..." He held up his fist and opened his hand, letting the sweet dreams drift and float away. He glared at Vicki, "And then you rang!"

With a smile, he kissed Vicki on the top of her head.

"Eat something! It's great," she giggled and took a long sip of coffee, "Lani?"

"Ah, yeah." Muk said sadly, "The memory that does not fade."

Muk stepped out of his colorful silk cocoon and carefully went for the coffee pot. He looked tired and very hungover, older than his years. A four-day stubble offered no improvement. The handkerchief that he uses to cover his eyes when he sleeps was hanging around his neck, like a bandito after a robbery. The bathrobe he wore was posh, long and monogrammed with an abstract logo of his own design.

He growled, "Lying in *wide*-awakeness, I began to realize that those dogs would not get so jazzed up unless it was anyone but you, Tricky Vicki." He pulled a spliff from behind the dirty blonde hair that covered his ear and pointed it at her. "Only you, Tricky Vicki."

Sweeping his hand over the tile countertop, Muk lit a match and then the joint. "I'm a little *Under the Volcano*."

"I can see."

"Always unfortunate. It's lovely to have you here."

Vicki patted Blu on her forearm and said, "I forget how much fun I have here. It's always so entertaining."

"I suspect the news isn't swell since you are here in the flesh." Muk was scratching his greasy head. "I just don't wanna hear it. I don't think I can hear it." Deep inside his cranium, a synapse fired and Muk noted that he was not hungover but actually still drunk.

"As you know, the world never stops turning," Vicki said with a wicked grin. She had known Muk since she was a kid and she has never stopped being entertained by the youngster. Only a few years apart, she liked to call him "youngster." She set her fork neatly on the side of the near empty plate. She carefully folded her napkin.

"Ahem." Vicki stood up and sauntered around the kitchen island as if she were addressing a jury. "The Freemanis have a little problem, a sensitive problem."

Muk was massaging his neck. "I don't like the word *sensitive*. It scares me."

To Pedro, he asked, "Am I good on the install day after tomorrow? Do I know what's going on? Am I on top of it?"

"You're in the top of the glow, Boss."

Muk gestured his relief and confidence with a shaka waggle. He took a gulp of coffee and was suddenly unsure if he could keep it down. He leaned heavily against the island in the center of the kitchen.

A young looking skater quietly sped into the room. He nodded Hello to a few and shaka'd Muk. He began to look for food, hunting around the stove. Vicki nodded to him.

Vicki said, "Welcome SkAter." She turned back dramatically, "The Freemanis are flipped. They want to halt the installation because their money to pay for it is tied up in some missing jewelry. Like twenty-two million."

Muk turned a whiter shade of pale.

“The Freemani jewelry empire loaned Ali BeeDee some jewelry to wear on the red carpet two nights ago. They loaned her six pieces and they got three back.”

“No shit,” said SkAter laughing.

Pedro stated, “Whaddaya expect?”

Everyone knew all about Ali BeeDee, the talented rocker and songwriter who had devolved into a hotel room demolitionist, red carpet prankster and tabloid terror. All of the rehab reality shows wanted her bad.

Vicki continued, “Missing are a large pair of earrings and a hefty necklace.”

Muk deflated as if he took a hook to the solar plexus.

Vicki continued, “The House of Freemani doesn’t want to risk the bad press and the loss of confidence. They’re buggered, Muk. They want you to get the emeralds back. Low key. They know how much you helped the Patels with their daughter.”

“Damn. This is more than I can think about at this time and place,” groaned Muk. He took a deep breath and laughed, “I hosed her down once, Ali BeeDee.”

Muk stood erect, reenergized. “We need that gig. We need the dough. Pedro needs to see the dentist.”

“Wisdom teeth,” Pedro reported to Tricky.

“What do you mean *hosed her down*?” asked Blu.

“I shot Ali BeeDee once. With a garden hose.” Muk laughed as he thought of it. Her life was caprice and whimsy. “Soaked her good.”

“Why?”

“Tell ya later,” he whispered, as if deflating, “I need...” Muk was fumbling. He looked nauseated. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back. “Okay.” Muk began to wage an interior argument, debating both intractable sides, paddling his gondola through a foggy canal. He was forced to relent to the only practical solution to his dilemma. A decision.

Muk grabbed a highball glass and opened the freezer. He filled the glass with ice and dropped just as much onto the floor.

The dogs frenzied themselves with the frozen toys, playing loudly, ice cubes skidding across the floor.

Muk spun the cap off a frozen vodka bottle and poured an aggressive drink. From the refrigerator, he removed a bottle of tonic water.

“Good God, Muk! Absolutely not!” Vicki stood; everyone expected her to lecture him about his drinkng. “It’s too early for tonic. Tonic is sugar water for Pete’s sake!”

Muk was halted. He recoiled on unsteady feet, slippered in black velvet and embroidered with skulls of his own design in silver thread.

Tricky ranted, “Orange, tomato or grapefruit. Juice is the only civilized mixer that can be served with breakfast.” She coughed theatrically, “There are rules for a reason. It’s bad enough with the liquid TNT.” She knew Muk well enough to express her concern with a sidecar of humor.

Muk pondered the question and found her suggestion admirable. “Well spoken Mum.” He replaced the tonic bottle with a grapefruit juice container. He splashed a little into his glass. “You should come for breakfast more often. I feel healthier already. And in defiance to your criticism, some situations demand extreme measures.” He held up the highball. “Dire measures.”

Muk shook his head, trying to find his authority. He tightened the sash of his bathrobe like a pirate before battle. “The install will happen on sched. We need to keep this project moving and get the money back in our pocket.”

Muk focused his unsteady attention on Pedro and nodded a confirmation. "Pedro, I need you to start a whole electronic enchilada on Ali BeeDee. Go back two months for behaviors."

Pedro slapped his chest, his open hand resting over his heart and a tee logo that read Good Luck Cult.

Muk turned to SkAte who had wrapped up a breakfast sandwich and was putting it in his shoulder bag. "SkAte, I want you to S and S Ali Beedee in K-Town."

"Got it. Sit and surveil," said the skater. He set communications with Pedro by locking eyes and wagging fingers. "I'm rollin'." The lanky kid glided out of the room.

Mustering some enthusiasm, Muk turned to Vicki. "Tell the Freemanis that we will be in their office this afternoon at Four. We're gonna get their diamonds back."

"Emeralds," Vicki corrected.

"All of the above. We will get them back from the devil Ali BeeDee!"

"Actually," Pedro said, "You have an interview with Artillery magazine at Four."

"I'll call and reschedule," said Blu, "Tulsa Kinney is the writer and she's cool."

Muk massaged his temples. The sound of his own voice had hurt his ears. The world was asking too much of him. He felt like he was falling. Muk stood at six feet two inches but he appeared to be shrinking. The fuzzy synapses of his brain were firing irregularly along its corroded wiring.

Muk said to Blu and Pedro, "The Freemani's haven't met you yet. So you need to get cosplayed up." He pointed at Blu and told her "You'll be our driver. I sense a Seventies vibe. Give us some Aaron Spelling. Go for glam. The younger brother likes chesty strippers."

He turned, "Pedro, you're the lead OG. Gimme a high tech detective. Go obvious and pack the heat, but be tech nerdy. To get to Beverly Hills at 15:55 means we cut outta here at 15 Hundred. I'll hit the pool for a rehab lap at 13:15. Anyone wanna join me? It's so nice to have a pool." Muk was sinking.

Matthew 'Muk' McKaylee stood straight up, gaining six inches and inhaled deeply. "I have to go lie down." He wrapped the Chinese blanket across his shoulders.

Blu handed him a fresh and very weak drink with a pretty mint garnish.

Very quietly and quickly Muk said, "Nick. Nora. Andale."

Instantly, Nora leapt onto a chair, to the counter top and dove into Muk's arm. The highball spilled nary a drop. Nicky circled his feet.

Muk drawled as might a Southern gentleman, "Lawd, spare me the pain of my sins!" and he left the room.

Nicky stayed behind. He was curious about a sound coming from beyond the closed doors to the East wing of the house.

Blu turned to Vicki and asked, "I wonder what Muk meant, *hosed her down*?"

"I don't know," said Tricky Vicki, "But I'm sure we are going to find out."

Pedro clapped his hands together like a coach. "Okay, Crew. Let's make it happen."

I looked up, to indicate a chapter had ended. Everyone appeared to be listening; that's a good sign. I kept going, "Chapter Three. It's Getting Sticky."

*

Nicky approached the closed door to the East Wing with a low guttural growl, an extended warning siren without a break for air. The double doors cracked open suddenly and smacked Nick, sending him tumbling across the room.

Nicky approached the closed door to the East Wing with a low guttural growl, an extended warning siren without a break for air. The double doors cracked open suddenly and smacked Nick, sending him tumbling across the room.

A laughing cocktail waitress blasted into the kitchen. She was adjusting the tight waist of her short flouncy skirt, a colorful circus uniform.

Nick yipped with surprise and retreated fast, with his toe nails skittering on the slippery Catalina tile.

“Howdy, y’all!” The twangy waitress smiled brightly and threw her hand widely.

Everyone smiled and waved them in. The crew had met her once before but none could remember her name, especially Will Steppinshire who followed the waitress into the room.

Snorting and giggling, he was tucking the tail of his button down shirt into his belted suit pants. When he looked up, he sang, “Good morning, everyone! Where’s lucky Muk?!”

“Retired,” said Blu.

Will was actually relieved Muk was not around; he had news that had been weighing on him heavily. Just when things had been going along so well, Will knew that the days at the mansion were numbered. The Good Life was ending. “Hey. Hey. Look at this happy family!”

It did look like a happy family. The morning sun had turned the room golden. Sunlight filtered with coffee steam and stove heat. Everyone was safe, warm and content.

Tricky Vicki had known Will in high school; their parents crossed paths. She liked him well enough, though she didn’t approve of his lifestyle. He was a good guy, a kid who was a bit too fast and too loose for a father with responsibilities. Tricky would often see he and his wife at school fundraisers and kid’s parties.

Nicky was pissed. The terrier had climbed atop the counter, carefully stepping around plates. He leaned forward and glared at Will with dead eyes and a low growl.

“A happy Good Morning! What were you eat-TING!”

When Nick the dog launched his offensive, Will screamed “Ting!” in a very high falsetto with his hands throwing higher. The dog was aggressively reading the riot act to the preppy who was now standing on one leg like a khaki-colored flamingo.

“Nick!” commanded Pedro.

The dog split the scene, leapt off the counter and bunkered at the edge of the room.

Catching his dignity, Will readjusted his blue and gold tie and continued, “Well, I’m awake. Good morning! What did you have for breakfast, gang?” He clapped his hands together like a sales manager at a company picnic.

Blu answered, “Huevos Revolucion. *Nada mas*. What can I make you? Want French toast, eggs and something?”

“Oh, naw...” said the waitress.

Will interrupted, “Sure!” Will knew that he would be eating something amazing.

Blu launched into a whirlwind of motion. She wasn’t too happy to start a whole new breakfast but she did like being in charge. Cooking had the many challenges of flavors, presentation, satisfaction and speed. Blu went for all of ‘em. Having lived a life out of control, Blu saw the kitchen as a safe place that was hers to define.

She threw six halves of andouille sausages onto the griddle.

Muk had known Will Steppinshire for many years. Their scenes had momentarily crossed many times over a decade.

Steppinshire was a lead realtor for Trans-Luxe Properties. He had the listing on the Silver Rio and had been working very hard to foil its sale.

To him, the Silver Rio was a glorious playpen, an Eastside retreat from his Westside wife and four kids. He kept a room at the mansion, a princely fuck pad hosted by his “best friend Muk McKaylee the internationally famous artist.” It was a line that worked most of the time. In return for breakfast and light housekeeping, he allowed Muk and crew to squat in the Spanish palace. Or maybe it was vice versa.

Blu was filling their coffee cups. “You were so quiet last night,” she snarked, “I didn’t know you were here.”

Will arched his eyebrows with a James Bond swagger. “Ya know. In like Flynn.”

Pedro had a funny feeling. He looked outside and said slowly, “It’s a beautiful day. It might be nice to sit out by the pool later. Or play a round of croquet. We’re not using the tennis court like we should.” He cleared his throat, “Blu, I’d like to try the French toast.”

“*De Nada!*” she replied.

“Hey! Yeah! Croquet!” Will’s basset hound eyes brightened, “We should do a Bocce Ball cocktail party kinda thing! At sunset.”

Pedro agreed, “I like it!”

“We’ll get smashed and have a tournament.”

“And win prizes!” chirped the cocktail waitress.

Will Steppinshire patted her on the knee with vigor, hoping to pat the invitation out of her head. He already had another date in mind. “Prizes? We’ll have to see about that!”

Pedro rose and went to his laptop. He opened four programs and typed “Ali BeeDee” into the searches. He turned to help Blu with the breakfast prep; he couldn’t cook but he could clean.

Blu didn’t want to wait the twenty minutes for the deep fat fryer to heat up, so she grabbed a loaf of sourdough, and made French toast in the classic Old California way.

“You wouldn’t believe who was in last night?” The waitress asked brightly.

Blu was interested. “Who?”

“Johnny Depp! And a wild gang of ten. No, eleven.”

“Wait a minute,” Pedro jumped in, “You work at the Mocambo, right?”

“I do.”

Will nodded vigorously. The Mocambo was the bomb and he liked this easy access into its privileged world. He was beginning to see this girl as a real keeper; he thought hard to remember her name.

“Yeah. They got me workin’ the Circus Room.” She pulled at the edges of her skirt and curtsied. Her 1940’s era uniform was made of subtle red and creme stripes. “Circus stripes!”

“That’s right! I remember now.” Pedro looked at Will, “We met so fast before. We should come visit you!” The Mocambo was a big nightclub and restaurant.

“I’ll getcha the big booth.”

Pedro tapped his forehead, “Sorry, what’s your name again?”

“Windy.” She said, “Like the wind. With a Y.”

Will moved in, “I’m sorry. I’m so rude! I thought I had introduced you two...”

Windy waved it away.

Will was surprised; he thought her name had started with a ‘M’. He pretended to stretch and gave Pedro a ‘thumb’s up’ behind her back. “Windy, Windy, Windy,” Will shook his head and pretended to say her name with breezy affection. In truth, he was trying to commit it to memory.

Vicki looked at her iPad. Oddly, nothing was screaming at her. She dropped her shoulders and relaxed. How nice. She reached for the coffee.

Blu served the breakfast plates. Windy jumped into waitress mode and poured coffee while Pedro passed the warmed syrup. The butter melted quickly into the thick sourdough French toast. The batter had been glacéed with vanilla and cinnamon. Any overt sweetness was cut with the sharp spice of the Andouille sausage.

Nick circled the table knowing full well that he would never receive a scrap, yet he remained always hopeful. Pedro tossed him a dog cookie.

Pedro and Blu cleared some plates and refilled the coffee cups. They would not allow Windy the waitress to help them.

With one hand, Will was absently playing with the fork on his plate and fluffing his collegiate striped tie with the other. His mouth was working up words he was not sure how to say.

Failing to act casual, he floundered with, "So, what's the schedule next week? What's a-happen-in' for the Muk?"

"Ah, the same old," said Blu.

Vicki nodded, "A big sculpture installation. Missing emeralds. Detective work. A dangerous pop star. Lavish entertainment. Skullduggery. And a coupla drinks."

Blu giggled. It made her realize that she hadn't had a dull day in a long time.

"Well! That sounds productive," said Will, "eh, My big boss is coming into town. Top of the totem. Big king Harcourt is a-comin' to the City of Angels."

Pedro stood on his tip toes.

Blu caught her breath.

Pedro panicked, "Why's your boss coming to LA?"

"He is. Worried. That this place. Hasn't sold. Yet."

Pedro and Blu looked at each other with horror.

As Muk's crewmates, they had sailed many storms and lived in many conditions. The Silver Rio was heaven. It was comfort. It was lux. It was elegant. It had everything. Now, their most quiet and unspoken fear flowered before them; they would lose the pool.

The hammer hit the nail. The shoe had dropped.

Blu faced Pedro and said without humor, "So they loaded up the truck."

"And they moved to Beverly."

"Hills, that is?"

Pedro nodded, "Swimmin' pools."

"Movie stars... I think I want to cry."

Will slouched back down. "Mister Harcourt is a-coming to LA."

Windy jumped in, "You need a reser for the boss at Mocambo?"

Will perked up, "As a matter of fact, I do!" This was an advantage he had not thought of. "Damn! That'd be swell!"

"So, what can we do about it?" asked Blu. She was matter of fact, cold even.

"Wing it. You'll know as soon as I do what their plans will be. Muk will come up with something," he swallowed, "But this is gonna get dicey. It doesn't look good. I'm playin' the middle and I just don't know how far it can go..." Will turned to Pedro, "You'll break the news to Muk?"

Pedro frowned with a grin, "He kinda likes it here. As a matter of fact, I think I can safely say that we all do."

"*Are you kidding me?* This is my refuge, my sanity, no yelling wife, my Fortress of Solitude, my dignity, no children, my Alone Time, my my man cave, my...!"

Windy had taken a step back.

Pedro interrupted, "It's apocalyptic."

"*This is definitely more complicated than before!*"

Pedro laughed. They had all worked very hard, several times, to stop this place from selling. "Nothing we can't handle."

Blu and Vicki chuckled; it had been fun.

"He is coming into town with a Prince or a King of some very foreign, very loaded land. He wants to sell him the Silver Rio."

"Shit."

"Double that."

"There goes the neighborhood."

Will leaned forward, speaking warily and very earnestly, "This could get sticky. Very sticky."

Blu massaged her temples. She replied with a sigh, "It already has." She pointed to the tail of Will's blue and gold striped tie. It was floating in a pool of sticky maple syrup."

*

I nodded with finality and looked around the room at the curious faces of my literary workshop. I felt I had to add, "And, that is what I wrote."

The room was quiet. A few were looking with some incredulity and others obviously liked it or thought well of it. Some indifference. I slowly gathered my papers, and stood, waiting for the commentary and criticism.

"What in the *fuck* was that?" Babbo said quietly, shaking his head. Of course, the Master of Subtlety said it loud enough that everyone would hear.

Cruddy pointed his bent finger at him and said in a Southern drawl, "Hey! No unsubstantiated opinion!" Then Cruddy looked at me, mugged and said, "What in the fuck was that?"

Everyone broke up laughing. I did too.

"Pearls," I replied, "These words are *pearls*!"

Paco was laughing his hyena hiccup, which got everyone else laughing harder.

Cruddy took control of the room, "Anyone? Who would like t' make the first comment?"

"I will," Richard the former attorney ventured, "I liked it. It was fun. A romp. A relief from the doldrums of our daily lives." Richard nodded at his own good words.

"Hey, *Dick*!" said Willza, "That sounds as honest and deep as a back cover blurb!"

A few knees were slapped amongst the laughter.

With a whip of her head, Dawntine laid herself out, "Camp. It is pure unadulterated camp..."

I was confused and a little offended by that. I had been thinking Hammett, Preston Sturges, Howard Hawks, John Kennedy Toole, Tarantino.

"You got the kitchen sink," she continued, "*And* the dancing dogs!"

"Everybody likes dogs."

"Unless you like cats." I didn't see what idiot said that.

"We're supposed to write non-fiction, about what we know," said Tall Carl, "What's your prior?"

"Yeah?" asked Tarb, who thought he knew me.

I just looked at them and shrugged.

"The protagonist was not likeable." Geraldo never spoke much but when he did it was pretty smart and pithy, "Who wants to spend time with an artist? Read a story about a contemporary art painter? Is that a relatable, likeable character?" After a pause, he answered himself, "No!"

The murmur in the room seemed to agree.

"Your main man is a stoner, a drunk..."

"Actually, that's why I liked him," said Sci-Fi Kim.

"No. Intoxicants never work well in fiction," said Ganja, "Except *The Ginger Man*, maybe."

Def, Hunter S. Thompson. Castaneda. Burroughs. Never mind.”

“Nobody wants to read about an artist,” said Dinovich flatly.

“And the others? A shady attorney and a slacker husband cheating on his wife and little kids? Hard to root for.”

“Sorry but your piece and your protag were dull and deplorable. Where was the invisible jet? Preposterous.” said Whister.

I was speechless and dumbfounded. I thought I had written a bead, a romp, a laugh, a dream and an adventure. A moment’s relief for our sorry times. Wodehouse for the Apocalypse. How could I be so far off, dammit? I had invested thought on this.

Suddenly the Emergency Lock Down Alarm began to wonk. Woonk. Woonk and never stop. It was a full Lock Down. Something real bad was happening somewhere.

Everyone looked at each other, stood up and shuffled out the room. Guards entered and the pace quickened. We all marched to our respective cots and rots.

Standing in my crib, I could hear loud, far off misery and trouble. Misery being misery, someone, somewhere, was getting it worse than I just got.

I liked the protagonist. I was writing what I knew.

Gordy Grundy is a visual artist, writer and columnist. A native of Newport Beach, he has been influenced by sunny flights of SoCal fancy, the bold stroke and the grand gesture. Hollywood, Disney, the secrets of re-creation and the Healing Power of Pop continue to fascinate him. As a writer and columnist, he has written for Artillery magazine, the Huffington Post, the Los Angeles Times, the LA Weekly, Coagula Art Journal and many others. He is the author of “Artist Pants” and the editor of the literary anthology “Gen F.” His visual and literary works can be found at www.GordyGrundy.com