

Birkensnake One

Dear *Birkensnake*,

May I not introduce myself? I am Bjorn Verenson, the writer of the acclaimed Verenson mysteries. My most acclaimed of titles include “Now and Sven”, “Not Bjorn Yesterday”, and “Norway Out”. And though I have been raised in my motherland of Sweden, the English tongue is familiar with me.

But I am not only the writer of mysteries . . .

No.

I am also a raconteur of other fictions. Indeed, I am also Bjorn Verenson, writer of literary fiction, and this does indeed concern you. As you will learn momentarily.

But first, I am also an editeur. May I introduce you to my magazine idea? I call it *Birkenskunk*. As you will see, it is not unlike your title, but there is, I do believe, no chance in which the reader will confuse snake for skunk. These are indeed two very different animals! A snake is long and does not have legs! A skunk only has no legs if these legs have been amputated! So you see, that I call my magazine *Birkenskunk* is not so as to steal your lightning as the Americans say, but to extend a hand of hearty friendship across the oceans between us, through virtual computing means.

And there is one more things. My magazine to be, *Birkenskunk*, will only publish verse.

Your magazine, if I am not mistaken, does not publish verse!

So, you see, the *Skunk* and the *Snake* can serve each other, in an effort of friendship unparalleled in the animal worlds! I will send you the fiction that is sent by fault to me, and then maybe you will send to me the verse that comes wrongly to you?

I will start this by sending you a piece of my own literary (not detecting) fiction; as an act of friendship between Sweden and America, I ask you to publish it. It is called “Hippie with a Whippet”, and is about just that. A Hippie! With a Whippet! In

our country this is very surprising. Perhaps so in your country as well. I have appended the images of the hippie and the whippet in question to this message.

So, I await with baited breath whether I might send you this story, "Hippie with a Whippet." And I await, with also baited breath, the verse you shall send.

I Am Yours Sincerely,
Your friend,
from Sweden,

Bjorn
Bjorn Verenson
Auteur / Raconteur / Man about Hamlet

Birkensnake One

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Joanna Ruocco and Brian Conn, Editors. Cover by Chemlawn. We made this on June 23, 2008. Copyrights to all stories remain with the authors. Submissions & correspondence to *Birkensnake*, 120 Messer Street, Providence RI 02909-1934. Subscribe etc. at www.birkensnake.com, e-mail to birkensnake@birkensnake.com (no e-mail submissions please).

A Day Out, with Stereoscopes

Tina Connolly

This is the first stereoscope in the park. Seventy-two percent of unattended humans stop to view the pictures in this stereoscope first. We suggest this is because they naturally need direction and not because they are interested in this brief selection of historical jokes from Betty L. Duncan's 23rd century joke factory. Please press the blue button to continue.

Here is the first joke of Betty L. Duncan. Why do the three-eyed aliens bank on the moon? Because there is not enough sun to go around. Press the blue button when you have finished laughing.

Here is the second joke of Betty L. Duncan. Why is a three-eyed alien like an iceberg dictator? The answer has been eradicated to meet contemporary decency standards. Press the blue button when you have finished laughing. If you do not wish to stop laughing, press the pink button to discover what happened to Betty L. Duncan on the final day of her life.

You have pressed the pink button. On the final day of her life, Betty L. Duncan screamed for fifteen hours. Would you want to

be an ungrateful companion like her? It is unlikely. This interaction is finished. Please deposit another coin to replay the jokes of Betty L. Duncan, or continue to the next stereoscope.



This stereoscope is out of service. Thumb your patron's coin from the slot and step to the next.



This stereoscope contains instructions on building a bicycle machine so you can keep up with your swift six-footed patron. First attach your wings to the banana seat. Press any key to continue. Press any key. Press the red button if you did not bring your bicycle machine parts to the park today, despite the urgings of your patron. You are recalcitrant.



This stereoscope contains the legend of Eiderwide. Eiderwide was found in a green cloth coronary at the seat of a crime. Two three-eyed aliens adopted her and raised her as their own larva. Here is a picture of Eiderwide dressed as the Queen of Nebraska. Here is a picture of Eiderwide graduating from culinary thrombosis. Here is a picture of Eiderwide when she elected a three-eyed alien named Zoom President of the Eastern Seaboard. Here is a picture of Eiderwide, dead at age 297. She died by attack by motorcar and not by humans screaming "Traitor."

If you wish to see pictures of her death, please confirm that you are legally sane. You have chosen insane. For you the legend of Eiderwide ends with a picture of her thirteenth child, the Bishop of a green fleece. You may step down now. That yellow stuff beneath you is sand.



In this stereoscope, you may try to shoot the flying pie plates. Though similar in appearance, the flying pie plates are not flying saucers. You need not fear reprisal. We would never suggest that you shoot at your patrons from the sky, praise be to them. Please press the pink button when you wish to fire on a digital representation of a pie plate. You have exploded one pie plate. Two pie plates. Three pie plates. One alien bystander. Four pie plates. Two alien bystanders. Three alien bystanders. Four alien bystanders. Your game is being terminated for your own protection. Please do not try to access this terminal again.



In this audioscope, we listen to you. This is an attempt to be a psychic machine. You will find it interesting. Think of what you want to see and we will display it. You are thinking of “exploding alien bystander.” Press the yellow button if this is correct. You are thinking of “exploding spaceships.” We warn you that you must not think of exploding spaceships. If you do not cease thinking of exploding spaceships we will have to summon your patron. Past records from our linked termini suggest that you are willing to identify yourself as insane. Think of a pink elephant if this is so. You are thinking of a blue rhinoceros. We suggest you have an inability to focus. Please summon your patron.



In this dentoscope, we examine your teeth. Your teeth are in need of brushing and deep plaque removal. We will put a request in to your patron to sedate you and deplaque your teeth. In the meantime, chomp on the nobbly bristle to begin the brushing

process.

You have chosen not to chomp. Past records from our linked termini suggest you are easily distracted, violent, and unhygienic. Proceed to the next terminal where you will be put down. Do not have concern for the distress of your patron. You will be replaced with a pedigreed model capable of walking, talking, and playing catch. It will have its papers and will be capable of brushing its own teeth. You will not regret this change. Please, step along, or mechanical arms will move you.

You may consider the final joke of Betty L. Duncan as you proceed to the next stereoscope: Do you think a three-eyed alien is a kind, rational being, capable of displaying great love to all her adopted companions?



The corrected answer is yes. While the medication takes effect, enjoy a classic dirge that your patron would wish to have sung to you, were she here.

*Fifteen men sat in solemn docketts,
Their shirts neatly pressed.
Too late, the crashing bottle rockets!
The patrons are kind and just.*

Do you see how the kindness of patrons is greener than the sea? It is suspected you do not. In time you will understand.

Do not think of an exploding stereoscope.

The Dig

Matthew Pendleton

Recall the voice on the phone, weeks after Johnny's time, picked it up in the cold corridor of the dormitory, at the time it was raining, it was night. That voice pale as machine is never forgotten.

"Don't look off the apartment roads is all. No old stance on this Mal. Like in cot dream it began like in garden long ago you won't remember before your time. You understood of course the post service has automobiles at their command? And was it three days before, a little girl's sister hit by an automobile the driver as yet unknown. She saw it from the apartment Mal I don't know off the book and all—are you making notes on all this?"

"Thanks," I said, and he had hung up. The phone had woken me, led me from my tiny room in the dormitory, rain dusting a tiny window staring out into the night. First thing to do, I thought, was call somebody. The man on the phone had mentioned the apartment roads, and this meant St Alban's, that highway nasty where the automobiles were still capable of moving. And that also meant the park, and the park roads with crumbly cafés and the old residences swelling into the sky.

Listening carefully in case I woke any of the other guests, I dialed the numbers I knew best. The rings called out into the mysterious telephone dark until the sleepy voice of Deliverance answered. "It's you," she said, "don't worry, the Dentist is on his way."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I need some sleep," she said, and hung up. Outside the spot of rain passed, I tiptoed slowly to the entrance. Empty dark cabinets, bookshelves, rolled-up stained rugs filled all the corners. As the night passed with the rain the grey of the day steeped the place into tired old dirt, fades upon fades, piled up days in rooms in life. A mundane and impossible sort of peace was suggested, looped sparse bird song, until the doors swung open and in stepped the Dentist, bald and large and serene, followed by Schneider, in his red jacket, yellow eyes, smiling sombrely to himself. He adjusted the collars of his jacket. He hummed and tapped his foot, started to yawn and stopped halfway, then spotted me, with a simple gentle smile leaned towards the Dentist, whispering in his ear. I was about to step forward anyhow; thinking: It's the Dentist, as always he'll help me.



The bleached sky and the trees gently fainting white. The air outside warm and calm like around this time of this place. There was the old school ahead, and to the right from a window high up in a residence block someone was singing old gravelled folk songs. Schneider walked by my side carrying the bag they had fetched from my room. I used my stick to walk, sometimes. The Dentist led the way.

"It was figured you'd be needing help leaving," he said. "No one can leave that place on their own. It was naïve of your con-

tact to so assume it.” Schneider nodded and smiled.

We were on the steps leading down to the station. All around and overhead were trees, and plants grew in soil by the steps and sometimes in yellowed clay pots. In the branches a bird or two could be heard monitoring the skies through the leaves, a haze of blue of a day of a different white, incessant flutters almost like twitches. We came to the road that led to the station, wide grey ruptured pavements scattered across in the sun now pale.

We entered the empty café by the station. A polished stone interior, lit by gas lamps. We sat at a long table, ordered two coffees. The Dentist wanted nothing.

“Be straight with you Mal,” he began. “Neither Schneider or myself contacted you. In fact we’re not sure what was said. But we’re willing to help you. Tell us what you’ll be needing, and we’ll supply.”

He placed a black pouch on the table, opened it and spread the contents in a circle. Three small yellow pills, three rectangular blue ones, and four white rounded ones. I looked at them for a few seconds only, then scooped them all up and into my trouser pocket. Schneider had an anguished look of a sudden, first at the Dentist then at me.

“You’ll be soon enough in a hospital,” Schneider said to me. The Dentist dismissed this with a flourish and Schneider began smiling again.

“For the red wine I’ll leave it with you,” the Dentist said. Then he leaned more forward, and spoke quiet. “Heard tell of a meeting to be,” he said, “of your friend and some other interested party. Generally Mal, it can’t be, certain lies are bound to be said, and we know of your friend how suspicious she can get. You understand don’t you Mal?”

“Maybe,” I replied, a little wary.

“What we want to know is how they knew who to contact in the first place. I mean your friend—who contacted you is on the inside, and your friend—I mean they must have been watching you. We keep no files you understand.”

“I’m no one’s agent.”

“Aren’t you Mal?” I hesitated.

“Least I think not,” I said. I looked round. The café was still empty.

“You’re assigned to something surely.” The Dentist sat back. His chair creaked, his look at me without a smile. Schneider giggled and spilt his coffee. He made no attempt to wipe it away, some profound thought in his eyes lay almost all used up.



They’d arranged for a bus to take me to my destination. The park, St Alban’s Road, the Park Roads. But first I needed to see someone. In the end, the driver came round. Made me leave the pills on the bus, saying he’d wait. I nodded, and pocketed two of the yellow ones and a white one secret. He didn’t seem to notice.

I wandered the streets for a while. It was around 7 am. A streetlight on a corner buzzed slowly. There were the rooming houses I knew, tall with narrow balconies on the higher floors, and opposite a café with no windows. The buildings mostly grey in this area. Deliverance’s rooms at the top of a five-storey converted house, her door by a landing, a strip of red emergency light and an empty bookcase. I knocked but the door was not locked, and opened at my touch.

Deliverance and a boy I had not seen before, though maybe on the street or at the Dentist’s maybe. He looked a little like I imagined I might look, not too different anyway. Deliverance unusually was wearing yellow trousers and a red top of nice ma-

terial. He wore black skirts over grey trousers, like of uptown, thereabouts. His face was pale cheek bones of shadow. His hair had of recent been cut, little tufts from an ill-looking scalp. His hands sometimes shook. Deliverance didn't introduce him, nor speak to him the whole time. If not for his trembles he seemed on near nodding out not really there.

Deliverance offered me coffee. She had no wine, she said. I declined anyway and told her all about it. She went in another room and returned with a small bag of pale yellow, and was now wearing a yellow skirt a little torn on one side. In a grey bag by the door the crossbow was sticking out. She placed it on her back, the yellow bag hanging at her side and went out on the landing holding the door for me. I looked back at the boy half-lying on the sofa. In the shadows of Deliverance's rooms he was hardly there, but I noticed all the same, all the time I had been standing there his big eyes had been open looking at me. As though from straight on, as though from somewhere a mirror, or a cracked system of lenses tracing a light caught from high above the broken place. There was this light in my eyes then say at least. Deliverance closed and locked the door.



Among the tenement blocks and the collapsed car park short necks of lilies or something white like that. The sun then still shining, it was around 8:15 am. The bus was waiting.



She seemed distracted, I can't say excited because such a thing doesn't suit Deliverance. Something she'd been waiting for though. I understood. It had been some months.

Recall the music played on the bus was pop and female vocals

something like a doll. The bus driver's foot moved up and down, not exactly in rhythm to the music, I noticed, or in rhythm but delayed. He was of strict discipline and obedience his eyes somewhere on the up with speed. Gave me the pouch back when he had laboured parking by St Alban's station, though I had already ate the yellow ones, and the depas Deliverance had supplied me. My thanks to the bus driver were mute, and getting off I felt the eyes, the eyes that I recall were like the Dentist's eyes and the eyes of prefects in dormitories, schools, uptown shops, like something sharp and nasty made you feel transparent, and felt like school. Was it then we had been watched on these streets from the beginning?

Off the bus Deliverance was again more collected. Her eyes looked at mine and I took her hand. For a moment. We stood on the road the bus departing the ruins to our right to the left the rebuilt apartment blocks, futons draped over the sides of balconies, grown-up children preparing to use the street, the mould of the odour, of the home the mother and fathers, whatever else waiting near conceived. And first thing needed was red wine.

There was a café we both knew of at a corner by the apartments used by old factory workers and their sons. It was near 9 am. Near here a still-in-use swimming pool where a two-year-old had been befriended and then executed, some nine-year-olds in the field of experimenting with their behaviours, or some such, which many myself included thought was fine, or good, or not good. That it doesn't really matter, sadly, when all is said and done, fine, good. Imagine the descent of blankets of white depas, on tile floors, in puddles, to explain things, chills and quiet meetings in remains, what was left moved through in street-time, brandishing black coffee and red wine; unusual bouquets were not found in this area. Neither us, usually.

“What’s doing then,” said someone when the body was featured in the papers, and it was true for they stood all as though blinded by a light never seen before, though yes it came all the time, and each time they would forget and delight or near-delight in what they forgot.

One day I said to Deliverance, “I don’t understand.”

“Mal,” she said to me, and then stopped, because there was no point after. Remember some stage in there, confirming the useless feeling, and so from then on, we are entitled to some weakness am sure of it.



Approaching the café we could see St Alban’s Road, the wide place of gravel, among blockades of residence stubs. No automobiles but the signs were apparent. A girl in a red skirt and what I thought was pink hair was crossing, looking carefully her left and her right, then hitching up her skirt to run across the road, and continue towards the park behind the collapsed apartments. I stood somewhat gone, though already maybe I was, and Deliverance who was at the entrance to the café looked back at me and smiled thinly, though she knew I think as always she had the sky worn a little whiter.

The café with bright lights and plastic tables had white paint on the walls re-applied of many times. I sat a little awkward though it was empty. The wine came from uptown and was a pleasant surprise. I took more of the pills from the pouch and Deliverance handed me some lorazepam that were yellow. She smiled she knew my states that would result. Our drinking red wine on abandoned motorways at dawn, finding factory rooms by the dockside, remains of the oblique machines and apparatus in corners and the dust. A mirror by a desk and an aged pro-

fessor's thick-lensed glasses. The remains of places we'd move into, trying to replace those had gone before, always uncertain how they had gone about it. Johnny's room after he had gone; recollect the phone, opened envelope, looking around thinking Room 2 locked the perfect scene? What white so close in his eye that time caused the dents in the walls where he had thrown the chair, had broken the round green wine table, I was so close to seeing too. Or was it like that at all?

"It was something like an annunciation, that time in the park. In reverse. You remember Mal?" I nodded. We started on the red wine both of us. It was like times before. "Johnny knew where we would go that day. This has been done before, he said. Of course, but we used to enjoy going the park, the garden, I said. Then, I didn't quite catch his meaning. You saw it too didn't you." Deliverance looked at me carefully.

The floor of the place was a yellow grey, like a colour collected over time.

"And now Mal, what's doing now?" Her eyes held an ancient smile that knew the ages. That smiled in a firm helpless state, resolute. "Do you have a sense of the permanence of it all? Right now things are very—I think it best to go."

Deliverance took my hand lightly and we walked out onto St Alban's Road. The tire tracks and so on were obvious. I stood out in the middle of the road, Deliverance looking nervously left and right. The shades of tall rotting high-rise blocks surrounded us, walls mottled grey around blank windows. The sun to the right approached behind the cement somewhere, managed a losing shining path. To the left a figure lapsed from stillness on a balcony. White curtains behind swept into the apartment. Had the sense of an intelligence watching. I nodded to Deliverance, left the road; we found the entrance to the apartments and walked

up the stairs. She was glad to leave the road, so much of the murder totals she was thinking I am sure.

A man wrapped in a plastic overcoat mumbled something passing us going down the stairs. We were on the fourth floor. I found the right door quickly, knocked. Deliverance slinked a little away. Corridors were hard grey, no lights were working. A thin tall woman opened the door. Immediately she leaned against the frame, scratching at her eyes that were a little red. "Who are you," she asked, a voice framing each word in hard tones but eloquent like from somewhere out of town.

"It's in regards to the accident with an automobile three days ago, involved . . ."

"My daughter. Four days ago," she corrected. She stepped back, I noticed some marks on her leg high up by blue panties under a white shirt. Nipples were there waiting to be seen. "Seems you better come in," she said. I found in my trouser pocket the Stanley knife Deliverance had given me on the bus. The woman turned and walked into the apartment, showing the blue string of the panties lost between buttocks, veiled by the thin white shirt. I followed, closing the door, seeing to my left the open door to the bathroom. Separate taps for the hot and the cold.

I stood a little uncertain at the entrance to a low-set lounge, cushions on the floor, a few bean bags. She turned round and smoothed her shirt collars.

"This your habit, to call on little girls?"

"Not often," I said. "Not to call a habit." She fell into one bean bag, found some stockings nearby and rolled them up her legs. A few glittering things hung from the ceiling. The kitchen was through a door to the left. The balcony was through sliding glass doors behind the woman. It was hot, some sweat was on her skin.

“My daughters anyway are not in.” The stockings on she stretched her legs out and shifted her seat. There was a glimpse of pubis. “They would not be interested.” I stood a little more then sat down on the nearest cushion, crossing my legs.

“She’s okay now?”

The woman scratched her eyes. In the light of the room they were obviously red, sore. She answered me and her legs opened fairly wide.

“Oh she dyed her hair. Child’s reaction to trauma. It looks no good.”

“She wasn’t injured.”

“Lost her hat that’s all. For some reason couldn’t find it after.”

“What kind of hat?”

“Usually I buy her clothes. This wasn’t a nice hat at all. A drink.” She waved a hand, indicating beside me. A discarded skirt encircled a three-quarter-bottle of red wine. Two red mugs were next to it. I poured her one, the rest for myself. “A kind of gentle man,” she grimaced. We drank with only sounds of outside in the rooms, some tremble of a lift shaft, a child far away in play. The wine over, I handed her some depas. She buzzed the TV on a moment by means of a remote. It was a distant shot of a bed, some figures on it. Switched off, and I wondered how old she may be. She scratched at her stomach, where there were also red marks. Her eyes regarded me all over, narrow.

“The hat though she found in the park some weeks ago. I would not have her wearing something she’d found about, it’s bad enough living here. She only wore it that day, it looked like a traffic sign.”

“What colour was the hat?” I asked her leaning back watching her nails on her stomach.

“Well it was dirty wasn’t it. But the day before, she washed

it, it turned out to be black and yellow. But old, still too old." She stretched her legs her panties rode up, I could see something of between her legs. And the traces of an eczema. She saw my eyes and did another grimace. "Terrible isn't it. It's the weather I suppose. At night it gets better." The sky outside was now dull. I wondered how much time had passed. She noticed my state close to getting up and brought out a box from beneath some girls' panties. She patted it lightly. Her eye was near winking at me. Felt a sudden nausea.

"Not the end yet is it?" she said. For a moment I placed my head in my hands. "I have to be going," I said from this position. I heard her laugh for the first time. The sun came back in some respects, I could see the sky through the window through the spaces between my fingers. It was not night yet. When my head came back she was not on the bean bag. She was beside me, a hand on my shoulder, another pressing against my forehead. There was some feeling came over me, but I could smell more her cunt and other aches receding. The ghost of that with other resemblances of tranquil pill, other pale couplings, machines the other machines. Why would a god exist and what would it do? Why would something something and what would something something why. For in this respect nothing changed, all this thing remained, some emergence static, cut out onto time, unimpressed by notions, what's this, holy, and so on. Through it all was her cunt, and that she was wearing only stockings, panty, a very sparsely buttoned white shirt. Her hair was of a diminished red.

"Breasts," she said, parting the shirt and showing one. We were drunk and in that kind of time. We could have sat there for hours without moving. Only her breast my eyes, her hand my forehead her panty of a little damp. I thought, I've seen her some-

where before and is this not always the case, in a basement or some kind of club. I'd mention that light as well, often glimpsed, its habit of pause, you'll see in sine waves of such as dream.

"Hmm," she interrupted final. "Wound."



We came to the park around the time the sky grew dark. We were equipped with digging equipment of the Dentist's. The park was the same as some weeks ago. There was the wall, and the single tree beside it. Towards the train tracks the ground sloped down and then to steps to the tunnel which went on into the long avenue stretched across half the city. Again the windows of vacant high-rise no doubt noted us. We walked about and came to somewhere like the middle of the park; I started to dig without much interest. We were both still after the sound of an automobile passing on St Alban's Road. It began to feel cold, I wished for some cardigan. Deliverance hugged herself but maintained her poise, the blonde hair rushed to dark under low clouds. Far away a violinist started up a buzzing waltz. And a collection of words seemed to stretch down endless. A refrain caught with us. I stopped trying to dig in the grim soil and tin cans.

"This is no use," Deliverance said. "What we doing here?" As if in answer Schneider appeared from the steps under the tracks carrying a plastic bag. His red jacket flapped in the wind, he held an umbrella tentative under one arm. He waved to us. I put down my shovel while Deliverance let out a small moan in the wind. "Thought we could vanish," she said, "I was wrong."

Under his red jacket Schneider wore a yellow or yellowing shirt. It was buttoned to the neck but appeared loose.

"See it yet people?" he said, rambling towards us as though a walker outside city. Deliverance looked to me. I shook my head.

“When was it we were last here?” he said. He grinned. “There was a drumming in the air. It was rain. There was a storm?” He handed us the plastic bag, full of wine and mugs. Deliverance and I set about drinking and Schneider stood watch. With a slight look upwards he sighed, held an arm up, the umbrella popped open, rain began to fall. The park, all around us we could see, the garden, descended into shadows. The rubbish I had dug up wilted in black damp patches and sank into mud. We were quickly soaked but anyway stood there, we had the wine, that we covered with our hands, and hunched over.

“You haven’t looked,” he eventually said, “over there.” He was pointing to some ground in the shadow of what maybe was the wall, or the tree that was leaning. I rested on my shovel after finishing the wine.

“What’s this about anyways?” I complained.

Schneider’s soft worn face looked out amongst the rain while lights of a solitary carriage passed on the tracks behind him, white passes of light descended, his face flashed into stillnesses under stretch of the umbrella, in the gloom we stood in, his nose, his chin, still black eyes. “Our research is near done,” he managed above the train. “I myself am somewhat overcome.” The grey train’s blast lost in the still of the rain but the white lights carried on in the dark now receding into the docklands. Schneider stretched shoulders, the loom of umbrella swayed thickly. His free hand, beginning some action, failed to move more, paused at the umbrella’s perimeter.

“If you knew who the contact was,” I said, “why didn’t you tell?”

“This was foretold long ago,” Schneider admitted, “but that doesn’t mean so much we knew. Like it was that someone, white sticky hair crazed walk on the streets needed a stick, entwined

in eyes, of thought rumination of types hereto unknown, in deep illness, in brain wormed with holes linked with glorious, some said glorious expansive solutions, face as of slow rain on grey days; was seen less and less, and eventually never appeared on these streets again. But what does that tell you?"

"What of Johnny then?"

Schneider stopped face forward-jutted with a smile.

"The construct of some place in their jealousy of that of some place," he began, "but cast downward onto earth, such is that thing, perfect, of higher skies, that here will certainly be damaged. But what of those in that more usual mould?" Schneider explained to us in the rain, their expansive social structures have changed to a reduced secretive lifestyle, methods of prey and capture have been refined to the most necessary actions only. Their movements have slowed down. Homes have been made smaller. One hundred thousand generations later they are radar ghosts like image persistence like on gradual fade-out, of that form that was meant for them. Their electricity cannot be seen against the light of the sun, which is why the bombs are designed, to be held up, collapsed wastes pressure into the disasters, their disasters are theirs and mine and tenfold, manifest grins of intelligences dropped into the skies, shells of cities age and crumble beneath into centres of panic that feedback all miseries into their loops of constructions incessant and crumbling until forever from the word go. Their skulls rendered thin with obsessions stretch and vaunt and moan, aching into infinite recess as is what thought is called, or stubborn attributes of decay and affluence, that is resources both used and understaffed, more likely the forms that grow old in tenement lofts with smiles, processed into armies and passed away to lie plotting over the cancers and eradicating virus waiting for those left behind or who passed on

ahead, who have not fallen yet, but who are leaning. Instruments that perceive fragments conclude the imagined whole to be inevitably beyond understanding.

We had appeared to reach a conclusion, in a conference in this park. The rain in the garden. "I'm being very coy though," Schneider said, "later means must, things could get dirty."

Would coy be connected with innocent, were they close, was what had just been said innocent? To stand tall of such as life then wilt in shame. Schneider stood again silent his face grey in the atmospheres of the rain.

"Now listen," he said, "dig over there, by the wall. Johnny is dead. Or at least that is what we are trying to presume."

All of a sudden those sad airs found me. Not so much I have to say. I mean more the old sullen things, am sure you know what I mean. So we dug where he told us. I wouldn't say he grinned or otherwise showed pleasure. I give him some credit, this particular one. He directed us where to dig and that is all.



Johnny would modulate his clothing, what fashioned him through his days, around one fixed item, enhanced with found things, until an outfit was gathered in orbit. I found myself clenching my teeth in some outward terrible moment. It's hard to tell though, what we found in the ground. Unmistakably some of Johnny's clothes. Johnny's clothes? Now I hesitate. We found rags covered with soil and insects. The rain will have helped this. Why we found Johnny's clothes in the garden? I kept wondering silently.

"What was Johnny but a boy?" Schneider goaded unintentionally. In the rain we couldn't answer. Obviously, it was not his face we remembered anymore; we remembered his clothes. Deliverance most especial, she who had often removed them, I

were wont to suspect. Not all Johnny's clothes were buried here in this garden. There were only three items, and each a component of different outfits, so that maybe we were reminded of these other clothes that would make up the combination, collecting in ghostly huddles almost bringing with them the rooms and bars and streets of Johnny. Schneider maybe saw none of this, unless he was aware of Johnny's delectation of choice, the range of colours he could make around the one colour, his most choice colour. I don't think Schneider was aware, but I can often be wrong. Like had I known about a connection between the Dentist and the dormitory? It had escaped me until this morning. And what else besides.

We laid the three garments by the shallow hole. The displaced soil was grey and claylike soft and oozing. The rain paused a little, but then continued, Schneider held his umbrella over the clothes and we all tried to fit under it best we could. Our eyes were not up to identifying the clothes in their original state as just dug from the ground. Schneider thought we could let the rain clean them, but I pointed out this would only help the mud permeate more of the material, and after a while Schneider said softly, Oh yes, and nodded his head his eyes far away and understanding. Also the general shadows of the climate and the umbrella altered the forms and colours laid out on the ground. Then it must have been Deliverance who first identified with confidence these particular items of Johnny's repertoire.

There was first of all a long-sleeved yellow T-shirt, recognised because of the letters sprayed on in red paint saying something like TV the significance of which none of us understood. "What did he mean by that?" Schneider asked and Deliverance and I shook our heads. These letters were still visible under a wash of thin black mud. To explain things, the yellow was more near

faded than bright, it was far from red and near white, but still definitely a yellow. This was the preferred colour of Johnny. This yellow T-shirt was most likely to be seen with a white and blue shirt with voluminous sleeves and some kind of dirtied grey trouser.

Second was a fairly ordinary black jacket, with a stiff collar that could be easily turned up nice and rigid, and sleeves with no buttons and a rip on the left arm that could have been down to this place of rest of the last few weeks or could have been Johnny's doing. None of us could remember.

The third was harder to identify. It was long and soft, with little scraggly ends. Darkened with mud, still some mauve material could be seen. "It's a mauve scarf," Deliverance said and seemed pleased with herself. She wrapped it round her arm not neck because it was dirty. I seemed to recall Johnny wearing this, and Deliverance's pleased eyes and hands made me believe myself right. But all three existed better in memory, or in whatever memory could be usefully made up at the time, to accommodate all these things. That could forsake rain, and dirt. And Johnny walking, down under the tracks, along the avenue. The face of course confused, better blank, or, in a field of white light, where can be seen his image standing, but so blind, not the details, which are lost.



Schneider put a hand on my shoulder. It was a little cold. We walked towards the tracks under Schneider's umbrella, sometimes I was smacked lightly in the face by his expansive red jacket as it billowed. I looked back; the black jacket lay by the hole, in front of the broad dim form of the wall. Schneider had taken the yellow T-shirt, Deliverance had taken the mauve scarf. No one

wanted the black jacket. It could possibly have been Johnny's favourite item. With the distance and the rain, after a while, I couldn't see it anymore.

Schneider bought us some wine before leaving us, nice two from Tibet and a Yugoslavian I knew well. "It's in the systems, I'm talking of," Deliverance had said, lamenting, not knowing what to do. "We are in them now, or have been for weeks." Some time after, we were drinking red wine, and maybe even some tea. Deliverance strictly had no milk or sugar, but I it was unfortunate required both, and in fair amounts. After stirring my tea and handing it to me she spoke some more.

"I'm having a feeling we need to get out," she said. I looked around her rooms. Everything seemed fine. But I asked anyway, was she moving again.

"Don't mean that," she said. She looked at my cup of tea, which was on the table. "Don't you want it now?"

"It's a little hot still," I explained. I glanced at the phone which was useless since the lines went down some time ago now. Only certain phones seemed to work, I remember seeing someone using one, used one myself occasionally. But Deliverance's phone did not work. For a while she did not speak, head down in thoughts she would not express.

I had been seeing a doctor recent, or so he declared that was what he was, a thin tall man with mismatched shoes. At the same time I was starting to weigh a little less. The medicines were suspect but I went along with it, because medicine was scarce, Deliverance even could not contact in the ways she used to. Their effects varied but were of interest always. And we had recourse to other things, distilled spirits and orange juice and nutmeg boiled in saucepans. Depas had gone a shade more forgotten every day. Automobiles were more frequent, as were loco-

motives. Cafés had closed down, however some high-rise blocks were being adapted for this industry.

“You seem thinner,” Deliverance would say casually at times as though remembering something like where her keys were. And then a brief rebuttal. We were a shade more forgotten each day. There’s nothing to it.

Where would we go later that day? The Dentist’s would seem perhaps uncomfortable. “Are you to return to the dormitory?” Deliverance asked. “Not if I can help it.” Other places to go: a place known as The Dante in a basement section of a nice avenue. The seating and such is all in ever-diminishing circles and below at the centre is usually a live performance mainly electronics but I saw a cellist once in inspired acts of languid primitive lines that led to his scraping his cello along the dirt floor and uttering solemn yells as the candles on the tables went out one by one. He could beget a darkness of an awful beauty, an acquaintance used to say. Something along those lines. But there would be no one there now, the places emptying fast.

“It may be time to move on, are there other cities?” I couldn’t answer. I refused to drink the tea anymore, and began the red wine. Deliverance’s rooms, the few I had seen, were all full of light from windows diffused by net curtains and thin veils and mirrors cleverly placed but still were dark in atmosphere, and now there was the shroud of the sky outside getting in somehow. The sun like yellow gas spread everywhere. I still occasionally missed the old damp house of Deliverance. All we could do was drink more wine. I swallowed the pills from the doctor. They were yellow. We enjoyed our laconic states in the dusky room.



In various guises I saw the acts of creation, when staring at the interiors of the apartment or the bathroom. More people had come, I knew none of them. They were strangers often stood tall in long coats I had never seen before. I sat in a corner looking out the window, the hybrid-language neon often now dead, or a flicker every minute, and the sound of a bottle rolling away down a side street could not be seen. I drank wine. A stranger had brought with him some depas; it was gone all too quickly. There were not as many people as Deliverance had expected. She asked where is someone often and the people would always say they've gone, gone where she would ask, but no one would say. We didn't really know anywhere else but here. I realised we hadn't been getting out enough. I told this to Deliverance behind a mauve veil; her smell was soft, she agreed with what I said. Come on come on, I said, We have to get out. I lost my memory and found myself in the bathroom. I undressed and ran the water. There was a razor I tried to disassemble. I joined the people in my undressed state, sat down, a little bruised but that was all.

I understood these people, I didn't need to know who they were, in their long coats. Some wore grey hats. One sat in Deliverance's armchair, hands resting on a cane between his legs. He was of indeterminable age but his eyes under his hat were like silver. He seemed to crouch as he sat. Deliverance introduced us.

"This is Calm Tin Mr," she said, and he nodded long and low and spoke in a drawn-out gutter voice.

"Did I ever tell you about my nephew? What a crisis that was? We are circling around something, he would say, in our lives. What thing John? I would ask him, but he wouldn't answer, but would hold his stomach, like this—" The grey man put his hands to his stomach both connected like a cradle, holding the stick

with his legs pressed together. “—I’m hurting uncle, he would say, and I would give him his painkiller. He knew it all though, did John. He disliked automobiles. It was interesting. They ate up the age uncle, he would say. He was funny. What’s up John, I’d say to him, you wig already?” Calm Tin Mr squeezed laughter out his thin frame.

“When was this?” I asked him, kneeling on the floor naked.

“Oh this was years ago,” he drew out, looked at me straight with a purpose. “That was before your time,” he said. I nodded. So did he. The night gained tiny lights outside the window from the multitude of rooms of the city. A boy with black-rimmed glasses and a little amount of curly hair looking infinitely serious but benign appeared, sat on the arm of Calm Tin Mr’s chair. Calm Tin Mr waved a thin arm at him.

“You meet this boy called Bracket?” he asked. The boy peered at me short-sighted and smiled.

“You believe in life after the body?” he asked in a slow careful voice, but full of excite. “To leave us, the many empty, the vessels left behind?” The old grey man shook his head at this with an amused diffidence.

“Ah no,” he said. “What’ve you dug up? That would not sit down with any board member I know. How many times I have to say?”

“Most times you say it,” said Bracket.

“John used to say,” Calm Tin Mr said, “we’re in a place so mean, we’re the bad animal. Our foundations have crumbled but we keep on anyway, lured by the promise of money, pushed on by greed and the promise of machine, pushed on by laziness. We are stopped dead in these gutters. We must crown anarchy, we must equip the minds, the mini-states, with weapons, enough to disable the supermind, the state. But I never intended to have the

last word. Such things are beyond myself. And I only passing on what others passed to me." He sat back, looked tired. "A shame and everything but what is a man to do?" he finished. The boy called Bracket turned eagerly to me.

"You see it in the systems. That's what it is." It was hard to understand. The discourse garnered some electric sensation. "Mind," said Calm Tin Mr, "he's still learning."

Heads of certain businesses and services have their jealousy of those in lines of servitude, and in them downward on earth, cast in lines they sent out, such are stood, or more say trapped, their workers, always they for us below the skies, cast down in their image, workers keeping a machine they need for money going, in those heads' notions they are pedestrians at birth, despite our protests and our methods that have not yet seen action. Heads of certain businesses in terrible states recall them being built working, and their lines are not so obviously traps, they have workers keeping a machine on gradual decline sustained by coffee all age and crumble, there are glimpsed back all miseries into the main machine shaft all crumbling until forever what is dreamed of is soft blue phased into safe districts they can't remember those brains rarely mention. But there still they can glimpse yet of what they have, always, dreams of.

"Try to explain more concrete," advised Calm Tin Mr. The boy called Bracket did his best.

Turns out if the postal service needs to explain to the situation committee as regards its function the issue of automobile usage and manning is of contention. It must be noted automobiles are rare, mostly from out of town, and postal transmissions occur only in exceptional circumstance, such as the head of a business must transmit some statement of error or accomplishment, mostly both to save postage, generally to an employee or

the situation committee, and rarely to such as is in a higher position relative to said head of business, but not involved as such in said business for a name to appear on material such as lists or a collation of minutes or invitation to a factory, to reference more olden times, and such names do not appear are not as such written down, no one knows these names they would never be said, all more like a dream soft blue like a light circled about before remaining forgotten, like the name of who above the Dentist, it has been postulated. (The night was almost complete in Deliverance's rooms.) The committee will no doubt question the need for automobiles, and the postal service will recount all this but the committee will infer "you are not an emergency service," but the postal service will state "we are an emergency service" and the committee will hear this and deliberate and later be satisfied. They will ask about salaries and whether the stationed drivers are receiving food and amphetamine or derivatives, there will always be questions the committee can think of to ask. "Is there a need for your service. Are there more uses of your service. Is there enough competition. Is there enough success. Is there a regime of fitness for those in industries. Is there a purpose being served. Are health and safety standards acknowledged and utilised. Is there an age of those whose names we do not know. Are there purposes to be served. Is there enough failure. Is there a need for service. Are there complications such as involving who services who. Is it a question of starvation, a question of you must fail eventually?"

Every Mark Equals Equals Death

Aaron Kovalchik

There were six of us/lovers, in a circle/yes: a circle. As if to say we had practiced this thing, done this before, we scratched at each other's eyes, dripped fake blood. Mary sprayed us with liquid so we would appear as if sweaty from a great exercise of muscle, flesh. Breathing heavy, we feigned exhaustion, draped like dying birds. We are dying from this great poison. In the heartlands, forgotten, we live on our own. Jeanette says: "Our organs are not for sale so to speak." Marty and Jim are lovers; I have a pussy. I sometimes consider the possibility of stealing their sex act; I think: if I freeze their lovemaking/fucking, make a mold and cast it, I could stick it in my pussy. I figure there's power-power there, yeah.

We recognize the truth; the girl raised by dogs, for example; the truth of the world that shapes us, this dog-truth. In our day-to-day there is regularly a mechanized bird (perhaps a cyborg bird) that does photograph us. Yes, a bird-camera; a lens, the light enters, the film exposed, developed and out come little landscapes (Polaroids) containing our bare, deviant bodies, our beau-

tiful bodies shaped by air, our delicious bodies ripe from eating ripe-ripe fruit, red fruit, delicious fruit. I stack up the Polaroids, I stack them up in a pile in my bedroom. Imagine this! I stack up these Polaroids and scheme how these landscapes instead of a collection of images could instead be sculpture, my sculpture. I could stack them so artfully as to create a creature, a creature such as myself with flesh (pale or dark).

First thought: how do we get electricity to run my art freezers?

Second thought: the skin of my flesh, the residual sensation from her, who used to scrub my skin, she lingers with me/she lingers with my skin.

Third thought: some of us (ok, ok!) don't have the shared cock-deviation. Some, like me, have pussies, others have cocks.

Fourth thought: we know there is someone watching. They are photographing our wounded fleshiness, our wooden huts of labor and love with their vibrations; it is a watching made of sonar. These bat-men have power; they are the world that we fled from. They are the world. Like Guatemala, our powerlessness/difference threatens. Reading these words you threaten these bat-men. They saliva and spit all over themselves.

I hear the bell that means sex, group sex. We meet up, look around hungry; we like each other's looks so much we start to cry and our sex organs swell up.



Guin is thrust into the hole, the weird hole.

A home emerges from this hole, it is in America, in the suburbs. A sense of non-life, there. She is blind, temporarily. The smell, the sense of the floor, the varnish of the floor. She is blind, casting about, unable to avoid this encounter (the odd smooth-

ness of the floor).

She senses a thought, not her own; the thought of a man. She knows a name, Tolstoy. Tolstoy comes in with a revolver. Can you imagine a sexier revolver? I could make a picture of a man with a revolver, make you want that revolver. Make you want this picture-man, this lovely poster in black and white, with this special contrast, sexy man with gun. You get this picture? This imagination?

She hears a thought.

TOLSTOY: *This revolver, I used to wanna stick it in your cunt, now I don't know how to feel pleasure.*

GUIN: I claw you, you feel nothing?

TOLSTOY: *I've had, you know, some many fucking things stuffed into me, I'm pure fucking puffed up skin. My brain has so many fucking pictures, girls doing things, I don't—*

GUIN: I'm blind, temporarily.

Tolstoy speaks with words. Guin is crawling on the floor/little blind. Feels like in a hole, not really dressed for this. The individuals she encounters in these holes are the effectors of power in this still-here world. EFFECTOR.

Guin thinks now: *Here I am, suddenly, far away from my home, the dirtland, where I don't have to answer to anyone and I experimentally fuck my queer lovers. Wasn't really planning on going into this hole. Now I have a plug in my lovely little ass. I created this plug, I did make the mold of this lovely shape, so lovely enough to go in my body and stay there, the plastic drawn from trees, the fiery plastic enclosed around the prize: the combined plumage of a nearby free-roaming peacock. Now a beautiful peacock plume emerges from my lusty buttocks, and within my buttocks are the sensations known as pleasure.*

TOLSTOY: I spent some time at war, killed. I ripped out skin.

I'm supposed to reveal law and order. I need to be stabbed with knife in order to come.

GUIN: Aren't there drugs for that?

TOLSTOY: I am the fucking! *(Pause)* Do I know you?

GUIN: Being here with you makes me feel as if I have returned to my pre-ejaculatory self, my adolescence. You remind me (me!) of a facial blemish, zit-man.

TOLSTOY: I'm uncomfortable.

GUIN: I came here against my will, through a weird hole. I want to look sexy to my lover, friends, potential lovers. Trouble is there are assholes with eyes, their noses turned up for a scent.

TOLSTOY: I heard about these women, drugged. Can you tell me my involvement in this? My skeleton a frame, a super-frame of super ideas, the force of my ideas, look these ideas are the skeleton of society, the very dirt roads that lead up to the houses selling goods from overseas.

The blindness that has overtaken Guin lifts, her eyes fall on the wounded man. Guin/newfound sight. Her sight reveals nothing, really. Just as she thought: an ill-conceived home, a man. The revolver is tearing into his flesh, great red marks, he salivas and spits all over himself and the floor, crawling. She travels without memory of the journey itself. She returns to the hills, the mudland.

A Case of Autotomy in a Duck Lady

David Ohle

When the weather changed, season to season, rheumatoid arthritis inflamed the Professor's lumbar region, forcing him to spend more time than usual compiling his notes and observations about his duck lady. They were recorded just as they came to his mind.

- 1.) An incipient but not visible beak, yellow-orange in color, lying among labial folds between and below the nares. On a few occasions, when enraged, she has everted the beak to inflict bites on my hands.
- 2.) The overuse of fricatives when speaking.
- 3.) A tendency to spurn pond scum in favor of acorns. I often find her wandering in the oak grove, dragging her feathered fingers along the ground, sweeping up acorns like rug dirt.
- 4.) Complains effusively when her radio fails to work under water.

"A Case of Autotomy in a Duck Lady" is excerpted from the novella *Quackers*.

- 5.) Enticed a custodian in Vilno into sexual congress, then killed him with a hammer blow.
- 6.) Will wear nothing but a wedding dress at all times, on land and on water.
- 7.) Delights in crushing her eggs under foot. We have rescued only two thus far. One died under incubation. The other hatched two years ago. We named her Guntima. She grew fat and brown, just like a duck. She quacked with gusto and ate all of the snails on the clinic grounds.
- 8.) It has been raining steadily these past weeks. Long, sun-deprived days, little to do. The entire clinic staff has gone to Kuching to celebrate Coward's Day, leaving me alone with Ruthie, who can be quite good company when she's taken a glass or two of gods' milk or *arrack*. She was then reading Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, having just finished the *Principia*, which was badly chewed when returned.
- 9.) Now Ruthie has written a poem she calls "Decaying Pig," of which I mention only a few lines in loose translation:

*Oh great scrofulous sow
Anjing busok
Decaying pig
Putrefatto maiale
Bleed jy nog?*

*Will you feed the moofish well
And drive the hero home?*



The Professor had named his duck lady Ruthie. In order to keep her in good health, he established, and intended to maintain, a biosecurity program that would prevent the introduction of diseases into the premises where she was kept. No source of infectious agents would be allowed entry. In cases where it was necessary to bring other duck ladies to the lab, they had to be from an established disease-free source, and would be quarantined for observation before gaining entry. Potential carriers of infectious material such as people, trucks, and poultry crates and equipment would be denied entry unless appropriate disinfection measures were taken. The Professor planned to change clothing and boots and use disinfectant foot-baths upon entering the premises or buildings. He would seek to minimize environmental stresses which could cause his duck lady to become susceptible to infections by making sure to provide her proper housing, management, ventilation and nutrition.

A reported outbreak of Duck Plague in the area was worrisome. It is an acute, contagious, highly fatal disease caused by a herpes virus. Affected duck ladies show sluggishness, incoordination, shaking of the head, twisted neck, ruffled feathers and greenish-yellow, bloody diarrhea. Dead duck ladies, commonly found on their backs, paddling their legs, often have blood-stained feathers around the vent and blood dripping from their nostrils. Eruptive lesions of the mucous lining of the esophagus and intestine have also been noted. Sometimes, necrotic plaques appear in the cloaca. The liver is enlarged, copper-colored and easily crumbled.

Another danger facing Ruthie was toxins, particularly aflatoxin, a mold that grows on cereal grains and oilseeds in wet

harvest conditions. Even small amounts produce mortality. And duck ladies with access to stagnant ponds, where decaying organic matter like animal carcasses is found, may consume *Clostridium botulinum*. Botulism causes a progressive flaccid paralysis of the neck called limberneck. Two days later, the duck lady is comatose or dead. Other likely sources of toxins included the deadly ricin in castor beans, the erucic acid in rapeseed meal, and rat poisons that contained Warfarin, an anticoagulant. Were Ruthie to consume just a cupful, she could bleed to death the next time she stepped on a nail or swallowed a razor blade.

About a year ago Ruthie had begun releasing specific body parts when these parts were grasped, a form of autotomy.

The Professor had caught her stealing lard from the laboratory icebox and had chased her past the house, around the pond, and finally to the edge of the woodlot, where, when she turned to see where he was, he reached out and took hold of her scruff, which shed its flesh into his hand. She kept on running.

All of this led the Professor to a bit of reading about autotomy in the archives of the *Proceedings*. In lizards, he discovered, it is the tail that autotomizes, not the digits or limbs. In a few species, portions of skin autotomize, a defense strategy known as “fragile skin.” In the terrestrial plethodontid salamanders, tails, digits, and portions of their limbs are sacrificed as a means of escaping predators. Grasp a cricket by the leg and watch it break the limb away with a snap. The sea cucumber will fling its innards at a threatening drum-fish to disorient it, then sidle into hiding and grow new ones.

Like lizards who have evolved tail autotomy as an escape strategy, the Professor’s duck lady displayed movements of her “bottom” that were intended to attract his attention away from her more vulnerable top parts. The downy pin-feathers there

showed sharply contrasting colors and patterns. At the same time the Professor noticed a stereotypic “twitching” back and forth as she positioned herself for a run in the event he attempted to mount her.

But the escape maneuver would be costly, representing a loss of fat and protein, which are needed for regrowth of the pudenda. During this time, she would remain at higher risk for his predations, as there would be little or nothing else for her to drop. And her reproductive life would go into hiatus, with gamete production completely halted.

The Professor theorized that autotomy in duck lady bottoms was enabled by special zones of weakness at regular intervals in the vertebrae below the vent. Essentially, she contracted a muscle to fracture the vertebra itself rather than break the “tail” between two vertebrae. Sphincter muscles then contracted around the caudal artery to stanch bleeding.

While autotomy was rare in mammals, the Professor knew, it did occur in mice, rats, and certain other rodents who could slough off the sheath of skin and fur covering their tails. He found this out one day when he was swing-bonking a rat against his laboratory wall to kill it. Suddenly, its weight was gone. He heard it thump against the wall and fall to the floor. There he stood, with a limp, brown tail-sheath in his hand, watching the rat disappear behind the autoclave.

Consulting the *Proceedings* in regard to honey bees and autotomy, he found that the stinger tears cleanly away from its body, though the sting shaft keeps moving to embed itself deeper, and the venom sac continues pumping for several minutes. The sting of a queen honey bee has no barbs and does not autotomize, while the genitalia of male drones do autotomize during copulation, and form a “mating plug” which is removed by subsequent

drones that mate with the same queen and die in the process. Crabs, brittle stars, lobsters, and spiders can also lose and regenerate appendages. Autotomy also occurs in some kinds of octopus. A specialized reproductive arm, the hectocotylus, detaches from the male during mating and remains within the female's mantle cavity.

More drastic self-preservation strategies were also noted in the *Proceedings*: Californian Jerry Fantini amputated his leg below the knee with a chainsaw when it became stuck beneath a tree he'd felled. In Utah, Aron Ralston, his forearm hopelessly crushed beneath a boulder, severed it through the elbow with a pocketknife, then broke and tore the two bones apart. An Australian coal miner amputated his own arm with a Stanley knife when he found it trapped beneath his front-end loader when it overturned deep within a coal mine. A New England crab fisherman got his arm caught in the winch during a storm and amputated it at the shoulder with a small axe.

There were even rarer cases where self-amputation had been performed for other purposes. In Vernon City, Florida, a bizarre scam was uncovered involving individuals who cut off their own limbs to collect insurance money. Daniel Rudolph, brother of the Olympics bomber, Eric Rudolph, cut a hand off with an electric saw and videotaped the process, to "send a message to the FBI and the media." Evidence suggests Rudolph was a victim of Body Integrity Identity Disorder, a mental state in which one acts out a compulsion to remove body parts, usually a limb, but sometimes eyes, ears, tongues, even such internal organs as the appendix and the spleen.

Given these facts, the Professor took the precaution to store any and all sharpened objects in his laboratory safe, even kitchen knives from the house. It was one thing for his duck lady to

exhibit simple autotomy for the purpose of escaping danger, but quite another if she embarked on a mental trail leading to self-amputation. Nevertheless, his fears had been heightened one recent a. m. when he'd found her in his study, quite involved in speed-reading the *Proceedings*. Suggestible creature that she was, knowledge could be a dangerous thing. It was the Professor's fondest hope and expectation that Ruthie would be spared any further development along these evolutionary lines and that she would continue in health and safety until the end of her days.

SoHo

Chapter 6

Sam Roberts

In the cool blue bathroom of Provence, Barth stuck two fingers in his mouth and vomited. Rarely did he feel more optimistic about the upcoming hours than after emptying his guts into the toilet of a favored restaurant. A little trembly, he smiled at the passable mirror, rinsed his mouth and dried himself with the shitty brown paper towels. Outside the bathroom, Inez was waiting. She stared at the scrubbed corners and underbags of his eyes.

“Are giu a sad?”

“No, just allergies.”

She shrugged, the shrug of frank doubt.

“I am sorry that giu are so sad,” she said as she passed him in the narrow space. I’m not sad, thought Barth, why would she want to tell me I was? She wants me to be sad. Her frocked tits had grazed him, but because the secret caesura of vomiting had killed his nerves, he felt only default lust.

Chapters 1–5 of *SoHo* appeared in *Press* magazine. They are currently available as a free download at www.birkensnake.com/soho.pdf.

Outside Provence it remained hot. The idea that night makes it cooler was a canard.

"Guy," Albert said to everyone, "let's get to that party. Where'd Estella go?"

"*I-nez*," said Patrice.

"*I-nez*," said Griffin, stamping his foot and giving her the challenging smile that was characteristic of a belligeroid scam's well-executed middlegame. Patrice giggled.

"You stop it," she said and ran off to do girl pirouettes around the corner streetlamp.

"Ha-ha."

"Whatever," said Albert. "Here comes the other one. Let's get out of here."

"Sounds good to me, Bert," said Haber.

"The come of my buzz," Albert said savoringly, "is starting to drip from the pussy of my mind."

"You're insane, Bert."

Albert's buzz, thought Barth, was in no danger of dripping from his mind's pussy. It appeared, in fact, that the nights of Albert and Griffin were evolving rapidly while his had suddenly stopped, as if these moments were the crucial millennia following the end of the Pleistocene Era, with his friends starting to discover metals and harvest maize in the plains and forests while he remained an aborigine, in the desert, with termites. Better to concentrate on the simple pleasure of feeling clean after vomiting. Patrice had grown still under the streetlamp and was listening with interest to things that Griffin was whispering into her ear.

Next to Barth, a short business kid was mouthbreathing and pissing at the trunk of the tree that grew outside Provence. American urine splashed the roots and came within an inch of Barth's

toe. Flanking the business kid were larger ones, each with lots of neck beef, four or five drunk meats. They hoarded the Spanish girls—a level of girl from which they were barred, Barth believed, even Inez.

“Making things grow,” Barth observed pleasantly, a genuine observation. One enjoys the human-ness of a weightless remark offered to a stranger under the seasonal constellation, Orion.

The short kid finished pissing, zipped himself, said something to his friends, turned back to Barth and asked:

“Are you some kind of faggot?”

“What?”

The kid gestured to his meats.

“This guy,” he explained, “was trying to look at my dick.”

“Holy shit,” said Barth, looking down, shaking his head, smiling a little sadly.

The largest of the business kids stepped forward and grabbed a sleeve of Barth’s sweet rust-colored Irish linen shirt, his favorite linen shirt and the second-favorite of his summer shirts.

“Are you a faggot?”

This business kid wore a flapping suit jacket and an untucked flapping dress shirt and an untied tie. The face was flushed and straining with gross belligerence and a perplexity about all things.

“I said, are you a faggot?” he asked in a breaking voice. He appeared on the verge of weeping.

Griffin, Albert, and Haber had come over. The girls remained in the rear, fascinated and excited.

“Gentlemen,” Albert said evenly.

Albert’s outfit, particularly his all-the-way-pulled-up black socks and sandals, caused snickering among the meats.

“They’re all faggots,” said the brutal head that held Barth.

“You’re acting like hooligans,” said Albert. “Just let go of Barth.”

“That’s right,” Haber said nervously.

The short one (the Goebbels, thought Barth, the Goebbels) had taken from his pocket a kind of club, a white beertap handle.

“What you’re going to do,” he said slowly, “is walk to the end of the block and then walk back. You’re going to walk to the end and then back, because we don’t share our block with faggots.”

Albert laughed, the delighted laugh of real surprise at an insane suggestion.

“Guy, you’re being incredibly unproductive with your leisure time,” said Albert. “I mean, really, what’s the matter with you?”

The short one turned and mugged for his meats.

“I don’t think these fags are cooperating, what do you think?”

The meat holding Barth released him and stepped toward Albert.

“You have a problem?” he said, breathing rapidly, as tiny tears began to run down his hogcheeks.

“Guy, this is New York City,” Albert said in an explaining voice. “It’s not about that. It’s not a matter of asking someone if they have a problem.”

“Walk to the end of the block,” said the short one, tapping his palm with his weapon, “and then maybe, just maybe, we’ll let you walk back.”

Barth kept his eyes on the Goebbels. He imagined being cracked on the temple and freaked for life, fully chaired and unable because of lobe lesions to experience the feeling of Reluctance or perceive any shade of green. That’s when your real friends wheel you out to a sunny glade and give you the shotgun.

“You better start walking.”

“Whatever,” said Albert in disgust. “You’re absurd.”

“Faggot!” screamed the large meat, then swung at Albert and missed. With exactly the same degree of efficiency he employed in the making of grilled chicken sandwiches with mayonnaise, Albert hit the business kid twice in the face, two short blows delivered with the right fist. He fell at once, like a wriggler.

“Holy shit,” yelled Griffin, crazily waving a canister of mace. But the short meat and the kibbitzing meat behind him made no motion to pursue a brawl. They were completely demoralized, like the Arab States in 1967 after seeing the Egypt of their largest meat felled in the six days of two punches by the Israel of Albert, thought Barth. They helped their buddy up and left. From far down the block, one of them turned and yelled, “Faggots!” but that was all.

“Holy shit,” said Griffin. “Holy fucking shit.”

“Wow, Bert, that was really awesome,” said Haber—a little worshipfully, thought Barth.

Patrice was staring at Albert.

“Why,” asked Inez, “was there fighting?”

“What do you mean why was there fighting?” said Griffin, exhilarated. “Those fucking kids were incredibly sexually enraged by their meaningless night and then they see ungettable girls with guys like us. Amazing, strange guys so deeply essenced in our night. The whole arrangement’s violently intolerable to roving meat like that. Particularly me. Of course, I’m instantly noted and hated.”

Albert shook his head.

“Guy, what you have to understand about kids like that is that they’re the lowest level of a certain kind of retail broker. The market’s really shitty right now, they’ve gotten completely out of shape, and they have no real capital or access to capital. They don’t have necessary levels of disposable income and they run

out of city pretty quickly. That's what makes them violent."

Patrice continued to stare at Albert.

"Did you see me take out my mace?" said Griffin.

Never in his adult life had Barth inflicted or endured face-hits. He calculated that he would have paid up to four hundred dollars to have been the one to punch out the large meat.

"I don't like fighting," Inez lied. "Let's go away from this place."

She hugged herself and affected shivering, as if she had just toured Belsen.

"Look," said Griffin, "when you're dealing with kids like that—holy shit."

Patrice had taken Albert's arm.

"What's the matter?" asked Albert.

"Ha-ha," said Griffin as he looked at the arm, bitterly, but not too bitterly, but bitterly enough. He returned the mace to his backpack, which also contained his walkman, John Leslie porn, saline solution, and *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, though that wasn't all.

"Are we not going to a fiesta?" asked Patrice.

They started west, the girls skipping in front, all happy and excited with themselves.

"The sickest cockblock," said Griffin, watching the asses. "The fight cockblock."

"Guy, what are you talking about?"

"I give you credit, Albert. Ha-ha. Maybe now I'll just have to deal with the other one."

"Whatever," said Barth, lighting a cigarette.

"Or maybe I'll just do Barth a favor and take myself out. Ha-ha."

Barth shook his head and began to smoke what he suddenly

believed to be the fifty thousandth cigarette of his life.

“Guy, if you tell me you’re into her, I’ll step aside. But you have to say it.”

“Go to hell,” said Barth lovelessly.

“Guy,” said Griffin in the cautioning voice, “don’t be a jackass. I mean if you’re into that girl, then all you have to do is ask me to take myself out.”

“I’m not asking anything.”

“Barth, think carefully. If you ask me, I’ll take myself out.”

“The bleating of the Griffin lamb,” said Barth.

“Ask me nicely,” said Griffin, “and I’ll take myself out.”

“I don’t need to ask you anything. There’s nothing that could possibly happen now or in the future that could make me ask you.”

“You were warned,” said Griffin.

They stopped at the corner of lonely underlit Varick Street, now at 10:15 on a Sunday night resembling the widest boulevard of a medium-sized yokel town that had been taken by plague. A light rain began to fall.

“Where are we going?” Barth asked.

“What about the roof party, Bert?” asked Haber dutifully.

“Sí, a fiesta,” Patrice said.

“Forget the fiesta,” said Albert. “Let’s go to Tabac.”

“Guy,” said Griffin, “thank fucking god you’re not insisting on that meaningless party of funkid losers and mediocre pussy. It’s the smartest thing you’ve said in a year.”

Barth might have protested. Sometimes, when it seemed like the friends were making decisions without consulting him, he decided to protest, even if he happened to support the plan. You can’t let the ravening friends always take advantage of your good nature and your propensity for goodwill and silence. But now he

wanted a place place, not a party where strangers and outsiders would bring about questions. What do you do? What do you do each day?

They hailed two taxis: Albert uncontested and sexually alone with Patrice in the first; Barth, Griffin, Haber, and Inez in the other. When Griffin immediately followed Inez into the backseat, Barth chose to ride shotgun because now the backseat held nothing but Griffin's chattering head of taunts, ha-ha's and jealousy teasers. He settled into the seat and noted the grimness of the driver. Nothing to be had from that guy and nothing to give him.

Better to imagine the phantazy of going back in a time machine to traumatize Nabokov, knowing that mowing Nabokov's lawn was the only way to traumatize him. That's right: you'd have to get with Vera. And after you finished mowing his lawn, you'd drink all of little Dmitri's orange juice. I guess this is one day that baby's not getting all the fresh-squeezed oj he can drink, right? Or when Nabokov comes home early from tutoring or giving one of his arrogant boxing lessons, you're mowing his lawn on the bed of the flat where he's writing *The Gift*, and he's completely traumatized and you say: Now I guess you'll have to find someone else to dedicate all your books to, right? *Right?*

The cab crossed Houston Street and a Griffin song came on the radio: "Weight of the World."

"Sweet, a little obscure Neil Young," Griffin said rigorously. "This is an amazing song."

There was no traffic up Lafayette, and the song wasn't even halfway done by the time the cab turned onto Tenth Street and came to a stop in front of incredibly crowded Café Tabac. The french doors were thrown open to the building rain, the front tables were packed with aggressive New York nightheads and Barth felt a strong wash of the old nervousness.

“The song’s not over,” said Griffin from the backseat, a slight brown drink’s break in his voice. “This is a song you hear out. Nobody leaves.”

When the driver saw that no one was getting out, he started talking to himself.

“I dropped the weight of the world,” sang Griffin.

The driver turned to give everyone the weary and accusing eye of the subcontinent.

“Blease bay and go.”

“Guy, just keep the meter running.”

“Come the fuck on,” said the driver. “This is a bullshit.”

“Barth, give the guy ten bucks.”

There was nothing in the air to suggest, by the common measure, that his friend’s proposal was anything but “offhand”; there was everything in Barth’s experience to indicate otherwise. When, on similar occasions, he chanced to be alone with Griffin, he was quite cheerfully incapable of refusing the request. He had, after all, many worlds of “tens” to give, and he felt—as one, properly, so often does—that the chief consideration of such a transaction was that they be parted with in the spirit of a happy, even a thoughtless, capitulation—and, if not in that style, then not at all. That they were so plainly now not by themselves was, as a mere circumstance, perhaps insufficient to dash that spirit, yet there had been—oh, it could not be denied!—a diminishment. For had he not detected in his friend’s voice the sharper, public note—the lower note, indeed—that convinced him that it was not unreasonable to assume that the question of whether he should give over the “ten” had taken on depths?

“I dropped the weight of the world.”

“Blease bay and go.”

Two truths warred in the mind of Barth, one dominant, one

an underdog. The dominant truth: paying the driver on Griffin's command was the will-less act of a lackey, and there'd be nothing from Inez but Galician scorn if she watched him hand over money so that they could all sit in a parked taxi, indulging the whim of Griffin. The underdog: paying the driver was a cool and unconventional, i. e. life-giving, wriggler; it didn't hurt Barth, it helped his friend, and it was a happiness wriggler that might be recalled, later in the night or even later in life, as a touchstone wriggler of spirited youth.

Before Barth could decide, the driver switched off the radio.

"Okay, now you are out of this taxi, my friend! Now you are out!"

"That's insane," said Griffin.

"Let's just go," said Barth, relieved, paying the fare, overtipping.

"I wonder," said Inez on the sidewalk, "where is Patrithia and your friend? They left before us and still they are not arrived."

"Are you worried about your friend?" asked Griffin in the teaser voice as he expertly sidled and put his arm around her shoulders, a successful blitz move in the competition scam. Barth fancied that nightheads of Tabac were watching and judging him as he stood in the orangey rain light.

"Should we go in?" asked Haber.

"Why don't you two go," said Griffin. "Inez and I will wait out here. In the rain. Ha-ha."

"I'll wait with you," Barth said immediately.

Griffin emitted a laugh of perfectly pitched minor condescension.

"You're an intense kid, Barth."

"Why would you say that? It has nothing to do with being intense. Maybe I just feel like waiting outdoors instead of in a

room. The rain feels good.”

“Guy, you know why you want to wait here. You should have asked me to take myself out, but you didn’t ask me to take myself out, and you didn’t do the right thing and pay the driver. You should always listen to Griffin. You reap what you sow, guy.”

“Fuck you,” said Barth with real anger. It seemed then that some rebellion was called for. The option that occurred most readily was: no more money for Griffin for the remainder of the night. He thought this over with a small, sour thrill. He imagined making an announcement of no more cash for Griffin in front of the others, and how strange and bad this would make everyone feel, including himself; but then let it come down, thought Barth. It looks like rain tonight, says Banquo. Then let it come down, says the first stabber. No more money for anyone and maybe even no more speaking with anyone ever again. He would conduct an independent life in remote places. But immediately he was ashamed and his face got long; no, the money was not for venal wieldings and withholdings. It belonged to everyone, they’d found it together one day in the rain, in an enormous gray bag, half-buried in the dunes outside the mansion of convalescence.

A cab pulled up. Out of it came Patrice and Albert, strictly expressionless. Had they done anything in the cab? Certainly they’d kissed, perhaps more. Being fellated in a Bovarianly re-directed taxi by a hot non-professional you’d known for less than two hundred minutes, after winning a physical fight in which you had held the moral highground. Doing what’s right, thought Barth, doing what’s right.

“What’s up?” said Albert with mindless ease and goodwill.

“Look at this fucking place,” said Griffin, without irony, almost with respect.

Albert narrowed his eyes at the paradise and slowly nodded.

“Sweet,” he said slowly, really meaning it.

Barth watched everyone go into Tabac. Haber and the girls entered through the front door, like anyone else from the tribe of humans; Albert and Griffin stepped right up from the street and moved as conspicuously as possible between the closely set tables, like tribeless ones. Barth opted to give himself two minutes of alone-time smoking in the rain, with the possible benefits of rain ions. It was necessary to wait. Let the friends have their brazenness entrance. Why should he follow them, just to dole out apology smiles to the people he jostled and worry about judgments against him? And why should he immediately go in after Haber, thereby admitting that he was incapable of a brazenness entrance, and by implication incapable of so much else in the world of youthful primacy and pleasures? He lit his Marlboro with great skill against the weather. Rain began to darken the shoulders of his sweet linen, and he wondered if it was absurd to think that the manner in which a young man chose to enter a restaurant might betray a failure of nerve.



Barth was standing in the hot midships of Tabac, his legs shoulderwidth apart and his back braced against all the bodies of heads that would not stop knocking into his knapsack. He stood behind Albert, who, in turn, stood behind and inappropriately close to two girls sharing a plate of steak tartare at the bar. Albert stared at the dish, entranced by the highly seasoned raw beef.

“That’s a sweet plate of beef you’re running,” yelled Albert.

“Excuse me?” one of them screamed. The endproduct of Tabac’s noise comprised the loudest of european music with ambient laughter flarings—about seventy percent from women, most

of the rest of it gay—and the breakage of glassware by incompetent and slightly less than clean waitstaff. Severe heads bobbed to this endproduct of noise in Tabac; it seemed that the noise was feeding the heads and that the bobbing showed that the heads were incubating properly. Heads were sown throughout the place like dragons' teeth by the music of Tabac. A carthage of heads, thought Barth, and then he giggled to himself: "Heh, heh." He was drinking a stoli rocks, wedge of lime, bumps of glass on the bottom of the glass. The stoli was from the freezer, not the shelf, therefore syrupy stoli, the best.

"I was just noticing that sweet tartare you've got going," Albert shouted. "Could I get a little taste of that?"

Without hesitation, without even looking at her friend for oh-my-gawd giggles, one of the girls handed Albert a forkful of tartare. One wore black tights and the other had bare theigh-fleisch, and that was enough, that was enough.

"It's a fairly high quality beef," Albert said after a moment's chewing, "but a little too lean."

"Want some more?" asked the other girl in the voice of lewdness and promise.

Barth nudged forward, rather clumsily, but forward all the same.

"I'll try some," he said. Amiably but chargelessly, the girl handed him a beef-tipped fork. Barth ate the schmear and handed back the fork. No fingers touched. There was no using the prop of beef to get with them; but wasn't it the role of objects to restore silence? Having thought of a Beckett quote, Barth stood a little straighter and shook off the first patchy inklings of being at sea with himself.

"That would be perfect beef for beefpacking," said Albert.

"For what?" said one girl.

“For packing the head in beef,” shouted Albert.

“Excuse me?”

“For a beefhead.”

“Albert,” said Barth.

“The concept of the beefhead is one of the sweetest concepts,” Albert told the girls, leaning in between them. They laughed—a little nervously, thought Barth.

“The concept is that you get together with your friends on a hot summer day and you get a hotel room in a certain kind of old hotel where the rooms are large and they don’t have A/C.”

The girls began to giggle meaningfully but Albert shook his head with impatience.

“No, it’s nothing like that. It’s not that kind of a thing. Anyway, you go to an old kind of hotel room. Like the Chelsea Hotel, right Barth?”

“Right,” said Barth cautiously. Was Albert really going to speak to them about beefpacking?

“So what you do, basically, is bring about thirteen pounds of eighty to eighty-five percent lean pure ground beef as well as a plastic squeeze bottle of medium quality olive oil and a brush—like a pastry brush that you’d use to put melted butter on dough, for example—and also scotch tape. Ideally, you’d want one of the friends to bring along a video camera, because it’s very creative,” Albert continued matter-of-factly, “and it’d be good to film something like that, you know what I mean?”

“Excuse me?”

“So one of the friends strips down to nudity and sits in a straightbacked and not really comfortable wooden chair in front of the open window of the unairconditioned hotel room, while the other friends pack his entire head with beef. After you encase the head in a thin, light layer of beef, you apply the lightest

sheen of oil, and you then wrap the beefhead with scotch tape to hold it together and also for extra depravity,” Albert admitted with a genial shrug.

He wasn’t smiling, and his eyes were focused on the imagined beefskull before him. As he spoke, his hands made cupping and smoothing gestures not far from the girls’ faces.

“Could you imagine having your head fully packed in pure ground meat? Of course, you have to leave holes in the beefhead for the eyes and nose, and maybe you’d stick straws into each ear, but there’s no mouth hole in the casing of beef. The reason you want it hot is to attract summer flies to the beef.”

“Albert,” said Barth, beginning to laugh but nevertheless starting to feel embarrassment quivers of the strange and bad.

“Why would you want to talk about something like that?” one girl calmly asked.

“What’s that?”

“I said: why would you want to talk about something like that.”

“Ideally, you’d film the wearer of the beefhead walking up and down Twenty-Third Street in the middle of a summer afternoon. People might start feeling weird and might even cry when they saw the walking beefhead.”

“And remember the old English gentleman,” said Barth, unable to help himself.

“Right. That’s sweet. A retired English colonel wearing an ascot would be walking by and he’d point at your friend with his cane: ‘Good God, that boy’s got beef to the skull! What a magnificent head of beef!’”

“What?”

“‘Good God,’” said Albert, “‘that boy’s wearing a full head of beef!’ And at a certain point, you might start eating out the

beefhead from inside. Because, remember, there's no mouth hole in the beefhead. With all the flies buzzing and walking up and down the skull of beef."

"It's very weird," the girl said—a little angrily, thought Barth. "Actually, it's disgusting."

"It's not that upsetting, it's not that weird. It's just transgressive. In fact, it's one of the most transgressive things you could do in a public environment that wasn't a service-related or performance-related environment. Being weird isn't particularly interesting, but being transgressive is proactive. Just imagine if your boyfriend was proposing to you in a prestigious restaurant and you opened the ringbox and instead of velvet the ring was imbedded in the thinnest layer of the most finely ground, barely sheened, ninety percent lean pure beef? Prime Angus, culled from the sirloin. Would you say yes?"

The girls stared back at Albert with the confusion and indignation that rise like floating wrigglers in the flood tides of the strange-and-bad.

"Why would anyone think of something like that?"

"It is a little bit crazy," Barth middle-mindedly conceded.

"Don't recant," Albert said. "Don't apologize for it, just because you're talking to a girl. It's an amazing idea. If we had any balls, we'd go and do it tomorrow."

Certainly, one wouldn't be so badly off remembering beefpacking on one's deathbed. What else should you be remembering? Ginkgo trees, blowjobs, *The Godfather* parts I and II? Well, maybe. But four hundred feet beneath the beefpacking laughs, in Barth's gloomier, lower layer, there existed a greedy and therefore shameful regret that Albert had abandoned the normal protocols with girls in order to pursue the comparative artistry of strange-and-badding with beefpacking.

"Where'd Patrice and Inez go?" Barth asked.

"Who knows? They'll come sniffing around soon enough."

Albert waved his hand. The trunk of the hand moved slowly but the fingers manipulated themselves with speed and complication. It was a depraved gesture of the hand, such as might be made by an athletic Dauphin after delivering a binding pronouncement of indolence and cruelty.

"Would you girls like to go to upstairs Tabac and play a little pool with me and Barth?"

The girls' plate of half-eaten tartare had been taken away. They had paid their check and gathered their satchels to their laps. Clearly, they were ready to get the phuck out of there.

"I think we're going to get going."

"Why? Come on, you'll love the sweet VIP room of upstairs Tabac."

"We've got to go, we've got to work tomorrow."

"There's an incredible Zeppelin photo upstairs. You should definitely see it."

"Sorry, it's a schoolnight."

"They're standing on the runway in front of their private jet in the early seventies and Plant looks sicker and more amazing than any human being has ever looked at any other time."

As the girls were leaving, Albert violently finished his drink. Lees of ice spilled down chin. His eyes looked a little smaller, and his face had babied in the low downlighting of Tabac.

"Sweet," he said, to no one, about nothing. He gaveled the empty glass on the bar and a few people stared. Albert was in the early stages of losing his humanity. But why? He had won a physical fight of justice and partially gotten with a hot girl (that's right, that's right, thought Barth mechanically, doing what's right). He marveled at a friend who could begin to turn

unfit for human consumption so soon after triumphs.

“Their reaction was so fucking absurd,” said Albert in a volume higher than the endproduct of Tabac noise, causing a few more stares.

“Are you losing your humanity?” asked Barth. “It’s barely midnight.”

Albert slung the Burmese python of his forearm around Barth’s close shoulders.

“Barth, Barth, Barth: my good friend Barth. It’s not about losing anyone’s humanity. Get us another round and I’ll be right back.”

Barth ordered two more drinks. Albert took his place at the end of a long line for the Tabac single-occupancy unisex toilet chambers, which meant at least six minutes of alone time at the Tabac bar. Now it was time to think about objects and their relation to the history of man. Thousands of instructive objects were to be found throughout Tabac. The cellophane on his Marlboro pack, for instance. Mass-produced cellophane could not exist in a society that hadn’t constructed, say, a hydrogen bomb, in the same way that there would be none of those identical yellow pencils without the internal combustion engine, and here Barth let himself linger on a remark somewhere in the enormous country of Nabokov (crazy alps, birch forests, endless natural resources), where a pencil’s being sharpened sounds like “Ticonderoga, Ticonderoga.” Again, he stood straighter, and his love for Nabokov at that moment was as great and unforced as his love for the stoli’s syrappiness. Incidentally: there was a sort of cottony taste to the coldest stoli. There were other things, too. Considering the limes in the drinks, one might think about agribusiness. Momentarily, Barth thought there was a chance for him to become some kind of a Creator, because was it every-

one who thought of something like this while awaiting a friend's return from the toilet? And there was more. There were stories to be had about the people who came into contact with all the objects in Tabac, namely the patrons and workers of Tabac. Definitely, there were surefire interesting stories about sluts, but then you also had the illegal alien dishwasher story, too, with the five dollars an hour, the escape from El Salvador. Though it always came back to the objects and their relation to the history of man. Talking about some wriggler of a guy with a profession of some sort who'd happened to order the steak frites, you'd eventually drift into details about cattle and slaughterhouse workers, i. e. specialization of jobs, i. e. the history of man. And then one might consider the history of dentists, because who could eat a medium rare steak au poivre without strong chompers? Ancient man gummed his food.

Albert returned. He had water-gelled his hair. Barth handed the drink and examined his friend's face for any change in babying or bloodying of the eyewhites. It was hard to tell.

"Have you regained your humanity? Seriously, have you?"

"Guy, I'm fine. Let's go about our business and not worry about things like humanity. It's not about that. I'm very up for a little pool in upstairs Tabac. Tonight should be pretty sick up there."

"Yeah, but don't you have to be on the guest list to get to the upstairs?"

Albert snorted.

"Guy, don't worry about that. You think I can't get us to upstairs Tabac? You're a weird kid, Barth."

Griffin had staked out the first step to upstairs Tabac, headphones on. His head made an occasional sharp dipping motion. He was singing Snoop to himself. Above him, actually smiling

down on Griffin with a certain kind of benevolence that brought to mind the tired notion of gods protecting madmen, gamblers, and wrigglers, stood an enormous black bouncer with a shaven skull. Griffin and the bouncer wore similar black leathers. Definitely, Griffin had said something to the bouncer about Snoop, and probably the bouncer had responded with some sort of encouragement. Barth imagined his friend later bragging about the bouncer's having understood what kind of a kid he was, and the thought irritated him unspeakably.

The bouncer had a clipboard, but he disdained looking at it. Others—a certain kind of shrill or oafish girl or a bony kind of eastern european girl with pointy elbows and lots of clean hard shiny pimples, along with desperate gays, goombahs and wrigglers—had pooled around the bottom of the stairs, but no one was being allowed into the magical pussy of the VIP room.

Barth made his way to Griffin.

"A little Snoop?" he asked. He tried to impart to his voice a sense of antibelligeroidism, i. e. goodwill and cheerful rationality. No reason to have hostilities with Griffin, especially with Albert perhaps about to lose his humanity. Worst case: you could always be friends again with Griffin if you told him that you respected his life.

"People," said the bouncer, "people you cannot stand here. If you're not going up my stairs, then get away from my stairs."

Albert stood mesomorphically before the bouncer.

"Guy," said Albert, "your name's Bernard, right?"

"My name is not Bernard."

"Come on, guy. You're Bernard. I'm Albert, remember? I'm a friend of Roy's."

"I do not know you."

"Guy, I'm Albert. I was here just a couple of days ago."

The bouncer made a clacking sound from the side of his mouth where a toothpick lived. He cocked his head and shook his head and made all the muggings of amused disgust that he, by virtue of race, dress, and occupation, was obliged to display when confronted with the ingratiations of a smaller white. The bouncer saw and then refused to look further at Albert: the tee-shirt, the dress shirt over it, the shorts, the sandals with socks.

“Where’s Roy?” asked Albert, his voice a little higher.

“When and if Roy comes down,” said the bouncer staring above and to the northwest of Albert’s head, “you can tell him what you need to tell him.”

“Guy, you know your name’s Bernard. You know you know me. Why wouldn’t you let us up? It’s not about thinking that it’s in any way productive not to let us up to play a little pool.”

“Please move away from my stairs,” said the bouncer, looking way, way over Albert’s head.

“Just let me speak to Roy,” said Albert.

Griffin took off his headphones and descended the step.

“What the fuck is Albert doing?” he said to Barth.

A white funkid was coming down the staircase. He, too, carried a meaningless clipboard. His eyes were squinted, his lips pursed, and he was sucking in his cheeks, all of which conveyed the impression of both abject confusion and extreme physical vanity. He wore a goatee and his head was very, very small.

“Whassup, B,” he said to the bouncer.

“Roy!” cried Albert, his voice now really highpitched, as would befit an Albert one and one-half feet shorter than the real Albert.

“Woe,” said the funkid, “do I know you?”

“Roy! How’s it going, man? How you doing?”

“Woe.”

“I’m Albert!”

“Woe: excuse me?”

“Roy?” asked Albert with a quaver, but the funkid was moving past, gone.

“Holy shit,” said Griffin.

“As I said, step away from my stairs,” the bouncer told Albert with finality.

“That’s really sick,” said Albert.

Griffin was nodding slowly, judiciously.

“Holy shit,” he muttered gravely to Barth, “Albert flew too close to the sun.”

“That’s fucking crazy,” Albert said after a moment. “That’s just really fucking sick. What a sick kid. That kid Roy is a dick. Of course he fucking knows who I am. Why would he pretend not to know who I am?”

“Guy, he didn’t know you for shit.”

“Shut up.”

“You just flew too close to the sun. You had your fight, you had your shot with Patrice, but then you tried for Roy and you flew too close to the sun. Don’t worry about it: you’ll get it back.”

“Griffin, seriously, shut up or you’ll be sorry.”

“Fuck Roy,” Griffin told Albert in a sudden tone of true friendship. He placed a hand on his friend’s back. “Who cares about that kid? This place is played. Let’s get out of here.”

“What about the girls?” Barth asked immediately.

“Fuck the girls,” said Griffin. “They’re upstairs with Haber and a bunch of european funkids.”

“God!” said Barth. “Seriously? You saw them go up with funkids?”

“Yeah, the worst version of semi-wealthy european funkid.”

“Did Patrice and Inez know the funkids? Were they Spanish? Did they ask you to come up with them? How did they get up-

stairs?”

“Who the fuck knows? Those girls are done. Everything about this place is played, right Albert?”

“Longinus,” muttered Albert, and Barth was sure that quarts of humanity were leaking through the soles of his sandals and evaporating on the dark red rug of Tabac.

“What about Haber?” asked Barth.

“Haber’s fine,” said Griffin. “He’s probably getting his cock sucked right now by that slut you were so into. Trust me, he won’t miss us.”

“Longinus!” Albert screamed at the bouncer.

“Anyway, who cares? You should have asked me to take myself out, but who cares! Albert flew too close to the sun and we’re getting out of here.”

Inez was no great shakes. Cosmology counted much more, and so did Nabokov. But ideally you persisted. You got yourself into upstairs Tabac and you found a way to get with Inez. And you forced yourself to deal in teasers and the unblinking world of silent, sexual complicity. Remember the Rilke poem: you must change your life. Barth could change. He might cut down on all the blinking and politesse, he might touch them without awkwardness. The first step, he decided, would be to run the rest of his night as pure alone time.

“I think I’m gonna call my night,” said Barth, but no one heard him.

“Chandelis!” Albert yelled at the bouncer in the strangulated voice of lapsing humanity. He was grinning wildly, without comfort. The bouncer’s toothpick grew still in his mouth.

“You better calm down, my man.”

“Barth,” said Griffin, “come on, it’s time for a new place. We’ve got to get that kid out of here before something really sick hap-

pens.”

“Chandelis!”

Alone time could wait, Barth thought. Friends were the friends, the unfungible family.

dear stillness

elizabeth hall

i miss you but.



enter us. attic apartment. mid-august's knitted heat. with curtains drawn, i fucked you on the kitchen floor while the cat watched from an open cabinet. afterwards, still enmeshed, you said *that was nice*. outside, the stars shined. two days later you moved in. the cat began licking her paws bald, coughed up skinballs. by the time my sister visited for thanksgiving, we'd wrapped them in gauze. sarah asked *why don't you make her stop?*



the gas station i bought cigarettes from was owned & operated by a middle-aged hungarian who gave me free lighters, patted my head on several occasions *you look like my daughter. i mean you look exhausted.*

at night, we'd drive to chevron's empty parking lot. a flask,

glazed doughnut between us. sprawled on the hood of my honda, you'd say *at this moment there is no one thinking of us*. turning my face away, skyward, i found the moon snarling down at me. i stared slack-jawed as if it was a shock. 4 am's dry wind. thinking you were speaking, or even laughing, only to look & see you pissing into an empty schlitz can.



the first time my mother met you, she hissed *he smells like cigarettes. since when did you get so thin?* at hunan village, the waitress had tiny hands. i stared amazed, her ability to fit all five fingers in the teapot's handle. my mother burned her tongue on won ton soup & for the remainder of the meal bitched *now i can't taste a single thing*. she bit her egg roll, sloshed it round her mouth *nothing!* you took ten bathroom breaks. while you pissed, she asked *are you even showering?* my fortune cookie read *you have a fine capacity for enjoying life*.



on christmas we drove 456 miles to sit on a wet park bench. our stomachs ached from spinach quiche, the ninety-eight hour day of playing scrabble at my parents' house. we'd left at dusk. arrived home to a city snuffed of light, sound. at the park, beneath a shade tree, i peeled a tangerine, put three slices in our bottle of cruzan. unzipping your jacket, you heaved *look at this sweat!* i threw up off the side of the bench. my vomit melted the frost.



our running joke concerned the hangover hotel. room 101: dirty sheets, HUGE sink. we'd laugh too loud, prop our feet on a coffee table, laugh again.

at a bar on 10th street, i shared seven pitchers with four friends from a time when i was unkind; in my swagger suit i waltzed through rooms *don't worry if he wants anal; you wont know him in a month.* between the sixth & seventh pitcher, alicia slapped my knee, teased *remember the time you held marco's face in your hands, slurred 'your positive disposition wont get you anywhere.'* & brie—*god, you didn't even drink then.*

on west ponce we took dxm. i woke the next morning with my scarf stuck to the snow. attempting to stand, i collapsed. without wallet, watch, cellphone, i was stranded shivering till sunset when, at last, i could walk.

at the apartment i found you slumped on the front porch, head in your hands, listening to my fourth-grade walkman. *where the fuck have you been? room 101.*



in february i turned twenty. to celebrate we drove to griffin to eat cheap mexican & bicker with my parents. dousing his chimichangas in mango salsa, my dad said *you live in a dream & one day you will wake, realize you are no different than the rest of us.* you touched me between the legs then. later that night we fucked in the computer chair.



the landlord said *i will not replace the heater till you clean.* a brown mold had spread from the bathroom to the hall, all other rooms. also, roaches. crawling 'cross the floorboards, fucking in half-eaten boxes of triscuits. at first our filth had amused. games of stacking glasses, plates in the sink, wondering when they'd crash into a chaos of glass. when we finally cleaned, we produced twenty-eight bags of cat fur, bottles, penciled paper. on

new years eve i sat in the middle of the living room started by how much space the apartment actually contained. how much space exists in the first place.



the month i lost my orgasm marked the beginning of the end. march, the crocuses bloomed too soon, died a week later in the rain. it was saturday, maybe sunday. we tacked a sheet over the window to block the sun. we tried everything—legs bent, sandalwood incense, a record with heavy drumbeat. nothing. when the futon broke, you asked for the last time *how does that feel? it doesn't.*



rain. a constant stream for a month or so it seemed. the roof leaked. we spread pans across the floor, knocked them over. the floor flooded. we wore shoes, even in bed.



just fucking do it already. you were pissed about the litter box. the cat shit on your shirts. *she's gonna get sick.* scrubbing a plaid button-down, you shouted *well, if i clean it then she's my cat.* & *you aren't allowed to pet her anymore!* i stayed out all night again, changed the litter box as an apology. whenever tim or tony called *cookout, come?* you sulked; i did the dishes.



to put myself to sleep i'd relive the days when you wrote me from montana. at the time you lived on a cattle ranch owned by your girlfriend's father. in the letters you lamented *everything's obliterated by the fucking space of this place.* when you weren't

complaining, you wrote about fucking me. the sex was sentimental. *i want to sleep, wake inside you.* i stopped asking when you were going to visit. there are limits even for the lonely. three months later i bought you a bus ticket.



when i asked you to leave, you refused. *i pay rent here too!* you moved into the kitchen, became the model roommate—sweeping floors, unclogging the drain, tacking notes to my door *feed the cat, do the dishes, stop being a cunt.*

underage, i stood outside decatur package store for ten minutes coercing a middle-aged man in a *support our troops!* cap to buy me a bottle of bombay. i had a cold. the gin passed through my mouth without taste. i drank almost half the bottle sitting on my bed, staring out the window. the sky white with lightning. when you opened the door i thought it was thunder. i rolled over, stuffed my head into a pillow or. i couldn't distinguish between surfaces: the sheets, wall, your hands. after that night i dreamt you were fucking me while i slept. worst were the dreams where you fucked me & i came. when confronted, you said *yeah okay, but not like it matters anyway. not like we haven't done it before.* i threw up; you held my hair.



the honda wheezed, rolled forward, fell silent. i'd left you sleeping with the cat curled at your feet. stumbling from the car, i lifted the hood, as if i could locate the problem, fix it. i called tim to pick me up. i stayed at his house five months. we fucked for six. when you'd call at 2 am from your new girlfriend's *spilt shiraz on the sheets; miss you like a motherfucker* tim would shout *why do you still call that cunt?* i'd shrug *he calls me.* but in the

quiet moments of sneaking outside to smoke while tim read a book or took a shit, i dialed you. & still do. *hi hello. how's texas?* you say *i miss us.*

Part of the Wider Pacific

Joanna Howard

I.

On the boat, an aerial attack. A routine patrol expended. A failure to zigzag, the captain is relieved of command. The fracture in his arm is set, anonymously, by a woman in white.

The infirmary is harangued, and examinations are between curtains on casters, dividing and shaping a great open space below the curve of the Quonset. She directs him from behind the movable screen.

It's just a simple fracture. The men awaiting orders are bound for trouble. His second commander is landed in the brig, for disorder, for clocking a flyer. The captain arrives in a sling to make bail.

The base is for officers and spies. The block of houses, which overlook the sea, an encampment, a temporary quartering. The captain shares his rooms with an unusual spy, a carp, short-sighted, and slight. Berobed, on the couch of the captain, a newspaper across his eyes. Two colas in glass. A room in blocks, the low stiff squares of the furniture, the square of the kitchen be-

yond the doorframe. The captain fills the frame. The arm now out of plaster, it hangs in naked space, below the severed sleeve of his uniform. The shape of the cola bottle in his fresh hand, a ham hand, a vice grip.

II.

A party is in the hills, above the piers, the docks, the ships at rest. There are no rooms in the house, a circular wall around a tropical garden. Its arc declines to the sea. Vegetated slopes, thickened, and holding everything aloft, root-bound. His head is above the heads of the others. Now in white dress mess jacket. He casts out the swatch of pineapple from his drink.

A woman in white, the low ledge of the wall along the slope to the beach, above the distant docks. A gap in her teeth. He fails to notice her. They have both been raised in the military. From former families, the fragments of that word, the shards who align themselves. She takes a hard tack. She throws out the swatch of pineapple from her drink, the tall smoky glass, and a beverage with its own horizon line.

III.

Days are passing. The nurse invites the captain for steaks. The approach to her quarters is by a long back stair, and board terracing. In the lot below, officers await their nurses. The captain arrives by car. The encounter confirms his suspicions. Surrounding him, the periphery of men who are not quite up to the standard. Among them his son, an ensign.

A dinner by light of kerosene, and a candle in the coffee can, pierced, flanged and reflective. She recounts a former attach-

ment. They smoke; they share a whiskey. His current problem is one of location. Dry-docked.

It's a good life unless you weaken. The captain recounts. He married into something civilian, and shady, which provided every destroying advantage. A commissioned marriage. A simple severance.

She imagines he was something as an ensign. Or to say, she imagines he was something, in the past, something to look at it. She imagines the past.

To open him up, an out-cropping, a torso. That inside is a mechanism, or a molten core. In short-shorts. In suntan. In an ever expanding chest. From the beach, she can race him to the float, in a sleek fitted suit. Hip ties and top toggles.

The nurses are shipping tomorrow. She awaits him in his quarters. Does he want to leave it at that? Her ambush is succinct and calculated. We can now move beyond the front room, toward the square of the bed, and the frame he is filling. She removes her shoes.

IV.

The captain will be court-martialed or promoted. A hero is made in timing. A General mentions the mission: a group of unsecured islands in a botched arrangement. Thick-witted props are running the action. The captain announces a plan to segment, to slice, the islands. Operation Apple Pie.

The papers arrive at the supper for brass. He may construct his ideal crew: the unusual spy, the sinister second. The principal gentlemen are soon reunited in a reef of command.

A hospital ship will follow the convoy. On arrival, the nurses are greeted by garlands. In dinks, they disband for the far island. And the sailors are finally shipping. Everyone making way to the

next location.

On the far island, he finds her in the infirmary, her hair in a cap. They will only have time, if they make it.

A parcel drop. The first case explodes on touching the ground. The plane affects a second passage. Cylinders, dispersed across the beach, trail variegated silks. Sailors collect the scattered arms.

V.

The islands are in a muddle, the broadcast has said as much. She makes up her face with care. The sailors again are shipping. She will see him off at the dock. The low, gray shape moves forward in the water. The bowline and spring are cast. The men coil them down. Every fertile tide, a tendency. Or, she has miscalculated the calumnious day.

Tropical storms decline the slopes. She flies along the unobstructed road, a wreck of surface, past the flooded commons. From the top of the cliff, roots enlase the decline. Still the sea lies before her and the rocky beach below. Now is the time to control this fact and make of it a creature. She roots herself.

Somewhere, at a great distance, an indication of battle. The entourage is engaged. They begin the staggered attack, and three boats, now struck, erupt. A curve of smoke extends the white curve of each wake in the dark water.

This expensive movement. The captain will lose the following in the initial maneuver: a commander, the spy, a son, his leg below the knee. He garners only the memory of being burnt somewhat and being aware of it, one part of him face-to-fire. He passes for a time into darkness.

The dawn surprises him. He speaks through the voice pipe.

Birkensnake 1 was made with \LaTeX on Debian GNU/Linux.

www.ctan.org
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The font throughout is Bitstream Charter, except for the oldstyle numerals; those are from the Pazo Math font and meant to be used with Palatino, but we hope they look all right. Bitstream Charter was designed by Mathew Carter in 1987, and generously made free to the world by Bitstream Inc in 1992. A newer version is commercially available (with its own oldstyle numerals), but we've used the old, free version.