

## BIRKENSNAKE II

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## The Children's Factory

Michael Stewart

FOR LITTLE GIRLS WITH DIRTY HEMS and boys who scratch their knees, there is the ever-small door of the children's factory. Little red bricks stacked forty feet high and windows by the hundred covered in dirt and ivy. And what light comes through comes green and dirty and too thick to make it all the way to the floor. The machines run by tiny hands. In the bowels, in the guts. In the very intestinal tract of it there is a machine run by tiny hands. This is the proper way to speak to children. The Devil only knows what their great machine does – other than wheeze and breathe. Perhaps they are digging – why not? And scraping and pulling. There is after all not a man among them over four feet tall. For breakfast they mix their milk with sugar, except when they are ill. Then they stir into their milk a quick pour of cow's blood. (It's good for the constitution. It thickens the skin. It drops the voice.) It's the old trick, the one with the bottle. Take it in piece by piece. Each small enough to fit through the mouth. It's the trick with the pear. Slip it in while you can and let it grow until it presses at the sides. Every once in a while they open a window, peek a little head out, and, small like a cat (or some other small, evil thing), ask politely for your child to come and play. The managers once sat in the office that overlooks the machine. A platform of windows. The newcomers.

The youngest ones have a natural authority. An inclination. A sudden mastery of the machine and an idea of how it fits together. Maybe even an understanding. But these things dim with height. The older ones are sent to posts still deeper in the machine, where wonder is a thing of pistons and gears. And over time they come up less and less, no longer fitting through the door.

## from *A World Called The Blazing World*

Danielle Dutton

WAS IT SHOCK, THEN, OR FEAR, or else a naïve sense of civic duty that provoked Margaret to join the Queen's court at Oxford? Certainly the stories were enchanting. One: that the glamorous Henrietta Maria (Marie de Medici's daughter) had scandalized the English by acting in her own court masques – now a princess, now an Amazon, now a water nymph, and so on. Two: that the beautiful young Queen, fond of masquerades offstage as well as on, had been spotted, by Sir John Davys, walking along the Thames and through riverside meadows disguised in order to “look upon the hay-makers, and sometimes take a rake and fork and sportingly make hay with them!” Three: that the Queen, calling herself “she-majesty generalissima,” had led an army from Bridlington to Oxford (early in 1642), straddling a horse like Alexander and eating with the men in the field.

Or had Margaret spotted her way out? Upon hearing the Queen had fewer maids in Oxford than she'd been used to in London, hands at her sides, before a painting of a dog, Margaret plainly requested that she be allowed to go. She had, she said, a “great desire” to do so. Her siblings were against it. She'd embarrass herself, the family. She was shy, had been so infrequently from home; she was strange – that much was

clear, even to doting sisters. But Elizabeth Lucas was tired. This war had come like a whirlwind. Hoping to please her youngest – who'd sunk into melancholy after the rape of their gardens – Elizabeth consented after a mere three sighs. Or perhaps Lizzie decided it was time her baby grew up? Therefore, at the ripe age of twenty (and nearly a spinster, let's face it) Margaret moved from her insular family into an insular court.

The trip to Oxford was made in the dead of night. Kisses on the lawn at St. John's Green. A perfect summer gloom of vegetal bravado: peonies, bugloss, native beetles singing. She rode with her maid (a girl called Elizabeth Moppet), pictured a royal reception in the wan summer sun. Curtsies and banners and rows and rows of marigolds. But when the coach came to a stop it was in front of a baker's house in an obscure and narrow lane. Margaret was sped inside (a strange man gripping her elbow!) and shown to a very bad bed. But she did not sleep. She kept her wits. Amidst the sour smell of yeast and mold, she crept from the bed to peer into the lane and saw a stack of soldiers' bodies.

The following day salvation came in the form of a handsome courtier. But she refused his arm, refused to speak, refused to meet his eye. A short trip, a series of crowded hallways, and then – unexpectedly – Margaret met the Queen. The Queen, stunning and Catholic and dressed in red and ermine. And dozens of sumptuous courtiers stood silent against the walls. Then someone cleared his throat – and Margaret saw she was in an alternate universe whirring far into space: African servants, poets, dogs in silken caps, platonic ideals, sparkling conversation, aristocratic ladies “half dressed, like angels,” and ivy-coated quadrangles with womanizing captains, dueling earls, actors. Artless girl, she was shocked to learn the court itself was a playground. In fourteen hours she'd gone from her mother's bosom to the celebrated body of Henrietta Maria, effortlessly arousing Puritan ire for years. And Oxford itself was rotten with spies. Dead dogs and horses clogged the waterways. Corpses from both sides were flung



on Jews' Mount. Enemy combatants imprisoned in parish churches. There were military parades for the King every morning at eleven. Grain was stored in Law and Logic, drawbridges built in Rhetoric, boots cobbled in the School of Astronomy and Music. The Queen rarely left her makeshift palace, and her ladies-in-waiting rarely left her side. Margaret spent hours in hothouse rooms, clutching the Queen's tortoise fan or gloves or lace fan or fox train. There were hierarchies amongst the ladies. Bickering over who sat where and when, who wore what and when, who fetched what and why, and who said what and to whom and what gave *her* the right to say *that*. And what flirts! Margaret shared a bed with one of the worst – another junior-ranking maid who'd had it to herself before Margaret got there. Worst of all, she was permanently underdressed, in courtyards and buzzing hallways, in her taller sisters' outmoded hand-me-downs and caps. So she designed in her mind a sugar-spun golden gown to walk the path to church in, trailing crimson petals and greenish beetle wings. Then someone cupped her breasts – two-handed! – as she passed like a ghost down the hall. Margaret rather “chose to be accounted a Fool, than be thought rude or wanton.” She never spoke, but immediately sent word to her mother, begging to be allowed back home. Elizabeth, now in London, as promptly refused. Bad as Margaret thought she had it, life outside was swiftly unraveling for those still loyal to the King. *Be tranquil*, her mother's note advised, *this war will soon be over*.

But the following spring it was not. So Margaret accompanied the Queen's court to Exeter, where Henrietta Maria gave birth to a girl – the labor causing hysterical blindness and a lingering pain in her chest. Two weeks on (and leaving the tiny princess), Queen and company fled to Falmouth, where – in “a galley with sixteen oars” – they sailed for France. The French had offered the Queen an entire wing of the Louvre. It was a temporary loan, to wait out the Puritan scourge. Six months – no more – and off they sped.

## From now on all I'll talk about is light

Blake Butler

**I**N THE COLD SUMMERS, as the dirt rose, I'd have each child stand before me in the yard. With the protrusions of their bodies I'd beat the life out of the rug – one massive cloth encroachment I'd stretched to fit the whole house. This method would coax more shit out of the deeper folds, where if allowed to sit the skin and spit would turn to cream. It also kept my hands from cracking on the wrap of the whip handle, from which my blood would spill and make stench to cull the wasps – not that they wouldn't be, regardless. Already we could not see the sun.

*A child is made of nothing, I would say into the air around the children so that they could say it back. What is put against him sticks to him forever without end, which is the reason anything goes wrong.*

The children's eyes made prisms. The rugthump punctured their voices as if they had been thrown down long windowed halls.

When I could no longer read one child's face through the dander, I continued with the next.

Sometimes the children would wear skin hoods. That was how I liked them best.

There was never any prayer.

After the beatings, in the tent, the children would get fed what we had made. Termite shit and cogs of smog hair and gash columns made from rubbing, plus whatever the house had sucked up in my absence and whatever sleep speech and gnashing I had given up that month. The kids, for their part, brought cloths I'd use to clear their clotted lungs and nostrils with the hammer and the stick. I could smell the smell of mothers rubbed into the fabric, gifts for parting hours. Sometimes the smell would make me moisten. The children's underskin was made of skin as well. Where I touched would go tattooed. I could count them out from overhead: *There I am. There I am.*

By day's end I was randy and electric. In the den my steak knives stuck together while I fit my fingers in my fold.

In the attic was a wax bath, with which I kept my and Sister's mind at ease.

I could not stop throwing up.

On the back rim of the schoolhouse the wasps continued with their hive. Each year I let them work well into the season. I liked their wingbeat in the evening. I liked the rind they'd form on Sister's body; her black feet rustled with their buzzing, prophesying walk. I knew she would. I knew she would. We wore her hair in silver knots like mine.

Each year, as summer shifted and licked in glass across the pond, I knew the cold months were coming when on some certain evening I'd become incensed. I'd work myself into a lather in which all I could think about was rupturing the hive: that mass of doors and windows through none of which I'd ever fit.

The first year I used a seven-foot machete.

The second year I shot a beam out of my eyes: radiance earned purely from my fury over Sister – her whole eyes not quite what wherever – and perhaps concerned slightly for my hymen, undulating, which in the night would keep me up, ragged, counting my inhale, waiting on the rheum. At my emission the children moaned a little, rattling their hands,

their own eyes lit as if in midst of replication, *one thing I'd taught at last, at least* – though in their eyes the light would quickly rupture or make paisley and I would sit us down to practice wishing.

From the hive meat we'd make rings that fit our fingers. Each one I kept as mine.

Each year, as we got older, the hive grew back faster and took more to knock down. At first it had resembled my pin-cushion, *soft with something solid in the center*; though by the second year it was more a harpsichord. The third year it shrank to a corsage, but by the fourth again it made a booming white balloon, in reign over the yard.

By the fifth year you could not hear the beatbox of my cleaning, nor the children hacking up and on their mangled sums. The children were older now, my height. We looked each other in the eyes and each time shuddered. Our sweat grew richer with recycle. My piss came neon yellow, cold.

At night the black glass bloomed above my bed. I could not concentrate on rubbing. Underneath me, Sister teeming. Sister of no words, no matter how I organized her gums.

I tried to make another backyard of the buzzing but my nails could not cut through the doubled sod.

I tried to fit myself into the skimmer. I tried to find the center of the hive – but by now, for all my anger, in the rasp of cells my skin just made more blushed.

The age came for me faster.

By the year my lungs were gristle, the hive was more than I could rend by light alone. The schoolyard stood white and sizzling. I learned to trick my arm into a rifle. I couldn't aim by seeing. I had to close my eyes.

By the year the children's mothers could no longer fit the children's heads into the cars to bring them on, I had to rent a wrecker. The hive was the size of my whole house. Was my house. Was in me. Was me. Was.

I called the renting men the names they wanted. I lost my nails trying to writhe the right way. Inside their barn I

showed the men the claw marks on my tonsils where the rash was coming up. I shaved. I made a stairwell of my body. I rang me. I walked out with the keys cold on my tongue.

By the year the roof opened over nowhere, I tried to beat the hive in halves for miles by wielding Sister's last wax torso, fat with layers laid by layer, the way the children also grew. I could still see her in there somewhat, her new mesh chest hardened where my sister lips had kissed. Inside the year we took turns breathing back and forth through one another with what air we had left, while around us the hive compiled the light to buzz and brick, a home.

## Five Simple Sentence Forms

Rhoads Stevens

**I** CLOTTED. I ate a knot I had found when I went with my father to meet his fiancée. She, the fiancée, looked modest. She gave me a ripe pear, a pear from the north of Spain – Galicia. I deemed the pear too ripe for my tastes.

I stank. Every horse I ever rode tried to rub me off its back. These horses smelled oniony. These horses shot me looks of certain depression. These horses judged me incompetent – such that they didn't want me on their backs.

I lost. I woodshedded my boat design for three weeks before I decided it was time to try it on a man-made lake. The lake was murky and designed by a man named Murphy. Murphy once cooked my father a meal – one that consisted of manioc and rooster heads. My father considered the coxcombs toothsome.

I wandered. The auctioneer said, "Gentlemen, the tigers in this cage will be sold by order of the Collector of Customs. The terms are cash. What do I hear for these tigers?" The tigers appeared sick, so the chiselers from Barnum & Bailey bid next to nothing. I wanted to give the tigers horsemeat I had chopped from those horses that had tried to rub me off their backs. I kept that horsemeat fresh by dangling it through a frozen lake's icehole and into frigid brown water.

I pined. I caught fish – perch, mostly – out of an icehole.

The fish were frozen. I prepared my father's fiancée fish since she had never eaten one before. She declared it not edible but wholesome, difficult to eat but pretty.

I expired. Scientists no longer manufacture coral snake antivenin in the U.S. Coral snakes are red and yellow, and you can remember this by saying "Red and Yellow – Kill a Fellow." I tried to show my father a coral snake I had found in his basement, but then that coral snake bit me. My father's fiancée kept me alive for a time.

## Knot

Matt Briggs

I WAS MADE OF STRING. While walking on the sidewalk back from the beach where I went during my lunch to drink coffee from my thermos and look at the gulls, I was afraid I'd snag myself on a bush and I'd begin to unravel. I'd hook myself on a blackberry or something. Blackberries grew in the margins between people's houses where they didn't pay attention, where anything growing could be the responsibility of the person next door. No one wanted to cut what didn't belong to them. Of course because of this fear I jinxed myself, and this is exactly what occurred. I snagged myself on the brambles near the empty lot.

I was packed as a baseball is packed: a tiny round part, my bones, encircled with string around and around, tied and covered with skin. While I had not been paying attention during my morning walk around the block, muttering to myself about my equations and trying to remember what it was I was trying to prove and for whom, I had worn a hole in my skin. I hadn't applied a bandage. It had scabbed and would heal, but on the walk that afternoon down to the beach under the clear winter sky I discovered the tide had come in bringing seaweed and upended starfish. The starfish were wrapped in weeds and kelp. They had more than just five arms. Some of them had six or eight or twelve arms. The arms were long



and curled around the starfishes' bodies in elaborate sweeps. They were orange and brown and russet. The gulls let out piercing cries as they hunted the helpless starfish. Each gull emitted a sound at a regular interval, and their cries overlapped and multiplied creating a jarring, pulsing agitation that spread over the entire beach. I wasn't able to take my peaceful lunch and drink my coffee on the bayside stones. In a panic, I picked the scab from my skin and exposed a loose fiber of string.

I tried to tuck it back in. I thought I had done so. If only I chewed gum, I could have patched myself this way. If only I bicycled, I could have patched myself with the repair kit.

When I snagged myself the string began to come loose. I didn't notice it. The string is very thin. A person can hardly see it. A well-placed foot can sever the string. I left a trail as thin as spider's silk from the blackberry bush into my house, and then through my house it followed me as I went about my day performing my calculations, fixing coffee, lying in the yard on the cool grass on my yoga mat and staring directly into the blue to empty my mind of everything except my problem.

I began to lose weight because it was trailing behind, a thin extension of myself. At first I thought it was because I wasn't eating well. I tend not to eat well when I am working on a particularly intractable problem. I spoke to my mother on the phone, and she mentioned the flu at her work. She worked on a computer in what is called a *server farm*. It was just her and the janitor in the server farm. Around them were actual farms that grew vegetables in the late summer. In the winter the fields were covered with ice and snow. "You mean," I said, "the janitor is sick?" "People have something, and it is going around. Maybe you have that?" "Who?" I asked. "Mom there is nobody there." "There are people here. I'd be lonely if there weren't. Everyone's got a job," she said. "And right now a lot of them are home sick. I'd be lonely if I thought they weren't coming back." I ate more, but still I kept becoming smaller and smaller. At first I liked the sensation of being small and

sitting at my desk. I moved more freely, and then I began to notice the string of myself sticking to well-trafficked locations.

I inspected myself and found the spot that hadn't healed. Lepers do not feel such things, and I wondered if I had leprosy. I didn't want to go the doctor to find out because he most likely would be puzzled to discover I was made of string. I patched myself then with a band-aid. I cleaned the house with a bucket, solvent, and an especially purchased rag because I do not keep rags in the house. The house needed a good rub-down anyway.

At the beach the next day I couldn't think about my problem. Instead I wondered, how did I come to be made of string? Other animals are not made of string as far as I know. I was made from scratch like a doll by my mother: my bones carefully wrapped in gossamer until I had muscle and flesh and brain. My equation seemed trivial after such a realization.

## Strange Animal: Three Stories

Christopher Boucher

### CAGE

I once dated a woman who kept her brother in a cage. The woman's name was Lana. Her brother's name was Dave.

Lana and I only had one date. She'd suffered tragedy after tragedy, she explained over dinner – she'd lost her parents in a car accident and suffered a stroke shortly thereafter. "I was *eighteen!*" she said.

"Wow," I said. "Jeez!"

"Nowadays I think of myself in, like, a little glass case. And every once in a while I can see His face outside the glass."

"Whose face?"

"God's."

I bit into my enchilada. "Yeah – wow," I said.

After dinner she took me home. As we walked up the front steps she pulled me close and said, "I feel this connection to you – like we've always known each other."

"I'm so attracted to you," I said.

She made eyes at me and opened the front door.

That's when I saw the cage. It stood in the living room, beside the television. It was maybe six feet tall and just as wide. A man sat in it, reading – he had black hair and he wore a flannel shirt.

"That's my brother, Dave," she said. "Hi, Dave!"

"Hi," Dave said, without looking up.

“This is Kenneth,” Lana said.

“Hi,” Dave said.

Lana led me to her bedroom. “What’s the story there?” I whispered.

“With what?”

“Why is your brother in a cage?”

“He needs to be.” She kissed me.

I pulled back. “Why?”

“Otherwise he misbehaves.” She ran her hands up my shirt. “I want you, Kenneth,” she said.

We lay down. She shuddered against me. “I have to be really careful. OK?” she said.

“OK.”

We took off our clothes. She was so passionate – she held my wrists and screamed out.

Before we fell asleep she lay beside me and said, “We’re blessed. Aren’t we *blessed*?”

I could hear Dave snoring in his cage.

Lana said, “Can we go to breakfast tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

“We can bring a plate home for Dave,” she said.

But something terrible happened in the night. I woke up and Lana wasn’t breathing. I couldn’t wake her!

I ran into the living room. “Dave!” I said. “Your sister’s not breathing!”

He sat up in the cage. “Call 911!” he said.

The paramedics came. Lana’d died of a stroke, they said.

After they left, I sat in the living room. I said, “Dave. Should I open your cage?”

He hung his head. “Just go.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Please go.”

At the funeral they wheeled Dave’s cage out to the grave-site. He trembled inside it.

Later, I saw Dave at the grand opening of a pool hall. He was shooting pool with three attractive women – you would never have suspected that he’d lived in a cage.

We hugged. “How are you?” he said.

“I’m fine – you?”

“Good – I’m going to grad school in the fall,” he said. “Finally get my degree.”

“In what?”

“Art history,” he said.

I said, “I love art history!”

#### STRANGE ANIMAL

There it goes again, I told my wife. What? she said. The strange animal, I said.

We were sitting at the kitchen table, discussing our marriage – my wife had just asked me a very thick question – when I saw the silver animal flash by the window.

It went hopping thataway, I told my wife. I stood up. This time I’m going to catch it.

Are you kidding me? my wife said. We’re in the middle of a discussion!

I’ll be right back.

Don’t you dare –

One minute, I said, and I ran out the back door.

I reached the sidewalk just in time to see the animal skip around the corner. I tried to run, but I am not athletic – my extra weight keeps me from moving fast. I ambled to the end of the street, and the flashrat saw me and scurried into some bushes.

I approached the shrubs and began to search them. Then I saw the animal, sharpening and tulsing against a root. I took a quick breath and leapt, shouting my attack cry: Yah!

It turned out not to be an animal at all, but the foil wrapper for a burrito – there was a Burrito Company logo tattooed on the foil’s shoulder.

I carried the foil home to show my wife, but when I got back I couldn’t find her – I looked in the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom. I called out her name and there was no response.

She was gone.

I thought, *Shoot*.

I sat down at the kitchen table and stared at the foil. Some time passed – an hour or two.

I lay my head on the table.

I thought you were an animal, I told the foil.

Well, I'm not, it said.

Then the phone rang. It was my wife. I just want you to know that I'm at my mother's, she said, and I'm not coming back.

It was just a burrito wrapper, I told her, not an animal at all.

I can't take the pain of living with you anymore, she said. I just can't. I said, I don't see what's so bad about living with me.

She let out a teary sigh. Maybe that strange animal is a blessing in disguise, she said. Like I said, I told her, it's just a burrito wrapper.

You would need to change so much, she said.

OK, I said.

You don't get it, she said. You don't even know what changes I'm talking about. I'll change in any way you want me to, I said.

I'm not sure you're *capable* of these changes, she said.

I said, It's so funny that it turned out to be a burrito wrapper –

Are you listening to me? my wife said. Are you hearing anything I'm saying?

– and not even an animal at all, I said.

My wife hung up the phone.

That was my wife, I told the burrito wrapper.

The foil said, What's her name?

Her name is Andrea, I said.

HAIRY

I liked her, but she was really hairy. She had hair all over her body. When we first met for lunch I couldn't get over it.

And it wasn't just her body hair – everything in her *life* was hairy. She told me about her hairy car. The small house she owned was covered in shag. Even her street was furry, she said.

Still, we had a lot in common – we were both from big families, we both liked prog rock – and I didn't want to let a little hair keep me from what might turn into an important relationship.

So I asked her out to dinner.

During the meal she said, "You know what?"

"What?"

"I have an interview tomorrow."

"For what?"

"A new job," she said.

"Duh," I said. "What kind of new job?"

"Human resources," she said. "Staffing."

"Staffing," I said.

"Which is actually something I'm really passionate about," she said.

"Do you work in human resources now?"

"Right now I work in retail." She stuck out her tongue. "But my passion is staffing."

After dinner we stood outside and hugged – all that hair! – and I said, "Hey – good luck tomorrow."

"Mm – thanks," she said.

"Call me and tell me how it goes, will you?"

"Really?"

"Sure," I said. "I want to know."

She called me that night; the interview had gone well. "I think I have a really good chance – they seemed to really like some of my ideas," she said.

"That's wonderful," I said.

"Eee – I'm so excited!" she shrieked into the phone.

We agreed to talk in a few days and plan a date for the following weekend. She called me again just two days later, though, and when I picked up she said, “I really need to talk to someone – would you mind coming over?”

I told her I’d be right there. My car struggled on the hairy pavement. I rang the hairy bell.

She answered the door in pajamas. Her hair was all over the place. “I didn’t get it,” she blurted.

“The job.”

“They just called. I was a finalist, but they gave it to someone else.”

“Oh,” I said. I hugged her. “I’m so sorry.”

She led me to the couch. “The woman on the phone said the other person just had more experience.” She looked into her lap. I thought she might cry.

I took her hands. “Listen –”

“I’m *never* going to get out of retail,” she said.

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.”

“You weren’t chosen for this job because there’s another job out there – one that’s even more right for you,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “You sound like my sister.”

“If you truly want to work in staffing, and you keep working towards it, it’ll happen for you. Everything you want is right around the corner.”

“Where?” she said. “I can’t *see* it! I can’t *reach* it!”

“But it’s there, and in time it will make itself known,” I said.

“When?”

“Soon,” I promised.



## Correspondence

Caren Gussoff

**T**HESE DAYS I'M A FUCKING GARBAGEMAN.

Restricted sort duty, feeding trash into the auger, scanning for anything hot that could blow the whole ship back into possibilities. I get industrial plastics, electronics, pill pods, wrappers, bottles, razors, stained drawers, nothing worth looking at twice. Nothing hot ever slips through. It's the last shred of dignity I've got.

The auger chews and swallows and I pull the processed chunk from where its gut would be if it had guts. I send it down the line to atomic conversion, where another machine digests it down to free hydrogen, carbon dioxide, and obsidian glass.

Above me, the hull quakes every time a falcon or flitter takes off, and groans as they land. They're the only things louder than the auger.

Fucking auger.

The letter looked like balled-up polycloth, soaked blue. No one blows or jacks blue unless there's a real problem. Instinct pulled it out seconds before the auger's teeth tore it to shreds.

I'd like to think I knew what it was the second I touched it. I balled it up and stuffed it down my cargo pocket.

"Airbee," Chief Petty Officer said. "What are you doing?"

I barely heard him. Fucking auger. "Sir?"

"What you got there, son?"

I was three years older than Chief Petty Officer but five ranks beneath. Threads still dangled from my sleeves, left over from my third stripe. I hadn't even warranted a new jumpsuit when they demoted me. "Nothing, sir."

"Thought I saw you touching the refuse, son."

This lot of waste originated from female berthings. "No, sir. Just inspecting for radiation, sir."

"Good," he said. "Carry on."

I crunched harder until the Bos'n Mate of the Watch ended the shift. I let the auger churn down and left it with a kick where its head would be if it had a head.

I took a cheese sandwich and a coffee from the mess on the way back to my berth. I ate on my bunk and examined the thing.

It was a letter.

I knew it was a letter even though I'd never seen one, the same way I'd know a cow was a cow or eyeglasses were for seeing.

It was a beautiful thing. The writing, whatever it said, carved all the way through it. I ran my fingers over the ridges, chewed on the corners until they softened down to splintery clay, and pretended to read it until I fell asleep.

I awoke, confused, to the Bos'n Mate's voice. Pieces of a dream, a crinkling sound I chased down corridors . . . a rushing river that stained me blue as I crossed . . . a processed garbage container dressed up with a dainty bow . . . secret messages, puzzles, codes.

I had to shake myself back together with a fresh cheese sandwich and a black coffee.

But when I shook together, I shook together different. I moved differently. For as long as I'd been a fucking garbage-man, there had been an automatic perfection to my movements, a bored grace to the sort, feed, pull, send. Now I made mistakes. I was careful; it made me careless.

The ship trembled beneath a landing falcon, flitters shook

the bays hovering for takeoff, and the auger rattled into my bones. I'd like to say I knew what was happening to me, why this piece of paper was giving me something that felt like hope.

I held up the line. Shifts ran long. The computer noticed; I felt it running a stats check on me, electric ghost fingers monitoring my heart rate, oxygen levels, blood pressure, and pulse.

"Fuck off," I told it. "Leave me alone. I'm fine."

"Airbee," Chief Petty said, walking up behind me. "Who are you talking to?"

I barely heard him. The auger scraped, metal on metal. I missed the pull. "Sir?"

"I said who are you talking to?"

The words sank beneath layer after layer of sirens, alarms, bells, buzzers – everything suddenly drenched in haze and red and cold. Orders to "General quarters, general quarters." Confusion, smoke, ethanol. The ship rolling, squirting oxygen and hydrogen out into empty space. Crewmen running; someone's hand on my arm and my hand in my pocket squeezing the letter. Then I'm pinned under the auger.

From under the auger, I see them roll by.

Everywhere, rattling in the corridors, across the ceiling, collecting crumbs of the ship in clear hairs I can only see in the flash of red lights. Then they're building bodies, snowmen of shattered ceramics, cracked resin, carbon, zinc, substrate copper, nickel, titanium, steel.

One is over me, bare eyes and a toothless smile. It pulls me out from under the auger and holds me like a lover. I throw my arms around its neck.

```
BAD_COMMAND. UNKNOWN_ERROR. FILE_NOT_F0%  
UND.
```

```
malfunction class variable {  
if TRUE = 1/FALSE = 0;  
try if (malfunction = 1) run systemScan
```

```
}

```

```
AIRLOCK_ALREADY_OWNED. DUMP_CONTENTS.
```

```
systemScan detect biosigns {
try parse String fileName = "personnel%
ile";
TRUE = 1/FALSE = null;
biosigns.match if (person = 1);
if (person = null) return <<"Something'
s wrong. Who's there?">>;
else doNOTpanic ();
}

```

```
UNEXPECTED_KERNEL_MODE_TRAP. TRAP_CAUSE%
_UNKNOWN.
```

```
maindataFile.open = run corticalScan;
return <<"Seriously. Do I know you?">>;
force interrupt (maindataFile.close);

```

```
UNKNOWN_LOGON_SESSION. OVERWRITE_ATTEMPT
T. PATCH_DETECTED.
```

```
Begin breach protocol {
if (malfunction TRUE = 1/person = null);
return <<"Name, rank, serial number.">>;
try (shutdown);
}

```

```
DATATRANSFER_INITIATED. UNKNOWN_PARAMET%
ER. FETCH. ACCESS. LOAD. RUN. ABORT Y/N%
? Y

```

```
TERMINATE_SYSTEM_PROCESS Y/N? Y

```

```
TERMINATE_PROCESS Y/N?

```

```
try  
dumpMemory.end;  
exit;
```

RUN. RUN. RUN.

I am Airbee Shawn July. I am a sanitation worker.

My duty is to observe the recycling of refuse on behalf of my fellow crewmates. I monitor the rubbish in order to ensure that no contaminants or anomalies enter the plasma arc conversion system. If a contaminant should enter the system, it could cause a nuclear reaction that would endanger the battleship's structural integrity.

I do not enjoy my job.

My job is essential, but it lacks dignity. I was once responsible for other things. I fell from grace. I am waiting to die.

But I do not die.

I drag my hand through a container. I am searching for something. I am bound to do so by a force I do not understand, an equation I cannot balance. It pricks at my consciousness, but it is not entirely unpleasant.

I am close to the solution. I could decipher it if I were not always under surveillance. I seek the source of this surveillance, but it too eludes me. I do not know if that is part of my punishment.

Today is not a good day.

Each container holds identical contents in varying configurations: synthetic and semi-synthetic polymerization products, inductors, nanostructures, skin, hair, teeth, nails.

There is movement behind me. "My child," says my superior, Chief Petty Officer Beau. "Tell me why you touch the refuse. I am suspicious of your motives."

Chief Petty Officer Beau is my superior although I possess more knowledge and proficiency than he. I do not like him. I wish to strike him, but fear and shame prevent it. "Sir, no," I answer, saluting him with the hand with which I have recently

touched the rubbish. "I am investigating the refuse before auger processing."

Chief Petty Officer Beau meets my optics with his optics, and we stand in this position for 2.37 seconds. I again wish to strike my superior, but instead I turn back to my work.

Chief Petty Officer Beau stands for another 5.68 seconds, then answers, "That is acceptable," and strides away to complete his assigned rounds.

I regard the sound of my superior, Chief Petty Officer Beau, walking away with something akin to pleasure. Sort, auger, seal, send. Sort, auger, seal, send. I open the next container of refuse and drag though it. I repeat.

Boss Companion of the Watch broadcasts the conclusion of the shift. I feel ambivalence about this. I proceed to the nutrition chamber, which is disorderly and loud. I do not wish to be there, although I do not know why. I depart for the repose of my small personal chamber, where I recline in solitude until the broadcast that signals the opening of my subsequent shift.

I am searching for something. I am bound to do so by a force I do not understand, an equation I cannot balance. It pricks at my consciousness, but it is not entirely unpleasant.

I do not make my daily quotas.

It is a punchline to a joke I have forgotten. It is an answer to a question I never knew. It repeats. Repeats.

I drag my hand through a container. Chief Petty Officer Beau is participating in a summit of superiors elsewhere, but still I feel I am under observation. I look around and no one is there. I filter and sift with attention, with languor, through layers of semiconductors and muscle, capacitors and bones.

Sort, auger, seal, send. Sort, auger, seal, send. I feel close to the solution. I will find it. I have a need to believe this. It feels like a short in my system. It repeats. Repeats.

Something in one container gives me pause. I push aside the refuse in order to assess the anomaly.

I see something. I reach. I reach out.

# Someday on Planar Surface

Matthew Pendleton

I · DELIVERY

2 · ALL THE SAME

3 · IN THE PROCESS

4 · DELIVERY

5 · FAR, IN THE WAY

6 · DELIVERY

7 · BANK

8 · BANK /  
HORIZONESQUE

## I

From 144D all the way to 336G, past the 321, 322, 323, 324 all-aisle enclave whispering to a forebear each from behind, Julian kept straight and on the task at hand. His tray out before him steady as could be, with an open-topped coffee-juice and a canned warming milk and a tube of bananas. The walk took a long time. He couldn't remember how long since he had last made it, whether the lights had been up or down, or the outside sheathed away so tightly.

A damp blanket lay over 336G. He put the tray down and stretched, looked around. It was a lagged twilit spot with the smell of perpetual sleepiness. Tatty picked-at cushions: mischief. Yoghurt lids utterly clean: hunger.

Across the way, someone was watching, wrapped in stiff grey blankets, head protected by several headphones; Alan, a little boy or a little old man, passed inscrutable eyes over the tray. Tongue peeping out of mouth. Dirty, tired face, as though with no prospect of any further wakefulness, excepting that for eating, excreting, maybe. — Tuppence, he said.

Julian stared ahead feeling the air dry his skin, scratched at his face as the offer was repeated. Later he would peer through gloom upon gloom for a worthy recipient of his delivery. Past prone forms, milk lights in intermittent flashes, fuzzy fabrics of a resolute seat or other, stitched-together blankets hung for curtains, he didn't know yet how far the tray would take him, would not have believed it.

— Tuppence. — For 336G, said Julian, that's all. — That's no one. I have tuppence. — That's very low currency. I'm going to have to wait. Julian sat down next to the target, 336G, resting the tray on his bony knees. — You've got some milk, it's what . . . — It's warming milk. — Well I wouldn't have minded tasting some warming milk. I heard about warming milk. And I heard of organs wanting to be repaired, and then they are. — Hmm. — Is it a medicine then? — I'm just the deliverer. — There isn't much more than tuppence here.

Julian had glanced through the region, noted the spots



empty but for prone bundles, and the regions shielded by darkness, the still. Distinct lack of business.

—So how much is that milk worth then? —You needn't bother about that. —What . . . —Not tuppence. Alan smiled. —Now I've heard of one thing being one price and elsewhere another . . . —Nothing's worth tuppence. —And I wonder what you would buy with the money from your goods and service.

Julian didn't answer. Alan leaned back, tinny music coming from his arrangement of headphones. For six pounds the goods on the tray could be purchased. Six pounds plus their delivery. How the customer had come across the money to pay, how they had developed and indulged their weakness for food, to want to pay for it, was unfathomable. But in the spaces of the world, monies were to be found, and food, as though scattered from original stores in a distant beginning; he imagined heading ever further, raising the price, at a half-exponential rate per 81 passes, considering his overheads.

A light or two, tinted green, came on some 3 back. He shook Alan by the shoulder. An eye popped awake, listening through the brittle music. His age, even this close up, remained indeterminate. —What is your morning, Julian asked him. —About now. He waved a hand about the place. He batted away Julian's hands. Another green light flickered on. —Describe it. —It is about the time an old sort of group switch on their lights about the same sort of time. Starting over there, and spreading, on that side, then this. And also it's the time when air flows most regularly. You'll hear it soonish. And a sort of holiday, about an hour long, will start within the next two hours. —Perhaps the goods are for that sort of thing? —A group purchase do you think? —Now and again this happens. —Perhaps more than you think. —You don't know 336G? —I see it but keep myself to myself. —Could they pay? —Your job tends to see people in a small way. And what would you pay for, after?

Julian took up the tray once more. He stood gazing into the ahead, attempting to judge the distance of the furthest

lights that glimmered red, pearl, and violet.

—You're off? said Alan. See you on the way back maybe. A hand wrapped in headphone cords reached out. Julian briefly shook it, business-like, and headed off.

On the tray as it travelled beneath the green lights: pool of glistening dark coffee-juice, hazy seasoning on its surface, warming milk in a squat can, tender yellow emblem, and robust tube of bananas, tiny chart of its reputed origin printed directly on the thin metal:

*Top Boarding School Unwanted Produce!*

*Bright Environs:*

*with Cool-Pak from Inception to First-Packing*

*Olfactory Add-Up*

*(spread to gut slowly)*

*Ahead-Produce Replica!*

Alan watched the delivery vanish into the twinkling haze of ahead, already looking ready to give up, giddy. What must it be like far ahead where the tray and its goods would be roaming, why it would be like the Green Night, and it would be like the Red Night, as he had read in the children's books, how did it go, *'In the middle there was a middle . . . ?'*

'And there were beings . . . from a middle world in a middle time . . . ? And these are like useful things, and useless things: stock . . . !'

Alan pulled the blankets over him, settled down into the darkness, secure. But he wouldn't have minded a drop of that warming milk!

2

Wan yellow beam, like a guide-light to a toilet, vanishing when a sleepy body passed before it, or followed its path, or raised a hand, stretching or wafting at dust mites or even a tiny imagined living thing; a hand was all it took.

Opening her eyes, Madeleine saw the yellow beam precisely before her like a made thing ready to touch. She remembered her dream as being a long thin yellow bridge suspended in a space vaster than any in the world, and here a small variant before her awakened self. Her hand lifted to strum at it, when it vanished; to her left a body rose. Chatter through the near-space, and the light rose: it was morning.

Books fell as she automatically stretched in her seat. They had collected on her lap as she more and more sleepily flickered through them, forlorn, or suddenly eager, an indication that she was dreaming, and they slowly slipped from her hands into the ready cradle of her prim crossed legs. She left them where they fell, splayed spines, or inward-bending cover, she did not mind at that particular time of that early morning. She wondered at the nature of the beam as it was made invisible by the rapid appearances of personal and more public morning lights. In the evening she could expect it to be back again. In any event, she liked settling down near the wan yellow light and reading her books.

She always woke softly as though guided up from it. Others woke like there was a shock, a falling dream, a tripping-up dream, an awareness of dribbling "outside" onto a pillow, blanket, shoulder, in view, in proximity to a disgusted public. Awake, recover, and scrub up, hardly more of a thought in between. She had seen a yellow lozenge space, felt an impartial warmth, people, older than others; a spacious toilet made of hard shiny tiles. Things she could not possibly have seen.

She lifted her feet to rub them mildly; around her, others were doing the same, or already up and making it to the toilets; lines formed quietly and with patience.

Claude found his green scarf beneath him, as well as his jacket, his whistle, his stowed-away coffee can. He looked into the morning: lights winking on over packed-together bodies, the guide-lights vanishing, swell of body-smell, can-smell, ahead-and behind-smells. There was Andrews weaving through the crowd for thin-coffee, Solomon not far behind, his bulk like

a pillar risen from the surface, dividing the crowds touched with the anxiety of just-morning.

Claude turned to look across at the girl called Madeleine. She managed to retain a pristine white scarf about her neck. Looking at her Claude un-remembered his time, his halting walks to ahead and returns in failure deeper to behind, mockeries and respite working at the pillow shop, he found the blank space he wanted in the face of Madeleine, its colour the colour of the lighting in whatever part of the world she had moved through. He followed. Where was she heading? Only ever forward. Ambitious?

In the continual murk of the perpetual forward he kept her in sight, her skin somehow immaculate reflecting the variable lights of morning, day, night. The blood rush of emergency lighting. Sour lemon of an irreparable toilet. Calming blue of a pillow shop. Throughout, Claude wondered what the true nature of her skin was. If something like a solitary light without colour were to exist – he tried thinking of a pure light, it would not come. But he was placid like knowing a meal was coming, as he stared at Madeleine.

Already the queues spread backward. An upheaval waiting, to start the day. Dawn spread from ahead as the lights at present-point rose to pinky-green to glow steady-bright as the day allowed. If in a queue, you were to be aware of other queues, appearing before you in the ahead, receding behind as though they had always been there. All movement seemed possible in any location, as a reflection of yours or that of your near-mates. Only the light made any difference. Wandering back into a night spot, you could feel sleepy and curl up like it was the most natural thing in the world. Those longest queues would fall asleep in the furthest ranks, until there was no longer a queue, but the normal diurnal moves and rests. All this sleepiness and wakefulness as a movement always ahead. What is there to queue for?

Claude had only a few items to carry if there was going to be any going anywhere. Watching Madeleine, he grouped his belongings together and fastened his shoes. Others had similar concerns. A thin man with bag full of old rags, and a notebook with notations of future garments he hoped to make, were he to encounter the appropriate materials, was a little behind Claude, who had watched him sort through a series of red threads, grouping them in their differing shades. As he watched and the day drew on, and the lights changed, the brightest red had a little green to it, and the darkest something almost blue. The man gave up, but with barely a sigh. These midnight hues swamped all things in sight, it was a clear signal to go to sleep.

Each coming night was like approaching something just beyond, gaining ground, but for the morning that popped up and changed everything. Not so much a losing race but a constant one. Madeleine's odd dreams gave her a sense of this outside the norm as well as outside the sense of the eternal continuum. She felt it like an inside. There was a secret room where things were different. Not an eternal day or night, but things that could be chosen. I have harboured a little hope, she often thought to herself, Let it now cause effect.

Something ahead she had seen in the past, was that possible?

Solomon patiently watched Claude watch Madeleine. He was aware of this routine. Claude was mostly a constant day by day in the slow moves made, and when he had first seen Madeleine, Solomon remembered, it had been like seeing a man receive a slow blunt punch to the bones. Nausea and outrage. Close to the source of various theories doing the rounds that suggested the outer remnants of a long-lost family, imagining a "sense of the familiar", "what a thing came before", "boarding school", and so on, remainders of a shock lost so far back it needed to be imagined again, and the tendency was to fall asleep unconsciously with something wait-

ing in the future, a hope or something more certain being looked forward to, acting as the reminder so that sleep was a long awake night, a serial expansion of loops, half left to trail among themselves, half extending into the future.

Claude gathered his things almost without thinking, tracing the route as it might play to ahead, tumble or not, step by step.

As she stood up she sat right back down. A rumble passing through the world, those on their feet in queues grabbed at any upright thing. Slow rumble through the world. Madeleine traced her way ahead through the swaying overheads, the slim push through the crowds it would require. She would have very little luggage. But the way is the way, ahead and not behind. The rumble would pass through and she would collect her books before standing up, bag handle wound about her hand, a juice perhaps in the other.

Morning persevered. Air almost chilly circulated and eased the stresses of the life. Some sucked from pipes, others rifled through reading material. It was the time when eternity seemed almost plausible, most bearable. They had forgot tales of grandparents, the absences overnight. Madeleine flicked through stories told to the young looking for indications of the ahead. Without much of anything, she closed her eyes for the first step, then slung her bag on her shoulder, and was off. She took care to fix the arch smile. And the eyes now open and like they knew what they saw.

At the cusp of entrance into what the crowd had waited for, Solomon saw her start to edge ahead. We can't be side by side or together, he thought, but all the same we can scratch each other's backs.

3

World moves through a weather. Course be true. But weather is invisible senseless big thing, if it was seen, the weather, the

world move no more. If it's an end you want – this much is true.

Solomon, face above crowds, neck pulsing, he was just woke-up, looming, as he liked to think of it, hoping for the direct connection from on high, when top-head and vibrant-heaven ceiling met.

That meant he would be feeling awake.

This much be true. This much be true and reliable as words on packaging.

Andrews peered over from within his queue, where he stood arms polite at his sides. He peered down at his shirt, then passed a hand over his cardigan. The world as an entire thing seemed to crush him, for one second, then he was returned, and looked over at Solomon his friend. Beckoned him over. Into Solomon's ear Andrews whispered, — I think the polarities shifted, all my lint has dropped away. They both looked through the queue to the ahead, its dim not-yet-dawn lights faintly shuddering. And then they looked to the behind, at the silhouettes of distant heads in the day light, at the rectangular rolling edifice of a last stubborn snack depot.

So Solomon whispered back to Andrews' ear, — It's time to gather it back then. And they would have clasped hands but for the queue, its formats, and its sudden shufflings away.

Wondering what kind of a morning it will be.

And Solomon was left – as Andrews filtered in his queue – thinking over: if something new were to be introduced, how horrifying that would be. He only saw a white lengthy being, length upon length appearing at the moment when he thought it would stop, soft to the touch – and the light of day (the day-light) appeared.

It was a shock like waking up a second time, he had to re-adjust like there were things just seconds ago only he had dreamt of.

The green of certain things registering like a sine wave, the white plastics showing their stains unashamed, the collapsed seating area where can-juices rolled to and were forgotten. Red eyes, open mouths, ridiculous dirty hair; it all got

too much and someone dimmed their light, others followed, and the brightness was happily marred by muzzy circles of green readying to turn orange. By consensus, this day shall be “overcast”.

Madeleine imagined her possessions as an array of extra limbs, she parsed through her books to find made-up inhabitable spaces. Each night before sleeping, she held up a sentence before her eyes. Even if she closed her eyes, the sentence would still be there, until the book dropped from her hand into her lap. She collected her books carefully, arranged them spine-up in her bag for the titles to be easily seen. Other things in the bag: an old shrunken orange, she had found it rolling towards her somewhere on her slightest advance to the ahead, a fair few days ago.

What were her books about? They had titles like “How To Cope With The Situation You Find Yourself In”, “Ideas Of Food”, “Ship-Shape And The Stocks”, “When Things Run Out”, “Socks And What To Do With Them”. They were each as thick as a wrapped bread slice, and contained lists and the like, and it all acted as a remedy towards sleep:

*‘Upon the cusp of falling asleep, there is a barrier, and in that barrier there is a middle, and in that middle is a middle muddled up.’*

As the lights switched to a steady ice-green she was up and away into the ahead. Looming through the lilting plain like passing beneath bulkheads of the imagined plastic edifice of an outer land flooded with amber light, post-morning/noon, she looked utterly unfrivolous and managed to ghost through the crowds to a quiet spot. Here the lights still slowly raised into their day-apex. She eased into a blue-washed corner, picked from her bag a book at random, and rested it on her crossed legs. Partly flicking through, she came to a list entitled “6 Transmissions of Love”:

<KNEEL> for the moment

<HAND> a hand is a gift when handed



<DAGGER> for the all-round suspicious world

The rest of the list was missing, a ragged rip through the page. She leafed further into the book, ah here was a children's story she had been through a lot, wearing down the pages, but she was still not sure what the story was, if questions were posed; were Madeleine to be asked to contribute an ending, she would mumble something about "walls", and a comeuppance only half believed in.

There was a soft house, of her and him. One washed the cups, one filled the cups. The soft house was soft but hard like harmony. A cup was chipped, it was cherished. Goings on going on. In the house was a cooker. "What's a house?" thought Madeleine and everyone who had ever read the book. Imagined exuberance, an exuberant surface, a house-hold. A house-hold, a space, imagined or made physical with hanging blankets to capture the funny full feelings produced like fuel of the world.

The little children's tale continued: One day the outside entered the house, it pulled down its walls. He went towards a patch of green night. The house had stopped, vanished. Cups rolled away. They would be under seats, thought Madeleine, she softly thought of being transfixed by the sight of things disappearing and lights appearing in the requisite colours – to her, who has stepped out (been removed?) from the old now house. It sounded exciting. She wanted to go after him in the green night, she looked the other way and saw an orange night. He was gone in the green night along with walls and cups. First she would follow him, it didn't seem right, after all this time together, to now stick with being apart.

Once the green night was entered it was not different to any other night. The green was like a dark. Like in the house there had been a dark, here was a similar dark, she said to herself: like being asleep and seeing. There he was, still standing, he was responding like a cup had been dropped, valiantly he would take on all comers until the situation re-

solved, he stood straight and stock still. Nothing was around him but that green dark, but it was familiar and had been there a long time. Familiarity with itself like the insides of a cooker.

She took his arm. Perhaps they will try the orange night, or the next night beyond. You cannot go home (a bizarre fleeting thing).

“I think,” she said, “we are a haunted house.”

The book perched in her lap. It was called “Once You Step Out From Where You Were Supposed To Stay”.

It was barely night back to the behind, where Solomon looked at his massive hands at first with glee, and Andrews wondered about joining another queue, but it went backward, but he thought that might only be temporary, and there was probably water to be had somewhere at its end.

Meanwhile Claude, slowly approaching the night-time of Madeleine’s new spot, recited some gestures of minimums, to keep from pouncing, to keep his heart steady.

- 1 · when stepping ahead, clasp hands behind back (and this he did)
- 2 · when skipping behind, cross arms before chest (but this didn’t apply)
- 3 · prefer the circle . . . (&c, he said, as she came into view, and he found a subtle vantage spot, eyeing up the new night, its colours on her skin)

4

Dust in large families among the frizzle of over 576 ahead. Julian placed a protective gauze over the open-topped coffee-juice. Still further ahead, a milk glow, like all colours of night and day in convergence.

He continually valued the goods in the tray. All together he had been expecting six pounds. There’s six pounds here and there’s six pounds there. Now even if he got six pounds

with no lip it wouldn't account for the distance of his delivery, the way back. Not the real costs maybe, but time, that meant something, made him feel tired. He found a seat and thought of resting there, maybe for several days, letting a morning catch him up, maybe slowly coming across a morning he could participate in. Everyone so half-collapsed all the time with the goods on them, it takes a different mind to think there are things around him saying: it is OK, what happens happens, then it manages into a sort of multi-dimensional puzzle, and solves itself too quickly to see; some voices could describe this sort of thing, when he was most optimistic, or in need of it, optimism, which required a clear view of the ahead, with only the known and surmountable obstacles.

That was when he was sleeping, most optimistic – removed from the world – but when awake he had the idea, it went like this: if I can create of my time a physical artefact, might it be sold and act as leverage for a perpetual sales walk ahead, and the tray and contents, its mass of profit increase boundlessly, grow heavy, bend the web of the world, and then he would see the edges of things wiped out (the certainty of profit causing the certainty of the ahead)?

Then he felt anxious and an old hunger appeared (but not for treats!), seeing himself in perpetuity, how frightening! on his feet, tray before him, the lights so far out crimson and pitch blue at the same time, petering together into the ahead, a gathered point.

He thought of worth. His employers knew who he was. A handy man, steady elbow, shoulder, wrist that bends in those spirited ways to pass the tray over heads. Only his manner disappointed them. Wary of pleasing, he slinked through his interactions with other staff, he looked at his shoes, he smirked in their faces, he half-dreamt of spitting on his hands, running his hands through his hair, then handling the goods, then wiping his hands on his trousers, then he would do it all again. Or it's what he sometimes thought they thought of him, and he pictured the worst thing he could do and felt a thrill. — He's a plodding evil idiot, he pictured them saying in

a dark boardroom, He can't deliver a kiss. He grinned to hear it, as he dreamt the ahead slowly lilting like weather was being reached, endlessly ahead, and so he vowed to deliver, the ultimate delivery, one that would cost more than the bosses back there had ever seen.

Patch of empty homes, seats managing by themselves among nothing but fondly-thought-of crumpled paper, soggy liquid cardboard that had once been a box, the tenderly-cared-for 10 cm<sup>2</sup> tin foil still used as bedding, a chewed pencil, pen nibs stored for stitching, band-aids for the washing up, the common litanies.

These between-spots, where 10s to 50s rapidly passed by with barely a seat, and only last lives curled up on the floor at the edges of the world; and suddenly coming across one remaining seat, rooted robust, with arms, and back to the up-most, a marvel. Time will be taken leaning in and carefully picking out hairs. Dust painstakingly moved to the edges then set flying. On the seat is sometimes a sign, for example a sheet of paper wedged in the joint between seat and back, with "pillow shop" written in big blue letters, and an arrow pointing to the ahead.

Half of him wanted to go back, to 336G, give whoever was there the damned tray and everything, and go home, his blanket he hoped he had folded, nestle under, forget.

Back there, far back, where the rules still meant something, he couldn't quite remember – what colour was his current home morning? how long the queue that slowly built itself every other day, only to lose half its lined-up flock in the night? how close were the nearest shops? – he thought of that last morning before the order came, the period before the final doze out of which he was shook awake. The lights, they must have been blue burnt low like a pitch blue, and that section very quiet. Out of his sleep he came, fingers fastened onto the blanket edge, he only barely sat up. A finger had come through a gap in the behind and poked him between

his shoulders. Julian turned half round to take in the message. It was something like:

—This is what happens when we get with shops and the exchange of things, excuse me for not saying this earlier, this is what goes on when you have a pound to make. For *IIIIIG*.

Then the finger and the voice went back to their sleep or whatever had been occupying them. *IIIIIG?* How far, Julian thought, how far for a message to go. How many ones? And he burrowed back into the blanket.

He had forgotten all about the message! after dozing, being shook awake, the order being told, the goods being secured, the tray balanced. What did the rules say about order vs. message? Which acceded to the other's priority? Where the authority?

The target was still far ahead wasn't it. He could communicate it some place soon and it would resume its journey wouldn't it. The message leaps, he thought. Is it efficient? Well it must be!

Other messages he had helped pass on: —With a clear head and that I am almost optimistic, and I will be waiting where the night is pink and that yellow light always swings by itself far in the ahead. —You've reneged on our deal, and there's a price. Two pound, forty pence, within one night. I will throw in two well-preserved sides of a cardboard box, being a businessman. —No hard feelings please. *8IF*, don't you remember? —Are there any more books? Have almost ran out and I can't get to sleep. —I can't be going to those shops anymore, it doesn't feel safe. May I depend on you in these moments? —May have found something! Something divided into as many portions as there are portions to move through! Respond! —What I wouldn't give to misremember the price of things. —Exactly enough to prevent repetition, in other words. —Nothing but a little agitated air, I had thought, but anyway, what is your location? Do the sides narrow? Respond! —Two steps forward, one back, a shuffle sideways, half a step back, it's business, don't give up! —Help me, I am feeling subject to an infinitely divisible penalty.

He stood at 1024, an obsolete row, gaps that went on far beyond the usual thinning, to each boundary of the world. If there was commerce here it would profit him a hundredfold, or there was no commerce, no money, and he would drink the coffee-juice, intersperse it with sips of the warming milk, leaving some to wash down the tube of bananas. And then he would go home. Six pounds down?

First he noticed it from afar, a blue glow about a darkly plump form. Some 32 back there had been a store lit by orange-pinks selling ointments (eye, hand, knee, and ear, maybe?), and before that a stockist of trousers and hats and underwear barely defined from a derelict spread of seats c to f (only the boxes of the goods beneath the seats, and a suspended piece of cardboard with numbers scrawled, which were not the prices of the goods but the calculations of sales, the staff perhaps knowing the numbers in their heads, very possibly those numbers being an improvisation around some fixed lower limit, influenced by the customer, their appearance, their boisterousness in surveying the produce, the evidence that showed what they could be made to pay).

Carrying his tray Julian felt a certain shame among this centre of professional commerce. Customers came to it, here somewhat out of the way, barely a single notable queue, patches between patched seats, like something of a hopeless future had been fastened over a normal quiet day-section. Yet what bustle, what quick notations of price, requests for payment, totting up! He hastened through, scuffing his shoes like he was in school, the buoyant expression of that kind of prickly obedience. But he was simply embarrassed.

Pillow shops are always blue, mostly they extend from the world to a mid-point then return, they are a bulge in the world. "Days be white, nights be blue" says a sign hanging from the overheads, above the common pillow display like a soft shield, cardboard counters and piled trays with demopillows atop. Promising pillows of all sorts.

Julian passed by quickly. It seemed an embarrassment of

systems, he and his tray here, something of a joke being told to one's face – blushing, he walked on, he scuffed his shoes.

Past the pillow shop the lights harmonised around a milk pink. Signs of commerce winked away, and remains of things he could not recognise appeared, marked by a yellow seat, a livid pink seat, a boundary of broken stacked trays. The population was straggly. Julian eyed any prospective buyers. Marasmus-ridden returnees to childhood. People sleeping like they had always been sleeping. A girl, a boy like a constantly maintained supply route, smudged faces, just out of school, not knowing what to do with each other. The world not being built for their little adjourn to companionship like settling down safe.

For the first time on his journey he thought he wanted to properly sleep. This was like thinking of settling down somewhere, it meant a safety beyond the day-to-day, it meant peace in one's time. He passed a rouge-lit canopied-space of two seats, it seemed to be a shop of clothes, handmade from loose threads collected and picked at over a lifetime. A final shop, ahead lay a dank-lit wilderness of empty stubby rows, remnants of decimated queues.

A chair stood out from it, its arms curved, its back back. White edges of fizzy hairs and dusts from long ago. It seemed to Julian an area of surfaces serene and almost pale like a clean toilet basin.

He sat down in the seat among something like an exhaustion, the closest he had come in all his time of service. He thought that he might wait for something, it was an odd thought that didn't seem to belong to him, who had to press on, had compelling reasons to do so (the selling of the produce, the way the price would change, the overheads, the way things – like a coffee-juice – meant more now). A strange seat he sat in, that had waited all the time passed to have an ownership of sorts of him in it, all his sorts, gendered, though previously meshed, although lost now and again, yes there is a moment of singleness – “where the best dreams are had” –

“here, is a point to be followed, or are you ahead, already?”

He woke with an image of the tray floating away, through a toilet door, down the toilet, somehow in free-fall, the goods still intact and arranged pristinely as a final frustration. In a flash he was awake and ascertaining the tray was still there somehow, on his stoic knees, how they mattered at that point, and he fought the pull of lulling in the seat, rearranged the tray – he swapped the positions of the coffee and the bananas – he thought a lot about his work, his world, how it extended into what once was distance, it was like breeding into the past, it was like being kept on a leash, and then to burrow down into a pillow. He went on, he decided: a little further on, it’s the only way.

Signs of commerce; his, only accounted for by himself. People were sleeping in their seats like they had always been sleeping. Lights down. Until things appeared he could not recognise, marked by a yellow seat, a livid pink seat, a boundary of broken stacked trays, 2401, and a man behind a stitched shield of magazines, watching Julian approach.

— Sir, said the man. — Hello. Julian had not seen this before. The magazines hid the man’s body up to his neck, he carried a rolled-up tube in one hand, the other hand was raised palm out as what was probably a warning, configured in a man’s hand – where had he learnt it? It was a daring feat of that sort of co-ordination. — Are you looking to go beyond, sir? — Beyond what? The magazines showed shoes, skirts, people dressed in them. — New entrances are accompanied by a small fee – It’s OK, it’s a world anew it promises – Remember the fear response, it’s somewhere inside you no doubt, remember what was learnt as a new thing to be dealt with – The fee gives a good calm to it as a procedure, it’s an old procedure, it goes smoothly.

Trade like any other. Would he accept a sip from the coffee, a sample of banana, a hand’s warmth of milk?

Julian carefully handled his tray. This wasn’t the time to be paying fees. He remembered the pillow shop behind him,



blue cocoon light, products he had had a shy eye on. But the start zone something never seen before.

A sip of coffee would contaminate, the hand would steal the warmth of milk. Best was an arrangement to take some of the contents of the tube of bananas, the tube remains, its label part of the price, and at least half the bananas, this would ensure some sort of continuation commercially speaking.

Julian would make a transaction.

5

It was at first being squidgy, that's how the boarding school was known, that it entailed a fair crumpling, and here they were at the mock-up of an entrance, arranged together, the mass unit ready to move, as memories go early, and the remaining scraps, through the home-space world-environment, the gaps only seemed natural as something that could not ever have been remembered.

The normal dim world that was to come, like tired lesions shown by the blunt object on the kitchen table that would create them, seemed as far away as a destination of travel not yet set out on.

Over there is the teacher's chair. She sits on it elevated on bony knees with a long nose that is neither cruel nor particularly intelligent, but teacher-like, the first glimpse of an authority usually hidden behind partitions and curtains stitched from blankets.

"Welcome," said the teacher. "A first lesson is always a special lesson. We will all put on our thinking caps for it . . . that's an expression," she said to the ones patting their heads and looking worried. There was always one or two. "Now, sit down. As you begin to enter the clouds of consciousness, you must be sure you become accustomed to the world being revealed in a proper fashion. You may find yourself asking: What is a wall and where did it come from? Whose colour is that? What make? Is there a wall beyond the wall I cannot pass? Who goes where? Can I sit there? Does anyone have

a question they are starting to form right now?” She looked over their heads waiting for a thicket of arms, but they still seemed entranced and shocked by the litany of questions, unable to separate one from the other. This lot seem duller than before, she thought, and, had I thought that the last time? But eventually a hand peek-a-booped above, belonging to a tiny boy wrapped in a blanket, meekly smiling at her.

His name tag read “Alan”.

“Yes Alan? What is your question?” Her voice sounded too stern to her, she would take steps to allow a gentle tone now and then.

The little boy called Alan asked his question.

“Where are we?”

The teacher smiled, she was glad of the ingenuity of such a little question, and how it troubled herself. Would she find something new at last in the boarding school?

“I am sure,” she said, “you will partly see some sort of place in the future and ascribe to it various things.”

Another hand tinily raised. On the name tag “Claude”, a boy peering from under a blanket stitched into a restrictive hood, dirty as though worn since the beginning. “What?” he said, and raised his eyebrows like an insinuation, like a joke in a bar. But the children didn’t laugh because they didn’t understand.

That would be the first lesson. She settled into the task.

Claude had two figures in his pocket that first day in school, and knew what to do with them, grapple them in his mittens and place them as though climbing the structures around him; they were utterly dwarfed. The placing of the figures in his pocket was long gone, but the memory of how to play with them remained, like he mysteriously already knew how to eat his lunch mysteriously present in his lunch box. He travelled upon the sheer wall of his world-space with the two figures, one was a man one a woman, one would help the other at the appearance of awkward angles, a hand passed down. He thought of the little figures among the landscape and won-

dered about the vast surface. He watched a girl in a maroon cardigan eating something from a small yellow packet, he absently allowed his figures to traverse higher the wall as he looked at her. He wondered what she was eating. The various possibilities had not yet occurred to him, he who still saw a bowl and called it "peanut", and a tray "dinner".

If she ever saw him it was with the pointed curiosity partnered to a smile typical of many little girls. He would not be remembered there. She would remember what she et maybe. And the clothes she was wearing. Girls growing up like a transformation. Only he would be left to recall all the various ways she had transformed, as though unquestioning the future, as though it would happen anyway.

"How can we know if someone likes us?" went one question from a little boy called Julian.

"Well there are many ways," said the teacher. "For example, if they ask to spend time with you."

"But they might be lonely."

"True," said the teacher, impressed. "Loneliness certainly negates the evidence that suggests they were being friendly. It is up to you to decide whether this person is lonely and, if so, to discard them."

She watched as the children diligently took down notes. She wrote on the blackboard in careful letters "loneliness".

In geography class the teacher drew a series of lines radiating in all directions from a single point. Then she heavily scored straight through, a single thick horizontal line, intolerant of everything else. The children, sleepy in the mid-day, who had seen it all before, drew on their desks or surreptitiously bent their rulers, wondered who could like them, what the teachers did after school, picked their noses. A rumble passed through slowly, from far away it seemed. "Hear that?" Andrews said grinning to Solomon, "It's like something building up, it'll come and overtake. Let's be diffident!" Later they would share some spiky crisps.

The teacher made a blushing Julian read from the textbook “Common World 101”. Slowly he made it through:

10036

*The method wasn't exact, as someone once said, put many os in front of the 1, and then past the many os, to their left, there can be a 1, so 100000000010036 – and who could tell, who could travel that far? But presume that left 1 as an edge, no matter if it's unreachable. And I say 1, when it's just as plausible to say 2, with enough capacity to de-limit, any number could do. And any number beyond (to the left), any number of them.*

10036

*Main home point for some.*

Solomon had twisted his ankle in the middle of the play seat set. He whimpered and said all the bad words he knew. The pain was like a foreign object rattling somewhere down there, it would set scanners off. He wobbled away to the play perimeter all the fun gone. A girl scooted past him.

Solomon, injured, felt there was something wrong, either with him or the world. The way things mussed themselves up, with his ankle throbbing, it didn't seem sensible to imagine things nicely ahead. This made him angry at things where he was now. Pointless limp moods.

“Hello,” said Andrews, he was touring the perimeter, trying to stay off the floor by leaping from seat-arm to upside-down food tray or toy box, cushions worked too, so he had several strapped to his back – it was cheating, almost. “Help me out here,” said Andrews, “move that box a bit.” Solomon did as he was told, grudgingly, slowly, and watched Andrews, thin and tidy in his buttoned down shirt and cardigan with precise turned-back sleeves, step on the box, then lean into a jump which sent him sailing into a nearby seat. He waved to Solomon, then was gone through the rows, to emerge on the other side of the play seat set.

The teacher of social studies faced the class of 10036, studied their little faces, the same as the little faces of 10016, 24, the

classes further back, numbers that now meant nothing. He launched right in: “Look at it this way, try this on for size, the world is a tool owned by you, handled by you to do the job of your life, available to be shared at any time (this is forced, part of the deal), and it makes the time you move in or sit down in or stand up in or view through looking ahead for the jobs you are to do – how about that, people?” He stared into the children, into their multitude of sleepy-eyes, tried to will some interest in his wisdom. He reached with one hand up to touch the roof of the world, wishing to bring it down on their child-heads, wanting them to look at what he could do with ease, appeal to their sense of wonder, his pride.

He remembered a thing he’d imagined his mommy telling him, it kept him up at night, did she tell it to keep him up at night, learning to weather the inconsolable: “There are blank spots in the world, they look like they’ve been tidied up. Like: ‘Tidy up your toys!’ your mommies yelled. Seats may still be there, maybe one upright seat, others topsy-turvy in a pile to one side. But no people, none of you and me. Because everything that lived and worked in that particular spot was there when a gauge read a limit or a nasty switch was hastily flicked or a rumour had started far away and got too much and a wall of the world actually started moving like a block and in the overheads things like cutlery began to move out . . .” He dimmed the lights, he rattled his desk, he let his pens slowly roll to the edge and fall, clatter to the floor one at a time. “In the middle middle,” he said, “in the dark dark . . .” and he continued while thinking: Teaching is ways blended from the past, how the teacher came to be. What I am doing is a sort of blend – the piece of a life added in to classroom procedure – charms added up . . . . O be careful what you wish for, class of 10036, peace, quiet, and then look what happens, look what’s going to happen!

Someone was interested in building a hutch out of old blankets and three shattered seats, what was wanted was a place that was dark and small, not so much for hiding as for resting

in. And if everything from those times had been remembered, then there could be mentioned the following other reasons: – to sit still and perfect away from most of the world, while considering the first inclinations to make love – to imagine vast terror loose in the world, with a smile: chopping zones, acid bidets, blankets, obligations to parents, joblessness, the approach of a firm moving wall, the sudden zip-cut of a section wracked with perpetual shaking (this zip-cut was not possible, a section could not vanish, unless there was an instantaneous movement of the bordering sections, so that they would click together, and no one outside the fated spot could know, it wouldn't work any other way – and who had heard of movement so quick there is no possibility of speed? that's not movement, that's a manifestation) – the virtue of ends to all the world – as had been learnt in class, inside a hutch was a good place for a Life-Form Search, scouring the tiniest bits and pieces of the world for signs of little life-forms, any indication, of legs, mouths, sprouting hair, was enough. Nothing, as yet.

Alan sat inside the hutch, thinking, thinking, thinking, until a girl peeped her head in. —Oy, he said, he tried to shoo her off. She poked her tongue out, she'd learnt this friendly annoying sign just seven playtimes ago, half by instinct, accident, half by the slightest half-sign of it as a tradition, like it had been seen in the world already, at an edge, culture.

The start of each day was about assembling in a place where one would eventually expect to be living, there was a queue to follow, practice entering a queue, dispelling of a queue that had lasted long through time, from that to how to find a place to sit down, storing personal articles or leaving them behind as was appropriate. Things became natural very quickly. Until it was over, the place where it had happened closed down, and different parameters to a life sent back, from the place rumoured to be a limit, and was where laws were made.

Gestures of Minimums carefully written on the blackboard to be copied. There would be a test!

- 1 · when stepping ahead, clasp hands behind back
- 2 · when skipping behind, cross arms before chest
- 3 · prefer the circle
- 4 · one should want to be a balm on many wounds
- 5 · share lots of water, string
- 6 · put hand down on reasonably flat surface when putting on light
- 7 · ensure demand equals a value, like what is behind
- 8 · when about to be loud, be quiet!

6

Julian's employment was in a store far far back now, that was not so much a store and more a storage depot, with take-away facilities. They were there because people needed things, and told others: —I fancy some tube bananas, someone would say, and their neighbour would tell them: —I know of a place, and the transmission of an order would be arranged. Julian would wait sleepy and a little bored in his space a blanket over his knees, until the order came through. Always a hand would tug at his ear lobe, and pull him close, and he would be told what to do and how. When he managed to slip off to sleep he would see piles of trays in his dream, watch them fall as he jolted awake. When he was told what to do he felt so adult. And hot drinks in the morning or whatever time it was, time he did his duties.

He stepped through the way and remembered many early moments, all in a quick bundle, and looked up and he was in a start zone.

The start zone, something he had never come across before. He noted the nearest number: 4096. Not 1. Are the divisions of the world so arbitrary? Was the smell a little odd? No food evident. To all intents an entrance, someone had

made an effort and cleaned the first six rows. After this the usual tatty bits of old enclave, had left behind a saucer, an old yellow spoon, a bundle of old underwear. At the furthest seen point ahead, a blue orb winked on and off.

The more he had moved on, and the massive invisible product of his tray had added up, he thought he would feel more and more at one with the number-prescribed images of commerce, the exchange, hand to hand, pocket from pocket, resting on his tray, benign, urging him on. But it didn't seem to work like that.

Some parts of the world were always humming, spots for invisible traffic, or where the unaccountably vanished lived. A lone seat or two among lost space; there was a feeling of tidiness, that this was all carefully arranged, sparse, very few obstacles, pleasant approach for a possible trade, in pillows. We are all welcome in these trades, thought Julian, we are all – he gripped his tray, he hardly wanted to let it go. He headed for the blue light.

Who will bear the authoritative weight of transactions implied as his responsibility only as the passage is a temporary interval, a long and travelling exchange between hands?

Who moves through the transactions, ensures the viability of the objects continuing, from hand to tray, tray to hand?

Who keeps the price like it can be got but out of reach, is a slippery thing, is like being good/bad at a school game? It's frightening! It's exciting!

The blue light came from the pillow shop and it seemed to make things clearer, like they were in a stasis, thought Julian. Things could be more ascertained in it.

Who will bear the authoritative wisp for his mild attempt at merely a thought of an insurrection? 336G?



The Pillow Shop Man patted Julian's head, its contours, all over. Julian felt under command, a soft and old and sensible authority. It knew what was best. It knew how not to be silly.

He was recommended a small pillow, the smallest there is while still feasible as a functioning pillow, for the size of his head. Without any further thought he handed over the warming milk, the open-topped coffee-juice (now with fitted gauze). The Pillow Shop Man looked them over, smiling, holding up the packaging to read the labels. He nodded, and placed Julian's pillow on the tray, next to the half-tube of bananas. He vanished into the blue interior of his shop, the transaction complete. Julian felt like he'd learnt something. Like getting older as he'd always thought of it, the more and more ready understanding of certain ways of the world. It's how people make their mark, fare well with authority, be gain-full.

He still had the tray, and wiped it lightly before placing it at his feet. And at his head, as he lay down, for his head, the pillow. It was a gentle sort of hardness, maybe hard-won, maybe another sort of thing after another sort of job. His view from the pillow: a tiny-vanishing speck of blue (on the yellow-stained endless carapace of the world-wall) that allowed him to believe in somewhere past the constant surface. There's a noise coming, in the churning beneath the pillow, somewhere in the world-floor, approaching to somewhere it stops short, or world or noise surrenders. It's a kind of travel in itself, surrender like air sucked out by proximal explosives.

He imagined a perfect, forever, clockwork-rhythmic cough – with a hint of acceptance, gladness of it, he imagined he would be glad of such a thing, because it meant a length so lengthy but divided as intervals he imagined as compartments, mythic rooms.

The dust would do it. Clockwork lodging in the future throats, lauded man, in the future, would eat less, and, therefore . . . is done in by its ancestry, too lengthy, too lengthy by half.

*At the edge of falling asleep there is a wall, and in that wall there is a middle, and in that middle there is a middle muddled up, that is sleep, a stream one comes to, infinite sleep in a finite head. Rest what one considers the unlikelihood of the continuities of life, rest the head, sleep easy = a pillow.*

78

Dark cone at end of it, here the lights are yellow points in a green glow. Banks of shining modules line the immediate walls. Beyond, there is the first narrowing in the world, a sudden round of curvature that looks like coming to a point (to what would be), to what would be an ending, something to delimit everything behind and create partial order at last (create the form at long last, what came “before”).

Along the limits of the narrowing cone, busy men and women, tapping at their machines, passing papers back and forth, and often mumbling together in little debates about their world and its future. Someone was hungry and wondered aloud about it, someone had dreamt of a beginning and felt sore about it, someone was tired but could not possibly fall asleep, muttering in the darkness:

“This is an up-scale meta-physical joint, if you hear something, it may well be what you think it is, it may well be not, if you think it is a hundred things, it may well be one.”

“It is long since walking got me anywhere – I don’t feel safe now back there – I am going to leave, I can’t go up those shops anymore – I’ve got to move somewhere else.”

Precise clicks of keys and buttons. Papers shuffled like dry skin being scratched. Thing scrapes against thing somewhere further ahead.

“What ruins the work is a reward other than work, what I like about money is that it is meaningless.”

“Press another button, one will do what the other won’t, above my head I shall flick a switch, we can call that a button too, one makes a rocking, another steadies the rocking, one wooshes, one calms.”

“Memory space, an array of zig-zags, between one point and its half (back) and hence multiple (ahead) living space, memorial one.

“between the ‘data’ and the ‘device’ –

“between the ‘device’ and the ‘function’ –

—If the world had a slot, where would it go? —Above and below so as to hem thus horizontal. —Only one slot. —Then around, like a socket.

Tapping into a haze, transports oneself. Merely a pastiche of movement is movement, the real thing is what moves. Feet become no longer living. Transport, transport, I am a thinking of means of continued thought. A person wants to it. I permit. I am likely to find a house, a home, it in bed, it in a bedroom, it in a table, it is a kind of way.

May my light at my seams become a milk.

I is fundamentals of feed.

I is long linger life.

I is time arced beyond and back again.

I is fond of you

(dark, cone, at sudden round, in near, end, half-lit,  
in a glow come to, school night, bed made, with, rd,  
beyond the dark, cone, admin, enmity, love (nr wing  
world plane) nd st nrr i th wrld – words, obey – term  
time, mark ts ofday/dayof – bedtimd)

tender yet people

78

Listen to this – It’s the latest figures – It’s trade people – Here we go again, I know I know, we are in the mood for dips, but isn’t it like it’s all meshed up now, fused together, it’s the future already, it is coping past and future, I call first dibs!

We startle with previously unconsidered loops – Get yourself out of this one, we say, it's sport – Well there was, like, time, a space – A beginning as memory – Odds and ends – Can't meet again people!

We are an event, have unending roots and a gown of self – The point is it's a world, a picture of bodies already formed, bargain! Towards breathless – In the weather – Outside the world – In two pieces in many pieces.

Clear the morning phlegm – There is a film around breathing apparatus – For emergencies – Like if I be emergent and change the ways of air and man, people!

Be the no man grace to world's end just beginning to be, the not of you, people! Here in the morning film of phlegm, awaked!

... forsook everything for some roomy surface. Somewhere I am partnered from. Pleat in world, abundance spread forth, hear my journey, I am arrivals.

... no means anymore to try on a new job, no time of the day left, a bit, more, later, will one do the gracious turn of polar transcendence, to get out of, therefore.

— Somewhere a sky?

— Gel-packed?

Echoing in many ways, back and forth, from half then half back again.

“Why, we've blocked all exits. No one's getting out. It's a solution of sorts. None other occur.”

CLAUDE: spoke to Madeleine only two times. He said: — How are you doing? and: — Sorry – because he had stepped on her

toes one time when a rumble passed through, it caught him unawares. That was enough, he thought, of that. He stayed where he was and let Madeleine pass out of sight. He remembered the night as it reached a crimson when she vanished.

SOLOMON: became as slow as his size had always suggested and snuck away to a corner next to an abandoned toilet. He maintained a fixed watch outward from the corner where toilet cabinet met the wall of the world's surface, and narrated the view to himself each day: —As sure as the interface, I seen the broad space grow a little green, and 16 people have queued and slowly passed ahead (the left) and when the night-time comes from behind (the right) (the same where the day comes) (and it goes to ahead) a little left luggage, and in the night 1 comes to pass through, where this place is going, actually going, seeing, an actual dark experience, I wouldn't mind – World move to pity-less square spot – Who goes where? – Until when within doesn't exist, well.

ANDREWS: moved on at least 1600. Had he gone 300 more, and had he had the funds, he would have entered anew, and found a new friend.

MADELEINE: moved on and on, and read more and more, until all that was left to be done was to read everything through a second time, and by the end of it she might have found herself close to a sleep that promised an endless set of new stories, that was what she wanted, the only way-out, as she closed her eyes.

JULIAN: eventually made it home. He retreated under his blankets there and fell fast asleep. He dreamt of a vivid space where a supper was being laid on a table. A body leaned over him, he heard the words to wake him up.

## Dogfight

Miles Klee

### OMEN, NOT VERY GOOD

Red celebrates return to consciousness by throttling doctor stooped over bed, whose pince-nez slips off to explode on white tile. For man shot in head and forced to land in Belgium, Red seems less the worse for wear as Schweinfeder and I struggle to break his grip. “That dog!” comes husk of voice, brutal vessels blooming in face. “Dog was toying with me!” At once he swoons, resumes glass coma. Doctor sucks air, clutches autograph book to chest, one finger placeholding still-blank page. “Same sweet baboon,” Schweinfeder snorts.

### NEMESSES COME AND GO

Red is distant unaccountable asshole, yet it's other people I'm expected to kill. Schweinfeder (secret Jew) is his other perpetual wingman; together we listen as Red dictates autobiography to bored propagandist. “Hawker, there was a worthy duel,” Red expounds, twisting blue hospital blanket. “But nemeses come and go.” Pantomime of kill. “New adversaries on the horizon?” doodling ghostwriter asks. “That cheeky beagle who took me down,” Red mutters. Would make the man see psychiatrist, were there one in the world worth five cents.

## I GOT A ROCK

He wants to fly; Luftstreitkräfte stalls. Germany's morale can't sustain loss of ace, not with sixty confirmed kills and twice as many myths to his name. Too late: under gauze-wrapped skull, all's gone awry. Nurses, one brawny, one bespectacled, latter addressing former as *Herr*, summon me and Schweinfeder when Red disappears. Discover him in hangar: drunk on morphine, drooling over moonlit triplane, filling with siphoned fuel. Mutters as we drag him back that we sound like muted brass played by fumbling amateurs. "Want to shut him up?" Schweinfeder whispers. "I got a rock." Valkyries track us in smoked October nights, eager to whisk Red to Valhalla. Propeller thrums in clotted black above. We tramp across the great pumpkin patch, sparing few.

## DEAD LETTER OFFICE

Grounding pilots insufficient: we come untethered, float off regardless. Schweinfeder stops bathing – nearly visible aura of dirt hangs about him. Red puts mailbox at foot of bed, is daily crestfallen to find it empty. I stuff with undeliverable mail, courtesy of postmaster friend. "Must be millions of people all over the world who never get any love letters," Red muses over ransacked pile. "I could be their leader." "Blockhead," Schweinfeder scoffs, "you *are* a leader." Red's epiphany hits so hard that for a moment I fear it'll knock his clothes off.

## DICTA BOELCKE

Rittmeister Richthofen, captain's hat concealing scar, trench coat lapping ankles, gives pep talk worthy of unwinning sports coach. "Air combat principles passed down by Maestro Boelcke are useless," he snarls. "Our new scourge defies them all." Only now do Jasta pilots realize damage done. They'd forgive his nausea during practice flights, his brief loss of bearings, but sacrilege will sink him. "The machine is painted like a

Sopwith Camel, but no propeller, synchronization equipment, or indeed gun, no wings of any description. Think a tiny airborne house." Ripples of nervous laughter. "Funny!" Red shrieks. "The mongrel does not need sun behind him; he feints and dives with total cool. Hunts alone, a rogue, a madman. English skill, American hubris." His eyes linger on pale redhead Adonis towards back. Obsessed stare unreturned.

#### MERCY

Schweinfeder returns from mission, with wink tells Red he was right as rain: snooping around front alone – atop house-shaped box – was calico dog, red scarf snapping in icy wind, who executed hairpin Immelmann turns, loosed swinging tongue with helium cackles. But flea-bitten fellow's sparring days are done, Schweinfeder gloats. Trails of bullet holes punched across wood, fiend went down cursing in gray funnel with final salute. Later, in bar, our melancholy ringleader interrupts pianist. "No more Beethoven, the sentimental bastard." So sarcastic blond plays American jazz, gets heads bobbing.

#### BORROWED DREAMS

Vision of engaging the Beagle. Stacks his oddly human teeth in towers, shakes into life the invisible gun. We set the sky ablaze, weave black zigzags across golden dusk. He climbs to a stall and plummets past, black ears trilling, face blank canvas, lifts goggles to reveal all-pupil eyes. Awake in pre-dawn, remember Mannie Red is his own worst foe. A yellow bird alights on the windowsill, speaking spells. Outside, Red stares at toy plane – jammed just out of reach in skeletal tree.

#### TARGET FIXATION

Most seductive of pilot errors. Picture school chum stealing football away as you approach goalkeeper – negated target, replaced by mere idea. Thought collapses to vanishing point,



razor anti-focus, smooth dissolution of ego: shading into prey. Bearing down on nemesis, in thrall to convergence, you forget to fire. He peels off, but afterimage follows phantom rails, and you, dizzy with frosted sun, pursue. Red is dead. Homed in till mutt turned ghost and solid ground rose up to meet. Suppose wishful imagination outwits always. Schweinfeder bewails attempt to slay fantasy, weeps openly, like child. "Take my handkerchief," I say. "Good grief."

## Sag: A Saga

Evelyn Hampton

**W**E LIVED IN A VALLEY of glacial till, a morass of moraine arranged by chance, as was my wedding to a man whose life was easy and brief, given up to the gods of excess and paunch.

He would go and come back, come back distant, then come back from his coming back angry. If I could watch myself from outside our window pry off his fingers . . . I often would think, but thinking is no window. Now I think less of thinking. I have broken windows.

We were married in a garden of stone, few flowers, fewer hours each day after, until darkness was our only and every hour, and every light in our home had to be brightly on. There was something I suppose the matter with his vision – he saw far, but only into himself, where he found himself looking back and laughing.

He was innocent in his proportions and in his distress. He preferred linen suits that were loose so that he could sweat unrestricted. He was huge but could not grasp himself. He emptied books of their meaning as he tried to reach through them to himself, though often he just threw the books back at the shelf. He thrashed in our brightly lighted bedroom at

night, drew the white sheets in a swath to his body. He looked like one of those Roman women carved in stone. He looked like one of those emperors who thrashes once and is done.

I am not brutal, he brooded.

His head twisted off into the light: our first night together.

My arm I placed in a door. I had hoped an escape was coming. I had thought, Love must be brutal to relieve me.

Love must be gone to leave me.

Love must be a hinged thing so that it slams.

Love must be an ingot so that it may be traded, sold, stored, recast, traded again, resold. It must be common as gold.

He was in the trade of metals. He came from a family that speculated in what was barely beneath the surface.

He hated that history is malleable and can be recast and retold. He worried how it would turn out for himself and his family. He regretted that his one brother was slow. Not retarded, no. But slow to make his millions grow.

The slow brother had a telescope and liked to observe the fixed stars.

My husband preferred the gold standard to celestial mechanics.

When the gold standard was abandoned the family managed stakes in silver; when silver tarnished they ored.

Copper or tungsten or nickel. Then crude petroleum.

He thinks too much, the world is too much with him, my husband said of his younger brother, quoting from a book he'd gone through and thrown.

Naturally their business soon was standard gas.

Let there be movement among the heavenly bodies.

A motor spirit put the fixed stars in motion –

not perpetual. The wells dried, and there had to be a crash.

After he lost everything the slow brother came to stay with us. My husband left to oversee a trade.

One night this brother pushed on my door. I heard the hinge. I swung open for him. It happened again, and then he left.

By then the hinge was rusted so the door could not slam shut. But he did push it. He pushed it twice.

Both of our children were born blue and crooked. It was a matter of their bones having fused in a confusion that is the source of itself. The doctor who pulled them from me would not let me see, tucking them under his gown. Each child had reached a blue hand out of me and jammed it into the doctor's mouth, a sign of contempt and derision.

Even when they were inside me I could sense them laughing: the first one rattled my bones, the second made me frightened for myself.

My husband did not appear to hear. In a rage one day he had stopped up his ears with wax.

His chiseled features had begun to sag so he covered them with wax.

*Has-been*, I remember thinking bitterly, sounds a bit like *husband*.

There are sources of delight in this language, if no longer in my body: the proximity of caul to cauldron. Our children were born within a year of each other, each born in a caul. The first time I saw my second I thought, My God, he has no face, he has no face! I thought his face must be still inside my body. Right away I went to the ocean. Salt collapses the wall of each cell and what's trapped might escape me, I imagined.

I swam out beyond a beyond I had imagined would be a cue, a coming-to of reason embodied in a scream. When I saw his face in a rock on an island I screamed. I returned to find my son grown a man.

My first child had the gall to be a dancer. The river that flowed north past our yard toward the memory of its glacier raged in spring and I believe this rage was what I watched when she was dancing. She found postures that were the

postures a body finds in the sinuous act of murder. At least if I were to murder I would hold my neck like that, with an insolent crook society cannot straighten. The crook the river took to carve an escarpment in its route around our home was where I often found her playing with broken toy things and my broom.

One afternoon my has-been went inside a room inside the house inside an hour. I watched my daughter launch a leap over the water. From then on there was just his voice occasionally that insisted, Leave the lights on! We did not see him again.

Well, the wind blew, and a city grew in rings around its howl. We watched our lives live themselves as if they were our neighbors, build houses, drive cars into yards. We sat on our weathered porch and were bored, very, by the ongoingness of this projection.

All that's left of our house is a window. There's not even a wall to contain it. My voice that cannot contain this story circles back for its self.

For my next marriage, raiment of ashes.

## Tumor Flats

Joyelle McSweeney

**I** LIVE IN TUMOR FLATS, formerly known as Taco Flats for the high percentage of Latins, even more formerly Elite Tacos, now also known as The Waste Land. If you want to know how I came this low, look around, kid, everybody's falling. I was never what you call a straight arrow but I made my way, Mercury Shoals, Muscle Flats, where I cut a record in the shower of a trailer. I wore a standup collar, fake hair, I had a velvet repel, I was shooting up life by the spoonful, but then my grind grew a rind that grew bitter and bitterer till my gears just went rust. Now I'm practically incarcerated in my recliner, glimming the smear world through a rip in my sack. But through this nick in my glass I spy the bright world, the little kids heavy with knowledge, their necks stalked, they need a constant tumor tutor to hold their throats open, check the lines that change their fluids, run their chemical baths.

But that's the bright world: palliative care, case histories, file o' facts. Here in Tumor Flats you got your types. There's the occasional cute girl, though they seem to disappear at twelve and reappear at forty. There's a harmless klepto, a celebrity. She moves amid the tumors, taking useless metal you can't even sell: the zipper off a fetid coat, the last husk of moonshine in a cleaned-out Coke. She wears a caramel flip teased high at the crown and a claret gown cut up past

the thigh, she wears slippers, she used to sing in a variety show, the money-colored curtains used to part and part for her, I remember, inside the little votive box that flickered like a penny candle, and the violins screeched high at her entrance like fat, like the streaks in her hair.

There is a tourist today amid the tumors. Spreading rumors, which are tumor cash, deprivation currency, degradation debit card, a fat-lip federal face. Fat the rumors and thin the fate. There is a philatelist who's come in for a lick. Let him have it. There's a slumming fatalist, but she won't last a day among these tumors. There's a butch *fatale* who is an optimist. There's an entire olive-clad decrepit army called the Army of Life. There's a *femme arabesque* in the sky above the denaturing plant. They've laid off all the workers like spoiled eggs but the plant just goes on making coolwhip from its own innards like a concrete goose. In the yard there's a lot of muck that won't burn, we tried it. In any case the air today is an outside story about an inside deal, a high-inside pitch, a false-bottomed truck, a suitcase not for the faint of heart. All is sugar and spit. Then all is drone. It's partly my fault. I can't hear properly, can't make the transmission. The top part of my audibles just split like a sack of sugar, then the lower part like an ass of slacks, so I only had the middle, but I got no truck with the middle. My father had a truck garden and my mother sold eggs. That was how they got through the last dip of this merrie go-round. Then these horses got hit with the virus and froze with that whacked-out mask of fear for a face.

How I Lost My Hearing, Ending Up in Tumor Flats:

The End.

A gunshot I hear again and again. My sleep of noisesome ricochet. But my days are so plush and thick, bathed in a fluid that doesn't care how it got started, and I never hear anything sneaking up on me, but somehow feel it and look up, like today I look up through the plastic, and I see the klepto smiling at me, and her smile is dazzling, it has black inside, and black plastic covers both her eyes, but sunlight smiles in

her stiff hair, and her skin is somehow rosy like a gift where her red gown parts, and I offer her my broken watch, full of metal, and she won't take it, but when I leave it on a sill she swipes it when we're both not looking, and then she's gone, and she beams munificent, after all, she bears riches, and she takes the haze with her from door to door as she tries to strip them of their bad luck charms.

The Army of Life might be a problem. They're soldiers from way back, believe in order in some vague oppressed way, and they're still wearing the clothes they got discharged in. No matter how many lines they did, doses they shot, scams they ran, cars they fenced, mamas they robbed, kids they beat, shit jobs they held and lost, they think the sickness comes from everyone else in the world but them. "It ain't right, it ain't right!" they like to whine, and then they march together in little handfuls of three or five or whatever they can muster, whoever is awake and angry and not in his tumor sleeping one off. Sometimes they form a kind of citizen's brigade and hassle the klepto, because she's out in plain sight, they try to get a hand in her gown and see what she's got there. When I see that I toss a few bottles at them and they wheel like whining dogs. Then they say to me, "Slick, you ain't law-abiding if you help that whore." I pretend I can't hear them, zip myself back into my wall.

There's some fires a few nights, and on the third night someone lights up the plastic tarp that's wrapped around my tumor, and its fumes make the walls flex and smart, but then it goes out, they must not have wanted to waste moonshine to get the fire going right. In the morning I inspect the damage: the burnt plastic has warped and then cooled in knots and shards, making for my tumor a weird and brittle shell, spiky and aggressive as a thorny crown.

But just when I'm starting to worry about the Army of Life, some cat in a suit shows up with a clipboard and fifty U.S. dollars stamped on a debit card for each patriotic sum'bitch and marches them all off from Tumor Flats, what a sad little pack of rats they make, each wearing an orange intake bracelet and



all marching in a greasy, haggard line.

Then it's quiet for the rest of the day. I'm not friendly with anyone to ask what's going on, except the klepto, she goes everywhere and sees everything but she doesn't talk, just goes on beaming that Jackie-O-smile like an energy source, that's Jackie-O not Jackie-K, Jackie-O, gliding through her many mansions like a single continuous tomb, more ageless than in her brittle youth, more relaxed now that she's seen the worst that Jackie-K was always bracing herself for. And let's not talk about Jackie-B, French class queen. The klepto sits with me late afternoon when the sunlight settles into the greasy toxin that gilds the air like sticky pollen, and the scraps in her lap also catch the light, and we watch the tumors revamp and reformat themselves, some casting an iridescence, others growing hair or teeth or pissing an acrid metallic stream, mine bulging with a springy mass that cracks the shell to sharp pieces that dig into its slick flesh until it expands again, grows an epithelium that sheathes the plastic.

I won't deny it: I've got a thing for the klepto. It's the way she moves as if she has shocks and struts: the way she glides like she's on whitewalls. It's the way her belted gown draws a line at her absolute center: saw here to cut the lady in half. Her sunglasses make a stage of every outing, and she steals from us like it's charity work, divine intervention. One night I drink a lick of moonshine – it only takes a lick in my condition to thin out my vision – till I see straight through the Flats to her tumor, which is dermoid, lined with teeth, they're slick as car keys, and I see her in her one movie role, the flop with cops that used to run on late-night, how she fought with the killer as the klieg lights blew their shadows up three stories tall on the wall behind them, above a mob that was looking the other way, at New Jersey.

One day I greet her with a movie line:

*Sweetheart, it's time to prove you're good for more than filling out that tight court stenographer's get-up.*

And then, because she doesn't answer, I say her line, too:

*Bud, I know I can be a good cop and I'm ready to prove it. I*

*just need my chance. Just give me my chance.*

She smiles at me like all the headlights at the drive-in, turned on me, and then she stops and fits her lips over her teeth.

Then I just want to so I lead her into my tumor and fold back her gown, work off her shell-colored panties.

Then I don't see her for a while, and then I see her again, she's standing at my fence with her arms hanging over into my yard, and she's got a bunch of orange intake bracelets hanging off each wrist. Up close I can see they're still printed with serial numbers in a grey print that's wearing off. The orange is also cracking off the Tyvek. I kiss her neck which smells like powder. Then I follow her like a cameraman down the *allée* between tumors.

And as I follow her form like a flaw in the film, a bleed-through from another scene, I'm elsewhere, I'm following a stiff lilac skirt, high ponytail and rounded white church collar down a hallway that can't be more than ten feet, but takes a sinner's forever as the hot dark air thickens, deep in the house, and pushes back against what we want to do. On the bedside table there's a Bible open and a place claimed with a ribbon so red I can't help but put a finger to it as Treesa stands in front of me and starts to lift up that good girl skirt like a miracle. Yea, like a mountain being lifted away.

*Amen, saints! Amen, saints!* The radio casts a call for witness as I keep one thumb on the hammer and one eye on the cashier and one eye squinted, though Treesa's brother told me time and again to keep both eyes open, fool, keep both eyes open. *And God bless the doctors may they be as sharp as they can possibly be but all healing comes from Jesus Lord I know you know that I said all healing comes from Him, Saints!*

But that weren't the bullet that took my hearing away and added it to one long reverberating crash that my brain can make in my dreams but another bullet when Treesa was with me in the showerbath where earlier we had made the record and now with everyone drunk in the front room she was here with me again it was a room with but one high flat window

and when Treesa sprung away from me one bullet caught her in the belly and another one burnt the lobe of my ear as it exploded into the wall.

And now I stand with the klepto before a little grassy decline and heaped at the bottom is about two-thirds of the Army of Life mostly lying on their sides like hieroglyphics with hospital gowns licking away from their old-man limbs instead of their discharge jackets.

Their own flesh shrinks away from them like it did in life, but no more than it did in life, their hair has been shaved short so their skulls show, and some of them have shunts or buttons behind their exposed ears, and their faces are a suffocated purple and their lips are black. They don't smell; it's as if they've been freeze-dried.

Up the other side of the decline is a wall of wire diamonds turned on their axes and beyond that is the strait and beyond that is the bright world where a low chalk-white building first smiles then goes blank. In this light its doors and its windows are a plasma blonde and something glints on top like tinsel, probably concertina wire gracing the epithelial of the roof.

It's a damn bad scene, in the middle of the afternoon, the klepto in her sweltering red robe and honey wig, the Army all lined up like the worst thing you know about yourself, repeated again and again, pinned in place, their black lips peeled back from their vicious teeth. I trade some of what I have for a bucket of moonshine, burn up the bodies that night. A chemical smell flies up like a curtain that goes up and up and into the Heaven, always rising for the scene that never starts. I stand and watch that smell rush up. When I turn around the rushing's in my ears and the smell settles on the tumors in a light blue powder that is quickly absorbed, causing some to go parched and split, others to swell and gloss.

I carry the rushing and the smell to my own tumor and lie down in my box of rags. The next day I don't feel so good, I feel bad. I've got a cloudy jug of water and a glass with desert-colored vinyl strips on its exterior. I fill the glass to the

third stripe and drink it down to the first. I try to do this as slowly as I can, to spare the water and my stomach, which is smarting and bucking today like a melted motherboard. My skin is fried in the thin places, friable, and there's an acridness between my eyelids and my eyes. My tumor is kitted out with plastic grills which house a vent that doesn't work anymore but I stare at the grills anyway trying to pull the air with my eyes through the slots.

A couple of days later I guess I pull myself onto my recliner where I can see out into the lanes. I see the glinting eye of the clipboard again, the blue and white suit of the man holding it, his stack of debit cards thick in the clamp. This time the fee is twenty-five dollars a head, and despite the cut price and although word must have spread about the pit burial of the Army of Life, the line is somehow longer, composed of sallow, thin, or unnaturally swollen bodies. Their skin has no natural luster, and the sun behind them lights up not the red blood in their veins but a straw-colored viscous matter that stands like ill will in their limbs and couldn't circulate worth nothing.

It's like a clearance sale; the desire of people to buy the stuff rises with the sinking prices. Except here what they're buying is their own death. Their own long visit to the pit. Even the earth won't cover them up. Even the ground won't have them.

As if to respond to my thoughts, one middle-aged lady in a huge faded vacation T-shirt turns to me with eyes that say, *But sweetie, my death won't make me anything if I wait for it right here, now will it?*

And then she's replaced in the hasp of my vision by the klepto, who smiles a wide smile and waits in the line with her hands clasped before her like she's walking for the communion rail.

Now she's taking a shuffle forward, and then a shuffle, till she's at the head of the line, refusing a proffered debit card and a bracelet and reaching instead for the clipboard, the ballpoint pen in the man's hand. The startled man and

the klepto push their arms back and forth a few times like dancing, the clipboard pressed upright between them, until he comes to his senses and flings her to the side. She lands on her hands and knees, her dress back and her ass exposed. For a few moments she's like an heiress groping for diamonds in the dust. He's patting all his pockets and the front of his coat until he finds another pen and continues with the next person. As a goon gets the klepto upright and leads her off to a dusty shuttle she waves right at me like she can see inside this tissue to where I'm watching. I'm watching. The flash of the pen in her hand.



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