

Birkensnake 5



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The Mystery of the Phallos

Simon Barker

Dad stayed home from work today and went to see Mum in hospital. Jane and I did not come because last time Jane would not let go and wanted Mum to come home. But Dad said Mum was not recovered. That made Jane throw her tantrum all the way in the car. Dad said after this performance we had better wait before we saw Mum again. So today he visited on his own. I took Jane up Mobbs Hill and left her at her school. On the way back the rain came pissing down and I got soaked.

Our English teacher Mr Slade was away so we did not do Wind In The Willows. I am sick of Wind In The Willows. My Granny read it when I was little but now I am sick of it. We had to do our homework instead. Chifley said what if we have no homework, and Miss Murdoch said I am sure you have homework for

one of your subjects. Do that if you have no English. Chifley had a book called The Perfume Garden. He borrowed it off Jones. It is a filthy book he said. It is from India. It is all about how to do it. It had a chapter called How To Make Your Member Large And Beautiful. I said Member was a funny word for your dick and Chifley said that is the word you must use or the book will get banned. But everyone knows what it means. I tried to read some under the desk but Chifley kept turning pages before I had finished. It was fairly dirty. Chifley said did I know what is the dirtiest book ever? It is Lady Chatterleys Lover. I said we had that at home. How could you he said because it is banned and you can not buy it in Australia or you will go to gaol. I said my Dads friend in London posted it and the post office did not check so we got it. Chifley said you have to bring it to school. My brother says it is the dirtiest book ever. It does not say your Member it says your Dick.

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barker

In maths Miss Affleck sent me to Mr Bruce because I did not complete my homework and this is three times. I brushed my hair behind my ears because last time Mr Bruce said get a hair cut Son your hair is beyond regulation. I had to wait in the office. Not doing your homework is a grave matter Mr Bruce said especially when you have been reprimanded twice. But there is another graver matter he said do you recall I instructed you to have your hair cut. I said yes. Then why have you not obeyed me Son. I said I did not know. He said the school rule is clear as crystal it must be above the ears not brushed behind. Long hair is associated with crime he said. Do you know if my car was stolen nine times out of ten it would be some one long haired he asked. He said report to detention this afternoon and tomorrow I expect to see your hair cut.

In the night my Dad cooked mixed grill. He could not remember Mums instructions and the vegies burned. When he took the lid off smoke went to the ceiling and it smelled very burned. So we had scrambled eggs again. I am sick of them like I am sick of Wind In The Willows. After dinner my Dad drove to the hospital. He did not come home till late. I got Lady Chatterleys Lover and started it. My sister asked what I was reading and I told her it was a book. I read Chapter One and it was about the War and Lady Chatterleys Husband coming home from Flanders in bits and not being able to have any children. But I did not find any dirty parts. When my Dad got home I asked could I have a note about my hair. My Dad is good at writing. When I stay home but am not sick he writes my son had an Indisposition. That is not a lie he tells me it is merely ambiguous.

In the morning I read Lady Chatterleys Lover again. In the book it said the Sex Business but it was not really dirty. I put it in my school bag. It is a paperback and on the front it says the book cost three shillings and six pence and is unexpurgated.

Mr Slade was back so we did Wind In The Willows again. It was not boring this time because Chifley and I read Lady Chatterleys Lover underneath our desk. Chifley did not read Chapter One because I told him there are no dirty bits. He flicked the pages until he came to them. It said the word Cunt but it did not say Dick. Instead it said John Thomas and the word Phallos. What is Phallos Chifley said to me. It must mean Dick I told him. Phallos Chifley kept saying The Mystery Of The Phallos and he sounded like an Englishman. I was pissing myself.

At lunch I had to report to Mr Bruce. Your hair is not cut Son he said to me. I expressly stated that you must have it cut by today.

I showed my note and Mr Bruce read it. What is this he said the length of my sons hair is not a matter of educational significance. I am sorely disappointed he said. Your father appears to be an educated fellow but he does not grasp the importance of this matter at all. I thought he was going to put me on detention but he only said some more things about long hair I have forgotten and then he dismissed me but I did not get any lunch because it was time for sport.

Chifley and I do not do sport. In summer it is just cricket and in winter it is rugby. They are fascist sports. I would rather do long distance running but they do not have it of course so Chifley and I do debating. Miss Murdoch sets the topics. Today's were "That Children Should Be Prevented From Playing War Games" and "That Coed Schools Are Better". I was on the government for the first debate. When I started debating I really stank and my mark was 4 4 5. But this time Miss Murdoch gave me 9 8 8. When it was over Chifley made me get out Lady Chatterleys Lover. He asked Miss Murdoch have you read Lady Chatterleys Lover and she said yes but where did you get that copy it is banned. Chifley said it was my Dads copy. Miss Murdoch asked is this true and I said yes my Dad lets me read it. Your Dad sounds quite progressive she said but you should not bring it to school because it is considered obscene by the benighted authorities here and you might find yourself in hot water. Can I read some to the class Chifley said. He is a stirrer. But Miss Murdoch said yes if you wish to broaden the outlook of your fellow students please give us a recitation. Chifley started reading a dirty bit and everyone shouted and sniggered so Miss Murdoch said I think that is enough. Give the book back to Richard if you are all going to be so childish. Then everyone made

more noise. Mr Bruce came in to see what it was about and he saw the book. What is that book he shouted. Give it to me. He went off his rocker. He said I can not believe it. First you defy me over the school regulation on length of hair and now I discover you with this. You are a disgrace he shouted and he ripped my Dads book. It was already ripping because kids had been trying to get it off me all day but he ripped it in half. I was shitting myself because now Dad would know. What are you doing Miss Murdoch said to him. That is my book. What he said. He was very red in the face. It is my personal copy she told him and I was lending it to Richard so that he could grasp the significance of our debate last week. She said the topic last week was “There Should Be No Censorship Of Literature”. What rubbish Mr Bruce said to her. This is not literature this is banned. You will have a lot of explaining to do young woman putting this into the hands of a miner. He shook his finger and he looked like he might explode. She said to him for Gods sake Harry the law is an ass about these things and once the government is changed such books will be studied in schools. But Mr Bruce shouted address me correctly in front of these boys Miss Murdoch. No you are being totally unreasonable she said back to him. See me in my office he said to her and threw the two halves of Dads book in the bin. After they were both gone everyone in the class went ooooooh.

My Dad came home early again because Mum was still in hospital. I did not tell him about the book. I could not think up any excuse. When I was watching tv some one knocked on our front door and it was Miss Murdoch. She said to my Dad I assume you have already heard about the incident this afternoon. He said no I have not heard. I find I am rarely made privy to any incident

these days. She gave him back the two halves of book Mr Bruce had ripped. He looked at me but I started watching tv again. Miss Murdoch explained about debating. She went into the kitchen with dad and they talked for a long time. I heard her say Mr Bruce was unbearable and how she dreaded that job and that this is a very backward country we live in and my Dad told her this country was run by second rate people very second rate. Then I heard them talking about London and other books. My Dad asked have you read Kangaroo and Miss Murdoch said yes at the university. One of the characters reminds me of Harry Bruce. I watched My Favourite Martian while they talked. I heard Dad say he would like to extend his hospitality but Richards mother is in the hospital and I am a notoriously poor cook. Miss Murdoch said thank you but she would have to decline in any case because otherwise she would miss her train. She shook my hand and said goodbye I will miss you and the other boys even Chifley. My Dad drove her up to the station but he was gone a very long time. When he got back he said you are fortunate to have teachers like Marigold. Marigold is Miss Murdochs name.

Miss Murdoch was not at school anymore. Instead we had a teacher called Mr Cox. Mr Cox was bald and when we heard his name we cacked ourselves. Chifley said Cox we can not call him Cox. That is a banned name. We have to call him something else. What about Phallos I said. No that is banned too he said even though no one knows what it means. We have to call him Mr Member until the government changes and then we will be able to call him Cox. So we all called him Mr Member behind his back. He did not do debating so Chifley and I had to do the fascist sport of cricket. Then on a Friday Mum came back from the hospital. Dad

said your mother will be unable to carry things for a good while. She is convalescing. But at least she will be all right. The doctors were extremely apprehensive but now they believe she will make a full recovery. She will not be able to bare any more children my father explained. That is all right I said I do not care about that. He said it was a small matter in any case because they were content with two children my sister and me. He stuck the two halves of book back together with sticky tape.

Let the Mother Worry

Tracy Gonzalez

I think it would be cool if we had a hotel party. In our hotel room. The one we will get when it snows.

We could invite men with beards and only cool women, only a few. Also, men without beards. And bald men and black men. Also gay men with tattoos. And men who have just experienced loss. We would have bottles of Jack and an assortment of mini-bottles of Boone's Farm we bought at the dollar store because we thought multicolored alcohol for a dollar was too awesome a thing to pass up. People would BYOB of course. That's what bathtubs filled with ice are for. Look how fast it fills up, the dark multiplying on the white like pancreatic cancer cells!

Some people bring McDonald's hamburgers. Others bring chips and processed square-shaped treats with cheese flavoring in sturdy boxes. It's a feast of greatness.

“Give me some of that blue one!” “I want red!” Everyone wants to drink the Boone’s Farm. “It’s like the Gatorade of booze!” Booze is in quotation marks. It’s Boone’s Farm after all.

The room heats up with bodies and no place to put the bulky coats. I want to sit in the middle of all of the men but it’s hard. They are everywhere. I settle for little sits here and there. They don’t know how I am doing that dual thinking with them that men do with women, how I am sizing them up like sex prey while my mouth does something else. They don’t know how I am really taking them in. Smelling them. Small touches. Brushing back hair. A test of their wrist pulse. How their neck takes to the pads of my fingers. Assimilating them. It’s what I do. I can’t help it. Heartbeat. Breath. Blink.

You watch me from all the places you are. I have not stopped keeping track of you. I can see you high-fiving me with your eyes. You are smiling like you never have before. We know this party is a fucking success and it hasn’t even gotten rolling yet. Somebody turns up a smoky, funk-based song and you grab the man you are chatting with and begin to dance. I clap. “There’s my girl!” I yell and it’s like gravity slips and the men slide toward you. Buckle against you. Yours.

There’s my girl, I whisper, licking my lips as they bury you inside the song and sweat.

I can see the top of the door to the room, opening and closing, opening and closing. Stoking the fire of the room over and over again. Bodies coming. Bodies leaving. Bodies. Bodies. Bodies. The only way they could be counted is if they could be killed.

It’s a joyful chaos.

In the bathroom, the bathtub. Everybody wants to piss next to the cold beers. Especially me. It's a great thing to be sipping a beer, releasing a beer and looking at beer all at the same time. I am fully aware of how drunk I am based on this thought I am having. I think of all the future pissers this night will bring, how wrecked the tile will be by morning. I apologize to the tile. "They mean you no harm."

I wash my hands and fix my hair in the mirror. Always fixing my fucking hair. I can hear how loud it has become in the other room. In another life, the one I left back there, I would be concerned. Worried we'd get thrown out. Here, in this faraway place, where it's just you and me, I don't care. I am who I am supposed to be here and a lot of people in that room only know this real version of myself and it feels clean and sharp. Flawless.

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gonzalez

I exit the bathroom and one of the wonderful men grabs me around the waist, verbally admires the curve of it and nuzzles my neck with his drunken face. His beard is scratchy and his arms are strong. I let myself go with it and my heart inflates and explodes inside my chest cavity. I want to tell him he should be thankful for my ribs and skin otherwise he would've been covered in chunks of heart muscle and gore. Then, I do tell him. When I am drunk and happy and feel loved I have no walls. He asks me why and I tell him about the explosion and he kisses me on the mouth like an old drunken boyfriend. He lifts me and carries me, as best he can, through the crowd of the room. A sack of potatoes. The men part the way, a slit in the sea where I want to swim.

He carries me, which is twisting around, which is the leaning and thrusting of forward and backward. All I can think about is how my ass is on full display and how everyone is taking pictures

of this spectacle and how they will end up on Twitter or Facebook and how I will have to make jokes about how the camera adds ten pounds. I hold my breath, try to feel lighter.

There are so many hands smacking my ass I think of the multitude of gangbang porn I have watched and enjoyed. All of those different hands, different ways they are telling me I am a bad girl. When I start to get excited is when he lets me down and I punch him like it was no fun at all. The punch hardly dents the fabric of his shirt. The punch is a kiss on his arm mouth. He dips me like he's my daddy but my feet are not on the tops of his shoes and his mouth is too close for a daddy's, the moment held too long. My hair touches the floor, my chest hot with his breath. All I hear are shutters going off, flashbulbs.

I know the night has been long but the night is also standing still. So many positions have been changed it seems as though the room has redefined its space several times over. I see you by the window, then by the couch. The same mirror appears on every wall. Our dual king beds are side by side, then head to head, then on separate sides of the room, our nightstand moves everywhere but the ceiling. The floor is long gone. I can hear you laughing but I cannot see you until, all at once, you take my hand and pull.

In the closet, the quiet. We hold each other and breathe. Our chests heave up and down together — part of the same skin. Telepathically we communicate everything that has happened to each of us since the party began. Everything up until this moment. When all the information has been transmitted, we drop our arms and you say, "It must be the Boone's Farm," referring to our new powers of communication. "Remember when we were alone and

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gonzalez

scared?" I ask. We laugh. We remember. It was our lives for so long before we came here. To this hotel, in the snow, in the far away.

Someone knocks on the closet door. So polite. And we are pulled, with an "IT'S MINE!" toddler force, and our feet fly. We fly. Far. Mine is a soft landing. I hear yours, into song, and then you laugh and then do not. The light changes from a hot orange-yellow to a faded tomorrow-might-never-come and for a moment all I want is to be back in the closet with you.

A man yells, "Let's roll!" and I am turned several ways, hands chloroforming my face. Or coats. Or beards. These bears of men. Such musk. It's a drowning. My drowning.

My shoes come off. Your hair is in my mouth and then it is not. Something rips. A song changes into another and I wrap my arms around it like it will take me somewhere. It does and I dance. So many fingers find their way into my mouth and I suck them all. I pay tight attention to

every
single
one.

The night goes on with the so-much-more becoming less and less. We are all shopworn: the men, the few women, us. Our skin thins out like the inception of lace. Everything is lazy and sour. The bathtub cancer has been cured, its sickness now settled on the tile, the carpet, countertops; shards shining. Everything is slow or melted. What might be the sun or the end of mankind is glowing the backs of the curtains like a mother shaking the cold shoulders of her blue-skinned child. We are that child. We do not try to find the light. Let the mother worry, we think, hearing each other perfectly.

a place 4 higher beings

d.

My sisters are indoors learning to swim. everyone must learn to swim, my mother tells us, because we are surrounded by rivers and ocean. indoors is a small body of water we've tamed. it's disinfected. that's where you go to learn.

but i am outdoors on the edge of the empty parking lot, hunting in a long ditch for red racers, which i catch and release like trout. sometimes, i catch the same snake twice. some bite, and i accept it, on my wrists and up my arms the pairs of pin-sized eyes of blood. the soft wind whispers in the knee-high weeds.

my father approaches with a fisherman, a friend of my father's, a man soon to be lost at sea, his name soon to be among those on a metal plaque by a statue of a fisherman in the marina commemorating the dead. the fisherman statue wears a parka with

the hood up and holds a heavy net. he seems forever about to die.
but he doesn't. he's just a placeholder.

i want to show my father something.

i lead him to it.

here, in the hill, in a nest of twigs and grass, a small dark hole.
what lives in there?

a dragon, says my father.

i reach in. i feel something. it is cold and round and thick and
scaly.

my father and the fisherman chat.

i work my hand up its body and to the base of its skull, and
slowly, i pull it out.

i hold it up like a prize shark. its tail reaches to the ground.

it looks at me and flicks its tongue and imparts to me the
power of thinking.

i stroke its head.

my father and the fisherman are pleased.

it's time to go home.

i wonder how my father knew.

he says he didn't.

it was just a thought.

he says maybe i made it come true.

and i am lost in thoughts—the gift of the snake—about
wishes. if you don't do something, it doesn't come true. and the
doing we do we do often under the influence of others. or every-
thing that's coming true is of our doing, and sometimes it's done
by or while wishing. like i'm wishing for you on a star while dream-
ing of you and reaching.



jim christopher was a small man.

maybe five-five, five-five and a half.

but he had gnarly biceps and bulging veins, a heavy mustache, and a deep, calming voice. he had no fat. and you could see the musculature just beneath the skin. he looked carved by someone. and he was. and when he spoke, it was about sailboats, and with intense and tireless interest. if he wasn't talking about sailboats, he was a quiet man — deep in thought about sailboats.

my father was into sailboats, too. my father raced lasers. sometimes i raced with him on big lagoon or in humboldt bay. we raced on waters green and black, on breezy days with blue skies and calm waters, and in storms, the skies black and hammering, the winds strong and whipping, the waters fierce. i felt like a god on those stormy days, speeding headlong, the sails bowled like fists, across the choppity chop chopchop SMACK of the briny sea. the ways of the winds and the workings of the sails were beyond me, and so my father manned the sheets, and upon them he read the winds in the thrashings of little strings. that my father was on sails meant i was on rudder, which, technically, if you want to be technical about it, means i was the captain.

we drove across town one day in i don't know which of the many rundown cars my father owned in a deteriorating sequence. turned left at the dairy queen with squeeze-out ice cream and shelves of model muscle cars.

towards the edge of town, the redwoods begin popping up like sentinels, solitary at first and then in stands. ahead or beyond

are whole forests of them. but we stop at jim's house, a small, yellow place tucked in a stand.

the garage door is open, and jim is in the garage in a white mask, like for keeping dust out of your mouth. he's in a short-sleeved, white t-shirt — his forearms the deep color of chestnuts. when he sees us, he sets something down and takes off the mask and greets us with handshakes, and he and my father start talking about sailboats.

cars go by. the trees move in the wind. in jim's driveway is his red banshee on a trailer. that's what he races. banshees are smaller than lasers, with a cockpit barely large enough for one, because you aren't expected to spend much time in it, you'll be so busy hiking out, out over the raging waters in a harness, on a trapeze, roped to the mast, all your weight against the winds and keeping the boat on its edge like a knife without capsizing.

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d.

i wish my father had bought a banshee a couple months back rather than a wildflower. he bought a wildflower so the whole family could sail. it sat four comfortably. it was a dull color and, needless to say, it was a slowpoke. to me — in love as i was with lasers and banshees — it looked like a big log.

one day at the lagoon, we had the laser and the wildflower out together. i was nine. and asked if i could sail the laser alone. so my dad took the wildflower, and i took the laser, and there was a good wind, and she took off, and my father's words, "stay close," just faded away.

sailing the laser without the help of the hundred and seventy pounds of my father on board was like riding an unbroken horse. she had so much power, and the power came out of the sky, and it was invisible. she was up on edge, slicing, skipping along the water

like a stone. i was hiking out. always, before, when sailing with my father, when hiking out over the waters, i was looking at my father in the cockpit — not like now, alone, looking at an empty cockpit, and the boat empty as a ghost ship and wild.

far behind me, a speck on the water, was the log with my father in it.

again and again, the laser capsized, throwing me out of the harness and flying through the air and plunging into the cold water, buoyed up by my life jacket, the taste of salt in my nostrils, the water bobbing eye-level in every direction, and lifeless on the water on her side, the laser, the sail stuck like cellophane to the waves.

to pull her up, you stand on the centerboard, and as the boat comes up, you leap backwards so as not to end up below her. then you haul your ass in sopping wet and wag the rudder, turning the boat slowly, the sails slowly filling up. and as they fill up, you draw them tight and close, and soon you are tearing through the water like through thin fabric, and the freezing wind on your wet skin awakens your every pinpoint.

i wonder what jim christopher and my dad are talking about, and circling around the rear of the banshee, i look into the garage where they are standing at a workbench handling long, slender strips white as bones. they are sail bones. they are of fiberglass. you slide them into sheathes in the sails, and they are its skeleton. they hold its shape.

check this out, d——, says my father. look what jim is doing here.

i say to jim, that's a cool banshee.

well, i like it.

he's working on making it faster, says my father.

how?

jim gestures to a stack of sail bones. there must be twenty sails or more worth of bones in the stack. they are grouped in bundles and bound like firewood.

each of these bundles, says my father, is a different sail.

i'm sanding the batts in slightly different ways, says jim, so they flex at different points. i believe i know which batts will be the fastest. but i'm testing it. there are so many factors. i may be missing something.

but he's not. deep within those sunburned eye sockets, far beyond the balls, he's figured it out. the tests are merely for the thrill of affirmation.

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it's so exciting.

d.

you're so excited.

it's nothing.

out there, is nothing.

nothing but water and wind, sky above and ocean floor below. and there are fairies. small as particles and on the wind in zillions. out there, you breathe them. they rush into your lungs and dance. and they rush out of your lungs and ride the tiger again. or they ride the tubes of your veins like skateboarders in your face. it's for the fairies you jump off the edge of the continent. i'm your mother too, say the waters. and together, the fairies and the waters say, it's new; it's new; it's new. and it matters not the land has turned to smoke.



it was snowing heavily, and so i got up earlier than planned. getting to the airport was going to take longer. i needed more time. i rolled my blanket and folded my cot, took a shower, skipped breakfast, layered up, warm and waterproof, and walked in the dark in the snow with my suitcase to the bus stop.

i stood for an hour. the snow was so deep, the bus must be late.

soon, a woman came out of her house on the corner and approached me and said, the bus isn't coming. they can't make it up the hill in the snow. but i'm taking my nephew to school in my subaru. if you help us dig it out of the driveway, i'll give you a ride.

the roads were empty of cars and the snow was falling so heavily you couldn't see far ahead. she dropped me at the station, and i thanked her.

all of the buses were delayed. after an hour of delays, a man in a security uniform approached all the waiting people and said, if you haven't guessed it, the buses won't be running.

i went upstairs to twigs and ordered a vodka.

through the fourth-story window of the restaurant, i could see on occasion a big four-by-four pickup and such go by on the distant highway.

i ordered another vodka, drank it, and headed for the road.

i hadn't gone far when a truck pulled over and the guy in it offered me a ride. he was a doctor. he said he would take me halfway to the airport. but when we got halfway there, he said, what the hell, and took me the rest of the way and dropped me off.

but the planes weren't flying. too much snow.

i began to wander the airport.

i ran into mark. he was with his wife. he said they were headed for portland. he says, we're driving. i don't need a plane. he offered me a ride.

some friends of his picked us up in a hummer. we were going to mark's house.

his friend says, you're not going to be able to drive in this with a two-wheel-drive vehicle.

o yes i can, said mark.

the snow had piled so high on the branches of trees it was falling in clumps, and there was a pile of snow in the road ahead tall as a man. mark's friend punches it and we explode through the pile careening.

you won't be able to do that, says his friend.

it's just a matter of momentum, says mark.

at mark's house, we load our luggage into a honda sedan.

as we are backing out of the garage, mark's friend approaches on foot.

mark rolls down the window.

take my car, he says. i'll trade you. i can't let you go in this. you'll die. take the hummer.

the snow is eighteen inches high. but in the hummer, mark sees no reason to be cautious. that visibility is zero doesn't matter either. mark used to operate radios for the military. he was a master of morse code. he used to listen for hours to intercepted messages sent in morse code. as we speed ahead with zero visibility, mark seems to be listening closely to a distant and faint clicking. morse code is like handwriting, he says. everybody does it differently. it's like a fingerprint. everybody has a style.

where are you going? i ask.

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d.

to a funeral.

a man in LA had had to shoot his son. mark knows the man.
he knew the son.

you? he says.

san francisco.



jaydn is my real brother. you're my real bro.

he lives in the sunset in a tiny studio with an electric bass, a record player, tons of tattoos and his wife kali. he's a poet. he tells me on the phone i might not recognize him. but i do. cause with a huge beard, he looks just like jesus christ.

the end of the world is in three days. a reverend or cult leader, a preacher in oakland, has announced it and advertised it widely. it's on billboards. on the radio. on TV. in an interview, when asked, what will you do if you wake up and the world is still here? the preacher says, it won't be. i don't even think about it. the world is going to end.

he's read the bible and done the math.

in jaydn and kali's studio, we listen to jazz. through the open window floats a chainsaw in the distance whining. and we listen to judas priest.

for the end of the world, we will be joined by bullrat, who is somewhere south of us, or north, at tribal fest, learning belly dance with rachel brice, who also says humanity won't survive, but that this doesn't relieve us of responsibility.

when bullrat comes, we are joined as well by cole and b.

for lunch, we eat burritos in the mission.

and for dinner, we go to a place kali says has the best sushi in the world.

in every bite, she tells us, you taste every flavor of the ocean's rainbow.

cole says he has always been interested in fashion. it's something about decorating your shape to look like who you are.

for the end of the world, i wear a grenade that's actually an ashtray made by a japanese designer.

the world will end at six pm, and we're on our way to zeitgeist. the beginning of the end will be marked by earthquakes. they will be small at first, but go on and on, getting bigger and bigger, getting insanely big, bigger than any earthquakes hitherto known to man. the news will spread. the damned be filled with horror. and following the giant earthquakes will be giant tidal waves, taller than our tallest buildings, heavier than the pyramids. and trumpets will sound, and in the thunder will be heard the devil's cheering.

we are approached on the sidewalk by a crippled elderly lady with a blue kerchief on her head like a maid. jaydn stops. the rest of us keep walking. the woman has a story to tell, and jaydn is listening attentively, bowed forward, nodding his big jesus beard. we wait on the corner for him. the story is a long one, and it ends with a plea for help, and jaydn nods and puts his hand gently on the woman's shoulder, and with his other hand takes out his wallet and out of it takes a twenty.

zeitgeist is packed.

they search us at the door.

it's muggy and smells of men and women, liquor and cologne and perfume and hormones and smoking meat. it's loud.

we squeeze in at a couple of the picnic tables on the gravel of the patio out back. hundreds of voices slosh like beer, and the doors of the porta-potties clap with traffic like flags in the wind slapping. the high wood fences that surround the patio are topped with barbed wire. the only way out is through the front door. guards in black t-shirts stand conspicuously about, arms folded, watching.

a guy next to us says, can i ask you all a question?

sure.

i'm a photographer. and these matchbooks are to advertise my business. which do you think is a better advertisement?

on the cover of one matchbook is a picture of a beach. on the cover of the other is a picture of a fashionably clad sexy girl.

of the matchbook with the beach kali says, this one looks like a brochure for travelocity.

i agree, says someone else.

you just like the one with a whore on it, says the guy.

it's more exciting, says kali.

they like whores, he says.

and everybody laughs.

considering the end is nigh, he is bold to be judging.

we are but minutes away.

barmaids in low-cut t-shirts and musclemen with their short sleeves rolled up are busy carrying platters of pitchers of beer, gold and brown and black as night.

under the table, i hold bullrat's hand.

she smiles. she has glitter on her eyelids, and it sparkles in the corpse-like yellow of the dying incandescents. she says, what if it really does end?

then he was right, and we were wrong, and he'll go to heaven,
and the world is ours.

as the hour approaches, pints are rising, people shouting, and
a countdown spreading, 19 ... 18 ... 17. soon we reach zero, and for
a moment defiantly brief, we murmur, and then we cheer.

to life!

our natural nurturing nature blooms. we have money to blow
on feeling better. the healing parties on. strangers to each other,
like threads in different sweaters. electricity racing through wires
overhead.

bullrat flashes me the metal sign.

metal is from hell. that's why it is unstoppable.

in the palace of the virgin lies the chalice of the soul. and it's
likely you might find the answer there.

bullrat tells me some believe the end of the world marks the
addition to our reality of a new dimension.

people ready for it will go there.

everyone left behind will think the people in the new dimen-
sion died. or they won't remember those people at all. they'll just
go on in the old dimension like nothing ever happened.

the new dimension is for higher beings. it will be place like
this. where people go on feeling.

The Sweet Stripener

Rolli

The children, don't understand. What they live, beg for and dream for is not squeezed from the machine with stripes intact. No — the stripes must be painted on, by hand, with so much care. It is almost unimaginable, the care.

My partner is a sweet turner. He holds the sweet, and turns it. I apply the stripes. He is my partner. But also, we are in love.

We work and live in the Cormack Candy Factory. Our region is Green Region 3, where sweets are painted; also, where nuts are shelled. At day's end, we sweep up the nut shells, lay down blankets, and sleep. Mr. Cormack charges not too much rent. It is difficult to afford anything, at present.

Mr. Cormack is a powerful man. He is a great and a terrible man. But also, generous. Without him, we would all have nothing. Not even a floor on which to sleep.

He is like a magician, this Cormack. I have never before seen his face. I have heard his voice, and when I turned—there was nothing. When I gaze at the intercom, I wonder, what his face must look like. If it's a pleasing, or a nightmarish face.

One evening, after the sweeping up, I was returning my broom to the broom cabinet in Hall 16. At the end of the hall was—a man. His back to me. A black suit, he wore. There had been rumours, of a black suit. Trembling, I moved forward. He was admiring, a painting, this hidden man. I became weak. But proceeded. I was ... perhaps six feet from him, now.

And suddenly, he turned. Hearing my light tread, he turned. The man in the black suit turned.

I looked up, at his face. But ... he wore a mask. A jewelled mask.

I trembled. And quit the hall quickly.

In the past, it was my duty to paint one hundred sweets per day, to keep my position. Now Mr. Cormack is insisting on *two* hundred. The thought of it, makes me shake. My art is taxing. There is so little time. But if I cannot keep up, and work and live in this factory ...

I do not even want to think, about that.

Shards of a Public Dream

Joe Kraus

When my turn came, I dreamt the ambassador wore a coat of elk-hide, cured so that each hair curled in place. He carried its bulk without effort, moving lightly, as if he wore only cloth. He had blackened the lids of his eyes with a cosmetic, and his lips, fleshy and bulging, lengthened his face. He was large, taller by a head than most of our men and so broad that, had I stood near him with open arms, his shoulders would have run from one of my elbows to the other. But even in dream I dared not approach him.

The ambassador unfurled the scroll, discarding its silk tie, and summoned the villagers. His words escaped my memory, but their weight stuck: the marshals had declared a new levy, and we were to surrender ten of our sons and fifty head of cattle. This disaster had threatened for several nights' telling, but it struck us

like a blow. I looked at the other women in the square, imagining whose child, whose homestead would go to satisfy such appetite.

As I spoke my dream to the morning assembly, their moans at my report echoed the wailing of the crowd in the dream. I looked at them and knew the flat days awaiting them: some would go to tedious work as office clerks or attendants, others to long hours of physical labor in factories or as domestics. All paid heed to me; all waited for word of what I had seen. As others had given report in the days preceding, so then did I. Yet as I spoke, I saw not so much their familiar faces as the dream itself: the cruel face of the ambassador, its malice more real at that moment than the friends with whom I dined every day.

The next morning, after a dark sleep, I joined the others. Brenda stood to report that she, in her turn, had dreamt the ambassador's demands. She told that he had held up a battered helmet, forged for one of our rebels, and declared that none could stand against the marshals. "He spoke as a bear growls," she said, "boasting that he would have his pick of our sons, threatening to make soldiers of any that survived the year, promising to return the others for burial if we made the muster by the fortnight." She told of the terror that had gripped the square even as the women kept their heads bowed, and the savor seemed to leave our breakfast as despair spread across our assembly.

"But hold, sisters," Brenda called. "At the peak of his gloating, from beyond the village gate, a horn rang out, and another joined it, and another still. And as the ambassador gathered himself, there came a blast so clear the mountain itself seemed to shake. Yea, sisters, I dreamt it even so."

Her testimony ended there, and the demands of our waking days called us to our separate occupations, but each of us knew beyond words the hope her vision heralded.

IMPERATOR

Diana George

The tide was out, the sea the merest sheen on the mud. Tiny pale sea-lice crawled over strewn and stranded things: collapsed and sclerosing hydromedusae, mantled opaque with decay; dull sea-glass and variegate, tattered plastic; flecks of nacre, of chitin; dead mussels and hake and shreds of dulse. Rot's force had swollen shells apart, avulsed the inner flesh.

Nothing to glean that was not tainted. Odtsetseg looked up; out where shoals gave way to channel, the *Cosco Imperator* was underway. At that distance, propulsion and displacement were alike obscured; Odtsetseg watched the tanker slide, wakelessly, atop an ocean as continent as earth itself. A flight of cormorants headed as if for the morning sun, then banked and dropped to skim a nearer target, a yellow raft lolling on waves that shoaled and rose and

foamed and collapsed the faster, the closer they came to shore. A man was seated at the back of the raft, an oar held upright in one hand. His other hand rested on the head of a small, scowling personage.

The wind had shifted. From the far-off mainland now: ash, defoliant. Odtsetseg watched the raft lollop on until it was within hailing distance.

The personage called out, in a voice louder than necessary, as if through a maelstrom, "Is this —— Island, or are you some maritime illusion?"

Odtsetseg nodded.

They trudged over tide-sheen all the way to Odtsetseg at the wrack line, the smaller perched in the crook of the taller's elbow and the raft dragged behind.

Odtsetseg said he had never seen anyone arrive on this island of their own accord. The only rafts here were handmade ones, confiscated before ever put to sea, or breaking into sodden flotsam under flailing, drowning prisoners.

The smaller one clambered down. Her scalp showed dull white under closely shorn hair. The taller sat down facing the sea. He opened a valve on the side of the raft; he put his lips to the valve and began sucking out great draughts of air.

Odtsetseg asked whether the two of them had come looking for the entrance to hell.

The man put the raft aside and spoke in a way Odtsetseg did not recognize, in a halting, humming groan and burr. At length he ceased; he applied himself to the valve once more.

The little personage said, "My friend here says you look like a man in whom we can have confidence. The fact that you have the

bearing and dress of a trustee is the least of it. You once led a life of violence and pleasure; now you are restrained, within and without. We applaud what we take to be your strategies: caution, absorption, a throttled-back curiosity. Pragmatic means of survival for the detainee from whom too little is expected rather than too much.

“We are Rudd and Weser; he is Rudd and I am Weser. Five months ago we stowed away aboard the *Cosco Imperator*. We had no desire to reach the ship’s destination — every ship is destined to sink or be scuttled; the final port is always ruin. Nor were we interested in any of the ship’s intermediary ports, not Qeshm or Rugen or the Saint Brandon Rocks. We chose the *Imperator* because it passes within a night’s rowing of this prison island.

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george

“The sea keeps plunderers out as much as it keeps the likes of you in. For you, this island is durance vile. It goes hard with you here; hard, the privations and the discipline; hard, the tedium and the sorrows; even your trustee status is but a lax noose. But for plunderers! For them, a prison island represents wealth itself, in sleeping form. In the form of slumber.

“We are not plunderers.” She swayed as she spoke: a stubby sylph. “We offer you friendship; we ask your trust. Be assured all three of us will profit by our association.”

How, Odtsetseg asked.

Rudd paused in his exsufflations. Ash was falling in pale flakes like shirred paper, vanishing on contact with seawater, settling in the baffle-seams of the raft draped on Rudd’s knees. Rudd spoke again, this time in hissed sibilants pocked with chirping.

Weser translated: “I feared for our safety on board the *Imperator* — I say ‘I’ meaning he, Rudd — and so I counseled Weser

to travel in the guise of a man, in case we should be discovered. Weser said she knew better methods for remaining unnoticed. Days, we secreted ourselves in disused storeholds. Nights, I bound Weser to my belly; I pulled on a bulky nautical sweater and thus we walked abroad, one unmolested corporate being. We waddled topside, stargazing, smoking, my hand tucked in my waistband in support of our great paunch. I spoke softly to Weser of all she could not see: the wrinkled black sea far below, and, up above us, the ship's bridge, massive against the night sky and lit by rows of tiny lights that made of every column a spire, of every porthole an architrave, and the whole one fairy kingdom, and all for us alone.

“We were free. Suspended between two trackless wastes — the sea, the sky — seen but unnoticed, fed without having to work, we wondered why we should ever go ashore again.

“A shadow of distrust passed through you just now, don't deny it — I say ‘just now’ meaning back then, when you asked your question. You are restless. So were we, in our doldrum world, though we did not know it yet. Contentment ripened, rotted. Underneath her bindings, Weser turned like a worm.

“We took to wandering below decks. Outside, perhaps, were whitecaps, booming swells, the pitch and roll, the brilliant sun. We knew nothing of all that. We followed narrow corridors lit by yellow bulbs in wire cages. I climbed down rungs bolted to walls, Weser on my shoulders, her fingers clutching my hair. We descended. Conduits on corridor ceilings sweated. A rusty grime prevailed. The air scarce rewarded breathing: a hot, dense fug of oil fumes and bilge reek. This far down, the sound of the ship was a thrumming amalgam so loud it subtracted the auditory from the world of the senses, from the world itself.

“In that loudness, Weser and I sometimes came upon a sailor. Like you, detainee, sailors often have reason to want to look insouciant, however startled they may be. Those we saw below, so far from light and air and day, may themselves have been hiding. We affected indifference at first; we let them go.

“In time, we brought certain of these sailors into our confidence, one by one. We would motion to a sailor to climb back up with us to the higher, quieter decks; we would show him our hiding places, our complex mode of speech, how Weser’s tiny person could be concealed under bandages. What lightsome hours we spent with our new shipboard friends, with the stoker Holf, with an oiler named Struc or Truc and his brother. We told each one he looked like just the man in whom we could have confidence, though this was perhaps least true of Holf. They brought along still others, in whom we also professed to trust. When the number of our sailor-confidants had grown sufficient, we gathered them nightly in one of the empty storeholds we favored. A row of rust-seeping, painted-over rivets ran the length of its floor. On our side of the rivet-line, I held Weser before me; I interlaced my fingers and she stood on my palms. *Who keeps you down?* we would ask the sailors. *Who robs you?* If we catechized, it was not in order to instruct, or not really. We did it for the savor of that astringent pleasure bachelors can take together in anatomizing the world and its corruptions. *Who holds you down, who robs you?* Weser and I would ask the sailors. *The swindlers*, they would answer us, *the swindlers and the oligarchs in their distant capitals*. We asked them what was more common, these days, than to foment crisis and ride it out toward profit.

“The sailors liked to bring Weser gifts: balisong butterfly knives, festoons of dates strung on bootlaces. Do not mistake these men for simpletons, I told Weser when we were alone one evening. — You’ve promised them they will reign in permanent riotocracy, Weser answered me.

“It was dusk, the first dog watch. Many of our confidants were on low-visibility detail just then. I imagined it a fraught and exhausting travail — peering into the chill penumbral fog, trying and failing and trying and failing to descry figure’s emergence from ground. But there had to have been exceptions, pleasurable ones, structurally impossible for Weser or myself to have experienced and therefore enviable: coming along a gangway the sailor notices a darkening concretion in the fog just ahead, which, as it nears and swells, takes on definition, reveals itself; not only is it a fellow sailor but a fellow conspirator, a confidant. The beautiful is just this: that which appears. Weser and I were denied this, denied, too, that serene pagan confraternity of sailors, however close we came, so that I preferred it when they were out in the fog somewhere, in that life unknown to me; I wished they would not return to the storehold bringing their absence, their distance, with them, a wish tinged by something of the same feeling that brushes up against me when I consider that I will never really know what Weser is saying to you now, ‘now’ meaning some future moment, imperceptible to me, after I have spoken and she is making sounds I can only assume render these meanings.

“Late one evening, there were just three sailors in attendance with us, bearing jars of turnip wine they had brewed underneath their hammocks. We told them we would return shortly, with

black bread and perhaps a cucumber. We locked the storehold behind us.

“Life at sea is life; the same night of confusion obtains there as elsewhere. Hour on hour you watch the ship’s wake churn and spume, wave on wave regressing, recurring, ever on the verge of revealing to you — to you only, just there where you stand — the secret of matter’s perpetual collision with itself. This presentiment of the infinite is an error. Men bring the world with them when they go to sea.

“We put it about, amongst our remaining confidants, that the intriguers had shown themselves heartily sorry in the moments just before we closed the door on them forever. We lingered over the story of their repentance: how plaintive; how affecting; how not unmixed with surprise (intriguers never expect to get caught); how orthogonal to the matter of their condign punishment.”

An ash-dusted crab finicked its way over sand and wrack. Fat stalks of saltwort trembled in the breeze. Whelks clung to rocks. Slack tide. Rudd folded the raft in thirds, lengthwise, and began rolling it up from one end.

What does your talk avail me, Odtsetseg asked. I found nothing to eat here and if I do not get back soon there will be nothing for me to eat there either.

Weser said, “I believe I speak for Rudd when I say we are ready to come with you, or nearly. You may introduce us, surreptitiously, to new confidants your discernment tells you are the right ones; our improbable arrival is already their guarantee of our worth. First, understand this: we would have spared those sailors if we could. In our first weeks aboard the *Imperator*, the two of us had lived as one being, I inside Rudd, installed there the way a man

in despair keeps the matter of his self behind a false door. What a queasy delight was our life.

“After the dispatching or anyway the immurement of the so-called intriguers, after we had told the story of their heartfelt remorse and our tender but pitiless justice, a story that bound our confidants to us more closely than even the catechism and the tributes, just then we were poised to go from triumph to triumph, not by restricting the number of those who knew our secret but by expanding it. We made ready for our imminent success. For three nights running, after the immurement, we gathered our remaining sailors, to prepare them. We asked them who the exploiters were. Our sailors answered us as prettily as ever.

“Here let me pause, detainee; pause at once. There is enough said. Find out from Rudd — if you can, without my aid — of the return of our accusers from their oubliette, haggard and wild-eyed, raving yet still possessed of enough sense to bring about our total ruin. It is for Rudd to tell you, in his monstrous language, if it can be called a language, of exposure, arrest, confinement to the brig. Least of all is there any need to speak of prisoners’ ecstasies, erasure of self, the dissolution of time in eternity; what knowledge, these days, is less secret? What more decayed, more contemptible, than the penitentiary’s gimcrack transcendence?

“Let Rudd tell you, if he cares to, whether in the succeeding months of captivity he despaired of ever reaching this island; I tell you I did not.

“Here we are now, ashore, as you see us now. Are we ourselves not a form of proof? Let it be yours to imagine the joy born fresh out of terror, the rapture of escape from durance, the wondrous reprieve from dread. Have confidence in us.”

My House Is a Doll's House

Katy Gunn

It is my month of Sundays. Because of it I will not have to sweep the floors, wash the windows, polish the doorknobs of other houses. My house is free. In it I will be easier to keep nearby for whenever the time is right. It is small and white with a small green yard with lots of colored buds. He gave it to me this morning. He said,

—It will be your month of Sundays. You're a pretty thing to work so hard,

as he patted my cheek and the door of my house. He had business to go to.

Outside, my house is shiny white horizontal slats that overlap to shelter lines of light green and tan moss. The slats overlap downwards right into the ground or grow right up from the

ground without a seam between ground and house. The grass grows up similarly. I lie in it. I touch my house.

Also growing up from the ground are bushes and trees with white, yellow, pink, lavender, blue, and green buds. Some of the buds have burst into small puffs like nothing that needs to be cleaned off.



Inside my house is sitting room, kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. It is a girl's bedroom with a sleigh bed like the bedroom in my doll's house. My doll's house was supposed to teach me to be organized and house-proud. I am house-proud. My house is a doll's house I can fit into.

All the walls are pink or white. All the carpets are blue or grey-tan. The windows are low and the ceilings are low. There is a door in the front and a door in the back that brush the grass and send up yellow spring powders.

In the bedroom drawers are dresses that fit me. I take off my working dress and put on a blue one embroidered with tiny blue flowers and buds. Under the sleigh bed are shoes that fit me. I take off my working shoes and walk barefoot over all of my carpets drying my feet.

On the table is an empty glass vase and an envelope of money. I fill the vase with thin branches of purple puffs from my yard. I put the money in my blue pocket. It is time for a meal. I want to have tea in my house.

At the end of the path from my house is a road and at the end of the road a vegetable stand. Beyond that, town. I have spent so

many Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays working in town. I will not go there anymore.

From the vegetable man I buy green-topped carrots, parsnips, onions, cow peas, lettuces, three watermelons with the flowers still on, and basil with roots.

— Those watermelons were grown in a greenhouse,
says the vegetable man.

— House,

I agree, and I give him a tip. I am a different woman now.

I plant the basil in the window box of my house with dirt from my yard. For tea I have the watermelon with the flowers still on. It is delicate like me in my blue dress. I can be delicate. I am a housed lady now. My house will be strong around me on all sides.

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gunn



I lie on my sleigh bed on my three crocheted blankets. One is yellow, blue, red, and green stripes. The second is cream and tan stripes. The third is gold, blue, purple, dark green, light green, burgundy, orange, and pink squares. The squares blanket is biggest and reaches up to my red and white pillows.

My head is on my pillows with his todger inside. His knees are on an orange and light-green square and a gold and pink square. My fingernails are holding two blue and gold squares. My fingernails are gold.

In the closet the gold paint sits in a glass bottle in a basket of glass bottles of pink, dark pink, burgundy, silver, clear, silver-

glitter, red, and coral pink paint. The closet door is open so the spring sun can come through the windows and shine off the colors.

It shines off the white curtains and my white sleigh bed too. It must shine off my teeth though I can't see them. My teeth are curtains and chairs for the room of my mouth. It is spring in my mouth and his todger is visiting like he is visiting my house.

When he leaves I plan to find all the white things in my house. I can already think of curtains, sleigh bed, kitchen, bathroom, three chairs, washbasin, and bowls and plates painted with blue buds. The bowls and plates are those of a lady. I try to think of all the things with blue buds in my house. When he leaves I plan to find all the buds.

I look around the room for buds and find blue buds on my dress, pink buds in a picture, and pink buds on the edges of my sleigh bed and drawers before he holds my head still with his hands over my eyes.

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gunn



A mailman delivers a card to my house. I am looking at my window when he comes up the tangled blooming walk. I think he might have a flower on his hat but when I meet him at the door it is only an insignia.

Still I welcome him,

— Isn't it beautiful here!

— Yes lady,

the mailman says. He gives me a yellow envelope.

It is addressed to a woman who is not me but it is for my house so I bring it inside. Inside the envelope is a yellow card with red and orange flowers and buds in the shape of a sun. It says *I hope this finds you well. Amelia.* It does. I put it on the kitchen windowsill where it matches the outside bush.

Past the card many of the buds are puffing out into flowers, especially the purple ones on the hanging tree. The buds on my table have puffed open too. I look at all the buds which have puffed in the yard and changed the kitchen window.

I think of what happens after all the buds puff. Leaves. I can't imagine my kitchen windows green with leaves.

After green leaves, red and orange. After red and orange, snow. I have seen so many other people's houses change this way. I have swept away the fallen leaves and away the snow. I can't imagine sweeping in my spring house.



I wear all the dresses and because I am a housed lady and do not sweat they continue to smell like spring. I pin tiny puffed flowers to my dresses with pins from my bedroom drawers. When he comes he says I am pretty and gives me tiny silver ducks on a chain.

— Duckling,

he calls me. I line them all up on my dresser. I line them all up on my grey-tan-carpeted floor. Their silver bottoms are narrow and fit neatly into the space between the grey and tan strings of the carpet. Even with my face very close to the ducks I cannot see the lines of their bottoms exactly. They grow out of the grey-tan carpet like my house grows out of the green spring ground.

He lifts my orange puff dress and hits my bottom. His todger visits the room of my bottom.

I knock over my ducks accidentally and set them back up. Ten silver ducks on a chain. The biggest duck is always first. It is the mother duck with room inside for all the smaller ducks. Or it is the man duck. He leads the way.

Next he rolls me over and visits my fanny. He spends a long time there. He enjoys his stay. Next he comes into the room of my mouth.

He gets white on my orange puff dress. My dress would be pretty with white buds embroidered. I might do it if I were a talented cleaning lady or a lady who needed money. But I have a house. I have a weekly allowance on the table. The watermelons at the vegetable stand are getting bigger and pinker the further it gets into spring.

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gunn



In the mirrors of my house I study the house of my body at length. Mirrors belong to ladies who are allowed to know all the rooms of their bodies and now mirrors belong to me. It is spring inside me. Everything is pink and white like my bedroom window.

Spring sun comes in my bedroom window and shines off my teeth which are curtains and chairs. It makes shadows in the piles of curtains hanging from the window of my fanny. I have many shadowy corners. I have a doorknob which he says he will push but he never pushes it.

When I am done I look out the window at all the fat bees working. They stumble from flower to flower spreading the spring.

I am a fat bee and I move from room to room. I am not a worker. I am the queen bee.

Sometimes the fat bees are interrupted by birds which fall from the trees onto the flowers flapping. The birds are hooked together in pairs and I know they are entering each other though with all the flapping I can't see it. Entering was never explained to me in terms of rooms before but now that I have figured it out I know I enjoy it.

I know the flapping and entering and falling from trees means that there will be eggs in the trees and the trees will grow leaves to hide them. I try to imagine my bedroom window green with leaves. I can't. I think of snow and it scares me.

My house is white. My house would disappear. There has never been any season other than spring in which I have been so big or real as to be housed.

I try to study my rooms again but I am sick to my stomach. I wait for him to visit but he doesn't. I look out the windows and notice for the first time all the buds that have bloomed out and fallen onto the ground already.



The vegetable stand is so full I can't decide what to buy. His entire front display holds fruit and some fruits have rolled out of their baskets onto the ground. I am too hungry to leave with nothing so I buy the three hardest plums at the top of their pile and eat them walking back toward my house.

The day he gave me my house I could see it from the road. Now bits of it are covered by the blooming white tree and the

blooming pink tree. On the purple tree are tiny specks of green. I can see them from the road. The green has come up from the ground and soon it will block my house.

I walk down the road away from the vegetable stand and my house. I walk until I have walked further than I have walked since he gave me my house. My feet feel a little bruised in the shoes from my house and I have to remember that I am not working.

At the end of the road, another little house. But heavier than my house is heavy with spring.

The lines of white and tan moss that grow under the slats of my house grow all over the slats of this house, and on the window boxes and roof. This house's bushes are bigger and the branches of its purple puffing trees hang closer to the ground. If the puffs have begun to fall from the branches it isn't clear because the ground too is covered with flowers. The whole house and yard are loud with fat bees.

I stand in front of this house for a while. I stand in front of this house for some portion of the morning. Eventually the door opens and a woman comes out.

She is as old as the oldest woman I have ever seen. The skin on her face hangs in curtains around her eyes and mouth. She wears a peach-colored dress and no apron so I know she is a housed lady or a woman who was once a housed lady. She is the lady of this house.

— Yes?

she calls out to me. It is a soft call.

— It is beautiful here!

I call back from the road. The plums have ripened inside me and my stomach is empty.



Inside, her house is like mine but older and faded lighter and stained darker. She pours red tea into two white cups with orange buds painted on them and mixes cream and sugar into both. She does not ask how much cream or sugar I would like. She mixes until the tea is white like the cups. She is a housed lady.

She gives me a cup on a saucer painted with orange buds and puts a jar of cookies on the table.

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gunn

—Forgive me if they're old,

she says. I forgive her. I tell her I love her house.

She smiles kindly at me like she might not understand.

—I mean I have a house too,

I clarify, and I describe all the rooms of the house he has given me. I do not say he gave it to me. She is an old lady and might not understand or might be offended. The implications might seem to her unfavorable.

She nods her curtained face while I talk about the way my doors slide right over the grass and send up yellow spring powders.

—I know that house. It used to belong to another young lady. A nice young lady. Holly. Used to wear a blue dress and shop for me in town.

The old lady might not have anyone to shop for her anymore. That might be why the cookies are old. I don't want to go to town anymore but I could shop for her at the vegetable stand.

—I could bring you vegetables from the vegetable stand if you need or would like. I am going there today. I have almost run out of vegetables.

All of this is true. I am respectable.

She can tell I am respectable. She tells me I seem like a very nice young lady and takes down a silver bowl filled with money. She gives me a handful and requests spinach, fruit, and potatoes.

— Always good to save up your money. Never know when your income might stop coming in. Or when you might stop being able to make it,

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gunn

she tells me as I leave her house remembering spinach fruit potatoes, spinach fruit potatoes, spinach fruit potatoes. I walk quickly to the vegetable stand and quickly back to her house. I try to picture the rooms I didn't see. She meets me at the door to collect her purchases, a disappointment. But she tells me to come visit again soon.



I take myself outside my house to have a picnic under the purple bud branches. Inside they are part of the kitchen. The kitchen window. Outside they are ceiling. Under the bud ceiling I eat a greenhouse watermelon and an outside watermelon.

— This watermelon was grown in my own yard, it's getting to be summer!

the vegetable man told me. I didn't tip him though he lent me baskets to carry all of my purchases and the purchases of the old lady.

Outside my house I don't think about summer. I eat the outside watermelon because I am outside. I eat the greenhouse watermelon because it is growing old and caving. Outside the watermelons are green striped like the moss under the slats or some small lizards outside my house. Inside they are one pink room.

Outside my house is one big house. It is divided into rooms. Under the purple bud tree is one room with tree and bush walls and a door into my house. My house is another room of the outside.

A lizard is a room that bugs go in to visit. A bud is a room with curled silk walls you can unpeel. Inside, threads like small people with yellow heads. They are tangled. I untangle them. I leave them inside where they belong and want to stay.



I watch the birds flapping and falling all day and when he comes to visit I tell him,

— Let's be birds!

Of course I mean houses. Let's play house, let's enter rooms. He seems to understand. He picks me up in his great big arms and twirls me around my sitting room.

He flies me onto his lap. I lift my pink dress and open my fanny with my fingers for him.

He says,

— Caw!

much more like a bird than a house so I put my hand on his beak.
He seems to like this and when I remove my hand he says,

— Caw! Caw!

again so I will put it back. This means one of his rooms is closed for
me. When with my free hand I try to find other rooms I know he
has he slaps my hand away and comes into my fanny very quickly.

— Yeah I'm your cock-sparrow,

he says through my hand.

When he leaves he pecks me on the mouth and I stick my
tongue in his mouth while I can.

— Whoa Nelly I am tuckered out,

he says and pulls back. Nelly makes me think of Holly because it
is also not my name.

I open the door for him and hold onto the doorknob so he
can't close it behind him. For a while I stand in the open doorway
letting what is left of spring into all my rooms.



— I can't imagine my house in summer. I can't bear it,

I tell the old lady.

She shakes her heavy head and scolds me,

— There are plenty of young ladies who would do anything to live in a house like yours.

I know. I am one of them.

She looks at me with her eyes almost closed and repeats,

— I know plenty of young ladies who would love to live in a house like yours,

and it sounds more like consolation than reprimand. When we have finished her jar of old cookies and she says it again I am sure of what she means.

— You know a young lady?

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I ask to check.

gunn

— I know plenty of young ladies,

she says. She looks at me for a long time with her eyes in careful slits before she continues,

— But you'll have to be somewhere else entirely. If you promise your house to a young lady for summer and fall and winter it will upset her greatly if you take it back before spring.

— But there is a gentleman,

I begin to confess.

— These things do not matter,

she interrupts me and pours more cream in our tea.



The next time he comes I ask if we can do it in all the different rooms. I don't say it means goodbye for now.

—Certainly we can do it in all the different rooms, aren't you a naughty girl, you probably want to do it with the windows open too don't you,

he says. He takes me into the kitchen and pulls open the window curtains. He pushes his todger through the curtains of my fanny so I am pinned against the window, my blue dress with the embroidered blue buds bunched over my bottom.

As my bottom goes up and down against the glass it opens to what's left of the spring. The buds outside stretch toward the window. They pull their branches and stalks of grass so everything bends toward my house.

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gunn

— Wait, wait!

I tell him so he will move back and I can open the window. His idea was good. Now both the kitchen and my bottom are open for the spring to visit. Later when I clean myself the cloth will stain yellow with spring powders. I will not clean the powders off my table and floors.



Before the date I have arranged with the old lady I am careful and loving to my house. I am sure to wear all of the dresses outdoors. I keep all the windows open. One spiky green vine with spindly

flowers grows into my bedroom window and begins to grow leaves and I pluck them off.

I take walks up and down the road to collect branches of unopened buds for my vase and all of my cups. I place a few in every room. I let the buds open but replace them before they wilt.

When he comes we enter each other in every room and make entering marks in the layers of yellow powders on all of the surfaces. I clean nothing. I will be cleaning soon enough. My house's only mess-maker is spring and it needs no scrubbing or dusting.

On the date I have arranged I take off the orange puff dress and fold it up in my bedroom drawer. I put on my working dress and working shoes and feel like another woman.

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gunn

The ducks come up from the carpet and go onto the kitchen windowsill with the card. With a pencil from the kitchen drawer I cross out *Amelia* and write *Elsie*.

—I hope this finds you well,

I say to prepare for the young woman who will live in my house for the parts of the year that aren't spring. I pat handprints into my door when I leave.



She is sitting at the old lady's kitchen table when I arrive. She has yellow hair and a dress the color of drying grass. Her skin is burned. She looks like summer. When I give her the key to my house she closes her hand around it and doesn't put it down.

She drinks two full cups of the old lady's tea. It has grown hot outside and I can barely drink one even though it will be almost a year before I have this much cream again.

— Be good, young ladies. Remember to save up your money,

the old lady says to us both as we leave.

The other young lady says,

— Yes, Aunty,

and I copy her because the name seems right. Aunty, who is a housed lady. I am a housed lady with a housed lady aunt and I will come back.



I walk toward the town and when I pass my house I keep my eyes on the road. I won't see it so far out of spring. My body aches slightly. My feet in my working shoes ache. I walk straight into town.

I will return to my house when the buds start to lift from the branches in the yards of the houses I don't own but clean. The young lady who meets me at the door may be entirely new to me, black hair and white skin. A red dress with white lace. A winter lady with nothing in the window box. She will relinquish the key and wish me welcome because we both understand the ways of houses like ours.

I will open all the windows when she leaves. She will clutch the money she has saved. I will clutch the key to my spring house in the happy room of my fist.

Bury

R. Matthew Burke

The ringing wakes me.

“Hello —?” “I’ve only just got back.” “What?” “My grandfather. He had been sick. The family knew. I went to India to visit.” “Where?” “Karnataka.” “Generally?” “Generally southwest. He only had daughters. Not sons. My mother. Her mother has been sick for longer than her father. My grandfather.”

“Your grandfather?” “Yes.” “Well?” “He’s died.”

“I thought you said your grandmother was sick. You said he said he’d wander the earth after she —. He was studying to become a yogi, or you told me.” “After he retired, he, yes. My grandmother’s still alive. My parents stayed longer, after I returned. My mother took pictures, I can show you online. In India it’s mostly

illegal to be buried. But according to whatever beliefs my grandfather studied —. That was what he wanted. They drove for four hours. He was in the backseat. His body was shutting down. Because there are only so many places where you can be buried. For four hours. He was still alive. We knew it was coming. My parents had labored to make the arrangements. They were in the front. My grandfather and grandmother in the back. Uncles and aunts in their own cars.” “Did you come back together, with your folks?” “They’ll get back here in a few days.”

“Things lonely for now?”

I think I hear a sound. I worry someone might be climbing through my fire escape. It passes.

“He died on the ride. My father could tell. He didn’t tell my mother. They were near the burial place. They arrived where a pit had already been dug.” “Who dug the pit?” “It was a place. The man who owned it dug the pit; he was as old as my grandfather.” “H—?” “82.” “Mine will be turning 90.” “The one with Alzheimer’s?” “There is only one. And not Alzheimer’s, a stroke. Which is my biggest worry. A stroke.” “I’m starting to worry about my blood pressure.” “We have years before we worry about that.” “By then it will be too late.” “Nabokov, something like a cradle perched between two endless pits of darkness.”

“What?”

“What was your grandfather’s yogic practice called?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Describe it, I could look it up.” “But he had been studying it for ten years. They strapped his body onto a wooden chair and put a pillowcase over his head.”

I consider turning on my bedside lamp.

“They lowered the chair into the pit. Do you know what a ku— never mind, a leaf. They put in layers. First the leaves. These up to his knees. Then, into the pit, like bindis, but gray. They signify —. They put these in. Layers up to his stomach. Then ash. Then leaves.” “What did they signify? Represent?” “I don’t know. Something to do with his faith or practice. I can’t quite remem—. I could look it up. They fill the pit until you can only see his head.” “How deep was it?”

“What?”

“The pit.”

“Like as deep as I am tall.” “Didn’t you say you were working again?” “Another temp thing. They say they’ll give me a contract.” “There’s time.” “It’s enough for loans. And plus the resume value.” “You’ll move out.” “Do you have work tomorrow?” “Is it a weekday?” “I’m sorry I called late.” “When —?”

“When it was filled up to his head, they sealed it off. With a slab of concrete. Sealed. Then piled some soil on top of the cement. That was it.” “Then what?” “Then I came back.” “Your parents?” “There are other things to take care of, rituals, some money, Grandma is still sick.” “How did you get back from the airport?” “What?” “Did you and your parents take the same car to the airport, or did you go separately?” “We flew out of JFK. I took the subway there after I’d gotten off work.”

“So how did you get home? Take the train all the way into the city, then NJT home?”

“No. I took a cab.”

“That must’ve been expensive.”

“Not bad.”

I get out of bed. Plod into the kitchen. Fill a glass with tap water and return to sleep without drinking any.

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burke

Primates

Anji Reyner

That damn frown is my daughter's favorite expression. She wears it all the time in preparation for her starring role in a community theater production. Perhaps Wanda is not exactly the star, more like floral backdrop. Tonight I'm supposed to get her to the venue at least an hour before the show starts. I don't have anything else to do on Monday nights.

I open the front door while Wanda adjusts her costume, smoothing stretched-out green tights. "You're going to be late," I tell her. I head out to the car while she watches the back of my shoes, counting the number of times the heels light up as they meet the pavement. When she reaches thirteen, my shoes and I disappear into the car.

We drive under thin cloud cover. I stare into the distance, thinking of myself as a tree and my daughter as a mushroom smothering my roots. On the other hand, my daughter believes herself to be the plot of wild grass separating the groves. In other words, we're both looking forward to her being able to drive.

Approaching the theater, we pass a stranger working out in the park. His strangeness isn't related to his body, it's the way he puts that body to use. He moves his butt to one side, butt to the other side, then a barely detectable knee bend, followed by arm stretches.

On stage a dandelion cowers under a bush. That's Wanda up there, with a yellow crêpe-paper moon engulfing her face. She bends her knees and leans forward like a constipated gardener. Now she is crouching beside an erratically stuffed black plastic garbage bag. I don't remember this scene from the film version starring Margaret Hamilton. I do forget a lot, but never something like that.

On Tuesday, while Wanda is in school, I craft walnut cutting boards in the basement. Through a small window at ground level, I can see the foundation plantings. Most have gone dormant for the season.

Our neighborhood attaches to the main road like the letter C. The house Wanda and I live in is in the middle of the curve. It's possible to come in the neighborhood one way and go out the other. If I drive north away from my house, I usually drive north toward my house on the way home. If I start out going south, I come home going south. In a typical day I don't exit and enter at the same junction, but I do change directions. In this way I can keep an eye on what's shifting around.

The people next door [stage left] invite us over for dinner from time to time. According to the man, their son is Hell on Wheels. They spend the entire meal talking about him. They say Hell on Wheels is an acceleration of evil: an evil traveling downhill, propelled by gravity. Hell operates on its own power, never bothering with a car. Hell used to ride a bike, but now he prefers those tennis shoes with embedded wheels. In any case, Hell chases you down instead of waiting for you to come to it. Hell currently lives in Omaha.

John Buckle also lives next door to us [stage right]. John doesn't live alone, he has Carl. I didn't meet Carl for the first time until about a month after Wanda and I moved in. I was watering the foliage near the back patio when I first saw him. I had set the hose aside and was bending down to tear away brown leaves at the base of the plant. I should have done that before I watered, because my hands got muddy. It was then, as I was staring at my hands, that I heard a little hoot coming from beyond the fence. I peered through a gap in the cedar planks; there sat Carl, a sizable chimpanzee, on a small chair next to a wrought-iron table. He was drinking from a plastic cup.

Carl used to be famous. Now he's officially retired because these days he's too big to stand on top of lions. I work sporadically. So sometimes when Wanda's not home I take Carl shopping. He walks through the mall on all fours but nobody around here makes a big deal about it.

Carl likes fast food, so on Friday we get in my car and go to the drive-thru. I order several different things for Carl to choose from. I assume Carl will pick a burger, but he has the chicken sandwich instead. And a little of the paper wrapper.

Instead of going directly back to my house, I drive through the neighborhood from south to north, around the C. Then I drive south on the main road. In this way, I form a reverse *D*. Carl taps his fist on the dashboard to Lite FM.

My phone rings and I answer. A voice informs me that an underage drinking party has been detected. It has always been my job to release the machines when this happens. I immediately make a U-turn and drive back to my house. After walking Carl home, I open the garage and get into the agency vehicle.

An hour later, I park in a campground lot. Without slamming any doors, I gather my poles and stirrups and hide behind the rock that hosts belly-flop competitions on the weekends. My thumbs work the controls as stones scrape one another under my feet. No matter the noise I make, teen laughter hinders their ability to heed warnings.

The last time I was called out on a job there was a family camped near the group of kids I was directed to expunge. Not wishing to involve bystanders, I waited until I could no longer tolerate the shrieks and assorted smoke. Unfortunately, the family disturbed the gravel mounds as they peeled out of the lot in their station wagon. I guess that couldn't be avoided. I recorded their license plate so the agency could send them a voucher.

At the end of my missions — that's what Wanda calls them — a crew arrives to clean up the mess. I tend to think their part in all of this is less satisfying than mine because collecting stray bits is tedious.

I finish my work and drive home. It's snowing for the first time of the season. I relax in the bathtub while Wanda watches TV. I look at the ceramic tiles on the bathroom wall. The patterns in the

blotches reveal wolves, volcanoes, and stationary bikes. While I'm sitting on the toilet the power goes out.

It's still snowing when I go to bed. I'm under the down comforter, listening. When I hear heavy footsteps on the deck outside my bedroom I stop breathing. Chunks drop from the trees with a thud, and then slide down the metal roof with a groan. The sound and feel is unfamiliar, but I can still identify it: many gorillas jump on the roof and sigh.

A Cleaner Today, a Brighter Tomorrow

Hobie Anthony

This girl's gotta get ahead in the world. I could do porn, but I never liked the makeup those girls wear. I could be a model. There are plenty of photographers who would love to take my photo. I really want to own a club like where I work, but I don't see how that'll ever happen. Dancers rely on cash, we can't get a bank to credit us for a whole club. My roommate comes barging through the front door like an asshole. I wanted peace and quiet.

I put on my headphones so he can't hear me. So he won't talk. If I don't respond, he can't hear me. So I won't hear him and he won't bother me. I have to wear large headphones so he will see that he is not in my head. I keep my back to him. He can't look. He's always looking. I am a pretty girl. My skin is perfect. I blink five times but he is still here.

I'm stuck with him. Houses don't sell when half the nation is unemployed. I can't afford the place without a housemate. He seemed nice when he moved in. He could pay the rent. He didn't mind when I told him what I do for a living. His eyes are green and his shoulders are thick slabs of meat. He didn't make a comment. His body is lean and veins pop from his arms, pulsing with blood. He tells me my outfits are nice. He stays in his room.

When he traveled to fuck some girl, I hoped he wouldn't come back. Every day he was gone, the radio had a story about a tornado near him. It was just a girl and her dog here alone in the house. I sharpened every knife, twice. I hardly used any extra electricity. I hoped he'd be caught up in a tornado. His body torn limb from limb and scattered all over Oz, or whatever dreamland he comes from. He lives in outer space. He forgets to do his dishes. His face is stubbled and manly. He forgets to put his food back when he's done with it. His witch lives in Oz and he masturbates to a fantasy of her.

I walk my dog. My pit bull pulls me. Bull-Pull. Bully keeps me safe because he is ferocious. His name is Mars, not Bull or Bully or any other thing. Mars. I don't know why I got him. He was a cute puppy and I was lonely. Men are unreliable, dogs are forever. I saw that on television once and it's true.

Here he comes again. Calling planet Pluto! He always finds a reason to come down the stairs. I don't think he eats when I'm not here. He clomps like an ape. He wears hats indoors. He's not very smart. He wants food and it takes forever for him to cook it. He doesn't do anything, why does he eat so much? Dishes clatter in his fingers. I sit at my computer and wait. I've told him how to

cook faster. He never listens. He is a misogynist. I am wearing a hooded sweatshirt today to cover my face. He tries to peek.



My job requires that men look. They pay a lot to see my holes. Dollar bills fill my garter. I keep my pussy shaved and my tits firm. Men are easy. When I rub against them, they come in their pants and give me money. It's an easy job but the girls keep telling me I'm too old. That's nonsense, but my knees get sore if I work too many shifts in a week. I used to work six nights a week when I was in college. My shifts are in the afternoons. Old men and half-blind drunks have dollars for me. I get some weekend shifts, and clubs all over town call me to fill a spot for a skinny, beautiful blonde. My ass is tight, my tits are rock-hard. Who cares if I'm thirty-five?

At work, I'm Dezi or Desiree. The young girls all want my name, they say so. They don't know it's a French name. It sounds cool to them. They can't use it in any of the clubs I've worked at in Portland. That's a lot of places. Those places all respect me and the work I do for them. The girls shake their cute little hips and their tongues flutter, trying to talk me out of my name. I'm a legend in this town. There isn't enough pussy in Portland to make me give up *Desiree*. No one knows my real name and sometimes I forget it myself. I got used to being called Dezi. I am surprised when my mother calls; she says, *bonjour Adrienne*. My father won't speak to me anymore. He is ashamed.

I need to figure out how to make more money. Even if I am hot, I will need a new source of revenue for the next ten years or so. I should run a club. My knees won't last long. I have a college

degree. I'm smart. Most club owners are just lucky perverts. I can design things. I can write and smile. Pantsuits look great on me. I tried an office job. That didn't work. I tried retail stores and regular restaurants. I'm best at dancing.



I haven't had a shift in five days. In the dressing room, I learn I have a new boss, a Ukrainian named Vlad. He bought the place with human-trafficking money. I know this because I saw him once before. I was doing a side job at a sleazy hotel and my client was late. Vlad was below me, in the parking lot. He had five young girls with him. He pushed them into a van. He had video equipment. A gun was in his waistband. It looked like a Saturday night special, the kind of cheap piece of shit you see on punks.

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anthony

Vlad is fat. He drinks coffee. His teeth are brown. He has a pimple on his bulbous drunkard's nose. He pulls me into his office. His face is pocked and his head is balding in patches. He is a dog with mange. Vlad says, you need to do more pole tricks. He wants me to bend over and show my asshole more. He knows I'm getting older, but I'm reliable and he can't fire me. He wants to wear me out and make me leave. I'll show that fat immigrant. He says my pussy is worn out. I say, I am hot. I hold my tight titties and press them together. He tells me they are like a cow's udder. I slap my hard ass and he says it is like a deflated child's balloon with stretch marks. I tell him I can pull down \$300 on a Monday afternoon. I tell you what, I am nice guy; I do you a favor. For now. He tells me to bend over the desk. I say I'll never get wet for him. Not pussy, he says, ass. You are disease, I wear rubber.

He stands on a phone book to penetrate me. This is what they're for, now that the internet is on cellphones. His penis is large. I didn't expect that. It takes a while for him to get it in, even with a lot of lube. I have a hard time relaxing my muscles. I say, slow the fuck down, fuckface-motherfucker. He says something in his native language. It takes a few minutes. My asshole opens and he's in me. He slams inside and my stomach feels knotted. I'm bent over a gorgeous rosewood desk, a real antique, an art-deco from the 1930s. His dick is so big it makes me wet. I want to kill this cocksucker. I stare into a knot in the grain, the only imperfection. The desk makes me like the large cock. Hard, hot piston-action in my rectum.

One, two, three, four, five.

Oh, god, give it to me.

One, two, three, four, five.

Fuck me harder, you fucking Russian.

One, two, three, four, five.

I feel a rush of juice and I scream.

I despise my vagina for betraying me. All I care about is the clean, strong desk, its fine grain; it's a boxy and sturdy piece of furniture that doesn't budge. I start to dry out. The finish is smooth and glossy. It cools my cheek and my breath condenses. He squirts more lube, it sounds like a wet shit. I like this desk, I say, one day I'll fuck someone worth a damn right here. He says I wish to be fucking girl worth a dog's balls but all I have is you, Dezi. I tell him I'm going to own this place one day. If could shit on his dick, I would, but I got nothing. I focus on the knot in the wood, the size of a pea, it gets larger the closer I move my eye to it. It's the one weakness in these strong lines, this brilliant design. His body

shakes and consonants spew in his gutter language. He pulls out and I fart. I'll shit lube for a few days.

I work and make money. Vlad watches. The cocktail waitress keeps his coffee mug full. He sends someone to buy a dance in the private room. He thinks I don't know. I make the guy bust a nut bigger than he's ever done before. I'm a professional. I bend over at the waist to show a big tipper my stuff and see Vlad talking to some strange guys. Pale men in dark suits. I'm fascinated. Vlad seems afraid of them and I want what they have. I want the power to inspire that sort of fear in a fuckface Russian. They seem to walk, but I'm not sure I see their legs move. I hear murmurs of speech, but I'm not sure I see their mouths move. In the dressing room the girls say they don't like those men. These girls are all dumb hicks.

On the drive home, the sky is a hideous pink. Stupid fluffy clouds float around. I have a wad of cash. Maybe I should start a business. I could set up something in the basement and pay girls to dance online, hardcore streaming shows. I'm a smart, independent woman. I am a beautiful woman. I will find the answer, but I want that fucking club.

Mars barks when I open the door. I feed him. His jaws are powerful enough to pull a train. They could pulverize bone. I let him outside to crap. I hear clomping on the stairs. I feel queasy. The jerk comes in to cook. I give him my prize-winning smile. My teeth are perfect. I say hello. I say my day was good. He says something about his boring life. I turn away. I put on my headphones and the hooded sweatshirt. There is sun coming through the window. I put on sunglasses. He cooks garlicky food. The stench permeates the house. I avoid his gaze. I point to the headphones. He smiles like a jackass. He's wearing pants that bulge. I fix a cucum-

ber sandwich, the vegetable heavy in my hand as I slice it. I take it to my room. I sit on my bed. I'll have crumbs in my bed. I hug my knees and hold my breath. I count to see how long I can go before I pass out. He talks to the dog with a throaty, deep voice. He must be a mental defective. I increase my breath-holding by a few seconds. He clomps upstairs. I exhale. T-shirts and tight pants fill my thoughts. The sweet, sweaty funk when he comes in from a bike ride. I'm wet. I rub my pussy. He can't know what I'm doing. I thrust my fingers inside. He can never know. He wants to know about this. He'd love to watch, he strokes it thinking about only me. I close my eyes and see his face.

I come in a rush of juiciness.

I wash my hands five times to forget.



I need to do something. I need to do something now. I clean. The dog shredded the stuffed monkey I bought. I sweep the stuffing. I mop the kitchen and polish the hardwood in the living room. I wipe my computer monitor screen. I find five books to get rid of. I find three shirts and two pair of shorts I can part with. Five and five in a box at the street. Five keeps me alive. Mother will be proud that I'm purging the clutter. I'll do the garage later.

I want the nightclub. I can run it. The fatass Vlad has no business there. I know this town and how things work. He does not know shit. I must have that club. I must or I will die. This idea repeats. It repeats and becomes a hard knot in my chest. It will not go away until I have what I want.



Vlad calls and wakes me up. He wants me to work. He wants to work me to death. Shower. Makeup. The bathroom is covered in grime. G-string and blue jeans. I feel shame for my life. Wash my hands five times. Sweatshirt and sunglasses. I make coffee for my thermos. I must have the club. I feed the dog. My hands are dirty. I wash them until they are clean. Upstairs is silent. Good.



It's a sunny Saturday. Portlanders don't stay inside on nice days, not even to look at my hot snatch. A few nobodies sit at the bar. I dance in open space. With no tips, I don't show my tits. I sway, hypnotizing myself. I have too many things. I should get rid of it all. It means too much. Special books, the panties I wore when my cousin François touched me the first time. I had little tits and fuzz on my pussy. François smelled funny. He was scared when I grabbed his small, pink dick. I have tests from college. I need to study them. People will steal my ideas if I throw the old notebooks away.

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anthony

Dezi. Hey, Dezi. I see Vlad down on the floor. A thin man with pale skin and dark eyes is at his side. Empty tables stretch to the far wall. Neon fades in the sun. Vlad says something about being sexier. I stare at the man. Something is in my head, a tone. It's like when I learned to tune a guitar in music class. The new sound matches the one in my head. The two become one. Vlad's friend is staring at me. We lock eyes. I start to salivate. I feel warm. I don't understand. This is not normal. I can't stop it. I don't want

to stop it. Vlad is talking. I don't listen. The man wants to know my desire. I say I want the club. He says I can have it. He says I have to kill Vlad. I say okay. He says a key to the club will be in my car after work. I should kill him soon. Soon is best. Tonight, I say.

Vlad is yelling at me to dance. I'm barely moving. I look at the man. He has no expression. He whispers something to Vlad, hiding his mouth, a confidence. I hear it, he tells Vlad it's time to get more girls and drugs. I know what's going on more than Vlad. He looks pitiful now. A customer puts a five dollar bill in my garter. Five to stay alive. I show him my asshole. I open my pussy and show him that. My knees are aching, but I give him a show like I haven't done since I started. I finger myself. I make him smell it. I suck the finger. He is my last customer. He takes out another five and I let him put it between my ass cheeks. I pull it out from the front. I give him a coy-kitten routine and lick the bill, a third makes fifteen. He's the last man to pay for my skin.

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anthony



I drive around. My minivan makes me look motherly. I stop at a pawnshop. I purchase a foot-long, razor-sharp knife with a bone handle. I buy a sharpening stone for appearances. It's for my husband, I tell the clerk. He likes knives, I say, he'll like it sharp. The clerk puts it in a box. My husband will like that, I say. I flash my million-dollar, award-winning smile. He takes my cash, three fives and the smell of sex parts. He gives me a look. I put my sunglasses on so he won't remember my eyes. I kill time.



The club's lights go out. The last drunk leaves. Girls meet their johns or dealers or jealous boyfriends. I open the box. The blade cuts the cardboard. There is a little rain. Puddles litter the alley. The backdoor light comes on with a motion sensor. The key works. The club is lit with neon signs. Vlad is in his office. Sweat pours from my armpits. I open the door. I hide the knife behind my leg.

Where you been, he says. You leave in middle of your shift, you stupid bitch. You think you have job now? How you get in here?

The pale man is there, sitting across from Vlad. His suit looks fresh at three in the morning. I hear him in my head. No words, but his sound sings with my sound. I know what to do. I say, I'll do whatever you want if you give me my job back. I walk around the side of his desk. I sway and he opens his legs for a lap dance. His arms are resting on the chair. I know he's got a gun. I lift my leg and rub his crotch with my foot. He gets hard. I see his eyes go soft. I say, you like that? He murmurs and runs his hand up my thigh, leaning in to reach my dry, cold cunt. His jugular is in my face. I can smell it. The buzz in my mind becomes an aria. He finds my panties. He closes his eyes. I swing the knife and slice his neck to the spine. His eyes pop open. Blood geysers from the artery. He tries to speak, but blood gurgles in his throat and pours down to his lungs. I swing the blade backhand. Vlad's head falls to his shoulder, held by a flap of flesh and spine. The song is so beautiful, cellos chime in, dulcet tones resonate in my pelvis and I'm wet. Vlad's blood streams down my face.

The man is behind me. He tells me to stay still; I close my eyes. My nipples stiffen. I feel a writhing muscle on my thigh. Another

wraps my waist like a constricting snake. A voice rings through my mind, my voice. I am one of them; I am theirs; they are mine. I think of tentacles. I feel one in my front hole. Another enters my back hole. They move deep in me. They pulse and slide in and out, first one then the other. There's a hissing rattle sort of noise. My eyes clench shut. The sound sneaks up my spine and into my head. Both tentacles go deep into me at once and throb in an alternating pattern. I see a bright light behind my eyelids. It is warm. I forget the blood and everything. I start to come. It starts with the light in my mind then moves through my body. I am radiant. I am perfect. I tell the light that I love it. It tells me that I am part of it, I will serve it and it will help me. I come until I collapse in a puddle of blood on my favorite desk. My eyes can't focus. I drool into the blood.

The man helps me cocoon Vlad in plastic wrap. We put him in the back of my minivan. I cover him with trash I carry in the back. The man tells me he will clean the office but I must get rid of the body myself. I shower in the dressing room. Hot water cleans my hair, pink rivulets swirl in the drain. The club is mine, mine, mine.



Blood is caked under my fingernails. The hacksaw is in the garage. I have a plastic bin full of clothes. I force myself to empty it into a garbage bag. Vlad lost most of his blood while I was passed out from coming. Less mess. I hack off his head. I spit in his eye and drop the head like a rotted melon. I separate the limbs at the joints and cut meat from bone. The torso is a problem. I don't have a tool for that. I stab it with my knife. I'm not a good butcher. I

go into the house and get Mars, who hasn't been fed since yesterday. He likes the fat and meat. He doesn't care if my butcher job is half-assed. He's starved and his chewing noises fill the room. Mars loves me so much. He loves me more now that he's got so much fresh meat. I push the torso in his face and his powerful jaws rend skin and muscle from bone in a wet tear. I sit in the backseat while he eats. I am exhausted. I lie down. I fall asleep to the rhythm of his jaws.

The jerk is in the garage. He is yelling and flailing his stupid arms. Mars is barking. The jerk is angry. His anger upsets me. He's wearing his stupid bike helmet. He says, what the fuck did you do? What the fuck is this? I've made a bad mess. I'm a bad roommate. I got blood all over his bike. My teeth go on edge. I look at him and flash my million-dollar smile. I've done the world a favor, I explain. He does not smile back. He does not ask how my day was. He turns to exit.

The knife slides between his shoulders as through soft butter. There's a slight pop when it pierces a lung. I pull the knife from his back. I grab his hair and pull his head back. The knife slices his neck to the bone. I'm stronger than I think. Maybe it's the adrenaline. It feels good. He twitches. Blood pours all over the floor. Another mess.

I kneel down. I look at his eyes. They are hazel and perfect. I've never looked into his eyes. I smell under his arms. He smells of soap and his man smell, sweet and musky. My heart goes hollow. I close his eyes. My vision blurs with water. Why did you have to do this, you asshole? Why did you never make a pass at me? You could have had this body, this beauty, a piece of ass beyond any you've ever known. That would have changed everything. I cradle

his head. I cry. His hair is soft; his face angelic as in sleep. My heart hardens and feels like a brick of coal. Tears fall from my eyes into his eyes. Mars' face is in mine, he feels my pain, he wants to protect me. He licks my face. He isn't afraid to whimper and press his body into mine. But he can't protect me from myself. I wipe my eyes and sop the dead man's blood.

I lick his lips. He tastes metallic. Mars raises his ears; he'll be hungry again soon.

New World Order

Bruce Holland Rogers

I meant to win the heart of Oola Pax, she of the violet eyes and the swaying hips. When Oola and her friends were out walking in the garden, I did a back flip from a standing start. I thought, *How do you like me now, Oola?* She pretended not to have seen. For the benefit of her friends, she pointed to the russet hills in the distance. Weren't they lovely? I asked if I could be of service. I lifted the shortest friend of Oola Pax over my head so she could have an unimpeded view. Oola's friend laughed, but Oola allowed herself only a faint smile.

Perhaps feats of strength were not the thing by which such a woman would be impressed. I put down Oola's friend and began to recite the value of pi to many decimal places. When I got to

33832, Oola put her hand over her heart. She looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. She said, "My goodness!"

I returned her smile. I was doing well. Now for some really good cosmology, to show her the power of my thoughts. I reimagined various universal constants. I made water a gas at one hundred degrees centigrade. I shifted the mass of the electron. I caused stars to implode and other matter to fly apart. In short, I unmade the universe, then put it all together again. *How do you like me now?*

But I must have left something out of the universe, some little cosmological spring or gear, for the universe reassembled was not the perfection it had been before. In this reconstructed order, the garden was a wheat field and I stood there all alone.

The sky is blue, and the stars are visible only at night. Animals live by tearing the flesh of other animals. But these are not the worst things. In this new order there are many holy books rather than the one. These holy books are full of murder, not math and sober explanations. One scripture disagrees with another. Human beings are aggressive, cranky, and likely to kill. I'd put everything back if I could, but my mind is fogged and my memory fails a little more each day.

I made an honest mistake. Call it a crime if you wish, but leave me alone. In this broken creation, Oola Pax is named Amy Ventura. She doesn't even know I'm alive, and I'm all out of tricks.

Bicycles

Joshua Willey

My brother and I slept in a grass hut on stilts twenty meters from a place the locals called Sunset Point, where a big tree had fallen out onto the reef and in the gloaming young Israelis just out of the army and sleepy-eyed Japanese and the occasional worldly Swede would sit on the tree and smoke hash or heroine from Rajasthan. The island's main road terminated amidst a thicket of banana trees and palm fronds by the beach nearby and Bengali tourists or families from Mumbai would step out of Jeeps to walk in their suits and saris along the sand. The reef was meant to be one of the best in the Andamans for diving, and every night we heard stories of manta ray sightings, sea cows and flying fish.

After pedaling through jungle for five minutes we hit pavement. There wasn't much traffic. Sometimes a motorcycle with an

entire family piled on, or an auto rickshaw with a lone fat businessman sweating inside. The school marked the outskirts of the village, the only one on the island. My brother rode ahead a little. We'd been some months in the tropics and had achieved the cadence of life that climate promotes amongst the fortunate. He wore only short soccer shorts and flip-flops, his skin freckled dark and rubbed smooth by sand and salt.

The village center consisted of a little market, a machine shop, a restaurant, the police station, the hospital, a barber. To the left was the jetty where most every day you could catch a ferry to Havlock Island or Port Blair. At the other end of town was a diesel power plant, its generators humming. A herd of goats slept on the blacktop and my brother rang his bicycle bell at them but they didn't move so we went around. Some kids played cricket. Sometimes bigger animals crossed the road, itinerant sacred cows or working water buffalo. The locals also used the asphalt's hard flat radiant surface to sort and dry the grain they harvested, and we often had to swerve around their crop.

It took an hour to reach the other end of the road at a beach on the opposite side of the island. This beach, being much further from the jetty, was even more abandoned. Only a guy with a machete selling coconuts was there and he was asleep. My brother said it felt like *Lost* and I agreed, though I'd never seen the show. We went in the water, floating on our backs once we'd gotten past the breakers, and then, back on shore, drank water from the plastic bottle I'd been carrying in my pack.

After cycling back to town we turned up the island's only other paved road to see a natural bridge, one of the island's chief tourist attractions. We stashed our bikes in the trees and walked

fifty meters through the jungle and out onto another beach. Kids were collecting shellfish from the tide pools, but they were far away and we couldn't even hear them although we could see they were speaking. The natural bridge loomed far overhead. "We're very far away now," my brother said, his eyes half closed as if it was all a dream.



My friend Seymour and I started out at my father's house on the north slope of Twin Peaks and rode down through the Haight. Some bums were playing ukuleles. He said I looked like a hipster because I had a vintage road bike and big glasses and wore my pants rolled up and no socks. I said he looked like a tourist because he rode a cruiser like all the tourists who rent bikes to ride across the Golden Gate Bridge. It was a sunny Sunday afternoon. We passed a block party around Fillmore. I ran every stop sign I could but Seymour made a show of following traffic laws, slowing down at intersections and throwing out primitive hand signals.

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willey

We hit Market and suddenly were riding with a couple of guys on fixed-gears who had to skid their tires sometimes ten feet to stop. Traffic was thick, cars, cabs, buses, trolleys, pedestrians. Wind whipped up the urban canyon from the bay. Seymour's fork was a little loose but it didn't matter. We were weaving between trucks and always getting to the front of the line at red lights and even riding up on the sidewalk a few times. It was like a video game.

There was a street fair along the Embarcadero and we turned towards Fisherman's Wharf. So many beautiful people were jog-

ging along the bay it was almost impossible to stay upright. Most people don't seem to have any idea how beautiful they are, which makes them all the more beautiful for their modesty. The wharf was swamped with tourists. We took pictures beside an old battleship and saw the guy who hides behind the fake bush and scares passersby beneath Ghirardelli Square. Kids swam at the marina; Fort Mason was packed with BBQs and Frisbees.

A wedding was underway at the Palace of Fine Arts. We stopped for water. A strong headwind slowed our journey beneath the Golden Gate Bridge. A few sailboats bobbed around on the Sausalito side and a big Hanjin barge was outbound, Oakland to the open ocean. Our big push was up the hill through the Presidio. By the time we got to the Emanu-El temple in the Richmond it was dark. We cruised down Arguello, across Clement, Geary, and Balboa, past the Indian Consulate and Rossi Pool, and into Golden Gate Park at Fulton. There were bums and sun-dazed weekenders still dozing on the grass, not realizing time was passing.

Finally we stopped amidst the pollarded trees at the musical concourse. A few Chinese were doing tai qi in the dark. After a rest we rode past Kezar, where the 49ers had once played, back to my father's place, a treehouse of sorts with a big view of Saint Ignatius. We watched the new *Lost* episode. Seymour told me that night he was getting divorced and didn't know just what he was living for anymore. He left before dawn the next morning. That was the last time I saw him.

I got up at five in the morning and had a cup of pu'er and walked down the concrete stairs to where my bike was locked up. I'd bought it cheap from a black (stolen) market, so I was always waiting for karma to kick in and someone to steal it from me (which someone eventually did). I rode out of my apartment complex, Tian Fu Hua Yuan, and into the streets of Yulin, one of central Chengdu's wealthier neighborhoods, which always appeared a little uncanny when empty at that early hour, considering the unbelievable traffic which choked it all day. I stopped to buy a bag of baozi from a shop with the steamers stacked high in front. I was a regular and didn't even need to order. By the time I reached the ring road the rush was on, and I crossed the twelve lanes at the light in the company of some fifty other cyclists and pedestrians.

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willey

It was the end of the term and an easy day for me. I had let the students pick something in English to watch and later be tested on. They'd picked *Lost*. Go figure. I rode right into the guarded cycle barn, free for staff, and collected a token from the clerk, who was smoking and reading the paper. He was not from Sichuan, and didn't speak with the region's lispy exotic accent, so I could converse with him OK. He would still be there at lunch when I rode to eat Korean food with my advanced lit class, and when I stumbled in to collect my ride in the dark, after the long day. Then I'd smoke one with him.

Yulin was quiet at night as well, though not like the morning. I stopped at a noodle shop. They knew me there too and always added extra chilies to my bowl. The two streets which intersected in front of my place were known to foreigners as Flower Street and Hooker Street, and the reasons were self-evident, even at the midnight hour. I rode, my cardboard carton of noodles dangling in

a bag from one handlebar, into the subterranean bike garage beneath my building, and locked it again. Then I walked the eight stories up to my apartment and collapsed on the couch, slurping my noodles and watching Billy Wilder movies with my roommates, who ran the city's only climbing gym. From our window we could see a great swath of Chengdu. No matter how cold it got, those lights always exuded some strange warmth we learned to live on. In the spring I left, and haven't been back.



We rode downstream, Jess and I. She wore striped socks pulled up to her knees and high-top sneakers and UCLA track shorts and a bright pink Bon Jovi T-shirt without sleeves and a red white and blue headband and BluBlockers. We passed an old logjam, the air thick with ponderosa pine pollen. A marmot cackled at us from across the way. We pedaled past Benham Falls, where the ashes of my mother and my dog were scattered, and down towards the flatter waters around Lava Island.

It was a wonderland for raptors. Cooper's, red-tailed, and sharp-shinned hawks all hunted the waters, as well as falcons and eagles. We stopped at Slough Camp and smoked a joint. Jess had that sad yet compelling faraway look that was her trademark. She was kind of a lipstick lesbian. I'd been in love with her since high school. She tried me on for size once but that was it. In me she only saw a friend, a shoulder to cry on, a confidant. We'd touch, but she never returned those sparks I reserved within myself just for her. Maybe it was a little tragic, a little trite. Anyway, that's how it was with us.

Kayakers passed on the river. The pot made us warm and energetic. We went faster now, the wind whipping our hair horizontal. At Meadow Camp we stopped for a swim, feeling the layers of dust washed from our skin. We lay on the grass in the sun. There were houses, mansions, across the river. The bluffs above us were popular among rock climbers. There was a long challenging traverse, innumerable bouldering problems, some nice cracks and chimneys. "You know there's still snow in the Ochocos?" she said.

Jess disappeared later that year. Some said she had gone to Guam to work as a stripper for the us soldiers stationed there. Some said she had gone to tend her dying mother somewhere in Saskatchewan. I go take that river ride sometimes and it always ends in tears. Why do I keep doing it then? It's like that Don Henley song: "Those days are gone forever, I should just let them go but ..." That's a big but. Some people have the one they love, and some have the love itself. Far be it from me to say which is greater.



Twink and I got off the bus and there was this cat in a Tiger Woods shirt offering us a cheap room to rent so we went with him. I was still rubbing my eyes from the long trip over from Marrakesh. Turned out he rented bicycles too, and in the morning, after a special tagine of thirty-nine spices, he gave us the bikes and a map and we took off toward a village some fifty kilometers away, through a deep arid canyon rumored to contain magical light.

Dwellings were built right into the cliffs. The light ricocheted around on the rocks. Twink was happy, riding with no hands and

impressing the locals with her textbook Arabic. At the far end of the canyon we met up with Tiger Woods's buddy, who ran a little guest house and was going to put us up for the night. There were some Spaniards there smoking hash. They'd been a few weeks in the desert and their hair had been bleached by the sun. They described driving at night in the dunes, where you could barely even keep with the road. The stone walls of the room radiated heat long after the sun had gone down, and we sat up late, the air thick with smoke, drinking mint tea much too sweet and talking about the smell of the air, us foreign policy, and the Internet. It was past midnight when we went to bed.

We slept in a big room with a dusty stone floor and no glass in the windows. I woke in the middle of the night and looked out at the yard. A few sleeping goats, the bicycles leaning against a shed, the Spaniards' Jeep. By the time I got back to sleep it was getting light.

When I woke, Twink was gone. I questioned the proprietor of the guest house. Between us we could speak a little broken Spanish, and he explained she'd left in the Jeep. He said I could leave her bike with him, eventually a tourist would come along and want to ride it the other way. So I rode alone back to Tiger's place. He'd spoken with his friend on the phone. He must have felt bad for me because he didn't charge me for the bikes, and even gave me a free bed. The next day I went back to the bus station. I still hadn't decided whether to head north, back towards Tangier and Europe, or the opposite way, towards Mauritania and the desert, deeper into Africa. The ticket counter cleared and I stepped up, smiled, and asked the clerk if she spoke any English.

The Party After the Party

Craig Foltz

Did I forget to mention the graphic designers? And how they bobbed their heads up and down up and down up and down in unison on the subway trains rattling underneath the city? This is what they listened to. These are the sounds they heard.

Gonjasufi. Mädchen Mit Hase. Girl with rabbit and flower. Little and Friday. Uomo. At each stop on the subway, a gust of hot air rushes in with a cluster of teenage girls wrapped up in Ecko and Tommy Hilfinger.

The teenage girls head towards Union Square. They head towards Battery Park before getting lost in the DVD section in Tower Records and disappearing forever.

The graphic designers look wistfully at the girls disembarking. There is music coursing through their headphones. The music comes from Germany and Belgium. It comes from Algeria and

Bristol. The discs were pressed in Canada, not too far from the blue-bottled beer distillery. They notice the scent of residual yeast when they puncture the transparent plastic wrapping. For the LP versions, a sticker on the packaging gives the weight of the vinyl in grams. Cover artwork is sparse, with repeating formalized patterns. Sometimes the artwork looks like one thing while intimating something else altogether. One of the designers, Dawn, wears a tee-shirt that says *I'm Not Dead Yet*.

Another one, Matt, the one with flat, slate-gray hair, listens to the clatter of the tracks beneath the train and wonders *Which is more interesting, the sound or the source of the sound?*

When nobody is looking he takes out his black permanent-ink pen and writes *I don't want to die in this city of lights* on the back of the seat in front of him.

Dawn presses her Freitag bag against the glass.

The army of designers take the train to the party. When they get bored with that, they take the train from the party to the party after the party. They gather like locusts in the corner of a Chinatown loft looking out over the city.

Locusts, is that the word for it?

Down below, the smell of pizza and taxi exhaust. Up above them, satellites march triumphantly across the sky.

Water towers dangle in the breeze, if you can be bothered to see them.

The graphic designers are into gaming culture. They enjoy blasting away at each other in a closed but shared environment. They are into protocols and utility applications.

If you ask them, they might tell you that they are dwelling rather than living.

They have miniature maps of distant Japanese towns stenciled on the insides of their wallets.

Osaka. Kyoto. Sapporo. Tokyo. Yokohama.

Like the rest of us, they believe in the power of wheatgrass and organic produce.

As for the rest of the people in the room, who are they? One thing is certain: they've come here to dance. But not the designers. They've come here to learn more about the impulses that the city redirects back at them.

For instance, the trashcan quietly smoldering away in dull orange flames on the street below.

The flickering yellow light in the corner of the room.

Did I forget to mention that the graphic designers speak in code?

Dawn leans in towards Matt and says, "Are you still the angry young artist I knew in college?"

Matt: "Let's not be ridiculous. I've gotten fat, bald, and happy."

Within their speech, the cryptic directions to the next underground party. Matt slides his headphones down and lets them rest there, suggestively, around his curved neck.

Dawn looks around the room. "Aren't you thirsty?"

They speak over the rims of shot glasses. The party twirls and keens around them.

"I could drink forever and ever."

Dawn taps her fingers on the windowsill and looks outside, over the skyline. "So this is what it's like to be alone."

Hundreds of other gatherings, just like this one, must be happening without them.

The loft undulates with a wave of new arrivals.

A designer in the corner stubs his cigarette out in the heavy glass object on top of the water cooler. A couple of others hover near the window. The host, wearing a shirt with the words *Sin-Eater*, floats near the entrance to the bathroom.

Back at the window, Dawn dangles her bare ankles precariously over the ledge. “Don’t I seem incredibly intriguing to you?”

Matt slips the headphones back over his head. “You seem kind of out of it, if that is what you mean.”

He slips his fingers underneath her belt loop and pulls her closer.

And what about what they meant? When they speak of thirst, they mean hunger. By hunger, they mean sexual appetite. By sexual appetite, they mean a desire to consume the other. By the other they mean the thing that has been signified.

And what about what’s been signified? According to some, that’s been lost in translation.

In the corner, the DJ working over a laptop with gloved fingers. A series of looping beats and formalized sound layers. Now that I think of it the words *garage door* don’t have anything to do with anything.

Dawn sighs. “It’s a little sad that we have to grow old.”

Matt nods and bobs his head to a slightly different tune.

The graphic designers sniff at the air before walking into a room. They check the temperature of the water before diving into the pool. Their heads go first and then their feet follow.

Dawn speaks to no one in particular, but she speaks for everyone. “Why are we always talking about the present moment as if it’s something we’ve already experienced?”

In her bag, anthologies on obscure architecture movements. Matt is never sure. “Who said anything about the present moment?”

He traces the bubbles circling Dawn’s elbows.

It was true. The present moment had finally arrived.

Dawn points at the sun coming up over the tops of buildings. “See, there it is. What did I tell you?”

The light pours into the corner of the loft where the remaining designers huddle. As the sun comes up, they hold one last ringtone competition, but nobody wins. The drumbeats dart in between their sentences. A few of them congregate in the kitchen. The *Sin-Eater* shirt has become separated from the body of the woman who bought it. De-coupled. Un-hinged. Refrigerator magnets spill across the floor. A picture of a baby with blond hair. Last year’s Christmas cards. An image of Lake Tahoe. Three salt-and-pepper-shaker sets.

Someone reaches over and turns the laptop off. The water cooler is nearly empty. Matt and Dawn slip out the door of the apartment and into the hall. They rub their hands along the walls of the corridor. They rub their hands along the curved handrails in the stairwell. Quietly noting all the impenetrable, pleasing surfaces along the way.



San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, July 2012

Joanna Ruocco and Brian Conn, editors

Cover by Chemlawn

OFL Sorts Mill Goudy by Barry Schwartz

Thanks: Joe Potts, Dan Lipsitt, Nicole Trigg



